Understanding the Residential Treatment Center School Academic Environment: Perspectives of Students and Teachers

Cheryl L. Somers, Angelique G. Day, Amber M. Sepsey, Delena Allegoet, Beverly A. Baroni & Jun Sung Hong

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Check for updates

Understanding the Residential Treatment Center School Academic Environment: Perspectives of Students and Teachers

Cheryl L. Somers [a], Angelique G. Day[b], Amber M. Sepsey[a], Delena Allegoet[a], Beverly A. Baroni[c], and Jun Sung Hong [d,e]

aCollege of Education, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI, USA; bSchool of Social Work, University of Washington, Seattle, WA, USA; cClara B. Ford Academy, Detroit, MI, USA; dSchool of Social Work, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI, USA; eDepartment of Social Welfare, Sungkyunkwan University, Seoul, South Korea

ABSTRACT

The purpose of the present study was to explore student and teachers' perceptions of the academic environment in an urban residential treatment center school setting, which serves female students with myriad behavioral, social, emotional, and/or academic challenges, half of which have IEPs and the remainder of which are significantly at-risk and also receive individual learning plans. Using focus group interview methods provided important information from both students ($n = 58$) and teachers ($n = 27$) regarding specific areas in need of improvement. The research team identified four primary themes throughout the student data and four in the teacher data. Themes that emerged throughout the student data included need for least-intrusive behavioral management, preventative strategies for behavior, differentiated instruction, and recognition. Teacher data resulted in themes of lesson plan difficulties, academic versus social-emotional well-being, balancing academic and behavioral needs, and additional assistance within the classroom. Both students and teachers voiced a number of significant concerns and provided useful ideas that can enhance the preparation and supports for teachers in training and practice, most immediately the information informed teachers in this specific context. Implications for research and broader practice are also discussed.

Introduction

In the United States, there are 427,910 children and adolescents placed in foster care (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2017), as well as an additional 70,792 adjudicated youths placed in other out-of-home-care facilities, primarily residential treatment programs (Sickmund, Sladky, Kang, & Puzzanchera, 2011). Youth involved in the child welfare system display a variety of psychosocial problems and risk behaviors, including substance use disorders (Pilowsky & Wu, 2006),

risky sexual behaviors (Carpenter, Clyman, Davidson, & Steiner, 2001; Dworsky & DeCoursey, 2009; Hoffmann, 2009), delinquent behavior (Day et al., 2013; West, Day, Somers, & Baroni, 2014), and trauma (Greeson et al., 2011; West et al., 2014).

Residential treatment programs are a setting where youth with serious emotional and behavioral struggles live temporarily outside of their home. This setting is often selected for those youth, whom outpatient treatment has not been effective, and whose educational needs require more support and supervision than a less restrictive environment at their school can provide. There is a large variety among residential treatment centers between, and even within, states. Many treatment centers, however, offer intensive care and support including comprehensive evaluations, therapy, psychiatric care, and an individualized treatment plan that denotes specific goals and strategies to help the youth grow emotionally, behaviorally, and academically.

Youth in out-of-home care are also at an elevated risk for experiencing a variety of academic barriers and challenges. Trauma that occurs early in life due to foster care placement can negatively affect youths' ability to self-regulate their behavior and form attachments (Cook et al., 2005), which, in turn, can interfere with their ability to effectively communicate, memorize, and organize information, as well as to form successful, positive relations with peers and teachers (Massachusetts Advocates for Children, 2005). In addition, youth who experience trauma from maltreatment display academic vulnerability, as they do not display appropriate social skills, and demonstrate problem behaviors more frequently than non-maltreated youth (Jansen, 2010; see Stone, 2007, for a review). Of note, females placed in out-of-home programs are more likely to have experienced victimization, neglect, and physical, emotional, and/or sexual abuse, than their male counterparts (Lev-Ari, 2001). Previous research has demonstrated that females entering residential treatment, compared to their male counterparts, have higher comorbidity of diagnoses, levels of hopelessness, negative self-evaluation, depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation (Handwerk et al., 2006). Given these findings, and the potential implications of these factors on school functioning, research investigating female-focused outcomes regarding residential treatment centers is crucial (Handwerk, 2006). Research specifically looking at educational challenges among females in residential treatment centers represents a current gap in the literature.

Youth in out-of-home care are also more likely to be assigned to special education services (Trout, Hagaman, Casey, Reid, & Epstein, 2008), and their graduation rates are significantly lower than their peers who are not in out-of-home care (Grogger, 1997). In addition, court-involved youth, including those in out-of-home care, in general, have lower IQ scores (Delaney-Black et al., 2002), are less likely to perform academically at an appropriate grade level, and are twice as likely to repeat a grade (Burley & Halpern, 2001). These academic problems can be a serious challenge for not only the youth but also their teachers.

Researchers examining educational outcomes of youth in out-of-home care, including those in residential treatment centers, reported a serious gap between care and education, and the failure of social services and schools to work together effectively (Gharabaghi, 2012). Thus, it is imperative that teachers and school personnel are well prepared and adequately trained to work with students with problems in emotional regulation, behavior, and socialization, as well as with students who come to school academically disadvantaged. Notably, teacher and students' perceptions of what they identify to be the challenges in this academic environment has yet to be looked at in a residential treatment program setting.

While there has been much research focused on working with and improving behavioral problems within the classroom of youth in out-of-home care, less focus has been on their specific academic needs. According to Minchew, Deaton, and Koballa (2014), teachers create their lessons based upon their previous and current knowledge of the children in the classroom to make the course material relevant and applicable. Other studies also indicated teachers' desires for greater skills and information, as some teachers voiced concerns about their roles and how to balance the students' academic needs with the behavioral challenges presented (Alisic, 2012; Zetlin, MacLeod, & Kimm, 2012). Further, one study reported that teachers in a school located in a residential treatment center conveyed a need for being able to "translate their trauma training knowledge into practices conducive to an educational setting" (Crosby, Day, Baroni, & Somers, 2015). In this study, one teacher specifically stated that it proved to be difficult to keep the students' trauma experiences from overshadowing the educational efforts.

For youth in out-of-home care, and most notably, residential treatment centers, which contain on-site schools, the school context is very proximal to their daily lives. Educational attainment of youth in out-of-home care can also counteract the negative effects of maltreatment, separation, and possible lack of permanency, which are commonly experienced by youth in out-of-home care (DuCloux, 2008; National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, 2014). Educational attainment not only increases the chance for economic success in adulthood, but also provides opportunities for improved physical, social, and intellectual well-being during these critical developmental periods (National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, 2014). However, much more needs to be explored to better understand teachers' needs and find ways to help find a balance between curriculum and instruction, and children's trauma experiences and behavioral reactions to enhance academic experiences of youth in residential treatment facilities.

This study investigated teacher and student perceptions with a specific focus on female adolescent students. The purpose of the present study was to better understand teachers and students' perceptions of the academic environment in a residential treatment center school setting using a focus group methodology.

More specifically, the aim was to better understand what teachers and students identify to be the challenges in this academic environment, with the goal of improving the existing curriculum.

Method

During each focus group, questions were asked from two semi-structured interview protocols, one for students and one for school personnel. Each focus group lasted approximately one hour and was held on school grounds. Students were randomly selected using stratified sampling techniques to ensure equal grades were represented, student and teacher focus groups consisted of approximately 10 individuals. The focus groups used for this study were collected over a two-year period. A total of tenstudent and school teacher groups were conducted during years 2013–2014 and six total student and school teacher focus groups were conducted during years 2014–2015. Each year, a total of 30 students were randomly selected to participate, and all faculty and non-administrative school personnel were invited to participate. Numbers varied slightly due to absences on the day the focus group was conducted. Each group consisted of approximately 10 individuals. There were 58 youth and 27 teachers, overall, who provided responses. Each focus group was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

A secondary data analysis was run using focus group transcript data that consisted of seven student focus groups and six teacher focus groups, which was collected across a two-year span (2013 to 2015). Student participants consisted of three focus groups of females between the ages of 13 and 19 who were enrolled in grades 9 through 12, with 64% of the students identified as African American, 7% White, 20% biracial, and 9% either Hispanic or American Indian. Approximately 40% of the students enrolled in the school were adjudicated youth and 60% were placed as a result of a substantiated abuse and neglect petition. Approximately half had IEPs and the remainder were so significantly at-risk that the school elects to create individual learning plans for them. Individual learning plans (ILPs) are a program that is student specific regarding curriculum and learning goals that the student helps create. While ILPs are curriculum focused, IEPs revolve around what accommodations or modifications a student should receive based on a disability in order to ensure access to the curriculum. Teacher participants included 7 males and 19 females, with one who did not specify his or her sex. Of the 27 teacher participants, nine were in their first year of teaching at this residential school. In addition, 70% of the teachers identified as European American, followed by 19% African American, 7% other race/multiracial, and 4% unknown.

The study site is a single-gender, public, chartered, strict discipline academy co-located on the campus of a large residential treatment facility in a large urban city in the Midwest. The school and facility provide educational services exclusively to female students who were currently or previously placed in a residential

treatment facility, and all had experienced child abuse and neglect. The students had varied traumatic histories, and the majority of enrolled students were three to four years below standard grade level. About 50% of the students qualify for special education; however, it is institution policy and practice to develop individual education plans for all students enrolled. Class sizes were small, typically no more than 15 students. The Common Core State Standards were followed, as required for all public-school institutions.

Average length of stay in the residential facility was four to six months. The school recognized that academic performance for each student is important, but that in addition, there were other factors that shape the success of a well-rounded student and the school aims to assist these students by adhering to a school discipline system that focuses primarily on treatment. The goal is to provide an effective social–emotional learning environment to teach students emotion self-regulation and positive social skills, including how to make more responsible choices.

Study Procedure

The study was approved by the first author's university Institutional Review Board. Information about the study was distributed to participants and their legal guardians during school registration. An assumed consent process was used, whereby students could opt out of participation at any time. These focus groups were conducted during the school day and were limited to one class period in length. Teachers provided verbal consent to participate in the focus groups. As these focus groups were conducted during after school hours, teachers that were not interested in volunteering were not required to stay after school.

Focus group method was used to explore student and teachers' perspectives of the academic environment in a residential treatment center. The phenomenological approach was utilized to inform the design of the current study. Phenomenology was selected because it provides the opportunity to uncover hidden processes and phenomena (Palmer, Larkin, de Visser, & Fadden, 2010), which is critical to understanding the unique needs and experiences of this vulnerable population. Although not commonly used in phenomenology, focus group were chosen because the data can uncover specific shared lived experiences; elicit new perspectives as group members confirm or deny each other's experiences; and provide rich, intergroup interpretation (Bradbury-Jones, Sambrook, & Irvine, 2009). Each focus group participant was assigned a number; these ID numbers and their corresponding responses were documented in the transcripts to ensure that the researchers could offer an account of each individual participant's claims and concerns and capture commonalities of experience to account

for context. Prevalence rates of identified themes were captured by frequency and participant.

An important characteristic of the focus group is that groups are the focus of the analyses (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). The main advantage of the focus group is the opportunity to observe interactions in a naturalistic setting, which provides the researchers an opportunity to collect data on a large range of behaviors (Morgan, 1996). When using this method, researchers have the opportunity to identify the full range of perspectives of the study participants, allowing them to clarify or expand upon their insights that might be left underdeveloped in an in-depth interview (Powell & Single, 1996). In addition, group discussions from focus groups can provide evidence about similarities and differences in the participants' perceptions and experiences, as opposed to reaching conclusions from separate statements from each interviewee from individual interviews (Morgan, 1996). Further, the ability to give the group control over the direction of the interview is highly useful in exploratory research, and focus group can produce concentrated amounts of data on the topic of interest (Morgan, 1996). And finally, the advantage of focus groups is the reliance on group interactions to produce data, and the comparisons that participants make among each other's perceptions and experiences are an invaluable source of insight into complex behaviors (Morgan & Krueger, 1993).

Analyses

Transcripts were analyzed for themes using a critical hermeneutics process (a line-by-line coding of the experiential claims, perspectives, and understandings of each participant) (Kinsella, 2006). Three researchers coded the transcripts independently; these researchers then came together as a group using constant comparison methods to explore commonalities, differences, and main ideas derived from the experiential material (Dye, Schatz, Rosenberg, & Coleman, 2000). Final themes and subthemes were derived through group dialogue, which developed a more interpretive account of the data. Focus group transcripts were coded by hand and prevalence rates by theme were hand calculated across all transcripts.

The research team identified four primary themes throughout the student data and four in the teacher data. Each student theme identified students' self-reported needs within the classroom as well as a variety of factors that could be modified in order to improve their overall academic experience. Within the teacher themes, various accommodations were identified that could improve the classroom environment as well as suggestions to manage challenges they encounter throughout the years in their position. These themes provide the basis for general issues that could be hindering students' learning environment

as well as teachers' instructional and classroom interpersonal effectiveness. These themes are presented in detail and later discussed.

Results

Themes from the Student Focus Groups

Theme 1: *Need for Differentiated Instruction within the Classrooms*. The strongest theme addressed by 77% of the students included their difficulties in the classroom that could be addressed by proper use of differentiated instruction techniques within the classroom to adjust to students' vastly different skills and backgrounds that they bring to school. For example, differentiation occurs when there is strategic variation in topics covered and materials used by the teachers. Approximately 26% of the students acknowledged that there is a need for more detailed instructions, while another 18% voiced that they were not being challenged by the coursework provided. Thirty-three percent of students stated that in order to address the variety of issues in one classroom, it would be beneficial to have additional staff in each classroom, such as teaching assistants or tutors.

Students expressed their frustration regarding the speed at which some teachers present materials, their brief explanations, and teachers' lack of patience when they are asked to explain certain materials multiple times. One student stated:

> … they [teachers] don't really know how to explain theyself or when students need help with certain things they just be like it's in the book, or ask somebody else. You supposed to help us to understand … to help us visualize it, and we still don't understand it … go over it a thousand times until I get it, because Miss XXX, she be able to break it down … then you still tell her you still don't get it, she'll come over to you.

> … sometimes I get irritated and I get mad if I don't know what I'm doing and I'm trying to ask and they are not really helping." "Just because another student get the work or whatever, that don't mean this student gonna get it … you have to actually take the time to explain.

Other students also expressed a need to be more challenged by the curriculum, stating that the school was "too easy" and the assignments given were below the level appropriate for their grade. These students expressed their concerns about not being prepared for life outside of the classroom. As students had mentioned:

> This school is too easy, like it's no challenge. I think that's why I get bored so quick.

> They should have like real classes that we have on the outside, and they need more teachers and more classes.

> Cause in real school you have challenges, this school, they just give you kindergarten work.

> … and then you're done with the worksheet, there's not another assignment that's comin' for you, you just sit there.

> … for like the last week, week and a half doing the same thing over and over again … and it makes me mad every time … because I'm sitting here like I'm not learning a single thing.

> … we're more than a grade behind.

> … I had to take my ACT, I got a 13. I mean, I didn't know nothing, nothing at all … they really setting you up for failure at this school and they think you doing something. I had … honor roll every quarter, you know or whatever, that's only cause it's way-it's super easy …

Finally, the students acknowledged that the teachers had difficulties with teaching so many students at different levels within each classroom. They voiced that the teachers struggled to meet the individual needs of each student, and they believe that additional, trained support in the classroom would be beneficial for both students and teachers.

Theme 2: *Need for Least-Intrusive Behavioral Management.* Thirty-four percent of the participating students voiced their concern about staff and teachers' methods of dealing with various student behavioral issues. Students expressed a need to have less intrusive ways to deal with behavior problems, such as having another adult speak with the student outside of the classroom and creating a solution where class could continue while the problem was being resolved. The students mainly discussed that it was important to avoid stopping the class, which would consequently interrupt the learning of those who were behaving properly. One student stated:

> … when she [teacher] seen one girl or a few off focus, she'll stop the whole class. I try to do my work, but when there's so much talking going on that's not about the work, I tend to get upset. A lot of kids walk out of the class to go and we have to stop like class … when they clear [when behavioral issues occur, all activity stops until situation is taken care of] … you gotta go in the first room so you're missing some of your class for a minute because they gotta deal with the situation before they take your out of the clear.

Theme 3: *Need for Preventive Strategies for Behavior.* The previous theme led to this next largest theme found among students. Approximately 14% of the students being interviewed identified a need for preventative strategies in the classroom regarding behavior problems. During this discussion, students brought up possible preventive techniques, strategies, and coping skills that could be utilized, such as taking a break outside the classroom, reading, or listening to music. Students also discussed how it was beneficial when teachers and students had a positive relationship, as this made it easier for the teachers to recognize individual warning signs and take action before the behavioral problems escalated. This is reflected in the following quotes:

If they got a problem have them step out in the hall and have somebody come [de] escalate them.

… there are some staff that will notice you're upset and pull you out of class to talk to you, try to help you calm down … a lot of the time they wait you know until the last moment when you're just about to explode or other kids are about to explode uh, and then they'll try to intervene.

Theme 4: *Need for Recognition*. Approximately 6% of the students interviewed expressed that those who stay focused and complete their work should be acknowledged. They talked about feeling frustrated with always striving to do well, but their hard work is often overlooked because the teacher tended to focus more on those who do not complete their work. The following quotes provide evidence for this:

… focus on the kids that are doing their work and that are participating and want to do good, don't focus on the kids that are being loud and obnoxious … don't focus on those kids.

… focus on the kids that are trying to get their work done.

he's [teacher] so focused on everybody else that he doesn't appreciate us … they're so focused on these other troubled kids that they don't focus on the people who really doing good.

Like when they gave student of the month to a girl that was barely ever in class … you give her multiple student of the months … and I'm sitting here like … I'm doing well in that class … then I don't get appreciated, I don't get recognized … I work my butt off and I don't get any appreciation for it. And you just take it for granted or like you just–you just don't care.

Themes from the Teacher Focus Groups

Theme 1: *Lesson Plan Difficulties*. The theme most frequently discussed was difficulties teachers experience when planning their lessons. Approximately 31% of the teachers interviewed revealed many challenges when creating lesson plans, such as being aware of the traumatic experiences of their students. They noted how difficult it was, especially as a new teacher, to know precisely what information would serve as a trigger in which students and how to make information relevant to the students' experiences. They also discussed the little time they are given to the lesson plan, and more specifically, insufficient amount of time for class preparation, which is needed for making adjustments to the lesson plans. As several teachers said:

I can have the first month of school planned out, and it could change the second I have my first class and … I need to teach a week or two before I can like really plan.

> I could plan a great lesson and I'm gonna have to do so much work every night because this didn't go well where in you know, 90% of other classrooms it would probably have gone beautifully but it didn't because of the nature of our school and our students …

> I teach Biology and one of our topics was genetics … it could really easily trigger someone whose mom did this or I never knew my parents.

> For me … it's just a mindfulness of like their sensitivity to certain things that would trigger them cause teaching social studies, there's some pretty rough stuff that … could set off a whole bunch of issues for some of the girls, so it just helps me be more mindful and observant of their reactions …

Theme 2: *Academic vs. Social Emotional Well-being*. Of the teachers interviewed, 29% brought up conflicting thoughts regarding teachers' concerns with students' academic growth versus the importance of students' self-esteem. The teachers noted that students' academic well-being was important, but because of the nature of the facility at which they are employed, often the academic mission of teaching becomes overshadowed by the students' social, emotional, and behavioral treatment goals of the child welfare agency. The quotes below support this:

> Attendance is terrible … it feels like they're pulled out of school for a lot of things … but at the same time, I know your education is, and their education has already been put on a stand still given the situation that you've been in x multiple schools.

> When you have a student that actually wants to do well … they'll get pulled all the time, but they're like "I'm not doing well in class," it's like you're not here, but it's also not your fault … being in class is important for learning … and then it's like that feeling I don't do well in school, you're not successful, and they're experiencing failure and … they shut down because they're not doing well.

> I don't care if they are going to get 32 on their ACTs, I care that they gain confidence, they feel good about themselves, and they leave a better person … they gotta learn algebra 2, this is very important, but really it is not that important … I want all the girls to be involved at whatever level they are able to achieve at.

Theme 3: *Balancing Academic and Behavioral Needs*. Concern was also expressed by 29% of the teachers regarding balancing students' academic and behavioral needs in the classroom. The concern was regarding the way in which behavioral issues were handled as to not distract others from the overall learning process. The teachers also mentioned about finding a balance between learned helplessness of the students and their own expectations of them, need for structure within their classrooms, and being mindful of students' trauma triggers and prevention of those behaviors from escalating. As the teachers have stated:

> Structure is very important to the girls, having some consistency and things that they can expect realizing that they appreciate that structure and support as far as knowing what to expect and consistency.

> I mean some of my really good students will then get triggered because they wanna learn and they want their teacher and their elders to be respected and they want to like defend the teachers … I've noticed with students getting triggered is not only with like the verbal assault that escalates and sometimes you know, physical assault also the inconsistency of like guidelines and consequences within our school …

Theme 4: *Additional Assistance within the Classroom.* Approximately 14% of the teachers voiced a need for additional and consistent assistance in their classroom. They expressed the varying academic levels of the students in one classroom. In cases where behavioral issues may arise, they believe that having another person in the room with them could improve these students' academic experiences. Some teachers acknowledged that they had received help in their classroom; however, those aids often were not trained to be working with this population. The following quotes support the above:

> … if someone [student] is put into (X) class and it's an algebra 2 class and they are not even ready for multiplication yet, we have to alter according to the kids skills 'cause that is what is expected here.

> I don't have a TA, I rarely have consistent staff, so it's difficult to rely on that kind of assistance … when I do get staff, I don't use them as efficiently because I plan on not having consistent staff …

> If I don't immediately … run over to them[students], but of course eight different girls are calling my name at the same time … but often they do- are agitated by that and they're like … nobody cares, everybody's ignoring me, and that gets to me.

Discussion

Results of this study offer insight into teacher and female students' perceptions of what they identify to be the challenges in a female residential treatment center academic environment. This is currently a gap in the literature, which the current study addresses. The various themes identified throughout the present study reflect complexities in students' academic and behavioral difficulties as perceived by both the students and teachers in a residential treatment center school. This school context is unique, but the issues experienced by the students in a residential treatment center are similar to those experienced by students in traditional K-12 settings where classrooms have significant number of students with behavioral, social, emotional, and/or academic challenges. In the present study, perspectives from both students and teachers revealed similar as well as different perceptions about the causes of and solutions to students' academic challenges. However, there are some themes identified uniquely by the teachers and not the students, and vice versa. For instance, both students and teachers shared concerns such as a desire to have extra help within the classroom and the difficulty balancing education and behavioral needs. On the other hand, only the

students mentioned feeling under-challenged and not receiving enough reinforcement. All of the themes are discussed next, and these findings provide openings to help improve educational opportunities for female students in this and similar residential treatment centers, by improving the teachers' preparation and supports in both training and practice.

Students perceived the class sizes to be too large and voiced their concern that their educational needs were not being adequately met. In addition, both teachers and students recognized the varying academic levels that comprised each classroom, which seemed to also negatively affect the overall academic environment. While class sizes at this school generally do not exceed a total of 17, there appear to be variations in students' academic skills and thus their needs for help may be overlooked. Students suggested having separate classes depending on the level of the students, but the teachers reported that some students have a difficult time waiting for assistance and suggested having properly trained help in the classroom. Indeed, there are residential staff members in the classroom to help with behavior management, but they do not typically have training in education. While both are solutions to improving students' achievement within the classrooms, these solutions may not be practical due to the nature of the facility as well as budget concerns. Working with youth at different levels within one classroom occurs in almost every school, and because of this, differentiated instruction has been heavily emphasized over the past few years. However, this becomes complicated by high level of turnovers in residential settings. Teachers in each classroom need in-depth training, which would include how to adapt to the varying environments and students' skill levels, in addition to behavioral training. Indeed, in-depth, in-classroom training has been suggested as critical for teachers' academic intervention (e.g., see Leisy Stosich, 2016), and this likely applies to these students as well.

Students' behavioral problems are common occurrences in residential treatment center schools. Training is provided to all school staff at the beginning of the year in all areas – behavioral, academic, community building, and procedural development. However, both students and teachers reported struggling with how disruptions in the classrooms are often handled. Both students and teachers mentioned that once a student exhibits disruptive behaviors, the remaining students are negatively affected by the disrupted flow of the educational environment and learning. Clearly, teachers cannot control the fact that some students develop intense triggers, but the students discussed possible preventative techniques that could work for each of them individually. Examples included teachers and staff being aware of the warning signs, or allowing students to take a break, read, or listen to music. A previous study supported these notions, with teachers reporting that unless behaviors were severe, it can be difficult to notice the subtler signs of behavioral problems (Frauenholtz, Mendenhall, & Moon, 2017). Students also emphasized that those who disrupt the class should be spoken with in privacy, rather than inside the classroom where the rest of the

students are present. These are all instructional skills that would ensure teachers' success in handling students' behavioral problems in the classrooms.

The prevention effort noted by both students and teachers as being the most important was positive teacher–student relationship, which is facilitated by a trusting relationship, allowing teachers to know the students on an individual level and becoming more aware of their triggers ways to calm them. One study that focused on classroom management strategies found that developing a rapport with each student was the most effective strategy (Brown, 2004). A study by Hughes, Wu, Kwok, Villarreal, and Johnson (2012) also found that a positive student–teacher relationship buffered the risk of low self-competence among students who were academically at-risk, resulting in less academic disengagement. Importantly, teachers can explicitly display care in constructive ways and to reflect on this in an ongoing manner, which was shown to have a positive impact on the students (O'Connor, 2006). This skill, while already incorporated in the training during the beginning of the year, could be enhanced and repeated periodically throughout the academic year to better prepare teachers for students' triggers, should they arise. In addition, teachers may also include students in de-escalation or calming strategies. For example, teachers could ask the students to name three things that would be useful in a situation where behavioral problems escalate. Doing so can improve student–teacher relationships by allowing students to provide feedback in situations in which they are directly involved. Students may also become more self-aware of their feelings and utilize skills that work best for them.

Another theme that emerged from the findings is academic expectations. The student group perceived their teachers as having low expectations of the students. Many expressed concerns that they would be underprepared for the "real world" once they complete the program, which can negatively affect their views of themselves and their academic potential. One earlier study reviewed research on self-fulfilling prophecy and teachers' expectations (Brophy, 1983). The study noted that while the effects of self-fulling prophecy can be small (about 5%-10%) in average classrooms, these numbers can increase based on students' perception of their teachers' behavior. In the present study, the students reported feeling as if they were not being held to the same standards as students in traditional public schools. Interestingly, teachers reported difficulty in challenging their students without overwhelming them. Moreover, many teachers admitted that the focus on academics can sometimes inadvertently shift when mental health and behavioral needs become more urgent. In the process of striking a balance between academic and behavioral expectations, both teachers and students will likely benefit from enhanced and explicit supports, starting with targeting teachers in training.

Finally, students voiced their concern about not being acknowledged in their classroom. Many expressed feeling upset that those who worked hard, completed their assignments, and excelled academically did not receive enough positive

reinforcement. They continued to express that teachers focus mostly on students who were struggling or who exhibited behavioral problems. Teachers in most schools experience challenges when they attempt to meet the needs of all students in situations where they must expend their energy inadvertently to a particular student who is acting out. In situations where teachers are confronted with students who demonstrate behavioral problems, they are more likely to respond by providing negative feedbacks (see Sprouls, Mathur, & Upreti, 2015). However, among the students who receive treatment at this facility, most have trauma histories and emotional/behavioral disturbances. There is a critical need for teachers to be trained to respond with positive feedback for students with special needs. To do so, teachers need to be provided with explicit and ongoing instructions on how to respond with encouragements to these students.

Limitations and Implications for Research

The issue of reliance on interactions in the group to produce data that is inherent in the focus group can be both a strength and weakness. The inherent weakness of the focus group is that the group itself may shape the nature of the data it produces, and might generate concerns about the tendency toward conformity (see, e.g., Sussman, Burton, Dent, Stacy, & Flay, 1991). The questions as asked elicited the responses that are presented, but it may be of benefit for future research on this topic to pull for information on potential themes for what is working well in the setting, if those more positive themes do not naturally emerge. Also, considering that the study participants were in a residential treatment center located in urban Midwest, the present study did not consider the socio-economic status and poverty, which can seriously undermine their educational experiences. Further, given the unique nature of the sample for this study (female youth in a residential treatment center), future research should focus the same questions examined in this study on other contexts such as therapeutic boarding schools or mixed gender treatment centers, which are also unique compared to the current sample. This is important as the results of this study may not generalize well to residential treatment facilities with a mixed gender or all male student body. Another consideration for future research is the teaching experience of the educators that were sampled in the focus group. Approximately one-third of the teachers were within their first year of teaching, and it is possible that their experience level may have influenced their responses in the focus group. These limitations aside, the study findings have major implications for future research.

As previously stated, empirical scholarship on educational attainment and outcome of youth in out-of-home care is limited, in comparison to studies on behavioral problems and emotional disturbance of these youth. Future studies might build on the current findings by exploring multifaceted factors that might be related to educational outcomes of youth in out-of-home care. Research

might consider, for instance, quality of students' friendships and peer relationships, work-related burnout experienced by teachers, and perceptions of other school staff members in residential treatment center schools. In a review of research on outcomes of youth in residential treatment center, Hair (2005) concluded that positive behavior and educational outcomes can be sustained in residential treatment centers that utilize a treatment that is multi-modal, holistic, and ecological in its approach. Thus, an ecological approach to understanding factors that are associated with educational outcomes of youth in out-of -home care is warranted.

Implications for Policy and Practice

Students' behavioral disruptions might supersede academic instructions, which is a common challenge expressed by teachers. Teaching various academic levels in one classroom is also a challenge, which can compromise students' learning and academic performances. Students who require extra help may not receive it at the pace they need and can fall behind as a result. In addition, students who need more challenging assignments may express boredom, do not learn at the level at which they are capable, and are at risk of behavioral problems. Moreover, students who work hard and excel may not receive the recognition and positive reinforcement that they feel they deserve, which can generate resentment and academic disengagement.

Ideally, residential treatment center teachers would be trained to help students in the classrooms on both behavioral *and* academic matters. However, this may not be feasible due to budget constraints in many of these centers. One solution could include additional training for current staff, residential staff, and teachers, particularly on how to provide intervention for academics among this at-risk population. Cross training between different types of staff/teachers can result in everyone working toward the same goals, which is most likely to produce the most successful outcomes in students (Dishion & Stormshak, 2007; Kirby & Fraser, 1997; Margolis, Fosco, & Stormshak, 2016). It will be most helpful for teachers and students in residential treatment center schools if there is an enhanced emphasis on both academic instructions and behavioral intervention that will best meet the unique needs of these students. For youth with both behavioral and academic needs, interventions should (a) be contextually sensitive and consider a lifespan focus and (b) consider the important role of adults (e.g., teachers, staff members, caregivers) in meeting the educational and behavioral needs of the students (see Dishion & Stormshak, 2007; Kirby & Fraser, 1997). In order to achieve this, it is necessary to provide an ecological assessment, which comprehensively assesses a youths functioning across multiple settings. For example, a youth may do well in math and science classes, but have behavioral outbursts during language arts. Or, a youth may be calm in class,

but become irritable and upset during unstructured time or during family time. Gathering this specific information on the functioning of each child, across various settings is essential to best understanding behavioral antecedents to focus on for treatment.

Many teachers who enter pre-service training may not know they are preparing to work in a residential treatment school. Very few universities offer pre-service training to prepare teachers to work in alternative school environments in which a high proportion of students have been exposed to trauma. To address this gap, the 115th Congress has introduced the *Trauma-Informed Care for Children and Families Act of 2017*; this bill, if passed, would require the Department of Education to award grants for the improvement of trauma support services and mental health care for children in educational settings.

Conclusion

Residential treatment centers strive to incorporate both behavioral and academic learning into their students' daily lives. Trainings for teachers and staff on working with students in residential treatment centers are provided annually. However, the study findings suggest that additional efforts are needed to improve not only the academic functioning of students but also the overall academic environment. These particular findings can be used to inform the development of an intervention to address the academic concerns outlined by the students. For urban youth in residential treatment centers, educational success is critical to their overall long-term well-being. To achieve this, the first step is to ensure that appropriate care is provided to students with behavioral problems and that any academic barriers are addressed.

ORCID

Cheryl L. Somers 🆔 http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3177-301X
Jun Sung Hong 🆔 http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2816-9900

References

Alisic, E. (2012). Teachers' perspectives on providing support to children after trauma: A qualitative study. *School Psychology Quarterly, 27*(1), 51–59. doi:10.1037/a0028590

Bradbury-Jones, C., Sambrook, S., & Irvine, F. (2009). The phenomenological focus group: An oxymoron? *Journal of Advanced Nursing, 65*, 663–671. doi:10.1111/j.1365-2648.2008.04922.x

Brophy, J. E. (1983). Research on the self-fulfilling prophecy and teacher expectations. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 75*(5), 631–661. doi:10.1037/0022-0663.75.5.631

Brown, D. F. (2004). Urban teachers' professional classroom management strategies: Reflections of culturally responsive teacher. *Urban Education, 39*(3), 266–289. doi:10.1177/0042085904263258

Burley, M., & Halpern, M. (2001). *Educational attainment of foster youth: Achievement and graduation outcomes for children in state care*. Olympia, WA: Washington State Institute for Public Policy.

Carpenter, S. C., Clyman, R. B., Davidson, A. J., & Steiner, J. F. (2001). The association of foster care or kinship care with adolescent sexual behavior and first pregnancy. *Pediatrics*, *108*, 46–52.

Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2017). *Foster care statistics 2015*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Children's Bureau. Retrieved from https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/foster.pdf

Cook, A., Spinazzola, J., Ford, J., Lanktree, C., Blaustein, M., Cloitre, M., … van der Kolk, B. (2005). Complex trauma in children and adolescents. *Psychiatric Annals*, *35*(5), 390–398. doi:10.1002/jclp.21990

Crosby, S. D., Day, A. G., Baroni, B. A., & Somers, C. L. (2015). School staff perspectives on the challenges and solutions to working with court-involved students. *Journal of School Health*, *85*(6), 347–354. doi:10.1111/josh.2015.85.issue-6

Day, D. M., Hart, T. A., Wanklyn, S. G., McCay, E., Macpherson, A., & Burnier, N. (2013). Potential mediators between child abuse and both violence and victimization in juvenile offenders. *Psychological Services*, *10*(1), 1–11. doi:10.1037/a0028057

Delaney-Black, V., Covington, C., Ondersma, S. J., Nordstrom-Klee, B., Templin, T., Ager, J., … Sokol, R. J. (2002). Violence exposure, trauma, and IQ and/or reading deficits among urban children. *Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine*, *156*, 280–285. doi:10.1001/archpedi.156.3.280

Dishion, T. J., & Stormshak, E. A. (2007). *Intervening in children's lives: An ecological, family-centered approach to mental health care*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

DuCloux, K. (2008). Community college education in a juvenile residential treatment facility: A case study of the academic achievement of incarcerated juveniles. *Residential Treatment for Children and Youth*, *21*(2), 61–76. doi:10.1300/J007v21n02_04

Dworsky, A., & DeCoursey, J. (2009). *Pregnant and parenting foster youth: Their needs, their experiences*. Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago.

Dye, J. F., Schatz, I. M., Rosenberg, B. A., & Coleman, S. T. (2000, January). Constant comparison method: A kaleidoscope of data. *Qualitative Report*, *4*(1–2). Retrieved from http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR3-4/dye.html

Frauenholtz, S., Mendenhall, A. N., & Moon, J. (2017). Role of school employees' mental health knowledge in interdisciplinary collaborations to support the academic success of students' experiencing mental health distress. *Children and Schools*, *39*(2), 71–79. doi:10.1093/cs/cdx004

Gharabaghi, K. (2012). Translating evidence into practice: Supporting the school performance of young people living in residential group care in Ontario. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *34*(6), 1130–1134. doi:10.1016/j.childyouth.2012.01.038

Greeson, K. P., Briggs, E. C., Kisiel, C. L., Layne, C. M., Ake, G. S., Ko, S. J., … Fairbank, J. A. (2011). Complex trauma and mental health in children and adolescents placed in foster care: Findings from the national child traumatic stress network. *Child Welfare*, *90*(6), 91–108.

Grogger, J. (1997). Local violence and educational attainment. *Journal of Human Resources*, *32*(4), 659–682. doi:10.2307/146425

Hair, H. J. (2005). Outcomes for children and adolescents after residential treatment: A review of research from 1993 to 2003. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, *14*(4), 551–575. doi:10.1007/s10826-005-7188-9

Handwerk, M. L., Clopton, K., Huefner, J. C., Smith, G. L., Hoff, K. E., & Lucas, C. P. (2006). Gender differences in adolescents in residential treatment. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry,76*, 312–324.

Hoffmann, S. D. (2009, May 16). *By the numbers — the public costs of teen childbearing.* Washington, DC: National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy. Retrieved from www.thenationalcampaign.org/resources/pdf/pubs/btn_full.pdf

Hughes, J. N., Wu, J. Y., Kwok, O., Villarreal, V., & Johnson, A. Y. (2012). Indirect effects of child reports of teacher-student relationship on achievement. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, *104*(2), 350–365. doi:10.1037/a0026339

Jansen, A. (2010). Victim or troublemaker? Young people in residential care. *Journal of Youth Studies*, *13*(4), 423–437. doi:10.1080/13676261003801770

Kinsella, E. A. (2006). Hermeneutics and critical hermeneutics: Exploring possibilities within the art of interpretation. *Forum: Qualitative Sozialforschung/Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, *7*(3), Article 19. Retrieved from. http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs 0603190

Kirby, L. D., & Fraser, M. W. (1997). Risk and resilience in childhood. In M. W. Fraser (Ed.), *Risk and resilience in childhood: An ecological perspective* (pp. 10–33). Washington, DC: NASW Press.

Leisy Stosich, E. (2016). Building teacher and school capacity to teach to ambitious standards in high-poverty schools. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, *58*, 43–53. doi:10.1016/j. tate.2016.04.010

Lev-Ari, T. (2001). Gender-sensitive treatment in "Zofiya" youth protection facility. (MA thesis). School of Social Work, Tel-Aviv University.

Margolis, K. L., Fosco, G. M., & Stormshak, E. A. (2016). Circle of care: Extending beyond primary caregivers to examine collaborative caretaking in adolescent development. *Journal of Family Issues*, *37*(9), 1179–1202. doi:10.1177/0192513X14536565

Massachusetts Advocates for Children. (2005). *Helping traumatized children learn.* Boston, MA: Author.

Minchew, D., Deaton, B., & Koballa, T. (2014). Teacher awareness of their diverse classrooms: The natures of elementary teachers' reflections on their science teaching practice. *Action in Teacher Education.*, *36*, 211–233. doi:10.1080/01626620.2014.917363

Morgan, D. L., & Krueger, A. (1993). When to use focus groups and why. In D. L. Morgan (Ed.), *Successful focus groups: Advancing the state of the art* (pp. 3–19). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Morgan, D. L. (1996). *Focus group as qualitative research* (*2nd* ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

National Working Group on Foster Care and Education. (2014). *Fostering success in education: National factsheet on the educational outcomes of children in foster care.* Retrieved from http://cdn.fc2success.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/National-Fact-Sheet-on-the-Educational-Outcomes-of-Children-in-Foster-Care-Jan-2014.pdf

O'Connor, K. E. (2006). You choose to care: Teachers, emotions, and professional identity. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, *24*(1), 117–126. doi:10.1016/j.tate.2006.11.008

Palmer, M., Larkin, M., de Visser, R., & Fadden, G. (2010). Developing an interpretative phenomenological approach to focus group data. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *7*, 99–121. doi:10.1080/14780880802513194

Pilowsky, D. J., & Wu, L. (2006). Psychiatric symptoms and substance use disorders in a nationally representative sample of American adolescents involved with foster care. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, *38*(4), 351–358. doi:10.1016/j.jadohealth.2005.06.014

Powell, R. A., & Single, H. M. (1996). Focus groups. *International Journal for Quality in Health Care*, *8*(5), 499–504. doi:10.1093/intqhc/8.5.499

Sickmund, M., Sladky, T. J., Kang, W., & Puzzanchera, C. (2011). *Easy access to the census of juveniles in residential placement.* Retrieved from http://www.ojjdp.gov/ojstatbb/ezacjrp/

Sprouls, K., Mathur, S., & Upreti, G. (2015). Is positive feedback a forgotten classroom practice? Findings and implications for at-risk students. *Preventing School Failure: Alternative Education for Children and Youth*, *59*(3), 153–160. doi:10.1080/1045988X.2013.876958

Stewart, D. W., & Shamdasani, P. N. (1990). *Focus groups: Theory and practice.* Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Stone, S. (2007). Child maltreatment, out-of-home placement and academic vulnerability: A fifteen-year review of evidence and future directions. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *29*, 139–161. doi:10.1016/j.childyouth.2006.05.001

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2012). *Trauma definition* Retrieved from http://www.samhsa.gov/traumajustice/traumadefinition/index.aspx. 10.1094/PDIS-11-11-0999-PDN

Sussman, S., Burton, D., Dent, C. W., Stacy, A. W., & Flay, B. R. (1991). Use of focus groups in developing an adolescent tobacco cessation program: Collective norm effects. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, *21*(21), 1772–1782. doi:10.1111/j.1559-1816.1991.tb00503.x

Trout, A. L., Hagaman, J., Casey, K., Reid, R., & Epstein, M. H. (2008). The academic status of children and youth in out-of-home care: A review of the literature. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *30*, 979–994. doi:10.1016/j.childyouth.2007.11.019

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2014). *Adoption and foster care analysis and reporting system.* Retrieved from http://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/cb/afcarsreport21.pdf

Vig, S., Chinitz, S., & Shulman, L. (2005). Young children in foster care: Multiple vulnerabilities and complex service needs. *Infants and Young Children*, *18*(2), 147–160. doi:10.1097/00001163-200504000-00007

West, S., Day, A., Somers, C., & Baroni, B. (2014). Student perspectives on how trauma experiences manifest in the classroom: Engaging court-involved youth in the development of a trauma-informed teaching curriculum. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *38*, 58–65. doi:10.1016/j.childyouth.2014.01.013

Zetlin, A., MacLeod, E., & Kimm, C. (2012). Beginning teacher challenges instructing students who are in foster care. *Remedial and Special Education*, *33*(1), 4–13. doi:10.1177/0741932510362506