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# Trauma and Triggers: Students' Perspectives on Enhancing the Classroom Experiences at an Alternative Residential Treatment-Based School

*Angelique Gabrielle Day, Beverly Baroni, Cheryl Somers, Jenna Shier, Meredith Zammit, Shantel Crosby, Jina Yoon, Megan Pennefather, and Jun Sung Hong*

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Youths in residential treatment (RT) are often burdened with histories of trauma exposure and experience a multitude of unique challenges for both daily functioning and developmental trajectories. Youths spend a large portion of their day in school; these educational experiences affect long-term well-being. This study uses qualitative focus group methodology to better understand the school experiences of youths placed in an RT educational environment. The sample consisted of 45 female residents placed in out-of-home care due to a child welfare or delinquency petition. Several key themes emerged that illustrate youth perceptions of the climate of RT, how strict discipline schools can affect mood, and what factors promote or hinder school engagement and disengagement. These themes included issues related to interactions with residential and school staff, teachers, classmates, and other staff; their own inability to interpersonally cope; and mismatches between their educational needs and services provided. The article concludes with a discussion of implications for policy and practice.

KEY WORDS: *education well-being; foster care; juvenile delinquency; youth voice*

Youths in residential treatment (RT) facilities are often burdened with trauma histories and experience academic, behavioral, and emotional problems (Abram et al., 2004; Ford, Chapman, Connor, & Cruise, 2012), which limit opportunities for a healthy, successful future (Wolpow, Johnson, Hertel, & Kincaid, 2009). The number of children and adolescents admitted to RT programs has increased significantly since 1980 (Doerfler, Toscano, Volungis, & Steingard, 2004; Zelechowski et al., 2013). Zelechowski et al. (2013) reported that 65,949 youths were in residential care in 2003; 75 percent were between the ages of 13 and 17 (Warner & Pottick, 2003), and 66 percent of youths in RT programs are female (Briggs et al., 2012). Trauma exposure among adolescents placed in RT programs ranges from 50 percent to over 70 percent (Bettmann, Lundahl, Wright, Jaspersen, & McRoberts, 2011; Warner & Pottick, 2003; Zelechowski et al., 2013). RT programs offer services that include drug and alcohol treatment, confidence building, military-style discipline, and psychological counseling for a variety of addiction, behavioral, and emotional problems. Many of these programs are intended to provide a less restrictive alternative to incarceration or

hospitalization (Federal Trade Commission, 2008). Adolescents who are placed in an RT facility typically have experienced a wide range of psychiatric disorders, particularly traumatic stress. Traumatic stress can stem from physical, sexual, or emotional abuse; neglect; accidents; exposure to domestic and community violence; natural disasters; and other adverse events (Griffin et al., 2011). Studies suggest that early traumatic stress is linked to future psychiatric care, poor mental and physical health throughout life, low educational attainment, homelessness, early pregnancy, poverty, unemployment, reliance on public assistance, impulsivity, dissociation, aggressive behavior, and relationship difficulties (Price, Higa-McMillan, Kim, & Frueh, 2013; Zelechowski et al., 2013).

Educational opportunities vary greatly in RT settings, from off-campus, public school partnerships in the local community to educational services offered on-site at the RT facility. Although traumatic experiences can affect students in public school environments (Overstreet & Mathews, 2011; Smithgall, Cusick, & Griffin, 2013; Vidourek, King, & Merianos, 2016), youths in RT school settings may have unique trauma-related issues (Crosby, Day,

Baroni, & Somers, 2015; Day et al., 2015). This article is restricted to understanding the educational experiences of RT youths in educational programs offered on-site at an RT facility. Effective schooling for foster and other adjudicated youths can lead to more positive outcomes (Mathur & Schoenfeld, 2010); however, traumatic stress may affect adolescents' perceptions, interactions, and learning (Hoagwood & Cunningham, 1992). The current study was designed to address the paucity of research that has been conducted to explore the role of RT schools in the healing and treatment of traumatized, court-involved youths who are placed in RT programs.

At school, students are expected to concentrate on their schoolwork, actively listen, participate in class discussions, and respond to corrections and discipline (Wolpow et al., 2009). For adolescents in an RT facility, school expectations may be compromised by trauma, which can undermine cognitive abilities and skills acquisition key to school success (Smithgall et al., 2013; Snowman & McCown, 2012). Trauma exposure may also lead to social and behavioral difficulties in the classroom; students who have experienced traumatic events exhibit more externalizing behaviors in school, such as aggressiveness, impulsivity, and fighting (Shonk & Cicchetti, 2001; Smithgall et al., 2013). As a result, these behavioral difficulties often lead to harsh school discipline (for example, suspension or expulsion), involvement in the juvenile justice system, or school dropout (Baroni, Day, Somers, Crosby, & Pennefather, 2016; Smithgall et al., 2013).

RTs must include an emphasis on academics in addition to custodial care. Successful implementation of quality academic programs in RT facilities is complicated by the characteristics of struggling youths and the design of RT facilities. Indeed, court-involved youths bring skill deficits, severe behavioral issues, and mental health challenges into the classroom; moreover, RT facilities are held accountable to security and safety considerations that largely supersede any educational efforts (Mathur & Schoenfeld, 2010). Specific, attainable, program-based changes with buy-in from students have the potential to make a genuine difference in the educational outcomes of court-involved youths. From a social-emotional perspective, effective RT schools must increase school engagement by creating a climate that promotes (a) positive teacher-student relationships, (b) positive peer relationships, (c) a personal sense of self, and (d) an ability to manage

emotions (Becker & Luthar, 2002). Identifying interpersonal cognitive problem solving as part of soft skill development, including social competence, is often a goal for education-based RT programs to address student engagement and disengagement (Small & Schinike, 1983).

To address the gap in understanding how schools in RT facilities meet the educational needs of court-involved youths, this study seeks to apply phenomenology (Palmer, Larkin, de Visser, & Fadden, 2010) to explore traumatized RT students' often hidden perspectives and lived experiences in their education environment. Recent research has illustrated the connection between students' moods and emotional states and their ability to engage effectively in the classroom (Crosby et al., 2015; West, Day, Somers, & Baroni, 2014; Wolpow et al., 2009). In the current study, we explore the following research question: What factors trigger negative moods (school disengagement) or enhance positive moods (school engagement) among court-involved youths enrolled in an RT facility school, and how do students perceive how RT staff, teachers, and other school officials respond to behaviors manifested in the academic setting?

## METHOD

### Description of Curriculum and Intervention

The school where the study took place implemented a modified version of the curriculum described in *The Heart of Teaching and Learning: Compassion, Resiliency, and Academic Success* (HTL) as the primary intervention (Wolpow et al., 2009). HTL is an integrated, manualized curriculum founded on research, theory, and clinical practice and is grounded in ecological and attachment theories applied using psychoeducational, cognitive-behavioral, and relational approaches. Additional information on the curriculum intervention is described in Day et al. (2015).

In addition to the curriculum intervention, the school implemented the Monarch Room (MR) as an alternative to traditional school discipline practices, to increase classroom seat time and maximize school engagement. When students become too escalated to remain in the classroom setting, they are sent to the MR for redirection and de-escalation or choose to go to the MR on their own. Once students are in the MR, a trauma-trained paraprofessional helps them de-escalate, refocus, and return to class. Various intervention strategies are used in the MR, including problem solving, talk therapy, and sensorimotor activities. The

MR is available throughout the school day, with each specific MR episode lasting approximately 10 minutes. Additional details describing the MR intervention are published in [Baroni et al. \(2016\)](#).

### Participants and Study Site

Participants included 45 randomly selected female students currently or previously involved in juvenile court. All study participants were enrolled between September 2013 and June 2014 in a public, chartered, strict discipline academy colocated at a large child welfare placement agency for girls in a midwestern state. Eighty-six percent were current residents in the facility, and 14 percent had returned to the community but continued attending the school. Participants were ages 13 to 19 years. Similar to the rates of foster care youths in the Midwest, over 60 percent of the study participants were African American ([U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, 2012](#)). The racial and ethnic composition and age of the study participants is representative of the school enrollment as a whole and is consistent with the national prevalence rates of juvenile justice-involved youths of color who experience placement in RT facilities ([Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2013](#)) (see Table 1). Individual-level demographic data (student race and age) were obtained from the school's administrative database and de-identified before they were provided to the research team for analysis.

The study site is a school that provides educational services exclusively to female students who are or have been in an RT facility, and all have experienced exposure to child abuse and neglect. Due to these traumatic histories, the majority of enrolled students are three to four years below standard grade level. Also, average length of stay in the RT facility is four to six months. Despite these limitations, 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.

### Procedures and Data Collection

The study was approved by the institutional review board at Wayne State University. Information about the study was distributed to participants and their legal guardians during school registration. An assumed consent process was used, whereby students, their caregivers, or both could opt out of participation at any time. The phenomenological approach provides the opportunity to uncover hidden processes and phenomena ([Palmer et al., 2010](#)), which is critical to understanding the unique needs and experiences of this vulnerable population. Six focus groups were conducted by independent researchers and were held at the school building where the intervention was targeted. Although not commonly used in phenomenology, focus group

**Table 1: Characteristics of Student Focus Group Participants versus Total School Population**

| Characteristic    | Study Participants<br>(n = 45) |      | Total School Population<br>(N = 124) |      |
|-------------------|--------------------------------|------|--------------------------------------|------|
|                   | n                              | %    | n                                    | %    |
| Race or ethnicity |                                |      |                                      |      |
| White             | 3                              | 7.0  | 26                                   | 21.0 |
| African American  | 29                             | 64.0 | 66                                   | 53.2 |
| Other             | 4                              | 9.0  | 8                                    | 6.4  |
| Multiracial       | 9                              | 20.0 | 24                                   | 19.4 |
| Age (years)       |                                |      |                                      |      |
| 13                | 1                              | 2.0  | 8                                    | 6.0  |
| 14                | 2                              | 4.5  | 17                                   | 14.0 |
| 15                | 8                              | 18.0 | 21                                   | 17.0 |
| 16                | 22                             | 49.0 | 43                                   | 35.0 |
| 17                | 10                             | 22.0 | 28                                   | 23.0 |
| 18                | 2                              | 4.5  | 6                                    | 5.0  |
| 19                | 0                              | 0.0  | 1                                    | <1   |

Note: For race or ethnicity,  $\chi^2(5) = 5.836, p = .32$ ; for age,  $\chi^2(6) = 4.538, p = .60$ .

methodology was selected 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, inter-group 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. In addition, middle and high school girls participated in separate focus groups to ensure that younger student voices were not compromised. Students were asked five open-ended questions: (1) If your mood changes throughout the day, what makes it change? (2) When I am having a bad moment at school, what helps is . . . ; (3) When I am having a bad moment at school, what makes it worse is . . . ; (4) How do your teachers and the school staff react to you when you are having a bad moment at school? and (5) If you were principal for a day, what advice would you give to teachers to work with students like yourself?

Three focus groups each were held in September 2013 and June 2014. Each group consisted of six to eight students and lasted for approximately one hour. Students were randomly selected to participate in focus groups and were informed that participation was strictly voluntary. All selected participants agreed to and participated in the focus groups. Two participants who preferred not to verbalize their comments during the focus groups were provided blank sheets of paper and were asked to share their responses in writing. These written comments were collected and added to the end of the focus group transcript before analysis was conducted. Focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

### Data Analysis

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 uploaded into NVivo (version 10) (QSR International, 2010), and reports were run to assess prevalence rates by theme across all transcripts.

### FINDINGS

Seven major themes and subthemes, along with their prevalence rates, are all displayed in Table 2.

#### Theme 1: Classroom Dynamics

Students identified several classroom dynamics that impeded learning progress: boredom, non-challenging assignments, constant classroom disruptions, and teachers' inability to respond timely to questions about the curriculum, as reflected in the following quotes:

I think school is too easy, like, there is no challenge. I think that is why you get bored so quick, 'cause in real school you have challenges, this school they just give you kindergarten work.

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Deal with they [student] attitudes even if you Dfeel like they being wild and obnoxious . . . you have 10 or 15 other students in the class that have attitudes and you hear them say, oh my gosh, can you go head on with the, uh, lesson 'cause they feel like they really tryin' to learn work.

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I had a test to do, and I was, like, I need help on this, kept asking them. Five minutes go by and I asked her and she *assumes* I'm being sarcastic about the help. But I asked her for help, then when the test came around and I'm like, I don't know this stuff, she want to get mad at me 'cause. . . I asked you five days ago to help me, now you sitting here cutting me up.

#### Theme 2: Family Issues External to the School Environment Affect Learning

Students described how personal family issues affected classroom learning. Specifically, students described their family environments prior to placement in residential treatment.

**Table 2: Major Themes of the Study Findings**

| <b>Theme</b>   | <b>Total Student References (n)</b> | <b>Focus Group's Theme Appeared (n)</b> | <b>Unduplicated Students Refs (n)</b> |
|--|-------------------------------------|---|---------------------------------------|
| <b>1. Classroom dynamics</b>   |                                     |   |                                       |
| Boredom: "I hate being bored. I get real irritated and I'll just go off on a teacher, I probably get sent back to the building."   | 33                                  | 3                                       | 14                                    |
| Classroom disruptions: "Everybody tryna do they work . . . ; it's people talking, and then the teachers gotta stop and they lose focus on what's going on."  | 38                                  | 4                                       | 24                                    |
| Lack of challenging work: "In real school you have challenges; this school . . . , kindergarten work."   | 19                                  | 3                                       | 9                                     |
| Slow response rates on teacher feedback and assistance with classwork: "I was, like, I need help on this, kept asking them. Five minutes go by and I asked her, and she gonna say I'm being sarcastic about the help."   | 56                                  | 6                                       | 28                                    |
| Total  | 146                                 |   | 75                                    |
| <b>2. Family issues external to school</b>   |                                     |   |                                       |
| "You dealin' with so much that's goin' on at home. Your family don't think about you when you be here. They (teachers) don't think about how it's goin' to affect you."  | 27                                  | 6                                       | 24                                    |
| Total  | 27                                  |   | 24                                    |
| <b>3. Interpersonal behavior and challengess</b>   |                                     |   |                                       |
| Avoidance: "I just ignore 'em. I leave it alone because it's not worth it."  | 29                                  | 6                                       | 23                                    |
| Peer conflict: "If you hit me then I'm gonna hit back, but it's gonna be ten times harder 'cause when I get mad, I just blank out, I just see red and black."  | 50                                  | 6                                       | 31                                    |
| Problem-solving skills: "I be trying to problem solve like, I think before I act now, you know, rather than just hit before I think."  | 32                                  | 5                                       | 23                                    |
| Thinking about positive things, future: "So I think to myself, you're about home soon, you about to see your dad again, see your mom again, you have to do a lot of stuff—you about to let that ruin everything?"  | 24                                  | 3                                       | 17                                    |
| Verbal reactions: "I get real angry and I say bad things, but I wouldn't wanna fight. 'Cause I'm not a fighter, but I just talk stuff."  | 50                                  | 4                                       | 28                                    |
| Total  | 185                                 |   | 122                                   |
| <b>4. Recommendations to improve school climate</b>  |                                     |   |                                       |
| Extracurriculars: "I think y'all should come up with more activities, like sports after school."   | 21                                  | 2                                       | 15                                    |
| Food: "We got processed food. This food don't ever get cooked; it's just warmed up."   | 52                                  | 5                                       | 18                                    |
| Living arrangements: "They're grown but they still don't clean up after they self. It be vicious everywhere, the floor, in the kitchen. It's just nasty."  | 19                                  | 3                                       | 12                                    |
| Monarch Room: "I think we should have more peer counseling. Say for instance, I'm in the Monarch Room and I ask, can they call one of my peers outta class so I can talk to this person because I can't talk to the staff about what I really wanna talk about." | 54                                  | 5                                       | 26                                    |
| Total  | 146                                 |   | 71                                    |
| <b>5. Peers</b>  |                                     |   |                                       |
| Creating drama: "It's so much drama, like all you hear all day is gossiping."  | 73                                  | 5                                       | 18                                    |
| Disrespectful actions: "People put themselves in the category of a young lady, but that's not what young ladies do—act catty all the time, cuss all the time."   | 105                                 | 6                                       | 35                                    |

(Continued)

**Table 2: Major Themes of the Study Findings (Continued)**

| Theme  | Total Student References (n) | Focus Group's Theme Appeared (n) | Unduplicated Students Refs (n) |
|--|------------------------------|----------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Positive influences: "I hang around mostly leaders in this school, positive people, and that just helps me."   | 17                           | 4                                | 18                             |
| Total  | 195                          |                                  | 71                             |
| 6. Residential treatment staff   |                              |                                  |                                |
| Helping behaviors: "They give you good advice and make you feel up when you down."   | 35                           | 6                                | 27                             |
| Lack of training, unprofessional behavior: "Half of these staffs be sitting here talking about other students; students be going back and tell students what the staff said."  | 104                          | 6                                | 27                             |
| Overly restrictive behaviors: "When you actually sit there and see that a kid don't do nothing but obey and just be consistent in doing what they have to do to out they treatment, they still being locked up. They don't have leeway; they can't go out to the mall with open placements." | 93                           | 6                                | 29                             |
| Total  | 232                          |                                  | 83                             |
| 7. Teachers  |                              |                                  |                                |
| Intrusive communication: "They don't care if you havin' a bad day, they just wanna keep askin' you what's wrong—I don't wanna talk about it."  | 73                           | 6                                | 28                             |
| Negative behaviors: "The teacher don't be even trying to be teaching; they just be letting the kids do whatever they wanna do."  | 82                           | 6                                | 33                             |
| Positive behaviors: "She always support me, like when she would see that I'm down, she come see me if I didn't even ask her. Like, she helped me if I needed any question or any extra help in our classes."   | 42                           | 5                                | 25                             |
| Supportive communication: "Every time she see me cry she give me a hug and ask me do I need to go somewhere to talk about it."   | 26                           | 6                                | 24                             |
| Total  | 223                          |                                  | 110                            |

Every day the things besides just school affects them every day, and that can also have a drastic change 'cause it can take over their mind, and when they are actually in the classroom and they are exacted to do one thing, they've got a million other things running through their mind and it's hard for them, it is.

\*\*\*

For one, my momma call me bitches and hoes all day every day at home; I get that enough from my momma, so to come in here and get locked up with a bunch of females I don't know calling out my name and I don't even respect my sister; well, I respect them, I don't get along with them.

### Theme 3: Interpersonal Behaviors and Challenges

Six interpersonal dynamics impeded or facilitated classroom learning: peer conflict, perceived mistreatment,

avoidance, desire for problem-solving skills, positive relationships, and understanding the benefits of educational attainment. Interpersonal factors that impeded classroom learning were conflicts with peers and perceived mistreatment by residential facility staff and school faculty. Avoidance both inhibited and promoted positive classroom learning. These behaviors included avoiding physical and verbal altercations when these situations presented themselves, as well as choosing to avoid friendships and connections with teachers and residential treatment staff. Interpersonal strategies that fostered a positive learning environment were the desire to learn problem-solving skills, develop relationships with "positive" people, and understand connections between educational attainment and employment opportunities.

You come in an environment or on a campus with lots of kids that have problems or issues that they can't solve, and they need someone

to talk to. It be kinda frustrating for a minute and then it's like, people blow it out of proportion to keep nagging or keep you frustrated over the same thing.

\*\*\*

What helps me is probably being around positive people, 'cause I try to hang around positive people 'cause I've had so many negative things in my life that I don't need any more negativity.

#### **Theme 4: Recommendations for Improving School Climate**

Students offered the following suggestions for improving school climate and culture: access to extracurricular activities, provision of elective courses, tutoring opportunities, and access to high school traditions (for example, yearbooks, dances, field trips). Students also discussed how food can affect their ability to learn. They were provided with three meals a day; however, students stated that they needed access to additional meals. Students said they would have a more positive attitude if they felt full.

[I think y'all should] come up with more activities, like sports after school . . . yeah, volleyball, basketball, I like volleyball . . . track.

\*\*\*

I feel like they should have, like, parenting classes or something, like, that will help them get out of here when they leave here and they can be a better parent for their child or just know what to do, instead of be like, "Oh, when I go home I'm gonna see my baby, then I'm gonna leave for a couples of hours and go get high."

\*\*\*

They say we might not be able to get yearbooks because some of the people that's graduating are from residential, and I feel that's not fair.

\*\*\*

You know you be cranky if you don't eat; I gotta eat at least six times a day.

#### **Theme 5: Peer Dynamics**

Students described how classmates instigated "unnecessary drama," such as engaging in physical and verbal altercations and gossip. Classmates were described as being disrespectful to one another and residential and

school staff. Still, students expressed wanting friendships and positive interactions with their peers.

It's so much drama, like [name of residential unit] all you hear is gossiping, 'cause that's all girls, who they don't like, you can't like a person when they first got there; you don't even know me. That's how I feel.

\*\*\*

I was close to going home and I was telling people, yeah, I'm going home, and I was telling people this and then they start bringing you down with them so you can stay here longer.

#### **Theme 6: Dynamics Involving RT Care Staff**

Students described how RT staff implemented overly restrictive rules and regulations and displayed unprofessional behaviors. On the other hand, they also described how RT staff helped in the treatment process, and perceived them as positive role models. In addition, students provided recommendations for training of residential staff to improve student-staff relationships.

What makes me more mad is when I'm in a situation and then every staff worker from [name of residential unit] just come out, then they say step out the classroom . . . they have you repeat the same story over and over again.

\*\*\*

Give them, give the kids respect; we all going through something.

#### **Theme 7: Dynamics with School Faculty and Other School Staff**

Last, students discussed interactions with faculty and other school employees. Specifically, they discussed how teachers remove misbehaving students from classrooms and how students and other school personnel sometimes disregard their opinions. Students also expressed concerns about how teacher turnover might affect learning. They also discussed how some teachers were supportive of student interests.

Before he left, he [math teacher] was teaching us a different thing in math, but then when another teacher came in; she teaches it in a totally different way than he did. So it got some of the kids

in that class so frustrated, then we just don't do the work no more.

\*\*\*

Please don't disregard these kids' opinions because, um, you know, we some, some of [us] are some smart kids. We some smart children.

## DISCUSSION

This study found several prevalent themes related to student social, emotional, and academic functioning that both promote and hinder school engagement and disengagement in a residential school environment, including classroom dynamics; external trauma triggers; interpersonal and other factors; and issues with peers, residential staff, and school faculty. When discussing classroom dynamics, students reported feeling bored, explained that their work was not challenging, and also felt that teachers did not respond to questions efficiently. This may have been due, in part, to the high prevalence of court-involved students who test below their academic grade level (Courtney, Terao, & Bost, 2004) and the difficulty of arranging classrooms to accommodate needs due to limited physical space and student and staff turnover. In addition, due to high student turnover and lack of timely access to school records for incoming transfers, students' academic abilities may be unknown. Therefore, teachers must juggle covering lessons to accommodate academically challenged students with addressing the academic needs of those who are more advanced. In addition, students pointed out that teachers do not always manage student behavior with trauma sensitivity. School faculty need to be mindful of students' traumatic histories and how trauma can manifest in the academic setting. This demonstrates a need for deeper trauma training, as well as efficient methods of training new teaching staff to get them up to speed quickly, including the need for implementation of classroom observations and coaching to ensure that teachers are able to appropriately translate trauma theory into classroom practice. Some teachers have personal trauma histories that can be retriggered through student interaction. Teachers with personal trauma backgrounds need to ensure that they get therapeutic interventions before entering the classroom.

Another major finding is external problems that hinder ability to thrive. Similar to other studies focusing on students in both public (Overstreet & Mathews, 2011; Smithgall et al., 2013; Vidourek

et al., 2016) and RT school settings (Crosby et al., 2015; Day et al., 2015), students reported experiencing stress before entering the classroom due to overwhelming socioemotional histories and peer or familial concerns. Students may become consumed by personal dilemmas that may prohibit school performance and attendance, and they are unable to focus on lessons when they are truant. Furthermore, the girls explained that interpersonal issues that manifest in the classroom can be distracting. These classrooms are filled with students whose emotional, psychological, and physical needs are unmet. Therefore, it is difficult to have students focus on education-related tasks. To prepare them to better manage educational demands, students desire better problem-solving skills to help them cope in the classroom and understand how those skills can translate to future environments.

Students reported that some RT facility staff have had a strong, positive influence on school engagement and socioemotional well-being. However, students also described the negative attitudes and behaviors of RT staff, which negatively affect student learning and engagement in the school environment. Moreover, they explained that when they felt upset and disengaged in the classroom (that is, putting their heads down and not attending to class material), RT staff resorted to the use of punitive measures (that is, taking away a home pass) rather than trying to understand the reason for classroom disengagement. RT and school staff should work collectively to identify and implement interventions that are consistently applied across both systems. The restriction of access to biological parents and siblings does little to support general health or education well-being. These issues highlight how cross-system dynamics can both impede and support education well-being for students in RT settings. When interacting on school grounds, RT staff need to respond to behaviors in a consistent manner aligned with the school's philosophy. Previous studies asserted that well-qualified, trained RT staff members help reduce recidivism rates, and emphasis on education in the treatment process is the most impactful way to influence behavior (Lowenkamp, Flores, Holsinger, Makarios, & Latessa, 2010; Mathur & Schoenfeld, 2010).

Several students verbalized the importance of food in mood stabilization and school engagement. Attention must be paid to students' physical health and how the amounts and the types of foods offered



may affect student learning. For example, some students may be struggling with blood sugar issues that necessitate the need for more frequent, smaller meals throughout the day. In addition, pregnant students, who are often overrepresented in alternative schools, may also have different nutritional needs. The three-square-meals-per-day general state guidelines offered by public health officials for implementation in schools may not apply to adolescents enrolled in residential-based, alternative school environments, such as those attending strict discipline academies. Challenges to implementing changes in food consumption and delivery include the fact that schools and RT facilities do not have all-day cafeterias. In addition, students may need nutritional education training to ensure that they make healthy food choices for themselves (and any unborn children).

Finally, students suggested that extracurricular activities, tutoring, access to various school traditions (that is, school yearbooks, dances, field trips), and for pregnant and parenting students access to parenting classes would enhance overall school experience and promote school engagement. Challenges to the implementation of extracurriculars include the fact that RT facility schools and other alternative high school settings tend to have small enrollment, which limits the resources schools have to implement after-school programs, including the ability to hire additional teachers needed to offer tutoring during and after school hours. In addition, system-level policies make it difficult to offer such opportunities to students, as competitive sporting events may pose a threat to safety and yearbook photographs can jeopardize confidentiality. In general, RT and traditional education systems have competing and sometimes conflicting goals; for the RT agency, safety, confidentiality, and permanency goals are paramount and will often supersede educational goals.

### **Implications for Policy and Practice**

Schools serving students with trauma histories in residential placement cannot be expected to provide mental health treatment, but should engage in strong cross-system communication and data sharing to work effectively with professionals across the mental health, child welfare, and juvenile justice service systems. These partnerships, when effectively working together for the common goal of educational success, can assist teachers with difficulties in the classroom more effectively, and reduce high teacher turnover, which for this population can be a

trauma trigger in and of itself. RT facilities and partnering schools that enroll high populations of residential-placed youths should offer employee incentives that reduce teacher and staff turnover and support self-care strategies. Also, schools and RT facilities should implement consistent instructional and disciplinary policies and procedures supported by evidence to improve education outcomes. This can ensure that student issues are managed effectively, and can provide school staff with more educational tools. Finally, residential facilities and their school partners should review existing system policies for ways to incorporate normalcy programming into school and treatment plans that foster engagement in healthy activities, such as sports, tutoring, and extracurricular events that do not compromise safety.

For staff practicing in residential schools, it is important to encourage a culture of trauma sensitivity, supported by ongoing training that includes information about childhood trauma, how trauma affects brain development, and its impact on youth functioning (that is, behavior and learning). Students in RT settings may not demonstrate the socioemotional skills necessary to be successful in class. Therefore, school and residential staff alike can engage students in learning academic material and model appropriate ways to socially respond to their environment. The need for development of trauma-sensitive schools is a theme that has surfaced in prior studies (for example, [Alisic, 2012](#); [Crosby et al., 2015](#)). Students should be given opportunities to engage in social skills and other soft skills development (that is, dealing with tasks that present frustrations, accountability, empathy, problem solving, and delayed gratification). Schools that enroll high numbers of youths from at-risk backgrounds, such as those who are or have been served in RT facilities, should be evaluated not only on strict academic test scores, but also on gains related to attendance and soft skills development.

### **Strengths and Limitations of the Study**

One strength of the present study was that it used random selection and focus group methodology that allow for a deeper understanding of ways in which adolescents in RT facilities struggle with their academic and interpersonal relations—which can potentially contribute to effective intervention and prevention strategies—and ensure that the reported themes are representative of the youths who attended the observed school as a whole. Limitations

also need to be acknowledged. Study participants were female and predominantly African American students. Their experiences may not reflect the experiences of male students served in RT facilities or the opinions of those who identify with other racial and ethnic groups. Finally, the perception of students on school environment is inclusionary of one important voice in the development of school policies and practice. The voices of faculty and staff should be considered to capture a more complete picture of these facilities.

## CONCLUSION

In sum, this study both confirms what is known about and sheds new light on the factors that either promote or impede school engagement and disengagement and other factors that promote the educational well-being of traumatized, court-involved youths. A comprehensive understanding of these themes is essential if we are to improve school climate and, ultimately, the high school retention and graduation rates among this population. This, in turn, requires the perspectives of all stakeholders, including youths themselves. “Nothing about us without us” best encapsulates this need to engage youths as leaders in the development of strategies intended to help them overcome the many educational challenges they face. **CS**

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Louisville, KY. **Jina Yoon, PhD**, is professor, Disability & Psychoeducational Studies, College of Education, University of Arizona, Tucson. **Megan Pennefather, MSW, LMSW**, is a research assistant and **Jun Sung Hong, PhD**, is assistant professor, School of Social Work, Wayne State University, Detroit.

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**Angelique Gabrielle Day, PhD, MSW**, is assistant professor, School of Social Work, University of Washington, 4101 15th Avenue NE, Seattle, WA 98105; e-mail: [ew6080@gmail.com](mailto:ew6080@gmail.com). **Beverly Baroni, PhD, LMSW**, is principal, Clara B. Ford Academy, Dearborn, MI. **Cheryl Somers, PhD**, is associate dean for research and **Jenna Shier** and **Meredith Zammit** are graduate students, College of Education, Wayne State University, Detroit. **Shantel Crosby, PhD, LMSW**, is assistant professor, Kent School of Social Work, University of Louisville,