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Exploring Trauma-Informed Teaching Through the Voices of Female Youth

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ABSTRACT

Trauma-exposed female students experience distinct challenges that impact their academic well-being. This study qualitatively explores female students' school experiences from two high school settings – one trauma-informed school and one comparison school that did not utilize a trauma-informed approach. This study examines how students describe emotional experiences in their academic environment and their suggestions for school improvement; as well as how their descriptions differ from comparison school students. Trauma-informed school participants experienced their education environment as emotionally supportive but were triggered by other students. They also suggest that teachers do a better job of recognizing their unique circumstances but describe stronger connections to school staff in comparison to the students at the non-trauma-informed school. Implications are addressed.

Keywords: childhood trauma, female youth, trauma-informed teaching, student perspectives, educational wellbeing

Psychological trauma is commonly defined as the results of experiences that are threatening or injurious to our physical, social, emotional, or overall welfare (SAMHSA, 2012). There is growing evidence that psychological trauma is most

frequently experienced by children and adolescents (Costello et al., 2002), as almost two-thirds of adults have reported experiencing adverse emotional events during childhood (Anda et al., 2006). Both youth living in impoverished urban communities and those who are court-involved – in the foster care and/or juvenile justice systems – are at high risk for traumatic stress (Ford et al., 2012; Pecora et al., 2005; Salazar et al., 2012), and may also have more difficulty recovering from such events (APA Presidential Task Force on PTSD and Trauma in Children and Adolescents, 2008).

In general, school functioning may be significantly impeded by a traumatic event, as socioemotional, cognitive, and academic functioning can all be affected by both chronic and acute forms of traumatic stress (Perfect et al., 2016). Many traumatized students struggle maintaining organization and self-regulation, as well as engaging in comprehension and memorization tasks (Wolpow et al., 2009). Although it is vital to maintain strong student-staff relationships in schools (Penner & Wallin, 2012; Wilkins, 2014), areas of functioning related to relationship-building, such as attachment and self-esteem (Luke & Coyne, 2008), and boundary-maintenance (Cook et al., 2005) may be hindered by psychological trauma. However, school staff may make incorrect assumptions about students' troubling behaviors and mislabel traumatic responses as defiance (Oehlberg, 2008) or student apathy (Cox et al., 2011).

Traumatized youth experience other unique barriers to school success. They are placed in special education programs with greater frequency, have lower scores on academic achievement tests, and often have lower grade point averages (Emerson & Lovitt, 2003). They are also disciplined with exclusionary methods (i.e., suspension and expulsion) at higher rates (Burley, 2010), while also having to combat difficult and complex community issues (e.g., poverty, crime, etc.) (Beachum & McCray, 2004). This may lead to many of these students feeling alienated from school (Smith, 2011).

Gender Differences in Traumatic Reactions

Trauma-exposed female youth respond to trauma differently than their male counterparts. For example, they more frequently experience internalizing behaviors (i.e., inwardly directed negative energy) as well as higher rates of mental health issues (e.g., anxiety, depression, and PTSD) (Postlethwait et al., 2010). Female youth, unlike male youth, often enter the juvenile justice system as a result of non-violent status offenses (Pasko, 2010) – actions deemed illegal due to the age of the individual, such as truancy or running away from home – and more commonly enter foster care due to experiences of sexual abuse or victimization (Baynes-Dunning & Worthington, 2013). The acknowledged differences highlight the importance of understanding the needs of traumatized female adolescents in school. It is particularly important to explore the school experiences of traumatized female racial/ethnic minorities who are at an elevated risk of negative outcomes. Research has shown that sexually victimized, Black, female adolescents are substantially more likely to engage in problematic and risky behaviors (Lang et al., 2011), and such traumatic experiences can impede their academic performances and success (Wolpow et al., 2009). Furthermore, although boys are suspended from school more, in general, female racial/ethnic minority youth – Black girls in particular – are substantially more likely

to be disciplined or suspended (Crenshaw et al., 2015; Morris, 2018; U.S. Department of Education, 2014). Notwithstanding, studies and interventions targeting educational performances and outcomes of female racial/ethnic minority students are limited (Crenshaw et al., 2015; U.S. Department of Education, 2014). Addressing this dearth in the literature by exploring the specific experiences and needs of this population is imperative to improving their academic condition.

Extant literature has examined school staff perceptions of the school performances of traumatized female students (Crosby et al., 2015; Zetlin et al., 2012). However, studies to date have not extensively explored the perspectives of the trauma-exposed female students themselves. Understanding the prevailing educational needs of female adolescents who are at high risk of trauma exposure is important for several reasons. As studies have demonstrated, traumatized girls involved in the foster care and/or juvenile justice systems commonly encounter various adverse experiences that heighten the likelihood of poor outcomes (e.g., sexual risk, substance use) (Lee & Morgan, 2017). These negative outcomes can severely undermine their school performance, which is crucial for future success when they transition into adulthood.

PRESENT STUDY

West et al. (2014) was among the first studies to examine trauma-exposed female students and their school perspectives in relation to trauma-informed teaching. The present study builds on West et al. (2014) by exploring key differences in school environment, as perceived by the students themselves (i.e., trauma-exposed female students in a trauma-informed school as well as those in a non-trauma-informed school). This study utilizes an empowerment approach, including trauma-exposed female students as participants in a collaborative process (Zimmerman, 2000) to identify existing challenges and potential solutions (Checkoway & Richards-Schuster, 2003) in their school setting. The study qualitatively explored the following research questions: (1) How do trauma-exposed girls emotionally experience their educational setting? (2) How do trauma-exposed girls feel that their school setting can be improved? (3) In what ways do trauma-exposed girls in a trauma-informed school setting describe their education environment differently than trauma-exposed girls in a non-trauma-informed school setting?

METHOD

Participants

All study participants were female students enrolled at one of the two public alternative high schools participating in the study between September 2014 and June 2015. These schools are co-located with a large child welfare agency in the Midwest, serving lower socio-economic student populations from the local urban community. Both schools have a small student body, with approximately 20 to 30 school faculty and staff. Student participants across both schools share similar racial/ethnic backgrounds, sociodemographic histories, school mobility and suspension/expulsion

experiences, and histories of court-involvement. However, the trauma-informed school operates using a trauma-focused school climate intervention (described below), resulting in a 2% suspension rate (i.e., nine students suspended) during the observation period (Baroni et al., 2016). The comparison school utilizes suspension and expulsion as its primary means of behavior modification and student discipline. Approximately 79% of the comparison school sample had been suspended two or more times, and 67% were suspended three or more times during the school year.

The sample consisted of 76 female students (n = 42 from the intervention school; n = 34 from the comparison school). Both schools recruited participants through random sampling among the 14 to 18 year-old population of female students at each school. Students were primarily Black and from neighborhoods of lower socioeconomic status – consistent with the demographic composition of the surrounding communities (Data Driven Detroit, 2013). Both schools are racially comparable and similar in grade level and the sample of students at the intervention school is also comparable to the total intervention school population, as indicated by chi square tests (see Table 1).

Description of the Intervention

Prior to the intervention, the trauma-informed school utilized traditional school practices and disciplinary procedures (i.e., suspension and expulsion). To improve student outcomes, the school adapted *The Heart of Learning and Teaching: Compassion, Resiliency, and Academic Success (HLT)* curriculum, which provides a framework for implementing trauma-sensitive practices in educational settings. The curriculum functions under six main goals: "Always Empower, Never Disempower", "Provide Unconditional Positive Regard", "Maintain High Expectations", "Check Assumptions, Observe, and Question", "Be a Relationship Coach", and "Provide Guided Opportunities for Helpful Participation" (see Wolpow et al., 2005 for further description).

The first phase of the intervention consisted of the adapted training curriculum. Modifications to the training included information on diversity-related issues (i.e., gender, racial identity), training on Theraplay – a clinical modality that promotes improved relationship building (Booth & Jemberg, 1998), specific trauma-informed classroom strategies, collaborative problem-solving techniques (Greene & Ablon, 2006), and discussions about self-care. The intervention also included training on sensory integration and applying the theory of how the body organizes and responds to environmental cues through the sensory system (i.e., sight, sound, touch, etc.; Ayres, 2005). Sensory stimulation can improve mood-regulation, coping, and self-soothing (Dorman et al., 2009). The sessions included case vignettes, role plays, games, individual coaching, plus descriptions of additional tools and resources available for classroom use.

The modified HLT curriculum was provided sequentially in eight professional development sessions. These sessions were presented to all school staff (i.e., teachers, paraprofessionals, administrative staff) in half-day trainings, with two-hour booster trainings occurring monthly at staff development meetings between October of 2014 and May of 2015. Two certified occupational therapists (OT) also participated in

curriculum development, providing an additional six sensory integration (Ayres, 2005) training sessions and information on how sensory tools can be used to assist students in self-regulation and de-escalation (Dorman et al., 2009). While no current quantitative fidelity data exist, six classroom observations were conducted, along with individual coaching sessions to address fidelity and provide additional intervention support.

The second part of the modified intervention was the development and implementation of the Monarch Room (MR). Named after the school's mascot, the MR is an alternative approach to traditional school discipline policies intended to increase student seat time and attendance. The MR is a designated classroom, filled with therapeutic tools, available throughout the school day and managed by trauma-trained staff who provide positive supports to help students de-escalate when needed. When students' emotional states or behavior interfered with their learning in the classroom, they were referred by school staff or self-referred themselves to the MR, an action viewed as supportive rather than punitive. Once in the MR, brief intervention strategies, including problem solving, talk therapy, and sensory-motor activities were utilized to assist students in de-escalating or regulating their emotions in order to return to the classroom within ten minutes or less. Preliminary examinations of MR tracking data demonstrated that MR use was associated with a decrease in students' school suspension (Baroni et al., 2016).

Data Collection

The current study – part of an on-going trauma-informed intervention development and evaluation project – analyzes data obtained from 10 hour-long focus groups held between September of 2014 and June of 2015 at each respective school. The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at the researchers' affiliation and the school administrators obtained students' consent/assent to participate in focus groups during the school registration process. The larger project utilizes an empowerment approach (Checkoway & Richards-Schuster, 2003), engaging both youth skills and voice in three evaluative roles: as subjects, consultants, and partners in research. Research questions and focus group protocols were developed based on student input from previous years of the study. Also, findings were analyzed using the direct input of students. For example, students were consulted during the data analysis process to provide feedback on the validity of the findings as well as how to implement organizational changes.

This segment of the larger project utilizes a semi-structured focus group interview protocol with the purpose of collecting data on youths' perceptions of their school environment to compare the student lived experience in both settings. Focus groups were held at the beginning of the school year in September of 2014 and again at the end of the school year in June of 2015, and were facilitated by external researchers trained in qualitative inquiry. Regarding researcher positionality, focus group facilitators – who also serve as co-authors of this paper – included three women (i.e., one African American, one Native American, and one white) with previous experience conducting focus groups and working with students and staff at the trauma-informed school to co-develop the emerging trauma-informed infrastructure.

At the time of data collection, these researchers were in their third year of collaboration to assist students and staff in embedding trauma-informed practices into their school culture. It is important to note the power dynamics at play during data collection, as young people – particularly those who have experienced trauma and/or marginalization – might be disproportionately represented in alternative school settings, hold little to no decision-making power in their school, and may feel less comfortable sharing authentically with adults in their environment. Therefore, focus group facilitators relied heavily on the trust and rapport that had been developed with students during the course of the intervention. The collaborative relationship, developed over three years, may have helped students – who were traditionally left out of school practice and policy decisions – to establish a sense of empowerment and autonomy in sharing perspectives to improve their school environment.

The interview protocol included the following questions: (1) If your mood changes throughout the day, what makes it change? (2) How would you describe your reaction when you are really upset at another student or staff member at school? (3) When you are having a bad moment at school, what helps you? (4) When you are having a bad moment at school, what makes it worse? (5) How do your teachers and the school staff members react to you when you are having a bad moment at school? (6) What advice would you give to teachers to work with students like yourself?

Analysis

Focus groups were both audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. With an emphasis on uncovering students' lived experiences, transcripts were coded independently by one of the focus group facilitators (i.e., a Black woman). For confirmability, the analysis utilized reflexive bracketing (Padgett, 2008), where the researcher mapped out the major themes by hand, as well as any researcher assumptions and key reflections. Afterward, transcripts were uploaded into NVivo 10 (QSR International, 2012) and the contents were further analyzed for recurring themes using constant comparison methods, which was used to assess differences, commonalities, and main ideas between the participants (Dye et al., 2000). Themes were identified based on those that were most reported across individual participants and between focus groups. These descriptive themes were included and summarized to describe the students' perceptions and lived experiences in their school setting. The results were reviewed by a subsample of 5-10 youth from each school, providing a member-check on the validity and interpretation of the data. During these member-checking sessions, themes were reported out to the youth and a discussion was facilitated regarding the accuracy of the findings. Youth confirmed that themes were consistent with their perceptions of lived experience and accurately reflected their experiences in their school environment.

FINDINGS

Students at each school described their emotional experiences at school, explaining the dynamics that impacted their emotional wellbeing throughout the school day. Themes 1-4 addressed the first research question, examining how trauma-exposed

youth emotionally experienced their educational setting. Participants described their usual reactions to negative emotions, factors that changed, improved, or exacerbated their mood, as well as their perceptions of how school staff responded to their emotional state. Theme 5 connected to the second research question, describing how trauma-exposed students felt that their school setting could be improved to better meet their needs. Analysis of the most commonly reported themes from both schools addressed the third research question, illustrating the similarities and differences in how students in both school settings perceived various elements of their environment. Findings from youth in the trauma-informed school demonstrated occasional parallels with that of youth in the comparison school. However, there were also several notable distinctions, as reported below.

Theme 1: "I Become Very Disrespectful and Very Aggressive"

Students from both school settings most often reported that they reacted to negative emotions by acting out. The following quotes illustrate how students reported handling negative moments at school with peers or staff:

> (*Intervention school*): Sometimes I do [fight]. When I'm in a bad mood, if someone that I don't like comes in the puzzle [my surroundings] and just rubs me the wrong way, I feel like fighting them, that's just how I am.
>
> …I give them [other students] the same reaction I would give anybody else on the street because you're my age, you're close to my age, and you think that you can just come to me any kind of way. I have a low tolerance for BS, so I come to them how they come to me… I become very disrespectful and very aggressive.
> (*Comparison school*): I'll go [react] physically, verbally, mentally, emotionally…
> You want to go there. I will go there. Come on! It's this one person who always tries me
> [provokes me] every day, and I just sit back like fight me. Now! You keep talking to me. Just fight me.
>
> …I'm a big wall of anger. I argue a lot. I try not to fight, but I end up fighting a lot. When someone's yelling at me, I yell back…I really have a bad temper… I'm trying to calm down, and even she [teacher] tells me 'You need to calm down'. I get really mad over stupid stuff. I cuss a lot because it's a part of me to get my anger out.

Students from both settings reported escalating their behavior physically or verbally (i.e., yelling, using profanity) to address their triggers.

Theme 2: "That's a Trigger"

Students at the intervention school most commonly reported factors that negatively, rather than positively, impacted their mood, and identified their

classmates as influencing these emotional changes. The reported findings are illustrated by the following quotes:

> Like this morning, perfect example, I got called 'crazy'… I got really upset because society has already labeled me as *crazy* because of the mental illness I've already been labeled with. So I'm already labeled as *crazy*, I don't want to hear my peers call me 'crazy' because that's something that triggers me. Because I'm not crazy. I'm very smart, very intelligent, very insightful, and that's just who I am. But people see my outer self—they don't get a chance to get to know me as a person.

> Say for instance, you were taken away from your mom and her rights were terminated. They [peers] will say, 'Oh, that's why you can't live your mom', 'Your mom's a B-word', 'Your mom's a crack-head', or something like that…that's a trigger…

As described, the classmate influence includes issues with bullying and antagonistic peer behavior, interactions with difficult student personalities, as well as conflicts or "drama" between students. At the comparison school, students also primarily reported factors that negatively influenced their mood. However, they identified the school staff (i.e., teachers and administrators) as impacting these emotional changes, as displayed in the following quotes:

> She [the teacher] likes telling on people…She always tries to get me in trouble... I'm like, 'You're worse than us [the students]'. We're the kids. Then, we have to treat you like an adult.

> [Teachers] suspend people for the smallest thing... I got suspended for yelling at somebody, and when somebody threw a chair in the classroom they didn't get suspended.

Comparison school students reported persistent conflict with their teachers, instances of classroom favoritism, and unfair allocation of discipline.

Theme 3: "Some of Them Are Supportive"

Students from the intervention school most frequently identified teaching staff (i.e., teachers, teaching assistants, school paraprofessionals) as being helpful in improving their mood during difficult emotional moments at school. This is reflected in the following quotes:

> Some of them are more supportive and ask you if you need to go to the Monarch Room, 'Do you want to step out in the hallway and talk to me?', 'Is there someone you would like to talk to', stuff like that or 'Just let me know if you need anything' and stuff like that. Some of them are supportive.

> A lot of our teachers have been here for at least two years and we have maybe one or two that have just started this year but they got the hang of it, that we're placement kids, and they know that we have issues. So they try not to

> say something [negative] because they never know what's going on with us…

Students reported that to help them move beyond their mood, teaching staff provided support, concern, and opportunities to process negative issues or triggers.

On the other hand, students at the comparison school most commonly identified their classmates as improving their mood when experiencing stress during the school day, as indicated in the following quote:

> With me, I usually tear up really easily. My friends will say to me, 'You know, it's not that bad.' We just start laughing... We can make jokes. We laugh about things… Everybody [peers] really tries to help each other.

Students reported that their peer group provided comfort, support, and humor as a means to improve their mood.

Theme 4: "That Makes Me Even Madder"

Students from the intervention school reported that while support from teaching staff can be helpful during a difficult emotional moment, it can also worsen their mood when a meaningful interpersonal bond does not exist between the student and a particular staff member. The following quotes provide an illustration:

> When I'm mad, I only go to certain staff… So, I don't like when people [staff] ask me what's wrong with me. I'm like, 'What's wrong with *you*?'. That makes me even madder. Why do you care what's wrong with me?

> They [teachers] are trying to be too cool… and they cross over boundaries. You are not my friend, you work here… Please don't touch me… I might feel threatened. Don't walk up. Don't stand behind me. They definitely do that, looking over your shoulder. I don't like that. I feel real threatened by that.

In the absence of an interpersonal bond between student and teacher, support is perceived as an intrusion. Students identified that such behavior, although perhaps well-intentioned, is perceived as prying, insincerity, and in some cases, a violation of their personal boundaries (e.g., staff touching a student to provide comfort).

At the comparison school, students also most commonly identified teaching staff as someone who aggravated their mood during a difficult emotional moment. However, in contrast to students at the intervention school, the comparison school students reported a different type of school staff response, as described below:

> I'm a really peaceful person, but [the teacher] really tries me on the worse days… [The teacher] ignores me… walks away from me while I'm talking to her. Then I end up screaming, which doesn't make the matter better, and then she wants to go and call the principal.

They explained that teaching staff would often respond with dismissiveness, indifference, or punitive actions (e.g., being sent to the office, being suspended).

Theme 5: "Understand That Everyone Has Their Backstory"

Students at the intervention school most commonly reported that their unique circumstances as foster care and/or court-involved youth should be a factor to be considered by teaching staff, as illustrated by the following quotes:

> I don't like being here [in residential placement]. Some of us are forced to be here, some of us put ourselves in here. So, of course when we have bad days, be considerate that this is not where we really want to be.
>
> [To the teaching staff] Don't take stuff so personal, because we have a lot more stuff going on than normal students…and be considerate of our feelings.

Although students, in general, felt supported by many of their teachers, the study participants explained that some teachers have difficulty understanding the complex moods of the students and their classroom behaviors. Intervention school students suggested that all teaching staff should show greater understanding, sensitivity, and patience.

Students at the comparison school also suggested changes in the teaching staff's response to students. However, they discussed this differently, as displayed in the following quotes:

> I would tell teachers to understand that everyone has their backstory. They can't treat me like they treat her, like they treat the other girl. Everybody's different.
>
> Stop being disrespectful… Listen to the students… and pay attention to their body language to see if they're [the student] mad or not.

Comparison school students suggested that teachers actively work towards building rapport with the students by improving teachers' classroom responses to difficult student behavior, avoiding negative comments toward the students, paying better attention to the student body language and triggers, and treating students individually.

DISCUSSION

The present study sought to explore trauma-exposed female students' perspectives on their school environment and their emotional experiences in the classroom by comparing two school settings. Themes 1-4 addressed our first research question, which illustrated how these youth emotionally experienced their educational setting. In previous research, trauma-exposed students reported witnessing various student behaviors that were related to negative moods, such as irritability, and frustration (West et al., 2014). Theme 1 (*I Become Very Disrespectful and Very Aggressive*) further illustrates the ways in which students manage their emotions and the behaviors that they use. Students at both schools identified verbal or physical acting out behavior as their primary way of addressing negative emotions and interactions with their peers and school staff. The present study findings are consistent with the

previous research, wherein youth reported managing stress via aggression or emotionally-escalated behaviors (West et al., 2014).

Theme 2 (*That's a Trigger*) and theme 3 (*Some of Them Are Supportive*) describe important distinctions between student experiences in both settings. Students at the trauma-informed school identified teaching staff as being useful in helping them to recover from difficult emotional states, with other students being the typical source of the conflict that triggers negative mood changes. On the other hand, students at the comparison school attributed these mood changes to the negative interactions with school personnel, while support from peers was often a source of comfort to overcome negative emotions. While the present study findings are exploratory in nature, there are indications that consistent staff exposure to trauma training on attachment, relationship-building, and collaborative problem-solving strategies may have equipped teachers at the intervention school with knowledge and skills to better address students' emotional needs. Students at the intervention school described their teachers as being concerned for their emotional well-being, unlike the comparison school where teachers were perceived as antagonistic and demonstrating favoritism.

Theme 4 (*That Makes Me Even Madder*) demonstrates the importance of strong interpersonal relationships between students and school staff members (see Penner & Wallin, 2012; Wilkins, 2014). Students at the comparison school described their perceptions of difficult relationships with the teachers, citing instances when students' emotional issues were often dismissed or ignored in class or addressed through disciplinary practices (e.g., school suspension). Such staff responses only intensified students' emotions, diminishing the potential for positive student-teacher relationships and interactions, and alienating the students from school. Students at the intervention school also spoke about the importance of positive interactions with teachers and staff, but also emphasized the need for building rapport prior to the interactions, as a lack of a strong interpersonal relationship can impact students' perceptions of a teacher's intervening behavior. Trauma-exposed students may have challenges with maintaining interpersonal boundaries (Cook et al., 2005) and may need even more time to form bonds with and begin to trust the staff members before feeling safe and supported in school. For example, students' feelings about being touched by certain staff members demonstrates how an action that was meant to be non-threatening and supportive can actually be eliciting very strong negative reactions when an interpersonal bond is not present. This is especially true for female students who have a higher likelihood of sexual victimization (Baynes-Dunning & Worthington, 2013) and may be even more sensitive to touch. Providing an infrastructure that promotes and encourages school staff to continuously build strong relations with students may be a necessary step in improving the educational setting for trauma-exposed students. Moreover, providing regular training on trauma-related topics (e.g., physical touch) may also help staff members to better understand how to best support the students.

Theme 5 focuses on how trauma-exposed students feel that their school setting can be improved, answering our second research question. Theme 5 (*Understand That Everyone Has Their Backstory*) further illustrates the need for positive and supportive school staff relationships with students previously exposed to trauma. Not surprisingly, students at the comparison school suggested that teachers and school

staff find ways to improve their responses and interactions with the students. In particular, students in the comparison school want teachers to initiate positive student-teacher relationships by refraining from stereotyping students, making derogatory comments, or exhibiting apathetic attitudes that directly jeopardize those relationships. Students at the intervention school focused their suggestions on school staff gaining a better awareness of the complex circumstances and related student behaviors associated with foster care and/or court-involvement. While intervention school students felt supported by staff awareness and cultural responsiveness, they continue to desire even greater sensitivity. On the one hand, the desire for greater sensitivity may be a manifestation of the trauma the youth had previously experienced. Foster care and/or court-involved youth often develop unhealthy attachment styles (Luke & Coyne, 2008), and female youth more frequently internalize traumatic experiences through anxiety and PTSD (Postlethwait et al., 2010), impacting their ability to have their needs and expectations met by others. On the other hand, the sensitivity need also highlights the importance of continued training and evaluation to ensure that all staff members are both gaining the new trauma-sensitive skills and are appropriately applying the new practices with students.

The similarities and differences across the study participants from themes 1-5 that were provided throughout this discussion address the third research question (i.e., In what ways do trauma-exposed girls in a trauma-informed school setting describe their education environment differently than trauma-exposed girls in a non-trauma-informed school setting?). Overall, students at the intervention school describe stronger interpersonal connections to school teachers and staff in comparison to students at the comparison school. However, surprisingly, issues of race and discrimination did not surface in our findings – although we should note that focus group interview questions did not specifically solicit students' racialized experiences. School discipline disparities rest heavily on Black girls (Crenshaw et al., 2015), impacting their overall wellbeing in school settings. However, experiences related to race were not prevalent in our data, which may be attributed to the racial makeup of each setting. Both schools had predominantly Black student bodies, and the comparison school – which had significantly more instances of exclusionary school discipline – had mostly Black administrators and staff, including the school principal. Therefore, students may have felt that instances of unfair treatment were less related to race. Still, similar to other work (see Ferguson, 2000), we recognize that issues of internalized racism and oppression can contribute to school discipline practices even when the students and staff are not cognizant of such biases. Therefore, further intentional study of students' racialized experiences may be necessary to uncover these nuances.

Limitations

The present study is one of the first studies to explore trauma-exposed students' lived experiences and perceptions of the school environment. However, common to qualitative research, the number of the participants is small, and findings cannot be generalized to trauma-exposed students in other types of school settings. Also, while efforts were made to maintain consistent intervention implementation protocols

during the study, extraneous school factors (e.g., changes in the student body) could not be controlled for in the study. There may also be significant variations in students' specific trauma experiences and social living conditions that might have influenced the comparability of the samples of students. Additionally, we unfortunately do not have data to link race/ethnicity with each focus group quote or with the races of students who participated in the member checking sessions.

Implications for Policy and Practice

Overall, findings reveal several potential ways in which a trauma-informed approach to teaching may improve educational environments. Schools could work to prioritize trauma-sensitivity, where staff members' actions and institutional policies recognize and demonstrate acknowledgement of student trauma and utilize students' perspectives to identify and address the students' needs. Schools might also implement consistent and dynamic professional development to train teachers on emerging research and practice related to childhood trauma, cultural-sensitivity, sensitive school discipline strategies. Additionally, school administrators might develop school discipline policies that are consistent, clearly communicated, and attachment driven. Traditional school discipline has relied on punitive methods (e.g., suspension and expulsion), which are found to be ineffective (Griffin, 2011), at best, and re-traumatizing (Wolpow et al., 2009), at worst. Trauma-sensitive and attachment-oriented approaches to student discipline (e.g., the Monarch Room) may provide a viable alternative to the traditional disciplinary approach.

As the state and federal priorities continue to emerge around social and emotional learning in schools (CASEL, 2015), trauma-informed practice may also provide valuable solutions for improving students' socio-emotional well-being, particularly among trauma-exposed students. Trauma-informed school practice means investing in social and emotional well-being, rather than students' academic progress alone. Efforts should be made to facilitate strong interpersonal skills and positive relationships between students, their classmates, and school teachers and staff. Implementation of the proposed approach calls for interdisciplinary collaborations and communications. As described in the present study, social workers and OT professionals can provide school personnel with knowledge on how to build relationships with and manage the behavior of traumatized youth. Policies that support collaboration between teachers and social workers, occupational therapists, child welfare, and juvenile justice personnel may help to create a school environment where social and emotional learning can take place.

CONCLUSION

Trauma-exposed female youth in urban environments encounter several barriers to academic success. However, such barriers may be ameliorated when schools and staff members function within a structured school environment that responds with awareness and sensitivity. The perspectives that trauma-exposed students provide can assist educators in developing more sensitive methods of meeting students' needs,

reducing the risk of re-traumatization, and ultimately improving the students' academic trajectory.

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