

RESEARCH ARTICLE

School Staff Perspectives on the Challenges and Solutions to Working With Court-Involved Students

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ABSTRACT

BACKGROUND: Court-involved students, such as those in foster care and the juvenile justice system, generally experience high incidences of both acute and chronic trauma, adversely impacting their educational well-being and overall academic trajectory. Utilizing perceptions of teachers and other school staff, this study explores the challenges and needs of school personnel working with this student population.

METHODS: Participants were school personnel employed at a Midwest, urban, public charter school during the 2012-2013 academic year. Focus groups explored the perceptions of school staff members working with court-involved students to develop a staff training curriculum. Focus groups also were conducted after the training intervention to get feedback from participants and identify remaining challenges. Focus group data were analyzed and results were member-checked with study participants.

RESULTS: Findings included 7 major themes (14 subthemes) regarding student behaviors that were challenging for school staff to manage. Themes included trauma-related behaviors, attachment-related behaviors, staff preintervention needs, intervention feedback, and staff postintervention needs.

CONCLUSIONS: Teachers and school staff can play a role in the educational well-being of court-involved youth. However, they need trauma-specific knowledge and resources to be effective.

Keywords: court-involved youth; educational well-being; teacher and staff perspectives; trauma-informed teaching.

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School personnel often interact with students who have previously experienced trauma. Prevalence rates indicate that traumatic childhood events are common place.¹ Over 25% of children experience trauma, including physical, sexual, emotional abuse, and witnessing substance abuse or violence within their household.² Among court-involved students, exposure to trauma is even more substantial,^{3,4} making the odds of encountering traumatized students dramatically higher for school staff working in residential settings.

Trauma can be acute or chronic and is defined as one or more harmful circumstances that persistently impede well-being and functioning.⁵ Acute trauma is generally considered to be the result of a recent

and emotionally intense distressing event, whereas chronic trauma results from intense, persistent, and varying traumatic experiences that generally have a greater negative impact on youth development.^{6,7} These chronic and complex experiences can impact cognition, affect regulation, behavioral control, self-concept, biology, attachment, and are often displayed in various internalized and externalized behaviors.⁸ Both boys and girls commonly demonstrate externalized behaviors (eg, anger), and girls more commonly internalize responses to trauma (eg, anxiety, depression).⁹

Not surprisingly, court-involved youth may encounter more academic challenges than other students. For example, foster youth are assigned

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to special education services more often than non-foster youth,¹⁰⁻¹² and almost 50% demonstrate behavioral or emotional problems.¹³ Youth in the juvenile justice system exhibit much higher rates of behavioral and emotional disorders¹⁴ and are more likely to experience school discipline, suspensions, and expulsions,^{13,15,16} requiring teachers to focus on socioemotional and behavioral issues in the classroom that impede learning.¹⁷ Although schools should acknowledge student capabilities and needs,^{18,19} targeted school services and resources are lacking.¹⁷

A study of teacher perspectives on working with traumatized students found several prevalent themes related to teacher uncertainty about roles, balance, and meeting student classroom needs.²⁰ Teachers also indicated a desire for greater skills, information, and support. In another study, educators in their first and second years of teaching reported that behavioral problems were one of the most challenging issues when working with foster care (FC) students.¹⁷ They desired more support from superiors, training on intervention strategies for classroom behavioral issues, and knowledge on interacting with FC parents and building stronger cross-system communication with child welfare workers.

Additionally, school staff are rarely trained to understand how to work effectively with traumatized youth, many of whom are in FC and/or are court-involved.²¹ Investing in the professional development (PD) of school personnel to promote effective relationship-building with traumatized students is important.^{22,23} Input from school staff in administrative decision making¹⁸ is necessary to promote cooperation among teaching and support staff, while maintaining appropriate expectations for student success.²⁴ Positive school climates must be established as they are also critical and associated with better teaching efficacy²⁵ and teacher job satisfaction,²⁶ which impacts teacher confidence,²⁷ and improves student behaviors, academic performance, and achievement.^{28,29} Teachers need appropriate training within college curricula plus postdegree PD to increase confidence in working with this population.²⁸ School interventions should be culturally relevant, include varied teaching modalities, and promote positive student-teacher relationships and a safe space for learning.^{30,31}

Teacher perception of student behavior can impact student success. Cox et al²⁸ reported that teachers who worked in a juvenile residential school facility perceived students as apathetic about class work. However, court-involved students may be too distracted by previous trauma to be attentive in the classroom, and school personnel can misinterpret this behavior as oppositional or reflecting mental health disorders.^{8,32,33} This may contribute to higher rates of school suspensions and expulsions experienced by court-involved youth.^{15,16} When court-involved

youth in residential settings are exposed to better learning environments, their academics improve and they become more likely to be successful when returned to the community.³⁴ Exploring perceptions of teachers and school staff, addressing training gaps, and providing needed resources to school personnel may be key to making this happen.

This study builds on the limited research available and investigates the needs of teachers and school staff in educating court-involved, traumatized students. This is among the first studies gathering teacher and school staff perceptions to inform the development and testing of a trauma-informed teaching curriculum. Our primary research questions were: *What types of student behaviors do school staff find difficult to manage? What types of student behaviors do school staff members feel competent to manage? What types of student behaviors do school staff members associate with students dealing with trauma and attachment issues? What do school staff feel they need to be more effective with their students? and How does a trauma-informed training intervention impact school staff interactions with students?* Staff perceptions of their challenges, needs, and useful aspects of the existing intervention may shed light on how to train and support school staff better in working with this student population.

METHOD

Participants

All participants were teachers and school staff members at a public charter school (2012-2013), co-located on the same campus as a large child welfare residential agency for girls in a Midwestern city in the United States. Table 1 contains participants' (N = 27) demographic information. West, Day, Somers, Baroni³⁵ describe the student population—female, court-involved students, who generally have a history of abuse and neglect and were subsequently placed in residential treatment. Approximately 90% have a mental health diagnosis. Whereas teaching staff are not systematically given specific diagnosis information for each student, the school integrates social-emotional growth into its mission and incorporates trauma-sensitive strategies in discipline. Most students served (86%) were current residents, whereas some (14%) have returned to community living but still attend the on-campus school. Students range in age from 12-18 years old. Approximately 44% were court-involved due to juvenile delinquency and 56% were placed as a result of abuse and neglect petitions.

Description of Curriculum and Intervention

As described in Day, Somers, Baroni, Crosby, Sanders, and Peterson (manuscript under review), the school selected a modified version of The Heart of

Table 1. Characteristics of School Personnel Participants (N = 27)

	N	%
Total	27	100
Race		
White	17	63
African American	8	30
Hispanic	1	3.5
Multiracial	1	3.5
Years of experience		
<1 year	15	55
1 to 4 years	4	15
≥5 years	8	30
Position		
Certified teaching staff	18	67
School support staff	9	33

Learning and Teaching: Compassion, Resiliency, and Academic Success (HLT) and implemented it as the primary intervention. HLT was designed for use in a variety of traditional and nontraditional education settings and is an integrated, manualized curriculum founded on research, theory, and clinical practice and grounded in ecological, attachment, and social learning theories, also integrating psychoeducational, cognitive-behavioral, and relational approaches. The curriculum was presented in half-day trainings, with booster trainings occurring monthly over 2-hour periods at staff development meetings that school year. There were 6 modules: (1) background and definitions of trauma; (2) compassionate schools and survival; (3) self-care; (4) curriculum domains and specific strategies;³⁶ (5) collaborative problem-solving;³⁷ and (6) role plays, games, and case vignettes. These were accompanied by additional tools and resources for classroom use. Information on diversity, including gender and racial identity, and training on Theraplay³⁸ were included.

The modified HLT curriculum was provided in groups by a psychotherapist certified in trauma and attachment. Individual classroom observations and coaching assured fidelity to the model. Because of staff turnover common to alternative education settings, training was ongoing.

Instrumentation

During preintervention focus groups, participants were asked to respond to the following 6 open-ended questions: *What types of behavior do you have the most difficulty with in your classroom? What types of behaviors do you feel competent to manage? What types of behaviors are displayed by students dealing with trauma? What types of behaviors are displayed by students with attachment issues? Describe any incident when you felt that you were able to overcome attachment issues with a student, and What do you feel like you need in order to be*

more effective with your students? During postintervention focus groups, participants were asked to respond to the 6 aforementioned questions, as well as the following 2 additional questions: *How did the trauma training impact your interactions with students?* and *What barriers still exist?*

Procedure

Five focus groups were conducted to understand participant perspectives, challenges, and needs while working with traumatized students. Participants were encouraged to share potential intervention and support ideas to assist them in reducing the impact of trauma on students' educational well-being. Focus groups were held in September 2012 and June 2013. Data were used to inform the creation of a trauma-informed training curriculum, which was implemented during the same academic year. The second set of focus groups was conducted post-intervention to further explore participants' experiences and recommendations. All school personnel opted to participate.

Each 1-hour focus group included 6-8 participants. They were conducted at the school and facilitated by independent researchers, to promote participants' open and honest dialogue. Groups were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Data Analysis

Transcripts were uploaded into NVivo qualitative statistical software and analyzed for themes using constant comparison methods, looking for commonalities, differences, and main ideas.³⁹ Because NVivo coding uses the direct language of the participants as codes rather than researcher-generated words and phrases,⁴⁰ the analysis is grounded in the voices of the participants. Three researchers trained in qualitative methods coded the transcripts independently, and then developed thematic categories through consensus. Interpretive disagreements were resolved by presenting supportive evidence and operational definitions for main themes. The 2 most commonly reported subthemes for each question across groups were included in our results to convey the voice of school staff. Results were reviewed by a subsample of participants as a check on the validity and interpretation of the data.

RESULTS

There were 22 student behaviors identified by the participants as being difficult to manage. Also, there were 9 student behaviors that school personnel felt competent to manage, 15 student behaviors that they associated with trauma, and 9 student behaviors that were associated with attachment issues. Additionally, prior to the intervention, school personnel reported

Table 2. Major Themes and Subthemes (N = 27)

Themes and Subthemes	N	%
1. Difficult to manage student behaviors		
a. Shutting down	7	26
b. Internal distractions	10	37
2. Behaviors teachers feel competent to manage		
a. Building rapport and trust	6	22
b. Extensive behavior management	9	33
3. Behaviors related to trauma		
a. Guardedness	7	26
b. Shutting down	7	26
4. Behaviors related to attachment issues		
a. Possessiveness	12	44
b. Difficulty maintaining appropriate boundaries	16	59
5. Needs prior to intervention		
a. Knowledge about trauma, attachment, and self-harm	8	30
b. Proper self-care	9	33
6. Impact of intervention		
a. Demonstrated the need for utilizing alternative instructional practices with students rather than using traditional methods	6	22
b. Provided insight into student behaviors	5	19
7. Needs after intervention		
a. Improvements in communication between academic and agency staff	7	26
b. Knowledge of how to practically translate training practices into an education setting	7	26

9 needs that could improve their work. After the intervention, 14 themes were reported related to the impact of trauma-informed training on their ability to teach students. Table 2 presents the 7 most prevalent themes that emerged from the data, plus 14 supporting subthemes.

Theme 1: Difficult to Manage Student Behaviors

Subtheme a. Participants commonly identified behaviors that cause students to shut down as difficult to manage, including students putting their heads down, sleeping in class, not doing assigned work, and openly disengaging from class participation. These findings are represented in the following quotes:

“I think shutting down is one of my more difficult ones [student behaviors] . . . to try to engage them when they’re shut down, their head is down sometimes they’ll use profanity to get you away from them. That’s the hardest for me to try to get them engaged when they’re in that mode.”

“A lot of them are just good at laying there and putting their head down and not answering you or acknowledging anything that you’re saying, and sometimes they’ll move past it and get back up for the most part. But the downright refusal to do the work, it’s, ‘it doesn’t count here,’ ‘it doesn’t matter.’”

Subtheme b. Participants identified that students’ internal distractions are even more difficult to manage,

including being off-task and focused on things unrelated to school work. This behavior is considered internal, as there is no known external stimulus present when the distraction takes place (ie, class disruption). Rather, it is produced from the students’ own difficulty paying attention during instructional time. This subtheme is shown in the following quotes:

“I see kids playing with phones, being distracted, and I’ll try to get them on task. I’ll even go as far as to create a lesson plan that’s geared more towards the things that they are interested in . . . and it is the kids that refuse to pay attention and be interested at all.”

“And my biggest thing is preoccupation, when they got their minds focused on other places other than school.”

Theme 2: Behaviors Teachers Feel Competent to Manage

Subtheme a. Participants reported feeling competent in their ability to build rapport and trust with students, showing interest through intentional positive interactions. The following quotes reflect this subtheme:

“I think that I am pretty good at establishing a relationship with children, kids, young people right away, quickly, just by casual talk asking them what they are interested in . . .”

“I think one of our strengths is developing trust and maintaining that trust in a very positive working relationship with the students over the course of the class.”

Subtheme b. Participants also reported feeling competent in their ability to manage extensive behavioral problems in the classroom, including student escalation, anger, profanity, and other defiant acting out. This subtheme was encapsulated in the following quotes:

“When they [students] are loud and they’re cussing me out, or they’re showing aggression, then I feel like I can verbally de-escalate them, and I can get in a non-threatening posture towards them . . . once I open up and I show them basically open palms that ‘I’m not trying to hurt you, I just want to get the issue resolved,’ that sometimes calms them back down.”

“ . . . I feel most comfortable with the kids with anger issues . . . like breaking up fights and people getting pissed and going to smash something, those are the kids I work- I think I work well with those ones.”

Theme 3: Behaviors Related to Trauma

Subtheme a. Participants associated guardedness with common behavior of traumatized students, manifested in lack of trust, self-disclosure avoidance, and rejection of meaningful connections with other

individuals. These quotes provide evidence for this subtheme:

“They [students] have a distrust. They don’t trust anyone.”

“Their [students’] guardedness. They don’t want to share with you. They keep everything inside, you ask them a personal question or you just ask them how has their day been going, they don’t want to answer, they keep everything within them.”

Subtheme b. Participants identified shutting down as another behavior common to this population, including sleeping, putting heads down, purposely disengaging from activities, and demonstrating general apathy toward class participation. The following quotes exemplify this subtheme:

“They have reached the point where they are just like ‘this [traumatic experience] always happens to me’ . . . they lose interest in everything else because of their experiences.”

“I will say sleeping. Sometimes the girls don’t have a good night’s sleep and just to get away sometimes when they have the trauma, that [sleeping] is something that happens.”

Theme 4: Behaviors Related to Attachment Issues

Subtheme a. Participants recognized possessiveness as a behavior prevalent among students with attachment issues, including students’ immediate attachment to people or objects and extreme anger responses when attachment is compromised. Students become territorial over teachers, staff, and even small items such as pencils and folders. This was reflected in the following quotes:

“ . . . sometimes the student will come in so irate if they misplaced things that belong to them. It could be a special pencil, a special note book, anything- it would just set them off . . . It becomes a big issue with them.”

“It might actually mean more to some kids, because you know how they are pretty much out of a home, so they don’t have anything that’s specifically theirs . . . so it develops a bigger meaning to them because they never had anything.”

Subtheme b. Participants also recognized that students with attachment issues demonstrate difficulty in maintaining appropriate boundaries. These students become close to teachers and school staff and begin to interact in ways inappropriate for the school setting, including constantly requesting personal touch, referring to school personnel as relatives (ie, mom, dad, aunt), and not respecting others’ personal space. Examples are exhibited in the following quotes:

“One of the things that we see is that they [students] want to attach to you . . . they’re your favorite, they’re your friend, they follow you around, they want to be the pencil captain, they want to help you with everything, and they overattach in some ways to the teachers because in some ways we present a safe image to them.”

“It’s almost like you become a parent figure and sometimes there are even personal space issues. They [students] want to be in your space, touching you all the time, hugs; and once they get a hug you have to pry them off almost, it’s like they are overattached.”

Theme 5: Needs Prior to Intervention

Subtheme a. Prior to the intervention, participants identified a need for greater knowledge about trauma, attachment, and self-harm behaviors, including how to address reports of self-harm, manage trauma and attachment-related behaviors, and balance teacher roles with students’ emotional needs. The following quotes demonstrate this need:

“I’d like to learn some strategies for how to deal with students who have attachment issues, and trauma, and what are some ways that usually work with them, and just have a bigger bag of tricks.”

“ . . . I’m a teacher, I don’t have training for psychology or social work or something like that, but the kids almost expect that from you, especially in an environment like this. . . . It’s difficult; it’s hard to find that balance without that training.”

Subtheme b. Participants also identified a need for proper self-care prior to the intervention, as working with traumatized students can be especially stressful, affecting them on a personal level and contributing to feelings of burnout. Participants also expressed a need for administrative policies that can emotionally support them in their work with students. This is displayed in the following quotes:

“Although we are trying to form all these different relationships and trying to meet the needs of all the girls you still have to take that time out for yourself also. Because if not, you’ll be frazzled in the first month. You won’t have anything else to give.”

“Especially when they [students] do get that rapport with you, they want to dump it all [student problems], they want to tell you all of it. And more times than not, teachers are nurturers at heart. We’re nurturers, we’re lovable, we’re caring, we’re empathetic, we’re those type of people . . . so you have to have that balance where, ‘OK, I can listen to your problems, maybe give you some advice about it, but not take everything on’ because it’s emotionally draining.”

Theme 6: Impact of Intervention

Subtheme a. Participants also reported that the intervention demonstrated the need for utilizing alternative instructional methods with students rather than using traditional methods. Teachers became aware of how traditional practices may need to be substituted for more accommodating styles of interaction. The following quotes express this subtheme:

“I’ve overcome the barrier of trying to suspend everybody . . . I will put you all out so that I don’t have to deal with the problem . . . but the problem is going to come right back in the next 3 days, so that’s one thing I had to overcome.”

“ . . . sometimes the lesson is secondary to how a student is feeling, how a student is able to cope with what they’re dealing with that day . . . so it [the training] allowed me to feel more comfortable taking time out to build relationships . . . instead of just coming in and saying ‘OK we’re going to learn, learn, learn today.’ ”

Subtheme b. After the intervention, participants reported that the trauma-informed training gave them better insight into student behaviors, including negative student behaviors that have generally been used to label students as “bad” or defiant, but are now understood to be student responses to the residue of previous trauma. This subtheme is reflected in the following quotes:

“I learned that the trauma that our students have experienced affects- has an effect on their learning. And you have to be conscious of that while teaching, it has to be trauma informed, it has to be gentle teaching, you have to keep that trauma part in the front.”

“They [students] might not be able to articulate why they’re acting like that, they can’t tell you why, but through these professional developments we see behind the scenes a little bit more. They might not be able to say ‘I’m acting like that because somebody beat me up last year.’ ”

Theme 7: Needs Postintervention

Subtheme a. After the intervention, participants identified a new need for improvements in communication with staff at the co-located residential program on campus. They expressed frustration with not having a clear system of communication with key personnel at the agency, including child welfare workers and clinical therapists, in order to proactively address student problems. The following quotes demonstrate this need:

“I don’t think there’s a regular structure, but there are certain people within the staff that seem to be in the know versus others . . . and those staff members will share

certain details . . . it [communication] happens on the spot not necessarily in advance.”

“My barriers weren’t so much with the students, just forming a relationship with [agency] staff- kids coming in, saying they’ve got things- drama they’re going through. I need to have confirmation with staff to what’s really going on . . . ”

Subtheme b. Participants also expressed a new need for strategies on how to translate their trauma training knowledge into practices conducive to an education setting. They conveyed a lack of clarity regarding how to execute their roles as teachers and school staff, while maintaining a focus on trauma-informed practices. This subtheme is exhibited in the following quotes:

“Relating it [the training] more back to the education . . . like some of it didn’t transfer over to the classroom . . . ”

“How do we work out the balance between the trauma and the education? . . . ultimately we’re a school and we’re supposed to be educating, yet we can’t unless we treat- deal with the trauma. And how do we keep it so that we don’t let the trauma part get overwhelming and the education drop or the education get overwhelming and the trauma fall aside? We’ve got to really strike that balance, and how do we do that?”

DISCUSSION

Two significant challenges in working with traumatized students are shutting down behaviors and internal distractions (Theme 1). However, school personnel felt capable of building positive, trusting relationships and managing escalated behaviors (Theme 2). This is contrary to other studies reporting student acting out as a major challenge for teachers.¹⁷ Theme 3 demonstrates how participants relate previous traumatic experiences to student guardedness and behaviors relevant to shutting down, while attachment-related behaviors were identified as student possessiveness and difficulty maintaining appropriate boundaries (Theme 4).

Prior to the intervention, school personnel expressed a need for knowledge about trauma, attachment, and student self-harm, plus strategies for proper self-care (Theme 5). This is consistent with Ko et al,²¹ who discuss a general lack of trauma training among educators. This also demonstrates the need to improve school climate for court-involved students, as it impacts teaching efficacy,²⁵ teacher job satisfaction,²⁶ and teacher confidence.²⁷

After the intervention, school personnel reported understanding the importance of compromise with students and reported improved insight into previously stigmatizing student behaviors (Theme 6). When

traditional authoritarian methods are used with traumatized students, they become entangled in classroom struggles for power and control, hindering learning and creating adverse learning environments. When traditional punitive discipline methods are used (ie, out of school suspension and expulsion), students later return to the classroom with unresolved and even exacerbated academic and emotional challenges. When teachers and staff recognize potential trauma-related behavior and negotiate with students, the school becomes a safer and more welcoming environment. As discussed earlier, educators in settings with traumatized youth may perceive student behavior as apathy,²⁸ defiance, or other forms of mental illness.^{32,33} The intervention helped several teachers and school staff make the connection between trauma exposure and classroom behavior and learning. This provided opportunities for school personnel to forge more understanding and compassionate relationships with students, also gaining perspective on how their interactions with students impacted the climate of the classroom.

However, further barriers exist. Participants identified new needs after the intervention, including improvement in staff communication and methods for translating training practices into an education setting (Theme 7). This highlights the importance of cross-system communication to improve academic environments for court-involved students. Similar to the findings of Alisic,²⁰ there is a continued need to define the roles of school personnel, improve their knowledge and skills, provide clear strategies, and increase their confidence in working with this student population.

Limitations

The restriction of the study sample being confined to one school building may not provide for generalizable results. This group of school personnel works exclusively with court-involved girls. Teachers who work with young men may identify different challenges that need to be addressed for that specific subpopulation of court-involved youth.

Conclusions

Despite limitations, findings from this research may provide useful insight into the needs of educators in traditional academic settings. Teachers and school staff working with court-involved students have a unique and challenging role to play in the lives of these youth. Student trauma creates significant impediments to learning and requires teachers to have trauma-specific knowledge, proper self-care, and support from administration to employ creative and nontraditional teaching strategies. School staff also needs to understand how to translate this knowledge

into classroom and schoolwide strategies. Exploring the perceptions of school staff and providing trauma-informed training helps ensure their awareness of and competence in working with court-involved youth and addressing the challenges to health and well-being experienced by this unique student population.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SCHOOL HEALTH

These findings reflect the need for aggressive revisions to practice and policies in educational settings that service court-involved students. Implications for practice include informing and consistently training school staff on the effects of trauma on educational well-being. Also, teaching staff should be mindful of how lesson plans may impact the behavior of traumatized students. For example, writing assignments may need to focus less on family experiences and should avoid terminology that may alienate students from nontraditional family structures.¹⁷ Otherwise, writing assignments may trigger trauma responses and impede students from being able to complete coursework requirements.¹³ Emerson and Lovitt¹³ also recommend that teachers and school support staff include self-determination and social skills training in their work with students, as social skills may promote academic success with emotionally impaired students.⁴¹

Implications for school policies include school administrators promoting collaborative and supportive environments to raise staff confidence^{25,28} and student success.^{26,28} Also, policies should foster a community-wide, trauma-focused approach with consistent cross-system communication between teachers, school staff, and other child-serving professionals, such as child welfare workers, juvenile justice professionals, and mental health therapists. Overall, school administrators should develop policies that support the use of evidence-based educational practices, providing PD to all school staff in order to undergird these practices, and implementing systems of evaluation to monitor their effectiveness.¹⁹ The voice of teachers and school staff is imperative to effectively implementing these strategies.

Human Subjects Approval Statement

A university-based institutional review board approved this study and the use of human subjects.

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