"Never give up." Adjudicated girls' school experiences and implications for academic success

Introduction

School social workers and other school-based behavioral health providers often struggle with promoting academic success for youth with delinquent behaviors. This may be especially difficult for youth who have been involved with the juvenile justice system. Yet, improving academic success for juvenile offenders is critical for reducing recidivism and promoting high school graduation, post-secondary education, and employment. Adolescents who perform well academically while detained are significantly more likely to return to school post-release (Blomberg, Bales, & Piquero, 2012). Those who have good attendance post-release are also less likely to be re-arrested (Blomberg et al., 2012). Unfortunately, adjudicated youth face significant barriers to academic success. Many have unaddressed emotional, mental, and physical health needs that compromise their academic performance (Alltucker, Bullis, Close, & Yovanoff, 2006; Frieden, 2003). Although this is a global problem, it is particularly salient in the United States, which incarcerates more youth, especially Black youth, and younger children than other industrialized counties (McCarthy et al., 2016). The following review discusses literature on academic outcomes among adjudicated youth and the particular needs of adjudicated girls, followed by differing perspectives on gender-responsive programming within detention centers. The review highlights the need for more research exploring the supports and stressors that adjudicated girls define as important in shaping their experiences in school.

The little existing research on academic supports for adjudicated youth suggests social support from pro-social peers and adults and a safe, positive school environment can mitigate some of the risks described above (Church, Wharton, & Taylor, 2009; Church et al, 2012). Juvenile offenders may be more successful in schools that provide alternatives to suspension and access to relevant social services (Sander, Sharkey, Olivarri, Tanigawa, & Mauseth, 2010). Alternative schools within detention centers tend to be more effective when they provide small student-teacher ratios and ongoing professional development for teachers (Blomberg & Waldo, 2001). Not surprisingly, the research findings on educational strategies for adjudicated youth parallel conclusions from emerging research on trauma-informed schools, which call for safe and supportive learning environments that employ alternatives to punitive disciplinary practices and easy access to support services (Cole et al., 2009; Perfect, Turley, Carlson, Yohanna, & Saint Gilles, 2016).

Research exploring the unique experiences of girls involved in the juvenile justice system is important since they may face unique barriers to successful re-entry. The proportion of delinquency cases involving females has remained relatively stable since 2005, accounting for approximately 27% of all cases. Only about 24% of girls involved in delinquency cases were referred for detention in

secure facilities. Girls accounted for 15% of youth in secure detention facilities in 2015. Over half of these girls identified as Black or Latina. In most cases, girls in detention were held for nonviolent offenses (Ehrmann, Hyland, & Puzzanchera, 2019).

Research with adjudicated girls points to a high prevalence of exposure to trauma, including physical and sexual abuse, domestic violence, and community violence (Foy, Ritchie, & Conway, 2012). Research on trauma exposure suggests that girls' responses to trauma increase their risk for involvement in the juvenile justice system (Ehrmann, Hyland, & Puzzanchera, 2019). In addition, their trauma exposure increases risk for academic failure due to the impact of trauma on the developing brain, which can result in greater impulsivity, stress reactivity, and difficulty with self-regulation (Teicher & Samson, 2013).

Detention programs that are gender-responsive may be important for promoting girls' successful re-entry into their families, communities, and schools (Smith, 2017). Rather than simply placing girls into a juvenile justice system designed for boys or separating residents by gender, this approach aims to create programming that views girls' needs more holistically (Goodkind, 2005). Gender responsive programming may include programs that are tailored for predominantly nonviolent offenders who have a history of trauma exposure. Gender-responsive programming for girls may also place a greater emphasis on relationship skills (Daniel, 1999; Goodkind, 2005), in addition to skills that are perceived as gender-neutral, such as problem-solving skills and independent living skills (Smith, 2017).

At the same time, Goodkind (2005) offers a critique of gender-specific programming for girls, arguing these programs can serve to perpetuate harmful gender norms. Gender-specific programming may neglect to consider how gender, race, class, and sexuality intersect, resulting in diverse experiences among girls within the juvenile justice system. Goodkind (2005) resolves her critique of gender-specific programming with principals for developing juvenile justice systems, which include moving beyond a simplistic view of the needs of boys and girls as dichotomous, attending to the importance of context, addressing program change at multiple levels, and emphasizing process. The varying perspectives on the most appropriate strategies for adjudicated girls calls for more research that explores these girls' unique experiences and their perspectives on supports that would help them succeed.

The research on academic outcomes among adjudicated youth is mostly limited to descriptive studies that provide little insight into their experiences of school. The authors could find no other studies that specifically explore the educational experiences of adjudicated girls. The research also underlines the need to better understand how to engage juvenile offenders in educational programs and develop youth-centered interventions (Smith, 2003). The present study addresses these gaps by exploring adjudicated girls' own experiences in alternative education

settings housed within detention centers and traditional schools. Some of the questions that drove the methods for this study were:

- What supports, practices, and environmental characteristics are helpful?
- What barriers made it difficult to be successful in the past?
- What would a model school for this population look like?

By gaining insight into supports and challenges that influence academic outcomes, we hope to better understand supports and services that will promote success for these girls.

Method

Sample and Setting

Adjudicated girls committed to state custody and residing within an intensive treatment program and their teachers were invited to participate. The program provides services to girls, 12-21 years old, who have a history of mental health concerns and/or trauma. It is designed to serve youth who are currently stable but have a history of psychiatric hospitalization or treatment due to a history of suicidal ideation, self-harm, homicidal ideation, neglect or abuse, depression, familial discord, substance abuse or other risk behavior, and/or academic problems. This program meets most of the criteria identified by Goodkind (2005) by creating a context that is tailored for girls who have experienced trauma and mental health challenges and providing intensive mental health services.

Treatment plans are individualized and based on the Wheel of Wellness model (Myers, Sweeney, & Whitmer, 2000), which addresses wellness, spirituality, work and leisure, love and belonging, friendship, and relationships. Programming aims to foster positive change at multiple levels, including the individual student, their peer group, their family, and their school environment. Services include holistic assessment, psychiatric services, medical services, individual counseling, group counseling, family counseling, family visitation, basic living skills training, physical education, vocational preparation and assistance with community transition.

Girls in the facility attend an alternative school program for most of the day in two classrooms with individual desks and computer stations for each student. Each classroom includes one teacher and approximately six students, and students work individually on computers wearing headphones. Students can work to attain high school graduation or their GED. Students who are working toward a high school diploma take online courses through ACCESS and earn credits toward graduation based on the number of ACCESS courses completed with a passing grade. Students who are at least 17 years of age and no longer enrolled in school can enroll in a GED program through a community college. Students complete computer-based practice modules with the support of a GED coach from the

community college. After students complete a minimum of 30 hours on the modules, a representative from the community college will come to the school to administer the test. Since 2015, five girls enrolled in the program have earned their high school diplomas, and six have earned GEDs.

At the time of this study, there were 12 students enrolled in the program, and 10 of these students chose to participate. Students ranged in age between 14 and 17 (mean age = 15.9). Although we did not ask students to report their demographic information, current residents included seven students who identified as African American, three Caucasian, one American Indian or Alaskan Native, and one Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander. The two teachers within the intensive treatment program also participated in the study. Both teachers were female. One identified as African American and the other as Caucasian.

Procedures

Procedures were approved by the University of Alabama's Institutional Review Board prior to implementing the study. The research team described the study procedures first to teachers and then to the students within the facility during school hours. Ten students indicated they wanted to participate and provided informed consent. Participants were compensated with $10.00 gift cards for their participation in a 45 to 60-minute interview that was audio-recorded and transcribed. The interviews took place in a room with only the interviewer and the participant. No teachers or staff were present in the room. Nor could they overhear the conversation, although the interactions during the interview were visible through windows. Questions included the following:

1. Tell me about a typical day at school.
2. What does it mean to you to be successful in school?
3. What has helped you to be successful?
4. What has helped others you know to be successful?
5. What are obstacles or problems you have faced in being successful in school?
6. What do you like most about coming to this school?
7. What would you change about this school?
8. What changes would you make to the last school you attended?
9. Do you think your opinions/views are similar to most of your friends?
10. What about those who actually do drop out or who don't make it? What could have helped them to stay in school?

Data Analysis

We used a qualitative approach informed by narrative methods because our study is rooted in the stories told by the participating girls and their teachers relating to school. Narrative inquiry uses stories and life experiences conveyed by

participants to understand how they create meaning from those experiences as part of their life story. The analysis aims to understand events as part of a coherent narrative and the meaning of this narrative to the participants (Bruner, 1991).

The authors acknowledge their positionality and how this may influence their interpretation of the data. The authors are white faculty and staff with advanced degrees in social work and/or criminal justice working within a university setting. The authors include three women and one man. Although one of the authors has extensive experience working with adjudicated girls, three of the authors had no prior experience working with this particular population. Two of the authors have worked with adults in criminal justice settings, and another author has worked with youth in educational settings. The authors' identity, including our values and social background, shaped the aims of the study, the approach, and our interpretation of the data. It is possible that participants, who differed from the researchers in terms of race, ethnicity, and life experience, were initially hesitant to share their stories. The authors conducted this research with the goal of learning from girls' experiences in the hopes of enriching our understanding of the supports and services that could help them succeed in school. This priority undoubtedly shaped the researchers' analysis of the data and conclusions.

Transcripts of audio recordings were analyzed using NVivo software for themes related to the girls' interpretations of experiences at school (Creswell, 2013; Saldana, 2016). Researchers analyzed transcripts using a two-step approach. First, each researcher read the same interview and separately developed a set of codes. They then met to achieve consensus on the codes and develop the codebook for further analysis. In the second step, each researcher coded the interviews individually using the codebook, although researchers were able to add new codes, as needed. The researchers reviewed each other's codes and met to achieve consensus on the codes for each transcript. This cross checking of interpretations was used to increase confidence that different researchers would generate similar findings from the data (Creswell, 1998). The coding procedure continued until the point of saturation at which no new codes were being generated. In addition to cross checking the codes, other techniques used to establish the trustworthiness of the themes included obtaining data from multiple sources (students and teachers) and peer debriefing, which involved reviewing themes with the facility's program director (Creswell, 1998). The program director provided feedback on the themes in three randomly selected de-identified transcripts. Two statements were re-coded in response to her feedback.

Findings

The analysis identified the following major themes relating to supports and stressors that defined their experiences with traditional schools and the school within the detention center: Barriers in school; Individual Characteristics that Promote Success; Coping Skills; Relationships that Promote Success; School

Environments that Promote Success; Transitioning to Traditional Schools. These themes are described in detail below.

Barriers in school

Participants identified barriers that prevent them from doing well in school. This was the most commonly cited theme in student and teacher interviews. One of the main barriers described by teachers and students involved a lack of support that students have endured for much of their lives. One teacher indicated, "A lot of our students have been to different facilities. Somehow, they have been let down. They are lacking support and…we are here to show you and give you support and love, and they are not used to it." Although this teacher described her efforts to provide support that had been lacking in the past, students still felt they did not have enough support. One student said, "I'm asking for help, and I was like, hey y'all, you know I need undivided attention on my way, …and you don't get any, so everybody gets frustrated."

Students identified challenges in emotion regulation and coping with stress. One student expressed, "I get more and more agitated throughout the day, and then, I just blow off the hinges." Similarly, a teacher communicated, "So, it's like she takes two steps forward and three steps back." The teacher further explained how she perceived the student's internal emotional state:

> "And I (the student) can think with you all one day, and next day, I'm just emotional. I can't do it. … We also have seen some aggressive [behavior], and it's just because I don't know how to express myself, and this is the only way I've known to express myself."

The classroom environment was cited as a barrier by several students. One student described disruptions in the classroom: "Like when I was taking the ACT test, you know, I can't concentrate, because everybody was just talking." Another student, when asked what gets in the way of getting her work done, said, "Distractions...coming around, talking." Some students also expressed that the physical environment amplified these problems: "Yeah, everybody is just so close. You know what? Give me my own space. I need my space. The class is claustrophobic in there."

Students did not feel that teachers were doing enough to set limits on the disruptions described above and that this exacerbated the problems in the classroom environment: "Everybody would be cracking and jokes on each other, just being loud and goofy, and not listening, and like the teacher doesn't have any control over [them], cause they won't listen. The teacher wasn't firm enough." One student described her experience in the alternative school program:

> "Here were two, three girls in there that don't have any work. I mean, all they do is complaining, complaining, yell at the teacher, calling names at

> the teacher, pick on the faults of everybody, and I just, I felt like, if they were just removed when they can tell there is gonna be an issue, that keeps all our minds concentrated... It might be five minutes that time, but, still, it's five minutes every week you could put in our work."

Similarly, another student suggested students who are disrupting class activities should be removed by sending them to a different pod, a separate physical location within the facility:

> "But, it would be easier if they could just talk to that one student. I mean, if they had to, if one student is acting up, they can head to them and just like [send them to] C pod or D pod.... So, it won't take all the staff, but still the girls who wanted to do work would still be able to concentrate and won't be distracted so easily."

The barriers cited by teachers and students suggest that the impact of classroom distractions combined with the students' difficulty controlling emotional responses to the distracting environment create a significant barrier to academic success. Although a distracting classroom environment would be a barrier to learning for every student, it is likely that the girls in this study have more sensitivity to distractions due to past trauma. All of the girls in this study had been placed into state custody due to stressors within their families, and all had experienced trauma and/or mental health concerns. Given the linkages in the research literature between trauma exposure and emotional reactivity, the participants may have more difficulty controlling their emotional response to distractions in the classroom (Badour & Feldner, 2013).

Individual Characteristics that Promote Success

The students in this study described success in multiple ways. Many students articulated individual characteristics that were protective, including an ability to follow rules and maintain focus during the school day.

It was important to some students to follow the rules and not cause trouble for others. One student described a successful person as follows, "They pretty much kind of follow the path. They follow the rules, and they know what is expected of them. And, [they are] less likely to be involved in fights, less likely to be involved in anything that against the school rules." Another student agreed with her regarding fights. She believed that she was successful because, "I haven't gotten into a fight since the last time I was here." These girls saw success as following the rules and guidelines that others, including their parents and teachers, set for them.

Many other participants saw success as more of an intrinsic mechanism. Externally defined goals and rules were important, but success was mostly determined by how hard each student worked. One student described how she defines success on her own terms, "You know, you don't have to go to college to be success. I learned it, and I succeeded myself." Similarly, another student said

that one must, “work hard and stay focused.” Lastly, and perhaps more reflectively, another student saw success in how she viewed herself for doing the hard work on her own. She said, “I get proud of myself for doing something by myself.”

Many participants described how their attitude helped to keep them on track. One participant told the researchers she had “that never give up attitude” and was going to do “her best at all times.” By keeping a “never give up attitude,” this participant meant that, despite all of the potential challenges in her path, she would not give up. Similarly, another student described how being serious helped her stay motivated, “Cause I’m serious about school work. That’s the thing.” Two other students responded similarly when asked about self-motivation. One said, “I just keep to myself and work on what I gotta work on.” Another participant said, “Just be goal-oriented. Like if you want to get it done, you gotta come here and work. Not like, ‘I don’t feel well today. I’ll do it tomorrow’.” As with the previous sentiment, these quotes captured a seriousness about keeping on track in order to stay motivated.

Students talked about the connection between having goals and self-motivation. Long-term goals were helpful in keeping these students on track and motivated. One student described a focus on graduation: “As long as I have my credits, I’ll be walking down the aisle, I mean, walking on the stage. I’ll scream.” Students discussed the importance of being goal-oriented in relationship to self-motivation, as follows: “Having goals helps people become self-motivated which leads to success.” Some students also related success to maintaining a career goal. One stated, “I guess I’m like motivated by… cause I want to be a scientist, work with people with cancer.”

Coping strategies

In a related theme, participants talked with researchers about how they coped with the challenges they faced in school and life. These coping strategies were important for staying motivated and focused, as described above. Students discussed creative strategies for coping with the stress they experienced. One student channeled her stress and anger into writing. Through writing, she was able to express her feelings, especially her anger: “If I get mad, like I’ll just write poems, or I’ll just write if I like something and then write it down.” Similarly, another student said she stays inspired by motivational quotes: “Yeah, I use quotes and stuff… It’s just like, look up motivational quotes.” She told us that she would look up encouraging quotes on the internet, print them out, and hang them near her computer or in her room. She sometimes also came up with her own motivational quotes.

Some students used positive self-talk and positive thinking to deal with the stressors of school and life. One participant reported she noticed a difference in her day when she started to think positively in the morning, before the day even started. She said, “So that’s one thing you’ve noticed that makes a difference. If you start

off saying, 'this is gonna be a good day,' and then you go in, and you're able to get some work done."

One student described how her faith helped her to cope, "And, I thank Him for giving me days that are good and days that are bad, because a lot of people don't have days to live with." Her faith helped her maintain a positive perspective.

Other students described coping in terms of an ability to block out distractions and focusing their attention inward:

> "I'm very good at blocking stuff out. Like, I would go out on my own world. … I really block people out. Like, sometimes, I'll try to block everybody…I am really good at blocking people out."

One interpretation of this quote is that the student is avoiding, rather than coping with, the challenging situations in her life. However, from her perspective, this coping mechanism helps her to be successful.

One of the teachers in the program observed some of the students blocked out noise in their classroom: "To her, blocking out the noise was a good thing, especially when trying to complete schoolwork." Unfortunately, she explained, some students liked to distract the others in order to get attention: "Some of them are better at ignoring certain things, or shutting extra sounds out, and while others are really good distractors and I want all eyes on me kind of thing."

A few students discussed using medication to cope with the stressors that they faced. For example, when asked about coping strategies, one participant said, "I used to be on medicines to help me stay focused, but I don't need them anymore." Participants discussed medications as a means of both increasing self-motivation and managing stressful situations.

Some of these coping strategies resonate with the barriers discussed above in that they relate to managing emotional responses to their environment. Students who were able to identify strategies that helped them maintain control of their emotions were more likely to be successful in the classroom. As with the barriers described above, the students' discussion of coping strategies should be understood in the context of exposure to trauma. Because challenges with emotion regulation are prevalent among children exposed to trauma, these coping strategies may be particularly important for their academic success.

Relationships that Promote Success

Relationships that were perceived as protective primarily consisted of relationships with parents and teachers. One student expressed that having her mother as a role model was helping her achieve her own personal goals: "I was gonna get my GED, but I want to walk and get my high school diploma- make my

mom happy. So, I want to become a doctor and psychiatrist because my mom, she's a nurse. My grandma is a nurse. My aunt's a nurse practitioner." Another student discussed a different sentiment relating success with family relationships. When asked what would make her feel successful, she responded, "I guess getting my family relationships back in touch. Because, my family relationships are not doing so well now. So, I feel like I need to get them back on track so I can stay positive." Improving her relationships with her family was connected to staying positive and being successful. One teacher also indicated that supports for the girls' families are critical, "I think there could be education classes, or something that guides these parents… I mean some [parents] are great advocators for their students or for their child."

Maintaining a relationship with school personnel was implicated in some students' emphasis on the importance of asking for help in school. Specifically, one participant said, "I say, like if you are scared about asking for help, people laugh at you or tell you, 'why you are asking a question?'. I just always ask questions." Another student agreed that success means asking for help, "I would say getting a tutor, and ask for help in school."

The teacher-student relationship is described as important both in the students' current alternative school environment and in traditional schools they have attended in the past. One of the alternative school teachers explained the importance of consistency: "I have another student that I don't think I'm reaching. She is, as she says, she is a troublemaker at school. And she doesn't like school. So, it's a struggle. But I'm consistent with her. We're gonna do school work."

Several students articulated the importance of feeling that adults in the program care about them: "The staff do care. Sometime they would make me mad, …but actually they do care and take their time. It looks like they don't because it's just so many of us. You know, I had a conversation with one of them, you know. You guys are gonna know all of us. Three of us came on one day. Staff tries to know all of us." Another student described an experience with a teacher in a former school who was concerned about her. This student seemed surprised this teacher cared enough to go looking for her: "Like that teacher, I remember one day, I was riding on a bus to my cousin's house, and I told her I was going there. I guess she forgot, and when I didn't get off the bus, she started to worry…and [my teacher] went looking for me."

Students felt that a good teacher motivates students through individualized attention and tapping into students' interests. For example, one student described a "good teacher" as follows:

> "She was a really good teacher, too. She really helps students. She was considerate about reasons for you might not do your work...I was depressed. I didn't want to do anything, I couldn't hardly, my mind was just blank all the time. But I talked to [my teacher] that I became a very big Christian

> person and we had tried watching Chronicles of Narnia...So she let me watch all three movies and write a paper about it. And by the time I was done, I was happier, healthier, motivated."

Students also discussed the importance of teachers' spending time with them individually to teach challenging material:

> "And when I started doing geometry and I was like, OMG I do not understand this, and I know, we did two-day straight work, we just sat together and we went through geometry for two days straight and I mean, the staff she had taught me something I could not think of doing."

Students discussed the importance of teachers' high expectations. One student said, "That teacher would push me to work hard, you know, to ask me to try my best."

Altogether, the quotes from students emphasize the teachers who were helpful to them communicated high expectations in the context of strong emotional support. It was important to them that teachers took the time to get to know students, gave them individualized attention, and tailored educational materials to the girls' interests and experiences. The girls' narratives placed stronger emphasis on social support from teachers than educational support. It was important for teachers to know each of the girls' unique strengths, coping strategies, and needs. This is apparent in the quote above in which the student emphasizes the importance of her teacher's building on the student's faith as a coping strategy and integrating that into course assignments. Because all the participants were in state custody, it is noteworthy that the girls expressed wanting the improve or repair relationships with family and acknowledged relationships with parents as important in their narratives about motivation and coping.

School environments that promote success

The girls spent a significant amount of time discussing academic and social supports, which help them to perform better academically. Students described counselors and tutors as important sources of academic support. When asked how a school could help her, she explained, "Talk to the counselor." Another student answered, "I would say, 'Get a tutor, and ask for help in school'." The students and the teachers in this sample understood the importance of social support to help students cope with the social and academic stress they face in school. They both communicated the importance of a support person within the school who could help students cope when they are feeling overwhelmed.

In terms of academic supports, students described some benefits of online instruction. The themes related to online instruction suggest individualized, self-paced instruction is important for the girls in this sample. Interviews referred to Access, their online learning platform. One student liked that this modality allows

students to set their own pace: “Actually I [would] rather do Access other than real classroom. Cause you know you can go all you own, you can go on your own pace. So, if you were in a classroom, you will have to do all these things. I just feel like ACCESS is a better way.” Another student liked the individualized instruction they received online:

> “I think it teaches you. The teachers teach you as if you are face to face. Like they give you goals for each day like, like they want you to finish this unit or this section, or they want you to turn this in. It’s not like you just take notes and have a test. Every single unit has a section that you have one or two tests that you have to complete. So, it’s kind of like you are basically in a classroom, just online. It’s like one on one, so it’s easier to learn.”

One downside of online learning was the potential for cheating. One student explained, “If you are on ACCESS, you are taking the test, you could easily go to your computer and open a new tab and get Google on ACCESS. It’s just annoying.”

Students thought there should be more support, more teachers, more space, more technology, and more security. A common theme for multiple students was the importance of having more teachers and staff to help them, both with their homework and with their day living situations. These students wanted more individualized attention. They acknowledged that they had little social support outside of the residential program. They liked the support they received within the program, and some felt they needed more in order to be successful:

> “I think they should …, you know, you should have more help. Too many kids have only one person. You’re gonna get agitated if you don’t gain all the attention. I get mad because I need help and, then, somebody else asked him. Don’t you see I’m asking for help? And I was like, ‘Hey y’all, you know I need undivided attention my way’. And … you don’t get any, so everybody gets frustrated.”

Students wanted more time and more teachers to help them finish their work quickly and accurately. The interviewer asked this student what would help her get through class more quickly – a goal that she identified earlier. She replied, “If I can, [I] do stay after the school. If we have extra stuff on the weekend, too. Bring me in here, and let me work on it.” Another student echoed this sentiment:

> “It would be cool for girls who wanted to, some of staff would like stay after from first shift for about 30 minutes to an hour. And if some girls want to do homework, we can go at 3:30 or 4 instead of getting out go 3. Cause I know I love to do work. And I know some girls over there love to do work.”

One teacher described support as exposing the girls to new information or experiences:

> "So, it's exposed them to different things. Things I don't think they would be introduced to, 'cause a lot of the students are sheltered. A lot of them have not been out of the state. Some of them have not been outside of their city. So, I try to expose them to different things that, like Miss ** said, they didn't know cotton came from a plant. So, she went to bring some cotton, and we do channel one news. I try to do it every day and expose them to what's going on in the world on their level."

Students believed that school needed more security on site. When she was asked for suggestions for improving schools, she said, "Security – put more security in schools." As the interviewer asked for more clarification, she added, "Security guards, the wand, you know they have that little sensor that you walk through …." Similarly, another student described how a greater number of school personnel would be helpful in creating an emotionally safe environment when another student was in distress. She found that everyone could be impacted by one student's emotional state:

> "I think that would actually be very helpful if we just had extra staff because, if there is something going on like that, I know last night we had an issue going on with one girl. They just didn't have enough staff, so we all had to lock down for the whole night because they kept acting out. And actually, that brought this to my mind. I've noticed though if one girl acts out, it's like ripple effect."

One student wanted more discussions of faith to be a part of her school experience. She did not think these theological discussions should occur every day but, maybe, every week or every month. This student thought that a connection with God might help others to feel better about themselves and cope with their struggles. She ended her description of this idea by clarifying that it should be voluntary:

> "So … that would be kind of cool if they had theology class for participants. Because, when you are going through this, it's hard to do without God. And I feel like there is a lot of girls here that know Him, but they are not close to Him like I used to be. So, if we just had that class we would bring some ideas, we can just, all you gotta do for me is just one scripture, and I can talk for hours. So, it doesn't even have to be once a week, it could be once a month if we just had a theology group, and they just got really good scripture out of the Bible, put it on board. Whoever wants to participate can participate."

Anticipating the Transition to Traditional Schools

Although all of the participating students were enrolled in the detention center's alternative school, many expected to return to a traditional school. Students and teachers discussed their recommendations for a successful school transition.

These tended to relate to bolstering support from families, peers, and behavioral health professionals, while incorporating ways to continue developing coping skills.

One teacher emphasized keeping parents and school personnel in the loop as students transition back into a traditional school:

> "I think parents need to be educated on what the students went through - what this program is. You know, have an idea what they learned, what their child learned. You know, what kind of coping skills did you learn, what can we do at home do make it more successful, so you don't get in trouble again. I think they need to be educated, and I think the school and the educators need to be educated about our students. I mean, unless they have an IEP, you know, and that IEP goes into detail, that child gets into trouble because of this…I mean, they [are] just thrown back to class without knowing anything, not knowing anything about these [students], where they are."

This teacher also described helping a student identify supports who may be helpful to her when she transitions back to her traditional school:

> "I said, 'Who was your favorite teacher, who was your favorite person, adult at that school.? She gave me a list of 10 people, and I've included that in her IEP. If this student feels like she is going to explode or wants to fight with somebody, please allow her to go to 'so and so's' office, … one of her favorite [people]. And, I wrote that in her IEP."

Similarly, a student described the importance of easy access to counselors and administrators during this transition:

> "Me transitioning to your new school- I need to know where to set my stuff. I need to see a counselor. I need the counselor to go to my old school to get my grades. I need the principal to put their two cents in you know. I need see a counselor so help me to get, if I need some, you know, what I need to do to graduate, and I need them to be on the game. I need them to do their job."

For some, friends were a motivation to go back to their former school, "Oh I'll go back to my old high school… cause that's where all my old friends, like I've known them since 8th grade. That's where all of them went." Another student expressed her feelings about losing contact with her friends at her former school, "Especially when I have no contact with them. Oh, that just tears me apart." However, this student also worried about losing contact with friends and staff within the alternative school, "You've gotten attached to people here that'll make it hard—hard for me to leave."

Students also discussed stressors associated with transitioning back into a traditional school environment. Many had experienced numerous school transitions resulting in lost educational time. One of the downsides of numerous school transitions discussed by students involved delayed graduation:

> "I have been going to that school since 5th grade…Like I said, I am leaving from this area to this area. But this time, when I left, I went to 5th grade there to 10th grade. So, I end up in, you know, used to all these stuff until 11th grade. And it's like, dang, … I'm supposed to graduate with my graduating class. But I can't, 'cause I moved."

Another student expressed a similar sentiment:

> "OK, actually, this is what would be 12th grade. They are still on 9th grade classes. They may have a mindset like, 'I'm not gonna do this because I already get this low, and this is gonna be really hard getting up here.' So that's why I said they do bad here. When they get out, they gonna do horrible, or worse, because they are already at the bottom. So how are you gonna get it up?"

Other students worried about transitioning back into a former school because they have a "bad reputation". As one student said, referring to her former school, "I don't want to go somewhere I already have a bad reputation." For adjudicated girls returning to traditional schools, strategies to promote a successful transition will need to acknowledge and address these stressors cited by the girls in this study and help them develop coping skills before they make this transition. Trauma-informed strategies during and after this transition will be especially important because the stress associated with changing schools and support systems could make it more difficult for students with exposure to trauma to draw on coping skills they were able to use in the small alternative school environment.

Conclusion and Discussion

This study explored narratives about school experiences among adjudicated girls with a history of trauma and mental health concerns. Through their narratives, we aimed to understand the meaning they attribute to their experiences and the supports and challenges that shape their academic trajectories. The girls in this study all aimed to achieve high school graduation or a GED. Their narratives place a strong emphasis on social support and positive relationships with teachers and families as the foundation for success. In order to cope with distractions that triggered strong emotional responses, the girls relied on a number of emotion regulation strategies that they were able to draw upon within the context of a safe and supportive classroom environment.

For the girls in this study, a safe and supportive classroom meant addressing safety issues and disruptions (i.e. removing a disruptive student and adding security

measures) so that they could focus on their work. Students discussed the importance of their teachers and were enthusiastic about teachers who demonstrated that they cared by providing individual attention and devoting extra time to students who were struggling with class material. A safe and supportive school environment, especially a connection with a caring adult within the school, was also described as critical for a successful transition into traditional schools.

Girls and teachers described students' difficulty regulating emotions as a barrier to coping with disruptions in the classroom. Some girls described using internal mechanisms, such as self-motivation and ability to cope with distractions, for staying motivated and focused despite disruptions. For others, external supports and reinforcement were more important. This was a recurrent theme even in the context of a small and supportive classroom environment. The girls in this study were in small classrooms of approximately six students and one teacher, and students worked individually on computers wearing headphones. Although this type of classroom environment is likely to have fewer disruptions and more teacher support than a larger, more traditional classroom, the girls continued to struggle with emotion regulation. Both students and teachers emphasized a need for more individualized support and attention. These narratives are supported by literature indicating that adjudicated girls have a high prevalence of exposure to trauma, which is associated with heightened emotional reactivity and difficulty with emotion regulation (Ehrmann et al., 2019; Teicher & Samson, 2013). Additional ideas for supporting students in the narratives included integrating a discussion of spirituality into the program, more physical space, use of technology in instruction, and more time to work on school projects after school.

Girls and teachers had suggestions for engaging adjudicated youth in school and helping them transition back into traditional school environments. They described efforts to relate the classroom content to girls' lived experiences and interests. Teachers saw the importance of educating families about supports and services that have been helpful for their child and keeping them involved with their child's progress. Family engagement was also important to students, as indicated by girls' references to the importance of family in keeping them motivated. Engaging students' families presents unique challenges in the context for this study. All of the participating girls were in state custody, and some reported strained family relationships. Also, since some girls came from communities located a great distance from the facility, it is difficult to regularly involve students' families in programming.

The girls' narratives resonate with recommendations in the literature for promoting a healthy transition back into the community for adjudicated youth. These include maintaining a secure program that emphasizes strong, positive relationships between youth and staff, family engagement, and connections in the community to facilitate youth engagement in community-based programming (Branson, Baetz, Horwitz, & Hoagwood, 2017). In order to meet these needs, it is ideal that girls are placed in facilities that are close to their home communities.

The findings of this study should be understood in light of its limitations. Although this study aims to learn from narratives of a unique population, rather than to generalize to a larger population of adjudicated girls, the small sample size means the conclusions are based on only a small number of narratives. In addition, the participants for this study were housed within a specialized program that provides many services that are missing from other programs for adjudicated youth, further limiting our ability to draw broader conclusions about the experiences of adjudicated girls. The girls interviewed here likely have a higher incidence of trauma and mental health concerns than a general population of students or even other adjudicated girls, because only girls who have experienced trauma and mental health concerns are eligible for placement in the program. In addition, the girls in the study received mental health interventions that develop protective factors at the individual, family, and school levels. These interventions go above and beyond those offered to youth in more typical juvenile justice settings.

The unique population and setting for this study also serve as its strength because there is so little research on educational practices with adjudicated girls and no other studies that focus exclusively on adjudicated girls with a history of trauma or mental health concerns. It also gives voice to the perspective of girls housed within a facility implementing many of the best practices suggested in the literature. Many girls in this program go on to earn their diplomas or GED, despite the research indicating most adjudicated youth drop out of school (Aizer & Doyle, 2015). Learning from their narratives can improve services at the setting in this study but can also inform questions for further research with adjudicated girls and strategies for easing their transition back into their families, their home communities, and traditional schools.

Implications for Practice, Research and Policy

The students and teachers in this study help us understand how we might improve the experiences of girls attending school within the juvenile justice system. The present study, along with other research with adjudicated youth, suggests social workers and other behavioral health professionals working with this population in schools will need to help teachers foster a classroom environment that is safe and supportive with minimal disruptions. Easy access to behavioral health services may mean the difference between graduation and dropout or recidivism. In addition, school personnel can promote success by helping students develop skills in emotion regulation and positive self-affirmation. Teachers do not typically learn how to foster these skills in their educational and professional development programs. Helping students develop these skills will require collaboration between teachers and social workers or other school-based mental health providers so teachers do not become overwhelmed by working to develop core academic skills while helping students to develop the requisite social and coping skills they need to be successful.

The students' stories resonate with the literature on trauma-informed systems of care within the juvenile justice system and trauma-sensitive schools.

These youth need to feel safe physically, socially, emotionally, and academically. Trauma-informed juvenile justice environments engage the youths and families, provide staff with training and support, and foster a safe organizational environment (Branson et al., 2017; Ko & Sprague, 2007). Similarly, trauma-sensitive schools train teachers and staff to understand the impact of trauma on their students. These schools foster positive relationships with teachers and peers and help students learn to self-regulate behaviors, emotions, and attention (Cole et al., 2009). These schools employ alternatives to punitive disciplinary practices and access to school-based behavioral health services (Perfect et al., 2016). More research is needed on the effectiveness of trauma-sensitive schools for adjudicated youth to determine whether this approach may disrupt the "school-to-prison pipeline" and its many economic and social costs to our communities (Attorney General's National Task Force on Children Exposed to Violence, 2012).

The interviews suggest that federal, state, and district policies could be strengthened by attending to the supports that are necessary for a successful transition from detention centers back into their communities and schools. Social workers have an important role to play in easing this transition. Students who have a history of trauma or mental health concerns need intensive, individualized academic and social support immediately upon transition and timely transfer of school records. Equally important is ensuring students have ready access to school social workers or other behavioral health professionals in the community. The girls in this study want to feel welcomed and supported in their new school with a clear plan for accessing supports.

The findings for this study should be understood within an international context. Across the globe, children are incarcerated at high rates with little access to a quality education. Although international law requires children be incarcerated for the shortest amount of time possible, children may receive life sentences in 73 countries, including the United States. Although childhood incarceration is a global problem, the United States incarcerates more youth than other industrialized counties and disproportionately incarcerates youth of color. The United States also can incarcerate younger children than other countries, holding offenders as young as six responsible for criminal behavior (Human Rights Watch, 2016; McCarthy et al., 2016).

Many countries have made efforts to reduce the number of incarcerated youths by raising the minimum age at which a child can be held accountable and providing alternatives to incarceration (Human Rights Watch, 2016). However, the high numbers of incarcerated youth continue to underscore the critical need for research on effective alternatives to incarceration and policies to ensure communities use these alternatives so that incarcerated youth have equitable access to effective services and educational programs. The United States has made some progress in reducing the number of incarcerated youths, and many states have adopted approaches that are consistent with best practices in educating youth in detention. These practices include small classrooms that afford the opportunity for

youth to form relationships with caring, motivated staff trained to work children who have experienced trauma, mental health concerns, and disabilities that impact learning. Staff need extensive support from supervisors to sustain this work (McCarthy et al, 2016). Partnerships among students, families, teachers, counselors, and social workers will also be instrumental in providing equitable access to safe, supportive, and effective educational programs.

Every participant in this study communicated a strong desire to be successful in school, and many articulated clearly defined career goals. They demonstrated their commitment to these goals by drawing on coping strategies to focus on their work in the classroom and putting in extra time to complete school work after hours. They continued to pursue these goals even in the face of many challenges and stressors that other students do not encounter. It is our responsibility to provide the support, coping strategies, and academic skills that are fundamental to maintaining their motivation and reaching their goals.

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