Student perspectives on how trauma experiences manifest in the classroom: Engaging court-involved youth in the development of a trauma-informed teaching curriculum

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how the lived experience of court-involved youth impacts learning and school culture, and solicits youth voice in creating a trauma-informed intervention to improve student educational well-being. Thirty-nine female students, with ages 14 to 18, participated in focus groups to describe externalizing behaviors that they have both witnessed and personally struggled with in the classroom, discuss the perceived causes of these behaviors, and their suggestions for improving school culture to reduce these behavior manifestations in the classroom. Two major categories of behavior were identified, including: "anger emotions" and "aggressive actions." Students described the causes of behavior as, "environmental influences" and "triggers." The most common solutions that students gave to reduce externalizing behaviors in school settings included "encouraging respect of others" and "improving behavior management to enhance student engagement." An additional solution suggested by the students included the "monarch room as support." The Monarch Room is an alternative intervention to traditional suspension/expulsion polices that provides students in need of specific emotional support an opportunity to redirect/de-escalate externalizing behavior or mood in the school setting. This study highlights the need for trauma-informed approaches in school settings, and the importance of the inclusion of a youth voice in developing and implementing these intervention models.

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1. Introduction & background

The challenges faced by court-involved youth are complex and widespread, as large portions of the youth population have had court contact, either as wards of the foster care or juvenile delinquency systems. The U.S. foster care system population reached 400,540 in 2011 with 31% of all children in foster care between the ages of 14 and 20 years (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children & Families, 2012a). The juvenile justice system has encountered even higher numbers of youth, with over 1.3 million delinquency cases appearing in juvenile courts across the U.S. in 2010 (Office of Juvenile Justice & Delinquency Prevention, 2013), with 70,792 of these youth being court-ordered into an out of home placement (Sickmund, Sladky, Kang, & Puzzanchera, 2011).

Foster youth and other court involved youth, such as juvenile delinquents, often present with a documented history of being abused and/or neglected by their families of origin. These traumatic experiences of

abuse and/or neglect impact the normal developmental trajectory, increasing the risk for emotional, behavioral, academic, social and physical problems (Cook et al., 2005). As defined by the Substance Abuse & Mental Health Services Administration (2012), trauma "results from an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual's functioning and physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being." Complex trauma, defined as "multiple or chronic and prolonged developmentally adverse traumatic events" (Wolpow, Johnson, Hertel, & Kincaid, 2009, p. 2), poses an even greater threat to youth. Types of traumatic events vary significantly, but generally include abuse or neglect, domestic violence, accidents or natural disasters, and terrorism or war (Griffin, 2011).

These experiences make them particularly vulnerable to negative outcomes including self-harm behavior, dating violence (Duke, Pettingell, McMorris, & Borowsky, 2010), delinquency and perpetration of violence (Bruce & Waelde, 2008), low educational attainment, homelessness, early parenting, working poverty, unemployment, dependence on public assistance, relationship difficulties (Lawrence & Hesse, 2010) and limited access to reliable transportation (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2004). Traumatic childhood experiences have also been linked to increased risk of substance abuse, mental illness,

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physical health impairment, and sexually transmitted disease (Griffin, 2011). Youth who experience abuse generally begin exhibiting delinquent behaviors at earlier ages, have higher juvenile recidivism rates, and display higher risk of adult criminal behavior than their non-maltreated counterparts (Day et al., 2013).

1.1. Academic issues of court-involved students & the school response

Achieving school success is generally contingent on the ability to effectively meet a combination of demands. Attention, memory, organization, comprehension, and self-regulation of behavior are but some of the abilities needed for successful classroom learning (Massachusetts Advocates for Children, 2005). For youth dealing with trauma, this can be very difficult to accomplish. Early trauma has had a demonstrated effect on youth self-regulation of behavior and attachment (Cook et al., 2005), as well as brain development (Anda et al., 2006; Black, Woodworth, Tremblay, & Carpenter, 2012). Dysfunction in these areas undoubtedly affects youth behavior in the classroom. Acute or persistently stressful events can create problems with a youth's ability to effectively communicate, memorize, organize information, and form positive peer and adult relationships (Massachusetts Advocates for Children, 2005).

Trauma can also impair a youth's ability to pay attention, establish appropriate boundaries, cognitively process information, as well as control anger, aggression, and other impulses (Cook et al., 2005), which may result in acting out and other externalized behaviors in the classroom (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention State Training & Technical Assistance Center, 2013). This may be due, in part, to traumatic reminders or triggers, which are regular references to previously traumatic experiences that exist in the youth's environment, such as smells, sounds, or the anniversary of the traumatic event. Although youth are not always cognizant of their triggers, their external behavior may be negatively affected as they subconsciously struggle to cope with the internal anxiety and concerns of safety that trigger their production (National Child Traumatic Stress Network Core Curriculum on Childhood Trauma Task Force, 2012; Pynoos, 1993).

Shonk and Cicchetti (2001) found that youth who had experienced maltreatment were less likely to become engaged in school, display appropriate social skills, and generally demonstrated more externalizing and internalizing behaviors than non-maltreated youth. Findings suggest that court involved youth are more likely to fail a grade (Burley & Halpern, 2001; Courtney, Piliavin, Grogan-Kaylor, & Nesmith, 2001; Courtney, Terao, & Bost, 2004; Pecora et al., 2005). They are also assigned to special education services with greater frequency (Macomber, 2009; Shin & Poertner, 2002; Smithgall, Gladden, Howard, Goerge, & Courtney, 2004) and have higher discipline referral rates and instances of school suspensions and expulsions than non-court involved youth (Burley, 2010; Courtney et al., 2004). Furthermore, exposure to violence has been linked to lower GPA's and higher school absence (Hurt, Malmud, Brodsky, & Giannetta, 2001), lower high school graduation (Grogger, 1997), and lower IQ's (Delaney-Black et al., 2002).

Schools can play an important role in linking traumatized students to the appropriate resources (Ko et al., 2008), as well as providing a trauma-sensitive learning environment to assist students in focusing on their academic success (Wong et al., 2007). This would include creating and maintaining safe and supportive learning environments, where student emotional responses can be managed and redirected toward more positive behavior (Bath, 2008).

1.2. Importance of youth voice

Generally, the focus of residential care has been on safety and permanency for foster care youth (Casey Family Programs, 2005) and reducing recidivism in the case of juvenile delinquent youth (Lawrence & Hesse, 2010). Little has been documented on the perspectives of court-involved youth placed in residential settings on school climate and educational well-being. Some studies have addressed student behavioral issues in relation to attachment (Moore, Marlene, & Holland, 1997; Penner & Wallin, 2012). Still, the perceptions and educational experiences of youth living in residential care remains unchartered territory, and can be useful in understanding how to address the challenges faced by traumatized students in the classroom. Indeed, adults who lack trauma-informed knowledge can easily misinterpret the experiences of traumatized youth and its impact on behavior (Richardson, Coryn, Henry, Black-Pond, & Unrau, 2012). School personnel may incorrectly assume that youth trauma responses are an indicator of other mental health disorders (Cook et al., 2005; Massachusetts Advocates for Children, 2005), as symptoms of both often appear similar (Griffin et al., 2011).

Some resources are available to assist with implementing attachment and trauma-related practices into classrooms (Casey Family Programs, 2013; Massachusetts Advocates for Children, 2005; Wolpow et al., 2009); however, student perspectives is largely absent from the development of these resources. The successful implementation of trauma-informed training and practice in schools depends on the adoption of sustainable practices and strategies as well as the development of a trauma-aware organizational culture that includes students and school personnel as equal stakeholders (Hummer, Dollard, Robst, & Armstrong, 2010). A large part of establishing this new culture includes creating engagement opportunities for traumatized students to share their thoughts and experiences with policymakers, educational administrators, teachers, and other school personnel. The phenomenological approach can be especially powerful in capturing this voice, as it explores a particular phenomenon, uncovering the lived experience of an individual through their sharing of thoughts and experiences (Palmer, Larkin, de Visser, & Fadden, 2010; Smith, 2004).

Interventions designed to improve school climate and instruction methods should be guided by empowering youth strategies, culturally relevant applications, varied teaching methods, sufficient dosages, theory-driven choices, positive relationships, and appropriate timing, and they should include well-trained professionals to ensure that youth are ready to learn (Coyne, Carnine, & Kame'enui, 2010; Nation, 2003). Understanding the school climate of K-12 institutions that serve students in residential care from the perspective of its students can provide much needed insight into how to best improve their educational well-being. Creating a classroom intervention informed by the views and ideas of students can improve its efficacy, as acquiring input from service users is an imperative step in improving services (Head, 2011). Using an empowerment perspective and youth participation to address problems in the classroom means creating opportunities for collaboration with youth (Zimmerman, 2000) encouraging students to identify what problems exist, and including youth voice in creating solutions (Checkoway & Richards-Schuster, 2003). This empowering process can impact students in several ways, including promoting individual and social development, demonstrating the importance of student rights (Head, 2011), promoting youth connection, increasing confidence, and enhancing decision-making skills (Checkoway & Richards-Schuster, 2003).

1.3. Present study

This exploratory study uses phenomenology (Palmer et al., 2010) to examine student perspectives of educational well-being. It directly addresses the absence of voice of court-involved students living in residential care in the current literature. This study provides insight into the description of externalizing and internalizing behaviors that are either directly experienced or witnessed by court-involved youth in the school setting and identifies potential causes of these behaviors. This study also utilizes an empowerment perspective through its use of youth voice to inform the development of a trauma-informed training intervention for teaching personnel to effectively work with court-involved youth to reduce the occurrence of these behaviors in the school setting. While the voice of these personnel is also imperative, and will be captured in an