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LOMA LINDA UNIVERSITY
School of Behavioral Health
in conjunction with the
Faculty of Graduate Studies

A Mental Health Needs Assessment of Students Attending an Alternative High School

by

Kelly Sachdev

A Project submitted in partial satisfaction of
the requirements for the degree
Doctor of Psychology

September 2023

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Each person whose signature appears below certifies that this doctoral project in her opinion is adequate, in scope and quality, as a doctoral project for the degree Doctor of Psychology.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Maya Boustani for all of your help throughout this process. From helping me choose a doctoral project, to teaching me how to write a paper based on a qualitative study, you have been there for it all. I appreciate all of your edits, support, and mentorship over the past two and a half years.

I would also like to thank Dr. Peteet for agreeing to be on my doctoral project committee. I appreciate all the time you took to provide me with edits and feedback throughout this process.

Finally, I would like to thank Talia Banayan, Valerie Watts, and Megan White for their help with coding and analyzing the data. I also appreciate all your support outside of data analyses throughout this process. I could not have done it without you.

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ABSTRACT OF THE DOCTORAL PROJECT

A Mental Health Needs Assessment of Students Attending an Alternative High School

by

Kelly Sachdev

Doctor of Psychology, Department of Psychology
Loma Linda University, September 2023
Dr. Maya Boustani, Chairperson

Research suggests that students who attend urban or alternative schools experience higher rates of poverty, family instability, and violence victimization. These risk factors can result in higher rates of depression, school absences, and lower academic performance. This needs assessment explores the mental health needs of students at a low-income, urban, alternative high school in Southern California from the perspective of students, teachers, and staff in order to better understand the stressors and mental health needs of this vulnerable population. Four focus groups were conducted with students ($n = 9$), teachers ($n = 7$), and staff ($n = 13$). Audio files were transcribed and two independent coders examined the transcripts and developed a codebook. Two additional coders coded the transcripts using the codebook and the themes were frequency coded. The goal was to identify stressors students at alternative schools face and their impact. The results will help inform the design of future behavioral health interventions to support students and teachers at the school's wellness center.

CHAPTER ONE

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Students who attend alternative high schools are more likely to experience significant risk factors including poverty, social disorganization, and various forms of violence victimization, including physical abuse, sexual abuse, and witnessing violence (Denny et al., 2004). Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory demonstrates how children's inherent qualities and their environmental factors interact to impact how they develop (Ashiabi & O'Neal, 2015). Bronfenbrenner emphasized that children should be studied in various environments (ecological systems) in order to fully understand their development. Bronfenbrenner's model has five levels: the individual, microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem. The individual level encompasses inherent characteristics, such as assigned sex at birth, age, health, and gender identity. The microsystem encompasses the most immediate environment in which the children live, with factors including family, school, and peer relationships. The mesosystem encompasses the relationships between various microsystems, such as the relationship between home and school or family and peers. The exosystem encompasses the people and places in which children do not necessarily interact, but still have an impact on their development. This includes factors such as the neighborhood, social services, mass media, and local politics. The final level is the macrosystem which encompasses the attitudes and ideologies of the culture. We will use this framework to explore and reflect on the impact of these factor on adolescent students' mental health and academic

achievement, with a focus on at-risk adolescents (students attending an alternative high school). We will also explore the role of protective factors, including family support and academic engagement.

Alternative Schools

Alternative high schools are schools that provide a non-traditional learning experience. They can be public or private, charter, or online schools and generally provide students with an opportunity to succeed in high school and earn their diploma. In 2013-2014, 2,000 school districts (15.3%) of the 13,072 school districts in the United States had alternative schools total (Education, 2017). In general, alternative high schools provide smaller class sizes, more flexible schedules and graduation requirements, a larger variety of teaching methods, non-traditional testing methods, and resources that address social, mental, and emotional needs (Sarikas, 2016). Students may be placed at an alternative high school because they have trouble learning at a traditional high school, need more support or guidance, have social or behavioral problems, are at risk of failing out of their current high school, or are experiencing difficult life circumstances.

In California, where our study takes place, a report suggests that approximately 10-15% of high school students attended alternative high schools (Messner, 2018). Compared to a typical high school, there were fewer students who attended each alternative high school. Overall, 88.6% of students who were enrolled in alternative high school stayed for at least 45 days; and 77% of students were enrolled for a minimum of 90 days (Messner, 2018). However, only 31.4% were enrolled continuously for the entire school year.

In a study of at-risk students' perspectives about traditional school versus alternative school, students in traditional high schools reported poor student-teacher relationships, feeling unsafe or uncomfortable in their school environment, feeling demeaned by overly strict school rules, and feeling judged or alienated by peers as major factors to their lack of success (Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011). On the other hand, students in alternative high schools had more positive student-teacher relationships and reported receiving more individualized attention. The alternative high school teachers' expectations for maturity and responsibility helped students accomplish goals outside of school. Students reported that teachers at their alternative high school understood the barriers they face and provided them with support and coping skills. They also reported more positive peer relationships (Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011). Attendance rates at a typical high school were higher than those attending the alternative high school, even though students at alternative schools earned significantly more credits. Although graduation rates were higher for students at a typical high school for a four-year range, overall graduation rates were comparable for the typical and alternative high schools if students were given extra time to complete their degree (Franklin et al., 2007).

Another study of students in alternative schools and students in regular education high schools found that students attending alternative schools had a more external sense of control, meaning they believed that they lack control over many of the things that happen to them and their abilities have a limited impact on their lives (Miller et al., 2003). Further, students at alternative schools who had a better perception of their teachers had a higher sense of school membership (Poyrazli et al., 2008). Male students and older students generally had a more negative perception of school staff as compared

to female students and younger students. Additionally, students who had a job outside of school were more likely to have higher grades than those who did not have a job.

However, this study found no relationship between academic success and feelings of school membership (Poyrazli et al., 2008).

Adolescent Risk Factors

Health disparities are defined as differences between racial/ethnic minorities and European Americans/Whites in the incidence, prevalence, mortality, and burden of diseases (Valdez et al., 2019). The poor outcomes that result from these disparities are significantly correlated with structurally shaped environmental and socioeconomic risk factors faced by people of color. According to SAMHSA, risk factors are “characteristics at the biological, psychological, family, community, or cultural level that precede and are associated with a higher likelihood of negative outcomes (SAMHSA, 2019).” Students may experience a variety of stressors, including stressors related to adverse childhood experiences, personal safety, access to basic needs, and social difficulties with parents and peers (Santiago et al., 2013). Students from low socioeconomic backgrounds are at elevated risk of experiencing cumulative risk factors (Wadsworth, 2011). Experiencing stressors can negatively affect students’ mental and physical health, as well as cause a decline in academic functioning. The following section takes an ecological approach to explore some of the stressors low-income students face and their resulting impact.

Macrosystem Factors

Poverty

In a self-report study of 268 students attending alternative education schools, students who endorsed significant poverty, bullying at school, and witnessing violence at home were more likely to develop depression (Denny et al., 2004). More females than males reported depression, with females more likely to have experienced sexual abuse and less school connection. Males with depression were more likely to experience higher levels of poverty and violence victimization with a lower reported level of social support. Both males and females who reported feeling depressed were more likely to have made a suicide attempt in the past year than their non-depressed counterparts. In this study, family connection and peer support were found to be protective factors (Denny et al., 2004).

In a review of studies linking poverty, mental health, and access to treatment, individuals who experienced stress related to poverty were at increased risk for psychological disorders, including symptoms of depression, anxiety, aggression, and hostility (Santiago et al., 2013). Poverty was a significant risk factor for experiencing trauma and violence, increasing the likelihood for developing PTSD, anxiety, and depression. Experiencing trauma also impacted aggression, delinquency, alcohol and drug use, and academic difficulties in this population.

Results from teacher and student surveys demonstrated that schools in communities with more concentrated poverty experienced higher levels of student delinquency and teacher victimization, with students also reporting less fair and

consistent discipline measures (Gottfredson et al., 2005). Schools in areas with more residential crowding experienced higher rates of teacher victimization, while teachers in larger urban areas with high need populations indicated that there was a less positive school psychosocial climate. Better disciplinary plans, including fair and clear rules, were related to lower levels of student delinquency and victimization. Lower levels of teacher victimization were related to a more positive perception of school psychosocial climate. Schools with positive teacher characteristics, including high morale, focus, strong leadership, and more involvement, experienced less school crime (Gottfredson et al., 2005).

Access to Care

In addition to experiencing higher rates of mental health burden, minority adolescents experience disparities in service utilization, treatment engagement, diagnostic practices, and treatment outcomes. Even when minority youth receive treatment, studies have shown that they are more likely to be misdiagnosed and receive inferior services compared to those received by White youth (Valdez et al., 2019). Compared to White children, Latino and African American children are significantly less likely to receive mental health services that they needed. Indeed, 75-80% of low-income children who needed mental health services did not get treatment, which was associated with factors such as not having insurance, coming from a single-parent family, neighborhood disadvantage, and social isolation (Santiago et al., 2013). Other factors correlated with not receiving mental health services included concerns regarding stigma, a lack of trust rooted in historical racism, and disapproval from family or community.

Exosystem Factors

Community Violence

Results from self-report data from adolescents' and their parents demonstrated that adolescents' community violence experiences negatively impacted their future school engagement and academic achievement (Borofsky et al., 2013). Additionally, a longitudinal study with adolescents showed that experiences of community violence also impacted adolescent mental health, such that those who experienced high rates of neighborhood violence were more likely to have lower levels of both sadness and anger regulation (Criss et al., 2016). In a focus group study of urban adolescents' exposure to community violence, the vast majority of students reported seeing or experiencing victimization by an act of violence in the past six months (Ozer & Weinstein, 2004). A greater level of exposure to violence was associated with a greater number of PTSD and depression symptoms.

A study of the effect of exposure to community violence on academic performance in adolescents from low-income backgrounds found that exposure to violence in adolescence was associated with an increase in delinquent behaviors and an increase in anxious and depressed symptoms. This increase in delinquent behaviors was associated with a decline in academic performance (Hardaway et al., 2014).

In a study of emotional and cognitive desensitization to community violence in adolescent males, depressive symptoms mediated the relationship between exposure to community violence during middle adolescence and late adolescent violent behavior (Gaylord-Harden et al., 2017). The effect of high levels of exposure to community

violence in middle adolescence on depressive symptoms was associated with lower levels of violent behavior in late adolescence. However, deviant beliefs were not significantly associated with community violence exposure and later violent behavior.

Perceived Lack of Safety

In a study of the impact of perceived school and neighborhood safety on academic achievement for urban students, youth-perceived safety in school and on the way to school was significantly associated with academic achievement (Milam et al., 2010). As perceived safety in school and on the way to school decreased, academic achievement decreased. Students' worry about their safety compromised their ability to focus academically.

Another study using cross-sectional data demonstrated that perceived school safety was significantly correlated with mental health problems in adolescents, such that adolescents who perceived more frequent rates of school unsafety experienced mental health problems more often (Nijs et al., 2014). Students exhibiting mental health symptoms were significantly more likely to experience a higher number of stressors and to experience victimization. Adolescents who sometimes felt unsafe at school exhibited more prosocial behaviors, while adolescents who endorsed feeling very often unsafe demonstrated fewer prosocial behaviors. This relationship between psychosocial functioning and perceived school safety was stronger for girls than for boys (Nijs et al., 2014).

Mesosystem Variables

Homelessness

In a report of homeless and highly mobile (HHM) students attending the San Francisco Unified School District, Hispanic and Black students were overrepresented in the homeless population compared to White and Asian students (Baharav et al., 2017). The majority of students who identified as homeless experienced homelessness for several years. Compared to students eligible for free lunch, HHM students were more likely to switch schools mid-year, more likely to leave their school district, twice as likely to be absent, and over twice as likely to receive out of school suspensions (Baharav et al., 2017). HHM students additionally had lower academic achievement and were less likely to graduate from high school. However, students' self-management and use of growth mindset predicted increased English language and math achievements.

A lack of consistent living situation can influence adolescent mental health. In a study using cross-sectional data, youth who experienced family homelessness were more than twice as likely to experience high levels of emotional distress, engage in self-injurious behavior, have suicidal ideation, or attempt suicide as their housed counterparts (Barnes et al., 2018). Developmental assets, such as positive identity, social competency, empowerment, academic orientation, positive teacher relationships, and parent connectedness reduced the probability that youth would experience emotional distress, self-injurious behavior, suicidal ideation, and attempted suicide. However, developmental assets as a protective factor was more effective for housed youth than youth experiencing family homelessness.

A systematic review of young people experiencing homelessness demonstrated that youth who experienced homelessness were more likely to experience homelessness later in life (Hodgson et al., 2013). Almost half of homeless youth had psychiatric disorders and the rate of comorbidity of mental health disorders was twice as high in homeless youth. There was a strong association between serious mental illness and homelessness, as well as between substance use disorders and homelessness. Additionally, family abuse, victimization, and risky street behavior predicted an increase in adolescent depression, which commonly occurred before the first experience of homelessness in the vast majority of homeless youth. In one study, 83% of youth experienced physical or sexual assault after becoming homeless and 18% of the victims subsequently developed PTSD (Hodgson et al., 2013).

In a cross-sectional study, youth who experienced homelessness or were highly mobile were at a higher risk for decreased academic achievement compared to low-income students and their more advantaged peers (Obradović et al., 2009). Homeless and highly mobile youth also had a greater risk for academic failure than low-income students who were residentially stable. However, homeless and highly mobile students could achieve reasonably good or above average test scores, with approximately 60% of these youth demonstrating academic resilience.

In a mixed methods study of homeless youth, a large majority of the sample reported using cigarettes, alcohol, and/or marijuana (Oppong Asante et al., 2016). A large majority of the sample also reported having been threatened with a weapon, assaulted with a weapon, bullied, and/or physically assaulted, with one third of street youth having been sexually assaulted or raped. Over half of the participants had previously engaged in

survival sex and/or had multiple sexual partners, with high levels of inconsistent condom use. The vast majority of the sample reported feelings of hopelessness and moderate to severe psychological symptoms, with approximately a quarter having considered attempting suicide (Oppong Asante et al., 2016). Self-stigma, social stigma, suicidal ideation, and exposure to violence were the best predictors for homeless youths' overall psychological wellbeing.

Academic Disengagement

Results from national survey data indicated that interpersonal climate levels decreased as the size of the school increased, with students feeling less connected and less positive about their teachers, and participating less in extracurricular activities (Crosnoe, Johnson, & Elder Jr., 2004). Students' positive views of the school and student-teacher bonding decreased as the size of the school increased. However, a different study using cross-sectional data demonstrated that ninth grade students who were assigned to larger classes did not have more mental health problems and did not experience a decrease in well-being (Jakobsson et al., 2013).

School connectedness seemed to influence student wellbeing in multiple ways. Students who reported low school connectedness were more likely to report depressive symptoms and engage in substance use and less likely to finish school two years later (Bond et al., 2007). Students with low school connectedness and high social connectedness were at a greater risk of developing anxiety, depression, and regular substance use two years later. Additionally, longitudinal data from childhood through adolescence demonstrate worse classroom engagement was correlated with more

symptoms of depression and physical aggression (Côté-Lussier & Fitzpatrick, 2016).

There were multiple factors that influenced parental academic involvement. Interviews with Mexican-origin families demonstrated that parental stressors were associated with lower levels of parental academic involvement, both at home and at school (Camacho-Thompson et al., 2016). Financial stress was negatively correlated with parental school involvement, while major family life stressors were associated with lower parental academic involvement at home. Parent reports of the quality of their relationship with their child was a significant predictor of parental school and home academic involvement (Camacho-Thompson et al., 2016).

Microsystem Variables

Adverse Childhood Experiences

Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), including psychological, physical, and sexual abuse lead to prolonged, lifelong health issues (Foege, 1998). For low-income children, the sum of the stressors they faced was correlated with physical and mental health problems, such that the risk for these health problems increased in a step-wise fashion with each additional stressor (Wadsworth, 2011). Children who experienced chronic social stress have increased sensitivity and physiological reactions to mildly stressful experiences, which interfered with their ability to learn new material and to implement material they previously learned. Additionally, student self-rated health and emotional distress were correlated with the likelihood of failing a class in the upcoming year (Needham et al., 2004). Students who struggled with mental and physical health

problems were more likely to miss school, have trouble focusing on their schoolwork, and feel disconnected from adults at school, all of which negatively affected academic performance.

Grief and Loss

In a study using survey data on the effect of sudden loss on academic functioning for adolescents, youth who experienced sudden loss were more likely to also experience another traumatic event (Oosterhoff et al., 2018). Sudden loss was the most prevalent traumatic event for adolescents and the most likely time to experience a first sudden loss was between 15-16 years old. Additionally, sudden loss was significantly correlated with lower academic achievement, lower beliefs that teachers are fair, lower ability to concentrate, lower levels of liking school, and lower feelings of school belongingness compared to students who have not experienced a sudden loss.

Social Factors

Peer relationships had a significant impact on academic achievement. In a cross-sectional study, adolescents with a higher number of depressive symptoms were more likely to report lower school involvement and poorer academic achievement (Chow et al., 2015). These same adolescents were more likely to have a friend with lower school involvement and poorer academic achievement. Additionally, in a longitudinal study, students who indicated frequent exposure to community violence were more likely to form friendships with other students who experienced low levels of academic engagement (Schwartz et al., 2016).

Another study using teacher-report data demonstrated that bullying, victimization, and daytime sleepiness were all associated with increased risk for learning and attention problems in alternative high school students (Rubens et al., 2019). Both bullying and victimization were uniquely related to learning and attention problems, as was daytime sleepiness. However, the association between bullying, victimization, and academic problems was strongest at low levels of daytime sleepiness.

A study on the effects of peer status and student-teacher relationships on adolescents' behavioral engagement in school demonstrated that behavioral engagement decreased as adolescents age, but girls continuously had higher rates of behavioral engagement than boys (Engels et al., 2016). Both students who were well-liked by their peers and students who were perceived as popular demonstrate lower levels of behavioral engagement. However, students with positive student-teacher relationships experienced higher levels of behavioral engagement.

School Absences and Dropout

School absence has a significant impact on academic achievement. In an exploratory study with adolescent from high-crime neighborhoods, older students tended to have more absences and a larger number of absences was associated with feeling unsafe at school, gang activity, and engaging in a delinquent peer group (Henry & Huizinga, 2007). Additionally, a multimethod study demonstrated that schools with high dropout rates also tended to have high rates of low-SES students, high number of reported board of education and law violations, and high suspension and retention rates (Christle et al., 2005). High schools with low dropout rates tended to have high rates of

academic achievement, attendance, recent graduates enrolled in higher education or employment, and ethnic majority students. School personnel at high-risk schools had lower expectations for student success, negative perception of the school's climate, and negative beliefs about family involvement (Christle et al., 2005).

Adolescent Protective Factors

According to SAMHSA, protective factors are “characteristics associated with a lower likelihood of negative outcomes or that reduce a risk factor’s impact (SAMHSA, 2019).” In a systematic review conducted by Rak and Patterson (1996), personal characteristics, family conditions, and environmental factors that promote resiliency in at-risk youth were all identified. In terms of personal characteristics, youth who had an active approach toward problem solving, a personal temperament that elicits responses from others, a positive view of their experiences, a vision of a meaningful life, the ability to be autonomous, and the tendency to look for novel experiences all had higher levels of resiliency. Multiple family factors also promoted resiliency, including the age of the opposite-sex parent, four or fewer children in the family, alternative caretakers, a network of kin of a variety of ages who the youth could turn to for advice and support, sibling caretakers, and household structures and rules (Rak & Patterson, 1996). Environmental supports, including role models outside of the family, also promoted resiliency. Finally, self-concept factors were important for promoting resiliency, including enhancing positive self-esteem, steeling oneself in the face of stress, and increasing self-competence as a result of overcoming adversity.

Mesosystem Factors

Academic Engagement

School engagement helps to explain the relationship between academic achievement and experiencing community violence. School engagement can be a protective factor for students who have experienced community violence, such that students who reported having strong school engagement did not experience academic achievement diminishment (Borofsky et al., 2013). Additionally, national longitudinal data demonstrated that adolescents who perceived school to be more safe were more engaged in their classrooms and reported less victimization (Côté-Lussier & Fitzpatrick, 2016). Female students had a higher likelihood of feeling safe than male students.

According to national longitudinal data, developing a sense of belonging for students may lead to increases in psychological well-being and improvements in achievement for students who perceived a greater sense of belonging (Anderman, 2002). However, African American and Native American students felt lower levels of school belongingness compared to Caucasian students. Additionally, urban schools had significantly lower rates of perceived belonging compared to suburban schools.

Having both good school and social connectedness initially was correlated with the best outcomes, including the highest likelihood of completing school and the lowest risk of developing depressive symptoms. Longitudinal data with secondary school students demonstrated that school connectedness also seemed to be a protective factor against substance use (Bond et al., 2007). Additionally, fewer school absences were associated with higher performance in school, participation in athletics, high education

goals, experience with positive teaching practices, positive student-teacher relationships, and conventional peer groups. Performing well in school could provide a buffer if an adolescent had a delinquent peer group (Henry & Huizinga, 2007).

Microsystem Factors

Family Support

Family-related factors, such as family cohesiveness and parental monitoring, were protective factors for at-risk adolescents. In interviews with at-risk African American families, family cohesion had a positive effect on adolescent school engagement, especially when parents also practiced good parental monitoring (Annunziata et al., 2006). Family cohesion increased school engagement in boys from families that practiced good parental monitoring. Good parental monitoring and family cohesion had an additive effect on girls' school engagement, such that girls from cohesive homes with good parental monitoring were the most likely to be engaged in school.

A systematic review of coping with poverty-related stress demonstrated that a strong social support system was shown to promote resiliency for low-income children experiencing adversity (Wadsworth, 2011). Adolescents who experienced mutual emotional support with their primary caregiver were more likely to have higher levels of both sadness and anger regulation. Additionally, children who used primary coping strategies, including emotional expression, emotion regulation, and problem solving, experienced fewer anxiety symptoms, depressive symptoms, and problems with aggression (Wadsworth, 2011). Children who used secondary coping strategies, including

positive thinking, acceptance, restructuring their cognitions, and distraction, also experienced a reduction in these same symptoms.

In terms of the effect of experiencing community violence, adolescents who reported a higher level of support from parents and who felt free to discuss violence experiences with others had fewer PTSD symptoms (Ozer & Weinstein, 2004).

Adolescents who reported more supportive teachers had higher levels of classroom functioning. However, there was no relationship between support from friends and exposure to violence and PTSD symptoms.

Parent report of closeness with their adolescent in a longitudinal study was a strong predictor of delinquency and substance use, depending on the environment (Dornbusch et al., 2001). Parental closeness was negatively related to the frequency of use among alcohol users and cigarette smokers in disadvantaged communities.

Additionally, parental closeness was negatively related to the frequency of delinquency and the frequency of violence among adolescents in disadvantaged communities.

In a longitudinal study using survey data, higher levels of school-based parental involvement along with higher educational expectations was correlated with better GPAs and higher educational attainment (Benner et al., 2016). Greater levels of academic advice from parents were correlated with higher educational attainment but were unrelated to GPA. School-based parental involvement was the most beneficial to more disadvantaged students, while parents' educational expectations were the most beneficial to more advantaged students. Students who were either low-SES or low-achieving, but not both, were more likely to benefit from parental school-based involvement (Benner et al., 2016).

Similarly, in a study of Mexican-American families, mothers' academic involvement while their children were in seventh grade was correlated with higher GPA at the end of high school for boys, as well as greater levels of preparation for post-high school education for both boys and girls (Camacho-Thompson et al., 2019). Fathers' academic involvement during seventh grade was correlated with higher GPA for boys at the end of high school. From the adolescents' perspective, girls who perceived their fathers to be less harsh in their parenting style generally were more prepared for post-high school education when their fathers were academically involved. Boys who perceived their fathers to be harsher in their parenting style generally were more prepared for post-high school education when their fathers were academically involved.

Parental academic involvement can also indirectly influence adolescents' school adjustment through its effect on student-teacher relationships. In a longitudinal study using self-report data, parents' academic involvement with adolescents was positively correlated with student-teacher relationship quality, as well as with adolescents' school involvement, perceived competence, and the value they place on academics (Cheung, 2019). Positive student-teacher relationships were correlated with better adolescent school functioning.

In a study on the effect of family connectedness on sexual risk-taking in alternative high school students, students at alternative high schools engaged in a higher number of sexual risk behaviors than students at regular high schools (Markham et al., 2003). Students' perception of their family connectedness could act as a protective factor against sexual risk-taking. Alternative high school students who reported higher levels of family connectedness were significantly less likely to have ever had sex, been involved in

a pregnancy, or to have had sex without a condom recently. Additionally, for young women, family connectedness was associated with not becoming sexually active at an early age, whereas for men, family connectedness was associated with using protection against pregnancy (Markham et al., 2003).

Student-Teacher Relationships

In a study based on nationally representative panel data, stronger teacher-bonding was positively correlated with later academic achievement, with the strongest impact for Hispanic American girls (Crosnoe, Johnson, & Elder, 2004). Stronger teacher-bonding was correlated with fewer future disciplinary problems, with this effect being strongest for white girls. Students who were in safer schools and in schools with more students of the same race-ethnicity indicated higher levels of bonding. The relation between the proportion of white teachers and teacher-bonding was positive for white students and negative for African American students and Hispanic girls (Crosnoe, Johnson, & Elder, 2004).

In a study using both cross-sectional and longitudinal data, students were more likely to have a positive attachment to school when they believed that their teachers care about them, try to be fair, and respect and praise them (Hallinan, 2008). If students believed that they were being ignored, misunderstood, devalued, or disrespected by their teachers, they would most likely have a negative reaction to school. On average, public school students reported liking school more than Catholic school students, despite being more likely to feel less safe in school (Hallinan, 2008).

According to longitudinal national survey data, students gave more effort when

they believed that their teacher cared about them (Muller, 2001). However, males, African American, Latino, and at-risk students were judged by their teachers as giving less effort in school. Students who were at risk of dropping out were more likely to be African American or Latino, male, and in a low-ability math class. These students also had lower academic expectations, received lower grades, and believed that their teachers were less caring. Having a caring teacher could mitigate some of these factors on a student's risk of dropping out of school (Muller, 2001).

Social Factors

Adolescent friendships can be a protective factor. In a study of African American and white adolescent students, having friends with higher academic achievement and school attachment was correlated with fewer academic problems in one year (Crosnoe et al., 2003). African American adolescents' friends valued education more, but liked school less than white adolescents' friends. African American adolescents were also more likely to attend larger, lower-performing, and lower SES-schools. Having high academic achieving friends was protective for students at any school but was especially protective in low-achieving schools. For African American adolescents, attending a large school undermined the ability of high-achieving friends to serve as an academic resource (Crosnoe et al., 2003). Similarly, using national longitudinal survey data for Latino adolescents', belonging to a close friend group and believing that they have friends were positively correlated with higher GPA (Delgado et al., 2016). Having others perceive these youth as a friend, as well as believing that they have friends, was positively correlated with school belonging, which was correlated with higher GPA. Alternatively,

Latino youth who believed that they were friends with people with high problem behaviors were more likely to be less involved with school.

School-Based Mental Health

Due to their easily accessible nature, schools provided an ideal environment to establish prevention, early identification, and intervention programs with the aim of preventing secondary symptomatology, such as substance use or suicidal ideation (Masia-Warner et al., 2006). Providing treatment in a familiar school setting may have reduced stigma and other common barriers to accessing treatment, such as cost and transportation. Additionally, a randomized control trial demonstrated that it was possible that at-risk adolescents who had low social support and experienced a high number of life stressors would gain the most from skills-training programs in school, as they would gain experience with skills not provided by their support network (van Loon et al., 2019). Adolescent students who participated in skills-training at school experienced reduced stress levels, internalizing behavior, and externalizing behavior. They also demonstrated increased self-esteem and well-being.

In a meta-analysis of preventive intervention programs in which 93% of programs were school-based, youth who were identified as having subclinical diagnoses left the programs with significantly fewer problems and significantly stronger competencies, with significant improvements in various areas of adjustment (Durlak & Wells, 1998).

In a systematic review of school-based intervention programs targeting adolescent depression, indicated programs, in which students who were showing mild or early signs of depression received treatment, appeared to be more effective than selective or

universal programs (Calear & Christensen, 2009). Programs lead by teachers were less successful at reducing depressive symptoms in students than were programs lead by others, such as mental health professionals, graduate students, or researchers. Additionally, programs that used elements of CBT seemed to be the most efficacious programs (Calear & Christensen, 2009). Indeed, Boustani et al. (2015) reviewed the current universal school-based prevention programs for adolescents and identified the most common practice elements across treatments to be problem-solving, communication skills, insight building, cognitive coping, and assertiveness skills. The most common instructional elements included psychoeducation, role play, and modeling (Boustani et al., 2015).

In a systematic review of school-based intervention programs targeting adolescent anxiety, both indicated and universal approaches resulted in reduction of anxiety symptoms (Neil & Christensen, 2009). Components of CBT were used in the majority of effective interventions. More interventions that used teachers as the program leader were effective than interventions in which other types of program leaders were used, which was a promising finding for the ability to implement anxiety interventions in schools (Neil & Christensen, 2009).

Bry and George (1980) looked at the feasibility and effectiveness of an early intervention program to prevent academic failure with high-risk adolescents in an urban school environment. Students, teachers, and parents all participated in the intervention. Students who participated in the program had significantly better grades and attendance than those in the control group (Bry & George, 1980). The students' improvement may have been partially due to receiving the special attention of a consistent adult at the

school. Following a school-based mindfulness intervention, teachers reported improvements in low-income, ethnic minority elementary school students' ability to pay attention, levels of self-control, activity participation, and respect towards others (Black & Fernando, 2014).

Student and Teacher Perspectives on Mental Health

In general, teachers can identify the stressors their students are facing and have positive attitudes towards providing mental health services in schools, but do not feel confident in their abilities to support their students (Walter et al., 2006). In a survey of 119 elementary school teachers, the teachers reported disruptive classroom behavior and a lack of motivation to learn as the most significant mental health problems that their students experienced. Although teachers expressed a desire to support their students, they reported a lack of information, training, and time as the barriers they experienced to helping their students. Additionally, the teachers in this survey demonstrated that they had a limited amount of knowledge pertaining to mental health, with the average score on this portion of the survey at 65% (Walter et al., 2006). Relatedly, the majority of teachers reported receiving limited formal education pertaining to mental health problems, both in their own schooling and in their careers. Although teachers reported positive attitudes regarding providing mental health services at school, they were not confident in their ability to effectively deal with mental health issues in their own classrooms.

Current Study

The aim of this study is to gain an understanding of the mental health needs of at-

risk adolescents who attend an alternative high school in order to inform the delivery of school-based mental health services. In order to achieve this aim, we will engage in qualitative analyses of four focus groups conducted with students, teachers and staff from an alternative high school in Southern California. This is an exploratory study; hence we do not have any a priori hypotheses. Our specific aims are as follows:

Specific Aim 1: Identify the self-reported mental health needs of adolescents attending an alternative high school in an underserved community of Southern California.

Specific Aim 2: Identify the teacher and staff-reported mental health needs of adolescents attending an alternative high school in an underserved community of Southern California.

CHAPTER TWO

METHOD

Participants

A sample of teachers ($n = 7$), students ($n = 9$), and staff ($n = 13$) from a Southern Californian alternative high school participated in four focus group interviews. Of the focus groups, two were composed of students, one was composed of staff, and one was composed of teachers. A clinical psychologist conducted the focus groups that were held in a classroom on the high school campus. Specific information pertaining to the study participants, including gender, age, ethnicity, and position at the school was not collected in order to protect the privacy of the participants. However, participants appeared to be gender and racially diverse. Student participants ranged from age 16-18 years old.

School Context

The school at which the study was conducted is a continuation high school for credit-deficient students who are at-risk of dropping or failing out. The school district includes 72 schools serving 53,072 students. Data collected from the current school indicate that students in this district are 88.5% economically disadvantaged, 74% Hispanic, 27.3% English language learners, and 13.6% chronically absent.

Materials and Procedures

Focus Group Interviews

During the hour-long focus group sessions, the facilitator asked questions addressing stressors students face, the impact of those stressors on students, the steps the school has already taken to address students' needs, and what the school still needs in order to best support the students and faculty. There was no structured order of participant response and participants contributed to the level they felt comfortable, guided by the facilitator's questions. The facilitator recorded the audio from each of the four focus groups and sent it to an outside company to be transcribed. The facilitator has a PhD in clinical psychology and was working as a trauma consultant in a Southern California school district at the time of the interviews.

Data Analysis

Two graduate students engaged in open coding independently and reviewed each focus group transcript to identify key words or phrases related to stressors students face, the impact of stressors on students, school-based characteristics and interventions, and unmet needs for students and teachers (Akers et al., 2010).

Following the individual open coding process, both coders met to compare codes to ensure that all key words were recorded and none were overlooked. Axial coding was the next step, in which the same coders individually identified common key phrases that were present throughout the transcripts and organized them into hierarchical categories (Palinkas, 2014). A codebook was created out of the resulting categories. Codes were

created to address the stressors students face, the impact of stressors on students, school-based characteristics and interventions, and unmet needs of students and staff. Next, random excerpts from all transcripts were compiled and both original coders tested the codebook on these excerpts to confirm its feasibility and appropriateness to accurately code the data. After the codebook was finalized, two new graduate student coders participated in a codebook training. They then engaged in consensus coding for all focus group transcripts using Dedoose, a qualitative coding software. After the coders independently coded each focus group interview transcript according to the codebook, they met with the first author. The first author operated as a third coder to review all codes, settle any inconsistencies, and determine the appropriate code in instances where the first two coders conflict on a particular excerpt (Palinkas, 2014).

After the coding was completed, we determined frequency counts of all the themes. This allowed the most frequently experienced stressors, and the impact of those stressors, for this population to be identified. Those themes were reported with accompanying participant excerpts. Additionally, the frequency counts from the teachers and the staff were compared to the frequency codes from the students to identify any differences in student versus staff and teacher perspectives.

CHAPTER THREE

RESULTS

Thematic Overview

A total of four transcripts were coded, representing four group interviews. The first transcript was of a group interview of students from the morning session ($n = 7$), the second was of a group interview of students from the afternoon session ($n = 2$), the third was of a group interview of staff ($n = 13$), and the final was of a group interview with teachers ($n = 7$). We coded 788 total excerpts across the four transcripts, with a range of 112 to 308 excerpts per transcript ($M = 197$). An excerpt is a unit of analysis composed of direct quotes from a focus group participant that falls into a general theme (academic difficulties, school environment, etc.). These themes were organized into a codebook that was comprised of six overarching categories (Level 1 codes) based on the discussion topics throughout the interviews. Through the process of axial coding, each level 1 code was divided into level 2 codes, with some of these level 2 codes further divided into level 3 codes (see Appendix C for details).

Included below are elaborations and exemplar quotes from the most commonly cited level 2 codes from each of the six level 1 codes. Level 2 and level 3 codes that were present in over 50% of the transcripts are described in detail below.

Stressors Students Face ($n = 151$ excerpts; 11%)

Across the four transcripts, 11% of the excerpts were about stressors students face. Student, teachers, and staff reported multiple stressors including various physical,

psychological, and logistical barriers that students face that cause distress. The most commonly discussed stressors were (1) community violence, including safety to and from school, bullying, and gang involvement; (2) abuse and trauma; (3) lack of permanent living situation; (4) grief and loss, including parental loss, separation, or divorce; (5) taking on inappropriate roles for their age; (6) lack of access to basic needs; (7) immigration status; and (8) early parenthood. The themes described below expand on the most frequently applied codes throughout the various interview transcripts. Each theme was present in at least 50% of the codes applied throughout the transcripts, meaning that the theme must have been coded at least 20 times. These specific themes capture the stressors students may face at home, in the community, or at school in their daily lives. The percentages listed below reflect the presence of the level 2 or level 3 codes within the level 1 code of stressors students face.

Theme 1.1-Community Violence (n = 28 excerpts; 19%)

The topic of community violence encompassed a significant amount of discussion in each group interview, with 19% of the excerpts describing how many students experience violence in their community or neighborhood, including gun violence, physical attack, or any other violent experience. Students' experience of community violence can take the form of bullying or gang involvement, and many times community violence impacts their safety to and from school. Additionally, teachers/staff and students had different views of how community violence impacts students. Community violence was cited 28 times across transcripts, with students citing it more than twice as much (n = 19; 68%) compared to both teachers and staff combined (n = 9; 32%). Students described

multiple incidences of when community violence intersected with their feelings of safety at school, such as,

“Just last year, they’re on a high speed chase and the dude crashed into the back fence and I guess he hopped the gate and just ran through the school. [The afternoon cohort] had just ended probably an hour before.”

Teachers also provided multiple anecdotes of incidences of community violence that impact students’ safety to and from school, including, “A student show[ed] up that had a bad bruise on[his] leg, and he said he was hit by a baseball bat by some kids that were trying to jump him on his way home from school.” The frequency of this theme highlights how much participants perceive that community violence impacts various aspects of students’ lives.

Theme 1.2-Inappropriate Roles (n = 23 excerpts; 15%)

The topic of students having to take on inappropriate roles was another pervasive theme throughout the group interviews, with 15% of the excerpts describing how students often face instability at home and a lack of parental involvement, which often results in the students having to take care of younger siblings or provide financial support for their family in addition to their academic responsibilities. Oftentimes, these responsibilities are beyond what is typically expected of adolescents in high school. Teachers/staff and students had similar perceptions of the impact taking on inappropriate roles has on students, with students citing it twelve times out of 23 total excerpts (52%) and teachers/staff referring to it eleven times out of 23 total excerpts (48%). Students mentioned having to prioritize their family over their education. “And them not just thinking, oh yeah he’s missing a lot of school. He’s probably doing something else. It’s

not that, I've got to take care of my family first." Teachers and staff echoed their students concerns around having to take on adult roles. One staff member described,

"I was going to mention, because you touched on something, you mentioned about their work conditions, I spoke to a kid not too long ago, I forgot how old he was, maybe 17. But he mentioned to me that his family made him go up north to go work in the fields. They just pulled him out of school and they just made him go up there. He had to work, he had to make money. And he was actually really happy to be back here in school after being through that. But he's not the only one. In all the years I've been in the school district, I've run into so many students who are under, you know obviously still in high school, and they're supporting their families by working a minimum wage type job. Working a lot of hours at a place that, probably not safe for them to be at night. And they're just playing a role that their parents should be playing. Whether their parents are actually doing it or they're not there or whatever the case is. I think that's part of why they don't take their education serious because they're trying to stay in real life or they're trying to make money. They're trying to put food on the table for maybe their brothers or sisters too. I've known kids in that spot."

Theme 1.3 Access to Basic Needs (n = 20 excerpts; 13%)

Lack of access to basic needs was another student stressor that was mentioned frequently throughout the four focus groups, with 13% of excerpts describing students' ability to access food, water, clothing, healthcare, sanitation, and other basic needs. Teachers/staff were three times more likely (15 out of 20 total excerpts; 75%) than students (5 times out of 20 total excerpts; 25%) to report difficulty accessing basic needs. Teachers indicated that school seems to be a place that can help fill this gap in students' needs. One staff member reported,

"I think a lot of kids come here to kind of get their basic needs met because they have food here, their friends are here and it's safe here, and suddenly you can sleep here (laughs). So I think a lot of them will show up just to get those basic needs met, even if you know the school part isn't their main focus and they don't do much with that. I mean, a lot of them have really good attendance but they don't do much in class. But they're here and they get breakfast and lunch and they're safe."

Theme 1.4 Grief and Loss (n = 20 excerpts; 13%)

Grief and loss was a student stressor mentioned frequently throughout the four focus groups, with 13% of excerpts describing grief that students may experience, such as the loss of a family member or friend. These losses could occur through death, deportation, or rehabilitation, as well as comments relating to students who have parents who divorced or separated. Teachers/staff and students reported different perceptions of students' experience with grief and loss. This theme was much more prominent among students (fourteen times out of 20 total excerpts; 70%) than teachers and staff (six times out of 20 total excerpts; 30%). Many students also referred to the impact of grief,

“Because I know ... we were talking about this a couple of days ago because they're trying to send me to the adult school because there's a lot of family stuff going on. My brother just passed and they're trying to get my brother and my cousin life and everything but at the same time they're trying to send me over there but they're not knowing what's going on. But it's not my fault I'm missing so much school. I've got to take care of my family.”

Although less frequently, teachers and staff did acknowledge how much loss many of their students have faced at such a young age, saying,

“They're separated from their parents. They lost their grandma. I have a kid. She was telling me she lost her grandma, she's separated from her parents. Now her uncle [has] a deadly disease, and it's like all of this happen at once at age of 16.”

Impact of Stressors on Students (n = 198 excerpts; 15%)

Across the four transcripts, 15% of the comments were about the impact of stressors on students. Students, teachers, and staff were able to identify multiple ways stressors impact students, including their mental and physical health, their behavior, and their ability to perform in school. The most commonly discussed impacts were: (1)

academic difficulties, including difficulty concentrating, lack of motivation, absence, and prioritizing family over learning; (2) behavioral problems, including attention seeking behavior, expressions of anger, cursing, alcohol and drug use, and internalizing behavior; (3) lack of trust toward others' in their lives; and (4) students' beliefs that they have to push through whatever stressors they are facing to continue applying themselves. The themes described below expand on the most frequently applied codes throughout the various interview transcripts. Each theme was present in at least 50% of the codes applied throughout the transcripts, meaning that the theme must have been coded at least 20 times. These specific codes capture the impact stressors have on students' daily lives, both at school and other environments.

Theme 2.1 Difficulty Concentrating (n = 45 excerpts; 23%)

Difficulty concentrating was the first impact of stressors that was identified frequently throughout the focus groups, with 23% of the excerpts describing how this impacts their ability to perform in school. Teachers/staff and students had different perspectives on students' experience of having difficulty concentrating as a result of stressors that they face. This theme was much more prominent among students (32 times out of 45 total excerpts; 71%) than teachers and staff (thirteen times out of 45 total excerpts; 29%). One student summed up the general reason for not being able to concentrate at school, saying, "You gotta worry about what's going on at home when you're at school and that's what worries ... that's why you can't focus." The students perceive that the teachers and staff don't fully understand the impact stressors have on their ability to concentrate. One student expressed, "The teachers and stuff. They don't

know, but the fact that you need to come to school and just learn after everything else just happened at home.” The teachers and staff expressed that there are more basic needs that are not being met that impact a student’s ability to concentrate in school. One staff member said,

“Well just from personal experience, I know if I’m hungry I’m not focusing on anything that I’m doing. And that’s like a very minimal circumstance to be in compared to some of these other things. If you’re worried about where home is going to be, how are you supposed to do homework, you know what I mean. If you’re worried about where you going to go live at when you leave here. So I think it’s a big thing that hangs over their head everyday.”

Theme 2.2 Lack of Motivation (n = 25 excerpts; 13%)

Lack of motivation was the second major theme frequently identified throughout the transcripts as a way students are impacted by the stressors they experience. Students’ lack of motivation to work in class or do the necessary work to pass their classes, as well as a general sense of hopelessness in response to the stressors they face made up 13% of the comments. Teachers/staff and students had different perspectives on students’ experiencing lack of motivation as a result of stressors they face. This theme was much less prominent among students (seven times out of 25 total excerpts; 28%) than teachers and staff (eighteen times out of 25 total excerpts; 72%). After talking about the stressors students face, when asked how these stressors impact them, one student commented, “Some people struggle to keep their grades up, or some people don’t come to school cause they don’t care.” Additionally, students commented on the impact teachers have on their level of motivation. “Sometimes they ask you what’s wrong and then you tell them and they’re like, ‘Oh well you need to pay attention’ or something like that. That makes you not want to pay attention more.” One comment by a teacher exemplified the

perspective of many of the teachers and staff.

“I also have a student in one of my classes that was going through some issues at home, with death and all that stuff. And they’ll come in and be quiet, unless you have a relationship or kind of know or recognize which most of us recognize as students, after a while you know them. They’ll sit. And they won’t bother anybody or do any work – you know, they’ll go through the motions but that’s exactly what they’re doing is really kind of a zombie going through the motions.”

Theme 2.3 Alcohol and Drug Use (n = 22 excerpts; 11%)

Alcohol and drug use was the final theme that was frequently identified as an impact of the stressors students face, with 11% of excerpts describing students’ alcohol and drug use, including use as a way to cope with stressors. Teachers/staff and students had similar perspectives on student alcohol and drug use as a way to cope with stressors they experience, with students citing it fourteen times out of 22 total excerpts (64%) and teachers/staff referring to it eight times out of 22 total excerpts (36%). Students explain their choice to use drugs and alcohol despite having learned that substance use is bad for them and the judgment they will face from teachers and family. “For some people, it calms them down at the same time. Like most people think, you smoke weed, you’re a bad person.” One staff member summed up the perspective of students using drugs with their comment, “A lot of drugs and alcohol use. And I don’t you know, I would assume it’s to kind of deal with these situations that we’re talking about. Or escape from them.”

School-Based Characteristics (n = 437 excerpts; 32%)

Across the four transcripts, 32% of the comments were about school-based characteristics. Teachers, staff, and students were able to identify multiple school-based characteristics that influenced the stressors students face and their impact, including the

school environment, the relationship between the people at the school, and the characteristics of the classes. The most commonly discussed characteristics were: (1) a supportive school environment, including individualized attention, small class size, emotional safety for students and teachers, and real life learning; (2) safety, including feelings of safety and lack of feelings of safety; and (3) relationships, including peer relationships, positive student-teacher relationships, and negative student-teacher relationships. The themes described below expand on the most frequently applied codes throughout the four interview transcripts. As mentioned in the previous sections, each theme was present in at least 50% of the codes applied throughout the transcripts, meaning that the theme must have been coded at least 20 times.

Theme 3.1 Supportive School Environment (n = 72 excerpts)

Theme 3.1a Real Life Learning (n = 47 excerpts; 11%)

The first theme frequently mentioned throughout the various focus group interviews was real life learning, with 11% of the excerpts describing teachers' attempts (or lack thereof) to teach in a way that relates what they are teaching to real life examples that are applicable to students. Examples of such real life learning included making a budget based on a minimum wage job or how to get a loan and buy a car. Teachers/staff and students had slightly different perspectives on real life learning, with students citing it nineteen times out of 47 total excerpts (40%) and teachers/staff referring to it 28 times out of 47 total excerpts (61%). Students expressed frustration with what they were learning, saying, "Most of the stuff that we're using now, we're not going to use after

high school.”

They expressed the desire to learn skills that will be useful to their future, such as “balancing a cheque book,” “how to pay a bill,” and “learning how to sew.” Teachers and staff reported both how real life learning has been effective in their classrooms but also that their school needs more real life learning opportunities. In addressing real life learning in their classrooms, one teacher commented, “I had a kid that was struggling with econ. I brought in my own personal budget and showed it to her, and she was like, ‘You do this?’ She was blown away. We made that connection. Make it personal.” Another staff member commented on the need for more real life learning opportunities, saying, “So we don’t have those resources in this district and especially not our continuation schools that need it. We need the graphics, the wood shops, ... more vocational. Those are what our kids really need.”

Theme 3.1b Emotional Safety (n = 25 excerpts; 6%)

Emotional safety was another school-based characteristic frequently discussed throughout the four focus groups, with 6% of the excerpts describing students’ and teachers’ feelings of safety surrounding their ability to express their emotions at school. Teachers/staff and students had differing perspectives of emotional safety experience while at school. This theme was much more prominent among students (nineteen times out of 25 total excerpts; 76%) than teachers and staff (six times out of 25 total excerpts; 24%). Students appreciated the teachers with whom they have close relationships where “you can go to their class and talk to them” when they were feeling overwhelmed or

stressed. Teachers and staff seemed to understand the need to build rapport and that relationship of trust before their students would confide in them. One teacher commented,

“Yeah, emotional safety, I think, has a lot to do with it, feeling that I’m not going to allow things in my classroom that are going to be negative. Or release that tension a little bit. They feel safe to actually express some of the things they wouldn’t express otherwise, too. I think they feel comfortable in that way in sharing some of that.”

Theme 3.2 Physical Safety (n = 86 excerpts)

The second theme frequently mentioned throughout the interview transcripts was feelings of safety.

Theme 3.2a Feelings of Safety (n = 25 positive excerpts; n = 61 negative excerpts)

Participants first commented on their level of feeling safe at the school. Within the topic of school-based characteristics, 6% of the comments were about feelings of safety versus 14% of the comments were about lack of feelings of safety. Teachers/staff and students had differing perspectives on their feelings of safety while at school. This theme was much more prominent among students (sixteen times out of 25 total excerpts; 64%) than teachers and staff (nine times out of 25 total excerpts; 36%). Students’ acknowledged that, although their community environment does not feel safe, “some of the teachers” at the school help them to feel safe. Teachers and staff recognize that school may be the only safe environment some students have in their lives. One staff member commented,

“I also think that makes, sets our school up as the only safe place for some people. And like it does provide them an escape when they are able to actually learn. And yeah it’s just a safe place for them.”

Participants also made comments describing students' and teachers' lack of physical and emotional safety while at the school. Teachers/staff and students had vastly different perspectives on the perceived lack of feelings of safety. This theme was completely different among students (61 times out of 61 total excerpts; 100%) than teachers and staff (zero times out of 61 total excerpts; 0%). Students provided multiple examples, such as at school, "there's only one security [guard]," but "the other schools, there's at least four or five" or how students "feel safer at home." Students also commented that they feel that their teachers do not understand their lack of feelings of safety because they do not live in the same unsafe neighborhood. "At 4:25, they drive out of San Bernardino, we stay here."

Theme 3.3 Relationships (n = 198 excerpts)

Theme 3.3a Student-Teacher Relationships (n = 112 positive excerpts; n = 86 negative excerpts)

Student-teacher relationships was another theme frequently mentioned throughout the focus group interviews. Within the topic of school-based characteristics, 26% of the comments were about positive student-teacher relationships versus 20% of the comments were about negative student-teacher relationships. Teachers/staff and students had similar perceptions of the positive aspects of student-teacher relationships, with students citing it 62 times out of 112 total excerpts (55%) and teachers/staff referring to it 50 times out of 112 total excerpts (45%). Many students recognize that the teachers who are hard on them and expect a lot from them are the ones who care the most. Students also gave

examples of teachers taking the extra time to make sure they're okay. "But there's some teachers who will pull you to the side when they know something's wrong. I don't know, there's some teachers that kinda wanna be like in your emotional life." Although a few teachers thought that positive student-teacher relationships will not make a difference in their students' success, most teachers recognize the great impact of the relationships.

"Well I mean I really, I think that we always talked about in all our meetings, that our strength here at [school] is the relationship building. And we do it and I think each one of us do it unconsciously for the most part and we don't really work at it, you know it's not an intentional thing, it's just a natural thing. And I think that that's, that's the difference. Because if it was an intentional strategic type of thing, it wouldn't be genuine."

Participants also made comments about the negative aspects of the relationships between students and teachers, including teachers' lack of empathy, understanding, and involvement. This theme also includes comments about what students wish teachers did to help support them. Overall, teachers/staff and students had vastly different perspectives on negative student-teacher relationships. This theme was much more prominent among students (82 times out of 86 total excerpts; 95%) than teachers and staff (four times out of 86 total excerpts; 5%). One student commented,

"Like if you're having a bad time and you wanna put your head down sometimes they'll make you do your work but they won't let you just relax or nothing. They'll make you do the work like it's that much more important doing your work than something happened to you. Yeah, then they tell you whatever happened at home, keep it at home. Yeah, like they don't care."

When teachers commented on aspects of negative student-teacher relationships, it was framed in a way that blamed the students.

"We have a lot of kids who, if they decide they do not like the teacher, their mentality is, 'I don't like Mr. [name], so I'm not going to do the work.' They don't see how self-destructive and harmful that is to themselves. They're that level of immature development."

School-Based Interventions (n = 357 excerpts; 26%)

Across the four transcripts, 26% of the comments were about school-based interventions. Students, teachers, and staff identified multiple interventions the school already had in place to help support students, such as verbal, environmental, and relational supports. The most commonly discussed factors included: (1) adapting to students; (2) accountability; (3) positive reinforcement; (4) expectations for students; (5) extracurricular activities; and (6) rapport building. The themes described below expand on the most frequently applied codes throughout the four interview transcripts. As mentioned above, each theme was present in at least 50% of the codes applied throughout the transcripts, meaning that the theme must have been coded at least 20 times.

Theme 4.1 Adapting to Students (n = 72 excerpts; 20%)

The first theme related to school-based interventions that was frequently mentioned throughout the four interview transcripts was adapting to students, with 20% of the comments around teachers' willingness to adapt classwork, class requirements, and teaching environments to better fit students' needs and abilities. Teachers/staff and students had differing perspectives on the frequency of adapting to students. This theme was much less prominent among students (25 times out of 72 total excerpts; 35%) than teachers and staff (47 times out of 72 total excerpts; 65%). Although students wished the teachers adapted to their needs more, they did acknowledge that the teachers find ways to adapt to their students, especially compared to teachers at their previous high schools.

“Compared to the last school I was at, it’s better than some high school. They helped me way [more] than teachers over there - they give you a pack and do it. But teachers here they’ll give you the pack and then they’ll show you what to do in the packet and then they’ll have you do it.”

The teachers acknowledged that although there are a lot of barriers to adapting their teaching environments to students, as there is such a wide variety of students in their class, they try their best.

“I think there’s a lot of collaboration between the teachers here regarding kids. If [teacher] is having an issue with a kid, she, I believe, feels free to talk to other teachers about the kid, ‘How’s he doing with you? What’s working for you?’ I heard this in the staff room all the time, people consulting about how we can help the kids better.”

Theme 4.2 Accountability (n = 81 excerpts; 23%)

Accountability was another school-based intervention that was identified frequently throughout the focus groups, with 23% of the excerpts describing teachers’ attempts to keep students accountable for their actions and behavior, including comments about teachers’ inconsistent consequences for students. Teachers/staff and students had vastly different perspectives on the level of accountability for students at the school. This theme was much less prominent among students (fourteen times out of 81 total excerpts; 17%) than students and staff (67 times out of 81 total excerpts; 83%). Students appreciate the level of accountability teachers expect from them. One student commented, “I feel like Sierra just keeps me going and just the way the teachers teach. Just the way they are. They get on me a lot and that’s where I feel like that’s good.” Teachers and staff reported that they end up being inconsistent in their consequences because they are not sure what are appropriate consequences for each of the kids.

“I think these students take advantage of what they feel to be a soft system at this school that caters to their trauma. If they’ve experienced trauma, then you don’t exact consequences. These students, they read that in five seconds. That’s not to suggest that our students don’t have trauma and that’s not why they’re misbehaving, but they take advantage of it. They game the system, and that reduces your ability to teach the 90% who are also victims of trauma and not acting out.”

Theme 4.3 Positive Reinforcement (n = 35 excerpts; 10%)

The third theme frequently endorsed in the school-based interventions category was positive reinforcement, with 10% of the excerpts describing teachers' use of positive rewards, including praise and recognition, to reinforce student behavior. Teachers/staff and students had vastly different perspectives on the use of positive reinforcement. This theme was not brought up by students, only teachers and staff (35 times out of 35 total excerpts; 100%). They reported struggling to find a balance between positive reinforcement and consequences, and were worried that positive reinforcement was not effective.

“Anything they do, like, ‘Hey, that was a neat paper. You’re doing a good job.’ Just constantly praising these kids. Even the more at-risk 10% students, we go out of our way to praise them any time they are not disrupting the class, because we want them to continue that behavior. We’re not just focusing on consequences, but there’s got to be a little of both. We’ve got a lot of the ... A lot of the in-servicing we have focuses on positive reinforcement, building the relationships, but there’s no focus on consequences.”

Theme 4.4 Expectations for Students (n = 85 excerpts; 24%)

Expectations for students was another school-based intervention that was identified frequently throughout the focus groups, with 24% of the excerpts describing teachers' communicating their expectations for students in regard to their schoolwork and behavior. Teachers/staff and students differed in their perceptions of expectations for students. This theme was much less prominent among students (eighteen times out of 85 total excerpts; 21%) than teachers and staff (67 times out of 85 total excerpts; 79%). Students appreciate the teachers who set high expectations for them because it shows that they care. One student commented, “If they care they’ll end up pulling that student to the side and they’ll tell you straight up, ‘I care about your grades, I care about this and I want

to see you graduate.’ Some teachers don’t do that.” Teachers and staff indicated that they want to meet students where they are at.

“Then if I give it to them as real as possible, not to an adult level but just at their age group level and I understand list, your job here and it is a job to come here and get your credits and move on to graduation. So you can get rid of this chapter of your life that’s probably not the best for you. But there’s better things for you. And you have to really instill that into their mind.”

Theme 4.5 Extracurricular Activities (n = 22 excerpts; 6%)

Extracurricular activities were another school-based intervention that was identified frequently throughout the focus groups, with 6% of excerpts describing extracurricular activities (or lack of) offered at the school. Teachers/staff and students endorsed different perspectives of the school’s extracurricular activities. This theme was less prominent among students (eight times out of 22 total excerpts; 36%) than teachers and staff (fourteen times out of 22 total excerpts; 64%). Students requested more activities that would be “things to keep them busy” and “keep your mind off what it’s usually on.” When referring to offering extracurriculars for students, one teacher mentioned, “I think those kids are looking for that. These kids are not going to raise their hands and ask for it. They’re not going to take incentive to build or do it. They want us to.”

Theme 4.6 Rapport Building (n = 49 excerpts; 14%)

The final theme frequently discussed under school-based interventions was rapport building, with 14% of the excerpts describing staff and teachers’ attempts to engage with students and build rapport with them. Teachers/staff and students reported similar perspectives on rapport building at school, with students citing it 22 times out of

49 total excerpts (45%) and teachers/staff referring to it 27 times out of 49 total excerpts (55%). Students appreciate teachers who genuinely try to get to know them and support them. One student commented, “If I can tell that they’re sincere, not if they’re just like ‘what’s going on why aren’t you doing this?’” Not that type of teacher. But if they really wanna know then okay.” Some teachers report using rapport building as a tool to get students interested in their education. Others, however, seem to genuinely want to build relationships with their students.

“I think as teachers in general, yes we are supposed to be there more for ... I think for me it’s more as a ... I guess still a relationship. I’m still there to help them and build that relationship with them. For me, I don’t really focus on an education as much as I do on building relationships.”

Student Needs (n = 166 excerpts; 12%)

Across the four transcripts, 12% of the comments were about student needs. Teachers, staff, and students identified multiple places in which students’ needs were not being met by the school. When discussing student needs, participants commented on what students need as a result of their stressors and resources that the school and staff can provide to support students. Factors referred to in this section included (1) psychological help, including counseling sessions, confidentiality concerns, positive attitudes toward therapy, and negative attitudes towards therapy; (2) social skills; and (3) coping mechanisms. The themes described below expand on the most frequently applied codes throughout the four interview transcripts. Each theme was present in at least 50% of the codes applied throughout the transcripts, meaning that the theme must have been coded at least 20 times.

Theme 5.1 Psychological Help (n = 118 excerpts)

Theme 5.1a Counseling Sessions (n = 46 excerpts; 28%)

Counseling sessions was the first theme frequently identified under the category student needs, with 28% of the excerpts describing students' experiences with counseling sessions or the possibility of offering counseling sessions at the school. Students and teachers/staff had different perspectives on counseling sessions for students. This theme was much more prominent among students (39 times out of 46 total excerpts; 85%) than teachers and staff (seven times out of 46 total excerpts; 15%). Most students indicated that therapy could be "helpful" and "comforting." One student commented on their past experience with therapy, saying, "It helped me. I still think of it but it helped me way more just to calm down." Teachers and staff acknowledged that the students needed more help than they could provide:

"They need sessions of counseling, [someone] listening to them. Some of the damage that happens to some of these kids is really ... I cannot handle it myself, although I went through a lot too, but I can't handle some of their ... I don't know how to say it, psychological injuries."

Theme 5.1b Negative Attitudes Toward Therapy (n = 23 excerpts; 14%)

The second theme for student needs that frequently appeared throughout the focus group transcripts was students' negative attitudes toward therapy, with 14% of the excerpts describing how talking about their problems will not help, that they need to deal with their experiences on their own, or only time will help. Students and teachers/staff endorsed vastly different perspectives on students' negative attitudes toward therapy. This theme was brought up by students only (23 times out of 23 total excerpts; 100%).

Students presented multiple reasons for not wanting to go to therapy, including, “They’re my problems. Why would I share them with someone else?”; “You’ve got to deal with it yourself.”; and “Counselors go behind your back and tell on you.”

Theme 5.2 Coping Mechanisms (n = 22 excerpts; 13%)

Coping mechanisms was another student need that was identified frequently throughout the focus groups, with 13% of the excerpts describing the coping mechanisms students currently use and the healthy coping mechanisms that they still need to learn. Students and teachers/staff had differing perspectives on students’ coping mechanisms. This theme was much more prominent among students (21 times in 22 total excerpts; 95%) than teachers and staff (one time out of 22 total excerpts; 5%). Students mentioned that they currently use alcohol and drugs to “calm them[selves] down,” but would be interested in participating in a group that teaches them how to meditate or extracurriculars that put them “at ease” and help them “take their mind off things.” One staff member suggested that students “need a class” where they learn coping mechanisms.

Teacher Needs (n = 48 excerpts; 4%)

Teachers and staff were able to identify multiple areas where teacher needs were not being met. When discussing teacher needs, participants made comments related to how the school can help support teachers as they work to support the students. Factors that were discussed surrounding teachers’ needs included: (1) teachers feeling unsure how to support students and wanting more training; (2) counseling sessions for teachers;

(3) self-care; and (4) emotional support. Across the four transcripts, 4% of the comments were about teacher needs. The themes described below expand on the most frequently applied codes throughout the four interview transcripts. Each theme was present in at least 50% of the codes applied throughout the transcripts, meaning that the theme must have been coded at least 20 times.

Theme 6.1 Emotional Support (n = 20 excerpts; 42%)

Emotional support was the only theme frequently identified throughout the focus group interview transcripts in relation to teacher needs, with 42% of the excerpts describing teachers' need to experience emotional support, through talking about their emotions or otherwise having a space to have an emotional release. Students and teachers/staff had vastly different perspectives on teachers' need for emotional support. This theme was much less prominent with students (0 times out of 20 total excerpts; 0%) than teachers and staff (20 times out of 20 total excerpts; 100%). Teachers and staff indicated that they feel very drained every day after school and want an outlet for that. One teacher commented,

“I use all my patience here, so it's like, okay, my kids, they know. They've been raised. They know what's up, so they could wait. I don't have any more patience because I already used it all in the daytime.”

CHAPTER FOUR

DISCUSSION

Students, teachers, and staff provided valuable information about their lived experiences, which allowed us to better understand the stressors students face, the impact these stressors have, and what supports are needed.

Stressors Students Face and Their Impact

Experiences of community violence, inappropriate roles, lack of access to basic needs, and grief and loss were the most reported stressors students face. Participants across all focus groups endorsed difficulty concentrating, lack of motivation, and alcohol and drug use as behavioral reactions to the stressors they face. These findings are consistent with previous literature.

Students who experienced a lack of access to basic needs as a result of poverty were also more likely to develop symptoms of anxiety and depression, as well as hostility and aggression (Santiago et al., 2013). In our current study, students' lack of access to basic needs was more prominently reported by teachers than by students. This could be due to a variety of reasons: students could be embarrassed to bring up their lack of access to basic needs, teachers could be overestimating the need, or perhaps students do not realize what they are missing.

Research has shown that adolescents who experience poverty are also more likely to experience trauma, with some adolescents turning to alcohol and drug use to cope with these experiences (Santiago et al., 2013). Additionally, adolescents who experience community violence are more likely to develop symptoms of anxiety and depression,

which can lead to academic disengagement and lower academic success (Hardaway et al., 2014).

Lack of motivation and difficulty concentrating can both be symptoms of anxiety, depression, or academic disengagement. In our study, students' lack of motivation was more prominently reported by teachers than by students. While some of the comments teachers made around students' lack of motivation acknowledged the impact of their environment, some also seemed to attribute their lack of motivation to laziness. Previous research on attribution theory has shown that people are more likely to blame their own difficulties on external factors (i.e., stressors) but others' difficulties on internal factors (i.e., laziness) (Weiner, 2010). Although we did not find any literature on the stress of adolescents engaging in caregiver roles, this is something that our team has observed on numerous occasions in the context of service delivery. Students are often expected to care for younger siblings, care for the home, and contribute to the financial expenses of the household. This expectation has increased during the stay-at-home orders. Students are staying at home and monitoring their younger siblings' virtual learning while engaging in their own learning when parents are at work.

School-Based Characteristics and Interventions

The results from this study indicated that there are several ways that the school is already supporting its students. Some of these factors included positive student-teacher relationships, feelings of emotional and physical safety, adapting to students, positive reinforcement, setting clear expectations for students and holding them accountable, and rapport building. Consistent with previous research, students are more likely to do better

in school and have fewer mental health problems when they experience protective factors such as positive student-teacher relationships, school safety, positive reinforcement, and strong rapport with teachers (Hallinan, 2008). In this study, teachers reported on positive reinforcement, but students did not mention it. However, this may be due to students not having the language to describe it. Additionally, previous research with alternative high school students indicates that there are higher levels of positive student-teacher relationships, adapting to students through providing more individualized attention, expectations for students' maturity and responsibility, and a greater understanding of students' stressors and support provided for those students as compared to a typical high school (Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011). In the current study, accountability was more prominently reported by teachers than by students. However, students were more likely to report that teachers were doing a good job holding them accountable, while teachers expressed that they are not doing enough or are not effective at holding students accountable. There seems to be agreement between teachers and students that the school should focus more on real-life learning and teaching students skills that they can apply to their future careers. This could be an important recommendation for alternative high schools or for high school districts generally.

However, results from the study also demonstrate that there is still a high level of unmet need at the current alternative school. Students reported feeling unsafe at school and some negative-student teacher relationships. Past research has shown that students who feel unsafe at school are less successful in school (Milam et al., 2010). Teachers and staff never reported feeling unsafe at school, although they did report instances of violence on campus. It is unclear if teachers overestimate how safe students feel on

campus or are assuming that their own feelings of safety reflect students' feelings of safety.

Students who are more academically disengaged, for reasons including negative student-teacher relationships, are more likely to experience anxiety, depression, and increased substance use (Bond et al., 2007). In our study, negative student-teacher relationships were more prominently reported by students than by teachers. This could be due to a variety of reasons, including a lack of insight from students or teachers being embarrassed to bring up their negative relationships with students. Often, when teachers mentioned negative student-teacher relationships, they blamed the students.

Student Needs

Students and teachers also expressed the need for counseling and education around coping mechanisms. Previous research has shown that there are multiple skills-based and CBT-based programs that can be implemented in schools to target adolescent anxiety and depression (Calear & Christensen, 2009; Neil & Christensen, 2009; van Loon et al., 2019).

Teacher Needs

Teachers and staff also endorsed needing extra support from the school, specifically emotional support, in order to be able to keep supporting their students. Although there has not been a focus on alternative schools specifically, there is research to suggest that teachers that serve in high need schools experience a number of stressors. Teachers who are white, female, have higher levels of teacher sensitivity, experience

higher levels of disruptive student behavior, or teach in low-income schools reported higher rates of burnout (Bottiani et al., 2019). Additionally, research has shown that student stressors, having students with severe behavioral and emotional needs, and negative student-teacher relationships also increase rates of teacher burnout (Grayson & Alvarez, 2008). In our current study, students never mentioned that their teachers may need emotional support. Perhaps the students are not aware that the teachers have needs and the impact on teachers of trying to support students. Research on treatments for teacher stress and burnout indicate that behavioral, cognitive-behavioral, and mindfulness approaches are the most effective, while interventions that were solely psychoeducational were the least effective (von der Embse et al., 2019).

Implications

There are a few implications from the results from this study that are important to highlight for alternative schools. First, students at the school experience a higher level and quantity of stressors, including stressors that may not have been identified beforehand, such as inappropriate roles. As teachers and staff, it is important to be aware of these stressors and to keep them in mind when dealing with negative behaviors so that misattributions of behaviors are less likely to happen. Second, school-based characteristics and interventions can have a large positive impact on students and their outcomes. At the current alternative high school, steps have already been taken to better support student mental health since the conclusion of this study. A Wellness Center was created, which provides one common space for students to access academic, mental health, and physical health resources. It was created with the hope that putting all of these

resources in one place would increase access to services and reduce the stigma surrounding mental health. Additionally, graduate students in clinical psychology from a nearby graduate university have partnered with the alternative high school to provide therapy to the students. They predominately used a modular psychotherapy approach that research has shown to be successful when adapted to a school environment (Lyon et al., 2013). Another factor that was identified in this study that both students and teachers agree is important is real-life learning. Students reported that they would be more motivated to learn if it was something that they felt would be applicable to their future work. Teachers also indicated that they want to teach their students skills that will be important to their future success, and that the skills that would be important to the students' success look different than for students who attend a typical high school. Finally, it is important to have a realistic understanding of the level of support teachers can provide to students and what needs to be handled by a trained mental health professional. Although teachers want to support their students and the main focus of schools is on supporting their students, it is important not to neglect teachers' mental health. It is important to provide support and interventions for teachers, especially in environments like alternative schools where students have a higher level of need and teachers will need to provide a higher level of support as a result.

Limitations

There were a few limitations to this study that should be kept in mind when interpreting these results. First, the population for this study was one alternative high school in southern California. Although the results from this study will be integral to the

services offered to this specific alternative high school going forward, it is unclear how generalizable this study will be to other alternative high schools or other high schools that serve vulnerable youth. Many factors could impact these results that would be different at other alternative high schools, such as location, school size, and stressors the students face. Nevertheless, the school demographics and stressors reported reflect what is seen in areas with high urban poverty around the country (Denny et al., 2004). As such, we believe many of the findings from the current study are likely generalizable beyond our local alternative high school.

The second limitation is the focus group format. By having all the participants in a group, there is a risk that some members may not speak up as much as others. Interview formats would have allowed us to collect rich qualitative data from all participants (Guest et al., 2017). However, given competing demands on school staff time and constraints, and student instructional time, the leadership determined that a focus group was more appropriate. Furthermore, the focus group format did allow participants to expand off of each other's comments and add more nuances. Finally, it is possible that a self-selection bias occurred in the makeup of the focus groups. Perhaps the most stressed students and teachers did not participate, making it possible that the focus group results did not encompass the full extent of experiences of students and teachers at the school. Alternatively, maybe the most stressed students and teachers participated because they needed to talk about it. Therefore, our results could be an over or under representation of student and teacher circumstances. Based on anecdotal and clinical evidence from our team, however, we believe these findings to be an accurate reflection of student and teacher experiences on this campus.

One final limitation of this study was that there was not a set script for the focus group interviews. Not having a structured script allows participants to freely choose the direction of the discussion, allowing opportunities for a wider range of topics to be mentioned. However, this comes at the cost of a structured format, which may bias the results based on what the participants chose to focus on and emphasize (Knox & Burkard, 2009). For example, the focus groups were driven by the participants who chose to speak up and were based on the topics these few participants brought up. This should be kept in mind when interpreting these results.

Future Directions

This study highlights the need for continuing research within the alternative high school population. Previous research has shown that students attending alternative high schools face a greater number of stressors and believe they have less control over things that happen to them than students attending typical high schools (Miller et al., 2003). Although the number of students attending alternative high schools is significantly smaller than the number of students attending typical high schools, it is still imperative that we understand the stressors these students face so that supports can be developed and implemented for these students. Our results indicate that students are open to receiving therapy as part of their school experience, but students may need to be educated on myths about therapy. Future researchers can implement evidence-based treatments in alternative school settings to determine if adaptations are needed for this population.

The results from this study are consistent with past research claiming that teachers are unsure of how to best support their students in the face of limited resources (Walter et

al., 2006). Moving forward, researchers can explore how teachers and staff can best support students while minimizing risk for burnout. In an alternative school environment with high-need students, it will be especially important to research how much teachers can do themselves and how much needs to be delegated to mental health professionals. Finally, it will be important to understand how to best support teacher mental health in alternative schools, in order to mitigate stress and burnout.

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APPENDIX A
INTERVIEW TOPICS

1. Stressors Students Face
2. Impact of These Stressors on Students' Lives and Wellbeing
3. Ways the School Supports Students
4. Ways the School Could Better Support Students
5. How the Teachers Need to be Supported in Order to Support the Students

APPENDIX B

CODEBOOK

Coding Instructions

You will be coding transcripts of four semi-structured focus group interviews. These transcripts will focus on responses to the following three sections of the semi-structured interviews: (1) What kind of problems or challenges are the students facing? (2) How do these stressors impact their mental health, behavior, and school engagement? (3) What is the school doing to support the students and how could it further support them? Have your coding manual in front of you and reference it often as you code the interview transcripts. Transcripts should be coded using Dedoose, an application for analyzing qualitative research.

Transcript Excerpts

Transcript excerpts will be predetermined by the lead coder. Transcript excerpts will only feature provider responses. Examples of excerpts:

- “Somebody's who's willing to learn and try. Maybe if they have some background knowledge, that's awesome, but as long as they're willing to participate and at least are open to the lessons, that's really awesome for me. I can teach them as long as they're willing to learn.”
- “Just reluctance to open up and participate in classes, afraid of being wrong, so then they don't share their knowledge with the rest of the class because they think, "Oh, I'm gonna be wrong and everybody's gonna laugh at me." I see a lot of kids that are afraid to ask for help, but once they see another kid asking for help and seeing the teacher go over there, they're like, "Oh, she's cool if I ask for help." I'm in there and willing to, but if nobody asks for help, then they're not willing to raise their hand and ask for that help. I taught all levels here and at traditional high schools, so I've seen a lot of-”
- “... a big range of kids. The ones that are stuck in their box are the ones that are hardest to reach. Once we can get them to open up a little bit and to-”

Although only transcript excerpts should be coded, coders must read the entire transcript as other parts of the transcript may provide important context for assigning codes. Portions of the transcript should not be included in excerpts for coding have been italicized and greyed out for the convenience of the coders.

Code Assignment

Each transcript excerpts should be assigned at least one Topic code, although more than one Topic code may be assigned to the same excerpts. Coders should focus on capturing the content of the excerpt with the most relevant code(s). Many times, one Topic code will be sufficient for characterizing an excerpt. Coders can assign codes to excerpts by right-clicking the excerpt and selecting “Add Code(s)” or by selecting the excerpt and dragging and dropping code(s) into the “Selection Info” pane on Dedoose.

Each transcript excerpt should be assigned the highest level code possible.

Time Considerations

Coding one transcript should take approximately an hour and a half hour. Please try to only begin coding a transcript if you know that you will have time to finish it. Rushing may compromise the reliability of coding, so do not rush. In addition, coding for too long continuously, or while very tired may compromise reliability. We recommend that coders take at least a short break between coding separate transcripts and do not code more than two transcripts in one sitting.

Basic Structure of Codes

| Topic | Specifier | Sub-codes |
|-----------------------------------------|-------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Stressors Students Face | Community Violence | Safety To and From School |
| | | Bullying |
| | | Gang Involvement |
| | Abuse and Trauma | N/A |
| | Homelessness and Abandonment | N/A |
| | Grief and Loss | Parental Loss or Separation |
| | | Divorced Parents |
| | Inappropriate Roles | N/A |
| | Access to Basic Needs | N/A |
| | Immigration Status | N/A |
| | Early Parenthood | N/A |
| | Poverty | N/A |
| Other | N/A | |
| Impact of Stressors on Students | Academic Difficulties | Difficulty Concentrating |
| | | Lack of Motivation |
| | | Absence |
| | | Prioritizing Family Over Learning |
| | Behavioral Problems | Attention Seeking |
| | | Anger |
| | | Cursing |
| | | Alcohol and Drug Use |
| | | Internalizing Behavior |
| | Lack of Trust | N/A |
| Moving Forward | N/A | |
| School- Based Characteristi cs | Supportive School Environment | Individualized Attention |
| | | Smaller Class Size |
| | | Emotional Safety |
| | Safety | Real Life Learning |
| | | Feelings of Safety |
| | Lack of Feelings of Safety | |

| Relationships | | Peer Relationships |
|----------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------------------|
| | | Positive Student-Teacher Relationships |
| | | Negative Student-Teacher Relationships |
| School-Based Interventions | Adapting to Students | N/A |
| | Accountability | N/A |
| | Positive Reinforcement | N/A |
| | Expectations for Students | N/A |
| | Extracurricular Activities | N/A |
| | Rapport Building | N/A |
| | Other Resources | N/A |
| Psychological Help | | Counseling Sessions |
| | | Confidentiality Concerns |
| | | Positive Attitudes Towards Therapy |
| | | Negative Attitudes Towards Therapy |
| | | Student Needs |
| | Social Skills | N/A |
| | Coping Mechanisms | N/A |
| Teacher Needs | Unsure How to Support Students | N/A |
| | Counseling Sessions for Teachers | N/A |
| | Self-Care | N/A |
| | Emotional Support | N/A |

Code Definitions

| Topic | Specifier | Sub-codes |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p>Stressors Students Face: Comments that describe various physical, psychological, and logistical barriers that students face that cause distress.</p> | <p>Community Violence: Comments relating to students' experience of violence in their community or neighborhood, including gun violence, physical attack, or any other violent experience.</p> | <p>Safety To and From School: Comments relating to students' physical and psychological safety on their way to and from school.</p> |
| | | <p>Bullying: Comments relating to students' experiencing physical or psychological attacks that are perpetrated by other students or peers.</p> |
| | | <p>Gang Involvement: Comments that describe students', friends, or family members that are involved with gangs or how gang violence has impacted students' lives.</p> |
| | <p>Abuse and Trauma: Comments about any physical, psychological, emotional, verbal, sexual, neglect, or other forms of abuse that a student may have experienced or witnessed.</p> | <p>N/A</p> |
| | <p>Homelessness and Abandonment: Comments about students who do not have a permanent residence, who are temporarily staying with friends, or who are living on their own without a guardian.</p> | <p>N/A</p> |
| | <p>Grief and Loss: Comments about grief that students may experience, such as following the loss of a family member or a friend.</p> | <p>Parental Loss or Separation: Comments relating to a student's loss of a parent, through death, deportation, or rehabilitation.</p> <p>Divorced Parents: Comments relating to students who have parents who divorced or separated.</p> |

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| | <p><i>Inappropriate Roles:</i> Comments about the lack of stability at home that students face, such as having to take care of younger siblings, provide financial support, or lack of parental involvement.</p> | N/A |
| | <p><i>Access to Basic Needs:</i> Comments relating to students' ability to access food, water, clothing, healthcare, sanitation, and any other basic needs.</p> | N/A |
| | <p><i>Immigration Status:</i> Comments about students or family members who are illegal immigrants, who have been deported, or who have dealt with ICE.</p> | N//A |
| | <p><i>Early Parenthood:</i> Comments relating to students having their own children or the barriers that result from having children (i.e. finding childcare, staying in school, etc.)</p> | N/A |
| | <p><i>Other:</i> Comments about stressors students face that do not fit within one of the above codes.</p> | N/A |
| <p><i>Impact of Stressors on Students:</i> Comments on how stressors students face impact their mental and physical health, their behavior, and their ability in school.</p> | <p><i>Academic Difficulties:</i> Comments relating to students' having difficulty with school-related performance and engagement.</p> | <p><i>Difficulty Concentrating:</i> Comments relating to students' having difficulty concentrating in class or having multiple things on their mind and how this impacts their ability in school.</p> <p><i>Lack of Motivation:</i> Comments relating to students' lack of motivation to work in class or do the necessary work to pass</p> |

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| | <p>their classes, as well as a general sense of hopelessness.</p> <hr/> <p>Absence: Comments relating to students' absence from school or class.</p> <hr/> <p>Prioritizing Family Over Learning: Comments about students' prioritizing family needs over school learning, such as missing school to provide financially for the family or take care of younger siblings.</p> <hr/> <p>Attention Seeking: Comments relating to students acting out in order to get attention from teachers, family, or friends.</p> <hr/> <p>Anger: Comments relating to students' expression of anger, including verbal and physical expressions.</p> <hr/> <p>Cursing: Comments relating to students' use of cursing to express themselves.</p> <hr/> <p>Alcohol and Drug Use: Comments relating to students' alcohol and drug use, including use as a way to cope with stressors.</p> <hr/> <p>Internalizing Behavior: Comments relating to students being withdrawn or isolated as a way to deal with stressors.</p> |
| <p>Behavioral Problems: Comments relating to issues with students' behavior and how that it impacts their learning.</p> | <p>Lack of Trust: Comments relating to students' lack of trust toward teachers, friends, or family relating to stressors in their lives.</p> |
| <p>Moving Forward: Comments relating to students' feeling that they have to push through whatever stressors they are facing to continue to apply</p> | <p>N/A</p> |

themselves and live their lives.

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| | | Individualized Attention: Comments about individualized attention given to students by teachers and staff. |
| | Supportive School Environment: Comments about aspects of the school that are in place to support students and help them succeed. | Small Class Size: Comments about the small size of the classes and the impact that has on students' learning. |
| School-Based Characteristics: Comments about the school environment, including the physical environment, the relationships of the people at the school, and the characteristics of the classes. | Safety: Comments about the students' and teachers' feelings of safety while at the school. | Emotional Safety: Comments on students' and teachers' feelings of safety surrounding their ability to express their emotions at school. |
| | | Real Life Learning: Comments relating to teachers' attempts (or lack thereof) to teach in a way that relates what they are teaching to real life examples that are applicable to students. |
| | | Feelings of Safety: Comments on students' and teachers' feelings of physical and emotional safety while at the school. |
| | | Lack of Feelings of Safety: Comments on students' and teachers' lack of physical and emotional safety while at the school. |
| | | Peer Relationships: Comments on the relationships students have with their peers and the quality of those relationships. |
| | | Positive Student-Teacher Relationships: Comments relating to the positive aspects of the relationships between students and teachers. |
| | Relationships: Comments relating to the relationships between the students, teachers, and staff at the school. | Negative Student-Teacher Relationships: Comments relating to the negative aspects of the relationships between students and teachers, including teachers' lack of empathy, |

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| | | understanding, and involvement. Also includes comments about what students wish teachers did to help support them. |
| School-Based Interventions: Comments relating to support the school provides for the students, including verbal, environmental, relational, and other aspects. | Adapting to Students: Comments relating to teachers' willingness to adapt classwork, class requirements, and teaching environment to better fit students' needs and abilities. | N/A |
| | Accountability: Comments relating to teachers' attempts to keep students accountable for their actions and behavior, including comments about teachers' inconsistent consequences for students. | N/A |
| | Positive Reinforcement: Comments relating to teachers' use of positive rewards, including praise and recognition, to reinforce student behavior. | N/A |
| | Expectations for Students: Comments relating to teachers' communicating their expectations for students in regard to their schoolwork and behavior. | N/A |
| | Extracurricular Activities: Comments relating to the extracurricular activities (or lack of) offered at the school. | N/A |

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| | <p>Rapport Building: Comments relating to staff and teachers' attempts to engage with students and build rapport with them.</p> | N/A |
| | <p>Other Resources: Comments relating to any other resources offered by the school to support students that do not fit into one of the above codes.</p> | N/A |
| | | <p>Counseling Sessions: Comments relating to students' experiences with counseling sessions or the possibility of offering counseling sessions at the school.</p> |
| <p>Student Needs: Comments relating to what students need as a result of their stressors and resources that the school and staff can provide to support students.</p> | <p>Psychological Help: Comments relating to students needing mental health resources to deal with the stressors they experience.</p> | <p>Confidentiality Concerns: Comments relating to students' concerns that what they discussed in therapy would not be kept confidential and that other students, teachers, and family members would find out.</p> <p>Positive Attitudes Towards Therapy: Comments relating to students' positive beliefs about therapy, including how it could potentially help.</p> <p>Negative Attitudes Towards Therapy: Comments relating to students' negative beliefs about therapy, including that talking about their problems will not help, that they need to deal with their experiences on their own, or only time will help.</p> |
| | <p>Social Skills: Comments relating to students' needing help with social skills, including communication, making friends, and interacting with others.</p> | N/A |

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| | <p><i>Coping Mechanisms:</i> Comments relating to the coping mechanisms students currently use and the healthy coping mechanisms that they still need to learn.</p> | N/A |
| | <p><i>Unsure How to Support Students:</i> Comments relating to teachers wanting more guidance and training in how to best support their students, including how to balance their own needs with their students' needs for support.</p> | N/A |
| <p><i>Teacher Needs:</i> Comments relating to how the school can help support teachers as they work to support the students.</p> | <p><i>Counseling Sessions for Teachers:</i> Comments relating to teachers' desires to have counseling sessions available to them and how that could impact their ability to support their students.</p> | N/A |
| | <p><i>Self-Care:</i> Comments relating to the teachers' need to take care of themselves so that they can better support their students.</p> | N/A |
| | <p><i>Emotional Support:</i> Comments relating to the teachers' need to experience emotional support, through talking about their emotions or otherwise having a space to have an emotional release.</p> | N/A |

APPENDIX C

CODEBOOK THEMES TABLE

| Codebook Theme | Frequency | Example Quote |
|---------------------------------|-----------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Stressors Students Face | 12 | “Yeah way more stress put on your shoulders.” |
| Community Violence | 15 | “A high speed chase and that dude hopped out the car and ran through my school.” |
| Safety To and From School | 5 | “Oh, on his way home, yeah. Yeah, I have another student that I found out yesterday that he was jumped last Friday walking home.” |
| Bullying | 5 | “A student showed up that had a bad bruise on his leg, and he said he was hit by a baseball bat by some kids.” |
| Gang Involvement | 3 | “Gang banging,” |
| Abuse and Trauma | 11 | “Dad came home, beat up mom last night, the police arrested him.” |
| Homelessness and Abandonment | 14 | “We’ve had students say they’ve been kicked out of their house.” |
| Grief and Loss | 15 | “My uncle just passed but they don’t know that.” |
| Parental Loss or Separation | 4 | “I have a kid. She was telling me she lost her grandma, she’s separated from her parents.” |
| Divorced Parents | 1 | “Divorced parents.” |
| Inappropriate Roles | 23 | “But he mentioned to me that his family made him go up north to go work in the fields. They just pulled him out of school and they just made him go up there. He had to work, he had to make money.” |
| Access to Basic Needs | 20 | “One thing I noticed too is hunger. I’ve heard a lot of kids tell me the only reason why they come is because this is where they eat.” |
| Immigration Status | 9 | “One of my students, that I will remain nameless, his dad was just deported, one of my students.” |
| Early Parenthood | 4 | “Having a kid.” |
| Other | 10 | “We have significant life issues these kids bring.” |
| Impact of Stressors on Students | 3 | “You would be able to handle it kind of, but it will still be there.” |
| Academic Difficulties | 4 | “But everybody’s thrown into one big old classroom, so we have SEC kids who can’t actually do it and college-level kids all in the same pot.” |

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| Difficulty Concentrating | 45 | “You’re in school and then you start thinking about, for example, his brother. Like he passed, like that’s hard.” |
| Lack of Motivation | 25 | “There’s no motivation to learn, really.” |
| Absence | 18 | “But I think a lot of them are just you know no one held them accountable for attendance.” |
| Prioritizing Family Over Learning | 10 | “But it’s not my fault I’m missing so much school. I’ve got to take care of my family.” |
| Behavioral Problems | 11 | “There needs to be a place for a student who is not working in a particular class and is causing a lot of problems to go.” |
| Attention Seeking | 8 | “Yeah. I think they’re needing a lot of attention-seeking, too. Either positive or negative, attention’s attention.” |
| Anger | 10 | “They bring on some anger that I don’t want to deal with.” |
| Cursing | 2 | “Like cursing, everywhere it’s, ‘F this, N that, F this.’” |
| Alcohol and Drug Use | 22 | “A lot of drugs and alcohol use. And I don’t you know, I would assume it’s to kind of deal with these situations that we’re talking about. Or escape from them.” |
| Internalizing Behavior | 5 | “I have students that would stand on the other side of the wall and just, you know, they just don’t want to be around anybody.” |
| Lack of Trust | 18 | “I wouldn’t want my parents involved.” |
| Moving Forward | 17 | “Because like in my situation, like I’m thinking about my brother and everything, but at the same time I know he’s not going to come back but I’ve got to keep just pushing forward.” |
| School-Based Characteristics | 30 | “But then you know how we change classes so often?” |
| Supportive School Environment | 11 | “To be honest, I think it’s a good school.” |
| Individualized Attention | 10 | “But teachers here they’ll give you the pack and then they’ll show you what to do in the packet and then they’ll have you do it.” |
| Small Class Size | 6 | “With the smaller class sizes, we are able to give them a little more individualized attention.” |
| Emotional Safety | 25 | “I encourage them to have conversations, about certain things. I feel at first they don’t, but after they get to know the class and how everything runs, I feel they start getting more comfortable, emotionally comfortable.” |

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| Real Life Learning | 47 | “Like say you don't know how to sew for example, they don't teach you that here. Basic needs to support yourself in life without having someone else.” |
| Safety | 2 | “Safety, yes.” |
| Feelings of Safety | 25 | “I've had students tell me this place is really mellow compared to their home school or wherever they came from.” |
| Lack of Feelings of Safety | 61 | “The school doesn't have a lot of security.” |
| Relationships | 6 | “Sometimes, it just depends on the teacher.” |
| Peer Relationships | 16 | “I think you've just got to be around the same people that's been through the same thing.” |
| Positive Student-Teacher Relationship | 112 | “If they care, they'll end up pulling that student to the side and they'll tell you straight up, ‘I care about your grades, I care about this and I want to see you graduate.’” |
| Negative Student-Teacher Relationship | 86 | “They don't care.” |
| School-Based Interventions | 0 | --- |
| Adapting to Students | 72 | “I heard this in the staff room all the time, people consulting about how we can help the kids better.” |
| Accountability | 81 | “There's a fine line between both, but just because you had trauma doesn't mean you shouldn't have consequences for your action, either.” |
| Positive Reinforcement | 35 | “Any little victory, we drown them in praise.” |
| Expectations for Students | 85 | “They need to catch up on their credits. That's why they're here.” |
| Extracurricular Activities | 22 | “Last year they had this like ... what was that? That little robot thing club they had?” |
| Rapport Building | 49 | “I think most of us do that. We socialize with the kids. I think they think we care about them.” |
| Other Resources | 13 | “Yeah, it just hasn't happened, because they say they don't have the money to continue to buy whatever it is that we're going to offer them.” |
| Student Needs | 8 | “Them just understanding more.” |
| Psychological Help | 13 | “Somebody is going to have to come around and just help you.” |

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| Counseling Sessions | 46 | “They need sessions of counseling, listening to them.” |
| Confidentiality Concerns | 20 | “I feel like the students will actually be able to know how I’m feeling and use that against me.” |
| Positive Attitudes Towards Therapy | 17 | “It helped me. I still think of it, but it helped me way more just to calm down.” |
| Negative Attitudes Towards Therapy | 23 | “They’re my problems. Why would I want to share them with someone else?” |
| Social Skills | 18 | “I think a lot of our kids need to work on more the social skills and soft skills, and how to respond, and when to act a certain way and when not to.” |
| Coping Mechanisms | 22 | “I meditate so like it kind of helps me feel free.” |
| Teacher Needs | 0 | --- |
| Unsure How to Support Students | 15 | “And I don’t know if I’m doing it right or not, because I’m not a psychologist, you know what I mean?” |
| Counseling Sessions for Teachers | 3 | “And how to destress before getting home.” |
| Self-Care | 10 | “On the way, I listen to music and sing all my way over here.” |
| Emotional Support | 20 | “Yeah, it’s terrible for me, because when I get home, I don’t have no patience anymore.” |