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Table of Contents

Articles

Measuring Well-Being as Students Transition Between Schools: The Validation of the Quality of Transition Instrument <i>Joanna Garner and Shanan Chappell Moots</i>	1
Alternative and Traditional High School Enrollment: An Analysis of One Urban District <i>Kimber L. Wilkerson, Kemal Afacan, Aaron B. Perzigian, Maxwell R. Courtright, and Lauren E. Lange</i>	13
An Interpretive Descriptive Study of Factors Affecting Academic Achievement of Underachieving Student Teachers in Nigeria <i>Kingsley Chinaza Nwosu, Cynthia Chisom Okoye, and Uchechukwu Hope Onah</i>	20
Resilient Doctoral Students in California: A Reflective Study of the Relation Between Childhood Challenges and Academic Success <i>Randy Bessey and Juan-Carlos González</i>	30
The Landfill Is Full: Breaking the Data-Dumping Model <i>Lauren L. Evanovich, Heather Peshak George, and Laura Kern</i>	37

Measuring Well-Being as Students Transition Between Schools: The Validation of the Quality of Transition Instrument

Joanna Garner and Shanan Chappell Moots

Abstract: Students who transition between school settings may manifest academic and social-emotional challenges that can be ameliorated through the efforts of educators and school counselors. To assess needs and outcomes, however, counselors require data from valid and reliable measures. This article presents the Quality of Transition Instrument (QTI), a brief, self-report measure of well-being for students experiencing school-to-school transition. The QTI was developed according to guidance on scale construction, literature-based research on risk factors related to school transition, and consultation with school counseling subject matter experts. Exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses were conducted using responses from 656 high school students who had recently transitioned into a new school. The analyses yielded subscales reflecting two factors: academic well-being and social-emotional well-being. The results indicate adequate content and construct validity as well as internal consistency reliability. Implications for school counseling research and practice are discussed. The measure is included as an Appendix.

Students in modern K-12 school systems often transition from one setting to another. School-to-school transitions are a normal aspect of students' educational experiences but they can be challenging, whether they occur at developmentally appropriate times such as moving from elementary to secondary school or when the student's family relocates (Benner, 2011; Benner, Boyle, & Bakhtiari, 2017; Bradshaw, Sudhinaraset, Mmari, & Blum, 2010; Vasquez-Salgado & Chavira, 2013). The period surrounding a transition can have significant consequences in multiple domains; when grappling with the change in school environment, students must establish new friendships, find their way around the school, fit in with new social expectations, adjust to coursework and homework expectations, and form good relationships with teachers (Lane, Oakes, Carter, & Messenger, 2014; Schoffner & Williamson, 2015; Wiles, Bondi, & Wiles, 2006). If not navigated successfully, such transitions can put students at risk for lower academic achievement and social-emotional wellness (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Bradshaw et al., 2010; South, Haynie, & Bose 2007; Schiller, 1999).

Findings from the literature suggest that greater or lesser success following a transition can affect a student's chances of completing high school (Alspaugh, 1998; Balfanz, 2009; DeLamar & Brown, 2016; Estell et al., 2007; Mac Iver & Messel, 2013; Norford & Medway, 2001; U.S. General Accounting Office, 2002). Positive school transitions may even reduce the likelihood that a student will experience long-term psychological distress, including depression and feelings of isolation (Chung, Elias, & Schneider, 1998; Ellerbrock, Abbas, & DiCicco, 2014). For high school students in particular, it seems that successful transitions between schools are predictive of on-time graduation and access to postsecondary training opportunities (Mac Iver & Messel, 2013).

The stresses associated with moving between schools can be reduced if the environment is responsive and supportive of a developmentally appropriate transition, defined as a transition in which students' needs are met and their concerns are alleviated (Ellerbrock, Denmon, Owens, & Lindstrom, 2015; Schumacher, 1998). School

counselors are in an excellent position to assess and potentially moderate transition-related difficulties (ASCA, 2004; Akos, Shoffner, & Ellis, 2007; Blair, Marchant, & Medway, 1984; Mac Iver, Epstein, Sheldon, & Fonseca, 2015; Rush & Akos, 2007). This is often the case for high school students, for whom family engagement in school life tends to decline (Mac Iver et al., 2015). Specifically, within the role of the school counselor as defined by The American School Counselor Association National Model (ASCA, 2004), counselors have a mandate for supporting vulnerable and underrepresented groups, including those at risk of academic and social-emotional challenges due to mobility. The skilled actions of school counselors have the potential to improve the quality of students' well-being during the school-to-school transition period through peer-to-peer programs, whole class instruction, small group intervention, or individual counseling (Akos & Galasi, 2004).

In order to identify which students may be at risk of difficulties, and to allocate limited resources appropriately, counselors need reliable and valid tools. In this article, we describe the development and validation of a measure of student well-being in the context of school-to-school transition. Our aim was to develop a tool that counselors can use to inform their decision-making when working with students who are experiencing school-to-school transition. First, we provide a brief overview of prior research in this area.

Domains of impact pertaining to school-to-school transition

Studies conducted in anticipation and in the aftermath of a school-to-school transition have revealed student concerns in academic and social-emotional domains that are related to the structural features of schools (Akos, 2004; Akos & Galassi, 2004). For example, moving from elementary to middle school or from middle to high school usually involves a transition to a larger, more impersonal environment. Such transitions are often associated with lower perceptions of school connectedness and support, increased attention to

peer relationships, and greater anxiety regarding grades (Mizelle, 2005). Results from longitudinal studies have corroborated the critical importance of examining students' academic or cognitive and social-emotional well-being. Following the transition from elementary to secondary school, grades often decline (Benner & Graham, 2009) and unchecked academic difficulty places students at risk of school failure and dropout (Alspaugh, 1998).

Similarly, in the social-emotional domain, school-to-school transitions can disrupt or exacerbate maladaptive achievement motivation (Eccles, Midgley, & Adler, 1984) and academic self-efficacy (Eccles et al., 1993). Although protective factors such as mastery learning-oriented beliefs have been identified, school-to-school transition for some students can also heighten preexisting psychological distress and depressive symptomatology (Chung et al., 1998; Kingery, Erdley, & Marshall, 2011). If unchecked, students' concerns may hamper academic achievement, lead to delinquent behaviors, or become serious mental health problems that jeopardize high school outcomes and postsecondary academic success (Bond et al., 2007; Fier & Brzezinski, 2010).

In addition to studying developmental transitions between levels of schooling, the educational research community has also begun to focus on the effects of high mobility on students' academic and social needs (Cole, 2012; DePedro et al., 2011; Popp, Grant, & Strong, 2011; Wood, Halfon, Scarlata, Newacheck, & Nessim, 1993). This research has shown that school-to-school transition support is even more critical for students who are highly mobile within and between school districts due to homelessness or other personal circumstances. Highly mobile students may face a fragmented curricular experience, resulting in frustration caused by gaps or repetitive content in the curriculum and differences in instructional approaches from one educational setting to the next (Alspaugh, 1998; Astor, Jacobsen, Benbenishty, Pineda, & Atuel, 2012; Department for Education of England, 2013; Titus, 2007).

Highly mobile students are also more likely to experience social disruption. They may perceive that they are on the periphery of social networks and report having fewer friends than other students do (Bradshaw et al., 2010; South et al., 2007). Though evidence on the impact of school-to-school transition on students' social-emotional well-being is still emerging (Rumberger & Mathis, 2015), researchers have found positive, and even protective, effects of specific school programming when educators and school counselors are trained to assess and respond to students' academic and social-emotional needs (Astor & Benbenishty, 2014; Garner, Arnold, & Nunnery, 2014).

One highly mobile population that has been studied over the past decade is military-dependent students, who move on average six to nine times during their K-12 education (Smith, Fien, & Payne, 2008; U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2010). For this population and other populations that may present with unique challenges, such as students with preexisting psychiatric needs, the actions of school counselors can provide significant improvements

to the overall quality of the students' transition-related experiences (Garner et al., 2014; Cole, 2012; Fier & Brzezinski, 2010; Ruff & Keim, 2014). However, more research is needed to determine the particular needs of different groups of highly mobile students and then to map the domains of students' needs to areas of school responsiveness (Ellerbrock et al., 2015).

Measuring the quality of school-to-school transition

A critical issue for those seeking to conduct research on school-to-school transition is access to measures of students' well-being during and after transitions occur. Although a large number of studies have sought to identify facilitating factors and barriers to success (for reviews, see Benner, 2011, or van Rens, Haelermans, Groot, & van den Brink, 2017), few have used students' perceptions to facilitate an understanding of transitioning experiences. Consequently, at present there is a lack of suitable tools with practical utility for assessing the quality of school-to-school transition.

For example, in their seminal study on developmental transitions, Akos and Galassi (2004) developed a checklist to capture rising middle and high school students' concerns about specific aspects of moving to a new school. They included one open-ended item asking students to comment on the "difficulty" of their move, which students may have interpreted in a variety of ways. Although easy to administer, this checklist approach does not allow the assessment of changes over time (Kline, 2005). Therefore, it is of limited use for counselors who are providing interventions and managing programs. Others have relied more heavily on a qualitative approach. In an evaluation study on the effectiveness of a school-based support program, Ellerbrock et al. (2015) gathered multiple forms of data and incorporated students' perceptions of their transition through open-ended prompts. This approach provided insight into students' ideas about what makes for a low or high quality transition, but does not permit a professional counselor to quickly document and interpret changes that may occur as the student moves into the posttransition period. Quantitative, scale-based approaches have also been used to investigate a wide variety of factors relating to the quality of transition, such as feelings towards school, school concerns, transition supports, and school connectedness. For example, Uvaas and McKevitt (2013) identified the salience of these factors for the overall well-being of their sample group of high school students. However, their measurement of these facets of transition required participants to complete 48 Likert-style scale items, as well as several open-ended prompts. This approach may be feasible for research purposes but is of limited utility in an everyday school setting where time and response burden constraints exist.

Domains of school-to-school transition quality and associated constructions of the notion of well-being have also depended on researchers' areas of focus. In regards to transition quality, whereas some have investigated academic factors, others have tended to focus on social-emotional aspects. For example, Akos et al. (2007) focused

on academics by examining patterns of mathematics placement following the transition to middle school, and DeLamar and Brown (2016) analyzed parents' perceptions of their students' academic outcomes during the transition to high school. Conversely, Rudasill, Niehaus, Crockett, and Rakes (2014) focused on changes in school connectedness and affiliation with deviant peers during the year following the transition to middle school. Goodwin, Mrug, Borch, and Cillessen (2012) followed students through junior high and high school grade levels and examined consistencies and changes in depressive symptomatology, but did not investigate academic factors pertaining to transition.

However, a study by Duchesne, Ratelle, & Feng (2017) underscored the need to consider the potential relations between multiple aspects of school-to-school transition. They found that students' perceptions of the degree to which their psychological and emotional needs were met were linked to cognitive and affective outcomes reflecting academic and social-emotional well-being during the transition period between elementary and secondary school. This type of research is also perhaps most relevant to school counselors, who examine social-emotional indices in the context of an academic learning environment. In addition, we argue that for practical purposes, counselors will benefit from a measure that attends to both academic and social-emotional well-being that can be interpreted by a professional who has detailed contextual knowledge of how students' concerns may interact with the posttransition setting. Such a measure could be used to help establish a useful working definition of school-to-school transition quality and could be used to further investigate cognitive and social-emotional aspects of student well-being.

The present study

Key to empowering school counselors to design and enact effective programs is the provision of access to brief, high quality assessment tools that can be used to screen students upon transition and measure responsiveness to intervention (Kahn, 2006; Studer, Oberman, & Womack, 2006). However, despite the emphasis on evidence-based practice within the field of school counselor education and research, there are few validated measures that practitioners or researchers can use to assess the quality of transition from the student's perspective and few measures that can simultaneously assess students' transition-related academic and social-emotional well-being. Recognizing the need to close the gap between studies that investigate transition-related constructs and variables and the data-informed design, delivery, and assessment efforts that accompany local, school-based programming (Hinkin, Tracey, & Enz, 1997; Mvududu & Sink, 2013), we developed the Quality of Transition Instrument (QTI). The QTI is a brief, self-report questionnaire designed for use by school counselors in upper elementary and secondary education settings. Our goal was to develop a measure that can be completed by a student in a short amount of time with guidance from a counselor. The utility of such a measure is that it can serve as a baseline and an index of transition quality

in both academic and social-emotional domains and be appropriate for use in either developmentally appropriate or non-traditional circumstances for a student's school-to-school transition.

The purpose of this study was to investigate the psychometric properties of the QTI to establish its validity and reliability for use in measuring student well-being for students who have recently transitioned between school settings. We addressed the following research questions:

- 1) What evidence supports the validation of the QTI?
- 2) What evidence supports the reliability of the QTI?

Method

In alignment with guidance in scale construction (Hinkin et al., 1997; Kline, 2005) and counseling instrument development (Mvududu & Sink, 2013), our approach involved several steps. The first stage entailed the actual development of the measure, with subsequent stages involving administration of the measure and examination of the psychometric properties of the measure. These stages are discussed in detail below.

Phase I. Survey Development

To identify constructs and potential items for the instrument, we conducted a review of the literature on risk factors associated with mobility and domains of well-being associated with the transition to a new school environment (e.g., Akos & Galassi, 2004; Moore, 2013; Popp et al., 2011; Rumberger & Mathis, 2015). Next, we drew from a district-wide needs assessment study (Garner et al., 2014) in which educators, school counselors, and school leaders were surveyed and interviewed to identify the primary domains in which their highly mobile students were perceived to require support.

In consultation with two counselor education faculty at our institution, we then focused our efforts on the domains of practice most relevant to the work of school counselors—academic and social-emotional well-being—as opposed to issues pertaining to staffing and professional development. This three-pronged approach led us to construct a working definition of psychological well-being: the relative presence or absence of distress pertaining to routinized academic, social, and procedural aspects of school life.

We included procedural concerns within the list of academic well-being items and included items related to emotional state within the list of social-emotional well-being items. The resulting pool of 24 Likert-type 5-point agreement scale items was reviewed by counseling and educational research faculty subject matter experts in order to establish content and face validity. Named the Quality of Transition Instrument (QTI; see Appendix A), the questionnaire was then used by staff in several school districts as part of initiatives in which school counselors focused on identifying and meeting the needs of students experiencing school-to-school transition. These initiatives

provided institutional support for counselors to administer and use the instrument. Data for this study were gathered to support the implementation of an academic and social-emotional well-being improvement program; we were authorized by the school district to use these data to examine the psychometric properties of the instrument.

Phase II. Empirical Study

Following development and administration of the QTI, we completed steps to examine the psychometric properties of the measure to establish evidence of the QTI's validity and reliability.

Participants. Data were collected from 683 students from seven high schools in a suburban school district in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States. All participating students in Grades 10–12 were transitioning into a new school. Participating students in Grade 9 were transitioning into a new high school from a nonfeeder middle school. About 3% ($n = 27$) were missing responses for one or more of the QTI items, and the decision was made to remove these participants from the dataset as the confirmatory factor analysis technique used does not allow for missing data. Our final analysis sample included 656 students, 40% of whom were in Grade 9, 28% were in Grade 10, 23% were in Grade 11, and 9% were in Grade 12. The sample included equal percentages of female and male students, with a majority of students (63%) being non-White minority, which mirrored the school's representation of minority students. The district also serves large numbers of military families and has an overall population of about 26% of students who are military connected. This sample included about 38% of students who identified as military connected. Although all participants were transitioning into a new school, 78% began the school year on the first day of classes; 22% transitioned in later in the school year.

Procedure

Data collection began after receiving Institutional Review Board (IRB) and school district human subjects review committee approvals. Trained counselors at each school facilitated electronic administration of the QTI for transitioning students within two weeks of enrollment, before delivery of any academic or social-emotional program services (excluding business-as-usual instruction). Students completed the QTI on a computer or tablet. Responses were conveyed to the research team without student identifiers. In addition to school name, enrollment date, date of completion, and demographic data, the measure included the 24 items discussed above and two open-ended items, which were excluded from this study. Items 5, 6, 8, 14, 15, 22, and 23 were reverse-scored before data analyses occurred. A retest was administered within 12 weeks of the initial administration; these data are the subject of ongoing study not reported here.

Analytic Approach

We used several analytic techniques to establish and support the validity and reliability of the QTI.

To establish construct validity and support content validity, we conducted exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses (Field, 2013). To do this, we generated random numbers using the RV.Uniform computation in SPSS and split the dataset into two groups using the median random number as a separation point. We then conducted an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) with one group ($n = 334$) to examine the factor structure and a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) with the second group ($n = 332$) to validate the findings that resulted from the EFA (Del Ray et al., 2015). We also calculated composite scores for the identified factors and used independent samples t -tests to examine differences in existing groups to explore criterion validity (Haggerty, Elgin, & Woolley, 2011). Finally, we calculated Cronbach's alpha coefficients to examine internal consistency to support the reliability of the measure. Means and standard deviations for the 24 QTI items are presented in Appendix B.

Findings

Exploratory Factor Analysis

We conducted an exploratory factor analysis using a principal components analysis (PCA) to identify common factors among the 24 QTI items and evaluate the appropriateness of each item for the purposes of the instrument. First, we examined a correlation matrix of the 24 items which revealed that four items—Items 5, 15, 16, and 22—shared small inter-item correlations (Pearson's $r \leq .15$) among eight or more other items; these items were subsequently excluded from further analyses (Field, 2013). Examination of the correlation matrix also revealed moderate correlations among the remaining items ($r < .50$), so we chose Varimax rotation for the PCA (Field, 2013). We opted to limit extraction to two factors that matched the hypothesized social-emotional and academic well-being constructs.

An initial PCA was conducted for diagnostic purposes and showed that 39.8% of the variance was explained by the two components. Factor 1 had an Eigenvalue of 6.12 and factor 2 had an Eigenvalue of 1.83. All but three items loaded on one of the two factors at .40 or greater and these items (Items 3, 6, and 14) were removed. We also made the decision to remove Item 12 as it was specific to military-connected students; we felt this would allow us to examine the QTI's appropriateness with all students experiencing school-to-school transition.

We then reiterated the PCA with the remaining 16 items. The analysis revealed that the two factors accounted for 44.9% of the variance, with factor 1 having an Eigenvalue of 5.22 and factor 2 having an Eigenvalue of 1.96. Each of the 16 items loaded on one of the two factors at .40 or greater (see Table 1). Seven items that were aligned with academic wellness loaded on factor 1, and eight items associated with social-emotional wellness loaded on factor 2. Of note was the finding that one of the items on the social-emotional subscale, "My teachers like me" (Item 2), loaded with the academic items rather than the social-emotional items. However, a review of

the literature regarding student-teacher relationships indicated that positive student-teacher attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions may impact academic performance as well as social growth (Crosnoe, Johnson, & Elder, 2004; Hamre & Pianta, 2006; Roorda, Koomen, Spilt, & Oort, 2011). Therefore, we opted to include Item 2 on the academic wellness scale for the remaining analyses, resulting in eight items for each subscale.

Table 1

Rotated factor loadings from PCA with Varimax rotation for QTI subscales

	Academic	Social-emotional
Item 1		.70
Item 2	.54	
Item 4		.70
Item 7		.57
Item 8		.64
Item 9		.67
Item 10		.67
Item 11		.53
Item 13		.76
Item 17	.47	
Item 18	.42	
Item 19	.84	
Item 20	.82	
Item 21	.60	
Item 23	.43	
Item 24	.60	

Confirmatory Factor Analysis

We conducted a CFA with the second sample to validate the factor structure that emerged from the EFA, to examine the model fit, and to explore covariances between factors. The CFA included the 16 items from the EFA and revealed statistically significant factor loadings for each, with factors ranging from .35–.74 for Academic well-being and .49–.75 for Social-emotional well-being (see Table 2). Further, the squared multiple correlation values, which explain the amount of variance accounted for by the common factor for each of the items, ranged from .12 to .56 for the Academic scale and from .24 to .57 for the Social-emotional scale, indicating that the two factors explained an adequate portion of item variance (Table 2). The χ^2 statistic for model fit was statistically significant, suggesting that the model was not a good fit to the data. However, sample size can affect the χ^2 outcome, with larger sample sizes resulting in inflated χ^2 values (Kahn, 2006; Mvududu & Sink, 2013), so we examined the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) as an alternate indicator. The RMSEA for this analysis was .09, higher than the traditional acceptable value of .05 but a value indicating adequate fit in a counseling context (Mvududu

& Sink, 2013). A statistically significant positive correlation of .76 was observed between the two factors.

Table 2

Standardized regression weights (factor loadings) and squared multiple correlations from CFA.

	Standardized regression weights		Squared Multiple Correlations	
	Academic	Social-emotional	Academic	Social-emotional
Item 1		.74		.55
Item 2	.63		.39	
Item 4		.75		.57
Item 7		.53		.28
Item 8		.53		.28
Item 9		.54		.29
Item 10		.65		.42
Item 11		.49		.24
Item 13		.62		.38
Item 17	.44		.19	
Item 18	.63		.40	
Item 19	.70		.50	
Item 20	.74		.55	
Item 21	.54		.29	
Item 23	.35		.12	
Item 24	.64		.41	

Criterion Validity

We hypothesized that differences may exist between different groups of transitioning students and wanted to determine if the QTI was sensitive enough to detect such differences. For this sample, we were able to distinguish between those students who began the school year on the first day of classes and those who enrolled in the school later. In addition, the data were gathered from an evaluation that included about 38% of students who identified as military-connected, and we were able to discern between those students who were military dependents and their nonmilitary affiliated peers. To explore group differences and examine criterion validity (Haggerty et al., 2011), we calculated composite scores for the eight Social-emotional items ($M = 30.81$, $SD = 5.28$) and eight Academic items ($M = 32.24$, $SD = 4.03$) and conducted separate independent samples t -tests using enrollment time and military status as the independent variables.

Mean differences in subscale composite scores between those students who enrolled late compared to those who began the school year on the first day of classes were not statistically significant at the $p > 0.05$ criterion level ($t = 1.42$, $df = 654$, $p = .16$ for Social-emotional scale and $t = 1.60$, $df = 654$, $p = .10$ for Academic scale) but late enrollers ($n = 143$) did manifest lower means on both subscales. For the military-connected vs. nonmilitary analyses, the military-connected group ($n = 252$) experienced higher

means on both subscales, but the comparison of means for the Social-emotional subscale ($t = -0.50$, $df = 654$, $p = .62$) and Academic subscale ($t = -0.79$, $df = 654$, $p = .43$) were not statistically significant (see Table 3).

Table 3

Comparison of means for Social-emotional and Academic well-being subscale scores.

	Target Group Mean (SD)	Comparison Group Mean (SD)	t	df	P
Late enrollers ¹					
Social-emotional well-being	30.26 (5.12)	30.97 (5.32)	1.42	654	.16
Academic well-being	31.76 (4.16)	32.37 (3.99)	1.60	654	.10
Military-connected ²					
Social-emotional well-being	30.94 (5.41)	30.73 (5.20)	-0.50	654	.62
Academic well-being	32.40 (4.15)	32.14 (3.96)	-0.70	654	.43

Internal Consistency Reliability

We also examined the internal consistency of the 16 retained items to establish reliability of the QTI. We calculated a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .86 for the entire QTI scale and coefficients of .83 and .77 for the Social-emotional and Academic scales, respectively. These findings were comparable to prior test/retest coefficients of .87/.88 for the entire QTI scale, .85/.83 for the Social-emotional scale, and .77/.80 for the Academic scale (Garner & Chappell Moots, 2018) and are well above the .70 acceptable level for establishing internal consistency (Field, 2013). These findings also support the PCA and CFA evidence of construct validity.

Discussion

The findings from this study provide support for the use of the Quality of Transition Instrument (QTI) by school counselors in settings where students are experiencing school-to-school transition. We found evidence of two scales within the measure that appear to represent students' perceived academic and social-emotional well-being. Items within the academic domain pertained to feelings of academic self-competence in basic subject areas, along with items that indicate whether a student can cope with procedural aspects of his or her courses, such as homework and following the schedule. Items within the social-emotional domain pertained to students' emotional well-being, feelings of being supported at school by others and at particularly vulnerable times during the school day, and the existence of friendships with others.

Items on the measure correspond with specific areas where school counselors can both advocate on behalf of students and can take actions to improve students' well-

being. For example, school counselors might meet with a student's teachers if the student indicates that he or she is struggling to keep up with schoolwork or cannot easily follow the schedule. Likewise, a counselor might also offer individual or small group counseling or facilitate the introduction to a peer if a student indicates that he or she feels lonely and does not have many friends. It is important to note that the measure offers counselors the opportunity to simultaneously gather data about two main areas of student concern and to assess how their scores may change over time. It may offer the counselor a data-informed picture of how students' social-emotional well-being is related to their academic well-being, and vice versa (Uvaas & McKevitt, 2013; Wiles et al., 2006).

By focusing on academic and social-emotional aspects of transition, the QTI may also offer those seeking to evaluate the impact of counselor- or school-based interventions, particularly in settings in which a large number of students may be highly mobile (Garner & Nunnery, 2018). When incorporated in a pretest and posttest manner into such a program, the QTI may provide one of many indicators of need or of improved school-wide responsiveness for its most vulnerable students.

Implications for practice

School counselors already support transitioning students by providing individual and small group counseling, peer-to-peer programs, and course placement and credit transfer assistance (Mmari, Roche, Sudhinaraset, & Blum, 2009). This is the case whether the school's transitioning population includes new students at the beginning of the year or midyear transitions made by migrant children (Splete & Rasmussen, 1977), military-connected students (Ruff & Keim, 2014) or students of poverty (Popp et al., 2011). Counselors can use the QTI to document and provide evidence for the impact of their work. This may prove to be meaningful when the measure is used consistently before and after an intervention, and if the measure is used in conjunction with other sources of information, such as attendance or discipline data.

In regards to counselors' data analysis and data-informed decision-making strategies, we would encourage that the strategy be mapped to the overall goal. However, at the individual student level, counselors may wish to monitor students' responses to each item in order to assess well-being at two time points. This may provide insights that allow focused effort towards supporting students with particular difficulties, such as anxiety or a perceived lack of relationships with trusted adults or peers.

At the group level, counselors may wish to attend to the items that require reverse scoring (see Appendix A), and then sum the scores for the academic and social-emotional well-being subscales. This would result in an overall assessment of students' well-being in one area or another. If collected before and after an intervention, such data may help identify areas of need or quantify the impact of a program on a given population of students. Finally, the magnitude of any gain in overall well-being as reported

by groups of students may be useful for counselors who wish to assess the impact of different strategies, such as the relative impact of a peer-to-peer mentoring system vs. additional actions by teachers or the counselor.

Limitations

One limitation of our study is the lack of additional information that was available about the sample, such as pre-existing difficulties, language barriers, special educational needs, or extensive prior experience with transitions. An additional consideration is that although counselors administered the measure in a one-on-one meeting with the students, we were not supplied with students' verbal reports or other notes gathered by the counselor that may have been helpful for corroborating the questionnaire responses and helping to further establish construct validity beyond the factor analytic techniques (Sink & Spencer, 2007).

A third limitation is the lack of available normative data. Having a nontransitioning group respond to the questionnaire in a pretest and posttest format would have permitted comparisons as to the stability of the measure in students who may have been experiencing some of the same school-related stresses but who were not transitioning between schools. Fourth, due to the nature of the applied context for the study, we were unable to simultaneously administer other, established measures of well-being. A final caution associated with the use and interpretation of these data is that our sample was comprised of high school students exclusively. Further research is needed to determine if the factor structure holds for students in earlier grade levels who may be experiencing school-to-school transition at the elementary to middle school level, or within grade levels but between different schools.

Future directions

Future research should continue to develop evidence to enhance the reliability and validity of the QTI. The measure has the potential to offer a rapid assessment of need or impact, particularly in schools where a comprehensive approach to transition support is in place (Garner & Chappell Moots, 2018). Comprehensive programs tend to involve academic and social-emotional interventions (Barton, 2006) and therefore offer the potential to leverage the skills of counselors in collaborating with classroom teachers (Holland-Jacobsen, Holland, & Cook, 1984). The QTI may also help educators understand how programs are facilitating change in student well-being.

Other considerations for future research include investigating the psychometric properties of the measure in regards to its sensitivity to differentiate between students who are experiencing transitions for varying reasons to further examine criterion validity. Although not intended as a clinical diagnostic measure, we anticipate that future studies could also explore normative aspects of the transition process for different populations and potential features of transition quality for developmental and mid-year transitions.

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Appendix A

Quality of Transition Instrument (QTI)

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Disagree nor Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
	1	2	3	4	5
SOCIAL - EMOTIONAL WELLBEING					
1) I feel comfortable in my new school.	1	2	3	4	5
2) My teachers like me.	1	2	3	4	5
3) There is at least one adult in the school that I can talk to if I have a problem.	1	2	3	4	5
Think about how you feel at school...					
4) I feel happy.	1	2	3	4	5
5) I feel anxious. *	1	2	3	4	5
6) I feel worried about things. *	1	2	3	4	5
7) I feel safe.	1	2	3	4	5
8) I feel lonely. *	1	2	3	4	5
9) I always have someone to sit with at lunch.	1	2	3	4	5
10) Students are nice to each other at this school.	1	2	3	4	5
11) Other students understand what it is like to move to a new school.	1	2	3	4	5
12) Other students understand what it is like to have a mom or dad in the military.	1	2	3	4	5
13) I have good friends at this school.	1	2	3	4	5
14) I have trouble falling asleep at night. *	1	2	3	4	5
ACADEMIC WELLBEING					
15) The work at this school is difficult for me. *	1	2	3	4	5
16) I can do the work in math lessons.	1	2	3	4	5
17) I can do the work in reading lessons.	1	2	3	4	5
18) I can get help with my homework if I need it.	1	2	3	4	5
When I am in class...					
19) I listen.	1	2	3	4	5
20) I do my work.	1	2	3	4	5
21) I ask questions.	1	2	3	4	5
22) I think about other things.*	1	2	3	4	5
23) I am easily distracted. *	1	2	3	4	5
24) I know what the schedule is.	1	2	3	4	5

* Reverse scored

Appendix B

Table B1. *QTI item means and standard deviations.*

	Mean	SD
Item 1	4.06	0.81
Item 2	4.15	0.70
Item 3	3.90	1.08
Item 4	3.79	0.90
Item 5	3.29	1.13
Item 6	3.33	1.20
Item 7	3.98	0.89
Item 8	3.77	1.16
Item 9	4.07	1.08
Item 10	3.67	0.92
Item 11	3.58	0.98
Item 12	3.44	0.98
Item 13	3.88	1.07
Item 14	3.74	1.20
Item 15	3.63	1.00
Item 16	3.86	0.99
Item 17	4.12	0.77
Item 18	4.19	0.78
Item 19	4.24	0.71
Item 20	4.37	0.65
Item 21	3.64	1.03
Item 22	2.68	1.04
Item 23	3.20	1.09
Item 24	4.34	0.72

Alternative and Traditional High School Enrollment: An Analysis of One Urban District

Kimber L. Wilkerson, Kemal Afacan, Aaron B. Perzigian, Maxwell R. Courtright, and Lauren E. Lange

Abstract: Urban districts are important places to observe the array of non-traditional schooling options in which high school students can be educated. We examined enrollment distributions in 1 traditional and 3 different types of alternative high schools in 1 urban school district. We coded all high schools in the sample district into 4 school types including traditional, innovative, behavior-focused, and academic remediation-focused. We analyzed demographic data of all high school students enrolled in the sample school district for gender, ethnicity, qualification for free or reduced-price lunch, and disability status. Results showed overrepresentation of male students, Black students, American Indian students, students who qualified for free or reduced-price lunch, and students with disabilities in behavior-focused alternative schools. Hispanic students were overrepresented in academic remediation-focused alternative schools. These findings suggest disparate enrollment practices among urban traditional and alternative high schools.

Traditional public high schools serve a diversity of students. However, not all students experience success in high school (Aud, KewalRamani, & Frohlich, 2011; McFarland, Cui, & Stark, 2018; McFarland et al., 2017). To meet the needs of students who do not experience success in traditional high schools, school districts increasingly rely on alternative schools and programs to provide basic educational services to a subset of students (Hodge, Liaupsin, Umbreit, & Ferro, 2014; Porowski, O'Conner, & Luo, 2014). Furthermore, Carver and Lewis (2010) reported a particularly high reliance on alternative education in public school districts in which a significant number of students are considered at risk.

Alternative schools and programs take many forms but can be categorized into three broad types: (a) schools that offer innovative educational approaches and are often accessible through an application process, (b) schools with a behavior or disciplinary focus designed for students who exhibit social or behavioral difficulties, and (c) schools designed to provide academic support to students who experience credit deficiencies or are otherwise struggling to stay on track for high school completion (Raywid, 1994). These three types of alternative schools are referred to here as innovative, behavior-focused, and academic remediation-focused, respectively. The three types of alternative schools are defined in contrast to traditional public high schools, sometimes referred to as comprehensive neighborhood schools, which typically account for the largest proportion of student enrollment in a district (Keaton, 2014).

Since alternative schools target specific student populations (e.g., students who fail multiple courses or students recommended for expulsion), it follows that characteristics of students who attend alternative schools differ from those of students in traditional schools. For example, Foley and Pang (2006) and Perzigian, Afacan, Justin, and Wilkerson (2017) noted higher male and Black student enrollment in academic remediation-focused alternative schools compared to traditional schools. Without distinguishing between types of alternative schools, Lehr and Lange (2003) reported that students of color are enrolled in alternative schools at disproportionately higher rates compared to their enrollment in traditional neighborhood schools.

Students with disabilities are frequently overrepresented in alternative schools as well; for example, Perzigian et al. (2017) reported that students receiving special education services for emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD) were overrepresented in academic remediation-focused alternative schools compared to traditional schools. Additionally, a study examining reading instruction in alternative settings revealed that nearly 45% of all students receiving instruction in alternative schools in one Midwestern state were identified with a disability and received special education services (Wilkerson, Yan, Perzigian, & Cakiroglu, 2016). Collectively, these findings suggest that enrollment in different types of educational settings may vary systematically by gender, ethnicity, and disability status.

As districts rely increasingly on alternative settings to educate students who are not thriving in traditional schools, it is important to understand attendance patterns to better understand the implications of varied outcomes associated with specific types of alternative schools. To date, researchers have reported mixed evidence of the effectiveness of alternative schools at improving students' academic and behavioral outcomes (Carswell, Hanlon, Watts, & O'Grady, 2014; Wilkerson, Afacan, Perzigian, Justin, & Lequia, 2016; Wilkerson, Afacan, Yan, Justin, & Datar, 2016; Schwab, Johnson, Ansley, Houchins, & Varjas, 2016; Zolkoski, Bullock, & Gable, 2016). For example, Wilkerson, Afacan, Perzigian et al. (2016) found that students attending behavior-focused alternative schools were suspended fewer times and received fewer office discipline referrals than a comparison group enrolled in traditional schools. However, the comparison group attended more days of school and earned significantly more credits.

Chiang and Gill (2010) reported lower standardized math and reading scores among students attending alternative schools compared to their peers in traditional neighborhood schools. Franklin, Streeter, Kim, and Tripodi (2007) showed that high school students attending academic alternative schools earned significantly more credits than their counterparts in a comparison group. On the other hand, Franklin et al.'s comparison group had significantly higher school attendance and graduation rates than those attending the academic alternative schools.

Wilkerson, Afacan, Yan et al. (2016) similarly found that students attending academic remediation-focused alternative schools earned more credits but had significantly lower attendance rates than a matched group of students who attended traditional schools. In another study, Franco and Patel (2011) reported that 70% of students in their study who attended a summer credit recovery program after their freshman year earned sufficient credits to catch up with their chronological age peers, though the program did not have an impact on the students' overall GPAs, underscoring the variability in outcomes within and across school types.

Previous researchers found emerging evidence of disproportionality in enrollment patterns among traditional and alternative schools (Perzigian et al., 2017). However, as reliance on alternative schools grows, it is increasingly important to consider enrollment patterns distinguished by school types. The purpose of this cross-sectional, descriptive study was to examine enrollment patterns across types of high schools. We addressed the following research question: How do proportions of students enrolled in different types of secondary schools vary with regard to (a) gender, (b) ethnicity, (c) socioeconomic status, and (d) disability status? To address all aspects of this question, we conducted a series of chi-square analyses.

Method

This section presents the study setting, data sources, and data analysis.

Setting

The following numbers are rounded to the nearest 10. Roughly 650,000 people populate the city in which the sample district is located, with approximately 20% of households reporting income below the poverty line. Half of the city's population identifies as White (not Hispanic or Latino), 30% as Hispanic or Latino, and 10% as Black or African American. Nearly 25% of households in the urban area speak a language other than English and 15% of the population is foreign born. The median household income is approximately \$50,000 annually with 40% of persons over the age of 25 holding a bachelor's degree or higher.

The sample district serves more than 84,000 students in kindergarten through Grade 12 each year and utilizes a range of traditional and alternative secondary schools for its students. During the 2013–14 academic year (AY), the district reported a four-year high school graduation rate, for students receiving a regular diploma, of about 60% with a 5% dropout rate. Additionally, the state education agency (SEA) reports that in AY 2013–14 approximately 40% and 75% of the district's 10th grade students did not meet proficiency on the state's standardized assessments of reading and mathematics, respectively.

Sample

Our overall sample included data from 20,742 students enrolled in Grades 9–12 during AY 2013–14. This number represents approximately 90% of high school students in the district during AY 2013–14 (23,401 total enrolled). Data were comprised of information regarding each student's current educational placement, ethnicity, gender, free or reduced lunch (FRL) qualification status, and disability

status. Table 1 provides a summary of demographic characteristics of the student sample from AY 2013–14. The student sample identifies predominantly as Hispanic (57.3%) and the majority of students (70.1%) qualified for FRL.

Table 1

Student Characteristics for Secondary Schools in Sample School District AY 2013–14

Characteristic	% (n)
Gender ^a	
Female	49.9% (10,302)
Male	50.1% (10,354)
Ethnicity ^a	
American Indian or Alaska Native	0.8% (159)
Asian	3.8% (775)
Black	16.4% (3,391)
Hispanic	57.3% (11,841)
White	18.6% (3,835)
NH/OPI	0.2% (32)
Two or More	3.0% (623)
FRL Status ^b	
Yes (Qualified)	70.1% (14,548)
No (Not qualified)	29.9% (6,193)
Student Disability Status ^b	
Yes (Receive special education services)	9.7% (2,005)
No (Do not receive special education services)	90.3% (18,745)

Note. NH/OPI = Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander; FRL = free or reduced lunch. ^aData for two behavior-focused alternative schools are not included in the reporting of this variable. ^bData for six schools include middle school students in addition to secondary students.

School Coding Procedure

The authors of this study coded all high schools in the participating district to examine the frequency and distribution of student enrollment across the different types of high schools. We coded schools using a researcher-developed protocol to determine school type. Protocol questions included:

1. Is the school identified as alternative, charter, intensive, transformative, or something other than a traditional high school in the publicly reported descriptions provided to the research team by the district?
2. Do the majority of students attend by choice or by referral/assignment?
3. Does the school curriculum focus on a specific skill area, (e.g., arts, technology), or does the school target a select student demographic other than students identified as at risk?
4. Is this school aimed at academic recovery or behavior modification?

We used the resulting information to determine a final school type. Schools coded as traditional met the following criteria: They were not identified as anything other than a comprehensive, regular high school; they served a majority of students who attended by choice; they did not target any particular student demographic or specific skill area; and they were not aimed primarily at academic or behavioral remediation.

Schools coded as innovative met the following criteria: They were identified as alternative, charter, transformative or something other than a comprehensive, regular high school; they served a majority of students who attend by choice; they focused on a specific skill area; and they were not aimed primarily at academic or behavior remediation.

Schools coded as a behavior-focused alternative were identified by the district as nontraditional; they also identified as providing behavior remediation; and they had a primary aim of serving students referred or assigned due to behavioral difficulty.

To be coded as an academic remediation-focused alternative, a school had to be identified by the district as a nontraditional setting; students were either assigned or elected to attend; and the school's primary aim was academic remediation and/or credit recovery.

The first author trained the coauthors as coders. Coders practiced coding with a sample of schools from a district that was not part of this study. In order to be considered successfully trained, coders had to reach 90% agreement with the trainer on a question-by-question basis, as well as in the final classification of each school. Using the participating district's 2013–14 enrollment guide, coders independently coded 53 schools with 92% agreement. We addressed all disagreements in a group meeting where we reached 100% agreement. The district did not include three of the 53 high schools in the publicly available enrollment guide. We extracted information for these three schools from the schools' websites. A researcher who was not part of the coding team summarized this information for these schools in a document. Then, we used this information as the source for coding of those three individual schools. We shared final codes with a district staff member as a validity check for our school coding.

School Types

We removed two of the 53 coded high schools from the analyses because no secondary students were enrolled in them during AY 2013–14. Of the 51 high schools remaining in the sample, six were coded as traditional, 26 were innovative alternative, four were behavior-focused alternative, and 15 were academic remediation-focused alternative. Traditional schools were the largest, with an average enrollment of 1,097. Innovative, behavior-focused, and academic remediation-focused alternative schools had average enrollments of 426, 99, and 180, respectively. Table 2 provides a summary of enrollment by school type.

Data Sources

We used district and SEA data in this study. We collected student gender and ethnicity data from the SEA. We excluded two schools from the analyses of these two demographic variables due to missing data at the state level. Data for free and reduced lunch (FRL) eligibility and disability status were obtained from the district and represented whole schools (i.e., data were not provided by individual grade levels). Six of the secondary schools in our sample also served students in Grades 6–8. Therefore, FRL eligibility and disability status data for those six schools included students who were in Grade 8 or lower in addition to the data for students in Grades 9–12.

Table 2

Secondary School Enrollment By School Type

School Type	Number of schools categorized in each school type	Total number of students served in each school type	Mean number of students enrolled per individual school
Traditional	6 (11.8%)	6,581 (31.7%)	1,097
Innovative	26 (51.0%)	11,064 (53.3%)	426
Behavior-focused	4 (7.8%)	397 (1.9%)	99
Academic remediation-focused	15 (29.4%)	2,700 (13.0%)	180
Total	51 (100%)	20,742 (100%)	

Data Entry Reliability

Two undergraduate research team member were trained for data entry, and 25% of all manually entered data were selected for a data entry reliability check. Reliability checks were conducted on an item-by-item basis to calculate data entry reliability. Data entry reliability was calculated at 100%.

Analysis

We used SPSS 22 to analyze the data. The dependent variable (DV) was school type. The independent variables (IVs) were gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and disability status. Socioeconomic status was operationalized as qualification for FRL status. School type included the following four categories: (a) traditional, (b) innovative, (c) behavior-focused, and (d) academic remediation-focused. We operationalized the independent variables as categorical variables: gender (male or female), ethnicity (American Indian, Asian, Black, Hispanic, White, Native Hawaiian, or two or more races), FRL status (qualifies for FRL or did not qualify), and disability status (identified with a disability or did not identify).

Using chi-square tests of independence, we tested for significant differences for student distribution across the four school types with regard to the four demographic variables. Chi-square is a commonly used test to evaluate a relationship between two categorical variables; it is also the oldest test used for this purpose (Agresti & Finlay, 2008). The use of chi-square analyses was appropriate because we examined the relationship between two categorical variables: student demographics and school types. We conducted a separate chi-square test for each independent variable. We created the following contingency tables: 2 (gender) x 4 (school type), 7 (ethnicity) x 4 (school type), 2 (FRL status) x 4 (school type), and 2 (disability status) x 4 (school type). Our data met assumptions of chi-square test: Variables were measured at nominal levels (i.e., categorical data); observations were independent; and sample size was large—expected frequencies were at least five for the at least 80% of the cells.

Privacy and Confidentiality

To accommodate the need for privacy and confidentiality we used deidentified data, minimizing the

risk of privacy or confidentiality breach. We kept digital data files on a password-protected computer at the institution with which the first author is affiliated in keeping with Institutional Review Board recommendations.

Results

Table 3 provides a summary of student demographic characteristics by school type. We indicated significant differences using subscript letters in the table. We summarize results of the chi-square analyses below.

Table 3

Student Characteristics by School Type

Characteristic	Traditional	Innovative	Behavior-focused	Academic remediation
Gender				
Male	51.0% (3,358) _a	48.2% (5,434) _b	77.9% (243) _c	52.9% (1319) _a
Female	49.0% (3,223) _a	51.8% (5,836) _b	22.1% (69) _c	47.1% (1174) _a
Ethnicity				
American Indian or Alaska Native	0.7% (43) _a	0.7% (74) _a	2.2% (7) _b	1.4% (35) _b
Asian	5.1% (333) _a	3.7% (420) _b	1.6% (5) _{b,c}	0.7% (17) _c
Black	15.3% (1,006) _a	16.5% (1,858) _{a,b}	28.2% (88) _c	17.6% (439) _b
Hispanic	51.4% (3,382) _a	58.1% (6,553) _b	39.1% (122) _c	71.6% (1,784) _d
White	24.5% (1,611) _a	17.6% (1,981) _b	25.0% (78) _a	6.6% (165) _c
NH/OPI	0.2% (10) _a	0.2% (22) _a	0% (0) _a	0% (0) _a
Two or More	3.0% (196) _{a,b}	3.2% (362) _b	3.8% (12) _{a,b}	2.1% (53) _a
FRL Status				
Yes	67.0% (4,409) _a	69.8% (7,725) _b	91.4% (363) _c	73.7% (1,988) _d
No	33.0% (2,173) _a	30.2% (3,338) _b	8.6% (34) _c	26.3% (710) _d
Student Disability Status				
Yes	11.8% (775) _{a,b}	10.7% (1,191) _b	32.2% (128) _c	13.5% (338) _a
No	88.2% (5,807) _{a,b}	89.4% (10,084) _b	67.8% (269) _c	86.5% (2,158) _a

Note. NH/OPI = Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander; FRL = free or reduced lunch. Means with differing subscripts within rows are significantly different at the $p < .05$.

The overall test statistic for gender representation across the four school types was significant, $X^2(3, N = 20,656) = 122.45, p < .001$. Male student representation differed significantly between traditional (51.0%) and innovative (48.2%), traditional (51.0%) and behavior-focused (77.9%), and innovative (48.2%) and behavior-focused (77.9%) alternative schools. No significant difference in male representation between traditional (51.0%) and academic remediation-focused alternative schools (52.9%) was noted.

Ethnicity

The overall test statistic for ethnicity was significant, $X^2(18, N = 20,654) = 645.81, p < .001$. We describe enrollment distribution for each ethnic group in the subsections below.

Hispanic students. Representation of Hispanic students in each school type was significantly different when compared to each of the other three school types (see Table 3). The proportion of Hispanic students was highest in academic remediation-focused alternative schools (i.e., 71.6%), followed by innovative (58.1%), traditional (51.4%), and behavior-focused alternative schools (39.1%).

White students. The proportion of White students differed significantly between traditional (24.5%) and innovative (17.6%), and traditional (24.5%) and academic remediation-focused alternative schools (6.6%). Similarly, White student representation was significantly different between innovative (17.6%) and academic remediation-focused alternative schools (6.6%). There was no significance in the difference in White student representation between traditional and behavior-focused alternative schools.

Black students. Black student representation was significantly different between traditional (15.3%) and behavior-focused (28.2%), and traditional (15.3%) and academic remediation-focused alternative schools (17.6%). Similarly, Black student representation was significantly different between innovative (16.5%) and behavior-focused (28.2%), and behavior-focused (28.2%) and academic remediation-focused alternative schools (17.6%). There was no significant difference in Black student representation between traditional and innovative or between innovative and academic remediation-focused alternative schools.

Asian students. Asian student representation differed significantly between traditional (5.1%) and innovative (3.7%), traditional (5.1%) and behavior-focused (1.6%), traditional (5.1%) and academic remediation-focused alternative schools (0.7%). Similarly, the proportion of Asian students was significantly different between innovative (3.7%) and academic remediation-focused alternative schools (0.7%).

American Indian students. American Indian student representation differed significantly between traditional (0.7%) and behavior-focused (2.2%), innovative (0.7%) and behavior-focused (2.2%), traditional (0.7%) and academic remediation-focused alternative (1.4%), and innovative (0.7%) and academic remediation-focused alternative schools (1.4%). There was no significant difference in American Indian student representation between behavior-focused and academic remediation-focused alternative, nor between traditional and innovative schools.

Hawaiian Islander/Pacific Islander students. Hawaiian Islander or Pacific Islander student representation was not significantly different across the four school types.

FRL Status

The overall test statistic for FRL status across the four school types was significant, $X^2(3, N = 20,740) = 132.29, p < .001$. The representation of students who were qualified for FRL was significantly different across all four school types as each one was compared to the other three types. Behavior-focused alternative schools were comprised of

the largest proportion of students who qualified for FRL (i.e., 91.4%), and academic remediation-focused alternative schools (73.7%), innovative (69.8%), and traditional (67.0%) schools followed, respectively.

Disability Status

The overall test statistic for student disability status was significant, $X^2(3, N = 20,750) = 184.19, p < .001$. The proportion of students receiving special education services differed significantly between traditional (11.8%) and behavior-focused (32.2%), innovative (10.6%) and behavior-focused, as well as academic remediation-focused (13.5%) and behavior-focused alternative schools. Similarly, the representation of students with disabilities was significantly different between innovative (10.6%) and academic remediation-focused (13.5%) alternative schools.

Discussion

In this study, we examined enrollment distributions of students attending four different types of secondary schools in one urban school district. We investigated whether student gender, ethnicity, FRL status, and disability status varied significantly across traditional, innovative, behavior-focused, and academic remediation-focused alternative schools. Findings from the analyses revealed significant differences related to each of these four student characteristics. In the following sections, we discuss our findings in light of previous research.

Variation in Gender Distribution

Though significant differences in gender distributions across traditional and innovative schools were reported, the most highly significant difference in gender proportions was between behavior-focused alternative schools and each of the other three types. Male students were significantly overrepresented in behavior-focused alternative schools when compared to any of the other three types. This study corroborates findings of other studies on enrollment patterns in urban districts (e.g., Foley & Pang, 2006; Perzigian et al., 2017), as well as Conger and Long's (2013) finding that male students were disproportionately placed in settings focused on behavioral remediation. That male students continue to be disproportionately placed in settings that focus on behavior and social skills underscores attributions that are made about male students when they struggle in traditional schools.

Given that outcomes for students in behavior-focused alternative schools are generally negative compared to outcomes for students in traditional secondary schools, (even when controlling for past behavior; Wilkerson, Afacan, Perzigian, et al., 2016), the disproportionate number of male students in behavior-focused alternative schools suggest that male students are being disproportionately relegated to segregated educational experiences in settings that emphasize behavior and social skills over academics.

Variation in Ethnicity Across School Types

Hispanic students have the highest risk of dropout of any ethnicity in the United States, with Hispanic males and Hispanic females more at risk than the rest of their gender, and Hispanic males the most at risk of any gender

and ethnicity combination as of 2010 (Aud et al., 2012). The significant overrepresentation of Hispanic students in our sample academic remediation-focused high schools, which provide services to students with credit deficiencies, aligns with that national data. However, Hispanic students were significantly underrepresented in our sample of behavioral remediation-focused settings, whereas both Black and White students were overrepresented. We recommend that future research focus on the decision-making process that prompts educators to refer students to specific types of alternative schools. It is possible that educators make different attributions to students' poor trajectories based on ethnicity. For example, prior research suggested that cultural deficit thinking was a factor in educators' performance expectations and the ensuing school placements of Black youth (Ahram, Fergus, & Noguera, 2011). Further, the finding that Black students were overrepresented in behavior-focused alternative schools was not uncommon, as several past studies documented the removal of Black students from traditional settings (Skiba et al., 2011; Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002; Smith & Harper, 2015; U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2018).

Variation in Proportion of Students Receiving FRL

Overall a relatively high percentage of students in our sample district qualified for FRL. Across school types, traditional schools reported the lowest percentage of students who received FRL with 67.0% of the students in the traditional schools so designated. The proportion of students designated as receiving FRL was 69.8% at innovative schools. Behavior-focused alternative schools served the highest proportion of students who received FRL at 91.4%, followed by academic remediation-focused alternative schools at 73.7%. The significantly disproportionate number of students who qualified for FRL in behavior-focused alternative schools, combined with the significantly disproportionate representation of males and Black students in these schools, merits further attention.

We know from past research that students removed from traditional, general education settings and placed in more restrictive and segregated placements for reasons related to poor behavior were at increased risk for school disengagement, dropout, and psychosocial effects, such as feelings of alienation and not belonging, depression and worthlessness (Ahram et al., 2011; Bottiani, Bradshaw, & Mendelson, 2017; Skiba et al., 2011). For these reasons, marked patterns of disproportionality should be investigated thoroughly as they suggest inconsistencies in our nation's ability to provide students from all ethnicities equal access to educational resources.

Variation in Proportion of Students with Disabilities Across School Types

Students with disabilities accounted for 11.8% of the student body in traditional schools and 10.7% in innovative schools. Behavior-focused alternative schools served the highest percentage of students with disabilities at 32.2%. Academic remediation-focused alternative schools served 13.5% students with disabilities. Behavior-focused alternative schools serve higher percentages of students with disabilities than any other school type, suggesting

that districts place students with disabilities who exhibit behavioral challenges in segregated settings at higher rates than students without disabilities. However, the percentage of students with disabilities in academic remediation-focused alternative schools suggests that is not true for students with disabilities who exhibit academic challenges.

Conclusions and Limitations

Our cross sectional analysis of enrollment across four school types (i.e., traditional, innovative, behavior-focused, and academic remediation-focused alternative schools), reveals significant differences in demographic characteristics of students who attend each type. Our findings, in addition to findings from previous research (Perzigian et al., 2017), suggest a pattern of disproportionate representation across school types within districts. Although limited in scope due to the nature of data from a single district, our work calls for closer examination of district policies and practices that lead to qualitatively different educational opportunities for subgroups of high school students.

Districts should consider the purpose of alternative education in their school communities and review identification processes that allow teachers and school administrators to determine which students are best served by alternative programs to avoid needlessly referring students out of traditional high schools or steering them away from innovative options. The overrepresentation of males, students who are Black or Hispanic, students who qualify for FRL, and students with disabilities in academic remediation and behavior-focused alternative schools is a call for further investigation of district- and school-level practices and policies that lead to students' removal from traditional settings.

The type of school a student attends often denotes the educational opportunities and academic and social experiences the students are afforded—or denied. Given the patterns of disproportionality, we recommend that future research examine school outcomes for students attending specific types of alternative schools. Data related to achievement in different educational settings could add to the discourse on our nation's widely acknowledged achievement gaps.

Our lack of access to special education data indicating the incidence of specific disability categories across school types is a limitation to our study. Understanding whether students with specific disability labels are more likely to be referred to a specific type of alternative school would deepen our understanding of enrollment patterns. Another limitation of our study is that we analyzed data from only one district. We therefore also recommend future research that includes additional school districts of varying size and composition. By doing so, we might develop a more comprehensive picture of student enrollment trends across the increasingly myriad school choice options being offered to students and families across the nation.

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An Interpretive Descriptive Study of Factors Affecting Academic Achievement of Underachieving Student Teachers in Nigeria

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Abstract: Reported incompetence of student teachers in Nigeria has become a national concern. However, little has been done to explore the mitigating factors to student teachers' academic success, especially from the generic qualitative approach. The present study adopted the interpretive descriptive qualitative design to examine factors affecting the academic achievement of underachieving student teachers in a Nigerian university. Semistructured interviews were employed in the data generation process. The study sample included 30 underachieving student teachers in the Department of Educational Foundations who were enrolled in the English/Education option. Using thematic content analysis, researchers reported factors such as lecturers' pedagogical incompetence, noisy and inadequate classrooms/libraries, negative influences from friends, students' lack of motivation and interest, procrastination, poor study habits, laziness and distractions, poor socio-economic background, and parental pressure contributed to students' underachievement. These factors were categorized as school, peer, personal, and home-related. Study results indicated that the interplay of forces outside the mental abilities of the students may have impeded their academic success, deepening our understanding that underachievement may not necessarily result from low mental ability.

Available indices on the performances of Nigerian universities project a very disturbing picture of the system (Jaja, 2013; Saint, Hartnette, & Strassner, 2003). There is insufficient empirical evidence that could help concerned stakeholders take appropriate intervention. Issues include inadequate funding, outdated research facilities, insufficient number of personnel, and poor remuneration leading to perennial brain drain, antiquated curricula, and inflexible pedagogical approaches (Saint et al., 2003). These contribute to limit the successes of students. Though institutional statistics are said to be unreliable and deficient, the percentage dropout rate has been noted as not less than 50% as of 2002 (Saint et al., 2003). This corroborates the public perception that the recent generation of Nigerian graduates is lacking the requisite knowledge, competencies, and skills that will help them survive in present society (Adeyanju, 2009).

Agu, Omenyi, and Odimegwu (2010) noted that Nigerian higher education institutions perform below expectation when weighed with national and international benchmarks of quality of output. Nwosu, Unachukwu, Achukwu, and Uzoechina (2017) stated the educational system in Nigeria is at crossroads in the 21st century and that stakeholders in Nigeria have shown their displeasure regarding the inability of the teacher education program to meet the demands of society. Teacher education in Nigeria has not been spared from this criticism, given the abysmal performance of its products in the workplace. Teachers trained recently in Nigerian institutions are seen to lack adequate competencies to function effectively (Adeyanju, 2009).

Students not attaining their maximum potential indicate that the system is dysfunctional for some (Balduf, 2009). This dysfunctionality is more disturbing when it occurs in a university system in which the student is expected to deepen critical thinking and research skills to successfully contribute to society. Ghadirzadeh, Hashtroudi, and Shokri (2013) noted that underachievement does not

always result from low cognitive abilities. Rather it may emanate from a mismatch between pedagogical approach and learning styles or the lack of awareness about learning strategies.

Underachieving students are those whose academic achievements are below expectations in comparison with their potential (Ford & Thomas, 1997). There is usually a significant performance departure from what is expected of them. This departure is occasioned by the interplay of several factors, including family, school, personal, and peer factors (Nomaan, Hanif, & Rehna, 2016). Other researchers note that performance below achievement expectation is linked to deficient study habits, attitude, interest, and time management (Ghadirzadeh et al., 2013; Suan, 2014). These factors have been summarized as "sociopsychological, family-related, peer-related, [and] school-related" (Ford & Thomas, 1997, p. 6). Also, Çakir's (2014) study involving gifted students who are underperforming indicated that underachievers have "low self-perception, low attitude toward their teacher and school, low motivation and goal valuation when they are compared to high achievers" (p.1037).

As common as the problem is in schools, researchers have only recently come to agree that a single definition of the term underachievement seems unattainable (Smith, 2003; Gallagher, 2005). The lack of a single definition has made it difficult to develop a comprehensive and all-inclusive psychometric instrument to help teachers identify underachievement in their classes (Smith, 2013). Ford and Thomas (1997) have noted that in a bid to identify underachievement, the teacher should address such pertinent concerns as determining if underachievement is chronic, situational, or temporary; determining if it is subject-specific or general; and determining the factors responsible for it. Stones (2016) pointed out that it is appropriate to base the definition of underachievement on a student's own prior academic attainment because it will reduce the likelihood of outright inability from

interfering with what is referred to as underachievement. A comparison that has to do with students and their peers is likely to introduce unnecessary variables that could make underachievement cumbersome to define and identify for appropriate intervention programs.

A key factor in underachievement is motivation. Underachieving students are motivated in other areas quite apart from getting good grades in school, and when they are motivated to learn, they are able to attain their potential (Rahal, 2010). What this finding implies is that to turn the underachievement of undergraduate students around, the school system and others must be involved in determining the best instructional strategies and learning environment for each learner, while also giving the underachiever great hope for success in their academic endeavor. However, research has shown that universities are not doing enough to help underachievers (Hans, 2014). Undergraduate underachievers, most of the time, are left to their own peril; and teachers and parents may see underachievers as never-do-wells, lazy, and unteachable (Rahal, 2010).

Agu and colleagues (2010) elaborately described the pattern of relationships between students and teachers in a typical Nigerian setting. They noted that the university environment in Nigeria is one in which students perceived as adults are left to cater for themselves without the needed support from the adult community. Adult students are seen as people who can take full responsibility for their actions. As such, little or no attention is given to their needs, even though recently, Nigerian universities have witnessed the admission of students who are sixteen years old and younger (Agu et al., 2010). This attitude that they are a part of a self-sufficient adult community may estrange students. Lecturers may believe that these students are equipped to take care of themselves, and little may be done to help those who may not respond to the academic pressure in the university environment (Hans, 2014). It is little wonder, then, that learner support services and student personnel services in both regular and open universities in Nigeria are either poor or lacking (Adegbile & Oyekanmi, 2009; Ogundele & James, 2014; Ejeh, Okenjom, & Chiziwoko, 2016).

Surprisingly, there is inadequate research concerning factors perceived by undergraduates that make them underperform in Nigerian universities. Most of the existing body of work is foreign-based and in a cultural context different from the culture in Nigeria. Efforts made in Nigeria to explore factors leading to underachievement are more or less focused on secondary and primary school students (Obomanu & Adaramola, 2011).

Suan (2014), however, found that teacher factors, student factors, and environmental factors were reported by university students as affecting their achievement. Suan (2014) also pointed out that teacher factors that affect student achievement include the teachers' mastery of the subject matter, instructional techniques and strategies, classroom management, communication skills, and personality. Student factors affecting achievement were comprised of study habits, time management, and attitude and interests towards mathematics. Environmental factors

included parents' values, attitudes, classroom settings, and peer groups. Balduf (2009), in a study with college students, found that inadequate study skills, poor time management, and internal versus external motivation contributed to the students' underachievement.

Robust empirical evidence is inadequate in Nigeria regarding factors perceived to cause underachievement. Using a qualitative approach, this study addresses the continued outcry and national concern regarding the poor performance of student teachers in Nigeria. In doing so, specific school-related, personal, and peer- and home-related factors which impede the academic performance of students in the university were ascertained.

Method

The particular design adopted in this study is the generic qualitative research of the interpretive descriptive (ID) family. Generally, a qualitative approach aids the exploration of participants' understanding, experiences, and perceptions of the phenomenon being investigated (Hancock, Windridge, & Ockleford, 2009). Through qualitative research, a wide range of the social world is investigated, including the weave of everyday life experiences and how they are understood and imagined by research participants (Mason, 2002). Qualitative research gives the researcher the opportunity to understand the experiences of the participants.

Within the qualitative paradigm, a number of established genres have emerged. Generic qualitative research is one of the qualitative research approaches adopted for pragmatic reasons (Cooper & Endacott, 2007). The beauty of generic qualitative study lies in the fact that it can draw on the strengths of established methodologies while maintaining flexibility in its approach, taking into consideration particular interests that may not fall neatly within the realm of a particular established methodology (Kahlke, 2014). The interpretive descriptive study, which is a genre of generic qualitative approach, is "epistemologically based in constructivist and interpretive naturalistic orientations" (Shaw, 2015, p.32). Its flexibility and practical applicability offer the opportunity for in-depth understanding of a phenomenon in a naturalistic setting.

The qualitative research approach is suitable for the present study which addressed students' perceptions of the factors underlying their underachievement in English language and literature. It helped the researchers describe and interpret participants' opinions on factors causing underachievement in English language and literature in a natural setting. In describing these experiences, we tried to gain understanding of directly expressed perspectives. In addition, we explored the deeper meanings of the expressed perspectives of participants (Shaw, 2015).

Participants

In conducting this research, first, we purposely sampled students of English Education in the Department of Educational Foundations, given the fact that available records in the department show that less than 60% of those students graduated on time within the last three

years. Second, 30 out of 75 fourth-year students were purposely sampled. These were students whose grade point average (GPA) was poor and who agreed that they were underachieving in their studies. Permission was sought to obtain their academic records from the academic adviser who is also the first author of this work. Informed consent was obtained from the students. The essence of the study was explained to them, and they agreed to participate. All participants were over 18 years old. They were assured of the confidentiality of the information obtained from them and that it would be used exclusively for research purposes. They were coded based on gender and respondent number as respondent one (female) or respondent one (male), respondent two (female) or respondent 2 (male), and so on.

Data Collection

The researchers collected qualitative information on the perceptions of school factors, peer factors, personal factors, and home factors that cause undergraduate student teachers attending university in Nigeria to underachieve in English language and literature. Semistructured interviews were employed in the data generation process. Before interviews were conducted, interview point guides were developed and reviewed among the researchers. Also, the researchers consulted an educational psychologist in the Department of Educational Foundations at the university where the students are enrolled. He noted his corrections which were taken into consideration. These point guides were used as guides and not as dictates to the interview process. Ethics and mannerisms that have to do with interviewing were discussed among the researchers and rehearsed. The interview sessions started with conversations aimed at relaxing the interviewees and creating an opportunity for discussion. The conversations were also used to inform the participants about the interviews' purposes. The interviews were conducted to elicit the interviewees' opinions and to gather sufficient information regarding the factors that cause the students to underachieve in their studies. This structure allowed both researchers and respondents to engage in productive dialogue.

The interviews took place in the participants' school environment and were individually conducted. The interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes for each participant during the participant's lecture-free period. After introductions, participants were asked to discuss the factors that contribute to their underachievement in their studies. Respondents were allowed the freedom to divulge their concerns related to the issues. In some instances, startling revelations were made by the respondents. A little probing was given in that direction when this occurred to ensure that the researchers set aside their everyday understanding and preconception about the issues discussed. Respondents' consents were obtained to audio record the interviews. All interviews were digitally recorded using Samsung Galaxy J5 SM-J500H and transcribed word-for-word. Efforts were made to report each respondent's experiences in a manner that took into consideration the context of the data generated to ensure authenticity of the data.

Data Analysis

In data analysis, the researchers adopted both interpretative/inductive and descriptive analyses. This approach ensured that, while researchers tried to remain close to data, inferences were made to arrive at a deeper understanding of the perspectives expressed by respondents. Data were transcribed verbatim and examined using thematic content analysis. Data were also concurrently analyzed and included in vivo codes (Kahlke, 2014) because the process of data analysis began as the data were being collected. This process helped the researchers to reflect on the data collected. Also, in the coding process, some exact expressions of the respondents were used.

The researchers read the transcripts several times and coded the data line-by-line to identify emerging concepts that addressed the research questions. These concepts were derived from the data. There was no restriction on the number of concepts to be considered, given the idiosyncratic experiences that could result in such situations. Hence, the concepts were identified as they emerged (Hancock et al., 2009). These concepts formed the themes presented in the results section. Before the coding of the data started, the researchers pre-coded the data by underlining a participant's significant quotes that struck their attention. These were reflected on and meaning assigned.

The data from each participant were considered separately to get an overview of the views of each participant. After identifying major emerging concepts, specifics were grouped into subthemes and these subthemes were drawn together to form themes. For example, under school-related factors, themes such as pedagogical incompetence emerged which was comprised of subthemes, such as lecturers' attitudes to classes and the adoption of deficient instructional strategies. When the final list of themes had been compiled, the transcripts were reread and a key words search was performed to ensure no relevant aspect of the themes had been overlooked.

Results and Discussions

The results are presented in terms of themes that emerged from interview analyses with supporting quotations from interview transcripts. Discussions of themes were conducted in place. The themes identified were to address the research questions with specific themes emerging from analysis of the transcripts.

School-Related Factors Contributing to Underachievement

Study participants mentioned lecturers' pedagogical incompetence, defined as a negative attitude toward classes and the adoption of traditional methods of teaching in the classroom, and inadequate facilities, defined as over-crowded, overused, or noisy classrooms and an ill-equipped library, as two school factors that cause them to underachieve in their studies.

Pedagogical Incompetence

Pedagogical competence has been conceptualized broadly as encompassing teachers' (lecturers') skills

exhibited in teaching; the knowledge required of teachers to teach in the most appropriate way; and the attitudes, dispositions, and values that teachers embrace and apply in the classroom (International Organization for Migration, 2014). Therefore, for a teacher to be pedagogically incompetent that teacher is lacking in one of or all the areas emphasized in the above definition. A majority of the students interviewed saw pedagogical incompetence as one of the school factors impeding their success in school.

Lecturers' Attitude to Classes

The attitude of lecturers was identified as one school-related factor that impedes students' academic successes. Lecturers were described as having negative attitudes about classes and lacking the disposition to help students as they teach. Lecturers were described late to classes and unavailable to students. This was identified by most participants underachieving in their studies. Speaking about lecturers not being available to attend to students' problems, a female respondent said, "Most times the lecturers are not always available to put you through difficulties."

Another female student described lecturers' lateness to classes as "teachers not coming to class when they are supposed to" while another female respondent stated that "the lecturers coming late to class when the students must have gotten tired of waiting for the lecturer and the lecturer just shows up, for me whatever the lecturer teaches that day, I don't assimilate it."

These responses are in line with the findings of Adaeyemi and Adeyemi (2014) in which institutional factors such lecturers' interest and commitment predicted the academic achievement of college of education students in Nigeria. Lecturers were unconcerned about students' academic welfare and were not able to attend lectures punctually, which resulted in decreasing students' motivation. When lecturers are interested in students' academics, there is the tendency that they will put in more effort toward teaching students, and they will have that pedagogical patience and tolerance with those who are not doing well.

Lecturers' Adoption of Deficient Teaching Strategies

Another form of pedagogical incompetence exhibited by lecturers that affected students' achievement is lecturers' adoption of deficient teaching strategies. This was identified as one of the factors that negatively affected study participants' performance in school. Undergraduate students noted that their lecturers adopted methods that alienated them from the learning process. Students were passive in class and that made them become bored with the class itself. This passiveness could have led to their seeing their lecturers as doing nothing in class. One respondent, a male, said that "sometimes the way the lectures are structured and the approach of lecturers, because you find out that most lecturers just come to class and basically do not give you the opportunity to participate actively in the class" can cause underachievement.

Respondents noted that not only are lecturers unable to integrate students into the learning process, but also that lecturers could digress and tell stories unconnected to the lesson of the day. This, to some, is annoying and leads to academic frustration. For example, a female respondent stated that "most times the lecturers don't go straight to the point; they tell stories not related to the topic and the lecture itself" while another, also a female, said, "And the lecturers sometimes do not teach us. They lecture what is not in the syllable [sic]." A third female respondent said:

Actually I will say the lecturers. They come to class and instead of teaching the related course outline, they will divert, telling us things from their houses and ancestors, what happened in 1999 and so on. It is always very frustrating and it makes me lose interest from the course and it is annoying.

Some lecturers were seen to be inefficient in classroom management and are most times seen as incompetent to elucidate terms that require explanation. This was stated by a female respondent, "Some lecturers are inefficient in classroom management and then lack explanations when it comes to terms you don't understand."

Students also reported a kind of incongruence between what lecturers teach in class and what they ask in their examinations. Students are most of the time shocked to observe that what is taught in class is not actually what is set in examination. One male respondent stated that "some of the lecturers give you what they like after reading your brain out, as regards grading of the examination." This statement agrees with the International Organization for Migration (2015) that reports more than 50% of Nigerian lecturers are pedagogically incompetent and that 25% are lacking in evaluation skills, both likely factors in their adoption of approaches that alienate students from the teaching and learning process. Some lecturers are also deficient in assessing students' learning at the end of the lecturers' teaching. That is why students reported a mismatch between what lecturers teach in class and what they ask during examination.

Noisy and Inadequate Classrooms and Libraries

Inadequacy of physical facilities was another impediment to students' academic success. This exacerbated students' academic challenges. In such discomfoting situations, many students found themselves unable to hear what the lecturer says in class. To compound the problem, students also reported that there were inadequate libraries for study as well. A male participant said, "The school environment, lack of classroom, as we can see, we are suffering from classroom problems, there is not enough accommodation where the students can relax and read and this affects me." Another respondent, a female, stated:

The classroom environment, the lecture halls are usually small. When you come late for a lecture you will find yourself sitting at the back of the class and

sometimes the lecturers have low voice. When I sit at the back, I don't hear them.

Further, the classrooms are small and lack adequate ventilation as described by a female respondent when she noted that "the major one [inadequacy], I think, is the classroom size and the conduciveness in terms of ventilation and the sitting arrangement" while another respondent, also a female, noted "inadequate structures and overcrowding of classes."

These findings concur with other findings that adequate facilities in school are strongly and positively related to school achievement (Baharin, Othman, Azizan, & Isa, 2015). Various reports have shown that facilities in Nigerian universities are inadequate, dilapidated, poorly ventilated, and overstretched (Abdullahi, Yusoff, & Gwamna, 2017). Students must be provided with the essential facilities that will help them study comfortably in schools.

A follow-up report indicates that the school environment is noisy which contributes a great deal to the distraction of students during lecture hours. Excerpts from interview transcripts of the participants demonstrate the theme. A female respondent, notes, "For example, in my department, the school environment itself is always very noisy, students walking up and down, sometimes the classrooms are too noisy that you don't hear what the lecturers are saying" while another female respondent notes a "lack of adequate facilities, not having enough books in the library that are relevant to what I am studying."

This lack stems from the fact that these facilities are overused (Abdullahi et al., 2017). Findings have shown that lack of good reading places could impede undergraduate students' achievement (Mersha, Bishaw, & Tegegne, 2013) and that school-related factors such as comfortable and strategic classrooms and well-equipped libraries were significantly related to undergraduate students' academic achievement (Baharin et al., 2015).

Peer-Related Factors Contributing to Underachievement

A number of peer factors were identified by the participants as factors that affect their achievement, such as negative influences from friends, keeping friends who are unserious academically, and discouragement from friends.

Negative influences from friends that cause a major distraction and encourage students to underachieve in their studies can be seen in excerpts of interview transcripts where a female participant said, "I have camera-freak friends, so when I come to school, we like to look good in front of the camera, so we do this even when the lecture is going on." Another participant, male, stated: "Iron sharpens iron. I have friends that are not academically sound, so they influence me negatively towards my academics." A female noted, "In class, most of my friends will talk while the lecture is going on. They bring up one topic or another, talk about the latest make up, clothes, and hairs and I am easily distracted and influenced by this."

Bursztyn and Jensen (2015) noted that students are highly responsive to their peers and what the prevailing norm is when they make decisions and are likely to change

their beliefs to conform to the acceptable norm to avoid social penalty. This is why students could be derailed by what their peers say and do.

Keeping friends who are dull academically was seen by respondents as influencing them gravely. Some of students had an unhealthy affinity with their peers that prevented the students from concentrating on their studies. Also, some productive scaffolding that could come from social interactions existing among peers was lacking because of an affinity with unserious peers. For example, one participant captured the fact that most of her friends choose to be absent from school and she copies this attitude from them. She said, "If my peer group or group of friends do not want to go to school, I find myself being influenced by them and, therefore, would not also want to go to school." Another participant added that "I like to study together. I find it difficult to study alone, so when my friends do not want to study, it is a challenge on my side. Seeing that I cannot study alone for a very long time, it is a challenge to my studies."

Also, respondents pointed out that their academic success is marred as a result of students who are not academically sound and are unserious. A female respondent captured this idea: "I keep friends that are not intelligent, friends that are extroverts, friends that consider their studies secondary and most of them don't come to school. So this affects me one way or the other." Another put it this way: "My friends lack devotion. They see school as a mere arena for passing time, and this influences me" while another said, "The kind of friends I keep are not really serious academically and they weigh me down and I cannot do anything about it." As a final example, one respondent noted, "The friends I keep mar me and their attitudes to reading is very poor so definitely I am affected with such attitude."

Students' associations with those who are not doing well and are not serious may be a cause or an effect of underachievement since Worley (2007) has stated that results from studies show that at-risk students tend to become associated with students who drop out. It is likely that associating themselves with those who are not doing well affects their own success and discovering that they are not doing well in school may push them away from those peers who are doing well.

Another important peer influence pointed out in this study is the fact that students get distracted by their peers even as classes go on. Study participants said they begin to discuss irrelevant issues that could put them off the points being made by their lecturers. One female respondent stated:

My friends contribute most times because when the lecture is going on in class and I am sitting with my friends, I get distracted and we begin to discuss, play music, talk fashion. Most times I don't get to listen to the lecturer and I miss out on the points stated.

Another said, "My friends are noisemakers and party goers and they affect me personally. When I sit with them

in class, I laugh a lot and with this I am distracted from the on-going lecture.” In another instance, a respondent reported being pressured by friends to leave school. She reported that “if you are not careful, they will take you out. My friends will always tell me, ‘Let’s go out.’ They will help me spend my day uselessly and at the end of the day it backfires on me.”

Also, the issue of discouragement from peers emerged from the transcript. Feedback from peers and their reactions to attempts made by underachievers sent a very strong message to the underachievers participating in the study. Some processed the reactions to such an extent that they interfered with their self-esteem and self-concept. One of the female participants stated:

My friends make fun of me when I fail in class, and they take me as a stupid person when I want to ask questions in class, so most times I just keep to myself and this hinders me from doing well in my studies.

The report of feeling discouraged agrees with Johnsons’ (2000) findings that students’ grade points could drop significantly if they are made fun of by their peers. This tends to dampen their self-efficacy and self-concept. They begin to restrain themselves from making creative efforts that will help them do better in their studies.

Personal Factors Contributing to Undergraduates’ Underachievement

Analysis of the transcripts reveals a number of personal factors or challenges that cause the participants to underachieve in their studies, including lack of motivation and interest, procrastination, poor reading habit, laziness, distractions from social media and movies, and excessive sleep.

Lack of motivation and interest

Some respondents were not motivated to put in effort in their studies and did not consider effort as a major factor in their academic pursuit. Some attributed their lack of intrinsic motivation toward their studies to their inability to find meaning in what they were doing, which dampened their interest. Also, some respondents who are likely to be extrinsically motivated to learn attributed their lack of interest and motivation in their studies to how they are handled by their lecturers. One respondent noted, “The major personal factor is that sometimes, I don’t have the motivation and encouragement to read,” while another, in a tone that showed resignation to fate, said, “I don’t know what else to say; everything boils down to lack of motivation and interest.” Some participants stated the cause of their not being motivated. This was captured as “Sometimes I lack interest in my studies. Some lecturers make me lose interest in my studies” and “The course I am studying is not what I want to study, so I have the reluctance and discouragement in studying hard.”

These statements agree with Balduf’s (2009) and Garkaz, Banimahd, and Esmaeili’s (2011) findings that

interest and motivation, both internal and external, are related to academic achievement. When a child is not motivated to learn, all efforts made by teachers and other stakeholders may not make any meaningful impact on the child unless the issue of motivation is addressed.

Our findings also agree with the findings of Baslanti (2008) in which undergraduate students who are underachieving reported that not spending the necessary effort, desire, and persistence in their study contributed to their academic woes and that they would do better in their studies if they enjoy the course. Respondents in the present study, in a bid to point at the causality of the low motivation, noted that their being in a course they are not interested in and incompetent lecturers led to their not being motivated to study.

The issue of procrastination

Most students face the issue of procrastination as they tend to delay and postpone their time of personal study and allocate that time to attending to their electrical gadgets, going on social media, and so on. This is what one participant said concerning the issue of procrastination: “I sometimes postpone my reading and this affects me personally.” Another participant added:

When the semester starts, I don’t like to resume immediately. I wait until two weeks or one month later and when I resume, there will be accumulated work load for me and laziness sets it.

Students who underachieve are found to procrastinate in their studies (Rosário et al., 2009), and procrastination is negatively related to academic achievement (Bezci & Vural, 2013).

Poor reading habits

Students reported that poor reading habits contributed to their not doing well in their studies. One of the participants said, “I don’t read well and don’t get the necessary materials for studies.” This was further demonstrated by quotes from other participants: “I don’t read well. I only read during exams and this is a problem,” and “I don’t like copying notes in the class.”

Salleh, Yahaya, Yusof, and Hussin (2015) and Balduf (2009) identified that the main factors that were detrimental in affecting the underachievers’ academic competence were poor study skills, such as a lack of proper study schedules, poor note-taking skills, no study groups, and lack of revisions.

Social media and movie distractions

Students also reported their experiences with social network and movies in which they noted that addiction to them has imperiled their performance in school. It was a theme that emerged from across the transcripts of many of the respondents. One stated: “I am addicted to pressing my phone. Facebook, WhatsApp, and other social media distractions are my major personal problems.” Others

identified distractions from “electrical gadgets, social media” and “movies. I watch movies a lot. I prefer to watch movies to read my handouts” Once participant noted: “I watch movies a lot to the extent that the time I allocate to reading my books is not enough.” Another said: “I give too much time to my phone instead of my books.”

Venkatashiva, Arti, and Amit (2017) found in their study that students’ excessive use of technology was seen as one of the factors that affect students’ success in school. This corroborates the reports of the respondents. When social media is abused, there is the likelihood that students’ academics are jeopardized, given that the time that should be dedicated to their study would be used for activities unrelated to their study.

Similar studies have found that use/multitasking on laptops distracts students’ attention (users and nonusers) and those who do score low on tests (Awwad, Ayeshe, & Awwad, 2013; Sana, Weston, & Cepeda, 2013). It is also possible that their engaging excessively in social media could result in academic underachievement.

Excessive sleep, laziness, and lack of discipline

Although both adequate sleep and rest are required and needed by students to help relax their nerves, they become problems when they become excessive. Excessive time spent sleeping may prevent students from devoting enough time to their studies. Some participants noted that excessive sleep becomes a personal factor that causes them to underachieve in their studies:

I find it difficult to read for a long time. I also see excessive sleep as a challenge to my studies, when I want to study I find myself sleeping most times and also [I experience an] inability to recall some of the things I have read. This is a challenge to me.

Another participant said: “I sleep a lot, so instead of coming to school I sometimes stay at home and sleep” while another noted “laziness and indiscipline.” One respondent said, “I find it difficult to read. I love ‘gisting’ and forget to read and sometimes when I read I don’t understand” while another pointed to “my carefree life. I don’t take things too seriously and it has contributed to my not doing well.”

Salleh et al. (2015) reported that personal factors such as excessive sleep contribute to underachievement. The volume of work to be covered by an undergraduate student demands that restraint is needed before indulging in excessive sleep.

Home Factors Contributing to Undergraduates’ Underachievement

Analysis of transcripts reveals a number of issues from the students’ home environment that cause the participants not to do well in their studies, namely socioeconomic background and parental pressure.

Socioeconomic background

Financial problem was a recurrent theme that emerged

from the interviews. Students noted that it affected them negatively in their studies by hindering them from paying full attention. One of the participants stated: “The financial challenge is one of the major issues that has affected me academically. Presently there are some books I need to buy which I have not because the money is not there so it is a challenge.” Another said, “The inconsistency in terms of financial assistance. Money doesn’t come ...so it impedes my performance in my academics.” Another participant expressed the theme this way:

But I will say the money aspect. There are situations whereby I will need to get some handouts and I call my parents to ask for money and they don’t give me. It discourages me and makes me feel reluctant and not willing to read that particular text.

Research has shown that income level of parents significantly predicts the academic achievement of students because it determines the type of parental attention and involvement students will receive (Dzever, 2015). This could affect their achievement because the university education in Nigeria is expensive and there is hardly any provision by the government to offset the financial burden of students in financial difficulty. Students are likely to engage themselves in economic activities to help themselves out, preventing them from devoting their time in their studies.

Also, other participants pointed out that parental educational attainment is another challenge in their study because it leads to minimal parental involvement in the schooling of their children. For instance, a respondent stated: “Also from my personal home background, my parents are not so educated and it tends to affect me in my educational background because they do not call to ask me about my educational challenges and this affects me.” Another reported:

My family background has a lot to do in my education, and it affects me because of the poor parental background I come from. Assuming I came from an educated family they would have started on time to teach me the ethics and values that will help me in a being a better person.

Chaudhry, Shafiq, and Berhanu (2011) found that parental educational attainment impacts students’ academic achievement. Better educated parents are more likely to be involved in the education of their children because they themselves have gone through the process and understand what it takes to become successful in an educational endeavor.

Parental pressure

Pressure from home is another cause of underachievement among undergraduate students. A student noted: “Yes, I only come to school just on the basis of going to school because others are doing so. My parents forced me here so my interest and motivation have not been developed yet.” Another stated:

I come to school from home and I stay with my mother and she can give trouble, because I have to settle her problems before I can concentrate on my studies. Sometimes I even run away from home to stay with friends so that I will be able to concentrate.

These pressures from the home can impede the academic success of undergraduate students. Other researchers have found that students who report high levels of parental pressure develop test anxiety and are negatively affected in their test outcomes (Nagpal & Sinha, 2016).

Conclusion

The study explored the factors affecting the academic success of undergraduate student teachers in Nigeria. Several factors were reported by respondents. These factors bordered on students' experiences with the school, peer, their own motivation, and the home. The array of themes that emerged from the interviews deepens the understanding that several factors impede the achievement of these students. These factors are, however, unconnected with their individual mental abilities, which is in line with the current view that noncognitive factors are as important as cognitive factors in determining the academic success of students. This suggests that a holistic approach be adopted to address the issue of underachievement among undergraduate student teachers in Nigeria.

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Resilient Doctoral Students in California: A Reflective Study of the Relation Between Childhood Challenges and Academic Success

Randy Bessey and Juan-Carlos González

Abstract: This general qualitative study examined how people with Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) were able to navigate adversity and ultimately pursue doctoral programs. The research focused on the academic experiences of doctoral students who had 4 or more ACEs and explored how resiliency helped these participants navigate the educational system. The case study was conducted with 7 participants who all had 7 or more ACEs and went on to be academically successful. Findings highlighted insights into the resilient lives of these individuals. Their historical narratives generated an exploration of the nature of trauma and overcoming adversity. Based on these findings, a discussion incorporates how educators can provide proper emotional and social support systems. Limitations and future directions conclude this study. Visual inspection of a general outcome reading comprehension measure were mixed, seemingly favoring the validated intervention and not close reading. Limitations of the research and implications for use of close reading with students at risk are discussed.

A recent essay published by Meg Jay entitled “The Secrets of Resilience” (2017a) talks about how successful adults overcame difficult childhoods. Jay’s article is a summary of her book *Supernormal: The Untold Story of Adversity and Resilience* (2017b). In both, Jay talks about the commonness of experiencing childhood trauma and still having success later in life. She states that nearly 75% of people have experienced early childhood trauma, such as trauma associated with a death or divorce, bullying, alcoholism or drug abuse in the home, mental illness in a parent or a sibling, neglect, emotional abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse, having a parent in jail, or growing up alongside domestic violence until the age of 20. Yet many people overcome trauma and achieve high levels of success as adults through resiliency.

Jay’s work and the work of other prominent scholars (e.g., Shectman, DeBarger, Dornsife, Rosier, & Yarnall, 2013) expanded understanding on how people use resiliency to achieve high levels of success. This study is similar to Jay’s in that both look at how people overcome childhood trauma. It is different in that Jay studied ordinary people in a multitude of professions while this study focused on doctoral students in the field of education.

So, how do youth use resiliency to navigate school and the schooling process? Shectman et al. (2013) addressed resiliency in their research, articulating how the recent movement for test score accountability has pushed aside other important human character qualities that define what it is to be successful. They declare that if young adults grow up cultivating and refining solid character skills, such as resilience, positive-mindset, and grit, they are much less likely to drop out of college and much more likely to become well-rounded, successful, and fulfilled people. Even with national attention, rarely is longitudinal research done to understand what happens to students after they leave school. The assumption is that a large number end up incarcerated (Hockenberry & Puzzanchera, 2015). The current study focused on doctoral students who faced these struggles as youth and asked them to reflect on their childhood experiences to help understand what happens with struggling youth who eventually succeed in school.

Youth face many risk factors, such as the adversity factors listed by Jay (2017). Felitti et al. (1998) categorized these as Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). In their study, Felitti et al. (1998) discovered that a large portion of the population had been exposed to trauma in childhood and categorized ACEs into three categories: (a) abuse (physical abuse, psychological abuse, and sexual abuse), (b) neglect (physical and emotional), and (c) household dysfunction (e.g., mental illness, incarceration of a family member, and separation or divorce). They found that these experiences were related to unhealthy outcomes later in life. People who had a history of ACEs also had effects that influenced poor social, emotional, physical, and mental health.

Additionally, the Felitti et al. (1998) study further showed that, compared to people with no history of ACEs, people with ACE scores of four or higher were two times more likely to smoke and seven times more likely to be addicted to alcohol or drugs. The people with four or more ACEs were also two times more likely to have cancer, two times more likely to have heart disease, two times more likely to have liver disease, and four times more likely to have emphysema or bronchitis. The California Department of Public Health (2016) also found that youth with four or more ACEs were twice as likely to drop out of high school before finishing and four times less likely to graduate college than youth without ACEs. The findings provide a contribution to the literature in that the doctoral student population sample had four or more ACEs, yet persevered in education. Another contribution to the literature was that the sample was largely composed of students of color, some from farm-working families in Central California. The participants of the study and the ways they dealt with ACEs were both unique in that this population receives little attention in research.

Educators also understand that having a positive sense-of-self is also important to academic success (Tinto 1982, 1988; Tough, 2012). Having a positive sense-of-self mitigates addictive behavior, such as alcoholism, drug abuse, and binge eating (Tough, 2012). Furthermore, Tough (2012) stated that as a result, children who grow up

in stressful environments normally find it harder to sit still in the classroom. These children also have a harder time rebounding from frustrations and experience difficulties in following directions, which can result in being suspended from school, all of which have a direct and negative impact on performance in school. Experiences of childhood trauma have also been found to disrupt healthy brain development and negatively affect school success (Felitti et al., 1998).

It is with this understanding of the negative effects of ACEs for youth that we focus on doctoral students who experienced four or more ACEs as youth. Given their challenging circumstances, these at-risk participants should more likely be school dropouts, not doctoral students. According to *Aces Too High* (2016), when a person has an ACE score of four or more, the person is more likely to suffer long-term health issues. *Aces Too High* (2016) reports that a person with four or more ACEs has a 390% increased probability of chronic pulmonary lung disease, a 240% increased likelihood of hepatitis, a 460% increased chance of being severely depressed, and 1,220 % increased possibility of committing suicide.

Prior research supported the *Aces Too High* (2016) findings in that people who had a history of ACEs were at increased risk of depressive disorders (Chapman et al., 2004) and attempted suicide (Dube et al., 2001). There is currently no distinction between the types of ACEs, only the number of ACEs.

The current study attempts to discover insights into the resilient lives of the individuals who overcame their ACEs. Resiliency for these participants is the ability to successfully navigate school and life, despite having faced the intense hardships of adverse childhood experiences. Wang, Haertel, and Walberg (1990) talked about resiliency as being successful despite the extreme hardships endured in childhood. For these participants, extreme hardships were specific to the ACE categories of abuse, neglect, and household dysfunction. Their reflective narratives add knowledge and make a contribution to understanding youth with ACEs.

Research Question

For the purpose of analysis, the research question asked was: How did doctoral students with early childhood trauma change their trajectory to achieve high levels of academic success? Through participants' narratives of how they navigated their academic worlds, insights into how children who were deeply immersed in trauma could become academically successful were obtained. According to Anastasi, Meade, and Schneider (1960), academic success includes factors such as successful grades, academic achievement, recognition for academic accomplishments, and timely graduation. For participants of this study, academic success is defined as the ability to graduate high school, continue on to attain a higher educational outcome, and meet desired college levels. It is through their stories that educators can glean remarkable insights.

Methods

The design for this study was qualitative. Through

interviews, the researcher found plausible explanations of how doctoral students were able to overcome ACEs.

Participant Description

Table 1 provides an overview of the participants. In total, there were seven participants. The sample included two men and five women. Five of the seven identified as Latinx. There was one Caucasian and one African American.

Initially, the research sought participants with four or more ACEs. However, early in the research, it was clear that many of those with a desire to participate had more than four ACEs. This was a unique sample because there was no expectation that doctoral students would be a population where one would find extensive childhood trauma histories. Ultimately, the sample of seven had an average of 8.5 ACEs, out of a possible 10.

Findings

Five major themes emerged for participants with severe childhood trauma relative to academic experiences. These themes remained consistent through grade school as well as the participants' college careers. The themes that emerged in this study include determination in schools for validation, education as means to escape, school activities as opportunities to be dynamic, fear of failure equating to academic success, and non-amical relationships providing normal models of success and interaction.

Determination in Schools for Validation

All seven participants discussed determination through situations in academic settings. The participants referenced this skill 54 times. All seven participants experienced being physically abused in their childhoods, and all seven participants experienced being emotionally abused in their childhoods. Participants throughout their interviews discussed fighting through tough situations to gain validation or fighting against the way things were at home. Education provided the opportunity to display toughness. One example was when Bailey, who is Caucasian and experienced eight ACEs, said:

Navigating through college, it's more than just getting an education. It's being able to validate that I'm capable. Honestly, I think it's just so I don't hear the gibberish that's in my head, the narrative that my mother used to say about "You're a lazy ass," or "You're worthless," or "You can't do anything." Or "Blah, blah, blah."

Bailey's words are representative of how participants used education to validate themselves and gain a sense of worth.

Chandah, an African American who experienced seven ACEs, also fought her way through school as a means to obtain endorsement from adults that she was not receiving at home. She stated, "I love validation. Validation at home was real ephemeral. At school, it was more consistent. It's probably a big reason why I did well in school." The importance of education as a proving ground was very important to students with ACEs.

Delphia, a Latina who experienced 10 ACEs, explained the importance of education as a proving ground this way:

Table 1

Participant Demographic Information

Pseudonym	Gender	Race / Ethnicity	Location Raised	Number of ACEs
Adriana	Female	Latina	Southern CA	7
Bailey	Female	Caucasian	Central CA	8
Chandah	Female	African American	Central CA	7
Delphia	Female	Latina	Central CA	10
Efrain	Male	Latino	Northern CA	9
Francisco	Male	Latino	Central CA	10
Gabriela	Female	Latina	Southern CA	9

Grade-wise, I did well. I excelled in school, again because it was my escape. It was my, if you will, my sanctuary. It was to me my way of fighting against the life that I had at home, particularly with my dad. I was told very often that I wasn't going to make anything with my life and I was a mistake and those things like that.

School was an escape from the abuses at home and allowed students to excel in something worthwhile. Delphia also pushed forward to validate herself. She said,

My father was afraid of me being educated, because if you're educated that means you become stronger in a place that he doesn't have strength. Obviously when I was younger he had strength over me because of course he's bigger and he's a man and all that stuff. If intellectually I was smarter than that, if I became stronger and smarter in that way, that was my defense, if you will. It was no longer this being passive and those types of things. That's what pushed me through.

Education as a Means to Escape

All seven participants utilized escape to help them navigate academic settings. This was referenced 34 times by participants. For all seven, school was a means to escape from home lives filled with trauma. Delphia immersed herself in school and used it as a way to escape her home. She explained:

I was ecstatic when I started school when I was younger because that meant of course escape from the environment that I was in. I think that really education as a whole from the very beginning was the root to my safety and security and being able to have a happier life you can say. (Latina, 10 ACEs)

School not only provided an escape but also a place of safety and happiness.

Adriana ran away to escape the abuse in pursuit of a different academic setting. She discussed the night she ran away:

I remember my dad telling me that at the end of the school year that I was no longer going to be allowed to live there and I would not ever see my brother again, and he told me all the whole typical spiel of what a loser I was, so that night I ran away, because I had goals, and dammit, I was going to make them happen. I don't know why I was thinking that at that time, but all I could think about was I will never finish high school if I stay living with my father. (Latina, 7 ACEs)

Francisco found escape in schools by reading and watching male teachers to see how they acted. He explained:

Since I don't have a mom or a dad, I look at male role models, and I look at people that I inspire to be like. I try to read books like them so I can see how they think like so I can partake in some of these philosophies and maybe try to be that type of man, rather than being the man that I was brought up to be. (Latino, 10 ACEs)

As Delphia quite simply put it, "Home was dirt...school was my refuge."

School Activities as Opportunities to Be Dynamic

All seven participants discussed staying active in their academic settings. Participants were involved in extracurricular work or taking a high number of courses. This was referenced 19 times and manifested itself as a means of staying at school so they would not have to go home, as another way to validate themselves, or to stay

active and keep their mind off the trauma. Chandah made a representative statement when she said:

I was in clubs. Anything I could do to stay out of the house, I did. I was always super involved with clubs and activities. Starting in junior high and then very much in high school. I did band first and then theater. (African American, 7 ACEs)

Chandah, like all participants, was extremely active and busy.

Bailey talked about staying active and busy while in college and beyond when she stated, "I took 21 to 24 units a semester and worked two jobs and graduated with honors with my BA and my MA and a couple of teaching credentials and I've been a workaholic ever since," (Bailey, Caucasian, 8 ACEs). This is very representative of the continuous need to be active, participating, and staying busy. Higher education provided that opportunity. Tinto (1975, 1982) also talked about how engagement in college helped with student retention.

Students with ACEs overcame adversity by being constantly on the go. Classroom and extracurricular activities provided the escape that the participants needed. Weiss and Wagner (1998) explained that abused children are not able to escape from a destructive home environment, yet these participants found a way through school activities.

Fear of Failure = Academic Success

All seven participants talked about the theme of fear in an academic setting. It was referenced 14 times. Participants talked about fear in the educational setting more as a fear of not achieving success, not being able to reach certain goals, or not being able to obtain a level of validation. Chandah explained these fears very well when she said:

I was just really afraid of failing, or being perceived as a failure, so much so that when I was confronted with obstacles I didn't even perceive them as issues. I just plowed ahead. Honestly, I don't feel particularly resilient, just really motivated to not fail. (African American, 7 ACEs)

Chandah's statement is representative of fear for participants. Their fear was not debilitating. Instead, it was motivating.

Weiss and Wagner (1998) discussed fear as the way a person's body reacts physically to trauma. The amygdala responds to signs of danger and the body's distress system is activated. The body sends large amounts of adrenaline to help the child fight or run away. Weiss and Wagner said that children with ACEs often detach or go into a freeze response. For participants in this study, fear was used to move forward, to push ahead, and to validate self-worth.

Nonfamilial Relationships Provided Normal Models of Success and Interaction

Relationships were critical to the success of participants. All seven participants had been physically abused and emotionally abused by their parents. Seeking relationships outside of the home provided participants the support to navigate out of childhood trauma. Sometimes those

relationships came in the form of a classmate's family. A common theme was that participants developed relationships with friends and the families of those friends. Bailey explained that she was able to navigate through school by having several friends with healthy families to figuratively adopt her. She said:

I got a taste of what a family really should look like... I thought I was crazy because my mom would say something in her drunken stupor. Maybe she'd give me permission to go with friends after school the next day and so I'd go with friends and then I'd come home, and I'd get the you know what beat out of me because 'she never gave me permission.' I really thought that I was kind of cuckoo. (Caucasian, 8 ACEs)

Efrain had also found love in the form of a friend's family who took him in, "I felt more loved and more encouraged by them than my own family" (Efrain, Latino, 9 ACEs). The theme of relationships surfaced time and time again with participants. They attributed their success and resiliency to the relationships that they formed. Relationships were a very important protective factor to participants.

Educators played a role in the success of the doctoral students in this study. Educators' roles were also mentioned by Tinto (1988). The teachers who were effective in having a positive impact in the lives of participants saw beneath and beyond the hard exteriors and defensive walls. For Francisco it was a teacher who let him handwrite assignments when she discovered he was homeless. For Delphia it was Miss P. who saw beyond the rough way of dressing, which Delphia admittedly adopted on purpose to put up walls, and invited Delphia to join her on a trip to Stanford. For Adriana it was Mr. W. who told her that he could see through her barriers and thought she had so much to give as a teacher. Efrain was wrongfully placed into a special education class by one teacher because he did not speak English, yet the special education teacher quickly built his self-efficacy back up when she gave him a position of prestige. Chandah was not as much of a challenge for teachers because she undoubtedly was a pleaser. However, she identified several educators who allowed her into their worlds so that she could escape hers. Gabriela was bounced around from one foster home to another, yet she recalled a teacher who kept track of her and would bring her back to the school for assemblies and events. She said, "I still felt part of the school. When people took the time to do that, I knew I was not nothing." The district eventually allowed Gabriela to stay in one school despite her living in revolving foster homes.

To develop relationships with people living in trauma, one must understand that a paradigm shift must occur. Francisco summed up the need for a paradigm shift in this way:

For people that are in trauma, it's hard for you to see how resilient you are because people continue to oppress you. Until you can get out of that cell or you can remove that blindfold over your eyes, it's hard for you to see how resilient you are or for you to believe how

resilient you are. I think that our world does a really good job of judging people, and it makes it hard for people to be resilient because when you judge people, it's hard to be resilient, especially when you already have people telling you that you're not good enough. I think that, in order for these things to work, we need to have a paradigm shift a shift of caring within our community. We need to have a philosophy shift. We need to really watch what we tell our kids. (Latino, 10 ACEs)

It is also critical to understand that developing relationships takes time. Most students living in trauma who enter the school system develop defenses. Adriana explained her situation like this:

This occurred, I can remember, as early as kindergarten. I remember first day of kindergarten I was in trouble because I wouldn't let my mom brush my hair, so I was in trouble, so I was slapped that morning and I can remember that, but by the time I got to probably second grade... I started to learn how to turn that off, so if my father or my mother would hit me, the physical pain for me, I didn't feel it as much as I did when I was younger because I learned how to make myself numb. (Latina, 7 ACEs)

And Delphia explained:

Being that I was abused a lot in all manners, growing up I dressed a certain way, which as to present a defense, so dressing baggy. It's just the culture. You have to dress to push people away, if you will, to armor yourself... I wasn't flamboyant and talkative. I wasn't like that. I was very reserved and kept to myself. I had a hard exterior. Yeah, I looked like I was pissed off all the time, mainly because I was. I knew that I wasn't dumb. (Latina, 10 ACEs)

Despite the obstacles clearly outlined by participants in this study, each one of them mentioned, by name, an educator who was able to skillfully navigate the participants' walls of defense to make an impact.

Discussion

It is a myth that many people who experience childhood trauma are naturally resilient and, therefore they do not need help because they have internalized mechanisms that allow them to overcome this trauma. Jay's (2017a) research clearly shows resilient people do need help because of early trauma, and despite their will to succeed, they also need support. This support is in the practice of forming positive relationships and having caring people who are willing to lend a hand through their life journeys. It is these types of support systems that make a difference for resilient people.

One example of a recent research study on continuation high school that has had a direct impact is Bessey's (2017). Bessey developed and implemented the four R's: relationships, relevance, rigor (building self-efficacy), and reflection, which have been a model for helping youth with

the experience of trauma. The four R's have helped Kings Canyon High School gain recognition (by having the highest test scores in Central California for continuation schools) for their focus on helping resilient youth.

Because of the work of Jay (2017a, 2017b) and Bessey (2017), it is clear that educators have a great stake in ensuring academic success for all children, especially at-risk youth. Despite living with extreme stressors, participants in this study would be considered resilient. Educational programs and policies that understand the effects of chronic stress and promote resilience may be able to contribute to student success. By examining these successful individuals who have overcome adversity, despite enduring ACEs, this study hopes to enlighten educators with insights into resilience that will have an impact on educational practices.

Participants tended to keep thoughts and emotions to themselves, which is problematic for educators who wish to help. At-risk students learn at an early age to suppress their feelings and close in the walls around themselves. However, each of the participants described educators in their lives who were able to overcome the barriers and develop meaningful relationships.

Being able to recognize the signals of students living with trauma is important in providing them the assistance they need. Schools must devise ways to identify students at risk. Schools that have social workers or psychologists on staff who can refer or provide at-risk students with proper social and emotional supports are essential.

Educational systems must help students develop self-efficacy and build self-worth. Participants in this study reported not having very high self-worth just as Tough (2012) explained that traumatic incidents in children could produce feelings of low self-worth. He also went on to say that feelings of low self-esteem could lead to addictive behaviors and self-destructive behaviors, such as heavy drinking, drug abuse, overeating, and smoking. Participants in this study did not engage in self-destructive behaviors. Rather they focused their energy into validating they were worthy. Educational systems played a major role in providing a platform for participants. They felt that the more education they had, the worthier they became. The participants in this study expressed a great fear of failure in their academic lives. Educators must work to improve the self-efficacy of at-risk students. Providing students with relevant and challenging assignments benefits their growth. Assignments should be just rigorous enough to stimulate the at-risk student, but not so rigorous that it paralyzes them.

All seven of the participants were emotionally and verbally abused in their homes; they came to school to escape those abuses. They had been told they were stupid and unworthy in their households; schools should provide the environment where students are guided to feel intelligent and worthy. Linda Darling-Hammond (2010) talked about students' willingness to commit to school and their own futures and the fact that it is interwoven with their perceptions whether their schools and their teachers believe they are worthwhile investments. Tinto (1975, 1982, & 1988) found that successful integration into an institution required a student to achieve levels of sufficiency in both

academic and social domains. Tinto went on to explain that drop outs occurred when students felt isolated or unable to connect either academically or socially.

Educators must develop relationships. Participants admitted to putting up barriers as a self-defense which could push educators away. At times, certain teachers were viewed as a threat by the subjects of this study. According to Weiss and Wagner (1998), repeated ACEs can affect the systems of a person's body and eventually a person's entire life. Children in these situations respond to every situation as if it is a threat. However, every single participant referenced an educator who made a difference in their lives. Relationships were important to the success of participants. Educators who took the time to see through the participants' walls were able to make a positive impact in the lives of participants. This task is not always easy and takes patience, time, and unconditional support. Children who live in trauma often put up huge barriers to keep people from reaching into their core. The importance of relationships continues well into college where research found that students who did not drop out of college were helped along the way by member(s) of the institution (Tinto, 1988).

Educators must learn to help at-risk students set goals differently in a safe environment. Participants were adaptive, resourceful, and active as they navigated in and out of their chaotic worlds. This is encouraging for educators. Establishing school environments that are safe and provide activities for at-risk students is critical. It should also be encouraging to educators that participants were adaptable since Luthar, Cicchetti, and Becker (2000) found that resilience was developmental and changing. This finding suggested that the positive adaptation and development could be taught and could lead to greater resilience. Students living in trauma could be helped to set goals. Educators need to be careful when helping at-risk students set goals and objectives. Participants in this study set goals to validate themselves and prove others wrong. Educators who are constantly having students set nonchallenging goals to obtain a higher score on a test or to settle for an average grade might find students with ACEs unreceptive.

Schools must provide many cocurricular or extracurricular opportunities for the at-risk student. Participants in the study expressed an overwhelming need to stay active. Staying busy not only provided participants with the ability to keep their minds off trauma at home, but also provided them an opportunity to physically be away from the abusive household.

Educators need to make a paradigm shift in the way they work with children who live in trauma. Viewing education through the eyes of these individuals who survived childhood trauma makes one do some embarrassing self-reflections. How many times have educators asked a child to take out a piece of paper and write about "What I did this weekend?" or "What I did this summer vacation"? Would Bailey, Efrain, and Chandah write about how they spent the weekend hiding in a closet to avoid being beaten? Would Adriana, Delphia, and Gabriela write about how they were handed over to a sexual predator? Or would Francisco explain his struggles to survive on his own because both

parents were incarcerated and both of his brothers had been murdered? Educators must approach assignments as if all their students live in trauma. This practice would allow all students to benefit. However, assignments directed explicitly for students of traditional upbringing can truly harm students in trauma and cause shame, emotional suffering, and isolation.

There is reason to believe that youth in schools, particularly continuation schools, come to educators with multiple ACEs that complicate their abilities to navigate the schooling process. Students navigate schools despite cultural and linguistic differences, and they navigate schools with intense focus and desire to succeed despite carrying the trauma associated with ACEs. The seven doctoral students who participated in this study and reflected on their childhood trauma and their resiliency offer understanding and hope for what is possible if at-risk students are viewed as assets with the ability for high levels of academic success, not problems to be fixed.

Limitations and Future Directions

The population of doctoral students who had four or more ACEs was not an easy population to locate; however, additional research with a larger national sample size could prove to be beneficial in adding additional insights into resiliency and ACEs. The participant population of this study was primarily raised in California. The researcher sought candidates from four California State Universities with different geographical locations inside the state of California. Future research across different states and different educational settings could further develop the findings of this research.

This research focused on themes and references from participants and did not focus on differences between the types of ACEs experienced, nor the number of ACEs experienced, by the participants in this study. The researcher observed that participants who had been sexually abused tended to be more emotional during the interview and they also tended to be more guarded in academic and social settings; however, these differences were not explored. Future research into participants with different types of ACEs might provide deeper insights into how best to support children living in trauma.

The participants in this study were a diverse group of students: two Latino males, three Latina females, one Caucasian female, and one African American female. Future research of singular populations, such as African American males, could provide additional insights specific to culture or ethnicity.

Research into ACEs pointed out long-term health concerns for people with ACEs. Participants in this study also expressed fears about their future. A longitudinal study of the seven participants would be helpful to determine if the same resiliency skills which helped them navigate into doctoral programs transfer into long and healthy professional lives.

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The Landfill Is Full: Breaking the Data-Dumping Model

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Abstract: Students at risk for behavioral difficulties have unique needs that affect their academic, behavioral, and social skills. Many of these students are served in various educational settings, possibly transitioning back and forth from traditional schools to alternative settings. As they transition, there is a chance that the students' behavioral data will not follow them to and from education settings. This study explores systems that are used for tracking students' behavioral data within alternative settings and the transition to traditional public schools. A survey was administered to district staff to ascertain the processes in place for the transition of students and their data between alternative education settings and traditional public schools. Survey results are discussed, school exemplars are presented, and implications for future research and practice at the district level are suggested.

Providing support for students with disabilities in schools has been a national priority since the passage of the law of special education (Education of All Handicapped Children Act of 1975). In 2014, over 5.9 million students (ages 6-21) were enrolled in public educational services, and about 9% of those students were identified as students with disabilities (National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), 2014). About 6% of those disabilities were identified as emotional behavioral disturbance (EB/D) and 5.3% were served in an "other environment" than their general education classroom (NCES, 2014). In Florida, almost 9% of the student population ages 6-21 was identified as receiving special education services and about 3% of this population was served in a separate setting compared with 11% of students identified as having an emotional disturbance (NCES, 2014).

Students with disabilities often struggle to graduation with and behavior challenges. In 2014, the average for all students graduating with a public school diploma in Florida was 76.1% (NCES, 2014), whereas for the over 357,000 (13%) students identified under Individuals With Disabilities Act Part B, 55% graduated and 3% dropped out (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). Only 28% of those students with disabilities who graduated proceeded on to postsecondary education settings within one year of high school (NCES, 2014).

In particular, students with or at risk for emotional and behavioral disorders (EB/D) fared worse academically compared to other students (Nelson et al., 2004) and were more likely to drop out of school; this risk is further increased by their mobility (e.g., changing of educational settings; Osher, Morrison, & Bailey, 2003). In general, students with EB/D traditionally have low school attendance rates, which likely contribute to poor academic outcomes (Anderson, Kutaalsosh, & Duchnowski, 2001).

Students identified with EB/D, as defined in the Regulations of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004); the successor to the Education of All Handicapped Children Act of 1975, are those demonstrating one or more of the following characteristics over a long period of time and to a marked degree, which adversely affects educational performance:

(a) an inability to learn which cannot be explained by intellectual, sensory, or health factors; (b) an inability to build or maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships with peers and teachers; (c) inappropriate types of behavior or feelings under normal circumstances; (d) a general pervasive mood of unhappiness or depression; and (e) a tendency to develop physical symptoms of fears associated with personal or school problems. (IDEA, 2004, CFR §300.7 (a)(9))

At every grade level, students with EB/D receive services from general education teachers, special education teachers, and other staff to meet their academic and behavioral needs. When challenging behaviors occur, schools are often left unsure how to educate students with EB/D and transfer them to alternative school settings (McDaniel, Jolivette, & Ennis, 2014).

Students Served in Alternative Settings

Alternative education (AE) settings aim to meet the needs of students who have not been successful in traditional school settings and are identified as exhibiting behaviors at risk for school failure (Carver, Lewis, & Tice, 2010; Scott & Cooper, 2013). Students in these settings often have educational, mental health, and behavioral challenges and benefit from individualized and intensive instruction more likely received in alternative school settings (Jolivette et al., 2012). AE includes various types of alternative school settings, such as self-contained schools, center schools, alternative learning areas, day treatment programs, residential educational settings, and juvenile justice facilities (Sedlak & McPherson, 2010).

Alternative education settings are often characterized by smaller class sizes and student populations and more individualized learning settings (Flower, McDaniel, & Jolivette, 2011; Jolivette et al., 2012). AE settings are designed to serve all students with and without disabilities. However, the rates of students with EB/D being served in AE settings are higher than other student populations and continues to rise (NCES, 2014).

Originally, AE settings started in the 1960s and 1970s as some schools embraced tenets of progressive education and provided alternatives for students who were not thriving

in more typical public school environments (Kelchner et al., 2017). The 1997 amendments to the IDEA continued this trend by emphasizing children with behavioral needs and allowing Individual Education Program (IEP) teams to place students in interim educational settings for up to 45 days (IDEA §1415(k)). The IDEA amendments opened up AE to students with disabilities as places of last resort for education and highlighted the role the schools played in the education of students with severe behaviors (Owens & Konkol, 2004).

Shifting to an emphasis on a more separate setting for students with disabilities runs counter to one of the core principles of the IDEA that requires students to be served in the least restrictive environment (LRE). Florida defines LRE as students being “served in the regular education environment unless the nature or severity of the disability is such that education in the regular environment with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily” (Florida Department of Education, 2000). The LRE is determined by the IEP team on a case-by-case basis considering a continuum of alternate placements, including instruction in regular classes, resource rooms, special classes, hospital/homebound, special schools, residential facilities, and juvenile justice programs (34 C.F.R. § 300.551). To be considered for a placement in an interim alternative setting, a student might be removed from the school for an offense (i.e., disobedience, disrespect, violence, abuse, uncontrollable or disruptive behavior) to the more restrictive settings that provide education and protect the student from expulsion (IDEA §1415(k)). As students identified with EB/D under IDEA are educated in alternative settings and achieve success, they ideally should return to their regular schools as soon as appropriate (Simonsen, Britton, & Young, 2010) and might then transition from AE to typical school settings.

Studies have reported that students are transitioning from AE settings to traditional schools. In a 2000-01 report on public alternative schools by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), 74% of districts allowed students to return to regular schools (Kleiner, Porch, & Farris, 2002). In a follow-up study in 2007-08, districts allowed 63% of the students to return (Carver et al., 2010). In the 2000-01 report, a student was more likely to be able to return to the regular school if the student showed an improved attitude or behavior (82%) and was motivated to return (81%; Kleiner et al., 2002). In 2007-08, those reasons expanded and included an improved attitude/behavior (78%), motivated to return (77%), approved by school or staff (60%), or earned better grades (58%; Carver et al., 2010). Additionally, 35% of the schools surveyed in 2007-08 had a database that allowed them to track a student after exiting the AE program (Carver et al., 2010). Sinclair, Christenson, and Thurlow (2005) examined the mobility of students across four years and found that 20% of the students attended two more educational settings per year and 15 of the 78 who finished school stayed in the same setting across four years. Overall, it appears that transition is a possibility, if not reality, for students with EB/D in AE schools.

Making a transition from an AE setting back to the typical public school is not without risk for such students. In a study interviewing students with EB/D who wished to remain in the AE settings, students shared that they preferred the smaller classes, stronger teacher relationships, not switching classes, working in an individualized way, knowing their peers, and feeling included (Owens & Konkol, 2004). Students indicated that they felt that if they returned to the regular settings, they might experience different learning environments and students who are at different academic levels, making the returning students' struggles more apparent (Kelchner et al., 2017). Such experiences often exacerbate the students' risk when returning to these settings and setting up more transitions to the original, more restrictive setting.

There is not as much research about the strategies to assist in the transition for these students and how best to reduce their risk for return to AE, expulsion, or dropping out of school altogether (Kelchner et al., 2017). Shortly after the changes to IDEA in 1997 that emphasized provision of special education in interim alternative settings, Rutherford and Quinn (1999) suggested that students with disabilities in AE settings would benefit from functional assessments (e.g., specific behavioral evaluations); functional curriculum (e.g., meeting students' needs); effective instruction (e.g., direct strategies that address IEP goals); comprehensive systems (e.g., coordinated special education); and appropriate staff resources and training, procedural protections, and transition programs and procedures (e.g., for the back and forth).

The need to focus on the transition of data is crucial because students often come into these settings after crises, which impacts the ability to plan ahead and leads to an IEP and other educational documents not following the student to the new setting. This lack of data transfer might impact the students initial programming (Rutherford & Quinn, 1999). When the student transfers back, a process should be in place to ensure collected data reaches the new setting (Rutherford & Quinn, 1999; Simonsen et al., 2011).

Additionally, as the student population in AE settings has shifted to students with disabilities and their accompanying IEPs, the importance of ongoing collection of data has become even more important. When Flower and colleagues (2011) reviewed the literature on effective practices for students in AE settings, they reported that one quarter included highly structured classes with behavioral management strategies. Subsequent studies looked at data collection, such as fidelity, implementation, social validity, and student outcomes, and found positive results in AE settings when data are collected and analyzed (Farkas et al., 2012). The need for data for IEPs and the practices used in AE settings suggest that there is a need for data, data analysis, and data usage.

Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports

Studies of students with EB/D suggest the need for implementation of research-validated practices (Cook & Cook, 2013; Lane, 2004; Lane et al., 2005); the importance of collecting data (Simonsen et al., 2012); and the necessity

of having a process for the transition, especially for data between the settings (Rutherford & Quinn, 1999). In fact, in a qualitative study using interviews at an AE setting for at-risk youth with behavior difficulties, students reported weaknesses of the program as “responding inconsistently to behavior problems, creating poor transitions to adulthood, and producing a physically dangerous school environment” (Free, 2017, p. 501).

The use of a Positive Interventions and Supports (PBIS) approach can promote student success in AE settings by addressing behavior through evidence-based practices, emphasizing the ongoing use of data, prioritizing student academic and behavioral outcomes, and providing systems that can assist in the transition of students to and from the program. When implemented with fidelity, the multitiered PBIS framework enables all students to be successful and has been demonstrated as effective in AE settings (Jolivette et al., 2012; Jolivette & Nelson, 2010; Simonsen et al., 2010; McDaniel et al., 2014), often emphasizing the importance of the systems, practice, and use intensified for these settings (Simonsen & Sugai, 2013). Initial case studies reported data often included the use of a PBIS system to help organize and prioritize the collection and use of data in AE settings (Farkas et al., 2012; Gelbar et al., 2015).

PBIS is a school-wide systematic multitiered framework approach for teaching and managing behaviors using preventive and proactive practices (Bradshaw et al., 2008; Sugai et al., 2000). It provides a prevention framework for delivering needed supports at the primary, secondary, and tertiary levels and consists of systems, data, practices, and effective integration that are critical to obtaining desired schoolwide and student outcomes (Sugai & Horner, 2002). Schools that have demonstrated high implementation fidelity of PBIS achieve better student outcomes, such as fewer office discipline referrals and suspensions (Bradshaw, Waasdorp, & Leaf, 2012; Flannery et al., 2014), reduced bullying (Waasdorp, Bradshaw, & Leaf, 2012), increased teacher efficacy (Ross, Romer, & Horner, 2012), gains in academic achievement (Bradshaw, Mitchell, & Leaf, 2010), and more student engagement (Algozzine & Algozzine, 2007).

Primary prevention. The first tier, Tier 1, is focused on schoolwide proactive strategies to prevent the most common challenging behaviors in all students (Evanovich & Scott, 2016). When PBIS is implemented with fidelity, roughly 80% of students will be successful with the schoolwide expectations identified and taught at this universal level (Sugai & Horner, 2009). Primary prevention strategies are universally designed to prevent problems, target all students and staff, provide students and staff with a strong foundation for teaching and recognizing appropriate behaviors, and have a low cost per individual. Examples include schoolwide positive behavioral supports (SWPBIS), school climate improvement projects, collaboration with family, and community engagement.

Secondary prevention. A smaller group of approximately 10-15% of students may need more intensive and targeted supports to be successful (Sugai & Horner, 2009). Tier 2 provides small group-based interventions to prevent

and mediate the most common behavioral challenges for students who were identified through review and data assessment as needing more support in addition to Tier 1 (Evanovich & Scott, 2016). Tier 2 students are not responding well to universal interventions, and data indicate the need for more supports. Tier 2 has a moderate cost per individual. Examples of Tier 2 interventions include social skills instruction, conflict-resolution lessons, and peer-tutoring programs.

Tertiary prevention. The next level is Tier 3. Roughly 5% of students identified through data assessment need more individualized support (Sugai & Horner, 2009). Tier 3 is the most intensive tier and requires the most support, because it provides individualized academic and behavioral interventions and supports for students, such as functional behavior assessments (FBA), behavior intervention plans (BIP), and wraparound services (Carran, Kerins, & Murray, 2005; Evanovich & Scott, 2016). Tier 3 supports include student-centered interventions designed to address specific, chronic problems and yield a higher cost per individual.

The use of data is an essential feature of PBIS and is necessary across all intervention levels (primary, secondary, and tertiary) and systems (school, district, and state). Data sources used in the PBIS framework can vary. However, the most commonly used reporting method of a behavior incident is an Office Discipline Referral (ODR). ODRs can be defined and then standardized for use at the district or school level, depending on the schoolwide PBIS expectations (Sugai et al., 2000). In AE settings, behavior incident reports are often used as proxy for ODRs because the students' behaviors cause them to leave the classrooms (Gelbar et al., 2015). In-school and out-of-school suspensions (ISS, OSS) data are also recorded. When analyzed, ISS, OSS, and ODR data are often referred to as behavioral data, which can be used to monitor student data across time, location, and setting.

In alternative settings, PBIS has been used effectively to improve behavioral outcomes for students with disabilities, such as a reduction in behavior incidents and a decrease in physical aggression (Simonsen et al., 2010), as well as adherence and social acceptance of the program (e.g., fidelity and social validity; Farkas et al., 2012). The core features of PBIS are still in place, but in AE settings these can be tailored to the context of the environment and student population (Jolivette et al., 2012; Simonsen et al., 2011). Specifically, data at an individual level might include incident reports, points earned under any behavioral systems for positive behavior, direct observations, and individualized student success (Simonsen et al., 2011) and, at a systems level, might take into consideration how many students return to a less restrictive setting (Simonsen & Sugai, 2013). Data can be used to make ongoing decisions for students. In sum, procedures for collection and use of data are enhanced through the use of the PBIS framework in AE settings.

Vignettes

Two students who have documented behavioral challenges highlight the need for frameworks of prevention and systems of data collection and transfer. Brian is a 7-year-

old male first-grade student who has been identified at risk for emotional/behavioral challenges as his behavior over the course of his first year in school has escalated from verbal disruption to physical altercations and running out of the classroom. In his previous district, Brian was placed in an AE setting in kindergarten and is currently in the process of being placed into another AE setting in his new district. His behavioral data was not transferred to his new district in the same state, and there are no documented behavioral data except that from Brian's first few months in the first grade.

Beatriz is a 16-year-old high school junior who has been identified for special education supports for EB/D. Beatriz's behavioral challenges have progressively become more apparent, as she has transitioned from internalizing self-injurious behaviors to outward or externalizing aggression towards peers. Beatriz has attended multiple school districts within the same 50-mile radius as her family has moved to various low-income housing during her enrollment as a K-12 student. Beatriz's behavior has resulted in multiple office discipline referrals with many instances of in-school suspension (ISS), and out-of-school suspension (OSS). Although Beatriz has an IEP, without a data-transfer system available across districts, she has experienced more than 10 days of OSS within a year. She has frequently transferred midyear, perpetuating the loss of data and increasing her behavior challenges in the classroom.

Purpose

Statement of research purpose and questions

Students with emotional and behavioral disorders (EB/D) or behavioral difficulties who display serious chronic and challenging behavior are frequently educated in alternative education settings (McDaniel et al., 2014). Research on using intervention approaches (e.g., using check and connect; Sinclair et al., 2005) to support individual students with violent behaviors and success for the reduction of behavior using a PBIS approach (e.g., Simonsen, et al., 2010) exists. However, little research exists on the transition of these students to alternative settings and back to their home schools (Kelchner et al., 2017). There has been a call for transitional processes, especially for data transfer, going back to the start of having more students with disabilities in AE settings (Rutherford & Quinn, 1999).

The purpose of this study is to explore the process that schools implementing PBIS use in transferring student data between AE and typical school settings. A survey was developed to determine what systems are in place, or the lack thereof, for tracking students' behavioral data within alternative settings and their sending schools and district. The study addresses the following questions:

1. What are the characteristics of AE settings and the students in the district who attend AE schools?
2. What are the district practices for the transfer of all students and for students with EB/D between AE and typical school settings?
3. What are the district practices for behavioral and academic data transfer for all students and for students with EB/D between AE and typical school settings?

Method

To fully answer the research questions and gain the perspective of a wide variety of educators from various districts, a cross-sectional survey was chosen as the primary means of data collection (Fowler, 2009). As the survey was designed to collect descriptive data on the procedures employed, it is not necessary to validate or test for reliability and/or validity. A survey allows access to a large number of districts to obtain information with a quick turnaround. It also provides an understanding of the systems, or the lack thereof, that districts currently use.

The survey was created using Qualtrics 2018 online survey software. The survey consisted of 33 questions, the first four of which were on district characteristics. Then, participants responded to 29 multiple choice and fill-in-the-blank questions (see Table 1) based on the transfer of students and data procedures. The survey was distributed through e-mail to district personnel who work with data in school districts in Florida. Electronic distribution required all participants to have access to the Internet to participate.

An introductory e-mail rationale was provided prior to participation. After reading the letter, participants clicked a link to access the survey. Participants were not required to provide any identifying information during the survey. However, they were provided the option to do so if they had any additional follow up comments or questions. All data were stored as deidentified responses on password-protected computers and transmitted over secure university emails. No information that could potentially lead back to participants was collected. The survey was live for participants' responses from December 2016 to March 2017.

Sample Description

The target audience included district-level administrators and district coordinators actively involved with the Florida Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (FLPBIS) project (see <http://flpbs.fmhi.usf.edu>). There were 87 individual respondents who started the survey, with 15 completing the entire survey with supporting data provided and included in the analysis. Emails were disseminated to 109 recipients, which reached all 56 active PBIS districts of the total 74 school districts in Florida. In most active districts, the survey was sent to at least two district contacts or coordinators (DCs) who share the role, which accounts for the higher number of invitations to participate than the actual number of active PBIS districts. Some of the incomplete surveys may reflect that both the district recipients (DCs) may have started the survey and then only one submitted a completed survey. The 15 full respondents each represented an individual district in Florida and comprised 23% of the active school districts statewide.

Survey Results

Results from the 33-question statewide survey are presented in the following survey analysis. The analysis reflects the completed surveys from 15 respondents across the state of Florida representing individual districts.

District Characteristics

Respondents answered four optional questions about school district characteristics. Of the 15 included respondents, 10 identified as rural (66.67%), three as suburban (20%), one as urban (6.67%), and one as other (6.67%). The second question asked respondents to report the number of alternative education (AE) settings in their district. One respondent reported they have no in-district AEs; two respondents reported they have one AE; six reported two AEs; one reported three AEs; one reported four AEs; two reported five AEs; one reported eight AEs; and one reported 13 AEs. The third question asked respondents to identify the types of AE settings in their district.

Six options were provided for respondents to identify and percentages of districts who responded having one or more were as follows: one (6.67%) has residential facilities; two (13.33%) have day programs; five (33.33%) have center schools; five (33.33%) have online programs; 13 (86.67%) have alternative programs; and four (26.67%) have other types of AE settings.

The fourth question asked if participants had access to 2015-16 school year (SY) data. Of the 87 respondents, 15 answered yes to this question. Data for SY 2015-16 were to inform the responses given for the next section, thereby creating the 15 respondents included in the analysis.

Overall Transition Procedures

We addressed the procedures for transferring academic and behavioral data when a student exits an AE setting. The results are presented in Table 4. The first set of questions asked about existing protocol for students with and without EB/D when transitioning placements within the same district. Respondents indicated that the placement decision largely depended on the severity or intensity of behavior. There was very little reported difference in transition procedures if the student were identified with EB/D.

Of the four respondents who indicated a difference in the procedures for the transition, all indicated that the difference in protocol was in regard to use of ODR data. One stated that the protocol “depends on if court system is involved; usually yes they go back. Occasionally they go to a more restrictive” setting. Another reported, “Placement is determined by an IEP Team based upon a variety of data. The district team conducts a hearing to determine best placement.” Similarly, another reported, “In cases of severe behavior (e.g., bodily harm, possession with intent, weapon), the receiving school might request a hearing. All available data will be reviewed. This is true for all students, not just those receiving special education services.” Another respondent commented, “Environment IEP determines placement, not ODR data. ODRs are used as evidence to help IEP teams make decisions, but are not the only data collected or used when making this decision.”

The other set of questions asked about the transition protocol of students with and without EB/D to placements outside of the sending or home district. Eight of the respondents (53.33%) indicated there is a system for transferring ODR and academic data to new placements (AE and other) outside of their district. All commented that they

send behavioral and academic information upon request through a new placement setting request. One commented, “When requested by the parent or receiving school, specific student data are sent to the out-of-district placement.”

Similar to their protocol for sending student data, there was no indicated process for receiving behavioral data for new students into their districts other than making a formal request. Of all respondents, one indicated that their district had a record transfer system but only transfers with requests, “FASTER record transfer system. Sent on request from the receiving school.”

Behavioral Data Transfer for Students Between AE and Typical School Settings

Current systems. Table 2 provides the percentage of questions about the systems in place for transitioning of behavioral data to and from AE settings. Of the 15 respondents, 100% transition their behavioral data (ODR) from the sending school to the AE setting and back again if the student is transitioned. A variety of systems were used to track the data and the range of responses, including Skyward, Student Pass, PEER, Genesis, FOCUS School Software, ProcessMaker Enterprise (PM2), Mainframe, eSchoolPlus, Infinite Campus, and other district-specific support applications.

A follow up question asked for respondents to provide the protocol used to transfer such behavioral data. Those using Skyward stated, “Skyward data indicate all referrals. Data from one setting can be narrowed by using date ranges.” A respondent who uses Infinite Campus stated, “All student academic/discipline data are entered into our database (Infinite Campus); at the time of student enrollment to the alternative setting, the receiving alternative school obtains access to the ODR.”

Similarly, those who use GENESIS stated, “Genesis/Ideas gives ODR data but must be accessed usually by guidance”, and “GENESIS data are available districtwide, so information about ODRs, suspensions, and discipline are accessible for each student.” Finally, those who use Student Pass commented, “School staff enter data electronically into the Student Pass data system and when the student’s enrollment changes, the data are immediately at the new school site,” and “happens automatically upon enrollment in Alt Ed.”

The next set of behavioral data questions asked specifically about the movement of data procedures of behavioral data for students with EB/D. Ten (66.67%) stated their procedures do not change. Of the five (33.34%) who stated their procedures are different for transitioning to and from sending school to AE and back, four stated their protocol included an IEP meeting to review behavioral data. Two of those indicated that the outcome decision of that meeting is entered into the PEER system.

Similarly, all 15 responses indicated that behavioral data procedures are the same if the student is going to AE or back to their sending school. Four respondents further indicated that the protocol for the transfer of behavioral data does differ for a student with EB/D, much like those who reported using the PEER system. This protocol includes

an IEP meeting and data-based decision making using behavioral and academic data.

Academic data transfer for students between AE and typical school settings. Table 3 provides the percentage of questions about the systems in place for transitioning of academic data to and from AE settings. Of the 15 respondents, 100% transition their academic data from the sending school to the AE setting and back again if the student is transitioned. A variety of systems were used to track that data and responses included the use of Skyward, Performance Matters, Genesis, FOCUS, Data Warehouse, Mainframe, eSchoolPlus, Infinite Campus, cumulative records, and other district-specific support applications. Protocols for transferring of academic data were stated as the same as for behavioral tracking data, with the additional comments on the use of Data Warehouse. One respondent indicated:

Data Warehouse is a web-based program that was created and is maintained by employees. Users may review data for individual students and for student groups, such as by class, course, course grades, and skill assessment results, as well as by special user-defined groups.

Another respondent noted, "Data Warehouse contains information regarding teachers, classes and schedules, test scores, aggregate scores and trends, course grades, Progress Monitoring Plans, Professional Learning Communities teaming and collaboration, as well as the ability to give and analyze online assessments."

The next set of behavioral data questions asked about the specific data movement procedures for behavioral data for students with EB/D. Twelve (80%) of respondents stated their procedures do not change. Of the three (20%) who stated their procedures are different for movement to and from sending school to AE and back, all three stated their protocol included an IEP meeting to review behavioral data. One stated, "Students are entered into Skyward, but there is an additional data packet for all students with disabilities, including students with EB/D; an IEP meeting is held and data is documented in PEER." All responses indicated that academic data procedures are the same if the student is going to AE or back to their sending school. Three respondents indicated that the protocol for the transfer of academic data does differ for a student with EB/D. This protocol includes an IEP meeting and data-based decision of behavioral and academic data.

Discussion

Summary of Findings

The results suggest that there is a lack of consistent procedures and protocols for the transferring of students' behavioral data. Of the 109 survey invitations disseminated, 87 responders attempted or started the survey but were unable to complete it due to the lack of data, accounting for 82% of all invitees. Of all who attempted to take the survey, 15 respondents (18%) completed it. It is important to note that the 15 respondents represented 23% of all

active PBIS school districts in Florida. The inability to answer data survey questions after recruiting additional district personnel for further assistance highlights the lack of a needed data system for tracking challenging students.

The low response rate suggests that more needs to be done to set up a process of data tracking and transferring students between systems. The majority did not complete the survey, suggesting a lack of data required to answer the questions. This finding further highlights the number of districts in Florida that might need to improve their data-tracking systems. When systems are inadequate or nonexistent for tracking student data, districts cannot identify the potential of "data-dumping" occurring within their district. Without a comprehensive system that is readily accessible to interpret and allow for proactive intervention across and within settings, addressing student concerns or potential system issues that may impact student success may be missed entirely. Many districts cannot identify that data-dumping may be an issue if there is no data to access. A system cannot be fixed when the area that may be broken cannot be identified.

The information collected from the results of the 15 respondents is critical to inform practice. The respondents indicated that when a data-tracking system is in place, data are successfully transitioned to and from LREs within district placements, and data are subsequently used to make decisions on LRE placement. Additionally, 100% of all 15 respondents reported that the sending of behavioral and academic data to the outside district placements occurred when formally requested. If not requested, the new out-of-district placement will be unaware of suspension days already accrued within a given school year. Students with EB/D and academic deficits might be at risk for experiencing loss of instructional time as well as exceeding the maximum of 10 days allowed under IDEA due to the lack of student information transferred.

In the end, the results of this survey suggest that the needs of students with EB/D are not being met due to a lack of a data system and transfer of data. In turn, students with EB/D are at risk for lacking protection by federal law under IDEA when the data transfer fails. The results highlight the lack of consistent protocol and procedures for behavioral data-tracking for students with the most challenging behaviors, therefore suggesting that the data-dumping phenomenon is occurring in Florida. Further, the results underscore the need for administrators to understand the importance of having such behavior data-tracking systems in place to provide effective and efficient education to their students and to maintain overall accountability.

Exemplars Within the Vignette

McDaniel et al. (2014) suggested that PBIS integration in AE settings should include staff consensus, aligning PBIS with existing behavior management systems and the need for heightened awareness for school reform. These authors recommended the following to AE settings and their districts:

- (1) Capitalize on any state-level PBIS support available,
- (2) Invest in the use of data-based decision-making,

- (3) Allow current behavior patterns to guide practices at both the school and district levels for the availability of transportable data as students transition across settings (Simonsen et al., 2010), and
- (4) Adopt practices focused on sustainability for long-term effects.

A major area of focus of these suggestions is based on data and examining the current practices around data being imperative to developing a comprehensive framework.

The large percentage of respondents who did not complete the survey because they did not have the necessary data further fuels the need to have a data-tracking system in place that supports students across LRE settings. School systems are engaging in a potential disservice to students with EB/D by not proactively allowing for the transportation of behavioral and academic data. The results of this study confirm the critical need for a consistent behavioral tracking system as a part of the data collection and data-based decision-making process for students with behavioral challenges.

Also highlighted through the respondents of this study is the need for data tracking across settings, even within an existing PBIS or multi-tiered system of support (MTSS) framework. While it is commendable that the data transfer occurs within district walls, states must consider how they can better meet the needs of their students by providing access to data that is transportable across their respective state and/or geographic region.

Florida has engaged in historical and widespread implementation with fidelity of PBIS, which has garnered the state a reputation both nationally and internationally as an exemplary state highly supportive of PBIS practices. One would assume that data-based decision-making across the majority of the state's districts was evident and an integral part of the PBIS process. However, this study suggests that despite the extensive PBIS activity across a state that has committed to the multitiered approach to behavior and has developed a strong statewide infrastructure, the majority of its districts are still lacking data-tracking ability. This highlights the need for further training and technical assistance at the state, district, and school levels and also magnifies the need for state leadership in recommending that districts establish comprehensive data systems that allow for student decisions to be readily made. For states and districts that do not have an established statewide PBIS project, data sharing will be even more difficult to establish without local support.

Below are two model demonstrations of alternative education settings for the FLPBIS MTSS Project that are realizing positive student outcomes. Both schools use the RtI:B (Response to Intervention: Behavior) Database (FLPBIS: MTSS Project, 2011). The RtI:B Database is a free online data system for Florida schools where faculty and staff record classroom referrals, ODRs, teacher ratings of student behavior, and/or direct measures of student behavior. The database provides user-friendly graphs to assist with data-based decision-making across school and student measures. The behavioral data presented below has

been entered into the RtI:B Database and exemplifies how districts can use this free system to track students as they transition placements within a district. The names of the schools have been changed to maintain anonymity.

As examples of ideal data transfers, the authors use Brian and Beatriz. Sam Daniels School (SDS) is an AE independent setting located in the panhandle or northwestern part of Florida in a medium-sized rural district. The SDS mission is to provide a safe learning environment that promotes each child's social/emotional and academic development through PBIS and research-based practices. All students are provided opportunities to develop and achieve according to their own strengths in preparation for integration to the least restrictive educational and social setting. PBIS expectations are to show respect, to be safe, and to be a problem-solver.

SDS serves 119 students in kindergarten through Grade 5 with 97% of students receiving special education services, 92% receiving free and reduced-price lunch, and an average daily attendance of 92%. SDS's 2015-16 data reported 571 ODRs per 100 students and their core effectiveness indicated 28% of students responding positively at Tier 1, 42% at Tier 2, and 30% at Tier 3. They scored 95% on the Benchmarks of Quality (Kincaid, Childs & George, 2005) implementation fidelity measure. Outcome data indicated both a decrease of 14% in ODRs and a 20% decrease in out-of-school suspensions from the previous year. However, there was a 78% increase in ISS due to a school policy of recording one-hour lunch detentions as ISS.

Brian was placed at SDS, where his behavioral needs were met with intensive supports, as the school has a PBIS coach or facilitator who works with the staffing specialist and guidance counselor to identify new students' needs quickly. Brian was identified as a new student and the PBIS Team immediately began collecting and monitoring his and other students' data daily. As Brian's data are recorded and monitored, his needs are problem-solved during the weekly PBIS meetings with the school's Crisis Intervention Team that provides extra support for students whose behavior indicates a need for more intensive supports. The team uses a push-in approach with Brian and other students to offer extra support in the classroom to attempt to deescalate his behaviors and keep him in class. Through consistent data collection and PBIS framework, Brian is able to experience behavioral success at SDS and is actively working with his sending school on a transition plan for his second-grade year.

Patton Academy (PA) is an alternative center located in the southern part of Florida in a very large urban district. The PA vision is to prepare students to effectively function in a culturally diverse and complex society. The school's mission is to help students achieve emotional, social, civic, and academic growth with the following five core values: responsibility, respect, trust, caring, and family. PBIS expectations are that students get in the game, respect self and others, own choices, work hard, and learn to lead. PA serves 74 students Grades 6-12 with 36% of students receiving special education services, 98% on free and reduced-price lunch, and an average daily attendance of 75%. The school's 2015-16 data reported 403 ODRs per 100

students, and students' core effectiveness indicated 47% of students responding positively at Tier 1, 44% at Tier 2, and 9% at Tier 3. They scored 82% on the Benchmarks of Quality (Kincaid et al., 2005) implementation fidelity measure. Their outcome data indicated both a decrease of 7% in ODRs and a decrease of 96% in out-of-school suspensions from the previous year. Due to PA's commitment to keep students in school, there was a 75% increase in ISS (yet this accounted for only a difference of six additional ISSs from the previous year) due to a district-imposed policy change.

Beatriz was placed at PA as a last resort effort, as her behavior had begun to be a threat to other students at her high school. Upon transition to PA, Beatriz had a behavior education plan established, targeting her severe internalizing self and other-harming behavior which had resulted in her exclusion from her traditional school setting. In addition, Beatriz's behavioral and academic data were transferred to PA and reviewed as a part of the enrollment process. As is procedure for PA, when the PBIS Team meets students—such as Beatriz—who have shown poor responses to Tier 2, interventions are identified and discussed. Although Beatriz recently transitioned to PA, the team decided that more intensive supports were needed at PA. Beatriz moved to more intensive Tier 3 supports during which time she received individual interventions on a weekly basis. Since Beatriz is a student identified with EB/D, an IEP team meeting occurred prior to her transition and will continue to meet frequently to monitor her progress and interventions during her time at PA. However, at PA, if a student without a disability does not respond to Tier 3 interventions and is being considered for special education services with a need to develop an individualized education plan, a checklist is completed to ensure that all Tier 3 components were implemented with fidelity.

Limitations

The results from this study sought to extend the literature on data collection and data transferring protocols for students with EB/D. Nonetheless, it is important to acknowledge limitations. First, although we had 87 individual respondents attempt the survey, 15 completed all questions allowing for a full analysis of their data. While this percentage represented 23% of Florida's school districts, the small number of respondents included in the analysis is limiting in generalizing results. Second, the survey developed from a need to understand the protocols and current practices of data transfer and was not psychometrically tested (i.e., the survey was not validated). We believe the results provide insight into the current practices of behavioral and academic data collection and transfer protocols and highlight the need for systems to reconsider how to best support students with EB/D. Therefore, the potential insights outweigh the limitations.

Implications for Future Research and Practice

As the outcome data from this study and the exemplars provided, there is a need for a standardized or statewide behavioral data system that would allow for the fluid transitioning of students' behavioral data to and from as well

as within and outside of district settings. With the myriad of data-tracking systems seemingly inconsistent across the small sample of schools that had the data to complete the survey, there is the possibility that data is being lost in transition. Future technical assistance and/or professional development on such data-tracking systems is paramount in reversing this trend. Researchers should expand on this study to hone in on similarities of districts who have implemented successful data-tracking systems. The successes with such data-tracking systems can shape the future implications of district systems-level and school-level protocols to increase the successful transition of important behavioral and academic data to and from various educational settings.

Additional implications for practice are the possible use of the Rtl:B Database as a system for tracking and moving ODRs. For schools outside of Florida, a similar database available is School-wide Information System (SWIS; May et al., 2002). Regardless of the tracker, until there is a universal tracking database, districts and schools can implement the use of a data tracker that will aid in the transfer of important behavioral data. Support for the implementation of and consistent prioritizing of the use of such behavioral data-tracking systems lies with the school and district administration, making the role of the administrator of utmost importance in understanding and mediating the need for data collection and to avoid the data-dumping model.

Conclusion

There is a clear need to support the successful academic and behavioral outcomes of all students. Behavioral difficulties are a clear challenge for such success, often leading to the transiting of some of the most challenging students (e.g., often those with EB/D) to alternative or other education settings. Implementing and using effective tracking and monitoring procedures for academic and behavioral data are very important. This study sought to add to the research on the processes and protocols for the transitioning of student data to alternative settings and back to their sending schools or to their next placement and the implications on district and/or state systems in supporting students.

This study surveyed active PBIS districts across Florida to describe data-tracking systems in place, or the lack thereof, for students' behavioral data within alternative settings and their sending districts. Results of the 15 respondents analyzed showed that when a data-tracking system is in place, data are successfully transitioned to and from LREs within district placements and data are subsequently used to make decisions on LRE placement. Of the 82% of respondents who could not answer the entire survey, all indicated that they did not have the needed data. This might be the most telling statistic of the study, reiterating the need to have a district, if not state and universal, data-tracking system in place and prioritizing the need of implementation of such a tracking system by administrators. The success of our most challenging students relies on the tracking and use of their data, not on the erasing of it.

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