Peer-Reviewed Article

"They Don't Care About You": Exploring Socioemotional Barriers in School Settings for Black, Trauma-Exposed Boys

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ABSTRACT

The study explores how a sample of trauma-exposed, Black boys experience their school environment and socioemotionally navigate barriers in their school setting. A content analysis was completed on focus group data collected from ten Black boys at a high school in an urban setting. The content was reviewed under the constructivist-interpretivist epistemology, using an empowerment theoretical framework. Findings included the following themes: (1) Teachers Change Your Moods—conflictual relationships with teachers negatively impacted their mood; (2) They'll Switch Up on You in a Half Second—interactions with classmates (e.g., social posturing or physical touch) could also be a barrier to their success; (3) When I'm Having a Bad Moment—descriptions of how they cope with challenging experiences in school; and (4) Tell Me Why This is Useful—instructional and relational suggestions for school staff to improve their learning environment. Implications for school policy and practice are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Whether exposed to higher levels of community violence due to a lack of economic and educational resources (Rich, 2016) or being more susceptible to adverse childhood experiences due to historical inequities and environmental factors (Sacks & Murphey, 2018), literature has shown that Black adolescents are at high risk of trauma exposure (Beasley et al., 2014, Chapter 1; Noguera, 2008). Middle adolescence (ages 14–17) has been recognized by scholars as an important transitional period for youth, where teens are attempting to solidify their identity and core friend group, continuing to adjust to school-related goals and expectations, establish positive self-image, and strive to make important life decisions (Gutman et al., 2017). Historically, Black adolescents have encountered substantial barriers to academic success, including ongoing racism and societal injustices (Kayama et al., 2015). While coping with these systemic and interpersonal prejudices, Black youth are expected to also navigate the typical developmental challenges common successfully during adolescence (Brittian, 2012), while also finding academic success in the classroom (Kayama et al., 2015).

Black youth are four times more likely than Caucasian youth to experience educational risk factors and barriers (Caton, 2012; Kirk, Lewis, Lee, & Stowell, 2011). Studies have explored factors that impact academic achievement for Black adolescents (Darensbourg, & Blake, 2014; Hayes, 2012), how attitudes toward racial socialization effect school outcomes (Noguera, 2003), how teacher expectations impact school performance, and the impact of the zero-tolerance policies on Black males' educational outcomes and experiences (Caton, 2012). These studies have found myriad factors that influence the academic achievement and school outcomes of Black boys. Still, not much attention has been given to the socioemotional experiences and perspectives of Black boys in schools or how they navigate existing barriers to their educational well-being. This study seeks to address this gap, exploring the complexities of school success from the perspective of Black, male students themselves. This study examines how trauma-exposed, Black boys experience their school environment, perceive socioemotional challenges, and navigate barriers to academic success.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Black Boys and Well-Being

Literature has consistently illustrated the ways in which African American boys disproportionately experience ecological risks to their well-being, including greater exposure to psychological trauma (Beasley et al.,

2014, Chapter 1; Noguera, 2008). Black youth have a higher chance of being exposed to violence and crime in their neighborhoods, and are also disproportionately targeted by the juvenile justice system when compared to the general adolescent population as well as other minority groups (Hirschfield, 2018). National statistics have shown that the mortality rate of young African American males is the highest among all racial/ethnic youth (Miniño, 2013). Black youth are particularly at risk for experiencing adolescent delinquency and poor school adjustment that can reduce the chance of future success (Caldwell et al, 2006). Overall, young Black males experience significant stress as they develop into adulthood surrounded by the historical, social, economic, and political realities that encompass many of the unjust elements of the Black experience in America (Caldwell et al., 2006).

Black Boys, Education, & Coping

Academic identification represents one's internal connection to his/her academic performance and the extent to which this performance impacts one's view of self, whereas academic dis-identification is defined as the steady process of mental disengagement from educational interests (Beasley et al., 2014, Chapter 1; Osborne & Jones, 2011). Prior studies demonstrated that students who highly identify with school earned higher academic marks, missed fewer classes, and had less behavioral problems than academically dis-identified learners (Beasley et al., 2014, Chapter 1). However, literature suggests that academic dis-identification represents one coping strategy that some Black males utilize in response to chronic stigma and negative stereotypes in educational contexts (Beasley et al., 2014, Chapter 1). Many African American males are often faced with the harsh realities of systemic racial injustice, which manifests itself in the form of run-down and overcrowded schools, less qualified teachers, and Eurocentric curricula (Beasley et al., 2014). These factors may cause Black boys to discount the feedback offered in traditional school settings, devaluing the scholastic process, and disengaging from what they believe to be an unfair education system (Beasley et al., 2014, Chapter 1).

African American males, on average, are disproportionately more likely than white males to be placed in special education, suspended or expelled from schools, and have lower grades (Beasley et al., 2014, Chapter 1). Black boys also have poor high school graduation rates and underrepresentation in postsecondary education in concert with overrepresentation in other areas, including out-of-school and in-school suspensions, school expulsions, unemployment and low employment, crime, and incarceration (Holzman, 2012). These challenges become compounded

when considering Black boys who have experienced childhood trauma. Literature expounds on the ways in which childhood trauma can negatively affect social, emotional, and cognitive processes, and also lead to behavioral and academic difficulties problems (Romano et al., 2015).

Research on inner-city, Black children has identified them as "complex copers", who use more types of strategies than do white children (Gaylord-Harden et al., 2008). In particular, Black girls generally apply more support-seeking strategies, while Black boys utilize more frequent uses of distraction and avoidant coping (Gaylord-Harden et al., 2008). For example, music can be a useful and preferred coping tool for emotional self-regulation among such adolescents (Saarikallio, 2011). Additionally, strong, positive student-teacher relationships are also healing and helpful for these students, as relationship quality between students and teachers is associated with a broad number of behavioral and emotional outcomes (Murray & Zvoch, 2011). Researchers recognize the importance of socializing agents (e.g., teachers) on the academic and psychosocial development of Black boys (Osborne & Jones, 2011). However, there is some evidence to suggest that Black students are particularly vulnerable to poor relationships with teachers, as the U.S. public school teaching force is predominately white and may knowingly or unknowingly conduct their classrooms using racialized prejudices and misconceptions (Beasley et al., 2014, Chapter 1). Additionally, for Black male youth, stereotypical perceptions of them as being dangerous can even further exacerbate these prejudices in ways that are less common for other students (Rios, 2011). Particularly, when these youth also have a trauma background, emotional sensitivity and coping tools are paramount in classroom settings (West et al., 2014).

Present Study

This study is grounded in Empowerment theory, which posits that empowerment is a key component of social change that is innately intertwined with shifting power structures (Hur, 2006; Page & Czuba, 1999). The purpose of this study was to explore how a sample of trauma-exposed, Black boys experience their school environment. In particular, the central aim of this study was to examine how these youth socioemotionally navigate barriers in their school setting as well as the factors that they perceive as helpful to their educational wellbeing. This paper utilizes the work of Paulo Freire (1973), one of the founding scholars of empowerment theory in education, as a platform for exploring these students' perspectives.

RESEARCH METHOD

A secondary analysis was conducted on cross-sectional, qualitative data from 10 youth participants. An Institutional Review Board at a local university approved the study. School administrators obtained informed consent/assent from students to participate in the focus group during the school registration process during the 2015-2016 school year.

Sample

A purposive sample of students were invited by the school's administration to participate in the focus groups, based on their varied self-reported histories with previous trauma exposure as well as their time enrolled at the school (i.e., all students invited to participate had been enrolled at the school for at least six months prior). Of those invited, 10 students opted to participate; the sample consisted of 10 Black, male students, enrolled between September 2015 and June 2016 at a public, charter high school, located in an urban Midwestern metropolitan area. Consistent with the surrounding community, the school's student population is predominantly African American (i.e., approximately 99%) and come from households with lower socioeconomic status (i.e., approximately 90% are eligible for free/reduced lunch). Participants ranged in age from 14 to 18 years old. Data on students' specific trauma histories were not included in the study.

Data Collection

A content analysis was completed on secondary focus group data collected from participants. A semi-structured interview protocol was used to collect youth perceptions of their school environment. The focus group convened in a designated classroom in the school building and lasted for approximately one hour. Focus group content was reviewed under the constructivist-interpretivist epistemology, using an empowerment theoretical framework.

Data Analysis

The focus group was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The transcript was coded independently by the first and second author, using reflexive bracketing for confirmability and extensive writing of memos. Then, researchers confirmed the reliability of our codes through consensus (Padgett, 2008). The analysis utilized a constructivist-interpretivist epistemology, which views the creation of knowledge as a subjective process that largely depends on context and the perspective of the individuals involved (Van der Walt, 2020; Wahyuni, 2012). Therefore, codes, themes,

and broader takeaways in this study were gathered by considering the specific positionality of the participants (i.e., African American male adolescents in the Midwestern region of the United Stated who have experienced trauma). If participants in this study had different identities or experiences (e.g., youth of a different race or raised in a different region of the United States), the drastically different themes may have emerged. Further, the researchers in this study acknowledge that their own experiences and positionality influence the interpretation of the data (Schwandt, 1994; Steier, 1991). In regard to researcher positionality, it should be noted that coding and interpretation of the focus group data were conducted by one African-American male researcher and one African American female researcher who have either directly or indirectly had experiences similar to those described by the participants of this study. Also, given the empowerment framework guiding this study, the analysis utilized the direct language of participants as major themes rather than researcher-generated words and phrases (Saldaña, 2009). Therefore, the analysis was grounded in the voices of the student participants. The empowerment theoretical lens was critical in both data collection and data analysis as participants were encouraged to honor their own experiences and lived reality in relation to navigating their school environment.

RESULTS

In sum, twenty-three different codes emerged from the analysis (see Figure 1). These codes were interpreted as four main themes, with the codes that were most commonly reported across participants being described below within each of the four themes: (1) Teachers Change Your Moods; (2) They'll Switch Up on You in a Half Second; (3) When I'm Having a Bad Moment; and (4) Tell Me Why This is Useful.

Theme 1: "Teachers Change Your Moods"

Participants expressed a variety of triggers that served as barriers to their success at school. Foremost, they reported that conflictual relationships with teachers negatively impacted their mood, serving as triggers for bad moods throughout the school day. One student explained, "I feel that teachers change your moods because some teachers, they actually, like, show that they don't care about you." In particular, participants did not feel that most teachers were helpful when they were upset, but rather made their moods worse. One student expressed,

> Well, like, most of the time they, like, just trying to see you go home, like, "Oh, he gotta go home and stuff". [Teachers] make us call our parents and come get us. They won't even pretend to ask us what's

> wrong with us…They'll ask you to go home before they ask you
> what's wrong with you.

This lack of perceived concern from teachers appeared to manifest in feelings of mistrust among the students and the perception that some teachers did not care about the students' well-being, but rather wanted to suspend or exclude students as a first resort.

Participants also reported a perceived lack of academic instruction from teachers during classroom time. On student stated: "And, it's certain teachers, when they give you classwork, they don't want to explain it. They just like, do this. It's on page blah, blah, blah, and they don't want to actually explain how to do it or where to find what...". This is exacerbated when teachers become frustrated with negative student behavior. One student expressed how a teacher handled their own frustrations in the classroom by withholding academic instruction when dealing with negative student behaviors:

> Okay like ... for instance, our biology teacher….it will be like at least
> about three people she'll yell at on a daily basis. And then she wanna
> punish the whole class like ... she'll be in the middle of a lesson and
> these three people, they'll just keep talking—disrupting her. And then
> she'll just like go sit out, won't teach nobody who wanna learn.

Another common trigger for mood change included the physical condition of the school. One student explained, "Like this school is real crap 'cause there's too many people in it." Multiple participants expressed frustration with crowded hallways and being in a "rundown" building, which affected their mood throughout the school year.

Theme 2: "They'll Switch Up on You in a Half Second"

Participants reported how interactions with classmates could also be a barrier to their success. They reported that they were sensitive to physical touch from peers, particularly when attempts were being made to physically comfort them by peers with whom they did not have a strong rapport. One student explained, "I hate when people touch me unless ... It's weird, it's just ... like ... Don't touch me if I don't want you to touch me." Many participants explained that being touched by someone that they were not friends with, even when intended for consolation, was a trigger for a mood change that could negatively impact the rest of their school day.

They also spoke about specifically contentious relationships with peers and how this could impact their experience at school. In particular, participants described female peers as emotional and challenging. One student stated, "Especially, like they [female classmates]- their feelings, it's

crazy 'cause they'll switch up on you in a half second and then they get mad at you over some stupid stuff." Participant also explained the stresses that come from interacting with male peers in potentially confrontational situations. One student explained that situations with male peers have the potential to escalate because of social posturing:

> …You could do something really simple, like accidentally ... say I accidentally bumped into John's shoulder. He'd get super angry for no reason. And most of the time the person doesn't even think it's that serious. It's just the fact that other people are around and their egos is like…oh you gotta prove you're tough or ... you know, something stupid like that.

Participants perceived their male peers as attempting to prove themselves through hyper-masculine posturing in order to gain respect from other peers. Participants also reported their attempts to prevent potential peer conflicts in order to avoid the escalating into more serious situations. One student explained his decision-making process when dealing with potential conflict:

> "I have like a three step process. The first one is, you know, straight-forward respectful. Second one is if you can't be straight-forward or respectful. If you wanna be all mad and oh, you know, "fight me", I'll just avoid you, cause, you know. And the third one, is if I do have to fight, then yeah."

This illustrates an intentional thought process to initially be respectful in the face of conflict with others, followed by avoiding the offending individual if the conflict persists. Then, as a third and final option, the participant will resort to fighting, if necessary. Some students also explained that their response to peer conflict was contingent on their peer's mood. One student explained, "It kind of depends with like a certain person mood 'cause like, sometimes you might avoid the person or other times like throughout the day you might actually cope with them and try to solve it."

Theme 3: "When I'm Having a Bad Moment"

Participants provided descriptions of how they cope with challenging experiences in school. They primarily focused on their peers and the use of music as coping tools. While they explained that there were times when other students were sources of frustration, they also expressed that peers could be a tremendous source of social support. Participants reported school friends as being a primary coping mechanism they utilized when they were upset. When asked about how their mood might improve throughout the day, one student stated, "I um…hang out with people that make me happy and there we go."

Another student echoed that sentiment when he stated, "Uh, like, talking to my friends…"

Participants also described the use of music as a preferred coping mechanism when they were upset or frustrated during school. One student explained, "…Yeah, like, um ... I listen to music. I just listen to music and....I daydream." Another student explained, "When I'm having a bad moment I too, like put my hood on my head, listen to music."

Theme 4: "Tell Me Why This is Useful"

Participants provided suggestions to teachers and school staff that would make their school environment more conducive for learning. Their suggestions centered around both relational and instructional improvements. For example, they suggested that teachers "try to build a relationship with them [students], but if the students don't want a relationship, just give them their space." In addition, participants voiced the desire to be listened to by teachers and staff and to be treated with respect. One student stated, "follow the golden rule, which states treat people how you want to be treated".

Participants also provided instructional suggestions, reporting the desire to have a curriculum that could be applied easily outside of school. One student explained, "…not just give them the intelligence; the math or whatever. Give them the wisdom with it. Like, tell them…what do you do with this [knowledge]?" The same student continued explaining,

> "Don't just give me a sheet with a graph on it, tell me to figure out what m, b, equals x, y. You know, all that stuff. I don't know what I'm gonna do with that. Tell me what I'm gonna do with that. Tell me why this is useful."

Another student appeared to be echoing a similar sentiment when he stated, "If teachers gonna give you a lecture, at least let it be life changing that actually means something." Additionally, with music being a common coping mechanism utilized by the students in the focus group, many of them suggested that teachers utilize music in their classrooms. One student suggested,

> "I'd tell the teachers to allow the kids to listen to music cause music really helps me to calm down and focus. Cause music- when I listen to music I can do a whole bunch of work."

Participants emphasized the desire for improved relationships, practical application of their course content, as well as the inclusion of new techniques (i.e., music) to help them be successful in school.

DISCUSSION

This study explored the school experiences of a sample of trauma-exposed, Black boys. Participants identified myriad barriers to their socioemotional and educational wellbeing, as well as ways that they cope to navigate these barriers. They reported that social challenges with their peers can be a triggering barrier. While some participants identified these social relationships as a means of coping, they also highlighted the ways in which peers can serve as triggers as well as how they navigate these social challenges. This is particularly important when considering the ways in which trauma-exposed youth may be triggered by certain types of social interactions (e.g., bullying, unwanted physical touch).

Participants also expressed frustration with the physical condition of the school building as well as their interpersonal and curricular interactions with their teachers. This is not surprising, given the disparities in school funding that have consistently relegated racial minority students to more under-resourced and overcrowded schools when compared to their white peers (Anyon, 2005; Kohli, 2018; Oakes et al., 2004). Participants may have perceived these physical disparities in their school building, as well as perceived their teachers' instruction as lacking relevance, in ways that contributed to academic dis-identification, as they struggled to see value in their school setting and to see themselves reflected in the course curricula (Beasley et al., 2014, Chapter 1). Furthermore, while strong teacher–student relationships are vastly important to academic success (Hughes & Kwok, 2007; Shaunessy & McHatton, 2009), much of the discourse around social and emotional learning has focused on interventions that emphasize the skills of the students, but do not address the skills of teachers and staff (Gregory, & Fergus, 2017).

From an empowerment perspective, participants voiced many concerns and suggestions related to their school experience. Education should be a process where students are not just the recipients, but also actors who are able to identify their issues and be a part of the process of coming up with solutions to best change their circumstances (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995). For example, participants identified music as a major coping tool, which has been shown to have an emotionally corrective impact with adolescents (Saarikallio, 2011). Further, they discussed the ways in which they attempt to avoid negative triggers from peers to elude conflict and other negative social situations.

LIMITATIONS

This study consisted of secondary analysis of data from one focus group interview of 10 Black, male, youth participants. Common to qualitative inquiry, our findings may not be transferable to other Black boys from other school settings who have experienced trauma. Additionally, focus group questions did not directly inquire about students' traumatic experiences outside of the school setting, which may directly or indirectly inform the findings of this study. However, students were recruited for the focus group via school leadership who were privy to this information. Additionally, data was not collected on teacher level demographics at the time of the study or on students' perceptions of teachers by race and gender.

IMPLICATIONS

Based on our findings participants desired to be heard and to have more inclusion in both the academic and disciplinary decisions made in their school. The participants' perceptions of being suspended from school as a first resort further supports other literature on the overuse and disproportionate nature of school exclusionary practices with Black boys (Beasley et al., 2014, Chapter 1; Holzman, 2012), and provides insight into the ways in which these practices create contentious teacher-student relationships. As an alternative, empowering students to voice their concerns in a constructive manner and providing trauma-sensitive school supports may be emotionally healing for trauma-exposed students. Further, schools may benefit from taking more collaborative and restorative approaches with students to empower them with feelings of personal value and to encourage feelings academic identification in the school's ecosystem. By soliciting the narratives and experiences of students, teachers, school social workers, school counselors, and school administrators may be better able to maximize students' potential and to utilize them as assets in their own education. Schools may also benefit from implementing social skills training as a part of their regular curriculum in order to help students improve peer relationships, understand appropriate boundaries, and learn strategies for navigating conflict. Also, teachers may need to explore alternative classroom strategies, such as letting students listen to music during class time in a structured way. This may create an environment that feels more emotionally safe for students and helps them to engage in learning.

While this study did not explore the demographics of teaching staff at the participating school, the racial makeup of the U.S. teaching force, in general, is vastly incongruent with the demographics of the student populations being served in the public school system (Beasley et al., 2014,

Chapter 1). However, research suggests that having role models who can provide culturally-relevant mentorship can improve the academic performance of Black boys (Gordon et al., 2009) and can be particularly healing for those with traumatic backgrounds (Jarjoura, 2013). Given this, the education field has expressed the consistent need for recruiting and maintaining a more diverse teaching workforce, recruiting teachers from similar urban communities, and better preparing white teachers to work with diverse student groups (Irizarry, 2007; Lau et al., 2007). The importance of enhancing teachers' understanding of diverse student populations is widely recognized in the teacher education field (He & Cooper, 2009). Preparing teachers to work with diverse populations and providing teachers with ongoing trainings about the importance of cultural sensitivity and cultural competency is necessary for teachers to build a strong teacher-student relationship that allows for trust, understanding, and growth to take place. To advance the cause of educational equity, educators of all backgrounds must examine their own conscious and unconscious beliefs, and truly reflect on whether they may hold negative stereotypes and perceptions about students' racial backgrounds and traumatic histories (Gregory & Fergus, 2017; Jones et al., 2013). This is also important for helping teachers to develop curricular changes and ways of instructing students that are personally relevant to students and their everyday lives.

CONCLUSION

Black boys who have experienced childhood trauma contend with a variety of factors that impact their socioemotional and educational wellbeing. School and school personnel can play a pivotal role in addressing these factors and providing opportunities for positive coping to improve school success. Youth perspectives are imperative to this mission and may not only empower students, but also assist schools in creating more equitable and holistic academic environments for their respective students.

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