

**Proceedings of the 2020  
Oxford Symposium in  
School-Based Family Counseling**

Edited by Nurit Kaplan Toren

The Proceedings of the Oxford Symposium in School-Based Family Counseling (SBFC) are papers based on presentations given at the yearly Symposium. The Oxford Symposium in SBFC is an international association of interdisciplinary practitioners and scholars interested in the development of, and research on, mental health interventions that benefit children by linking family and school.

ISBN: 978-1-952741-29-6 for ebook

ISBN: 987-1-952741-30-2 for print version

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DEDICATION



In memory of

Dr. Judy Goodell

Friend, Colleague, and Visionary Leader

in School-Based Family Counseling

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## Foreword

Dear Readers,

Despite a long tradition of meetings in Oxford and elsewhere, because of the COVID-19 pandemic, for the first time the Oxford Symposium in School-Based Family Counseling was held online.

The 2020 SBFC Oxford Symposium webinar was a great success and an opportunity to meet SBFC members around the world, and it provided a sense of belonging and connectedness in a time of social distancing.

The proceedings of the webinar reflect the multicultural character of the symposium, manifested in the topics presented as well as in their relevance to school-based family counseling. The proceedings cover three main areas. The first three manuscripts concern the *SBFC cultural context* and shed light on the difficulties faced by minority groups worldwide, prejudices toward minorities, and the degrading treatment they receive in general, and in school in particular.

Deb S. *Education for Children of Commercial Sex Workers (CSWs): A Community-based Participatory Approach.* (keynote)

Pond A. & Christensen T. *Thunder Valley Community Development Corporation Youth Leadership Initiative Development*

Mackie K. L., & Radna-Crasta R. *Culturally Responsive Re-engagement of Children and Families Experiencing Expulsion from School Using a Restorative Practice Approach*

These manuscripts offer an insider's perspectives of children from minority groups, and they point to the positive effect of developing innovative community support for students, such as fostering education, sustaining youth leadership in the community, and adopting a restorative practice approach to coping with racism.

The second area of the proceedings deals with the *school and classroom context*. The manuscripts focus on cognitive, emotional, and social development in school, showing how teachers can be enabled to apply neuropsychology perspectives in improving students' executive functions to enhance cognitive and affect regulation of pre-primary and middle school students. This section also sheds light on the challenges faced by schools in coping with bullying and deals with the types of power imbalances that should be considered.

Korzeniowski C., & Ison M. *Supporting Students' Executive Functions in the Classroom Context*

Ison M., González D., & Korzeniowski C. *School Intervention: Promoting Socio-Cognitive Functioning in Initial Education*

Nelson, H. J., Kendall, G. E., & Burns, S.K. *How Covert Aggression Contributes to the Power Imbalance Experienced by Children Who Are Bullied*

In sum, teachers' understanding of children's experiences associated with aggression and bullying in school can help teachers develop cultural patterns in school that support acceptance, belonging, and resilience.

The third area focuses on *family and school relationships*. School and family are the most significant environments for children. This section describes systemic initiatives in school-based mental health services. It also discusses the multidisciplinary foundation of Marriage and Family Therapy

(MFT), a key to better understanding the implementation of systemic thinking in the school setting by considering family engagement.

Laundy K., Cushing E., Fuqua W., Wallace L., & Klima E. *Connecting the BSFC dots in American: Family therapy in schools topical interested network.*

Fuqua W. *Understanding the Experiences of School-Based Marriage and Family Therapists*

Chang J. *High-Conflict Divorce: A SBFC Approach*

Sung H. *Comprehensive Parent Education on Supporting Emotionally Intelligent Parenting*

Kaplan Toren N. *Parents' and k teachers' perceptions of educational goals: In the eyes of the beholder*

Finally, the proceedings of the webinar provide insights into the value of teacher-parent relations and the contribution of each party to the child. To foster positive and meaningful teacher-parent relations, it is important to be aware of the different voices and consider the different perspective and unique viewpoint of each partner, and to improve the communication skills of both teachers and parents.

I wish to thank the authors for sharing with us their research, learning experiences, workshops, and knowledge. I hope that our readers—scholars, practitioners, and researchers—will enjoy the fruitful proceedings of this webinar.

*Nurit Kaplan Toren*

Senior Editor, Oxford Symposium in School-Based Family Counseling and Oranim Academic College of Education and University of Haifa

# **1 EDUCATION FOR CHILDREN OF COMMERCIAL SEX WORKERS (CSWs): A COMMUNITY-BASED PARTICIPATORY APPROACH**

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Sibnath Deb

Rajiv Gandhi National Institute of Youth Development in the  
Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports, India

## **KEYNOTE PRESENTATION TO THE 2020 OXFORD SYMPOSIUM IN SCHOL-BASED FAMILY COUNSELING**

### **ABSTRACT**

*Children of commercial sex workers (CSWs) are the victims of social discrimination, like their mothers, and suffer from inferiority complex, social alienation and lead a poor quality of life. Children of CSWs are often deprived of education as educational institutions require the biological father's name for enrollment. Female children are groomed for the same profession while male children often perform casual work. Oftentimes, these children are overlooked and little effort is made to integrate them into the mainstream of society through education and meeting basic needs.*

*Given the plight of the children of CSWs, a five-year action research was planned to rehabilitate a group of 30 children, selected on some criteria, and bring them within the mainstream*

*of the society through a community-based participatory approach. The steps which were adopted include (i) Identifying the community leaders through reference; (ii) Interacting with community leaders to establish rapport and explain the objectives of the project; (iii) Sharing the rehabilitation plan with the mothers of the children; (iv) Interacting with the children to identify their needs through focus group discussion; (v) Identifying local schools; (vi) Psychological assessment of mental health and cognitive abilities of the children; (vii) Providing periodic/need-based counseling to children and their mothers, that is CSWs, to make them understand about the value of education and addressing other personal issues; (viii) Initiating dialogue with the Principal/Headmaster of the school for admission of the children; (ix) Initiating dialogue with the local public representatives/leaders; (x) Initiating activities for socialization and enhancement of social acceptance; (xi) Arranging extra-curricular activities, games and sports as well as outings for the children; (xii) Providing financial support to cover basic expenses; and (xiii) Process documentation and monitoring of the impact of the intervention program.*

*Findings disclosed that need-based support services in terms of social, psychological (counselling) and general needs were found to be very beneficial and brought positive changes in behaviour, attitude and perception of life in most of the children of CSWs and their mothers. Four project staff members acted as legal guardians to admit the children in neighboring schools and educational guidance was provided by community youth volunteers who helped the children gain confidence. The local*

*Youth Club provided by the community leaders for the children during evening hours was an opportunity for the children to study in the club while their mothers were working. Cooperation and support from community volunteers and public representatives played a very important role in the socialization process and helped the children to overcome inferiority feelings and regain self-confidence. All the children, except four, were pursuing their studies successfully at the end of the project period. Few opted for vocational education and were performing well. However, after five years of project period, sponsorship was extended to the children who were pursuing education successfully so that they can continue studies successfully and become self-reliant. The study has important implications for school-based family counseling intervention with marginalized populations.*

**Keywords:** *Commercial Sex Workers, Children, Rehabilitation, Education, Community-based Approach, NGO*

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## **INTRODUCTION**

CSWs have been in India for a very long time and it is not a legal profession. In every city this profession lures people from all walks of life to visit the CSWs. Women and children from very poor families, who become victims of false promises of marriage and get pregnant, often land in this profession due to social stigma and family disownment. In some cases, sex workers are trafficked to other cities and become victims of sexual abuse and/or commercial sexual exploitation. Over a period of time, the

dynamics of this profession has changed. In addition to CSW who are rejected by the family members, many women from lower middle class or even from middle class families and, even school/college students secretly work as CSWs to earn money, in order to meet their materialistic needs and sometimes, to take care of any financial crisis in the family. Sex workers often loiter by areas of high traffic, such as bus terminals, railway stations, and in front of cinema halls. Certain city hotels, who have their contact details, connect them to the customers.

### **Background of CSWs**

The background of CSWs differs from country to country and the reasons for entering into the profession vary. For example, in Thailand, commercial sex trade is a culturally accepted profession. One can become a CSW, earn money and go back to the family. In Australia, students who fail to secure scholarship for higher studies are likely to sell their body for huge sums to arrange tuition fees. Some women enter this profession to earn money to maintain their substance dependence behaviour. In India, CSW entry is mostly due to poverty and family conflict. Available evidence highlights that most sex workers in India are from the rural areas and are of primary level education. Due to the lack of education, many women are unable to find work which leads to the decision to work as a CSW to support the family (Gadekar, 2015; Panda et al., 2015; Servinetal, 2015; Sahni & Shankar, 2011; Deb, 2008). Other factors, such as trafficking, sexual exploitation and/or abuse resulting pregnancy and false promise of marriage, may also lead to sex trade

(Jayasree, 2004). These women lack social support and absence of a social network make them more vulnerable to trafficking. Every day, CSWs entertain about 3 to 4 customers and earn about Rs.2000 to Rs.6000, as reported by a number of studies (Gadekar, 2015; Ragesh, 2015). So far as age is concerned, they mostly belong to the 15-18 age group. A good number of them are up to 30 to 35 years and married and have children (Gadekar, 2015; Sahni & Shankar, 2011; Ragesh, 2015).

### **Challenges Experienced by CSWs**

CSWs experience numerous challenges that vary depending on location. More precisely, challenges for CSWs from developing countries like India, Bangladesh and Nepal are totally different than those from developed countries. Social discrimination toward CSWs is much more prevalent in the developing countries than in the developed countries. Sexually transmitted diseases and HIV/AIDS is a major issue facing CSWs as most customers prefer to have sex without protection. CSWs who insist on protective measures often lose their customers. CSWs are mostly regarded as one of the prime transmitters of HIV in India (Deb, 2008).

CSWs experience a range of other adversities related to health and other occupation related problems like gynecological problems, complications with abortion, malnutrition, and lack of antenatal care. Some even experience physical abuse, forced sex, fear of losing customers, and feeling of insecurity, especially as they age (Pardeshi & Bhattacharya, 2006; Gadekar, 2015; Willis,

Welch, & Onda, 2016; Ragesh, 2015). Findings from India, Bangladesh and Namibia reported physical abuse of street sex workers by police, the general public and/or customers, in the form of threats with weapons or being forced to have unpaid sex (WHO, 2005; Ragesh, 2015). Mental health challenges are very common for CSWs as they do not lead an ideal life as a part of a nuclear family and lack social support. The common mental health challenges include anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation, and emotional breakdowns (Ragesh, 2015; Deb, 2008).

Like CSWs, their customers also experience social stigma and discrimination. As a result, customers prefer to visit them secretly and meet in hotels away from their homes in order remain untraced (Benoit et al., 2018). Ironically, people of the larger society use CSWs secretly for their physical needs, but do not treat them like other citizens. CSWs are at the mercy of the customers and often experience humiliation during their interaction with customers, since they badly need money for their survival and for other essential purposes. Generally, social acceptance of CSWs is very low. When they go to any health centre, they experience neglect or discrimination. The moment one learns about their profession, which is a prerequisite for procuring any official documents (which include, the ration card, voter card, health card, or aadhar card) even government officials look at them differently.

So far as living conditions are concerned, CSWs, who operate their business from red light areas, live in very small rooms without proper ventilation and other basic amenities. If a

red light district CSW has a child, they live in the same room and when customers come, they ask the child to step out. Since there is no other option during their business hours, children of CSWs loiter on the street and in the process, most of the girl children are sexually abused while some provide services to their mother's customers by bringing alcohol or cigarette and/or different forms of tobacco.

### **Population Density of CSWs in India**

There are an estimated three million CSWs in India and a large number of them are under 18 years of age (Sahni & Shankar, 2011). The survey of UN AIDS carried out in 2016 indicates that the number of CSWs in India was reported to be 657,829. Although sex work in private is not a punishable offence in India, related activities like running brothels, pimping and forced sex work are considered to be illegal as per the Immoral Traffic Prevention Act, 1956 (Rajasekharan, 2014).

### **Children of CSWs**

Information about the status of the children of CSWs is scanty worldwide (Willis, Hodgson, & Lovich, 2014; Beard et al., 2010). Very few studies reported the health status of the children of CSWs and their educational background. As per the Right to Education Act 2012, 25% of seats at school should be reserved for socially disadvantaged children. However, it is very difficult to determine whether the aspiration of this act is fulfilled in reality. The issue requires an in-depth investigation of the situation and

corrective measures should be taken accordingly. The children from disadvantaged families who attend school get mid-day meals. Since the majority of the children of the CSWs do not get admission to the school, they are denied by the same government facility. Normally, CSWs feed the newborn the food they have, which is not always nutritious, and at times it is also not good for their health (Pardeshi & Bhattacharya, 2006). One study from Mumbai reported that malnutrition is a common problem for the children of CSWs (Kakeri, Gokhale, & Waghmare, 2018).

So far as immunization is concerned, children of CSWs either get partial immunization or are completely denied immunization. As a result, they become vulnerable to various preventable health problems (Kakeri et al., 2018). Most children born in the red light areas grow up without any support from others except the biological mother. Previous research carried out in Pune (India) demonstrated that a good number of CSWs became pregnant a number of times and went for medical termination of pregnancies (MTP). Initially they did not prefer to have a child out of the notion that it might affect their profession. Over time, they wanted a child in their lives for familial connection and to stave off loneliness since they are disconnected from their own family (Pardeshi & Bhattacharya, 2006). Another study from Bangladesh observed a range of health problems like birth defects, illness, still birth and even neonatal deaths faced by the newborn babies of CSWs. The causal factors behind such problems were the practice of their

profession during pregnancy, malnutrition, alcohol and drug abuse, STIs and lack of breastfeeding (Willis et al., 2016).

Regarding the education of the children of CSWs, the issue of securing admission in a school is very complicated. Some of them do not have birth certificates as the mother did not obtain one from the Corporation Office. Also, for admission to schools, the father's name and signature is a prerequisite. Most of the children do not know their fathers. Normally no CSW customer is willing to allow using their name for a child's admission in the school. Some of the CSWs prefer to conceal their profession because of social stigma. Because of the said reasons, most of the children of CSWs remain out of school. Even the children who are able to get admission in the school use the name of somebody else as a father figure. In general, the children of CSWs experience a lack of support for going to school. Some of them are unable to pay tuition fees to the schools and some experience discrimination by the school (Menon, 2010). Lack of space for study during evening hours, when the mother remains busy in running her profession, is demotivating for the children as they may not be able to complete the home work and respond in class when the teacher asks a question, resulting in humiliation before other children in the class. Finally, these children become school dropouts after a few years.

### **Mental Health of the Children of CSWs**

Limited literature is available on the mental health of the children of CSWs. Although some research was done in the

developed countries, social science researchers have shown little interest in this issue, perhaps due to a range of challenges for data collection. However, one secondary study from a developed country reported that a number of factors adversely affect the mental health of the children of CSWs (Beard et al., 2010) and these include separation from parents, sexual abuse, early sexual debut, low school enrollment, witnessing the interaction between mothers and clients, and social marginalization. Evidence also highlights that the male children eventually become criminals, drug abusers, develop suicidal ideation and/or some children commit suicide due to their real life situation (Willis et al., 2016; Villemain, 2015). Police raids in the red light areas are very common which cause severe trauma to the children. Despite several adversities, some children are lucky to have some support from the people of the larger society in the form of sponsorship for their educational expenses and some, especially those who exhibited some good qualities or talent, have even been adopted and provided shelter (Beard et al., 2010).

### **Upbringing of Children by CSWs**

Life is such a struggle that CSWs cannot pay much attention to a quality upbringing of their children, which includes providing immunizations to their children on time, health checkups for minor ailments, proper nutrition, education, safety as well as congenial living environments. Social support is also very poor for CSWs and their children as they are totally disconnected from their families and hardly any family members

enquire about their welfare and well-being. Therefore, children of CSWs experience a range of adversities during childhood. Evidence concerning the rehabilitation of the children of CSWs is scanty.

### **Objective of Action Research Study**

Given the plight of the children of CSWs, a five-year action research study was planned to rehabilitate a group of 30 children of Ram Bagan Red Light Area, Kolkata, India, in order to bring them within the mainstream of the society through a community-based participatory approach.

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### **METHODS**

*Research Design:* A community-based participatory approach was used for rehabilitating the children of CSWs.

*Study Area:* The study was carried out among children of CSWs of Ram Bagan red light area of South Kolkata, India.

*Selection of Children of CSWs:* The criteria which were followed for selection of the children for the present project are as follows: a) CWS children below 20 years of age who were b) Interested in studies and attending school, and c) residing in the Ram Bagan red light area for the last 10 years.

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## **Intervention**

Any intervention program requires planning, keeping the real life situation in mind. For this project, project staff had several brainstorming meetings and accordingly, the following steps were taken up for effective implementation of the project:

*Identification of Community Leaders:* An effort was made to identify the community leaders of Ram Bagan area with the help of personnel of another non-government organization and a series of interactions with the community leaders was conducted for establishing rapport and for sharing the plan for the welfare of the children of CSWs. Community leaders living in the same area found it to be an interesting program for the rehabilitation of the children of CSWs and agreed to become a partner for implementation of the project and ensuring full cooperation.

*Discussion with CSWs:* Taking CSW mothers into confidence was essential for success of the program. A series of meetings were held with the CSWs about the program and its benefits. Some mothers were hesitant to allow their children to become a part of the program while some instantly agreed to put their child in the same project as they wanted to see their child leading a better life. Initially, the thought was of shifting the children from the red light area to a residential institute for their safety and for providing a better environment and all the 30 children were shifted, based on mothers' consent. However, within a short period it was observed that some mothers were unable to accept the separation of their child as he/she is the only person in their

life. Some mothers went to the residential schools and tried to take their child back. Considering the close emotional attachment of mothers with their child, after two months the children were shifted back to the Ram Bagan Area where their mothers were living and where they preferred to rehabilitate the children.

*Identification of the Needs of the Children:* Four Focus Group Discussions were conducted with the children to assess their needs. The needs identified were as follows:

- General Needs: School uniform, casual dress for daily uses, school fees, educational materials like books, note books, pen, pencil, school bag, school shoes and so on
- Social Needs: Social recognition, interaction with other children through games and sports and cultural activities
- Psychological Needs: Mental health support such as individual and group counselling based on psychological assessment, periodic assessment of mental health in terms of resilience, motivation in studies, and sense of well-being

*Identification of Local Schools:* Research team members made a list of the schools located in and around Ram Bagan Area and visited all the schools with a request to admit the children of CSWs under the intervention program. As desired by the school authorities, research team members agreed to act as legal guardians, which is a pre-requisite for children to be admitted to

a school. Research team members also ensured good conduct of the children while at school and urged the school authority to pay special attention to these children so that they did not experience any discrimination. However, some school authorities refused to admit these children because the children came from socially ostracized areas i.e., red light areas and their mothers worked as CSWs. Admission of these children might tarnish the image of the school and the school might not get students in the future.

*Psychological Assessment of Mental Health of Children:* Mental health assessment of all the children was carried out periodically with special reference to their cognitive abilities, resilience capacity, academic motivation, and social support. Findings of the assessment were the basis for providing need-based inputs and counselling from time to time. It is relevant to mention here that all the 30 children were divided equally among the four project staff so that individual attention could be paid to them and staff could help the children to remain mentally happy and healthy.

*Periodic/Need-Based Counselling of Children and Their Mothers (CSWs):* Both mothers and children were provided periodic counselling to discuss their issues and challenges. Individual counselling was provided when a child or mother had a sensitive issue to discuss, while group counselling was conducted for addressing common issues of both mothers and their children.

*Dialogue with the Local Public Representative:* In order to ensure social acceptance of the children of CSWs, an effort was made to discuss the project with the public representative and they were invited to different social events as Chief Guests to distribute the event prize to the children.

*Socialization Process:* The efforts towards improved socialization of the children were made to familiarize the children with social expectations and social manners so that they could easily mingle with the children of the larger society.

*Process Documentation and Monitoring of Impact of the Intervention Program:* The entire process of project implementation was documented throughout the project.

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## **RESULTS**

The intervention program implemented through the participatory approach was found to be very effective in rehabilitating the children of CSWs through the education and socialization process. All the children, except four, were pursuing their studies successfully at the end of the project period. A few opted for vocational education and were performing well. Four project staff acted as legal guardians in order to admit some children to neighboring schools. Findings disclosed that need-based support services in terms of social, psychological (counselling) and general needs were found to be very beneficial to bring positive changes in the behavior, attitude and

perception of life in most of the children of CSWs and their mothers.

Local Youth Club Members and leaders were empowered to implement the project with the guidance of the project staff. This was found to be a suitable approach to implement such a project in a Red Light Area as the Youth Club members accepted it as their own project. The local Youth Club facility provided by the community leaders for the children during evening hours made possible an opportunity for the children to have a place to study while their mothers remained busy with their profession.

The community volunteers identified through the community leaders played a very important role in monitoring the children and providing them guidance for study during evening hours in the Youth Club. They developed a schedule in discussion with the children for the whole day and insisted all the children follow it. After returning from the school, children used to take little rest at home with their mothers and then they came to the Youth Club by 5.30 PM for study. Normally, CSWs start entertaining their clients after 6.00 to 6.30 PM and it continues up to midnight. However, mothers were sensitized to restrict their profession to 10.00 pm so that when children return from the Youth Club, they could comfortably stay at home with their mothers. Educational guidance provided by the community youth volunteers helped the children to deal with their doubts related to academic issues. In fact, cooperation and support from community volunteers and public representatives was instrumental in the socialization process and helped the children

to overcome any inferiority feelings and regain their self-confidence. Coaching on social skills helped the children of CSWs to maintain proper social behavior in schools and become well-adjusted with peers while cultural activities, as well as games and sports, had given them a sense of social acceptance since the children from the larger society participated with them.

*Role of Community Leaders and Its Impact:* Support from the community leaders was instrumental to overcome all hurdles in implementing the action research in the red light area. In reality, it is very challenging to implement any intervention program in red light areas because of non-cooperation, especially from the persons who operate the commercial sex trade/business. Involvement of community leaders in the project had given confidence and courage to the CSWs to allow their children to join the project. Community leaders also played a key role in involving the public representatives of the community and inviting them to different events organized for the welfare of the children. The public representative attending the prize giving ceremony for games and sports was highly motivating for the project staff, community volunteers, CSWs and their children. It was a positive signal that the larger society showed greater social acceptance of the children and their mothers.

*Role of Mothers and Its Impact:* Initially, mothers were apprehensive about putting their children in an intervention program. However, several rounds of discussion with the mothers by the project staff and the community leaders gave them confidence that joining the project would be beneficial for

the children's future. Looking at the children's disciplined lifestyle after joining the project and their interest in studies gave confidence to the mothers who felt less anxious and were more relaxed. Thereafter, the CSWs were very cooperative with the project staff. The CSWs changed their own lifestyles for the welfare of the children by getting up early to prepare the children for school, enquiring about school after return of their child from the school, insisting children to go to the Youth Club during the evening hours for study, and restricting the timings of their own profession. The mother's caring gesture towards children was very inspiring and motivating for the children in their studies and a sense of happiness on the faces of the children was clearly visible.

*Children's Response to the Intervention Program:* The program for addressing the three broad needs of the children helped the children to get admitted to the local schools, continue their education, and join in different group activities like games and sports, outings and cultural programs. The children were provided with a school uniform, school shoes, books and other study related materials, school tuition, and informal clothes for daily use. This support was highly motivating for the children. All the children were sponsored by Save the Children (UK), India. Moreover, after five years of the project, sponsorship was extended to the children who were pursuing their education successfully so that they could continue their education and become self-reliant.

Regarding psychological needs, in addition to periodic

mental health assessment, children were provided group counselling for discussion about general issues. Individual counselling was provided for addressing personal and sensitive issues. Periodic mental health assessment helped to track the status of mental health of the children over six months, to understand the impact of different resources provided to the children and to ensure necessary mental health support.

For social needs, a range of activities were provided and they included social skills training in socially accepted group behaviour, organizing games and sports, cultural programs, and outings for the children. For games and sports and cultural activities, children from the neighboring communities were invited which removed the CSW children's feeling of social isolation and gave them and their mothers a sense of belongingness. The performance of the children of CSWs was remarkable as they could showcase their talents publically and receive prizes from the Public Representative and other community leaders.

*Views of Some Children about the Program:* It is clear from the views of the children who were pursuing their education smoothly that the impact of the project was positive. According to some of the children,

*“Sponsorship helped us to get admitted in the local school and continue education” – a male child*

*“Now we are safe since we go to the study centre during evening hours” – a female child*

*“Support from community volunteers was very helpful for study” – a male child*

*“Counsellors (project staff) were very supportive” – a female child*

*“Outings were very enjoyable and refreshing for all of us” – a male child*

*Impact of Counselling of Children and Their Mothers:* Counselling had very positive effects on the mental health of the children as well as on their mothers. Children could discuss their general issues in a group counselling session which helped them to clarify their concerns while individual counselling helped to discuss personal issues like problems dealing with their mothers' clients. These include: male customers trying to touch their private parts, asking them to fetch alcohol, physical health problems (gynecological) of mothers, indirect pressure from mothers to entertain the clients (when the mother was not able to serve the clients as per their desires). After personal discussion with a project staff member, who also acted as the counselor, the children would feel relieved.

At the same time, group counselling enhanced a sense of belonging and unity among the children. Group counselling with mothers brought happiness among them since they understood the benefit of the intervention program for a better future of their children. In turn, the mothers restricted their business hours so that the children did not feel embarrassed. The mothers' cooperation facilitated the overall rehabilitation

process of the children.

*Impact of Education:* Out of 30 children, 26 were pursuing their education successfully (24 taking formal education while two enrolled in vocational education) at the end of the five year intervention project. Four children discontinued education despite the intervention. Performance of some of the children in the first Board Examination was very satisfactory. Two children who were pursuing vocational education were also performing well. The following two cases are clear examples of the positive impact of the intervention project. The third case study which describes an unsuccessful case, describes the unfortunate situation of an adolescent girl. Code names are used to protect confidentiality.

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### **Positive Case Studies**

*Case 1:* Rina, aged 18, female, an only child, was born and brought up in the Ram Bagan Red Light Area of Kolkata. She was well mannered and a good looking girl. She showed interest in studies and was punctual in attending the school. Every day she used to come to the Youth Club to study during evening hours and clarify her questions with the teacher. She passed the first board examination (i.e., Secondary Examination, Grade X final exam) with First Class and subsequently the Higher Secondary Examination (i.e., Grade XII final exam) with good results. After passing the Grade XII exam, she got admitted to the Nursing Course. Her ambition was to become a nurse so that she can

serve many people. She also stated that after getting a job, she will ask her mother to quit the profession and will shift to another residential area for better living.

*Case 2:* Anil, aged 18, male child, was living with his mother in the Ram Bagan Area. He was an obedient boy and was interested in studies. He did not indulge in any undesirable activities under peer influence. After passing the Higher Secondary Examination (i.e., Grade XII final exam.), he took admission in a Drama Course in Rabindrabharati University. After seeing his performance, a Professor of the same course adopted him and provided him special guidance. After the completion of his Drama Course, he was writing scripts and directing different drama programs and has become self-reliant. He got married to Rina, they had a child, and both of them are living happily. Rina has taken her mother to live with them.

### **Unsuccessful Case Study**

*Case 3:* Rani, 15 years, female, elder daughter out of three siblings, was living with her mother and grandmother in Ram Bagan, Kolkata. Both mother and grandmother were in the same profession. A five member family was dependent upon the income of Rani's mother. The mother became sick and was unable to entertain any clients, resulting in a severe financial crisis as there was no support from any other source. Rani was admitted to the research project and admitted to a local school. However, she was not regular in attending the school and the evening study center. When project volunteers visited her house

to know the reasons for her absence, it was learned that she had moved to Mumbai for a job. However, after six months, she returned back to Ram Bagan from Mumbai and was HIV positive.

### **Positive Development with NGOs**

Of late, some NGOs have come forward to support the children of CSWs for education in addition to providing them safe shelter (Dutt, Roopesh, & Janardana, 2017; Rajan, 2014). The role of some of the government schools in India is also positive as they have started admitting the children of CSWs, encouraging the mothers to attend parent-teacher meetings.

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### **CONCLUSION**

The intervention program was highly successful in achieving its long term objective i.e., rehabilitating the children of CSWs through a community-based participatory approach. The action research project did not only change the life of the 26 children of CSWs, it also changed the outlook of the mothers in regards to happiness and hope. Further, the social acceptance of this group of population was remarkable. This project got the attention of the local and larger community since it had emphasized rehabilitation of the children of CSWs, and keeping them with their mothers in the same community through education. Education is a very powerful resource for changing the life of disadvantaged children because it leads to employment so that they can support their mothers and help

them to leave the CSW profession. Support facilities by the community volunteers and community leaders were essential in implementing the project systematically and gaining the confidence of the CSWs and their children. Although the research period was brought to an end, the project is continuing and providing sponsorship to all the children until they become self-reliant.

For the success of the project, continuous encouragement by project staff, empowerment of community leaders in implementing the project, and close monitoring of the progress of studies of the children, active community involvement, and mothers' support played very important roles. Support, encouragement, social recognition, and community participation for children of CSWs can bring miraculous changes in the life of these children and help them to overcome inferiority feelings and become confident in moving ahead in life despite all adversities.

## **Recommendations**

Based on the first-hand experience of the project, the following implementations are recommended for the welfare of CSW disadvantaged children:

1. More and more NGOs need to come forward to address the issues and concerns of the disadvantaged children, especially the children of CSWs, and adopt a similar model for their rehabilitation through education.

2. Vocational education is an essential tool for these children, especially for those who are not interested in formal education.

3. Safety of the children of CSWs should be ensured through community support with the help of community volunteers and leaders.

4. Efforts should be made to arrange alternate professions for mothers as a good number of them are unable to continue with the profession after a certain age and/or because of various health problems.

5. There is a need to carry out more research on different categories of disadvantaged children since their life challenges vary.

6. Members of the larger society should come forward and adopt the children of CSWs with a requirement to allow all the children to remain connected to their mothers.

7. In the latest National Youth Policy, 2020, for the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports, Government of India, it is recommended to include the issue of overall welfare of the children of CSWs.

### **School-Based Family Counseling (SBFC) implications**

This action research project with the children of CSW

mothers is an example of school-based family counseling. The intervention to help children clearly involved both school and family interventions, as well as community intervention involving a Youth Club, community leaders, city officials, and children from the broader community. The hallmark of the SBFC approach is using integrated interventions at multiple system levels: school, family, and community in order to help children succeed at school and at life. This qualitative SBFC study lends support for the effectiveness of SBFC in helping marginalized children and families.

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## **Acknowledgments**

This action research project was a team effort. The author acknowledges the contribution of the following persons in different capacities for the success of the project:

- Dr. Samir Narayan Choudhury, Director, CINI-Child In Need Institute, West Bengal, Kolkata
- Ms. Lakshmi Chatterjee, consultant to the Action Research Project
- Ms. Routraut Roy Choudhary, consultant to the Action Research Project
- Dr. Shishir Senapati, Assistant Director, Research Unit, CINI-Child In Need Institute, West Bengal, Kolkata
- Dr. Shyamal Choudhury, Research Officer, Research Unit, CINI-Child In Need Institute, West Bengal, Kolkata

- Mrs. Monidipa Ghosh, Research Investigator, Research Unit, CINI-Child In Need Institute, West Bengal, Kolkata
- Mr. Koushik Dutta, Research Investigator, Research Unit, CINI-Child In Need Institute, West Bengal, Kolkata
- CSW mothers and their children
- Community Leader Mr. Shankar Sarkar
- Community volunteers namely Haru Singh and Bibhas
- Local public representatives
- Local school authorities for admitting the children to their school

Acknowledgement is also due to Save the Children (UK), Delhi for sponsoring the project.

## **2 THUNDER VALLEY COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION YOUTH LEADERSHIP INITIATIVE DEVELOPMENT**

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Aimee Pond & Taylor Christensen

Youth Leadership Development in Thunder Valley, USA

### **ABSTRACT**

*Thunder Valley Community Development Corporation (TVCDC) is located on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota, United States. It's creation was inspired by a group of spiritual youth and adults who were very spiritually connected to our culture. TVCDC started by bringing a group of young people together to ask what their needs are or what they envision for their community and realizing there were many who needed homes, employment, access to healthy foods, and a need to reinforce Lakota language and values.*

*TVCDC consists of nine different initiatives that work together to engage the community and enforce our Lakota values. Throughout time, TVCDC has grown to meet many of the needs of our community and has been a very wide resource for our people within our reservation. One of these initiatives is the Youth*

*Leadership Development Initiative (YLDI) which builds upon community strengths to address needs through making cultural traditions, practices, Lakota language, and ceremonies the means of healing and restoration. This manuscript will explore a case study of how one local community based program uses culture and school partnerships to increase youth mental health and decrease youth suicide on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation. These efforts are based on a best practice approach and are an example of a community-based school-based family counseling approach.*

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## **Thunder Valley CDC Mission and Values**

Thunder Valley Community Development Corporation (CDC) envisions a liberated Lakota nation through our Lakota language, culture and spirituality. We have developed a comprehensive, innovative, and grassroots approach to collaborating with and empowering Lakota youth and families to improve the health, culture and environment of our communities, through the healing and strengthening of cultural identity. Through our nine holistic and comprehensive initiatives, Thunder Valley CDC has designed and is continually building our very own exercise of sovereignty and self-sufficiency. Thunder Valley CDC's values stem from Lakota spiritual and community based roots. We value the idea that sustainable communities must consider social needs, environmental responsibility, and economic vitality. This idea nurtures a vibrant, healthy community that embraces its cultural

heritage while also celebrating its role as community, ecosystem, and marketplace. We are producing repeatable, measurable models based on our values such as respect, generosity, courage and fortitude, that can be utilized by other communities to inspire vital, transformative change. We are defining what equity and liberation look like through a series of grassroots programs and initiatives that target: basic human needs in our community (such as water, food security, housing); community wealth building; holistic well-being and healing (spiritual, mental, emotional and physical); and the desire for a more cohesive, thriving community.

### **Thunder Valley CDC Initiatives**

Thunder Valley CDC has created an Ecosystem of Opportunity through nine different initiatives: Regenerative Community Development, Workforce Development, Youth Leadership Development, Social Enterprise, Housing and Homeownership, Regional Equity, Lakota Language Revitalization, Food Sovereignty, and an Education (school design and construction) Initiative. According to the Bronfenbrenner's ecosystems approach, people are affected by things close and far from them and a change in any part of the system has ripple effects for all parts of that system (Howe, 2009). We are using these initiatives to impact, and ultimately transform, the systems and structures that have perpetuated the pervasive effects of colonization and oppression for Lakota people, and particularly, on what is now defined as the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation. Thunder Valley CDC has been

intentional in our community engagement and capacity building to ensure the vision of liberation and sovereignty that our founders had comes to fruition. We evaluate our programs on their adherence to a sustainable, triple bottom line, which holds people, planet and prosperity in equal standing. For example, we believe that all people in the community have an inherent responsibility to take care of each other and the environment in order for us to prosper and flourish as a healthy community.

### **Community Needs and Problems**

Thunder Valley Community Development Corporation (TVCDC) is located on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation which is home to about 15,000 Oglala Lakota people according to the census (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018), however some estimates say the actual population varies between 16,000 and 40,000 (Bosman, 2015). The Reservation has a long history of systemic poverty, 80% of people are unemployed and 50% of the population lives below the federal poverty line (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). Oglala Lakota County is the second poorest county in the United States. The infant mortality rate is five times the national average, and the rate of diabetes is 4 times the national average. Oglala Lakota County ranked 59th of 60 counties in South Dakota for overall health outcomes in 2017 (County Health Rankings.org, 2020). There is a outstanding housing shortage on the reservation, with a need of at least 4,000 new homes (Nord, 2015). The teen suicide rate for native youth is around 150% higher than the average national population (Re-member, Inc., 2020). The most jarring statistic is

that there were over 16 youth suicides in 2015 (Bosman, 2015). These statistics depict a difficult reality on the Reservation.

Knowing that education is a key component to the long-term success of Lakota youth, the following comparisons are provided to help identify the gap in access to resources that support educational success for Lakota children and their families, leaving them vulnerable to long-term negative outcomes. According to 2013-2017 U.S. Census Data, there are 7,044 youth enrolled in school from Pre-K to college out of around 23,000 residents (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). There are a total of four high schools and 14 elementary/middle schools on the reservation. One-quarter of the adult population does not have a high school diploma and just 13% percent of Oglala Lakota have undergraduate degrees, versus 24.4% of the general population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). Not only are less native youth graduating from high school and then earning a post-secondary degree, the reservation is also lacking in educational attainment compared to national standards. According to, The National Center for Education Statistics, in 2017 across the nation, Native American youth had a high school graduation rate of 74% compared to the national average of 85% (2020). According to the 2015 National Indian Education Study, the lowest scoring percentages of native students in reading and math were found in Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) schools which have the highest concentration of native students compared to other public schools who have less native students (Ninneman, Deaton & Francis-Begay, 2017). This highlights the fact that our current education system is not meeting the needs

of schools with high rates of Native American students and these students face additional challenges compared to non-Native peers.

Faced with geographic isolation, educational barriers, minimal employment and limited access to extracurricular activities, youth have an increased risk of suicide, depression, alcohol abuse, substance abuse and criminal activity (Youth.gov, N.D. & National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Division of Violence Prevention, 2019). Along with being disproportionately overrepresented in the criminal justice system, many Native American youth are overwhelmingly faced with systemic and infrastructural injustices such as overcrowded homes, unhealthy foods, low performing schools, and parents that are unemployed (Re-member Inc, 2020 & Development Services Group, Inc., 2016). These are the needs we aim to address with our preliminary Youth Leadership Development Initiative (YLDI) and pilot programs. Lakota youth on the reservation lack the opportunity to learn how to manage their daily lives and build protective factors preparing them for a successful life in our society. These protective factors and life skills are often acquired through employment, training opportunities, and extracurricular activities that are necessary to promote positive self-image and leadership development.

### **Proposed Solutions**

Through our multi-faceted, holistic approach to youth empowerment, Thunder Valley's YLDI aims to reverse the lasting effects of colonization and poverty in our youth through four

goals: nurturing of positive youth leadership development; language & culture acquisition; traditional & contemporary recreation/ physical activity; and peer and adult mentoring.

Thunder Valley CDC was born out of a realization that systemic poverty on the reservation is most impacting youth. We also realized that youth were turning to traditional Lakota culture and spirituality as a way to change the difficult realities they were faced with. Local Youth wanted an opportunity to envision a new kind of future, so they turned toward the Sundance as a place of strength and prayer. Thunder Valley CDC therefore began as an organization that empowers Lakota youth by hosting youth leadership development and entrepreneurship opportunities and opportunities to connect to culture and spirituality. We felt that while these endeavors were valuable to youth we needed to do more. When these children returned home from the program, they were still faced with systemic and infrastructural injustices such as overcrowded homes, unhealthy foods, low performing schools, and having parents who were unemployed and addicted to substances. We decided that we could not solely focus on youth development and entrepreneurship in a vacuum, rather it would require a place-based systems approach to impact the deep-rooted realities on the reservation.

We believe our community's strongest asset is our youth, therefore, we need to invest in their future by building their leadership skills to ensure the success and wellbeing of our communities. Half of the population is under the age of 25 which

to Thunder Valley CDC is a huge asset to changing the harsh realities we live in. It is an opportunity to leverage assets such as traditional values and culture. Throughout our YLDI programs outlined below, we seek to grow and nurture skills in youth that make them productive, healthy, and “well-rounded” members of our Lakota nation. These skills include personal goal setting, self-determination, intrinsic motivation, developing cultural identity, resiliency, post-high school readiness, and critical thinking. Through a variety of programs, our YLDI will provide access to a multitude of opportunities for our youth including, internships, positive adult and peer mentorships, recreational activities, and traditional cultural activities/knowledge. At Thunder Valley, we truly believe that strengthening self-identity and using Lakota culture as our main prevention tool is the answer to the issues we are struggling with the most among our youth population.

With these initiatives, our mission is to empower Lakota youth and increase self-confidence and quality of life on the Pine Ridge Reservation. The YLDI seeks to create and cultivate opportunities for Lakota youth that enhance leadership skills, promote personal and community wellbeing, and sustain culture and spirituality. Throughout all of our initiatives, we take a multigenerational approach to building community health & wellness by involving all ages of people in the community because we feel that all family members should be involved in the process to make a longer lasting change in the community. We encourage physical fitness including contemporary sports and traditional activities, positive social-emotional health, and Lakota spirituality in our youth. In short, our YLI ideas include,

youth leadership & internship programs, cultural camps, mentoring, traditional/contemporary recreational/physical activities, youth council, and after school programs to remediate these pervasive, systemic injustices and prevent youth from falling into self-destructive patterns and eventually the criminal justice system.

### **Current Youth Leadership Impact**

Youth Leadership Development Initiative is a program that pursues a multifaceted strategy to empower youth and increase their self-confidence and quality of life on the Pine Ridge Reservation. We connect youth and families to learn the Lakota language, practice traditional food sovereignty, and promote and host safe, healthy, physically active community activities. This approach encourages social connectedness and physical health, decreasing the rates of depression, suicide, and obesity. Since 2015, the YLDI has impacted over 300 youth, including employing over 70 youth, in the community doing various roles. Our YLDI started with a 6-8 week summer youth leadership program on site in collaboration with our Food Sovereignty Initiative. Around 25 youth were employed in the summer to learn about food sovereignty and work in the garden on our demonstration farm, plant trees, building chicken coops, and other gardening activities. This summer program has since evolved to include not only food sovereignty and gardening but also financial literacy classes and community service projects in various communities. Our summer youth have planned and organized numerous free events for the community from glow run/walks to volunteering

at our local native nursing home.

Additionally, in partnership with Red Cloud School, we have employed 8-10 high school mentors throughout the summers and school year in our Lakhotiya Skinciyapi (being active through Lakota language) program. These student-athletes are role models in the community and serve as mentors who teach, guide, and coach younger kids in activities from nature hikes to sports camps. All the mentors who have participated in this program have graduated high school and gone on to college. Most of them participate in college level athletic programs. As we move forward in this work, we aim to expand to a year-round program that utilizes a holistic approach to youth healing and development. Below is an outline detailing our current YLDI programs.

### **Unique Youth Programs and Initiatives**

We have evolved into offering three separate summer opportunities for youth. Firstly, the High School Summer Leadership Academy is designed for 9th-12th graders who want to develop and pursue additional educational and leadership skills. The academy will utilize various strategies including the use of curriculum on critical thinking and leadership skill development. We will also take youth from the leadership academy on a sacred site visit and invite community leaders to lead discussions around culture and key community issues. At the end of the three week program, participants will have learned about various topics including: climate change, tribal

government and politics, and community organizing.

Secondly, we host a High School Summer Internship created for 9th-12th grade students who want hands on experience in the following career tracks: Communications & Media, Information Technology, Administrative & Office Management, Fundraising & Community Organizing, Finance & Business, Facility Management, Property Management, Homeownership, Food Sovereignty, Regenerative Community Development, Lakota Language, Workforce Development, and Youth Leadership Development/Mentoring. Thunder Valley CDC is the internship site with our various staff utilizing their strong unique skill sets serving as supervisors and mentors for the students during this intensive learning opportunity. Each internship supervisor develops goals with their intern that can then be measured at the end of the summer internship experience.

Thirdly, we host a one-week Middle School Cultural Camp designed for 5th-8th graders. Our goals are to increase their cultural knowledge in the areas of traditional foods, art, history, ceremonies, customs, and beliefs. Strategies include: taking the youth on a camping trip in the Sacred Black Hills and traveling to sacred sites with respected cultural leaders who will share oral histories and knowledge. Additionally, the participants in this program have access to positive adult and peer relationships while building a stronger skill set as mentioned.

In addition to summer opportunities we have two year

around initiatives called Lakħótiya Škiŋčiyapi ("Being Active through Lakota Language") and the WWHY Girls Society. Lakhotiya Skinciyapi is a year around youth program that is designed to increase physical activity and improve self-identity on the Pine Ridge Reservation, an area that suffers from a high rate of obesity and diabetes, in addition to problems that accompany low self-esteem. To combat the latter concern, the community has recognized the need for programs that improve language proficiency and self-awareness of Lakota youth using the Lakota language as the means of instruction. This initiative builds on community and individual strengths and develops youth leadership by providing a cultural connection with the Lakota language and physical/ health education. Attendees will learn life skills through the expression of the body and the voice of the Lakota language. Participants will learn the value of not just their heritage language, but also self-empowerment and the worth of essential life skills such as focus, self-control, perspective, communication, critical thinking, taking challenges, and engaged learning. They will also learn about how the *ehaŋni Lakħol wičhouŋ* – the traditional Lakota lifestyle – was intrinsically bound with physical activity and exertion. The primary goal for this program is to increase physical activity and improve self-awareness of Lakota youth, using the Lakota language as the means of transmission. Specifically, Lakħotiya Škiŋčiyapi will involve taking high school students to help mentor elementary and middle school children through athletics and health training. In preparation, mentors will be taught the necessary Lakota language vocabulary, as well as athletic and health information. They will then help pass on this knowledge to the younger students. All children will demonstrate

competence in fundamental motor skills and selected combinations of team sports skills. They will identify basic health-related fitness concepts using appropriate Lakota vocabulary and thought processes. The mentors and students will exhibit acceptance of self and others in physical activities and identify the benefits of a physically active lifestyle using the Lakota language. The WHY Girl Society is a more recently developed year around initiative or program. The goal is to strengthen identity, empower, and educate girls on the Pine Ridge Reservation. The society will meet regularly and will strive to be a safe and consistent place for girls to express themselves, have fun, gain support and confidence, practice Lakota culture and spirituality, and learn valuable life skills. The Girl Society is meant to provide mentorship and prepare girls for life challenges and traditional Lakota womanhood ceremonies. Establishing the Pine Ridge Girl's Society will address the downward spiral of young women and create a better reality of womanhood. Participants will be recruited between the ages of 10-14 years old. Some older girls between the ages of 15-19 who will serve as peer group mentors, thus embracing the Lakota value of kinship. Using a girl-centered and culturally relevant curriculum, the participants will learn from healthy, female, adult facilitators and guest speakers. They will also enjoy experiential trips visiting sacred sites and participating in ceremonies.

### **Program Success and Evaluation**

Thunder Valley CDC has developed an Impact Measurement and Evaluation System to ensure success of its

programs and initiatives. The system is a complex and multi-faceted system, established to measure TVCDC's impact at the employee, program, organization, and community levels' and abroad through various spaces: in the home; on the jobsite; in tribal, state, and federal political arenas; among funding sources; and more. In other words, the System is tailored to measure impact from the individual to the system-level—the entirety of TVCDC's Ecosystem of Opportunity.

Evaluative in nature, the System is wholly connected to TVCDC's mission statement, overarching messaging points, strategic directions, and theory of change. Therefore, employees, departments, programs, initiatives, and TVCDC as a whole are evaluated through the System. Through evaluation, TVCDC can reaffirm our efforts or make informed strategic internal and external changes—changes to nourish the ever-changing needs and goals of an ecosystem where opportunity can flourish. Ultimately, the system will offer strategies and tools for other communities to replicate for their own Ecosystems of Opportunity.

The System is composed of forms that document successes including: knowledge growth, habit change, change in health and wellbeing, funding acceptances, collaborations, overall goal achievement, and more. The forms allow for assessments to be made through time, thus providing TVCDC with the ability to evaluate the Ecosystem of Opportunity as it evolves.

All Initiative Directors utilize the Programs and Initiatives Evaluations as well as the General Assessments. Some forms are filled out weekly, while others are filled out on a quarterly or annual basis. Other forms such as Outreach Event Tracking or forms created to collect data after a participant has completed a program are contingent on a specific occurrence in time as well. Other forms are time specific; some surveys for example are filled out yearly, while other forms were created to collect data after a participant completes a program. We work with Sweetgrass Consulting LLC as our outside evaluator. Also, we have a Director of Evaluation that works with each Initiative Director on a weekly basis to ensure that data is being entered into the System (Salesforce).

In addition to our internal evaluation and measurement systems in place, we have identified the following outcomes and measures for each of the four following major YLDI initiatives/goals that will determine our success throughout each program previously outlined:

### **Mental Health Prevention**

The Reservation has a long history of genocide, racism, and historical trauma. There are many difficulties that our community faces on the reservation and it is our goal in the YLDI to make sure that the youth will always have opportunities to escape their own realities. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, “Suicide prevention programs should not focus on a limited range of self-destructive

behaviors; rather, programs must emphasize the root conditions and an array of social, psychological, and developmental issues. Community involvement from the beginning is critical in developing strategies with which to address issues identified in a culturally, environmentally, and clinically appropriate manner,” (2010). We know that it is important to make sure that the individual lives of our youth are healthy and taken care of. Especially during this time of the COVID-19 global pandemic and social distancing, being away from normal routines; it could bring sadness while having to be isolated. It is common for youth to have problems at home and to be recruited for counseling (Gerrard & Soriano, 2013). On the reservation, it is common for our children and/or youth to come from unstable or unsupportive backgrounds. It is our goal at TVCDC in the YLDI to make sure that youth throughout the reservation understand that we are an open armed source to be there for them when it is needed.

There are various programs, camps, mentoring, activities, events, etc. that we bring to the community so that our youth and community members have the opportunities to access different experiences. It is within our Lakota virtues and beliefs to always take care of one another and to be there for one another when times are difficult. TVCDC aims to make sure that our reservation has various opportunities and resources so that our people and youth will always have access to help, guidance, or work whenever it is needed.

The work that is done in the YLDI is based solely on the

youth. Throughout the years it has formed into a very popular and important initiative as it focuses directly on the future generations. At this time in their lives we believe that it is important to give them opportunities to explore, create, compete, share, and learn as they grow. We want it to be a place that our youth enjoy coming to and also a place where they will gain knowledge and experience positivity.

### **COVID-19 Pandemic Response**

During this current COVID-19 pandemic, our youth are affected by the negative impacts of social distancing requirements, virtual and distance learning, and engagement through social media. It has been a very difficult process as we are trying to make sure our youth are safe. As suicide is a big problem within our communities, social distancing has been difficult for many of our people. It is hard for many people to not be in their normal routines and it could cause sadness, depression, isolation, and not wanting to reach out for help. It is important for us to get our resources out to the reservation so that we can provide for them what we can. Usually when they would go to school, attend events, work, camps, tournaments, etc. it was a break from their own realities and since COVID-19 has come into play, none of this has been possible.

All our programs have been cut from in person contact with the community. We have purchased activity kits that are filled with outdoor activities to encourage physical fitness. We

have also started a Pen Pal program within our WWHY girls society. Women throughout the reservation were interested in being mentors for young girls who may need the guidance or assistance. This is a chance for our young girls who are becoming young women to have someone to reach out to and depend on when they are having a difficult time. Additionally, we had to switch to a virtual High School Leadership Academy.

COVID-19 has been a life changing experience for our development but we are learning to adapt and make sure that our community along with our staff are safe and their mental health is always taken care of. The Youth Leadership Initiative Director is also a Social worker and has her share of experience in helping youth along with her work at TVCDC. She aims to make sure that everyone is always taken care of and that our youth always have something to look forward to at the end of the day. It is our goal together to make sure to continue to provide guidance, prayer, assistance, and wellness to our community members.

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### **Relationship to School-Based Family Counseling**

Our Youth Leadership Initiative at Thunder valley CDC is an innovative, culturally appropriate, community-based approach which fits into the SBFC metamodel in various ways. According to the SBFC model (Gerrard & Soriano, 2013) a counseling approach should be integrative of the child, family, school and community. At Thunder Valley CDC, the entire

educational approach is a community-based program thus involving the individual, family, and community members in a community setting. In addition, the approach is comprehensive and addresses the needs of youth and mental health through a holistic effort including the physical, social, and spiritual well-being of the individual and entire community. In conjunction with the SBFC metamodel, Thunder Valley programs are systems based, strength based, supportive of parent involvement/partnership, and culturally appropriate for Lakota youth (see Figure 1).

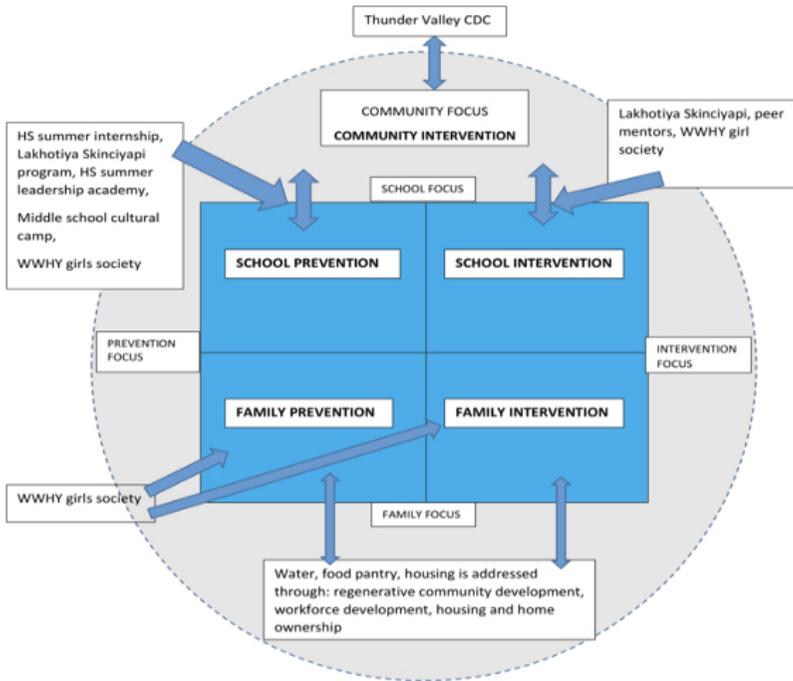


Figure 1: The SBFC Meta-model

based program. It addresses the educational needs of Lakota children and youth through community sponsored educational

programs that teach critical thinking, such as the Summer Youth Leadership Academy. It strengthens family and community relationships by providing a variety of opportunities for youth and families to be involved. Youth isolation is addressed by the Lakotiya Skinciyapi mentoring program and other opportunities in which elders or community members engage with youth. A huge healing component of Thunder Valley's programs are that culture is prevention and the mechanism in which healing takes place. Through these programs individual youth learn and grow thus producing a ripple effect in the family and for future generations and eventually making positive changes in the community.

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### **3 CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE RE-ENGAGEMENT OF CHILDREN AND FAMILIES EXPERIENCING EXPULSION FROM SCHOOL USING A RESTORATIVE PRACTICE APPROACH**

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Karen L. Mackie & Rebeka Radna-Crasta

#### **ABSTRACT**

*When students experience exclusionary discipline practices due to behavior infractions involving physical harm at school, the process of returning can be alienating for families, and no more so than for families who are racially or socioeconomically marginalized. Centering family perspectives and attending carefully to affect in the re-entry process can help school staff facilitate meaningful restorative relationships during a very vulnerable time. The restorative approach encourages school staff to develop critical consciousness and emotional intelligence about implicit bias and structural disadvantage due to intersections of racism and classism at school. Educator perceptions about the purposes and values of schooling can create negative judgments of families misaligned with prevailing school expectations. Restorative interventions such as the Circle of Hope process encourage the repair of engagement between the family and the school, offering opportunities to re-define school difficulties and re-establish what the child and family need*

*to ensure school success. Restorative practices align with narrative therapeutic understandings of where knowledge resides within a system and how participation in a school can become more democratic and anti-racist. Restorative practices are well aligned with the SBFC core model, and offer further opportunity for integrative interventions that positively impact marginalized individual children and their families, as well as transform oppressive aspects of prevailing school cultures.*

**Keywords:** *exclusionary discipline, anti-racism, restorative practice, affect, narrative approach, school counselors*

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## **INTRODUCTION**

School counselors are tasked with serving all children and families within their school building, and with coordinating and maintaining connections between the school, its students and families, and the surrounding local community (ASCA, 2010; Bryan et al., 2019). The role of a school counselor also involves culture brokering, which means translating the climate and culture of the school to new families, and doing so with sensitivity to what is needed for school success in relation to what may or may not be working educationally for a particular child. School counseling involves developmental and social-emotional expertise, which is often not widely shared by other educators in the school, who are more focused on content learning and educational outcomes related to successful graduation from the K-12 system. As schools seek alternatives to

traditional school discipline for behavior infractions (Duncan, 2014), the training of school counselors has also come to involve intentional exposure to restorative practices as a dimension of the counselors' social-emotional expertise. In this paper, we argue that there is a greater role for school counselors and others who similarly bring social-emotional, systemic and relationship perspectives to the work of transforming the 21st century schooling experience in the US. In particular, we argue that there is a great need for even more cultural responsiveness and anti-racism in our application of restorative practices in schools than previously considered. This approach may reduce the effects of systemic racism and classism on families of color and on low SES families that result from the culture and climate dynamics of the typical American school. Jones and Okun (2001) write about White supremacy culture, citing a variety of inter-relational dynamics that show up in American organizations, such as schools. These dynamics are often taken to be a "neutral" mode of working and relating to others, when they are instead representative of a larger trend of White supremacy, which assumes that the cultural norms of Whiteness give rise to a White identity that is superior to all other cultural identities. Some of the cultural norms associated with White identity and supremacy identified by Jones and Okun (2001) include: sense of urgency; defensiveness; objectivity; power hoarding; right to comfort; fear of open conflict; and individualism. These characteristics privilege the protection of the status quo and established power dynamics within schools over meaningful, systemic change in how school personnel relate to students and families of color. The structural aspects of White supremacy and the unconscious implicit cultural bias that results for staff, have an impact on the

schooling experiences of students and families of color, starting in the earliest, elementary grades.

Research from Loveall (2018) and Skiba (2011) supports our contention that school discipline even in the elementary grades, reflects racial inequities that concern school counselors and school-based family counselors. Loveall (2018) states “researchers studying a nationally representative sample of elementary and middle grades students found that Black students were 2.19 (elementary) to 3.78 (middle) times more likely be referred to the office for problem behavior than their White peers. Once in the office, Black students were more likely than White students to be suspended out of school or expelled for similar offenses” (p.9). Losen and Martin (2018) also discuss racial disparities in attendance resulting from disciplinary actions, stating, “One of the most striking racial differences is that Black K-3 students lost 13 more days per 100 students enrolled than the statewide average for all students in the lower elementary grades...moreover the rate of days lost per 100 Black students in grades K-3 was higher than the aggregate rate for all students in grades 9-12” (p.7). We maintain that attention to racially and culturally sensitive restorative practices for the resolution of conflicts occurring between students, families and school personnel in the early K-5 grades may help avoid the greater likelihood of alienation between students, families and schools involved in conflict or discipline during the middle and high school years, when the consequences of disengagement, alienation and expulsion are even more serious for student educational outcomes and adult life chances.

### ***Why Do US Schools Practice Exclusionary Discipline?***

In a review of the evidence base on the effectiveness of efforts to reform school discipline, Steinberg and Lacoë (2017) note that their question is “vitally important because a safe school climate is essential for student success” (p. 44). This assumption about safety, reflected in the phrase “safe and orderly schools” as a common school district goal across the nation, reflects educators’ response to concerns about the extent of bullying, school victimization, violence and disruptive behavior that was widely reported starting in the early 2000’s.

Response to the levels of disruption and violence reported by educators led to widespread adoption of “Zero Tolerance” policies to address student and staff fears about students carrying weapons to school to handle bullying or anticipated violence between students, as well as to cope with student use of chemical substances and alcohol as the 21st century began. Unfortunately, these policies also increased the number of youth suspended or expelled, with no evidence of positive impact on school safety (Losen, 2014). Another problematic effect of these policies was that school misbehavior increasingly became handled by school resource officers, who had involvement with official legal systems, including police, rather than by the school itself. Petrosino et al. (2012) identify the net effect of this change in policy and subsequent practice as contributing to the “school-to-prison pipeline” trend which overall has highly damaging implications for individual success outcomes in the US.

While The National Center for Education Statistics report for 2006 indicated that out-of- school suspensions that year had started to decline, in 2012 one third of teachers again reported that their teaching was impacted by student behavior problems at school. Steinberg and Lacoé (2017) wrote, “regardless of the kind of discipline districts choose to employ, policymakers and school leaders must recognize that school disorder and violence have adverse effects on all students” and that “recent evidence also shows that exposure to disruptive peers during elementary school worsens student achievement and later life outcomes, including high school achievement, college enrollment and earnings” (p. 45). Thus, both the extent of challenge to schooling that disruptive or violent behavior engenders, and the common community expectation that students at school be kept safe and able to learn, have resulted in US schools enacting various forms of expulsion for students not meeting behavioral expectations for safety within the student body.

At the same time, there has been a strong critique of suspension and expulsion practices in US schools, particularly in the last ten years, as the evidence suggests that suspension and expulsion is unevenly executed, resulting in disproportionate suspension rates. A report from the New York Equity Coalition in 2018 showed that 11.4% of Black students experienced at least one suspension during the 2016-2017 school year, which is in stark contrast to 2.7% of White students. In addition, Skiba et al. (2011) analyzed school level data on disciplinary referrals and found that among the 364 schools studied, Black and Hispanic students “were more likely than white students to receive

suspensions or expulsions for ‘minor misbehavior’ such as inappropriate verbal language, minor physical contact, disruption and defiance” (in Steinberg & Lacoé 2017, p 45). Steinberg and Lacoé (2017) concur with Skiba (2011) adding that students with disabilities also face exclusionary discipline twice as often as their peers do. Even more alarmingly, they note that racial disparities in suspensions begin as early as preschool, where black children comprise 18% of enrollment but are reflected in 48% of the suspensions. These racial disparities continue throughout primary, middle and high school where Black students comprise 16% of enrolled students but 34% of students suspended once, and 43% of students with records of multiple suspensions. Thus, US schools have had to reckon with how to reduce violence and disruption to increase safety, without also aggravating racial inequities and exclusion of differently abled children starting in the earliest pre-school years.

### ***How is Systemic Racism Perpetuated in US Schools through Implicit Bias?***

Decades of research have demonstrated clearly that students of color and students from low-income households are often treated differently from White and middle or upper class students while in school, and that these differences in experience have a negative effect on such students in terms of learning achievement and school engagement. (McKnight et al. 2017; Smith & Harper, 2015; Fabelo, 2011; Gay, 2010). One factor that has contributed to the discrepancies in school experience and achievement for students is the demographic reality that while

student demographics have shifted to a majority of students of color, teacher demographics in public schools have not (Amos, 2010; McKnight et al. 2017; Walker, 2016; Ohito, 2016). A second factor is that there is a relationship between persistent achievement gaps for Black, Hispanic and low-income students, as well as for students with disabilities, and educator's implicit biases (Gay, 2010). In a comprehensive analysis of the dynamics between teacher and student ascribed race, and the perception of disruptive behavior that resulted in out-of-class referrals and exclusionary discipline, Wright (2015) found assessments of behavior were more favorable when Black students were observed by Black teachers, and that this finding was stable across different Black teachers of the same Black male students, indicating that it is teacher perception and not changes in behavior that produce these results. Similar results were not found for race-matched Hispanic or White students.

As the US has continued to grapple with its history of racial inequity, beginning with its instantiation of slavery as an economic and legally organized arrangement in the forming and conduct of the nation, educators have become somewhat more informed about the racist and/or classist structures and assumptions within which they operate every day. However, these structures and assumptions also operate outside of conscious awareness, absorbed as part of everyday cultural socialization from childhood. These unconscious biases can feel shameful and painful to uncover for both White individuals and persons of color. The acknowledgement and unpacking of personal investment in systemic racism is at odds with avowed

American values of fairness, generosity and the reward of individual effort (McIntosh, 1989). White educators, who carry greater social privilege due to race and status positioning, struggle to reconcile their conscious intentions with their unconscious, biased actions towards students and families of color, or of low economic status. Restorative justice has evolved in the American context as one approach that can undercut the school-to-prison pipeline and support achievement success for students in school, by seeking out the meanings and contexts of disruptive behavior and repairing relationships fractured by systemic racism, classism and implicit bias within education itself (Fronius et al. 2019).

### ***Approaching Conversations on Race through Partnership with Counselors***

In order for US educators to build capacity for anti-racist engagement with Black and other marginalized students and families of color, they must become aware of the ways they participate in White supremacy through their affiliation with the culture of schooling, perpetuating its effects in the form of implicit biases expressed towards students. Ohito (2016) argues for use of “a pedagogy of discomfort” in the education of White teachers in order to prompt them to contend with their personal roles in the maintenance of institutionalized Whiteness in US classrooms. In order for these conversations about implicit bias to be effective however, White educators need to develop greater capacity to endure the discomfort and tension that comes with explicit discourse on race and racism (Ohito, 2016;

Cook et al., 2020). Avoidance of these uncomfortable feelings on the part of White educators, defined by DiAngelo (2011) as a defensive manifestation of “White fragility,” ensures the maintenance of White supremacist models within US schools (Hines, 2016).

School counselors, who themselves may occupy a variety of race and class positions, are in a unique role as school culture brokers, for helping develop key working relationships with the school principal and other key stakeholders at school. Counselors can facilitate explicit conversations about race, oppression, and institutionalized Whiteness as these impact the education of Black and other racially or economically marginalized students affected by the norms of school culture. Nurturing this type of relationship with the principal is a particularly important task. If school administration is ready for these important, yet oftentimes uncomfortable discussions on how implicit bias harms students and families of color, teachers are more likely to be expected to engage in this personal work (Cook et al., 2020). Sarfo-Mensah (2020) explored questions that can be posed to White educators to help them determine how they may or may not be operating from an anti-racist framework within school. The school counselor, who is also responsible for engaging in this work personally, may regularly lead professional development with small groups of educators so that conversations on implicit bias and the important work of discomfiting ourselves become normalized within school.

Explicit conversations about race, and racism between

culturally diverse school stakeholders also have the potential to increase feelings of trust and partnership within school-family relationships, and to uncover challenges that schools face when seeking to divest from unexamined assumptions and actions of White supremacy. Cook et al. (2020) conducted a study utilizing Critical Race Theory in Education (CRTE), which posits that “courageous conversations” on race relations can improve relationships between families and school professionals. A small sample of teachers, administrators, and parents of a variety of cultural backgrounds at a public K-8 school engaged in critical race dialogues for two-hour sessions over the course of five weeks. Results highlighted that while White participants felt that the conversations about the lived experiences of their colleagues and student family members of color were “eye-opening” (p. 135), some participants of color, as historically marginalized individuals, felt that they were not being exposed to new ideas or conversations. This outcome underscores the fact that school personnel need to unpack experiences of race without unduly burdening families of color as they seek greater equity at school (Cook et. Al 2020).

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### ***Black Identity and the Culture of Whiteness***

The school system in the US upholds White middle-class values (Jagers et al., 2019) and has long taught Black youth and families that in order to fit in, they must express their affect in a way that is palatable to a White audience. Whiteness as a culture

values reason more than affect, whereas the Black community is generally far more expressive around feelings (Parham et al., 2015). Black families that have assimilated into Whiteness and know how to code switch between cultures are likely to have an easier time interfacing with a predominately-White school system to make sure the needs of their children are met (Cross et al., 2002). According to Jagers et al. (2019), when students and families of color in school demonstrate “variations from those normative patterns [it] can result in... unwarranted low expectations, experiences of cultural mismatch, discrimination, micro-aggressions, and implicit biases by peers and adults” (p. 164). For example, when Black parents and guardians show up to school with strong affect, it can come at the expense of being taken seriously by staff. In particular, cultural stereotypes such as “the angry black woman” are used to belittle and silence Black women for daring to passionately advocate for themselves and their families. Black parents of school-age children must contend with this power dynamic in order to navigate the culturally White school system. Even in predominantly Black neighborhoods; leadership and staff in US schools are typically White, and without careful reflection, they will either consciously or unconsciously uphold the supremacy and cultural norms of Whiteness.

### ***Narrative Therapeutic Understandings within Restorative Practices***

Since the 1990s, suspensions and expulsions in US schools have been on the rise with the implementation of Zero-Tolerance

policies (Smith et al., 2015). While these policies seek to message a strong stance against certain behavior infractions within school, the reality is that “exclusionary discipline practices” (Loveall, 2018) isolate students, labeling them as “offenders,” and constructing a negative reputation that is hard to overcome (Winslade & Monk, 2012). These practices frequently lead to demoralization and eventual dropping out prior to graduation. Edwards (2017) tracked the workings of this process in a qualitative study of Black girls and school administrators’ perceptions about re-entry after exclusionary discipline. Black girls are also over-represented among suspended and expelled youth, and along with Black boys, are punished more harshly for the same misbehaviors other children commit. Edwards (2017) studied the stigmatizing effect of an offending reputation on girls’ sense of personal resignation and contrasted these with the perceptions of school administrators who were reluctant to impose exclusionary discipline in favor of interventions they perceived to be caring. The girls in Edwards’ study described their perceptions and experiences, recommending strategies each of the stakeholder groups in a school could take to enact seeing them as the individual people they are, rather than through the lens of “bad reputation” which adjudicates them based solely on what they have done that got them into trouble within the school.

In the same sense that restorative justice seeks to shift the frame for understanding offending from retribution to reconciliation within a community; and school personnel are encouraged to shift from thinking about management of

behavior deficits to creating inclusive spaces through building collaborative relationships with students and families; narrative therapy (White, 2007) seeks to replace individualist and deficit language surrounding problems with language that opens opportunity for personal agency and empowerment. Winslade and Monk (2012) apply the linguistic practices and philosophical premises of narrative therapy to the work of mediation and restorative conferencing in school communities, stating that “what is distinctive about a restorative approach is the emphasis on understanding offending from a relational perspective” (p. 82). They also state that when students get into trouble at school, “the process moves from accusation to moral guilt. The offender is required to demonstrate remorseful and submissive behavior and to acknowledge the authorities if he is not to attract righteous anger directed at him alone” (Winslade & Monk, 2012, p.84). Edwards (2017) documents what happens to students who resist such a process and the school seeks to reinforce its authority by moving into a criminalizing stance in response. Winslade and Monk (2012) further state, “by contrast, restorative processes are not just interested in the voices of accusation and guilt. More perspectives are deliberately brought in to the conversation. Rather than being isolated, the offender is wrapped in a network of those who matter to him and can support him to be accountable” (p.84). Even more importantly, what is avoided is the creation of “a split community in which the majority are taught to fear and protect themselves against the minority” within the school and surrounding community (Winslade & Monk, 2012, p.82).

In both the judicial and medical systems, the language surrounding the identification of difficulty is individualist. Problems or symptoms are given an intrapersonal attribution as reflecting trouble that is carried internally within the person. By contrast, narrative and restorative practices share the understanding that psychological and sociological difficulties are largely relational and contextual in nature, reflecting rupture in interpersonal processes. A relational interpersonal frame for resolving problems assumes bi-directionality in that those who harm can also be harmed by their own actions. This shows that harming is thereby not reflective of an inherent identity status as offender or perpetrator, but reflective of a rupture in right relationship that needs to be re-instantiated. Narrative practice approaches also eschew hewing to single, totalizing stories about individuals that result in labeling and poor social reputations. Winslade and Monk (2012) note that single storied identities are particularly damaging for children and youth because resisting the power of these circulating reputational tales is practically impossible. As a result, a child or marginalized person deprived of social power to protest comes to perceive themselves as diminished and personal or contextual change as improbable. Single stories that produce poor reputations at school also tend to employ universalizing language, such as “this child always underperforms” or “this child is never functioning at grade level expectations” that render counter-stories informed by counter-examples invisible. Since no person operates identically every hour of every day, invoking language that invites perceptions of unalterable performance of fixed identity characteristics reduces stakeholders’ ability to detect promising new pathways for changed action that are predicated on noticing the exceptions to

the performance of troubling behavior.

Narrative therapeutic approaches to change-making are exceptional in their use of linguistic devices that locate problems as separate from persons. This framing, called externalization (White, 2007), allows problems to be considered as “alien” to the individual self, and responded to as a formidable foe whose tactics can be discovered, mapped, and defeated by ingenuity. In this way, the individual is freed from the deficit or blaming stance of “having a problem” located inside themselves, to becoming an agent of resistance against the problem.

As in restorative practices, the use of language itself in narrative conversation offers a new place for the target person to stand, and enables their agency to counter the harmful effects of the problem, re-assume accountability for self and to others, and as a result make apparent the possibility for re-inclusion and a reconciled reputation within the home, community, or school. The work of the other stakeholders in restorative conferencing is critical, paralleling the function of “outsider witnesses” within narrative therapeutic practice (White, 2007). Outsider witnesses affirm preferred, new identity stories for the person, making what is spoken real and material within the community. Outsider witnesses are able to assist in circulating support for an individual’s revised identity story among the other adults at school. This may look like a child or family being recast from a “dysfunctional” or “deficit-ridden” identity to being perceived as “persevering and strong despite stressors” (Winslade and Monk, 2012; Madsen, 2007).

## ***The CORE Model of Collaboration in relation to Restorative Practices***

Minke's (2010) CORE model of collaboration aims to build trusting relationships between school staff and family members via adherence to the following principles: connection, optimism, respect, and empowerment. These ideals of relationship, embodied within the acronym CORE, come into play in the training of teachers and other school-based professionals through opportunities to "think differently" about families, "talk differently" with families, and "behave differently" alongside families in collaborative contexts. The CORE model states that teachers and school staff can engender trust in all families, including families of color, by listening and seeking to learn about what those families value. School staff members should genuinely feel and message the perception that all families are doing the best that they can for their children given their available resources. In addition, families are viewed as the experts on their lives and the needs of their children, and as a result, power is shared among stakeholders (Minke, 2010). The CORE model shares many values with the umbrella of restorative practices, which also seeks to build authentic relationships wherein successes are celebrated, and harm is acknowledged and repaired. The CORE model as originally defined (Minke 2010) does not explicitly address how power differentials organized around issues of race or class, influence the work of empowering families within the context of schooling. An update of the model, the School Based Family Counseling Meta-Model (Gerrard & Soriano, 2018) acknowledges the need for practitioners of

school-based family counseling to extend their interventions towards advocacy for children, families and schools in relation to existing community organizations, including healthcare and law enforcement, when families experience challenges and obstacles emanating from these agencies. The SBFC Meta Model (Gerrard & Soriano, 2013) like the CORE model before it, is fundamentally a systems theory approach, particularly suited to helping families of primary and middle school children develop optimally during critical junctures where practical interventions can help coordinate the multiple intersecting systems of school, family and community in terms of salutogenic impact on relational dynamics. However, further work incorporating understandings of structural racism and White supremacy into the CORE and SBFC Meta Models is still needed. Extending the CORE model emphasis on collaboration, communication and eco-systemic theory into examination of racism and anti-racism in relation to its premises and practices, would align its cross-disciplinary strengths with current and on-going social justice work in school communities today. As with restorative practices, implicit bias on the part of White counselors intending to work systemically, can create a barrier to authentically connecting with families of color via CORE and SBFC Meta Models, in ways that practitioners of these approaches may initially fail to perceive as they interact with families.

### ***Holding Space for Affect and Emotion in School***

Within conversations between Black and similarly marginalized students and families and White educators in US

schools, the centering of expressed affect, including expressions of anger, can allow for new opportunities for connection to emerge. Without genuine acknowledgement of affect, families may leave interactions with educators feeling disrespected and unheard, which can lead to further alienation. Exclusionary school discipline is one area that can engender strong affect within the experiences of students, families, and educators alike. Since research shows that Black students are more likely to experience suspension than their White peers, a reality that is further compounded by gender and disability status, (Smith 2015; Losen & Marton, 2018), Black families are more likely to endure both social isolation, and painful affective experiences in relationship to school administration and staff upon re-entry, and potentially throughout the remainder of the school year. Families may be left without opportunity within school to process their emotional responses to their child's school removal, which can close the door to authentic partnership with families. Given the racial disparities in suspension data in many US schools, race dialogues as explored by Cook et al. (2020) come to mind as a pro-active vehicle for cultural exchange, affective expression, and trust building that could play a positive role in bridging these communication gaps. Cook et al. (2020) highlight the important distinction between a "safe" space and a "brave" space (p. 125). The former is characterized by comfort for all participants in the conversation. However, comfort in a conversation about race and racial inequity tends to allow the White supremacist status quo to perpetuate within the school and avoids meaningful change. On the other hand, a "brave" space looks like a conversation where White participants are able to sustain the discomfort that comes with acknowledging the

realities of systemic racism, remaining vulnerable in the face of the affective experiences that may arise for them, such as guilt, anger, and shame. Increasing White educator capacity for and openness to the discomfort that comes with unlearning implicit bias, expanding perspectives on systemic racism, and engaging with raw affect is an important aspect in preparing them for creating authentic connections with families of color.

### ***Emotions and Emotional Process in Restorative Practice***

Through a study on restorative justice practices across the Western justice systems and throughout indigenous societies, Rossner (2017, 2013) discovered that there are assumptive, procedural, process, and emotional factors that impact the experience of restorative justice methods for both victims and offenders. Most notably, empirical research indicates that the most successful restorative conferencing approaches involve narrative and expressive elements, along with ritual dynamics that produce a community of care, capable of witnessing and containing strong feelings. One particularly strong affective experience that must be understood and facilitated, is the shame and shaming (Braithwaite, 1989) that explanatory theory within the restorative justice framework identifies as integral to wrongdoing and to efforts to repair harm through reconciliation and restitution. Degradation occurs in the process of excluding people, so must be addressed upon re-entry. Since this emotional burden is disproportionately borne by Black and similarly marginalized students and families, White educators must be prepared to hold space and center such

painful feelings, many of which may be oppression-linked; this is a central component of authentically repairing relationships in the wake of exclusionary school discipline. White educators are called upon to contend with their own sense of moral righteousness and racial privilege in situations where they may have been personally harmed by a Black or similarly marginalized student, leading to the student's suspension. A conversation between the teacher and the school counselor might help this process ahead of the conversation with the student and the family. Energizing efficacy and hopefulness for and during the process is a part of emotional visioning, which must welcome in the potential for Black anger as the advocacy that it represents.

### ***Affectively Centered Restorative Conferencing: Circles in Schools***

Restorative practices, as they are currently utilized in US schools today, come from restorative justice, which gained popularity in the 1970s in the Western criminal justice system (Rossner, 2017). Restorative justice brings victims and offenders together to share subjective, affective experiences of the offense committed, and to engage in collaborative problem solving (Gregory et al., 2015). This approach has since, been utilized all over the world, and has become a common practice in US schools in the form of restorative circles and conferencing. While there has been more research on the use of restorative practices with students in secondary education, it is important to increase attention to the role of this work in the school experiences of younger students of color, who face marginalization and

discrimination as they move through the US school system (Kervick et al., 2020). While there are many different tools that fall under the umbrella of restorative practices, Kervick et al. (2020) assert that full school support of a restorative approach is required for a successful school culture shift from a punitive to restorative model of student discipline.

Restorative circles hold space for the sharing of personal stories, affect, and experiences to build healthy and authentic relationships between school staff, students, and families (Holtham, 2009). Circles are a versatile approach to relationship building and maintenance that can be used informally to build classroom relationships and formally in response to student situations where harm has occurred (Smith et al., 2015). Although the use of restorative practices in schools has been shown to foster more positive relationships between students and teachers, research has found that implementation of these approaches alone was not enough to eliminate the racial trends in discipline referrals (Gregory et al., 2015; Anyon et al., 2016). However, an increase in authentic and trusting relationships between students of color and their teachers may mitigate the effects of implicit bias as it plays out in school discipline, as measured by student perception of teacher fairness (Gregory et al., 2015). This suggests that while there is more work to be done in establishing an anti-racist lens in re-imagining school discipline, restorative practices are a promising approach for the creation of a more equitable schooling experience for marginalized students.

### ***School Counselor as Facilitator of Brave Conversations***

One of my (Radna-Crasta) roles as an Elementary school counselor involves facilitating restorative conferences for students and their families upon the students' return from a suspension. We refer to these conferences as circles of hope, and we adopted this protocol after watching a video of a re-entry circle for a high school student (Friedman 2013). In the video, school professionals in a high school in Oakland, California wrap support and love around a Black student and his mother following the student's incarceration for implied drug dealing. As opposed to focusing only on the student and his behavior's impact on his academic and personal life, the conversation in the circle also addresses underlying family stressors that likely contributed to the student's engagement in these activities. In one moment, the facilitator breaks script and addresses the student's mother, who is visibly emotional, and asks the school-based team for any information on job opportunities for the mother to pursue. My colleagues and I were moved by the space that the school-based team held for the multiple layers of affect, narrative, and need expressed by the student and his mother. Allowing each stakeholder the chance to be brave and vulnerable with one another fostered a sense of authenticity, love, and support that we hoped we could emulate in our work with students and families experiencing the isolation, anger, and shame often associated with school removal.

In autumn 2019, I facilitated a circle of hope following the suspension of a Black second grade student. He bit his teacher following an exchange regarding non-compliance with a

classroom direction. At his circle of hope, attendees sat in a circle of chairs, and were as follows: the student, the student's mother, a private educational consultant, principal, classroom teacher, dean of students, and behavior specialist. In taking on the role of facilitator, I assumed the working belief that a central role of a school counselor is to be an agent of change within the school (Winslade & Monk, 2007). In order to behave like a change agent on behalf of this student and his family, I knew I would have to hold space for multiple stories and expressions of stakeholder affect when discussing the suspension and ways to move forward. My challenge as a facilitator in this particular circle of hope was to welcome all affect – especially the more challenging expressions of anger, frustration, exhaustion, and rage – while still helping to shape the conversation towards solutions and working partnerships on behalf of the student. I had to consciously work against US cultural practices that “[encourage] separation, demonization of those who disagree... hierarchy, and reliance on experts to solve problems” (Pranis, 2005, p. 62), and the cultural aspects of White supremacy that perpetuate defensiveness and fear of open conflict (Jones & Okun, 2001). I did this by giving all present in the circle an opportunity to speak on how they were impacted affectively by the situation, and to reframe the student’s behavior as a relational process as opposed to an individual problem experienced by an individual “problem student.” This framework is embraced in the CORE model as a central tenant around “think[ing] differently about families and problems by taking a systems view” (Minke, 2010, p. 3). Additionally, I knew I couldn’t “protect” anyone in the circle from any of the authentic, affective expressions shared by members of the circle during the conversation. This is what

differentiates a “brave” space from a “safe” space, the latter being a circle where all are entitled to comfort, especially those in power (Cook et al., 2020; Jones & Okun, 2001). My role as a facilitator of brave conversations is to restate what I hear, and ask more questions to guide the group deeper into what was experienced and what needs to happen next.

### ***Reflections from “Mama-Bear”***

While preparing this paper, I (Radna-Crasta) had the opportunity to speak on the phone with the mother of the student who had been suspended. She generously shared some reflections of her experience of her child’s circle of hope conference back in the autumn of 2019. To protect their privacy, I will refer to this mother as “Josephine” and her child as “Robert.”

### ***Creating Connection through Vulnerability***

Josephine shared that she felt a shift during the circle of hope experience, pointing to the sharing of authentic feelings during the whole-group circle (with specific reference to tears on the part of Robert’s teacher) and in personal sharing from our dean of students in a one on one conversation directly following the circle. The dean of students, a Black woman who had been present during the circle of hope, made herself vulnerable to Josephine by sharing a story of personal struggle and resilience from her own life. Josephine added that she had been initially dismissive of her as a member of Robert’s team because she wasn’t familiar with her and thus was not open to her role as an

authority figure. However, the dean of student's instinct to follow up with Josephine following the circle with a private conversation where she made herself vulnerable –and thus “de-rolled” herself from her expert status –played an instrumental role in Josephine's positive experience of the circle of hope as a whole. She was moved by having the opportunity to see school leaders as people with their own stories, which contributed to Josephine's sense that school staff genuinely wanted to partner with her to help Robert experience success in school. For Josephine, the circle of hope was effective because of the balance of power she experienced, wherein all staff members joined with her and Robert as one supportive and very human team.

Josephine shared that when she first arrived at school for the circle of hope, she was feeling defensive, anxious, angry, and frustrated. She also reported feeling isolated, brought on by a sense that school staff didn't have the tools to help and support Robert in school. She added that as a Black woman, she takes on a “Mama-bear” and advocate role for Robert, and feels defensive when confronted with school staff members with whom she doesn't already have a strong, pre-existing relationship. Josephine had invited a private educational consultant, a professional the school team had met with earlier that year to help advocate for Robert's new individualized education plan (IEP) to support his specialized learning needs.

Because she also used to work in the same urban district, Josephine had insight into what school culture that centers Black

students and families should look like, both from the perspective of parent and professional. Josephine recalled hearing White colleagues talking about Black students in ways that fundamentally devalued them as human beings. They would make comments such as “he’ll just end up dead or in jail,” which demonstrates a lack of compassion and helps to perpetuate the systems which isolate and ultimately fail Black youth and their families. This is also an example of the harmful role that implicit bias plays in enabling the devaluation of Black students and families in White educational settings. Josephine commented that without restorative practices or a conference like the circle of hope, these students are left to fall through the cracks of a system that criminalizes them and doesn’t hold space for them to speak to what they are going through as people. These comments and attitudes get in the way of establishing connections and relationships with Black students and families, which is what the circle of hope aims to facilitate through authentic sharing.

### ***The Role of Love in School***

Josephine shared that love and a feeling of belonging plays a vital role in repairing relationships with students and families after a suspension. She felt that the circle of hope—which also included Robert—helped him to not feel targeted by school staff based on the suspension. She said that Robert needed to feel that school staff members “still [loved him] and still care.” Josephine also disclosed that Robert had experienced multiple instances of removal from his institutions of learning, namely day care facilities. Josephine was called to pick up Robert

from day care one day due to a disciplinary issue, and she shared that the director of the day care was in tears when she arrived. This is because Robert had said to her, “I know you’re gonna kick me out because that’s what everyone else does.” Robert’s experience of being unwanted - and rejected - speaks to how Black children who experience a cycle of school exclusion and removal feel they are not worthy, that they are “trash,” and that their situations will not get better. However, the circle of hope seeks to hold space for the authentic expressions of these feelings, and share the message that people in school still love and care about students regardless of their behavior. According to Josephine, this message of love has to be a central force, and it must be authentically experienced by students and their families.

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## **CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

### ***A Call for White Discomfort***

Josephine’s reflections upon her time in Robert’s circle of hope point to the key role affect plays in the maintenance of authentic relationships between school staff members, Black and other marginalized students, and their families. In order to partner with Black students and their families within a school system that reinforces White supremacy, school counselors must model the process of centering “expression[s] of emotion in narrative form” (Rossner, 2017, p. 22) during restorative conferencing, even if

these affective narratives may cause discomfort in school staff. Ohito (2016) states the importance of embracing discomfort as a means of “elucidating how white supremacy functions - and can be challenged - intra- and inter-personally” (p. 456) as it relates to the education of White teachers, and ultimately, their ability to establish supportive relationships with students and families of color. Through attention to affect, and the embracing of anti-racist teaching and learning, all school leadership and staff members create opportunities for rich relationship building and common ground with Black students and families (Ohito, 2016). Perhaps entering into restorative conferences having had opportunities to probe and reflect upon their own internal biases or blind spots could further improve family connection and engagement.

### ***Leveraging our Current Professional Models***

School-based family counselors working with the CORE model (Minke, 2010) and professional school counselors engaged in bringing comprehensive services to schools through multi-tiered systems of support, positive behavioral intervention systems and creation of academic home networks (Savitz-Romer, 2019) can each leverage the power of their current work by more deliberately engaging in anti-racist and affect-supporting restorative conferencing practices. We have argued in this paper that sensitivity to the preferred cultural and affective experiences of marginalized students and families must be centered in all school-family-community interactions if we are

to work as anti-racist professionals within educational settings. Working in this manner will strengthen other models for therapeutic intervention and family-school collaboration in which we currently engage. We can reduce educational disparities in how children are treated at school, support opportunity pathways for children's school success and insure their families' empowered inclusion in all educational decisions that affect the wellbeing of themselves and their children.

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## 4 SUPPORTING STUDENTS' EXECUTIVE FUNCTIONS IN THE CLASSROOM CONTEXT

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Celina Korzeniowski & Mirta Ison

Human, Social and Environmental Science Institute of the  
National Scientific and Technical Research Council (CONICET),  
Argentina.

Faculty of Psychology, Aconcagua University, Argentina

### **ABSTRACT**

*Proper development of executive functions (EFs) in children is associated with well-being, health, and positive social relationships, and it is a critical predictor of school performance. Family and school context shape EFs' development. At school, educators play a critical role in modeling and supporting students' self-regulation skills. In line with this position, the goal of this study was to design a school-based intervention aimed at: 1) helping teachers reflect on their students' EFs and their educational practices used to support students' self-regulation; and, 2) training educators in the design of teaching sequences aimed at promoting students' EFs. For Methodology, 735 educators from the province of Mendoza, Argentina,*

*participated. The professional training was structured in three stages. In the first stage, a theoretical-practical training was offered on the implication of EFs in self-regulated learning, and teachers were asked to assess their students' EFs, using an observational inventory. In the second stage, teachers self-assessed their educational practices using the Educational Practices Inventory (Korzeniowski, 2019a). In the third stage, teaching teams proposed educational sequences aimed at promoting EFs. For Results, it was noted that educators more frequently employed strategies to scaffold students' cognitive flexibility, and they reported metacognition as a target EF to enhance in their students. Then, educators designed 85 teaching sequences in which they embedded areas of school curriculum - Math, Science, Art, Gym- with strategies to promoting students' EFs. Teaching sequences were creative, innovative and used a variety of resources. In Conclusion, training teachers in using a continuous process of assessment, implementation, and evaluation of teaching sequences to strengthen students' EFs is a valuable way to make classroom environments more supportive of students' cognitive development.*

**Key words:** *executive functions, self-regulated learning, teachers, school-based intervention, teaching sequences, Argentine students.*

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Executive functions (EFs) constitute one of the most distinctive aspects of the human being, as they enable the ability to act with purpose and in a self-regulating manner in various contexts of social interaction (Diamond, 2013; Walk et al., 2018).

EFs are higher-order cognitive abilities involved in the self-regulation of actions, thoughts, and emotions necessary to achieve goals and solve problems (Diamond, 2013; Korzeniowski et al., 2017b). Literature identifies three core EFs: inhibitory control, working memory and cognitive flexibility (Diamond, 2013; Miyake et al., 2000). From core EFs, other more complex are developed, such as planning, organization, metacognition, monitoring and decision-making (Diamond, 2013; Miyake et al., 2000).

EFs play a critical role in cognitive, social and emotional development of children and adolescents, and predict many life outcomes (Diamond, 2013; Walk et al., 2018). Their adequate performance in childhood is associated with good school performance, purposeful social relationships, emotional well-being and behavioral self-regulation, which all predict better health, better quality of life, greater academic success, better employment status and a lower incidence of behavior problems, in adolescence and adulthood (Diamond, 2013; Moffitt et al., 2011).

EFs emerge in early childhood, and follow a long development that continues until adulthood (Hughes, 2011; Korzeniowski et al., 2020). Their development is associated with

the late maturation of a set of neural networks coordinated by prefrontal cortex: seat of cognitive control (Fuster, 2001). Its extensive and slow development is a facilitating factor for cognition, since it creates various time windows in which brain plasticity is increased and experience has the maximum impact on brain development (Armstrong et al., 2006).

EFs can be negatively affected by stressful environments (Hackman et al., 2010) and by the lack of quality and proactive interactions with adult caregivers (Bibok et al., 2009). However, environments that promote healthy child development can help children to strengthen their EFs (Hackman et al., 2010). During the last two decades, environmental factors that model the development of child EFs have been studied, identifying factors from family, school, and community. Family and school constitute the two social institutions that most affect the development of children (Gerrard & Soriano, 2020). Therefore, pioneering research focused on family context and identified a set of predictors of EFs, including: parents' educational level (Hackman et al., 2010; Matute et al., 2009), prenatal and postnatal stress level (Hackman et al., 2010), family socioeconomic level (Hackman et al., 2010; Hoff, 2003; Korzeniowski et al., 2016; Matute et al., 2009), rearing practices (Hackman et al., 2010; Hoff, 2003; Spruijt et al., 2018), cognitive stimulation (Hackman et al., 2010; Hoff, 2003), quality of mother-child interactions (Bernier et al., 2012; Bibok et al., 2009; Spruijt et al., 2018). Other studies have been interested in the characteristics of school context and have pointed out: school climate and classroom quality (Weiland et al., 2013), classroom management (Bardack & Obradović, 2019; Korinek & deFur,

2016), teacher's emotional support (Suntheimer & Wolf, 2020), collaborative interactions between teacher and students (Bardack & Obradović, 2019; Hu et al., 2020; Korinek & deFur, 2016; McKinnon & Blair, 2018; Rosen et al., 2014), peer relationships (Vandenbrouck et al., 2018).

This body of research has generated growing interest in the design of ecological interventions aimed at improving resources in family and school in order to enhance children's cognitive development, especially in children from vulnerable contexts. From this perspective, school-based interventions have been designed, based on the close relationship between EFs and school learning.

EFs are significant predictors of school performance and school success from preschool to adulthood (Best et al., 2011; Fuhs, et al., 2014; Korzeniowski et al., 2016; McKinnon & Blair, 2018). EFs are considered critical for school readiness, future academic performance, and successful learning (Nyroos et al., 2018). In addition, EFs favor adjustment of children to school context (Blair & Raver 2014; Diamond, 2013).

Adequate development of EFs is associated with better performance in different subject areas, such as Literature, Mathematics, and Science (Best et al., 2011; Fuhs, et al., 2014). This is based on the fact that EFs orchestrate various cognitive processes that enable student to initiate and complete tasks, set goals, plan and organize activities, focus attention, sustain cognitive effort and persevere in face of difficulties, detect errors, recognize new perspectives, formulate alternative plans when atypical events occur, and reflect on thoughts and actions

(Blair & Raver, 2014; Hodgkinson & Parks, 2016; Korzeniowski et al., 2016; Nyroos et al., 2017).

From this, the importance of promoting schoolchildren EFs arises, as a way to increase their resources for learning. Experiences carried out have implemented different types of school-based interventions, such as computerized cognitive training, cognitive games, role plays, curricular adaptations. These experiences have obtained favorable results, which indicates that EFs can be trained and improved with practice (Diamond & Lee, 2011; Diamond & Ling, 2016; Korzeniowski et al., 2017a, b). In recent years, there has been a growing interest in the design and application of enriched school curricula, as these interventions can benefit more children and be sustained over time.

Most of specialized curricula have been tested in preschool years (Anderson et al., 2020; Diamond & Lee, 2011; Janz et al., 2019; Walk et al., 2018). Results obtained indicate that participating children presented improvements in EFs and in school performance. Despite these favorable results, few experiences have been extended to intermediate elementary school grades and to middle school (Hodgkinson & Parks, 2016). At this stage of the school path, students must face new challenges and carry out more complex learning, which imposes new demands on EFs. Therefore, this stage can be of great interest to apply school-based interventions.

Design and application of enriched school curricula requires transferring knowledge and strategies to educators, who will be responsible for implementing techniques and

strategies. This implies recognizing the role of teacher as a mediator of cognitive development of students (Bardack & Obradovic, 2019; Keenan et al., 2019; Korinek & deFur, 2016), and highlights the importance of providing instances of teacher training for EFs. Two ways have been identified by which educators promote development of students' EFs: one implicit, from modeling the use of EFs in daily school activities; and, other explicit, through scaffolding development of students' self-regulatory capacities (Bardack & Obradovic, 2019; Korinek & deFur, 2016).

Teachers model EFs to their students in multiple ways, such as when they: plan and sequence learning tasks, organize and structure the classroom, resist distractions, control frustrations while maintaining a good class climate, or use their flexibility to find different solutions to problems (Bardack & Obradovic, 2019; Hodgkinson & Parks, 2016; Rosen et al., 2014). Likewise, it has been observed that teachers who denote greater cognitive and emotional self-regulation abilities are more likely to use educational practices that explicitly support or scaffold students in the acquisition of self-regulation abilities (Korinek & deFur, 2016; Raver et al. 2012; Rosen et al., 2014). Scaffolding is an adjustable and transient support that enables students to solve problems that they would not solve without receiving help (Bibok et al., 2009; Brown & Paliscar, 1989; Vygostki, 1991). A recent study documented that scaffolding of planning and cognitive flexibility skills offered by educators was associated with improvements in students' EFs six months later (Bardack & Obradovic, 2019).

Although these school-based interventions are grounded in cognitive neurosciences, they can be articulated with the School Based Family Counseling (SBFC) model. SBFC is an approach to helping children succeed at school and overcome personal, interpersonal, and family problems (Gerrard & Soriano, 2020). The SBFC model proposes different levels of intervention, and one of them, focuses on school prevention programs. School prevention programs refer to interventions that focus on teaching students or teacher's skills that could prevent future problems (Gerrard & Soriano, 2020). School-based interventions aimed at training educators in strengthening students' EFs, can be included at this level. Consequently, articulating both approaches could be a way to create better educational practices aimed at promoting good school performance and healthy development in students.

In sum, teachers play a key role in the development of students' EFs, which constitute cognitive resources for learning and healthy development. From this basis, a requirement arises to train teachers in educational practices that promote students' EFs. Considering that experiences carried out have so far focused mostly on preschool years, the present study set out to train elementary and middle school teachers in the design of educational activities and practices aimed at enriching school curriculum in order to promote students' EFs. The research goals were: 1) helping teachers reflect on students' EFs and their educational practices used to support students' self-regulation; 2) training educators in the design of teaching sequences aimed at strengthening students' EFs; and, 3) analyzing didactic sequences created by teaching teams, describing curricular

areas, proposed activities, target EFs to enhance and, teachers' actions aimed at scaffolding students' EFs.

## **METHODS**

*Participants:* Participants were 735 educators from Mendoza, Argentina. Elementary teachers (n = 405) and middle school teachers (n = 329) participated. 73% were female and 27% were male. Average age was 41.74 (SD = 8.68), ranging between 24 and 57 years of age. Length of service in teaching was 10.09 (SD = 9.72). 76.1% had completed postgraduate studies and 96% reported having completed teacher training courses.

### ***Instruments and material***

*Teachers Observation Inventory of Students' EFs (Korzeniowski, 2019c):* This inventory allows teachers to assess executive functioning of their group of students during daily school activities. It can be applied by teachers to identify strengths and weaknesses of students' EFs, target EFs to enhance and monitor the group in case of applying intervention strategies. It was designed based on target behaviors associated with EFs referred by literature (Hodgkinson & Parks, 2016; Korinek & deFur, 2016). It is made up of 7 subscales: Attention, Inhibitory Control, Cognitive Flexibility, Working Memory, Organization, Planning and Metacognition. Each scale was made up of four items. Table 1 provides examples of items for each subscale. Teachers use a three-point Likert scale to report the frequency of students' behaviors, where 0 = frequently, 1 =

sometimes, 2 = never. Score of subscales ranges from 0 to 2 points, indicating that the higher the score, the greater the performance in EFs. The following interpretation criteria are used to assess EFs performance: 0 - .49 = very low performance; .50 - .99 = low performance; 1.00 - 1.49 = moderate performance; 1.50 - 2.00 = high performance. For the study sample, inventory subscales presented an adequate internal consistency, ranging from  $\alpha = .76$  for Attention to  $\alpha = .83$  for Metacognition.

**Table 1. Examples of items for Teachers Observation Inventory of Students' EFs**

Subscale	Items
<b>Attention</b>	Students are easily distracted while doing school activities
<b>Inhibitory Control</b>	Students act impulsively without thinking about consequences of their actions
<b>Cognitive Flexibility</b>	Students don't adapt to changes in habits or routines
<b>Working Memory</b>	Students have difficulty relating a new idea or concept to what was previously learned
<b>Organization</b>	In written assignments, students express their ideas messily.

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<b>Planning</b>	Students forget evaluations and scheduled school activities
<b>Metacognition</b>	Students have difficulties in checking their homework to see if they have made mistakes

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*Educational Practices Inventory (Korzeniowski, 2019a):* This inventory assesses activities and practices that teachers use to strength and scaffold development of students' self-regulatory skills. It was designed based on educational practices that literature refers to as enhancing students' EFs (Bardack & Obradovic, 2019; Hodgkinson & Parks, 2016; Korinek & deFur, 2016; Rosen et al., 2014). It is made up of 10 subscales: Organization Techniques (9 items), Learning Expectations and Routines (4 items), Student Involvement (9 items), Instructions (7 items), Planning Scaffolding (7 items), Metacognition Scaffolding (5 items), Cognitive Flexibility Scaffolding (7 items), Working Memory Scaffolding (5 items), Attention Scaffolding (8 items), Behavioral and Emotional Control Scaffolding (7 items). Table 2 provides examples of items for each subscale. Teachers use a three-point Likert scale to report frequency of use of classroom practices, where 0 = never, 1 = sometimes, 2 = frequently. Score of subscales ranges from 0 to 2 points, indicating that the higher the score, the greater the frequency of use of the proposed strategies. The following interpretation criteria are used to establish gradients of use: 0 - .49 = low use; .50 - .99 = low-middle use; 1.00 - 1.49 = high-middle use; 1.50 - 2.00 = high use. For the study sample, inventory subscales presented an adequate

internal consistency, ranging from  $\alpha=.62$  for Learning Expectations and Routines to  $\alpha= .82$  for Attention Scaffolding. Finally, to assess teachers' perception of filling of the inventory, two closed questions were included at the end of the inventory: 1) Did filling the inventory help you to reflect on your daily educational practices and learn new strategies? and, 2) Could filling of the inventory be included as a frequent activity within teaching?

**Table 2. Examples of items for Educational Practices Inventory**

Subscale	Items
<b>Organization Techniques</b>	I use, consult and model the use of schedules, calendars, task lists and other organizational tools
<b>Learning Expectations and Routines</b>	I establish step-by-step routines for daily tasks, for example: transitions.
<b>Student Involvement</b>	I provide students with opportunities to express their ideas and make decisions.
<b>Instructions</b>	I check understanding of instructions by students.
<b>Planning Scaffolding</b>	I provide reminders and feedback on achievement of partial goals.
<b>Metacognition Scaffolding</b>	I propose questions or activities for students to monitor and review their learning process.

<b>Cognitive Flexibility Scaffolding</b>	I practice and model different solutions to problems.
<b>Working Memory Scaffolding</b>	I take breaks for students to update information learned and integrate it into a meaningful whole.
<b>Attention Scaffolding</b>	I use mindfulness meditation techniques to optimize attention focus processes.
<b>Behavioral and Emotional Control Scaffolding</b>	If I perceive that students show difficulties in controlling their behavior, I stop teaching and open a space to discuss what happened.

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*Professional training program on EFs (Korzeniowski, 2019b):* Professional training program on EFs is a theoretical-practical training for educators, designed to enhance students' EFs. It is developed in three stages.

In the first stage, a theoretical-practical training is offered on the implication of EFs for self-regulated learning. Teachers carry out the following activities: 1) Reading a theoretical material on the conceptualization of EFs and its implication for learning, and 2) Transferring of theoretical postulates to everyday classroom situation, by observing classroom situations in which students exhibit strengths and difficulties in their executive functioning, using Teachers Observation Inventory of Students' EFs (Korzeniowski, 2019c).

In the second stage, teachers reflect on their key role as

mediator of students' cognitive development. To achieve this goal, three activities are proposed: 1) Analyzing educational interventions as strategies for promotion of students' EFs; 2) Reflecting on the role of teacher in interventions; and, 3) Teachers' self-assessing their educational practices in order to identify their strengths and weaknesses in scaffolding students' EFs skills, using Educational Practices Inventory (Korzeniowski, 2019a).

In the third stage, teachers are trained in designing didactic sequences that articulate school curriculum with strategies aimed at promoting students' EFs. Four activities are proposed: 1) Analyzing a theoretical model proposed to frame teaching actions, which was developed based on contributions from neurosciences and education; 2) Reading a manual with techniques and strategies to promote EFs in the classroom; 3) Presenting models of didactic sequences (Andersen et al., 2019; Cabanes et al., 2018); and, 4) Elaborating educational sequences articulating school curricula with strategies aimed at enhancing students' EFs.

### ***Procedure***

Professional training program on EFs was requested by the Education Department of Mendoza, Argentina, and was framed within the Provincial Interlevel Articulation Plan (PPA). Educators, heads of schools, superintendents and school counselors from elementary and middle schools throughout the province of Mendoza participate in PPA. Professional training program had both a face-to-face version, which was intended for head of school, superintendent and school counselors, and an

online version, intended for educators.

The online training proposal for teachers was publicized through the Educational Department of Mendoza's website, and those teachers who were interested in the training, enrolled in the program. Teachers' participation was voluntary. Teacher training was online, and lasted three months, from October to December. It was developed in three stages. In each stage teachers did theoretical and practical activities.

Teachers were informed that data collected in the inventories and through the program could be used for research purposes, and their informed consent was requested. The filling of the Teachers Observation Inventory of Students' EFs and the Educational Practices Inventory, was anonymous. Teachers completed inventories on a google drive form. Teaching sequences created by teaching teams were uploaded to the Educational Department's platform. Once training was finished, teaching teams received feedback about the didactic sequences they have created and their performance in the program. Finally, teachers received a certification for their participation in the training.

## **RESULTS**

First, we analyze teachers' report about executive functioning of their student's group during daily school activities. Mean of students' EFs values ranged from .71 for Metacognition to 1.09 for Inhibitory Control, indicating that teachers perceived difficulties in EFs of their student groups. Metacognition was the

most weakened cognitive function reported by teachers.

Then, classroom practices that promote students' EFs used by the participating teachers were analyzed. In 9 of 10 variables evaluated, teachers ( $n = 735$ ) obtained an average that ranged between 1.55 and 1.68, which indicates that they regularly use educational guidelines and strategies aimed at strengthening students' EFs. It was observed that guidelines they use most frequently are those aimed at promoting students' cognitive flexibility ( $M = 1.68$ ), followed by those that support promotion of working memory ( $M = 1.61$ ) and planning ( $M = 1.61$ ). Moreover, teachers frequently assess students' understanding of instruction, explain, practice and review procedures several times, and provide feedback to students in order to promote their self-management. Finally, it was observed that teachers regularly engage in behaviors designed to capture and sustain attention of their students ( $M = 1.46$ ), although they use these strategies less frequently than other educational practices analyzed.

Subsequently, teachers ( $n = 735$ ) valued their experience regarding filling of the inventory as an instance of self-evaluation of their classroom practices. Most of teachers valued this experience favorably, and reported that this activity helped them reflect on their daily educational practices and learn about new strategies to enrich themselves (98%). They also pointed out that filling out the inventory could be included as a frequent activity within teaching (97%).

In the third stage of training, the teaching teams made didactic sequences designed to promote students' EFs. Teaching

teams built 85 didactic sequences, which integrated promotion of EFs with different curricular areas, such as Mathematics, Reading, Writing Workshops, Environmental Education, Natural Sciences, Social Sciences, Gym, Sex Education, Statistics. Sequences were characterized by being creative, using diverse resources, including recreational activities, and stimulating student involvement. It stands out that 36 sequences presented an interdisciplinary proposal, and 15 proposed activities between the family and the school.

Sequences that proposed activities to promote communication between family and school ( $n = 15$ ) were diverse, creative, and in some cases, presented an interdisciplinary proposal. Analyzing the proposed activities, it was observed that in eight sequences, students had to comment on what they learned at school to their relatives. For example, students told their families about the importance of having healthy eating habits. In five didactic sequences, students had to carry out an activity with their families. For example, students surveyed family members about significant learning and produced a report that they shared at school. Finally, two didactic sequences involved family participation in the development of activities at school. In one of them, families helped their children to design, build and operate a supermarket using recycled material. In another, students held an educational outdoor festival, in which they tasted healthy dishes with their families.

In 94% of didactic sequences ( $n = 85$ ), teaching teams identified with accuracy EFs that they would promote through the proposed activities. In each didactic sequence, teaching

teams selected between two to six EFs to promote, with the most frequently chosen being: Metacognition (78%), Planning (72%) and Organization (72%).

Finally, in 83% of sequences (n = 85), teaching teams reported scaffolding activities that they would use to promote students’ self-regulation abilities. The most widely-used scaffolding strategies were those aimed at strengthening metacognition, such as developing self-evaluation grids. Table 3 provides examples of proposed classroom scaffolding practices.

**Table 3. Examples of classroom practices aimed at scaffolding students’ EFs.**

EFs Scaffolding	Classroom Practice Examples
<b>Attention</b>	Using varied resources to capture student attention: videos, web resources, satellite images, games, songs.
<b>Inhibitory Control</b>	Ball games and playground activities to improve students’ inhibitory control
<b>Working Memory</b>	Help student to do mental calculation using cards games and calculation crossword
<b>Cognitive Flexibility</b>	Brain Storming

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<b>Planning</b>	Help student to design a school calendar and an agenda
<b>Organization</b>	Provide support for organizing ideas before writing a report
<b>Metacognition</b>	Provide a guide to model task evaluation

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## **DISCUSSION**

This study presents an experience of a professional teacher training aimed at promoting students' EFs in the classroom. The results obtained highlight the teacher's role as a mediator of students' cognitive development and provide new evidence for the design school-based interventions, public policies and teacher training.

The results obtained underscore the importance of providing teachers with opportunities to assess their students' EFs and to reflect on their classroom practices, offering them specific instruments of assessment. In this experience, teachers were able to assess the executive functioning of their group of students in regards to identify target EFs to enhance. Metacognition was the most weakened EFs reported by teachers.

Furthermore, teachers were able to assess guidelines and teaching strategies aimed at strengthening their students' EFs, which led to two interesting findings. First, it was observed that participating educators quite frequently use educational guidelines that promote students' self-regulatory capacities.

Specifically, use of classroom practices aimed at promoting development of cognitive flexibility, planning and working memory was identified as a strength of the group. Such practices included: promoting students' creativity and divergent thinking, modelling resolution problems techniques, favoring memorization of content through use of diagrams, graphics or images, assisting students to develop an efficient plan to achieve a goal, and providing feedback on achievement of partial goals.

Recent research has pointed out that the use of these classroom practices over time is associated with promotion of students' EFs (Bardack & Obradovic, 2019; Hodgkinson & Parks, 2016; Keenan et al., 2019; Rosen et al., 2014). A study indicated that teacher scaffolding of cognitive flexibility and planning during school activities was associated with better performance of students' EFs six months later (Bardack & Obradovic, 2019). This report can contribute to interpreting results obtained from a study carried out with a large and representative sample of 55,000 schoolchildren from Mendoza (Korzeniowski & Ison, 2019), in which students' EFs were evaluated and cognitive flexibility was identified as the strongest. These results could be associated with practices reported by teachers in this study, who use guidelines and strategies with high frequency to strengthen students' cognitive flexibility. However, future studies are necessary to test these associations directly and predictively.

Second, teachers valued their experience regarding filling of the inventory, and reported that this activity helped them to reflect on their daily educational practices and allowed them to learn new strategies. They suggested that this practice could be

carried out as a systematic activity in the school year. Frequent review of the inventory can be a valuable resource, from which teachers can adjust their strategies according to the needs and progress of their students (Korinek & deFur, 2016; Nyroos et al., 2017). Likewise, discussing and analyzing educational practices with other colleagues can help teachers agree on a consistent educational plan for different subjects, grades or levels in order to achieve greater mastery and generalization of target competencies in students (Korinek & deFur, 2016).

In the third stage of the professional training, teachers were trained to design educational sequences articulating school curricula with strategies aimed at enhancing students' EFs. Teaching teams proposed 85 didactic sequences, in which they integrated specific activities aimed at strengthening students' EFs into the teaching of Mathematics, Language, Social Sciences, Natural Sciences, Arts, Gym, Environmental Education, Sexual Education, and English. The designed sequences were creative, used diverse resources, included playful activities and stimulated student involvement. Some of them proposed interdisciplinary activities addressing EFs stimulation as a transversal axis in different study subjects, and others included activities that favor school-family communication.

It is important to note that teaching teams planned activities aimed at promoting communication between the school and the family, in 15 educational sequences. Different gradients were observed in family participation. In some activities, parents were informed by children about what they had learnt at school, and, in others parents participated in

activities carried out at school. These activities show that teachers value building bonds between family and school.

In 94% of didactic sequences (n= 85), teachers accurately identified EFs that they would stimulate with proposed activities. In 78% of sequences, teachers proposed activities aimed at strengthening metacognition, in 72% planning-organization skills and in 69% cognitive flexibility. The greater inclusion of these EFs in the design of didactic sequences could indicate that educators consider the stimulation of complex cognitive abilities to be more relevant in the transition stage between elementary to middle school. These findings are in agreement with previous studies, which indicate the greater implication of complex EFs in learning processes, as students advance in elementary (Best et al, 2011) and secondary schooling (Hodgkinson & Parks, 2016; Vandenbrouck et al., 2018). Planning, organization and cognitive flexibility are necessary for students to successfully solve more complex learning tasks. Likewise, metacognition becomes a relevant cognitive resource to move from external regulation to self-regulation of learning processes.

Interestingly, in 84% of sequences proposed, teaching teams were able to explain specific strategies and activities that they would use to scaffold EFs' development. Teaching teams identified various scaffolding strategies, including: using diverse and creative resources - videos, songs, games - to capture and sustain students' attention, providing reminders, modeling the use of a school calendar, modeling the use of brainstorm, and using self-assessment grids. Reflecting on how to scaffold cognitive development and diagram it in concrete actions is not

an easy task for educators. In this experience, educators were able to overcome this challenge and developed ideas on how to adapt their pedagogical practices and daily activities to promote students' EFs. In line with previous studies (Bardack & Obradovic, 2019; Keenan et al., 2019; Korinek & deFur, 2016), this data shows the relevance of enriching teacher training with the contributions of neuroscience.

In sum, the results obtained indicate that teacher training achieved its goals, while it managed to transfer knowledge and strategies to educators, who were able to use them to create new and better educational practices that promote students' EFs. These findings indicate that teachers were able to look at educational reality from a different perspective: from the neurosciences. Strengths and resources used in this experience that may have favored the appropriation of knowledge by teachers include: integrating theories of learning and for neuroscientific models, exemplifying EFs in everyday school situations, providing tools teachers to value their educational practices and their students' EFs, encouraging participation of teachers in the construction of strategies.

The experience had limitations. Professional training began in the middle of the school year, lasted three months and was conducted online. It would be desirable for future training to start at the beginning of the school year and extend for a longer period of time, in order to be able to monitor teachers' learning process and help them develop mastery in the use of strategies. Likewise, it would be desirable to extend the network of trainers and create interdisciplinary work teams to monitor the progress

of interventions in schools. It would be desirable for future research to include a control group, and to be able to carry out post-tests of students to assess the impact of the interventions. The results obtained are limited to teachers from Mendoza and cannot be generalized to other educators from other regions and countries. Therefore, it would be desirable that future training could be extended to a larger area of Argentina and replicated in other Latin American countries.

In line with other researchers (Bardack & Obradovic, 2019; Keenan et al., 2019; Korinek & deFur, 2016; Walk et al., 2018) and pioneers in the field of executive functions (Blair & Raver, 2014; Diamond, 2013) have postulated, this study underlines the importance of incorporating these professional training programs within public educational policies and in teacher-training programs.

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## **CONCLUSIONS AND CONTRIBUTION TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF SBFC**

The experience carried out presents an advance in training of Latin American teachers, in two directions. One aspect is that it is a novel and creative experience because, to date, there have not been documented instances of teachers professional training aimed at designing didactic sequences that integrate the promotion of students' EFs. The second aspect is that the experience has been applied to a school stage not contemplated in previous studies: passage from elementary to middle school.

The training was a significant learning experience for participating educators, who appropriated the contributions and strategies of neurosciences, to create new and better educational practices aimed at strengthening students' EFs. This experience demonstrates that researchers and teachers have to articulate perspectives, knowledge, experiences and objectives to co-construct enriched educational practices.

This experience shares the foundations of the SBFC model and extends its focus to a new area of application: neuroscience. It shares the ecological perspective of the SBFC metamodel, which highlights school as one of the social institutions that most affects children's development. In this particular experience, the role of teacher as an adult who models and scaffolds the development of children's EFs is valued and highlighted. Furthermore, it shares the importance of promoting children's and adolescents' school success, and, consequently, proposes to enrich educational practices with the contributions of neuroscience. The professional teacher training on the promotion of students' EFs is a school prevention program, while its ultimate purpose is to enrich educational practices in order to promote students' self-regulation capacities, which are closely associated with better school performance, well-being, purposeful social relationships, and healthy development in children and adolescents. Therefore, its contribution to the SBFC model lies in its including, within the school-based interventions, those aimed at promoting and strengthening students' EFs.

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## 5 SCHOOL INTERVENTION: PROMOTING SOCIO-COGNITIVE FUNCTIONING IN INITIAL EDUCATION

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Mirta Ison<sup>1,2</sup>, Daniela González<sup>2</sup> & Celina Korzeniowski<sup>1,2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Human, Social and Environmental Science Institute of the National Scientific and Technical Research Council (INCIHUSA - CONICET), Mendoza, Argentina

<sup>2</sup> Faculty of Psychology, Aconcagua University, Mendoza, Argentina

### ABSTRACT

*Early childhood has been considered as a developmental stage characterized by relatively high levels of neural plasticity, in which certain parts of the brain and their corresponding functions are especially susceptible to environmental influences. For that reason, it is called a “window of opportunity” to enhance cognitive and socio-emotional functions.*

*In this sense, the educational and family context is an optimal environment favoring the integral development of children. The main objective was to train initial education teachers in socio-cognitive functioning in early childhood to enable implementation of a stimulation program to optimize the efficacy of these functions in their students.*

*The project was carried out in 2 public pre-primary schools in Mendoza, Argentina, with different socio-contextual characteristics: the first school was located in an urban area; and the second was in a socially-vulnerable area. We worked with 255 initial-level students (4-5 years). The work was carried out in 3 stages: First stage consisted of theoretical-practical training for teachers as promoters of socio-cognitive development in their students. Second, children were evaluated in order to investigate, maturity indicators, attention, working memory and identification of emotions. For their part, the teachers answered the Executive Functioning Scale (Korzeniowski & Ison, 2019). The third stage was "Post-evaluation", in which the socio-cognitive performance in children, the teachers and the parents' perception of the applied stimulation program were evaluated. The results showed significant improvements in children's performance in different socio-cognitive functions after stimulation strategies were applied intensively and systematically in the school context. In turn, 81.82% of the teachers gave a positive assessment of the training sessions, highlighting the relevant support of the provided materials and strategies. 79.39% of the parents considered that the stimulation program produced significant advances in school performance of their children.*

**Key words:** *socio-cognitive functioning, school intervention, workshop for educators*

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Socio-cognitive functioning is a wide construct, which encompasses a series of cognitive and socio-affective processes responsible for behaviour self-regulation that permits finding problem resolution. This construct, referred to by numerous authors as executive functioning, has been associated with academic achievement, especially early and middle childhood (Blair & Raver, 2015; Shaul & Schwartz, 2014; Zelazo, Forston, Masten & Carlson, 2018).

Early childhood possesses particular characteristics, due to a combination of factors, the most important being highly-related cerebral plasticity, rapid development of neuro-cognitive processes that support cognitive functions (Zelazo, 2015) and the possibilities that offer social contexts of interaction for their progress.

In this sense, family and school are two of the most important social institutions that involve the development of children (Gerrard & Soriano, 2019). Thus, there would be no socio-cognitive and emotional functioning in children that could unfold, independently of narrow interaction with significant developmental contexts. Therefore, socio-cognitive functioning in childhood must be understood as a dynamic, multifactorial process, and that depends, on a large part, on the situation in which its development occurs (Brizuela & Scheuer, 2016).

Considering the contextual and socio-cultural approaches to development, collaborative interactions that are established between children, their classmates and significant adults in the

surroundings form a favourable environment for learning experiences (Vygotsky, 1988; Rogoff, Correa-Chávez, & Silva, 2011). This refers to the concept of Proximal Development Zone, widely studied, referring to a shared psychological place where the adult can interact with children that favors socio-cognitive and emotional development, through mediation (Casas-Miranda, Jarque, & Amado, 1999).

In Argentina, the formal educational system starts at 4 years. For younger boys and girls, this situation represents a challenge and an opportunity in terms of establishing new interpersonal relationships with peers and significant adults, generating a favourable place for the unfolding of socio-cognitive and emotional-cognitive performance.

It is in the framework of these socio-emotional interactions where children will develop their potential at the cognitive level, progressively internalising these experiences and working together with their peers and their teacher. From this perspective, teachers play a very important role as facilitators of learning. A student is required to put into practice a series of socio-cognitive and emotional skills during the teaching-learning process (Clements, Sarama, & Germeroth, 2016; Watson, Gable, & Morin, 2016).

The socio-cognitive and emotional skills are the basis of students' understanding and their responses to teacher instruction (Benson, Sabbagh, Carlson, & Zelazo, 2013). However, although the importance of these skills is well documented in various studies (Blair & Raver, 2015; Diamond, 2016; Zelazo, Forston, Masten & Carlson, 2018), their importance

for academic performance remains little-known to educators (Gilmore & Cragg, 2014). For example, knowledge about the crucial role of attention, working memory, cognitive flexibility and inhibitory control in learning are generally lacking in teacher training. Therefore, the questions that arise are: How to narrow the gap between the knowledge produced by the scientific community and its application to the teaching and learning processes? Why is it necessary for educators to be trained in understanding the socio-cognitive and emotional functioning of their students and its transfer to the education curriculum?

Based on the above, the focus of this work was to train initial education teachers in socio-cognitive functioning in early childhood to enable implementation of a stimulation program to optimize the efficacy of these functions in their students.

The secondary aims were:

1. To obtain further information on the socio-cognitive and emotional functioning in children, both pre- and post-stimulation program
2. To examine whether the applied stimulation program helped to strengthen socio-cognitive and emotional function in children, according to the teachers' perceptions
3. To describe the opinion of the parents concerning whether the program was useful for improving the socio-cognitive and emotional abilities in their children.

### ***Executive Functioning in Early Childhood: Why Promote Their Development?***

In general, there is consensus among researchers, although not in a uniform manner, in characterising executive functioning as a multidimensional construct composed of a specific set of implied cognitive abilities, acting in an active and intentional way, in the regulation of attention and involved in the conscious resolution of problems directed to goals (Miyake, Friedman, Emerson, Witzki, & Howerter et al., 2000). An example of this is, when asked a question, a person must put into practice a set of self-regulatory skills in order to answer it.

These cognitive skills include cognitive flexibility, working memory and inhibitory control (Carlson, Zelazo, and Faja 2013; Diamond 2013; Zelazo, Blair, & Willoughby, 2016). Cognitive flexibility implies thinking about something in multiple ways. Examples are: considering the perspective of another person on a situation, thinking of different points of view, or resolving a mathematical problem in multiple ways. Working memory (WM) implies having in mind information and manipulating it in some way, as, for example, in the comprehension of a story, where various pieces of information must be integrated into a coherent whole. Inhibitory control is the process of regulating attention in order to, for example, ignore a distraction, avoid an impulsive expression or not give an unproductive answer. This triad is the basis of other more complex functions such as planning, organisation and metacognition (Baggetta & Alexander, 2016; Clements, Sarama, & Germeroth, 2016; Diamond, 2013; Korzeniowski, 2015; Miyake, et al., 2000). Brain development

occurs in large part in the function of experience, and neural networks that support EFs are modified during this development, due to neuroplasticity factors (Zelazo, et al., 2016)

Early childhood, approximately from 2 to 6 years, is considered as a “window of opportunity” for the development of EFs (Zelazo, et al., 2016; Traverso, Viterbori, & Usai, 2019). Between 3 and 5 years, it is observed that boys and girls start to develop the abilities: to maintain more than one representation in their minds; to flexibly change the attentional focus; to inhibit the tendency to give a dominant answer; and, to regulate their emotions (Diamond & Ling, 2016; Willoughby, et al., 2017). Specifically, from 4 to 6 years, there is progressive reorganisation such as in both inhibitory control and working memory, which are EFs that, although different, are interrelated (Miller, Giesbrecht, Müller, McInerney & Kerns, 2012).

Longitudinal studies give consistent evidence about the interdependence between EFs and learning: a good executive performance favouring academic learning and activities implied in school learning strengthening executive functioning (Fuhs et al. 2014). Thus, socio-cognitive functioning is fundamental for the performance in many types of learning activities in which children participate in pre-primary and the first grades of primary school.

Even though socio-cognitive functioning is able to improve through training and practice, it can also be diminished by adverse experiences. For example, high levels of stress in early childhood are associated with low performance in EFs, which, in turn, lead to higher levels of stress manifested in learning

situations (Evans y Schamberg, 2009). However, there is also evidence that good performance of EFs can protect against risks associated with social vulnerability (Morelato, Korzeniowski, Greco, & Ison, 2019; Korzeniowski, Ison, & Dibafio, 2017; Segretin, et al., 2014), as well as risks of academic failure (Masten, et al. 2012).

Interventions directed towards strengthening cognitive functions have demonstrated to be beneficial for helping boys and girls to obtain academic achievement (Blair & Raver, 2015; Ison & Espósito, 2020; Korzeniowski, Cupani, Ison, & Difabio, 2016; Korzeniowski, Ison, & Difabio, 2017; Korzeniowski, Morelato, Greco & Monteoliva, 2020; Segretin et al., 2014; Zelazo, et al., 2018). Here, the social interaction contexts play a central role in modulation of processes implied in emotional and cognitive self-regulation in children. Both aspects are of central importance for learning in school.

Socio-cognitive and emotional functions of schoolchildren can be strengthened with practice, through the implementation of intervention through stimulation programs. Various studies have emphasized that such implementation by teachers can contribute to significant improvement in the socio-cognitive functioning of their students, providing ecological validity to the intervention (Diamond & Ling, 2016; Traverso, Viterbori, and Usai, 2015, 2019).

In 2017, based on the research carried out by our team in this intervention area, we were mandated by the provincial education department in Mendoza, to design and implement a stimulation program to promote cognitive and socio-emotional

capacities in boys and girls of initial education, through teacher training. This is how “Proyecto Piloto Integral de Nivel Inicial” (PINI) emerged.

### ***Description of PINI***

PINI, the Integral Initial-Level Pilot Project in English, was initiated in 2017 by the Director of Initial Education, part of the Mendoza provincial education department called Dirección General de Escuelas (DGE). Its objective is to promote successful educational trajectories in boys and girls of 4 and 5 years, linking integral physical education, music education and the promotion of socio-cognitive and emotional functions (SCEF), the latter in coordination with the Child Psychology Group (University of Aconcagua and CONICET). Our research team participated in three central axes of the PINI: a) training for preschool managers and teachers on socio-cognitive and emotional functioning in early childhood; b) design and elaboration of a stimulation program called "Strategies for socio-cognitive and emotional development in initial education", to be applied by teachers; and, c) evaluation of the effectiveness of the applied program. PINI continues to the present.

The proposal developed in the pre-primary schools had 3 levels of action: children, parents and teachers, with the purpose of:

- a) Optimising the socio-cognitive-affective performance of schoolchildren.
- b) Promoting cooperative work between classroom, physical education, English and music education teachers in order to

articulate activities to promote socio-cognitive and emotional functioning in early childhood.

c) Promoting teamwork among professionals, teachers and parents in order to foster an interpersonal climate favoring cooperative relationships in the school context.

Thus, this proposal was aligned with the SBFC theoretical model, because it was hoped to help children in promoting socio-cognitive functioning, directly involving teachers and indirectly engaging parents.

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## **METHODS**

### ***Participants and procedure***

All investigation procedures and the evaluation instruments applied were reviewed and approved by the DGE. Parents of participating children were informed about the procedures of the study before giving their written consent. Participating children were given verbal information about the procedure.

Participating in the study were a total of 11 preschool teachers and 255 children of 4 and 5 years (130 males, 125 female) from the province of Mendoza, Argentina. At the time of first testing, children presented an average age of 62 months (SD = 7.57 months). We worked in 2 primary schools with different socio-contextual characteristics: the first school was urban (Mendoza Capital), involving 3 teachers and 111 schoolchildren

(56 male, 55 female, Mean age = 63 months, SD = 7.06 months); and the second located in a socially-vulnerable area of a municipality near the capital of Mendoza, involving 8 teachers and 144 schoolchildren (74 male, 70 female, Mean age = 61 months, SD = 7.77). Table 1, shows the age distribution.

**Table 1: Age distribution of the children, for both pre-primary schools**

	Urban Environment	Vulnerable Environment	Total
	f (%)	f (%)	f (%)
Classes, 4 years	49 (44.1)	71 (48.6)	120 (46.7)
Classes, 5 years	62 (55.9)	73 (5.4)	137 (53.3)
n	111	144	255

### ***Stages of research, and procedures***

The work consisted of 3 stages:

*Stage 1- Teacher Training:* In 2017, training for kindergarten teachers began, consisting of 8 theoretical-practical meetings of 2 hours each. The themes of attentional and

perceptual organization, working memory, inhibitory control, cognitive flexibility, planning, social withdrawal, emotions, resilience, social vulnerability and strengthening of socio-emotional resources in school contexts were addressed.

In each meeting, each of the functions and skills involved in the stimulation program, its evolutionary development and the reason for its importance in promoting its development were analyzed. Thus, teachers learned about child cognitive and socio-emotional development and its importance for social and academic skills. They also learned how to find creative solutions to exercise socio-cognitive and emotional functions. In the meetings, ideas were proposed on how to incorporate the contents of the stimulation program into the school curriculum and into the daily routines of each grade. With physical education teachers, English teachers, and music teachers, different activities that they could implement in their classes were discussed and practiced, to foster the development of socio-cognitive and emotional functions in their students. Associated with these training sessions, our research team produced a booklet with different exercises and strategies to be consulted by teachers, thus providing ideas on how to transfer what was learned into practice in their student group.

*Stage 2- Pre-assessment:* In 2018, work began in schools. Before the application of the stimulation program by the teachers, the following functions were evaluated in children: maturity indicators, attention, visuomotor perception, visuospatial skills, working memory and identification of emotions.

- *Maturity indicators* were evaluated using the “Human Figure Drawing” (Fernández Liporace, Brizzio & López, 2017).
- *Attention* was evaluated with the “Cumanin figure cancellation tests” (Portellano et.al, 2000).
- *Visuomotor perception, visuospatial skills and working memory* were analyzed by means of the “Copy and Reproduction of Memory” test of the “Complex Figure of Rey” (Figure B-Rey, 1987; Lozada & Espósito, 2018).
- *Emotion recognition* was evaluated through images. This instrument consisted of 6 cards, each of which contained the drawing of a child's face representing an emotion. The emotions evaluated were: joy, anger, fear, surprise, displeasure and sadness (Ison & González, 2018).
- *Executive Function Scale* of students (EFS, Korzeniowski & Ison, 2019) was answered by the teachers. The internal consistency of the scale was .95- IC 95% [.94, .96]. The EFS assesses the teacher's perception of behaviors in students that denote: attention, metacognition, inhibitory control, organizing, planning, cognitive flexibility and working memory. For the correct interpretation of the EFS, it is necessary to take into account that, a higher score in attention, inhibitory control, organizing, and cognitive flexibility signifies a lower-level performance in these functions. On the contrary, for the metacognition, planning, and working memory factors, a higher score implies a better level of performance.

Once the evaluation stage was completed, the implementation of the stimulation program designed to strengthen socio-cognitive functioning in pre-primary children began. This program was applied by teachers for 4 months, using socio-cognitive functions and working daily with recreational activities based on ones described in the stimulation booklet

(Ison & Espósito, 2020). In addition, each task was promoted by the teacher, who guided and monitored the development of the activity and "scaffolded the knowledge", giving positive feedback, trying to maintain the motivation of the group and promoting emotional self-regulation in their students. The teacher functioned as a support or guide structure for the execution of the tasks in the children, such as: helping them to think about how they did the activities, why they did it this way, and what other activities they could think or do.

Although the teacher training program had a defined structure with specific content, the teachers could creatively incorporate other activities, allowing them to adjust their work to the characteristics of the group of children. The focus was on stimulating a function or a set of them for its strengthening.

*Stage 3 - Post-evaluation:* Subsequent to the application of the intervention program, the re-evaluation of the socio-cognitive functions in the children was carried out. Furthermore, two surveys were carried out, one for parents and the other for teachers, in order to investigate whether the applied stimulation program helped to strengthen socio-cognitive and emotional functions in children. In addition, investigation was done into whether they had noticed improvements or positive changes in the children after the application of the program, and into what processes or aspects they observed such improvements (secondary aims: 2 and 3).

## Statistical Analysis

To begin, the Kolmogorov-Smirnov (K-S) test was applied. It indicated the studied variables did not adjust to the model of normal distribution. Then, to respond to the objective of the work, descriptive analyses (mean  $\pm$  standard deviation) and pre-test comparisons with non-parametric tests (Mann Whitney U) were conducted to investigate differences between groups at baseline in relation to maturity indicators, cognitive processes, identification of emotions scores and teacher's perception of socio-cognitive functioning in their students. After that, to evaluate the effectiveness of the training program, intragroup comparisons with Wilcoxon signed rank test for related samples were made, with a significance level of .05. The magnitude of the differences was estimated using the bi-serial correlation index (Dominguez-Lara, 2017), and Cohen's criteria (Cohen, 1988) was employed to interpret them.

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## RESULTS

### **Baseline Level: comparative study for both pre-primary schools**

First, descriptive statistics (mean  $\pm$  standard deviation) were obtained for each of the socio-cognitive functions evaluated in children from both socio-cultural contexts, in order to analyze whether there were differences in the baseline. The same was done with the variables of the Executive Functioning Scale answered by the teachers. Subsequently, to find out if there were significant differences in the performance of students according to the educational environment prior to the application of the stimulation program, the non-parametric hypothesis test for independent samples  $U$  of Mann-Whitney was applied.

**Table 2. Pre-intervention: descriptive statistics of indicators of maturity, socio-cognitive functions and Teachers' perception, according to each school**

		Urban Environment	Vulnerable Environment		
		<i>n</i> = 111	<i>n</i> = 144		
Socio-cognitive Functioning		M (SD)	M (SD)	<i>U</i>	<i>p</i>
Children	Maturity indicators	16.23(7.83)	11.2(5.77)	3970.5	<b>0.001</b>
	Attention	6.08(3.52)	4.98(3.35)	6484	<b>0.012</b>
	Visuomotor perception	12.38(7.36)	11,44(7.65)	6089.5	0.370
	Visuo-spatial skills	23.03(9.19)	20,91(10.17)	5714	0.101
	Working memory	18.13(8.58)	16,4(9.82)	5613	0.083
	Emotion recognition	1.63(1.04)	1.06(0.99)	5464	<b>0.001</b>
Teachers' perception (EFS *)	Attention	3.17(3.25)	3.06(2.98)	7871.5	0.762
	Metacognition	4.74(2.01)	4.97(1.88)	7359.5	0.233
	Inhibitory control	4.13(5.11)	3.89(4)	7570.5	0.406
	Organizing	2.77(3.29)	2.81(3.04)	7859.5	0.745
	Planning	3.13(1.34)	3.44(1.15)	6401	<b>0.003</b>
	Cognitive flexibility	2.29(2.15)	2.31(2.4)	7771.5	0.631
	Working memory	9.52(2.8)	9.39(2.91)	7812.5	0.68

\* *Explanatory note:* For the correct interpretation of the EFS, it is necessary to take into account that a higher score in attention, inhibitory control, organizing, and cognitive flexibility signifies a lower-level performance in these functions. On the contrary, in metacognition, planning, and working memory factors, a higher score implies a better level of performance.

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As Table 2 shows, there are differences between both groups in the baseline in maturity indicators ( $U = 3970.50$ ,  $p = .001$ ), attention ( $U = 6484$ ,  $p = .012$ ) and recognition of emotions ( $U = 5464$ ,  $p = .001$ ), all in favour of the urban school children. In turn, when analyzing the teachers' perception regarding the cognitive functioning of their students, significant differences were only observed in the planning area, in favour of the socially-vulnerable school children ( $p < 0.003$ ) (see Table 2).

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***Training Effects on Socio-Cognitive Functioning in initial-level children: comparative study***

To analyze whether the stimulation given by the teachers

managed to increase the socio-cognitive performance in their students, intra-group comparisons (pre-post assessments) were made for each of the pre-primary schools. In addition, the teachers' perception of socio-cognitive functioning in their students was analyzed.

### ***Urban schools: intragroup comparative study***

As Table 3 shows, in the post-test, urban school children showed improvements in all the variables analyzed. When analyzing the teachers' perception regarding the cognitive functioning of their students, in the post-test, the teachers observed improvements in metacognition ( $Z = -3.29$ ,  $p = .001$ ,  $r = .31$ ), and working memory ( $Z = -2.88$ ,  $p = .004$ ,  $r = .27$ ). But they note that performance worsens in inhibitory control ( $Z = -3.15$ ,  $p = .002$ ,  $r = .30$ ) and cognitive flexibility ( $Z = -4.58$ ,  $p = .001$ ,  $r = .43$ ).

### ***Vulnerable schools: intragroup comparative study***

In the post-test, vulnerable school children showed improvements in all the analysed variables, equal to the previous group. When analysing the teachers' perception regarding the cognitive functioning of their students, in the post-test, the teachers observed improvements in attention ( $Z = -2.61$ ,  $p = .009$ ,  $r = .22$ ), inhibitory control ( $Z = -2.11$ ,  $p = .035$ ,  $r = .18$ ), organizing ( $Z = -4.13$ ,  $p = < .001$ ,  $r = .34$ ), planning ( $Z = -3.16$ ,  $p = .002$ ,  $r = .26$ )

**Table 3. Pre-test and post-test differences in functions evaluated in children and teachers' perception, for the urban environment**

Variable	Urban Environment						
	N	Pre	Post	Z	p	r	
		M (SD)	M (SD)				
<b>Children</b>	Maturity indicators	111	16.23 (7.83)	18.06 (7.61)	-3.62	<.001	.35
	Attention	111	6.08 (3.52)	9.40 (4.14)	-6.55	<.001	.63
	Visuomotor perception	111	12.38(7.36)	17.88(7.21)	-4.28	<.001	.41
	Visuospatial skills	111	23.03(9.19)	29.78 (9.00)	-5.20	<.001	.50
	Working memory	111	18.13(8.58)	25.49(9.41)	-5.60	<.001	.54
	Emotion recognition	111	1.63 (1.04)	2.50 (0.89)	-6.35	<.001	.61
<b>Teachers' perception (EFS)</b>	Attention	111	3.17 (3.25)	2.86 (2.75)	-1.33	.183	.13
	Metacognition	111	4.74 (2.01)	5.49 (1.98)	-3.29	.001	.31
	Inhibitory control	111	4.13 (5.11)	5.38 (4.56)	-3.15	.002	.30
	Organizing	111	2.77 (3.29)	2.97 (3.01)	-.91	.361	.09
	Planning	111	3.13 (1.34)	3.08 (0.68)	-.15	.883	.01
	Cognitive flexibility	111	2.29 (2.15)	3.37 (1.93)	-4.58	<.001	.43
	Working memory	111	9.52 (2.8)	10.16 (2.27)	-2/88	.004	.27

EFS: take into account the explanatory note in Table 2.

and working memory ( $Z = -2.88$ ,  $p = .004$ ,  $r = .27$ ) (See Table 4).

### ***Post-assessment comparisons between groups***

When comparing the performances obtained by the children of both educational areas in the studied variables, we observed that the two groups showed improvements, and those gains were from moderate to very large in relation to their baseline (Urban School group:  $r =$  from .35 to .63; Vulnerable School group:  $r =$  .28 to .71).

When analyzing which group obtained greater gains in the performance of the variables under study after the stimulation program, it was observed that children in urban schools achieved a greater magnitude in the improvement of attention ( $r = .63$  vs.  $r = .38$ ), in visuospatial skills ( $r = .50$  vs.  $r = .33$ ), in working memory ( $r = .54$  vs.  $r = .28$ ), and in emotion recognition ( $r = .61$  vs.  $r = .53$ ), compared to vulnerable environment children. In contrast, the vulnerable school children presented higher gains in: maturity indicators ( $r = .71$  vs.  $r = .35$ ) and visuomotor perception ( $r = .51$  vs.  $r = .41$ ), compared to children from the urban school.

### ***Parents' and teachers' perception of the stimulation program***

After the stimulation program, two online surveys were carried out, one for parents and the other for teachers, in order to find out their opinions concerning whether the program was useful to improve the socio-cognitive and emotional abilities in children.

**Table 4. Pre-test and post-test differences in functions evaluated in children and teachers' perception, for the vulnerable environment**

		Vulnerable Environment						
Variable		Pre		Post		<i>Z</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>r</i>
		<i>n</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>				
Children	Maturity indicators	144	11.2 (5.77)	17.15 (6.34)	-7.43	<b>.001</b>	<b>.71</b>	
	Attention	144	4.98 (3.35)	6.99 (2.65)	-4.18	<b>&lt;.001</b>	<b>.38</b>	
	Visuomotor perception	144	11.44(7.65)	15.39(9.01)	-5.62	<b>&lt;.001</b>	<b>.51</b>	
	Visuospatial skills	144	20.91(10.17)	24.9(10.51)	-3.60	<b>&lt;.001</b>	<b>.33</b>	
	Working memory	144	16.4(9.82)	19.17(10.99)	-3.04	<b>.002</b>	<b>.28</b>	
	Emotion recognition	144	1.06 (0.99)	1.9 (0.91)	-5.36	<b>&lt;.001</b>	<b>.53</b>	
Teachers' perception (EFS)	Attention	144	3.06 (2.98)	2.72 (3.11)	-2.61	<b>.009</b>	<b>.22</b>	
	Metacognition	144	4.97 (1.88)	5.21 (2.04)	-1.49	.136	.12	
	Inhibitory control	144	3.89 (4)	3.59 (4.25)	-2.11	<b>.035</b>	<b>.18</b>	
	Organizing	144	2.81 (3.04)	2.24 (2.87)	-4.13	<b>&lt;.001</b>	<b>.34</b>	
	Planning	144	3.44 (1.15)	3.80 (1.50)	-3.16	<b>.002</b>	<b>.26</b>	
	Cognitive flexibility	144	2.31 (2.40)	1.96 (2.19)	-1.73	.084	.14	
	Working memory	144	9.39 (2.91)	10.01 (2.48)	-2.88	<b>.004</b>	<b>.24</b>	

EFS: take into account the explanatory note in Table 2.

A total of 97 parents responded to the online survey, of which 77 parents (79.39%) considered that the PINI contributed to improving the socio-cognitive and emotional performance in their children. The positive changes observed were, for example to mention the most frequent, that their children shared their things with siblings and peers, had a greater desire to write and do homework, paid more attention to daily activities and were more motivated to want to learn. However, 17 parents (17.52 %) neither agreed nor disagreed with the program, and only 3 parents (3.09 %) disagreed with the implementation of this program. Parents whose responses were neutral also observed improvements in their children's socio-cognitive performance.

Moreover, 11 teachers responded to another on-line survey whose purpose was to find out whether the work material was clear and accurate, whether the accompaniment by the researchers was satisfactory or not, on what aspects they observed changes in their students and whether the program should continue. Nine of the eleven teachers (81.82%) observed improvements in the performance of their students, especially in the functions of attention, working memory, inhibitory control, relationships with peers and cognitive flexibility. Likewise, they considered it extremely beneficial for their students to continue the stimulation program. However, 2 teachers (18.18%) disagreed with the application of the stimulation program. Although a large percentage of teachers agreed with the training received as part of the PINI and the implementation of the stimulation program under their charge, two teachers did not agree with this methodology. It is probably due to high levels of resistance to change and innovation in their teaching practices.

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## **DISCUSSION**

The principal aim of the present study was to train initial education teachers in socio-cognitive and emotional functioning in early childhood to enable implementation of a stimulation program to optimize the efficacy of these functions in their students. The discussion of the results is organized into three parts according to the secondary aims: the assessment of the children to measure socio-cognitive and emotional functioning, the teachers' assessment, and the perception of the parents respecting the stimulation program applied by the teachers to their children.

### ***Children' assessment***

Before the stimulation program, both groups started from a different baseline in terms of the performance of their socio-cognitive and emotional skills. Thus, urban school children performed better in three of the six skills evaluated: maturity indicators, attention and emotion recognition, compared to vulnerable context school children. However, after applying the stimulation program, both groups obtained improvements in the performance of all the variables evaluated, and the magnitude of these improvements ranged from moderate to very large. It is expected that these functions have improved due to maturation, and not only due to the stimulation program. This aspect may be collated in future work when control groups are incorporated.

When performing an inter-group analysis, we observed that urban school children obtained greater gains in attention, visuospatial perception, working memory and emotion recognition, compared to the group of vulnerable context school children. On the contrary, the vulnerable group obtained higher gains in maturity indicators and visuomotor perception.

Research has revealed how certain socio-contextual factors could act as modulators between socio-cognitive-emotional development in childhood and the social-vulnerability conditions (Ison, Greco, Korzeniowski & Morelato, 2015; Korzeniowski, Ison, & Difabio, in press; Miyake, et al., 2012; Usai, Viterbori, & Traverso, 2018). For this reason, it is important that the different child social interaction contexts can provide opportunities to strengthen their socio-cognitive and emotional resources.

The implementation of intervention programs in the school environment favors the development of socio-cognitive functioning in early childhood, and that the training of these processes has greater effects in younger children (Diamond, 2016; Diamond & Ling, 2016; Willoughby, et al., 2017). In this study, the variability of the results observed in the children of both primary schools indicates that the stimulation program should be further adjusted, taking into account the specific needs of each group, as well as making the necessary adaptations for its greater efficacy.

### ***Teachers' assessment***

The teachers participating in this experience were able to integrate the activities present in the socio-cognitive stimulation program (SCSP) into the curricular content, adapting this proposal to the needs of the children and the organizational structures of each school. Thus, classroom teachers, as well as the physical education, English and music teachers, worked in an articulated way to carry out recreational activities that would lead to improving the socio-cognitive functions of their students. Different children face different challenges and, therefore, teachers were encouraged to apply the new knowledge, taking into account the particularities and needs of their own group, and setting realistic goals for improvement.

In addition, teachers were encouraged to focus on the strengths and resources of their group of students, rather than on weaknesses. This task was monitored by researchers from our team, who helped teachers focus on the achievements and resources of their students. Before the implementation of the stimulation program, teachers from both educational areas did not observe differences in the socio-cognitive functioning of their students, except for Planning. Teachers at the vulnerable school reported higher scores for this function, compared to the scores of teachers at the urban school. That is to say, they observed that their students, when faced with a task, such as drawing or putting together a puzzle, first thought about how to do it, and then did it.

After the stimulation program, the teachers of the urban school observed improvements in the functions of metacognition and working memory

In addition, after the stimulation program, when analysing the teachers' perception regarding the cognitive functioning of their students, in the post-test, teachers at the urban school observed improvements in metacognition and working memory. However, they noted that performance worsened in inhibitory control and cognitive flexibility. An aspect to probably consider is any high expectation of change on the part of the teachers of this group, in relation to their students.

Furthermore, teachers at the vulnerable area observed improvements in attention, inhibitory control, organizing, planning and working memory. A question that could be raised considering the results is whether the stimulation program was more effective in this group of children, or was this interpretation due to the teachers positively over-evaluating the small changes or advances in their students? This aspect should be considered for future research.

Dealing with the specified aims listed in the introduction, the results generally indicate that the main goal, of training initial education teachers in socio-cognitive functioning in early childhood to enable implementation of a stimulation program to optimize the efficiency of these functions in their students, has largely been met. In addition, the secondary goals concerning examining the parent's opinions, the extent of further improvement in the children's abilities, and the extent of the

improvement of the children's socio-cognitive and emotional abilities have generally been met.

### ***Parents' perception***

Most parents perceived improvements in their children's school performance and considered that the stimulation program was beneficial for their children. They considered that it was very important to give continuity to this project, since they observed in their children: greater motivation to attend classes, better psychomotricity, greater attention and concentration when carrying out activities, greater openness to music and learning another language such as English, greater ability to memorize, better relationship with peers when wanting to share their things or their snacks and desire to read and write.

Parents whose perception was neutral, that is, neither in favour nor against the application of the stimulation program, also observed improvements in the socio-cognitive performance of their children. Probably, this group of parents did not consider that these improvements were due to the implementation of the program.

Regarding parents who disagreed, future studies should investigate the reasons for this disagreement.

Probably, parents should be given more information during the process of implementation of the stimulation program, and not only evaluate their perception at the end of it.

A more systematic monitoring of parents, by the team of psychologists and teachers, should probably be implemented in future research.

In summary, dealing with the specified aims listed in the introduction, the results generally indicate that the main goal, of training initial education teachers in socio-cognitive functioning in early childhood to enable implementation of a stimulation program to optimize the efficacy of these functions in their students, has largely been met. In addition, the secondary goals concerning examining the parent's opinions, the extent of further improvement in the children's abilities, and the extent of the improvement of the children's socio-cognitive and emotional abilities have generally been met.

These findings, although preliminary, are encouraging, since both parents and teachers observed advances in children's socio-cognitive and emotional skills after the stimulation program was applied in the classroom. Moreover, when comparing performance in socio-cognitive functioning, both groups showed improvements whose gains ranged from moderate to very large in relation to their baseline. However, the urban school children obtained gains in a greater number of functions when compared to the group of school children from the vulnerable school. Evidently, greater adaptations and modifications should be made to the stimulation program, so that it can achieve higher levels of effectiveness in the deployment of socio-cognitive capacities in children.

It is desirable that these programs be motivating for children, using different sensory channels to stimulate the various functions, that they be sustained over time, that they be adapted to the characteristics of each group and that they be articulated with the daily activities of the classroom, giving ecological validity of these interventions (Ison & Espósito, 2020).

In turn, teacher training in the promotion of resources can lead to creating conditions of equal opportunities and can generate benefits in the learning of all its students.

This proposal was inspired by the School-based Family Counseling (SBFC) theoretical model, upon which our Socio-cognitive and Emotional Program (SCEP) was designed, because it was hoped to help children in promoting socio-cognitive functioning, directly involving teachers and indirectly engaging parents. Our SCEP was designed so that teachers, in daily contact with their students, could integrate it into the curriculum through school activities and stimulate these abilities, according to the characteristics and needs of their group of students. The teacher, in fluid dialogue with parents, could provide instructions so that these functions could continue to be promoted from the family home. Furthermore, both teachers and parents could monitor the performance of these functions in the child and make modifications to the stimulation plan, if necessary. The scaffolding and timely support of significant adults is a necessary condition for the strengthening of socio-cognitive and emotional skills in children, fundamental for school learning.

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## **CONTRIBUTIONS AND LIMITATION**

Certainly, this work has limitations that must be taken into account when interpreting the results: first, there was a lack of a control group to investigate the weight of the maturation factor; second, the results obtained must be limited to the sample of Argentine children under study and must not be generalized to other populations; third, the activities of the stimulation program were strongly focused on socio-cognitive aspects and not so much on the emotional ones; and, fourth, techniques for evaluating socio-cognitive and emotional functions should have greater ecological validity, especially in young children. Even so, taking into account these limitations, we can say that the main contribution of this work was to increase the evidence of the importance of teacher training and knowledge for the development of strategies that can be used to scaffold socio-cognitive and emotional processes in the context of teaching-learning.

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## **Acknowledgements**

This work has been written within the framework of the PIP 2017-2019, N° 11220170100664, supported by National Council for Scientific and Technical Research (CONICET).

The authors gratefully acknowledge David Beach for the English version.

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## **6 HOW COVERT AGGRESSION CONTRIBUTES TO THE POWER IMBALANCE EXPERIENCED BY CHILDREN WHO ARE BULLIED**

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Helen J. Nelson, Garth E. Kendall & Sharyn K. Burns

Curtin University, Australia

### **ABSTRACT**

*Studies focus in bullying research, the term covert has been used to contrast relational acts of aggression with physical and verbal aggression. In Australia, children have described covert aggression as that which is deliberately hidden from adults. This has implications for adults who work with children in schools.*

*Question and assumptions. We explored children's experience of the power imbalance associated with covert bullying, using a systems framework. Bullying was defined as aggression that is repeated in a relationship of power imbalance.*

*Method. In a mixed-methods study, thematic analysis of focus group discussion with children from one school (n=22, ages 9-11) identified factors that influence power imbalance. Results informed the design and validation of two measurement instruments with children from four schools (n=337, ages 8-12).*

*Structural equation modelling was used. Instruments measured: peer related aspects of power imbalance; children's experience of teacher support after reporting aggression.*

*Findings. Factors that influenced power imbalance included peer valued characteristics, popularity, friendship, social exclusion, and secrets from the teacher. Adults did not always see that children were bullying others or being bullied. Some children who reported bullying were overlooked, their experience of harm dismissed by the teacher; other children who felt heard by the teacher were excluded by peers.*

*Discussion. Implications for school-based family counseling relate to intervention within a systems model to promote cultural patterns that support acceptance, belonging and resilience.*

**Keywords:** *School bullying, covert, power imbalance, teacher.*

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Children's development is shaped within social systems of care, when they encounter difficulties children learn within a supportive environment. When surrounded by protective systems of care, most children develop resilience and learn how to adapt to new situations. Over time they gain an increasing influence over their own development and on their social and physical environment. Through this influence, the benefit of nurturing care can extend through generations (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Not all children experience consistent nurturing care; this can reduce their capacity to adapt and thrive in

challenging environments. One challenge faced by school-aged children is that of bullying, defined as aggression that is repeated in a relationship of power imbalance (Nelson, Kendall, et al., 2019b). While aggression may occur as teasing between children of equal power, the child who bullies another causes harm in an attempt to gain power, for example popularity or status. Bullying is repeated when the child who is bullied feels overpowered, and unable to resolve the situation (Menesini & Salmivalli, 2017). Children who are bullied will ideally receive support from peers and adults at school, helping them to overcome adversity and learn resilience. This article reports the results of a study that investigated the experience of children who reported bullying to an adult at school. First the research framework of developmental systems theory is introduced (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006).

Bullying occurs in relationships that are perpetuated within the context of different socioecological systems. Within the developmental systems framework, biological and social development is shaped as children interact with, and experience, their environment. Family, school, community, policy, and history each represent systems that influence development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Experience relates to the feelings or emotions that motivate children, including anticipation and belief, hope or doubt (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Through their experience children increasingly become agents of their own development, and of the development of others. For example, at school they may influence or be influenced by peers, teachers, and pastoral care workers. This model of development therefore recognizes the interactions

between the effect of the environment on the child and the increasing effect of the child on the environment (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Underlying this are the opportunities that occur for growth during sensitive periods of neurobiological and cognitive development, for example as children seek to be accepted by peers at school.

Children's evaluation of "who I am" at age five to seven tends to be more positive than in the following years. At age eight, children's cognitive capacity for self-reflection increases, and they increasingly compare themselves with others to evaluate their own self-worth (Eccles, 1999). This has been shown in neuroimaging studies that mapped brain activity as children responded to scenarios that evoked emotion; from eight years of age children's emotions were strongly reflected in their own self-appraisal (Pfeifer & Peake, 2012). Children's sense of identity is progressively framed within their relationships with peers through the questions "what do others think about me" and "where do I fit in" (Pfeifer & Peake, 2012, p. 56). They seek to be accepted by peers, placing worth on qualities that are valued by peers and on belonging within the group (Burns et al., 2008). At this age bullying increases as some children intentionally harm others in an attempt to gain social status and belonging (Cross et al., 2009). In Australia, children have described the harm of covert bullying, defined as bullying that is intentionally hidden from adults (Cross et al., 2009).

The capacity for families, schools, and communities to support children is influenced by policy, beliefs, and values promoted at school, state, national, and international levels.

Perhaps the most overarching policy is the right of each child to be heard (UNICEF, 1989). This seemingly simple and fundamental right is met within layers of complexity. For example, covert bullying is hidden from the adults who children might turn to for help (Cross et al., 2009). This is consistent with the self-reported behavior of children aged 10 to 13 years in Australia; children who bullied others sought to do so in front of peers to gain status and a feeling of being respected, and denied their bullying behavior to adults to achieve an enhanced reputation (Houghton et al., 2012). Similarly, teachers have been unable to correctly identify students who were bullied (Oldenburg et al., 2016), or have attributed responsibility for bullying to the student who was bullied (Byers et al., 2011).

In responding to vignettes, teachers showed greater empathy for children who were visibly bullied, and were more likely to dismiss children's report of covert bullying as not serious, or as a normal part of growing up (Byers et al., 2011). Consistent with Cross et al. (2009) covert bullying was defined as hidden from, or not acknowledged by, adults, including rumor spreading and social exclusion. Teachers who view this behavior between peers as normal may recommend that children work it out themselves, dismiss the harm, or advise children to avoid aggressive peers (Migliaccio, 2015; Troop-Gordon & Ladd, 2015). By intentionally hiding the behavior from those who can intervene, children who bully others limit the opportunity for the bullied child to be heard by someone who can provide a secure base of emotional support. This increases the helplessness and isolation felt by bullied children (Byers et al., 2011). Through meta analyses and longitudinal research, school bullying has

been associated with loneliness, anxiety, depression, and diminished school performance (Baly et al., 2014; Lereya et al., 2015; Ttofi et al., 2014). These are related to the neurobiological response associated with unresolved stress (McEwen & Gianaros, 2010). In contrast, emotional support provided by an adult at school may promote resilience, defined as achieving a positive outcome in an adverse environment (McEwen & Gianaros, 2010; Oberle et al., 2014). This article presents an overview of a research project in Western Australia to understand children's experience of power imbalance associated with covert bullying.

### ***Question and assumptions***

We explored children's perception of factors that influence or protect against the power imbalance in bullying, including covert aggression, defined as aggression that is intentionally hidden from adults. We anticipated that covert aggression would increase children's experience of power imbalance by limiting their access to secure relationships, including those with their teacher. This article collates our research findings in relation to children's experience of power imbalance through physical, relational, and covert aggression (Nelson, Burns, et al., 2019; Nelson et al., 2018; Nelson, Kendall, et al., 2019a, 2019b).

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## **METHODS**

### ***Participants and procedure***

In a mixed-methods study, thematic analysis of focus group discussion with children from one school (n=22, ages 9-11) identified factors that influenced children's experience of power imbalance related to bullying. Focus groups were held in June 2015 with children from school grades 4 to 6 in a middle-income independent school in Perth, Western Australia. Parents gave written informed consent and children gave written assent. The qualitative method and results are reported elsewhere (Nelson, Burns, et al., 2019; Nelson et al., 2018). Results informed the design of two measurement instruments, each was assessed for face validity by children who participated in the focus groups, and for content validity by expert reviewers. The psychometric fit of each measurement instrument was validated with children from four schools (n=337, ages 8-12) using a method of structural equation modelling in statistical software MPlus version 7 (Muthén & Muthén, 2015). Factor loadings of .55 or higher were considered good, and above .32 adequate. Items were free to cross load onto other factors, in this way helping to explain some of the latent or hidden influences on children's experience of teacher support (Marsh et al., 2011). The statistical method and results are reported in detail elsewhere (Nelson, Kendall, et al., 2019a, 2019b). Ethics approval was obtained from the Curtin University Human Research Ethics Committee (RDHS-38-15) with governance granted from each school.

## **RESULTS**

Findings of this study are reported in detail elsewhere in two parts, first in relation to measurement of children's experience of power imbalance, second children's experience of teacher support when reporting bullying. A summary of the collated research findings is presented in this section, beginning with qualitative findings. Factors that influenced power imbalance included peer valued characteristics, popularity, friendship, social exclusion, and secrets from the teacher. When asked who was likely to bully other children a grade 4 girl replied, "people who are really smart and pretty and popular, so they just bully the people who aren't, because they are the people who are easy to get" (Nelson, Burns, et al., 2019, p. 6). Children in all grades (n=22) identified that children are bullied for "how they look," or for not having "what everyone else has," this included smart phones, electronic games, clothing or shoes (Nelson, Burns, et al., 2019, p. 6). Possession of these characteristics afforded some protection from bullying, as did athleticism.

Friendship could contribute to, or protect from, bullying. The attribution of friendship as an influence on bullying was in relation to children's attempt to gain popularity or status. Girls and boys from each grade spoke of harm perpetrated by friends through gossip or misplaced trust. An example was given of a girl who developed a trusting friendship with a popular child and then misused the friendship to gain status: "When they do become best friends the faker ... just tells some rumours to get that person down the bottom of the popular list and they just say 'oh, get it, I'm the most popular person here' " (grade 5 girl) (Nelson, Burns, et al., 2019, p. 8). This was also spoken of by grade 6 children, "They might like, put one of their friends under

the bus, so they like might tell one of their friends like most valuable secret to the popular group and that might like just get them in” (grade 6 girl) (Nelson, Burns, et al., 2019, p. 9) “It’s just a way they try and win and be on the top” (grade 6 boy). Many ascribed this to the power of the peer group or of the most powerful child in the group, “I think lots of people bully one person, so then the people that have got lots of people on their side, um, they all agree with the person that’s being the big bully and so then the person that’s by them-self can’t really do anything till he gets, or they get, someone on their side” (grade 4 boy) (Nelson et al., 2018, p. 285).

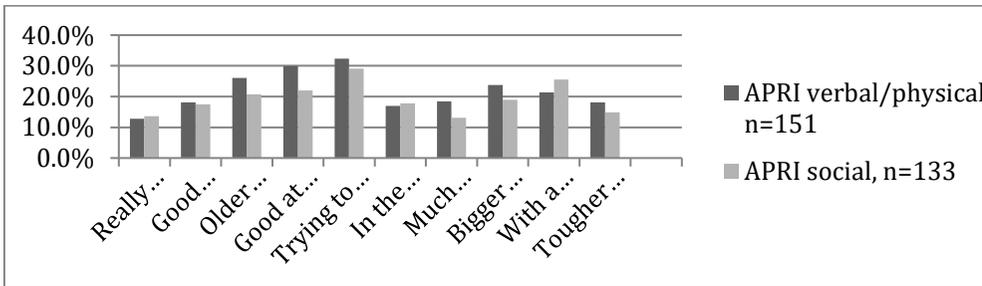
Having someone who was on their side, a friend who would “stand up for them” offered protection from the experience of power imbalance, as did having a friend who would tell the teacher (Nelson et al., 2018, p. 287). However, friends did not always choose to support the bullied child in telling the teacher, and some children were rejected by friends after telling: “they might give you nasty looks and not be your friend anymore and cannot be your friend” (grade 5 girl) (Nelson et al., 2018, p. 286). Children from each grade equated bullying with loneliness and isolation, as described by a grade 4 girl “Bullying, bullying is a way to bring someone’s self-esteem down and make them feel bad about themselves. Take away all their friends and feel like there’s nobody with them” (Nelson et al., 2018, p. 284). This was spoken of in the context of being alone with no help to resolve the situation, including friends or staff. One grade 6 girl spoke of her experience “at my old school with my teacher and kids I got bullied” (Nelson et al., 2018, p. 286). At her new school this girl had received emotional support and overcome the experience of

power imbalance to actively defend children who were bullied.

The theme *secrets from the teacher*, overlapped with a peer-valued characteristic of being smart. Children spoke of being bullied because they were *smart in schoolwork or talented*. Alternatively, some spoke of being “put down” by children who were academically talented. The word smart was not only related to academic ability; smart children could have the skills to stand up to an aggressor with “good comebacks.” Alternatively, smart children might “get away with bullying,” by telling lies to the teacher, or because the teacher would not expect these children to bully others (Nelson, Burns, et al., 2019, p. 7). Some children who reported bullying to an adult at school or at home were overlooked; their experience of harm dismissed. Adults did not always see that children were bullying others or being bullied as discussed by children in grade 6: “Whenever he did something wrong he would blame it on me, and he would always tell rumours” (grade 6 boy); and “(Teachers) ignore me like it was my fault” (grade 6 girl) (Nelson et al., 2018, p. 286). Children in each grade reported similar experiences of being overlooked, or even blamed for the bullying when they them-self had been the one to experience harm.

Qualitative results informed the development of two surveys, the Scale of Perceived Power Imbalance (SPPI) and the Student Experience of Teacher Support Scale (SETSS). The surveys were included in a questionnaire completed by children from four schools (n=337). The 8-item SPPI was answered by children who reported victimization by the Adolescent Peer Relations Instrument, a survey that has demonstrated reliability and validity in Australian primary schools (Parada, 2000). The

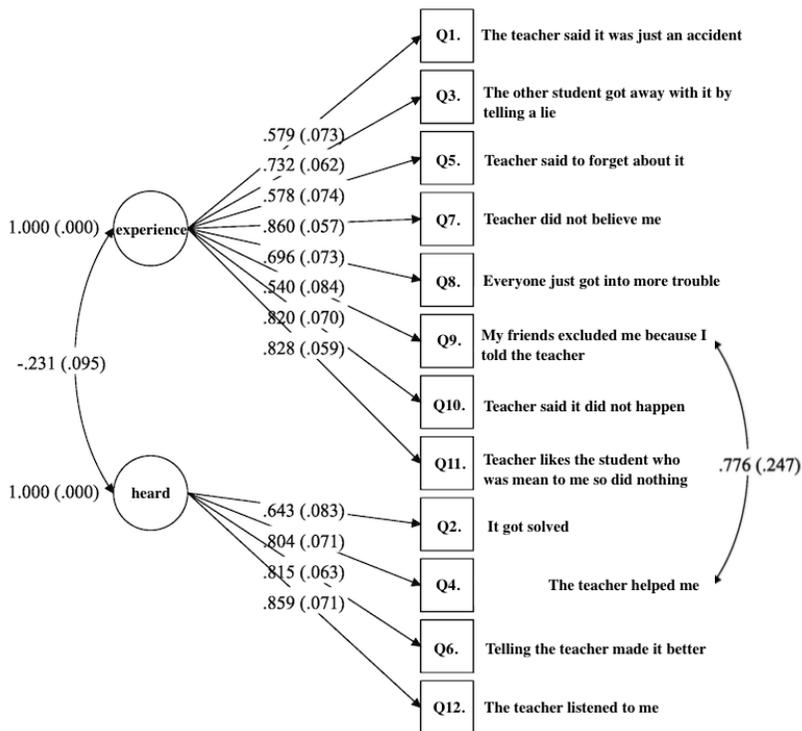
SPPI was displayed in the online survey if children reported frequent physical and verbal victimization (n=146) or frequent social victimization (n=127). Confirmatory factor analysis resulted in two factors of adequate fit, social power and physical power (Nelson, Kendall, et al., 2019b, p. 7). The two most frequently answered questions representing an experience of power imbalance did not load onto either factor; “good at sport,” and “trying to be more popular” (Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Frequency of victimization by item. Children who answered “yes” to experiencing victimization by the Adolescent Peer Relations Instrument and subsequently reported an experience of power imbalance to the stem question “When these things happened to you was the mean student ...”

The 12-item SETSS was displayed to children who answered “yes” to a stem question that they had told a teacher when another student had been mean “to you or someone else” on purpose (n=230). A 2-factor model resulted, student experience and heard (Nelson, Kendall, et al., 2019a). Acceptable model fit was identified when question 4 “the teacher helped me” was allowed to covary with question 9 “my friends excluded

me because I told the teacher.” Factor loadings are shown in Figure 2, as is the covariance between questions 4 and 9.



**Figure 2.** Factor structure of the SETSS.

The curved arrow on the left shows the correlation between each factor of the SETSS. The straight arrows show the factor loadings, and the curved arrow on the right shows the covariance between questions 4 and 9.

## DISCUSSION

This research adds to understanding children's experience of power imbalance associated with aggression and bullying that is intentionally hidden from adults at school. Discussion of the implications for children incorporates the focus group themes of *peer valued characteristics, popularity, friendship, social exclusion, and secrets from the teacher.*

Bullying can be shrewd, targeted at children who are seen to be different and do not have the characteristics that others value. Peer-valued characteristics are consistently found to include appearance, athleticism, and possessions (Green et al., 2013; Thornberg, 2018). However, peer-valued characteristics are neutral, as demonstrated in focus groups they can influence or protect against children's experience of power imbalance. Power imbalance was promoted when children abused the status attributed to them because they possessed these characteristics (Nelson, Burns, et al., 2019). Status is attributed to others according to the cultural norms that influence how worth and value are ascribed (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Thornberg, 2018). Within these cultural norms are layers of social complexity. For example, Thornberg (2018) found that while girls who were obese were bullied, boys who were obese but also physically strong and assertive were not bullied. Similarly, in our research, peer valued characteristics of good looking did not consistently load onto a factor representing experienced power imbalance, whereas being "tougher than you" did. This complexity within the attribution of worth and value may mask

teacher awareness of power imbalance and bullying, and teachers may dismiss children who report bullying (Thornberg, 2018). Just as peer valued characteristics are neutral, so is power – it can be used for good or harm. The challenge to leaders and policy makers is to promote a culture in which power is harnessed for good, in which the whole school promotes respect for the dignity and worth of each person.

School cultures reflect societal values, these include social confidence and reputation. In understanding these norms we may understand some factors that contribute to children’s experience of power imbalance. Teachers have attributed bullying to the bad manners of the children who bully others (Thornberg, 2018), or to the individual characteristics of children who are bullied, including appearance or lack of confidence (Rosen et al., 2017). By attributing blame to the characteristics of the bullied child, teachers may validate bullying (Migliaccio, 2015). For example, a grade 6 girl who did not distinguish between the teacher and children at her old school when telling her history of being bullied, “at my old school with my teacher and kids I got bullied” (Nelson et al., 2018, p. 286). Attribution of bullying to the manners of a child who bullies, or the nature of a child who is bullied, suggests that teachers are unaware of how power imbalance within bullying relationships can isolate children and interfere with their capacity for emotional adjustment (Kaufman et al., 2020). In school practice, the attribution of bullying to children’s individual characteristics blinds others to the goal directedness of bullying, and hinders our understanding of how to lessen the harm of bullying (Kaufman et

al., 2020; Thornberg, 2018).

The goal-directed use of social power may be consistent with the use of the word “smart” by children in the focus groups in our study, for example, in being able to deceive the teacher by telling lies. Children associated being smart with manipulation of others to achieve personal goals of social dominance (Nelson et al., 2018). This is consistent with research findings that some socially clever children manipulate peers through the strategic use of intimacy and social isolation (Kiefer & Wang, 2016). In our focus groups many children spoke of the harm experienced as friends used a process of intimacy, lies, and social isolation to achieve a goal of social dominance. Children who were bullied experienced power imbalance as an inability to make change without help. But help is not easy to find in an environment where others are being cleverly manipulated, where peers feel unable to help because of a group based power dynamic, or where teachers are unaware of the unequal power structure. In a qualitative study, Rosen et al. (2017) asked teachers what advice they would give to victimized students; some answered that students should find support from peers because “there’s power in numbers” (p. 133). The difficulty with this response is that children who use social manipulation to unite the peer group recognize the power in numbers, and use this power against the bullied child. Children who have social power may also be clever at intentionally hiding aggressive behavior from adults, and may even be regarded positively by teachers (Hawley, 2003). Teachers may not recognize bullying by children who are popular or who make a favorable impression on others (Cunningham et

al., 2016; Mucherah et al., 2018). Kaufman et al. (2020) call for unique strategies to tackle school bullying, including “teaching children to defend themselves by finding support” (p. 387). To give this support, teachers will benefit from the backing of policy and leaders who acknowledge how covert bullying may contribute to children’s experience of power imbalance through social isolation.

If teachers feel unable to engage with children who report covert bullying due to a lack of evidence, children may lose a secure base of emotional support. When this secure base is removed the power imbalance experienced by children may be heightened, resulting in an elevated neurobiological stress response, an internalizing of fear, and impaired capacity to learn. Alternatively, teachers who do not disengage may respond by punishing the child who bullied others (Byers et al., 2011). In our study a strong covariance was demonstrated between telling the teacher and being excluded by peers (Nelson, Kendall, et al., 2019a). Thirty nine percent of children, who reported that the teacher helped them, also reported they were excluded by friends because they told the teacher. Similarly, Cross et al. (2009) found that bullying became worse for 45% of children who sought help from an adult and improved for only 25%. Teachers have also said that attempts to stop bullying can actually make it worse (Cunningham et al., 2016). This is possibly related to punishment of children who bully others (Byers et al., 2011). Because covert bullying is not visible to teachers it can be very difficult for teachers to understand how to respond. Empathic listening and a non-punitive approach is recommended when

responding to reports of covert bullying (Byers et al., 2011; Troop-Gordon & Ladd, 2015).

In the Netherlands teachers nominated children they considered to be bullied, and children (aged 8-12) reported their own experience by self-report (Oldenburg et al., 2016). Only one quarter of children who reported that they were bullied were nominated by teachers. Several teachers voiced doubt that these children were actually bullied (Oldenburg et al., 2016). This was attributed in part, to children's decision not to tell the teacher, a finding that is consistent with our study and with other recent studies; children often choose to tell friends and family rather than the teacher (Blomqvist et al., 2020; Shaw et al., 2019). This demonstrates the value of a systems approach when implementing interventions. Hunter et al. (2004) found that children are more likely to seek help if they expect they will learn to deal with bullying or that the bullying will stop; although bullying stopped for 24% of children who told the teacher, only 12% felt better. This emphasizes the importance of helping children to process their own negative emotions (Hunter et al., 2004). There is great value in partnering with families to build a culture in which children feel safe as they seek support to overcome power differentials in relationships at school (Gerrard & Soriano, 2013; Kaufman et al., 2020). By listening to, and supporting children as they problem solve, we recognize children as active participants in their own their own life, and nurture resilience (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Teachers want to understand how to support children who are bullied, and to reduce the harm of covert bullying (Cross et al., 2009; Migliaccio,

2015). Their ability to have a positive impact is supported in a whole school culture that acknowledges the power differentials experienced by children who are bullied, and provides a culture in which peers, families, and teachers feel supported.

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## **CONCLUSION**

Bullying occurs in a relationship of power imbalance; power itself is neutral and can be used for good or harm. Bullying occurs within layers of social complexity; through the worth that is attributed to status and the misuse of power to gain status. Because of social norms, and the complex interplay between factors that infer status, it can be very difficult for teachers to recognize bullying. Policy and practice will ideally promote empathic listening as children seek emotional support to overcome the power differential of bullying, including overt and covert bullying. This is necessary across all socioecological systems through which developmental support is given to children, with particular focus on supporting the families and teachers who most closely care for children. This includes being aware of cultural values and norms and building a whole school culture that respects each person. Within this culture children may develop resilience as teachers focus on listening to those who report bullying and give them emotional support rather than trying to “fix” the bullying problem by punishing those who seem to be doing the bullying.

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## **7 CONNECTING THE SBFC DOTS IN AMERICA: FAMILY THERAPY IN SCHOOLS TOPICAL INTEREST NETWORK**

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Kathleen Laundry, Central Connecticut State University, USA

Erin Cushing, Southern Connecticut State University, USA

Wade Fuqua, University of Louisiana, USA

Laura Wallace, Antioch University, USA

Eileen Klima, Humbolt County Schools, USA

### **ABSTRACT**

*Since the 1970s in the US, Public Law 94-142 has mandated that school-based mental health services in the US be provided through a special education “planning and placement” process of individualized assessment and programming by a multidisciplinary school team of providers. In the past two decades, more systemic initiatives such as School Based Family Counseling (SBFC), Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) and Response to Intervention (RTI) have been*

*added to create Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) in schools (Cholewa & Laundry, 2019). The goal is to provide more comprehensive services in schools to a broader range of students, families, and educators, in order to boost student achievement and resilience more effectively. The need for such support for schools across systemic levels has grown with the current coronavirus pandemic and the cultural/racial distress in the US.*

*In the past thirty years, all fifty states in the U.S. have enacted licensure of the profession of marriage and family therapy as one of the licensed mental health professions providing services to schools across the country. Family therapy is now both a multidisciplinary practice as well as the sixth licensed mental health profession. It is regulated by the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy in North America (AAMFT). Family therapists now join counselors, psychiatric nurses, psychiatrists, psychologists, and social workers in schools across the country through state certification, contracted service delivery and through school partnerships with community clinics and agencies. It is an opportune time for MFTs to become embedded with multidisciplinary teams in education, fortified with systemic training at the core of their graduate preparation.*

*As family therapists enter such practice areas as schools, medicine, and the military, AAMFT created Topical Interest Networks (TINs) in 2018 to expand the systemic orientation of MFTs/SBFC clinicians across settings, and to encourage integrated multidisciplinary practice patterns across health care and education. This paper summarizes the first two years of*

*effort by the AAMFT leadership team of the Family Therapy in Schools TIN. Its aim is to promote collaborative, systemic mental health practice in education by connecting school-based TIN members with innovative practice patterns and professionals who work in schools across the US, Canada, and the world.*

*Following an introduction to the emergence of systemic initiatives such as SBFC and family therapy into schools, this paper outlines three current areas of TIN activities. They include: Bimonthly Zoom workshops with national/ international leaders who practice systemically in schools; bimonthly Spotlight Newsletters highlighting innovative school leaders and what they do; and a Member Forum web site for TIN members to collaborate.*

*The TIN team will then illustrate how MFTs are joining school health teams in three ways, which include: State certification or endorsement and how it is achieved; contracted school-based services between private practices/agencies and schools; and conjoint community partnerships among schools and community service providers such as child guidance clinics, youth and family and social service agencies. All TIN leaders have been involved with one or more of these three types of school-based practice across the U.S.*

**Key words:** *Multi-tiered systems of support, Multidisciplinary, Eurocentric, Systemic*

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## INTRODUCTION

The civil rights era in America ushered in the landmark *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision in 1954, which affirmed the right of African American students to attend integrated public schools (Laundy, Nelson & Abucewicz, 2011, p. 1). *Brown vs. Board of Education* prompted the further advocacy necessary to enact the landmark Education for all Handicapped Children legislation in 1975, or Public Act 94-142. That national law mandated free and appropriate public education (FAPE) for students with special learning needs, which was to be offered in the least restrictive environment (LRE) (Laundy, 2015, pp.21 - 25). Such legislation created the need and opportunity for physical and occupational therapists, speech and language therapists and mental health professionals to partner with educators to help a fuller range of students to succeed and achieve in schools.

Such service was initially based on a special education process of “planning and placement”, which involves assessment, team collaboration and matchup with needed services for students with disabilities by Planning and Placement Teams (PPTs). It was based on the US practice of individual assessment and treatment in health care, a practice which is known culturally as “Eurocentric” (Carter and Hernandez, 2020, p. 351). Over time, it was determined that such assessment needed to be done earlier in children’s school careers, and that students with special needs should be less isolated from their mainstream peers. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 created

the path for the establishment of the Response to Intervention (RTI) initiative in 2005. That initiative helped shift the national mandate from ensuring that specific services are provided to individual students, to evaluating whether all students are learning and achieving.

The No Child Left Behind law paved the way for the creation of more systematically integrated layers of service to students at schools called Multi-Tiered Systems of Support or MTSS (Goodman-Scott, Betters-Bubon & Donohue, 2019, p. 1). MTSS incorporates whole-school, group, family, and individual levels of interventions, depending on what services are needed. It has empowered the creation of more systemic, multicultural elements in school service delivery, including more multidisciplinary relationships among service providers and families, and conjoint family therapy (Carter & Hernandez, 2020, p. 352).

Nurses, school counselors and school psychologists have been salaried school personnel since the beginning of special service programming in education. Social workers joined school systems around 1975, and family therapists joined school systems as MFT licensure was established across the US in the 1990s. MFTs have provided school-based support for several years, and they officially achieved school certification across the US in 2008 (Laundy, 2015).

Despite the presence of mental health services in schools, however, services have often continued to be delivered through

an individualistic “Eurocentric” lens (Carter & Hernandez, 2020, pp. 352 - 353, 356). Constraints to student resiliency and achievement were seen to reside within that student, rather than through illness, poverty, or other systemic adverse child experiences. Because of the growth of MTSS services in the past decade, systems trained mental health professionals are now incorporating more family, social and cultural variables into the multi-tiered array of school-based services as schools support them.

Starting in 2019, the AAMFT Family Therapy in Schools Topical Interest Network (TIN) began to identify and highlight innovative clinicians, programs and services that systemically contribute to successful student learning and achievement. First, the TIN team created bimonthly Zoom workshops to interview leaders across the US who were designing school based mental health initiatives in underserved areas of Wisconsin, Kentucky, and California. They highlighted TIN Team leader Eileen Klima, school counselor, school psychologist and MFT from Humboldt County, California; her work will be featured later in this article. Working collaboratively to achieve state certification was another featured Zoom interview with Drs. Ralph Cohen and Kathleen Laundy, TIN Chair, from Central Connecticut State University.

National and international School Based Family Counseling (SBFC) leaders such as Drs. Brian Gerrard, Michael Carter, and Emily Hernandez from the Oxford Symposium in SBFC have also been featured in Zoom workshops. They highlighted

systemic school services and programs such as culturally sensitive school-based family meetings, and conjoint family therapy.

In addition, the TIN team publishes bimonthly Spotlight Newsletter interviews with school-based clinicians from the mental health disciplines of counseling, family therapy, psychology, and social work to highlight their systemic work and the multidisciplinary nature of what they do in schools. The network of the Family Therapy in Schools TIN has grown to over 300 members in the past two years. To accommodate this growth, AAMFT and the TIN team established and maintains a web site and discussion forum for TIN members to address concerns, make connections and share information.

Through these activities and their own experience, The AAMFT Family Therapy in Schools TIN has learned that MFTs are joining with schools and fellow health professionals in three important ways. These are: Through state certification for school-based practice; through special contracted service delivery to schools; and, through community partnerships among schools and community agencies. The TIN Leadership Team will describe each of these methods for joining with school systems in the following sections.

### ***State Certification, Contracted Services & Community Partnerships***

While systemic support for students has grown since the

establishment of Public Law 94-142 in 1975, the federal enactment of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in 2001 omitted Marriage and Family Therapists (MFTs) from the list of qualified school-based mental health providers (“Family Therapists in Schools,” 2020). Consequently, most states followed suit, developing regulations and endorsements for school-based mental health positions that excluded MFTs. As a result, MFTs have creatively found ways to work within school systems outside of these federal regulations.

In the past two decades, states have worked to create legislation for state certification and endorsements for school based MFTs. After a 15-year journey, Connecticut was the first such state to enact public school certification (CT Public Law 07-241) for MFTs in 2007 (Laundy, 2015, p. 28). State school certification regulations were written in the following two years, creating a clear set of requirements for licensed MFTs to achieve school certification, including specific learning domains and school-based practicum/internship experience. As currently written, MFT graduate students must complete 2-3 extra courses (6-9 credits) beyond the clinical MFT curriculum to meet requirements for state certification in schools. Post-graduate MFTs wishing to obtain this certificate may also enroll in these required courses.

To date, several other states are working to enact similar certification legislation to promote school-based positions for MFTs. However, because each state government has different regulatory bodies for mental health professions and its own

licensure and certification requirements, pursuing school MFT certification is taking different routes for MFT professionals and AAMFT divisions across the country (Laundy, Cohen & Bishop, 2013, p. 736). In Vermont, for example, the Agency of Education (AOE) offers an endorsement for “School Based Clinicians.” These positions can be filled by psychologists, social workers, MFTs, or mental health counselors but the state does not specify educational or professional requirements for MFTs (M. Troop, personal communication, July 1, 2020). While requirements and regulations vary state to state, state licensure and school certification offer the benefit of ensuring higher quality of care and collaboration among multidisciplinary members (Laundy, 2015, p. 101).

In the absence of school certification, allied mental health professionals have made it possible to work with schools through contracted services and programs. For instance, Gerrard cites the successful Mission Possible university-school partnership between the University of San Francisco School-Based Family Counseling program and surrounding schools. Over its 30-year history, that program has provided school-based family counseling services to 100,000 children and families in over 100 Bay area schools (Gerrard, 2013, p. 710, and 2008, p. 14 and 28-29). Similarly, California State University programs also provide contracted partnerships with schools that seek to systemically address a wide cultural range of constraints to school achievement and resiliency through SBFC (Carter & Hernandez, 2020, p. 351).

Some school-based counseling services are offered directly in schools by licensed or certified mental health clinicians. In Connecticut, school districts have utilized MFT services through direct contracting or collaborative “sharing” with town youth service bureaus and other social service agencies for many decades (Laundy, Cohen & Bishop, 2013, p.729). Many MFTs have established close working relationships with school administrators, support staff and special education staff through multidisciplinary collaboration. These relationships often result in contracted consultation services to school systems, including participation in PPT meetings, involvement in building and implementing appropriate systems of support, and the provision of specialized clinical services for identified students and their families. See the next section for more information about such partnerships.

A third opportunity for MFTs to work within school settings has been through relationships among schools and community agencies, including hospitals and non-profit health clinics. Such partnerships follow various models and formats but have increasingly taken shape as school-based health centers (SBHCs). Schools have increasingly become the setting where health care needs are first recognized and addressed (Laundy, 2013, p. 741). Since the development of the “medical home” concept in 1967 by the American Academy of Pediatrics (Laundy, 2013, p. 741), a growing number of hospital, community, and school-based partnerships across the US have emerged to support student health, well-being, and academic success.

The presence of school-based health centers has significantly grown in the past two decades. According to data gathered by the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA), there are well over 2000 SBHCs nationwide (“School Based Health Centers,” 2017). MFTs are frequently hired into behavioral health positions by these community organizations and placed in school settings. This allows for multidisciplinary teamwork within the SBHC itself, where clinicians work alongside nurses, doctors, dentists, and psychiatric providers. Further, it promotes collaboration across the larger school organization, where clinicians can utilize opportunities to work with teachers, administrators, and support staff to boost student success.

The benefits of such contracted services and community partnerships are numerous, including the ability to provide services outside of school hours, both in school and in off-site locations, the potential for continuation of services for students and families during school breaks, and access to additional resources and services. It must be noted, however, that while many such valuable relationships and programs have been developed, contracted programs are often subject to the threat of termination or alteration when funding ceases and/or school priorities change (Laundy, Cohen & Bishop, 2013, p. 726).

Despite the challenges, however, there is a growing array of randomized control and other evidence-based studies that document the value and effectiveness of SBHC (Gerrard, Carter, & Ribera, 2020).

## ***Examples of Clinical Practices from Family Therapy***

School-based family counseling supports a family-inclusive, multisystemic perspective about student achievement and resiliency in schools. Cross-disciplinary research has explored the role of family-centered techniques and systemic treatment in students' academic health (Martin, 2013; Taylor, Clayton, & Rowley, 2004), and the role of families in student development and academic achievement has become increasingly apparent (Valdez, Carlson, & Zanger, 2005). Caffery, Erdman, and Cook (2000) state that the interaction between the school and the family must be included any treatment of academic and behavioral problems. They note that without "a collaborative partnership between the two systems" (p. 155), many of the issues underlying school-based difficulties will remain unaddressed.

Family therapy emerged partially as a challenge to the idea that an individual could be removed from its system, treated in isolation, and returned "healed" to its environment (Gurman & Kniskern, 2008). There is growing evidence that the impact of the environment inevitably proves stronger than the "changed" individual, drawing him or her back into previously dysfunctional patterns. Paylo (2011) describes curriculum for training school counselors infused with the basics of Bowen, Minuchin, and de Shazar, suggesting that the use of such resources as a family autobiography and a Family Collage might assist school clinicians to generate support for a student's academic achievement. Attempts have been made to involve the family in school-based

bullying interventions (Butler & Lynn Platt, 2007), and family interventions from structural-strategic, solution-focused, and narrative therapies have been shown to be useful for school-based family counseling (Terry, 2002).

Just as a systemic approach considers the process of change to include the therapist's own relationship with the client system, so too practitioners who integrate systems thinking into the school have begun to consider how the therapist's own processes impact the system of intervention, whether student, classroom, school, or family. Evans and Carter (1997) state that school-based family counselors need to have resolved their own issues sufficiently to facilitate interactions with families with high levels of conflict. Terry (2002) describes a master's level course, "Family Counseling in Schools," which involves students sharing their past experiences with schools and families and exploring how their professional mission (whether they are driven towards social change or relationship problem-solving) may influence their work. Holcomb-McCoy (2004) emphasizes the need for counselors in the school setting to have done personal family-of-origin work to understand the systemic perspective more fully.

In alignment with this perspective, a growing body of family therapy literature continues to explore applications of the principles of family theory to the school setting. Over the past 10 years, solution-focused brief therapy (SFBT) has shown potential to reduce students' behavior problems and help them manage intense negative feelings, decrease conduct problems and other externalizing behaviors, improve outcomes for substance

abusers, and help students do better academically, as measured, for example, by earning more credits (Kim & Franklin, 2009). Other promising applications of family therapy models to student problems include strategic family therapy (Nelson, 2006), narrative techniques (Butler & Lynn Platt, 2007; Stacks, 2007), and structural principles (Butler & Lynn Platt, 2007). Nelson (2006) applies the “invariant prescription” to the school setting, arguing that school counselors should receive systems training to address problems of hierarchy between parents and children. Terry's (2002) masters level course, “Family Counseling in Schools,” teaches the interventions derived from structural-strategic, solution-focused, and narrative models, and part of the course involves exploring how beginning therapists’ past experiences with their own schools and families may influence their work. Similarly, Paylo (2011) recommends integrating family systems theory when training school counselors, to both teach them about family systems and uncover their own family-of-origin issues that may impede work with clients.

Although these school-wide applications are promising, perhaps the most powerful impact occurs when MFT theories are applied to a smaller system. One example of a family therapy technique being applied to an entire classroom is the solution-focused Working on What Works (WOWW) program. Developed by Lee Shilts and In Soo Berg in 2002, this model was first applied to urban schools in Florida. According to Kelly, Kim, and Franklin (2008), two coaches observe a classroom for ten structured weekly sessions. After gathering qualitative data for forty minutes, the coaches provide 15-20 minutes of feedback to the

whole class. In the WOWW model, only strength-based feedback (i.e., praise) is provided, children are not taken out of the class, and several solution-focused techniques (class goal setting, mid-treatment meeting with teacher, and “noticing cards”) are used (Lloyd, Bruce, & Mackintosh, 2012). The program also includes a vital element of teacher debriefing (Kelly & Bluestone-Miller, 2009). Evidence-based research on the model suggests that the WOWW program improves classroom management (Kelly & Bluestone-Miller, 2009), increases empathy within the classroom setting (Lloyd et al., 2012), and improves class attendance (Wallace, Hai, & Franklin, 2020).

Systems thinking lends itself well to school-based work, and the field of marriage and family therapy has produced several effective and highly collaborative ways of working within a school setting. With a strong grounding in systemic theory and interventions designed to incorporate multiple people, MFTs and other systemically trained mental health professionals are often able to provide direct, incisive treatment likely to work at a classroom level. The classroom system is large enough to allow quality systemic interventions, but small enough to allow for a single mental health practitioner to make a significant impact. The research on family therapy interventions applied to the classroom is promising. The next step is to expand research and practice to explore the impact of classroom-level interventions on student mental health and academic outcomes.

### ***Other Contracted School-Based Practice Options***

While certification standards may vary from one state to another, systemically trained clinicians are able to work in a school setting in several ways. These include options for community mental health centers, behavioral health agencies, and private practitioners who contract with schools to provide services to the student population and families. Many private practitioners who do not contract with a school have some number of clients who experience school-related problems, and the school is one of the primary avenues for mental health intervention (von der Embse, 2018).

As mentioned previously, states such as Connecticut have a certification available to MFTs to seek employment opportunities in the school environment, while other state departments of education do not recognize MFTs yet as one of the primary mental health providers in schools. The need to address family-related issues in school continues to be a rising concern for many teachers and administrators across the country with increased episodes of school violence, as well as the ongoing presence of divorce, separation, custody issues, and other issues that inundate school campuses across the country. Given the current coronavirus pandemic and the growing awareness of systemic racism, MFTs and other systemically trained clinicians hold a timely set of skills to work with a variety of presenting problems and manage multiple spheres of influence with clients (Laundy, 2015). Student internships are often the first place that therapists-in-training experience the application of systemic

therapy principles outside of the therapy room.

Some graduate students experience school-based work as a part of their internship or practicum course. There are multiple examples of programs utilizing graduate level interns in school settings. Ziffer, Crawford, and Penney-Wietor (2007) utilized graduate students in a school counseling program to identify and help students and their families recovering from parent separation and divorce. Another example is the Systemic Change in Schools and PROMISE programs developed by Anne Rambo in the 2013-2014 school year, utilizing graduate level interns to work with at risk youth in the local school district, Broward County School District in Florida (Collins-Ricketts & Rambo, 2015). This program involved graduate interns applying solution-focused brief therapy to youths in school experiencing disciplinary action and other negative events that often lead to referrals to law enforcement and expulsions from school. Through participation in the PROMISE program, student suspensions decreased, and school policies changed based on this evidence. Collins-Ricketts and Rambo note the value of applying systemic therapy models to both individualized care (students and families participating in the program) and systemic change within the larger school district.

For states without a school certification, another frequently utilized method of working in a school setting is by contracting between school and behavioral health provider. This often is the result of either a formal request for proposals to develop a partnership with schools, or the result of a provider

working with multiple students in a school over time, thus naturally creating a partnership between the two. In one author's experience, the Little Rock School District in Arkansas created a formal contracting process with a district-employed therapist who coordinated mental health efforts across the district. This change came after nearly 15 agencies were working "inside" the school district, and often multiple agencies' staff members were present in a school building at the same time. The increased presence of mental health created a need for more clearly outlined and integrated policies for practicing school-based mental healthcare.

Clinicians contracting with a school may experience a variety of advantages and disadvantages to this arrangement, based upon the specific partnership between the two organizations. Some clinicians employed by an outside behavioral health agency may have a caseload that includes some school-based clients and some clients based at the agency's clinic. This arrangement results in the clinician splitting their time between the two locations. While some clinicians may prefer this arrangement, others may identify difficulty fully engaging in the school environment due to the obligations of services scheduled for the agency's office location and school schedules. Stated differently, the need for one person to balance time, schedules, paperwork, and other requirements across two settings can interfere with a clinician's ability to fully engage fully in either setting. Clinicians may experience a natural pull between the school staff and agency administration and requirements, while also working to maintain client care. Likely

most clinicians have the relatable experience of balancing client care against agency requirements, and school involvement can add layers of responsibility, such as participation in school committees, special education meetings, or other events (Fuqua, 2020; Laundry, 2015).

Several authors of this paper work in a private practice and collaborate with local schools by working with the individual clients' teachers. On a small scale with individual teachers in a school, an MFT's unique systemic training positions the clinician to address the influence the entire school 'system' has on the student's presenting problem. The MFT can serve as a "go between" or moderator for families struggling with school staff. In other situations, school staff may rely upon the MFT to support communication between separated parents or high-conflict families (Fuqua, 2020).

In recent research completed by Dr. Fuqua, TIN Secretary, multiple examples of MFT employment in schools were identified by participants. One example was the option for charter schools or other non-public schools to hire MFTs for school counselor or mental health intervention positions. Freed from the requirement to meet specific qualification and regulatory standards, one grouping of research participants were employed by a group of charter schools in a large metropolitan area in the Southwest United States who sought out MFTs to work on their campuses because of the MFTs' systemic training (Fuqua, 2020). Multiple examples provided by research participants indicated the value of systemic training in their school-based work, which

was not limited solely to the role of the MFT as the client's therapist.

MFTs working in schools may also experience the transition to being a quasi-member of the school staff. Close collaboration between school staff and MFTs working in the school and employed by an outside agency can result in the MFT being a valued member of the school staff. This transition reflects the ability for MFTs to travel between the systems of schools and therapy, and this taking place over time can result in policy changes at the school or district level as MFTs begin to integrate systemic concepts with school operations (Collins-Ricketts & Rambo, 2015; Fuqua, 2020).

### ***Community Partnerships and Advocacy***

Schools and communities working together are vital for the success of students in the 21st century, especially during the COVID19 pandemic, changing technology, and the ongoing chaos of the world. Since the formation of the TIN in 2018, members have shared how MFTs, communities, and local schools are working together across the US. Humboldt County has one such grassroots program located in a very isolated and rural part of northern California. Humboldt County is about 100 miles south of the Oregon border. It is a beautiful, scenic area where giant redwood forests meet the Pacific Ocean. Its population of approximately 100,000 is spread across roughly four thousand square miles. There are thirty-four different school districts, with some of these districts consisting of a one-room schoolhouse.

Despite its beauty, Humboldt County also ranks Number one in the state of California for suicide rates, drug overdoses, Hepatitis C, and domestic violence. Seventy four percent of the population has an Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE) score of four or more. (Humboldt County Department of Public Health, 2018). Recently, the county was featured in a Netflix series called Murder Mountain. This series describes the underground marijuana industry that thrives in the southern part of Humboldt. A few years ago, it was noted that the main economy is a marijuana and other drugs economy worth about sixteen billion US dollars (Humboldt County Sheriff Deputy, personal communication, 2016). The school districts are made up of a unique range of families, from well-educated children with great home lives to children showing up at school having never seen a crayon, tape, or glue. There are families living in the woods, subsisting on roadkill from the local highway. In fact, one student's home chore was to take a rake and gather the fresh roadkill from the night before so that his family could eat. Some of these families have been living like this for generations.

Recently, Humboldt County received a grant that brings mental health clinicians into the schools. Sadly, the grant provides only one mental health clinician per five thousand students. Another grant provides a mental health clinician from a private agency, access to the schools and students for limited services of six visits per student and only provides services to approximately thirty students. Families need more help, because small rural counties in California like Humboldt are unable to effectively compete for available funding resources. They must

compete with large cities like Los Angeles, San Francisco, and San Diego for such aid.

To have school-based family counseling be successful and available in Humboldt County Schools, work needs to occur more effectively with the systems that are in place, which includes the schools, the families, the local businesses, and community members. They need to direct the time and energy toward working together, without counting on limited outside grant funding or extra monies from somewhere else. One such ongoing pilot project is at Arcata High School (AHS), one of the five main high schools in Humboldt County. AHS has a population of approximately 1200 students in grades 9-12, where such community and the school systems has worked together. This project was highlighted in the Family Therapy in Schools TIN workshop series, as well as at last year's Oxford Symposium for School-Based Family Counseling.

A six-week pilot project was first created as a volunteer effort by the teachers, who donated their time and skills to the success of the program. The purpose was to develop healthy relationships with the at-risk and high-risk families of 9th and 10th grade students. Dinner was served on Monday nights to families with whom the school wanted to improve their relationship. The school invited fourteen families, and five families showed up. The dinners were prepared by the culinary class at Arcata High School. School staff and families ate together as one large family unit. The participating school staff demonstrated and modeled appropriate conversation and

feedback. An English teacher taught different mindfulness activities as the group shared dessert. After dinner, Humboldt State University students majoring in the fields of Psychology, Social Work and Child Development provided childcare for family members younger than high school age. The Marriage and Family Therapy students provided activities and group counseling for the high school students who attended. The Marriage and Family Therapist at the high school worked with the parents in a separate group. At the end of the evening everyone gathered as one large group and each person was asked to describe in one sentence what the evening was like for them. The evenings were always followed up by optional family therapy. Four families participated in ongoing family therapy at the school.

A high school aged child of one of the families also works part-time as a student custodian at AHS to help support his family. He attended the dinners, but his mother and stepfather were suspicious of the Monday night pilot project. They were homeless, and they lived in a nearby campground. His mother and stepfather would come to the school parking lot and hang out during the program, but they initially declined to participate. The school staff made a point of greeting them and initiating short, non-threatening conversations every week. Eventually, the stepfather came to the doorway of the room where we held our dinners and peeked inside. The next week he came a few steps through the door and watched all of us, but he did not want to eat dinner with us. He did not want his son to participate in the mindfulness activities, but he let him participate in the dinner

and group activities. The next week, the MFT invited the stepfather and his wife to meet with her. Both the mother and stepfather came to the MFT's office and shared that when this student was younger and living in a large inner-city area, he had been abused by his biological father and eventually joined a gang. He had been present for the murder of one of his friends and had been the target of a drive-by shooting. The student's mom and stepfather relocated to Humboldt County to keep their son safe from rival gangs. The young man had been attending AHS for nine months, and his parents said that this was the most successful their son had ever been at a school. The school staff was excited about establishing trust with this family.

The pilot project has continued to grow at AHS with the assistance of more community members, businesses and students from Humboldt State University getting involved. Many hands working together can help change a family. During this past year, volunteers set up a program to provide food for students and their families who would go without for the weekends and during breaks from the school year. The intent of the project is to develop healthy families through the school and community coming together without the assistance of grant funding. Unfortunately, the AHS pilot project has been on hold due to the COVID19 pandemic, but plans are in place to resume the project as soon as possible.

According to the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP), successful partnerships of the school, and family focus on establishing intentional coordination,

consistency, and continuity with family and educators. These conditions are accomplished through joint problem solving, two-way communication, and shared decision-making. Partnerships are integrated into school routines and elevated as a priority for student success and school improvement. Underlying successful partnerships are positive relationships (NASP 2019). The Coalition for Community Schools and NASP state that in order to have the most positive impact on the academic wellness outcomes of students, it is imperative that schools and communities work together through a collaborative and comprehensive approach (NASP, 2016).

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## **CONCLUSION**

The aim of the AAMFT Family Therapy Topical Interest Network Leadership Team is to “connect the School Based Family Counseling dots” that are growing in the U.S. and across the world. To that goal, this paper introduced its activities to the Oxford Symposium during its first two years of operation in the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy. The TIN Leadership team summarized its inaugural activities, highlighting how MFTs are joining multidisciplinary teams to promote school achievement and resiliency in three ways. This paper outlined how MFTs have joined multidisciplinary mental health colleagues through school certification, contracted initiatives with schools, and through community partnerships to create more systemic and culturally sensitive programs and services for students. The authors explained how they are sharing news about the growth

of MFTs on multidisciplinary school teams through bimonthly TIN workshops highlighting national and international school leaders, through a bimonthly Spotlight Newsletter, and through a web site forum for TIN members to communicate with each other.

The authors chose not to focus on the constraints to creating multi-tiered systems of support for students in schools in this paper. Indeed, there are many challenges to developing systemic, collaborative teams in schools, which is the subject of other papers. But current events in health, education, and culture are providing unique systemic opportunities to promote academic achievement more comprehensively than we systemic thinkers have traditionally had. Schools are where children spend the bulk of their time outside of the home, and schools are where some children are provided their major health care and stable opportunities for learning. There is growing evidence for the value of building systemic resources to boost children's health and achievement through the development of collaborative, multidisciplinary health care in schools. The AAMFT Family Therapy in Schools Topical Interest Network Team chose to highlight the success of these initiatives in its first two years of operation.

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## 8 UNDERSTANDING THE EXPERIENCES OF SCHOOL-BASED MARRIAGE AND FAMILY THERAPISTS

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Wade Fuqua

University of Louisiana at Monroe, USA

### ABSTRACT

*The school setting is an increasingly examined area of mental health intervention and there is a growing body of research surrounding the role of systemic therapists working in school-related positions. The multidisciplinary foundation of Marriage and Family Therapy (MFT) is key to better understanding the implementation of systemic thinking in the school setting. Drawing on earlier research by authors such as Vennum and Vennum (2013) and Laundry (2015), the presenter conducted an interpretive phenomenological analysis to examine the experiences of Licensed Marriage and Family Therapists and their work in schools.*

*Through a series of structured interviews, participants were asked a series of questions in order to better understand the therapist's experience of providing services to students, supporting school staff, and implementing systemic interventions in the academic environment. Criteria for participation included*

*participants being graduates of COAMFTE accredited universities, holding a valid Marriage and Family Therapy License, and either currently working in a school setting or had done so within the last five years.*

*After a thorough analysis and development of common themes among the transcripts, four themes emerged from the data. The themes were (a) the naturally systemic environment of schools, (b) a bifurcation in experiences of engaging the entire school system or focusing on treating the identified client, (c) an intentional involvement of family, and (d) advocating starts at the school level. Using existing research and data reported by participants, the presenter draws comparison to other professions with which systemic therapy has been integrated. The presenter identifies possible advocacy strategies for future efforts.*

*\*Research conducted as part of dissertation process.*

**Keywords:** *school- based family counseling, marriage and family therapy, systemic therapy*

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## INTRODUCTION

Mental health intervention and services in schools is a growing topic of study with the increase in school violence, bullying, and other mental health concerns being identified by researchers in schools (Sanchez et al., 2018). Schools are also considered primary places for intervention for children, and a variety of mental health providers are present in schools to engage students and their families in treatment (Villarreal & Castro-Villarreal, 2016). Marriage and Family Therapists (MFTs) are uniquely suited to school-based work, based upon the systemic training and skills MFTs hold (Laundy, 2015; Vennum & Vennum, 2013). In these school based mental health services, MFTs support student socioemotional and educational development and treat diagnosable mental health conditions. Sanchez et al. (2018) report a wide variety of mental health programs taking place in schools. Some programs focus on school-wide intervention, while others focus on individuals or small groups, and within this array of types of programs there are a variety of providers practicing in schools.

There are a variety of mental health professionals working in schools across the country. School counselors, Licensed Professional Counselors, Social Workers, and Psychologists tend to be some of the professionals most commonly found in schools, but Marriage and Family Therapists are an increasingly present discipline within school settings. While school counselors are often considered the primary mental health providers in a school setting, recent trends indicate school

counselors tend to spend a majority of their time completing administrative and educational tasks that take away time from providing mental health services (von der Embse, 2018). Laundry, Nelson, and Abucewicz (2011) cite that until 2007, MFTs were not eligible for certification for practice in schools, and in 2007 this changed when Connecticut became the first state to approve MFTs for school certification, more easily opening the door for school districts to employ MFTs. Other states, including Texas, Maine, and New Mexico have added MFTs to the list of approved providers in school, eligible with certification in the state (Vennum & Vennum, 2013). Laundry and colleagues note that MFTs have served in schools for many years prior to this legislation being enacted.

MFTs are systemically oriented and trained to work in a variety of settings; clinicians are trained to work collaboratively and see interactions and patterns among individuals in the maintenance and creation of mental health problems (Becvar & Becvar, 2009; Laundry, Nelson, & Abucewicz, 2011; Terry, 2002). MFTs intervene with students in the context of their relationships and interactions in the school in order to support problem solving. For example, a student may face a problem related to bullying, and the MFT will help the student cope with their experience of bullying by examining the interactional patterns that maintain the bullying behaviors. At the same time, some students may experience problems at home or in the community that interfere with their functioning at school. A student's parents' divorce may lead to increased stress moving between households and escalating parent conflict; some students

experiencing these problems that may not be related to but interfere with school can cause a series of behavior problems and even student drop-out (Iachini, Petiwala, & DeHart, 2016).

In these types of situations, an MFT is able to utilize specific training around working with marriages and family relationships, and the school setting is replete with interactions. Becvar and Becvar (2009) identify MFTs to be trained in ways to explore interactions and how individuals relate to one another, and how this influences change. Considering a school setting, there are hundreds, if not thousands, of interactions that take place a day in just one school building. There are interactions among students and teachers, between students and teachers, between students or teachers and administration staff. There are added layers of interaction when considering special education and auxiliary services that take place at school, as well as the inclusion of family members present. An MFT is uniquely positioned to intervene in classrooms and schools based on the number of interactions that occur in these settings, yet there is less research regarding the presence of MFTs in schools. MFTs are able to examine and intervene in a classroom setting to support peer and student-teacher relationships, much like relationships are addressed in family therapy. This is an appropriate comparison given the amount of time a classroom of students spends together every day, week, and school year. Taken from this perspective, students are viewed and understood through the connections in their lives instead of the wrong behaviors displayed in school (Lindo et al., 2014).

There is a growing research base for MFTs in schools, and this is met with the simultaneous increased focus on school-wide approaches to mental health and disciplinary intervention; these larger-systems of change with multiple settings and persons involved is an ideal place for MFTs to practice (Brigham, Gustashaw, Wiley, & Brigham, 2004). Vennum and Vennum (2013) report MFTs working in schools as practicing at a natural crossroads between where problem behaviors and symptoms are reported and where treatment is provided, instead of referring a student for services outside of a school, thus losing the context and relationships that influence the problem.

In spite of this natural affinity and connection, there are no consistent standards for MFTs practicing in schools, and professional development in this area is minimal. Survey research completed by Vennum and Vennum (2013) reports a variety of advantages and disadvantages MFTs identify about working in schools. Among the advantages reported by participants was the ability to address student problems in the school setting, or the context in which the behaviors occur. From a systemic perspective, clinicians are able to identify the problem-generating and problem-maintaining relationships and interactions. Additionally, the authors reported consistency among participants who identified the added ability to interact with family and school members at the same place, adding both convenience for treatment and increased collaboration across therapy services. Several disadvantages were also identified and included difficulty in completing full sessions due to the school schedule, as well as the need for educational activities to take

priority at times.

Vennum and Vennum (2013) communicate some information about the experiences of MFTs in schools, yet much of the research regarding school based mental health services, including research about MFT practice in schools focuses more on theoretical application, individual programs intervention, and other aspects of the practice that lacks an experiential element. Some existing research can support MFTs in the development of school based program development at both a school wide and a more focused, smaller level at school (Butler & Platt, 2008; Collins-Ricketts & Rambo, 2015; Wallace, Hai, & Franklin, 2020; Ziffer et al., 2007).

In 2013, Brian Gerard and Marcel Soriano published a model for school based family counseling (SBFC), and further crystallized the study and training of mental health counseling in schools. Though the model is not unique to practice for MFTs, the SBFC model outlines an effective practice for clinicians working in schools to work with student mental health problems in the context of multiple systems, including school, friend, and family groups. This model is further defined in the 2020 publication by Gerard, Carter, and Ribera of *School Based Family Counseling: A Practitioners Guide*. Accessible to mental health professionals across multiple disciplines and teachers and administrators, this publication solidifies how a collaborative and systemic approach to counseling and family involvement is both an effective and needed approach to practice in schools.

The author worked in school-based therapy for approximately 6 years, and was unaware of the growing body of research related to school based practice or the SBFC model. However, while working in schools, the author was able to utilize his systemic training to engage in mental health services in multiple schools. Working in a metropolitan school district in the capital city of a southern state, the author was the only identifiable Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist practicing school-based services at the time of the research (Lisa Williams, personal communication, April 26, 2017). The research reported by Vennum and Vennum (2013) was the foundation of the current research; the author was able to identify personal experiences that coincided with those experiences reported through the survey research. Aiming to identify a way to better connect and understand the experiences of those MFTs working in a school setting, the author was able to identify multiple research articles with information about the practice of systemic therapy in schools but little research about the experience of those individuals working.

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## **METHODS**

In order to better understand the experiences of MFTs working in schools, the author conducted interviews with Licensed Marriage and Family Therapists working in schools. More specifically, the author sought to identify any reported experiences that may be tied to the MFTs' systemic training. This is consistent with the author's personal experience of working in

a school attempting to engage with clients and families, as well as collaborate with school staff in the process of treatment. Due to the author's personal connection to the experience as an MFT working in schools he utilized an interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) to guide the research process (Smith, Flower, & Larkin, 2009).

IPA researchers frequently utilize their own experience throughout the process of conducting and analyzing data, and this is consistent with systemic epistemology. Systemic clinicians engage in therapy services with clients and consider their own influence on the presenting problem and individuals involved in maintaining the problem. This is an isomorphic process to the current research in which the author is able to connect with participants because of possible shared experiences. Previous experiences would significantly influence the development of interview questions, follow up questions, and other aspects of the data analysis process. MFT practices in school is quite a large field, and through this IPA qualitative research process, the author hoped to identify a small part of that experience through reports of MFT experiences in school (Smith et al., 2009).

A total of 8 MFTs participated in research interviews, at which the author identified saturation of the data. Smith and colleagues identify saturation is often achievable with up to 6 participants. Participants were eligible for interviews if they graduated from a marriage and family therapy master's program accredited by the Commission on Accreditation for Marriage and Family Therapy Education (COAMFTE) and held a current

marriage and family therapy license in their respective state. The author utilized this screening criteria as accreditation standards established by COAMFTE assured systemic orientation for MFTs, especially when considering the differences in licensure standards across states (Crane et al., 2010). Participants were either currently practicing in a school setting or had done so within the last 5 years at the time of participation in an interview. Participant experiences, however, may have covered a much wider timeframe if the clinician had been practicing in a school setting for more than 5 years.

An initial call for participants through COAMFTE program directors yielded minimal responses and only two possible participants. Additionally, the author posted in the American Association of Marriage and Family Therapy (AAMFT) TIN (Topical interest network) “Family Therapy in Schools” message board. This online community consists of graduate students and licensed professionals choosing to subscribe to the TIN through their AAMFT membership. Because of limited response from the initial calls for participation, chain sampling led to an eventual 8 participants completing interviews. Participants who responded to the initial call for participation were referred by their colleagues for the current study, and all referred met the previously established conditions for participation. All participants completed a demographic questionnaire and informed consent documentation prior to their recorded telephone interview, which lasted approximately 30-45 minutes.

All participants reported currently working in a school,

and some were employed directly by the school while other MFTs identified being employed by an outside mental health agency that contracted to provide school-based services. Of those interviewed, two MFTs reported previous teaching experiences which influenced their desire to work in a school, and 6 participants reported no previous school work experience. Six MFTs reported working in large metropolitan school districts with 2 participants identifying working in rural school districts. There was one cluster of three participants, who were colleagues working in Kindergarden-8th grade charter schools, obtained through chain sampling that worked for a public charter school. The two participants working in rural districts identified being employed by outside mental health agencies; this arrangement led these individuals to work in a variety of schools in their area. Finally, three participants identified being employed by public school districts. Within in this setting, however, there was difference among participants with Participant 1 working in up to 13 different schools and Participant 5 only working on 1 school campus.

The following questions completed the initial interview guide for all interviews. The author adopted a semi-structured interview process, focusing on open-ended questioning to maximize data capture (Smith et al., 2009). All interviewees responded to the initial list of 14 questions, and each interview consisted of follow up questions based on the content of the interview:

1. Talk to me about how your systemic training has been helpful in a school setting.

2. How do you describe your experience of practicing systemic therapy in a school setting?
3. How do you think what you do in school, practicing systemic therapy, is different than what other mental health professionals do in a school setting?
4. To what extent can systemic therapy support students to resolve school-related problems?
5. What about supporting families?
6. What about supporting school staff?
7. How do you maintain your systemic epistemology?
8. In what ways has your systemic training and practice influenced the school, including areas of discipline, policies and procedure, and overall climate?
9. In what ways, if any, has it been a challenge when practicing in a school setting?
10. Tell me about a case example that embodies the systemic influence in a school.
11. Is there anything else that you would like to add that I haven't asked?
12. What else do you think would be helpful to understand the use of systemic therapy in a school setting?
13. What advice would you give other systemically oriented practitioners in regard to systemically oriented practice in a school setting?

#### 14. How can we advocate for more MFTs working in schools?

Some interviewees struggled to respond to some questions, and follow-up clarification was offered when needed. Questions two and three were consistently difficult for participants to differentiate when responding; more contextual information based upon the participant's responses at that point in the interview was offered to participants.

After transcribing each interview, the author began an extensive review of each transcript, making note of individual participant responses and reported experiences. A review of the data included focusing on the targeted phenomenon in relationship to each individual reporting the experience, as the individual's unique employment and practice context is important to understand the participant's responses. Focusing on contextual information is again consistent with systemic epistemology as mentioned previous because MFTs address mental health and behavioral symptoms among the people that may perpetuate the problem (Becvar & Becvar, 2009; Keeney, 1983).

Following data collection and analysis, interviewees participated in a member checking process in order to maintain a high level of credibility through data collection and analysis. Credibility measures are critical elements of IPA research due to the heavy influence a researcher's experience has on data collection and analysis (Smith et al., 2009). Three participants responded to the member checking process reported agreement

with both the accuracy of their transcripts and the interpretation of their experiences as they related to the themes identified through data analysis.

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## **RESULTS**

Through the interview and analysis process, several themes emerged amid the many experiences shared by those interviewed. The predominant themes identified were (a) *that school is a naturally systemic environment*, (b) *there seems to be a bifurcation of experiences when engaging in the entire school system versus focused treatment on identified clients*, (c) *MFTs practiced with intentional family involvement in school*, and (d) *advocacy efforts start in the school where the MFT is practicing*.

In addition to the themes identified above, there were consistencies between participant experiences and existing literature on MFTs practicing in schools. In particular, many of the advantages and disadvantages reported by Venum and Venum (2013) were also reported by participants in this study. Among those recurring experiences were the challenges with balancing academic and mental health interventions, limited time for sessions, as well as the richness of data available for intervention. The latter is indicative of the shared experience across participants in identifying the school as a naturally systemic environment. The consistency of experiences across

this study and other published research also indicates the integrity of the experiences reported by those interviewed.

### **The Naturally Systemic Environment of Schools**

A majority of participants described their experience working a school in such a way that was consistent with a systemic epistemology. In fact, most described their experiences in schools as practicing in a naturally systemic environment. Stated differently, the school setting can be conceptualized in a systemic framework when considering the various sub-systems (classrooms, grade-levels, peer groups, staff, students) and other factors including incorporation of health, rehabilitation services, assessments, and social-emotional development. Participant 3 identified the following:

I think the biggest thing is understanding that school is a system too. When we think systemically, we automatically think of family and community, but the school is its own little ecosystem, and I mean... I like Venn diagrams to show how everything is interacting. And changing the structure of the school, the social structure or whatever, is just as difficult as changing that in a family. I haven't tried yet to see if there are patterned roles in the school like there are in a family, but it would be interesting to see.

Other participants identified similar experiences and thoughts regarding naturally systemic elements of the school

setting. Participant 8 compared the school setting to that of a family, and “if you can kind of use that systemic brain and view your school as a family. And view those relationships that you build with every single teacher.” This alludes to the parallel process ongoing between an MFT and a family and an MFT and members of a school. While the above participants reported favorable experiences working in a school, Participant 2 in the study reported having more frustrating experiences, yet she also identified how some teachers in schools she visited naturally being systemic in their orientation to classroom behavior (viewing influence in relationships) which made it easier for her to utilize systemic therapy interventions. Research Participant 7 identified the benefit of systemic practice in school very succinctly:

Some students might have personality conflicts or clashes with other teachers, and part of that systems theory is to look inward and invite the teachers to look inward at what is going on in their lives, and what is impacting them and how they are approaching or seeing a certain situation.

Across all participant interviews, MFT experiences indicated a consistently comfortable fit for utilizing systemic therapy interventions.

### **A Bifurcation of School Experiences**

The second theme identified through analysis was a primary difference in experiences of those interviewed. Some

MFTs reported experiences that were more consistent with school-wide engagement and influence on the larger school, and other participants identified experiences more focused on one-on-one intervention with clients and families. Both of these experiences included a significant amount of family and school staff involvement, and the primary difference seemed to be focused on the MFTs' influence on the school with changes in school climate, discipline, and other areas.

Participant 4 reported school staff members being resistant to change and school officials being resistant "to budge on discipline." This participant further indicated,

It is a narrow line where I offer to talk to people about how I'm happy to share some suggestions with you guys about what kind of things might be implemented in the classroom or what kind of strategies we could use at school to help this child stay on task and stay in his seat and that kind of stuff. But I don't put.... like I don't tell them what to do.

Another participant (6) identified feeling frustrated in talking to teachers because the school staff members did not seem to identify the importance of working together. This led to the participant reporting consistent feelings of being frustrated with having multiple people engaged in student services, and there was little engagement in collaborative care.

Interestingly, Participants 6, 7, and 8 all worked on

different school campuses for the same charter school district, and each person reported a different experience working at school. Participants 6 and 8 reported frustrations with not being able to influence the larger school environment, while Participant 7 identified a greater ability to influence the larger school environment. Multiple participants identified experiences of being considered administrator-like individuals in school, and this level of engagement led them to be able to influence disciplinary action decisions and other school policies. Participant 3 keenly identified how “schools are definitely looking to those of us that they allow in as experts and so we are saying, ‘hey, look, look beyond the individual.’ And they say, ‘oh yeah, we can see that.’” Participant 3 reported it clear process to develop relationships in school and influence the overall climate. Previous schoolwork experience as a teacher coincided with participants reporting a clearer process to engage in the school environment as an MFT. With follow up questioning on these experiences, participants indicated more familiarity with the academic aspects of schools.

### **Intentional Family Involvement**

Family involvement was one of the main ways by which the interviewed MFTs reported their work being different than that of other mental health professionals working alongside them in school. Consistent across all participants was the focus on engaging in as much family work as possible. While some participants identified challenges with increasing family engagement in treatment (Participant 2), other identified their school and staff as more encouraging with this focus. Participant

4 reported an example in which a teacher struggled with one student yet never met with the parents. In this example the school staff only spoke with the parents when communicating student problem behaviors, and this led to the parents having a negative, resistant attitude to engaging with the school staff. The participant identified helping the parents and school be “on the same page because they are able to see the other’s perspective a little bit better and I feel like that is beneficial for the kid in the long run.” At times this comfort with family work and intentional family involvement led to the MFT being a mediator between parents and school staff locked in conflict. This also meant that the therapist was called on to be a mediator between divorced parents struggling to communicate with one another.

The impact of increased family involvement in services in school was reported by several clinicians identifying the school staff members considering family involvement when managing a student’s behavior and education. The therapist’s role in engaging both the school and family in the student-centered problem provides a more supportive environment in which all involved focus on resolving the student’s problem instead of developing an adversarial relationship between school and family.

Some participants identified family involvement as the focus in school-wide programs, in addition to family involvement in direct therapy services with students. Participants 5, 7, and 8 reported creating parenting classes on their respective school campuses in order to increase the presence of parents on

campus, as well as providing foundational information for student wellbeing. Participant 5 communicated unique experiences by working in a community school that consistently hosts “community events...that obviously are geared for students, and parents, and families of the school....” The MFT identified using these events outside of school hours to support family engagement in services.

### **Advocating Starts in the School**

When asked about possible efforts to advocate for more MFTs to work in schools, some participants struggled to identify specific steps to take. Responses ranged from “Gosh. I don’t know. Win the lottery and get a lobbyist” (Participant 2) to “Wow. That is a great question. Well in [my state] we’ve only recently got a law passed for us to be able to diagnose. So that is a new thing” (Participant 4). One consistent response was the need to focus on gathering data to track MFT effectiveness in schools. Working in a large urban school district, Participant 1 reported how

We need results, and that is what we are trying to figure out, is how to show that it is helpful, just like any counseling practice. How do we show what we are doing is of value, so one of the things we are trying to do is get feedback? There is always the, you know, qualitative feedback you can get which is people saying, ‘We like her. We think this is helping, you know, him or her.’ This is helpful but we need to see results and that is what we are

still trying to figure out how we do that because it does not always directly impact [inaudible], but that is what they are really looking at schools. They go based off of money and what works, and if you can help kids, you know make a difference in getting the kids to school. Finding ways to collect data, that will really help and show the school district, you know the board members, that you are making improvements through the data and that really helps speak their language.

Participants reported school staff members and administrators maintaining some level of confusion about the role of a Marriage and Family Therapist in a school until the MFT was able to communicate and educate the staff on their skill set. Participant 5 reported working to educate the school staff on the differences among the primary mental health professions such as social work, school counseling, and psychology. And while this effort may not increase the overall presence of MFTs working in schools, the participants indicated more inclusion in the school environment once staff members better understood the MFTs' scope of practice.

In addition to the reported need to advocate for their own role, the MFTs interviewed communicated a need to "become part of the system" (Participant 8). This is isomorphic to the way in which a systemic therapist views themselves in the change process – considering the influence of the therapist on the system. It is clear from the data that large-scale advocacy efforts may be desirable for many, and the best place to start is

with small-scale advocacy efforts in the individual schools and districts in which the MFT is employed. Participants 6, 7, and 8 reported the charter district in which they worked moved to only employ MFTs for student intervention positions due to previous success with employing MFTs.

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## **DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

A framework for school- based marriage and family therapy practice is established in the literature, primarily through Laundry's (2015) work on multidisciplinary systems of support in schools. The experiences reported by participants in the current study are consistent with many of the principles laid out in previous literature identified above. The identification of the four emerging themes are both consistent with existing research, as well as a source of new information regarding school based MFT practices.

A similar comparison may be apparent to some readers when comparing school based MFT practice with medical family therapy. Identifying the overlap from marriage and family therapy and the biological, psychological, and social aspects of medicine, researchers began to advocate for the incorporation of MFTs in medical settings in order for the clinician to support the patient and family through the multifaceted experiences of medicine (McDaniel, Doherty, & Hepworth, 2014). Over years of integration and development, medical family therapists are now a growing presence within the MFT and medical fields, with

graduate degree programs created to support the field.

The systemic training of MFTs is essential to understanding the comparison between the inclusion of MFTs in school and medical settings. An MFT's unique ability to collaborate with a variety of disciplines by examining the relationship among those involved in a system is key to understanding the effectiveness in schools. If, as identified in data analysis, the school is a naturally systemic environment, then it is natural that MFTs would focus on increasing both their scope of practice in schools, as well as advocating for a larger presence of MFTs in schools. An inclusive approach to mental health, systemic therapists work with the many disciplines present within schools to best support student mental health and wellbeing.

The experiences outlined in the current study help establish the need for more MFTs to be in schools, supporting, students, teachers, and parents in problem resolution and mental health. Research participants identified the need for more data to increase the numbers of MFTs in school, and other areas of study are apparent from the current research. A better understanding of the bifurcation of experiences in working with the school is of particular importance to the author, given the degree of difference participants reported in their experiences. It is essential to further examine both sets of experiences in order to establish and influence professional and training standards for MFTs working in schools. Additionally, a closer examination of engagement strategies between MFTs and schools is a clear next

step following the experiences reported in the current student when considering the difficulty with which MFTs responded to questions about these strategies.

Further research participants may be able to provide more specific responses if questioned differently, including a possible incorporation of a Likert-type rating scale to which the clients can respond. For example, question 4 in the interviews could be phrased differently so that the interviewee can rate on a scale of 1 to 10 how important the person believes systemic epistemology is helpful in resolving school-related problems. Participants may more easily be able to conceptualize their thoughts on the subject in question. Participants who were referred by colleagues may have maintained some concern regarding the anonymity of their responses, thus the interviewer reiterating the anonymity of their responses may lead to more elaborate responses in future interviews.

Additional consideration for further research includes a more robust demographic survey and description of practice or school setting to coincide with the qualitative data collected through interviews. This will add valuable data to the body of SBFC research by continuing to map the terrain of existing SBFC practitioners across the county.

The current research demonstrates a high level of consistency between experiences of MFTs working in schools with the experiences and principles reported in professional literature. Through the better understanding of working in

schools, MFTs can work to increase the awareness and need for MFTs in schools, providing a foundation for ongoing improvement in professional and educational standards.

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## 9 HIGH-CONFLICT DIVORCE: A SBFC APPROACH

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Jeff Chang

Athabasca University & Calgary Family Therapy Centre

### ABSTRACT

*Divorce is a stressful event for families. The vast majority of families experiencing divorce settle into a “new normal” in which children’s functioning largely returns to its previous baseline. However, when parents are at high conflict one another, the disruption of the initial separation does not abate, and in fact may escalate, leading to academic, emotional, and behavioral problems. In some cases, problems persist into adulthood. High-conflict parents’ interactions with one another and their litigiousness invite some professionals to practice defensively and fearfully (Bow et al., 2010).*

*Schools have a unique position in western society—they are the one institution that involved all children. Taxpayer-funded schools are obligated to serve children within their geographical boundaries. Children enduring their parents’ conflict present schools with a particular challenge. School-based family counselling (SBFC) practitioners, with their fluency in systemic thinking, knowledge of child and adolescent development, and*

*relationships with school staff can play an important role in supporting a school's response to high-conflict parents. This chapter will introduce readers to high-conflict divorce, describe the school's unique role, and provide an overview of how SBFC practitioners can help.*

**Keywords:** *separation, divorce, high-conflict, school counselling and divorce*

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## **INTRODUCTION**

High-conflict divorce <sup>1</sup> harms children and adults. Children of high-conflict divorces experience more mental health problems than either children from so-called intact families, or children whose parents divorce without excessive conflict. They may have poorer relationships with their parents, and may feel obligated to choose one parent over another, with some even “solving” this problem by declining contact with one parent (Amato, 2010; Bacon & McKenzie, 2004; Carter, 2011; Deutsch, 2008; Strohschein, 2012). When parents are embroiled in litigation, they have less time and energy and fewer financial

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<sup>1</sup> In this chapter, I use the term “high-conflict divorce” to describe highly conflictual interactions that may include protracted or recurrent litigation, irrespective of whether the former couple had been legally married or not.

resources to devote to their children (Henry et al., 2009).

Services to manage parents' conflict, such as parent education (Alberta Justice and Solicitor General, 2019; Eddy, 2013; Ontario Ministry of the Attorney General, 2019; Rauh et al., 2016), mediation (Emery, 2011; Folberg et al, 2004), and parenting coordination (Carter, 2014; Higuchi & Lally, 2014) have become more common in recent years. Although they are helpful to many divorcing co-parents, they are far from universally available. On the other hand, K-12 schools, especially public (as they are called in the US and Canada) or state (as they are called in the UK) schools, are required to serve students within their geographical boundaries. Schools are unique in that they serve virtually all children, and often bear the brunt of parents' conflict with one another, affecting not just teachers, but secretarial and maintenance staff and bus drivers.

In this chapter, I will provide a primer on high conflict separation and parenting, describe the effects on professionals, and recommend six components to help support schools to maximize their effectiveness with their students and mitigate the effects of parents' conflict. Along the way, I will demonstrate how SBFC practitioners have the ideal profile to support their schools, students, and families.

### **High-Conflict Divorce: A Primer**

In North America, approximately 40% of marriages end in divorce within thirty years (Centers for Disease Control and

Prevention, 2017; O'Nions, 2018). Two-thirds to three-quarters of divorcing parents with children agree on parenting issues without overt conflict or litigation. Another 10 to 15% require one contested court application, leaving about 10% who engage in repeated litigation. These high-conflict co-parents seem entrenched in vicious cycles (Carter, 2011). A smaller proportion of divorcing co-parents require more intrusive measures such as a bilateral custody evaluation, a highly intrusive form of psychological assessment, and an even smaller proportion may go to trial (Carter & Hebert, 2012).

While a court may eventually make an order on parenting arrangements, either after a trial or by agreement, this often does not resolve the emotional aspects of the conflict. Maccoby et al. (1992) found that one quarter of divorces were highly conflicted three and one-half years after the separation; almost all the respondents were divorced by then. Even when major issues, such as the proportion of parenting time or decision-making have been concluded, either by agreement or by court order, some parents may still litigate over regularly occurring decisions like vacations, extracurricular activities, health care, and schooling.

The British Commonwealth and the USA have common law legal systems that inherently define parties in a court action as adversaries. Legal training teaches lawyers to be zealous advocates for their clients. The adversarial court system is not nimble enough handle the relational issues of families (Chang & Vath, 2021, in press): “Family justice issues are primarily social

and relationship problems that contain a legal element” (Reforming the Family Justice System, 2021).

## **Parents’ Interactions**

Parents in high conflict interact in characteristic ways. One prominent author suggests that some individuals have “high conflict personalities” (Eddy, 2013), but on the other hand notes that when parental conflict is entrenched, it is difficult to tell who the “high-conflict person” is (Bill Eddy, personal communication, May 24, 2019). Regardless of who is “more responsible”, the patterns of conflict can be daunting for practitioners.

High-conflict parents tend to reflexively blame their co-parent and to characterize them in one-dimensional terms (Johnston, 1994, Lebow & Newcomb Rekart, 2007; Strohschein, 2012). For example, in a first session, Jose<sup>2</sup> referring to his former partner, Gabriella, said

*"She does not see reality the way I see reality or probably you do. It always needs to fit her situation. She has a severe... lying issue. You know, she lies when she's happy, she lies when she's sad, she lies when she's in trouble".*

Conversely, later that week, Gabriella referring to Jose, said

*"I've always been really, really honest with [the children]. My son found a box of condoms in his dad's truck, and he said,*

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<sup>2</sup> All client names are pseudonyms.

*“What the heck?”... And so, I went off on Jose. I said, “How do you let your children see this? Why can’t you just [be honest]”? Because his biggest excuse is, “I’m going to church.” Well, I didn’t know there was church between somebody’s legs”.*

The divergent perspectives of the parents can be unsettling for practitioners.

Other parents engage in amateur diagnosis. When Jen and I were discussing books she had found helpful to her high conflict situation, she recalled reading *The Psychopath Next Door*<sup>3</sup>, but could not recall a second, recalling only that it was a “another psychopath book” (Department of Justice, Canada, 2015).

Some parents actively and directly denigrate the other parent. Some tell their children directly about the misdeeds or shortcomings of the other parent, sometimes with the rationale of “just being honest,” or the child(ren) “needing to know the truth.” Alternatively, some parents are less direct, solicitously explaining that the other parent is “ill,” or “an addict”, and professing care for them. Still others imply that the other parent is not safe to be around, for example, stating, “I just want you to be safe, so text me any time you want if you think Dad is out of control” (Johnston, 1994, Lebow & Newcomb Rekart, 2007;

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<sup>3</sup> I have searched for, but could not find *The Psychopath Next Door*. There is a book called entitled *The Sociopath Next Door* (Stout, 2005).

Strohschein, 2012).

High-conflict parents are frequently highly vigilant about the other's parenting missteps. Being a few minutes late to a transfer of care is interpreted as gross neglect. Failing to send along an item for a child's recreational activity invites a flurry of criticism. Often parents feel the need to record conversations and/or document their actions and the actions of their co-parent as potential evidence in litigation (Johnston, 1994, Lebow & Newcomb Rekart, 2007; Strohschein, 2012).

### **Effects on Children**

Children of high conflict divorces experience elevated incidence of alcohol and drug use, difficulties in school, behavioural problems, early sexual activity, antisocial behavior, anxiety, and depression. They report poorer relationships with their parents, lower quality of life, and feelings of obligation to choose one parent over another. Lower academic achievement, poorer psychological well-being, and difficulty maintaining their own intimate relationships may follow some children to adulthood (Amato, 2010; Bacon & McKenzie, 2004; Carter, 2011; Deutsch, 2008; Strohschein, 2012). With parental time, energy, and resources being funneled into litigation, children typically pay the highest price in high conflict divorce (Henry et al., 2009).

### **The Effect on Professionals**

Professionals working with high-conflict parents

experience many conflicting feelings: a desire to help, perhaps even rescue children and young people; invitations to align with one parent and blame for the other; fear of a complaint to a licensing body or school division. In fact, high-conflict divorce work leads to a disproportionate number of complaints against practitioners (Bow et al., 2010; Kirkland & Kirkland, 2001).

Several years ago, I taught a workshop on therapy with high-conflict separating families in a large Canadian city. The director of a rural mental health clinic told me that she had offered two of her staff the opportunity to come to the workshop. She told me that they had declined, saying, “If we go to this training, you’ll make us see these people.” This is typical. There are a small number of specialists who routinely work with such families, but many, if not most, practitioners try to avoid these families if possible.

### **The Unique Role of Schools**

Schools are the only societal institution that reach nearly all children in the developed world. While counselling agencies and private practitioners can choose to exclude some child clients, and in fact often do if their parents’ conflict is too difficult to manage, taxpayer-funded schools have no such option. Moreover, school personnel act as a sensitive barometer of children’s functioning—more so with respect to elementary students whose teachers spend most of most days with them, and less so for high schoolers who move between classes. Nonetheless a child’s school is a daily touchpoint with caring

adults. If a child's academic, emotional, or behavioral functioning declines, teachers, administrators, or counsellors often notice and reach out to the student or their parents.

If a child does not move outside of a school's catchment area, the school may be the social system with which a family has the longest relationship. A school is central to a child's life. On the other hand, the school is peripheral to the conflict between the parents. This creates both an opportunity and a challenge. The opportunity is creating an ongoing stable presence in a student's life that can provide a haven from their parents' conflict. The challenge is that the central characters in the conflict, other than the parents, are lawyers, therapists in community practice, mediators, and parenting coordinators. Schools may be left to support the young person and perhaps "pick up the pieces" when their parents' conflict takes its toll.

Conflict between parents comes to light in various ways (Thompson & Amato, 1999). Major transitions, such as one parent initiating the separation; having to move to a different residence; one parent recoupling, moving in with a new partner, marrying, or having a child; or a change in one parent's work schedule are examples of major transitions. However, issues that may seem routine at school many not be seen that way by a parent. For example, something as simple as school arrivals and departures, whether by bus or a parent's vehicle, may be difficult to navigate between parents who do not communicate with each other. In some conflictual co-parenting relationships, one parent may raise issues about their access to information; they may

complain that the other parent does not inform them of assignments, field trips, or special events at school. One parent may believe that the other parent volunteering at school is a move to exercise control, erode their own relationship, or spend time to which they are not entitled with the child. A disparity in homework completion may invite a pattern of criticism coupled with defensiveness between the parents that may spill over onto the school. Finally, a referral for counselling, assessment, or special education might amplify disagreement, or trigger suspicion or mutual blame between the parents. High conflict co-parenting sometimes comes down to simmering stability, punctuated by interludes of crisis.

It is essential to think systemically to avoid aligning inappropriately with one parent and to work effectively with families experiencing high-conflict divorce. SBFC practitioners' ability to think systemically complements the skill sets of other school staff—from secretaries, caretakers, and bus drivers, to teachers, vice-principals, and principals. I recommend that schools adopt the following strategies as they support children and youth through high-conflict separation, divorce, and parenting: *focus on the big picture; use the core business of education as the entry point; use a team approach with one key individual as a coordinator; support colleagues to interact purposefully with parents and step-parents; create a safe, affirming, and neutral space for students; and, family therapy.*

## **Focus on the Big Picture**

### **Help Your Colleagues Understand the Context**

Classroom staff see students daily and are aware of their functioning. SBFC practitioners, thinking systemically, are well-equipped to see the big picture and help others do the same. Systemic thinking requires us to zoom in and zoom out (Chang, 2020a). Teachers are primarily trained to zoom all the way in to consider the young person’s individual behavior, academic skills, and cognitive abilities, and to see how individual characteristics such as learning disabilities, ADHD, or neurodevelopmental issues play a role. Zooming out, SBFC practitioners can give teachers and other school personnel an understanding of the divorce process and how interactions between the parents can affect the young person. As SBFC practitioners, we can contextualize the young person’s school-based behavior for the rest of the school staff, and coach them on specific strategies to support the student, and support the parents without aligning inappropriately with either.

Given that a school’s relationship with a family may last for years, SBFC practitioners can be the school’s institutional memory with respect to these families. Your school can provide a stable environment for your student. A reduction in conflict, if it happens, will occur slowly. After periods of apparent stability, destabilizing events such as those listed above, can “upset the apple cart.” Help the staff respond calmly to recurring crises. Think of your involvement as a long-term endeavor.

## **Larger Systems**

SBFC practitioners' training in cultural diversity and social justice give us the ability to inform others in the school about the effect of larger systems on families (Collins, 2019; Imber-Black, 1992). SBFC practitioners are able to ask about and conceptualize the involvements of family members in work, recreational and cultural connections, health care delivery systems, social services, the economy, historical trauma, and migration and dislocation. Using this information, they can consult to school staff on how to best support students caught up in their parents' conflict.

## **Understand the Interactions Between the Parents**

School staff may have had multiple interactions with the parents in which the parents describe the parenting missteps of the other parent, the other parent's mental health diagnosis, or how the child does not want to see the other parent. They may have spoken compellingly about how the other parent has been abusive or controlling. These entreaties by a parent may leave staff feeling put upon or drawn into aligning with one parent's narrative or the other's. It's not uncommon to connect with one parent and form the impression that they are lovely and their co-parent must be terrible, and meet with their co-parent feel exactly the same—but in reverse! By listening to the accounts of each parent, a SBFC practitioner can infer the interpersonal patterns that are churning between parents and assist school staff to contextualize the child's situation (Tomm et al., 2014).

## **Use the Core Role of Education as the Entry Point**

The core role of schools, is of course, educating young people. Separated parents who are at high conflict with one another universally espouse “the best interests” of their children, of which education is one of the most important parts.

SBFC practitioners’ systemic training enables them to see patterns of interaction in systems and to discern where boundaries can and should be set. Our systemic view makes it possible for SBFC practitioners to support teachers and administrators to set boundaries with parents. Parents may issue invitations—direct and indirect, subtle and not-so-subtle—for school staff to align with their position against the other parent by discussing how the other parent does not support their child to do their homework, keep their child on a predictable schedule, or suggesting the other parent is poorly-educated. Support your colleagues to decline the invitation to align with one parent by stating and restating that “we are here to support your child’s education,” and not to advocate for either parent’s position. Firmly and nonblamingly ask parents to use the school’s communication tools (i.e., the school’s website, learning management system, e-mailing with teachers, and the paper calendars some school districts issue to students) to get parents “on the same page,” at least with respect to educational matters. Like other parents, they may require support and encouragement to support their child to complete homework, but it is important to be mindful that these kinds of conversations should be conducted with just that parent, lest the other use it as litigation fodder. When high-conflict parents attend a meeting together, chair it assertively to keep on topic. If necessary, hold separate meetings with each parent.

## **Use a Team Approach With One Key Individual as a Coordinator**

SBFC practitioners are ideally positioned to be the “go-to” person to coordinate the school’s response. For this, they require the close support of the school administration. SBFC practitioners’ systemic sense of how high-conflict parenting can affect children and youth, and how those same patterns can spill over to affect school personnel, enables them to provide “big-picture” guidance to the school staff. Dealing with high-conflict families can take its toll on school staff. In addition to parents’ attempts to involve or triangulate them, staff may feel upset seeing the evident distress of children caught in the middle.

Support non-teaching staff such as educational assistants, cafeteria personnel, and cleaning staff with whom a child may have a connection. School secretaries in particular may feel involved but powerless, given that they are often the first point of contact for an angry or demanding parent. Secretaries also may have the task of watching a child in the school office placed on them by default, which can give them the chance to develop a special connection with a child. The upset that teachers feel at students’ distress may even more acute for non-instructional staff, who have neither the knowledge of child development nor the support to set boundaries that teachers and administrators do.

Most school jurisdictions have regular meetings of school mental health personnel, teachers, administrators, and special educators, under such names as “case management team”,

“school resource group”, “student-specific planning team”, or other similar titles to regularly review special or inclusive education programming. Such a forum can be useful to develop the team’s response to high-conflict parents. This is an ideal place for a SBFC practitioner to take the lead.

High-conflict parents tend to focus on the legal system and court orders. Parenting time and transitions of care, decision-making, school holidays, and extracurricular activities are typically specified by court order. Some parents generously interpret court orders in their favor, so it pays to be warmly skeptical about statements like, “I have full custody,” or “The father is not involved.” SBFC practitioners’ knowledge of systemic interactions and of legal and ethical issues enable them to explain the implications of informed consent, confidentiality, and court orders to their colleagues. It is useful to obtain court orders, keep them on file, and be prepared to explain them to the rest of the staff. Enlist the aid of administration if necessary.

SBFC practitioners should also be familiar with the privacy legislation and school district policy pertaining to release of information and informed consent and consider the systemic implications. For example, in most jurisdictions, one guardian’s consent is adequate for psychological assessment, special education, or therapy. However, seeking the consent of only one parent might well inflame the conflict. A SBFC practitioner can help the school navigate the complexity of reassuring a parent that services are for the benefit of their child, that services are not meant to undermine their parental decision-making or

parenting time, and that they are not solely the other parent's agenda. It is important to be the school's institutional memory for these issues so school personnel can be consistent over time in their interactions with the parents.

### **Support Colleagues to Interact Purposefully With Parents and Step-Parents**

As stated above, interacting with high-conflict parents is draining for professionals. SBFC practitioners can model and coach school staff to interact purposefully with parents who might be complaining about and blaming the other parent. In your consultative role as a SBFC practitioner, coach teachers to listen supportively and acknowledge emotions without affirming the truth of what the parent is saying (e.g., "When she does that, you feel it is controlling," or, "You interpret his parenting style as irresponsible."). Support your colleagues to listen, not encourage this kind of talk, and move on when one parent is pathologizing the other or discussing litigation. Gently and firmly reiterate that the school will not take one parent's side in court, and work to move the conversation to a discussion of their child's education.

Solution-focused (SF) practice (Iveson & McKergow, 2016) offers useful ideas and skills about how to interact with parents when one is blaming or pathologizing the other. SF practice does not encourage practitioners to "go deep" therapeutically. Keeping in mind that we are not attempting to train teachers and administrators to be therapists, as SBFC practitioners we can coach them to have SF conversations with

parents. Using SF skills can redirect conversations from complaining, blaming, and pathologizing to a more practical and positive perspective.

One important SF skill is *listening for openings* (Chang, 2020b). Coach your colleagues to be on the lookout for times when things are somehow better, or at least not as bad. It is useful to ask for descriptions, as detailed as possible, and in a curious way, without suggesting or even implying that the parent should take some action to try to improve the situation. Asking *exception questions* (De Jong & Berg, 2013) (e.g., “Tell me about times when things are not quite so bad,” “What does it look like when you are not fighting so much?” or, “What’s different about the days when Ryan pays attention in class better?”). High-conflict parents tend to see the other parent as the problem, so to even imply that they could or should do something different might be received as blame, when they are certain they are blameless.

SBFC practitioners can also coach teachers and administrators to use *coping questions*, another SF practice. When a parent is complaining about the other parent or describing how terribly things are going, support your colleagues to ask questions like, “With all the stuff happening, how do you keep going?” “How do you keep it from getting even worse?” that emphasize how the parent manages the problem or limits its influence in their life.

## **Create a Safe, Affirming, and Neutral Space for Students**

When a child feels caught between their parents, they find refuge in neutral spaces such as extracurricular activities and school. Resilience literature states that children surpass negative environments when they have connections with a warm supportive adult with firm values, and they are provided an outlet for a skill or aptitude and affirmation for it (Nicoll, 2015; Ungar, 2018). SBFC practitioners can advocate for their schools to create experiences in which children distressed by their parents' high-conflict interactions are recognized, feel special, and thrive. Give them a specific role or involve them in a project where they can make valued contributions. Sometimes they will just need to talk or know that someone understands.

Some children will require specialized services to improve their social skills, develop their emotional self-regulation capacity, or learn alternatives to aggressive behavior. Children whose parents are in conflict with one another may require these targeted services simply to cope. Unfortunately, this may be the best we can do for children whose parents' conflict is intractable.

## **Family Therapy: Setting Up For Success**

SBFC practitioners may have the opportunity to work therapeutically with high-conflict parents and the children. First, it is important to “set up for success.” When engaging parents for

therapy, I emphasize to the parents that:

- I take a family systems approach, which considers the family overall, and that I do not take the side of, or blame any individual in the family. I maintain an independent position.
- I reiterate that, as a therapist, I do not take an advocacy position in court matters. I see the family, not any individual, as the client.
- “Family therapy” does not automatically mean that the whole family meets together. While I think that children whose parents are separated or divorced do better when parents can make decisions together and communicate adequately, I do not insist on having parents in the same room if they are not agreeable. I usually start by seeing each parent on their own before seeing the child. I often alternate seeing one parent with the child and the other parent with the child. I don’t meet with parents together unless they are willing and able to do so.
- Both parents have equal opportunity to have appointments with me, and have the same access to file information about their child.

When requests for therapy for a child come from one parent, it is particularly important to include the other parent. When one parent requests services without involving the other, I typically put the bullet points above into an e-mail, send it the parent requesting services, and ask them to send it to the other parent and copy me. This structural move may not guarantee the

trust and participation of the second parent, but increases the likelihood of participation, and is a good risk management strategy. While in most jurisdictions it is legal to provide specialized services with one parent's consent, it is not prudent. Involving both parents make sense systemically, given that their conflict often exacerbates, if not causes, their child's difficulties.

### **Family Therapy: Practical Strategies**

I start by meeting with the parents separately at the outset of therapy. This provides the opportunity to understand the issues from each parent's point of view. I strive to develop a working alliance with each parent, in which they feel understood and I acknowledge their perspective and feelings without agreeing with the factual truth of what they are saying. Obtaining each parent's description of and thoughts about the other's behavior, provides valuable information about the interpersonal patterns operating between the parents (Tomm et al., 2014). Coping questions and listening for openings, as described above, are useful here as well.

After meeting with each parent, I usually do parallel sessions, alternating seeing one parent with the children, then the other. This provides valuable information about the child's interaction with each parent. Children often present very differently with each parent.

Meetings with the child and each parent can go a long way toward building credibility with the parents. Parents tend to

trust those whom their children like and trust. Doing some straightforward therapeutic work that improves the parent-child relationship or helps them get a handle on the child's behavior or emotions builds credibility as well.

Structural family therapy (Lynch & Lynch, 2000) asserts that children's problems arise when the executive functioning of the parental subsystem breaks down. This is most acutely the case when parents are at war with one another, entirely compromising their capacity to collaborate. Ideally, it is best to meet parents together, but it is not always possible. They may be simply unwilling to do so despite your success engaging them and assisting their child.

It is also important to recognize the limits of one's competence (Patterson, 2009). These families push us to the threshold of our skills. Because of the entrenched conflict, sometimes exacerbated by ongoing litigation, having parents meet together is a high-risk strategy that one should undertake only if the clients are willing and if you are confident in your skills. I typically offer parents an individual session to prepare a meeting with their co-parent.

If you conclude that it is manageable to meet with parents jointly, understand that you likely to need to be more active and directive than usual. You may feel more like the chair of a meeting than a supportive counsellor. Set ground rules (e.g., "(a) I am the chair, so I will recognize people to speak; (b) You agree to speak only to me, not each other unless otherwise

permitted; (c) We agree that this meeting is to discuss school-based decision-making for (child). As such, the school will set the agenda (d) We will not discuss past issues or litigation.”). Be clear that you will manage the session (Folberg et al., 2004).

In session, stay focused on present and future. Listen carefully for the patterns of interaction that exist between the parents. If it seems viable, feed their problematic patterns back to them, highlighting these are vicious cycles that seem to have a life of their own (Tomm et al., 2014). This reduces the likelihood that either parent will feel blamed. It is also helpful if you work as much as possible to provide each parent equal air time.

On the other hand, as you listen their accounts, be attuned to openings when the parents describe things going better, or at least not quite as bad. Ask about what’s different. Obtain as detailed a description as you can, asking about the sequence of events, dialogue, and actions. As you respond to the parents’ responses, listen for positive (or at least not as negative) emotions and effects. If they do not mention better times on their own, it may be useful to ask them to be on the lookout for times between sessions when things are not so problematic (de Jong & Berg, 2013; Iveson & McKergow, 2016). Also, after asking the child’s permission, highlight what the child says they appreciate about their parents’ behavior, or what they say about when things are better. This is typically more helpful than giving the parents suggestions from an expert point of view, and clearly more helpful than their co-parent giving them parenting advice

(Selekman, 2010).

Ultimately and ideally, you are seeking to lead the parents to make joint decisions on behalf of their child, set the stage for them to deliver their joint decision to their child, and have the parents agree to implement relevant treatment plans as appropriate.

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## **CONCLUSION**

High-conflict divorce and parenting is harmful to children and parents, and upsetting for professionals. Parents' conflict can wear on schools and consume administrative resources. School based family counsellors, with their systemic view, ethical knowledge, and relational skills can contribute a great deal to the school's response. In this chapter, I have provided an overview of high conflict divorce and co-parenting and provided recommendations for how schools can respond to these difficult situations. The expertise and leadership of SBFC practitioners can contribute a great deal to the well-being of students, parents, and school personnel dealing with high-conflict divorcing and post-divorce families.

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# 10 COMPREHENSIVE PARENT EDUCATION ON SUPPORTING EMOTIONALLY INTELLIGENT PARENTING

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Helen Y. Sung

Alliant International University & Cupertino Union School  
District, USA

## ABSTRACT

*The purpose of this non-experimental, “ex-post-facto”, method of study is to investigate the impact of an education series for developing emotionally intelligent parenting. The training uses twenty-six themes associated with twenty-six letters in the alphabet to help with retention of information and their related skills. Over a two-year period, an exploratory group of thirty-two parents completed a one-hour long weekly training for thirteen weeks. An anonymous survey was administered at the conclusion of the whole training. The first part of the survey was quantitative in nature and used descriptive statistics to report on the percentage of parents’ responses on a scale of 1 to 10. The second part was qualitative, and the questions were open-ended for short answers. The similar themes were categorized and*

*described as above. In addition, some parents volunteered to video record their feedback and others wrote letters giving their permission to publish them in support of the program. Overall, parents who participated reported benefits in their daily lives, increased understanding, and would recommend it to others.*

**Keywords:** *Parent Education/Training, Emotional Intelligence, Emotional Well-being, Educational shift*

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Changes in the educational pedagogy are needed to prepare the students for 21st century opportunities. Students need to become well rounded in thinking, reasoning, and emotional well-being to work with diverse people in a global society. The goal of education is no longer to gain knowledge and understanding of the concepts but to expand and increase rigor for critical thinking, inquiry, debate, evidenced-based decision making, negotiation, and problem solving (Kennenberg, 2014). Educational priorities have shifted when individual states adopted Common Core State Standards that increased both breadth and depth of study to better prepare students for an ever-expanding global economy (Harrington, 2017). The teachers have been trained in all subject areas to integrate and practice skills in their classrooms (Kennenberg, 2014; Hubbard, Fowler, & Freeman, 2020). New instructional strategies have enabled students to evolve as more independent thinkers,

problem solvers, and analyzers of data. Greater emphasis has been directed toward project learning, reading for specific information, analysis of thinking, and active learning through direct experience. While there may not be a clear roadmap, teachers are encouraged to integrate “the four C’s” in their instructional practice: Collaboration, Communication, Critical Thinking and Creativity. These essential skills are associated with emotional intelligence (Pasi, 2001).

The literature on Emotional Intelligence documents benefits to academics, leadership, productivity, customer service, relationships and mental health (Taylor, 2001; Maulding, 2002; Nuttall, 2004; Drago, 2004). The Common Core aligns with current requirements for critical thinkers and problem solvers rather than memorizers of information to repeat on tests (Harrington, 2017). Children are now growing up with internet and social media that provide them an essential global perspective. Emotional competence and intelligence are critical in our efforts to ensure a better future worldwide. However, the change is not happening at home. Parents rely on what they have learned from their cultural upbringing and perpetuate the same patterns of interaction with their children (Sung, 2010). Therefore, a comprehensive emotionally intelligent parenting education program is needed to inform parents.

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## **Social-Emotional Needs**

Traditionally, academic instruction was generally the responsibility of the teachers and social/emotional guidance was primary the domain of parents at home. However, not all household environments are optimal and may result in certain negative outcomes. It has become imperative that schools include social emotional consideration alongside academic instruction. Attention to social emotional learning of students has been found to have a powerful influence on learning in a meta-analysis conducted by Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger in 2011. When children are emotionally secure and competent, they are more likely to achieve and validate their sense of personal well-being. Cross F. D., Liu, J., Bharaj & Eker, (2019) explain how teachers can strategically integrate social/emotional and academic development in their classrooms. The Common Core State Standard encourages group work, communication, problem solving, assertiveness, and emotional regulation when working with others. Teachers have an opportunity to give feedback and reinforce pro-social behaviors in their students.

Meanwhile, students arrive at school already conditioned by outside experiences that impact them emotionally. Their personal outlook cannot be appropriately understood unless schools acknowledge varying cultural beliefs and values. For example, Pappas (2019) addresses how the traditional norms of masculinity may be harmful to boys in ways that restrict emotional expression. These internalized attitudes may create

social conflict, resulting in obstacles to effectively cope with negative behavior, or seek much needed support. The image of masculinity has existed for many generations. Patriarchal hierarchies continue to exist throughout the world. In the United States, it is a known fact that voting rights were not extended to women until 1920 with the passage of 19th amendment, after a generation of political activism and struggle. “Equal pay for equal work” in actual practice was not officially recognized until 1963. These arduous political and legal undertakings were required to begin advancement beyond a male-dominant culture. Continued work is essential in a hierarchal system where people of different races and gender continue to be marginalized. In much the same way, children are thought to be in the lowest rank in the hierarchy. As a result, their thoughts and feelings are often not taken seriously. The UN Convention on Children’s Rights outlines four rights of children: Article 2, right to nondiscrimination, Article 3, duty to promote best interest of the child, Article 6, right to survival and development, and Article 12, right to be listened and taken seriously. Nastasi & Borja (2016) capture the children and adolescents’ voice in their international studies on psychological wellbeing in children and adolescents.

Understanding the impact of cultural influence is the important first step in recognizing the emotional outcomes but it should not stop there. If there are negative results, it becomes the responsibility of educators to raise awareness so that these issues can be addressed. Parents may have grown up in a hierarchal and domineering environment, or may have become too permissive in response to the traditional ways. Their beliefs

and interaction patterns may be ineffective or confusing. The parenting “styles” are varying reflections of their cultural experience and conditioning. Alegre (2011) reviews literature about parenting practices that predict children’s emotional intelligence. The four main dimensions were identified: parental responsiveness (parental warmth, emotional regulation), parental positive demandingness (behavioral control, autonomy, appropriate expectations), parental negative demandingness (punitive discipline), and parental emotion-related coaching (accept children’s emotional display and help children use emotional information for positive outcomes). Parental responsiveness, parental emotion-related coaching and parental positive demandingness are related to children’s higher emotional intelligence, while parental negative demandingness is related to children’s lower emotional intelligence. Children who possess greater emotional strength had parents with higher emotional intelligence. Asghari & Besharat (2011) found perceived parenting of involvement, autonomy, support, and warmth dimensions were linked to emotional intelligence. Three hundred fifty-two college students completed the “Perception of Parents Scale and Emotional Intelligence Scale”. The results of these surveys indicated that all effective dimensions of parenting were positively associated with emotional intelligence.

Authoritarian, authoritative, overly permissive, or neglectful parenting styles have formed the basis of various studies. Argyriou, Bakoyannis, & Tantaros (2016) investigated factors that contribute to emotional intelligence traits among 127 adolescents in Greek schools. Parental Authority

Questionnaire and Trait Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire-Adolescent Short Form were used to analyze a multivariable mixed-effects regression model. Association between authoritative parenting styles and emotional intelligence traits were found to be significant. Those parents with higher emotional capacity were also communicative, set clear guidance, expectations, followed through, collaborated in problem solving, and modeled pro-social behaviors. They were more likely to rear adolescents with higher emotional intelligence. As the study considered the traits associated with emotional intelligence, the authoritative characteristics of parenting revealed a significant impact on emotional intelligence, suggesting that the environmental factors at home were more notable in both positive and negative outcomes.

The home culture may be impacted when parents are educated on emotionally intelligent parenting because they create the environment at home. Sung (2019) describes the proactive training for parents to raise awareness about the parent's role in promoting emotional intelligence at home. The result indicated a positive trend for those who participated consistently for at least 3 to 4 sessions. The current study is an expansion of the previous parent education program. In order to change the culture for optimal emotional competency and intelligence, a person must experience prolonged forethought on the subject, repeatedly practice, and make connection to practical experiences (Tonyan, 2017). The qualitative responses in this study provide insight to the impact of the current extensive training, which includes twenty-six themes associated with the twenty-six letters in the alphabet.

## **Theory on Emotional Intelligence**

The social constructivist framework (Vygotsky, 1978) is used to explain the cultural influence on parenting and emotional intelligence. Our mind develops through personal interaction with the environment. The promotion of emotional intelligence is consistent with the System's Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), in which the various layers of system's culture impact individuals. The competitive and meritocratic culture of the macro-system describes how our society defines success and rewards winners. The organizational culture of the institutions in the meso-system describes the hierarchy system of social status, power, and control. The micro-system exists within the family and the parents do all they can to prepare their children for the competitive and social status driven society. As a result, many individual's emotional experiences are impacted in their daily lives. The drive for success is considered the norm and emotional needs may be neglected. The mentality that if you're not a winner, you're a loser, leaves many children feeling helpless and powerless. Furthermore, the Ecological System of children has significant impact on the children's emotional wellbeing. The mental health of children may be linked to the experiences in the children's immediate environment (Gutkin, 2008). Emotional center of the brain is also impacted when children witness interactions that affect them emotionally. While the perpetuation of the system's way of power and control may have stifled the emotional wellbeing on individuals with less power, those in authority position have the power to change the system they are engrossed to improve emotional competence and intelligences in the future generation.

The culture in which the children are immersed impact the development of personal efficacy and emotional intelligence (Bandura, 2002; Sung, 2010). The children’s experience in their home environment over a length of time shape their brain function in the emotional center of the brain (LeDoux, 1996). The priorities, expectations, attention, reinforcement, and practice shape the neuropathways and develop habits, reasoning, and values. Unless skills are repeatedly practiced, just hearing about them does nothing for neural pathways and learning (Tonyan, 2017). This is the reason behind the twenty-six themes in the comprehensive training series. The goal of the training and discussion is to divulge the traditional beliefs and values that maintain our behaviors, learn a new way of thinking, and apply behavioral change associated with new thinking. The thread that ties each of the theme is to be mindful of the impact of our words and actions on emotions of children in our care.

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## **METHODS**

This study is non-experimental, “Ex Post Facto”, study because the survey was conducted after the comprehensive parent education series. The parent education occurred naturally in response to a school moving in a new direction to decrease stress over homework at an elementary school level. Parents were anxious about no homework policy and needed to know what else they can do besides homework with their children. This

was an opportunity to learn about emotional intelligence and engage with their children in a different way and create opportunities for emotional intelligence growth.

Initially, all parents at the school were invited to participate in a one-time presentation about the importance of emotional intelligence in learning and psychological well-being. After the presentation, the parents were invited to sign up online for a specific training on emotionally intelligent parenting. The principal was the main contact person who kept track of the registration and communicated to parents about the training. He provided the space and time for the training. The sessions occurred the first hour of school in the multi-purpose room. The parents stayed for training after bringing their children to school in the morning. Many parents worked in the tech company in Silicon Valley and had flexible schedules. Varying combination of parents attended the training. It was most beneficial when both parents attended the training. Some parents split their time, a mother would attend few weeks then a father attended other weeks. They would share notes and discuss topics at home. Either mothers or fathers attended individually but more mothers attended than fathers. They were encouraged to discuss at home to be consistent between parents.

During the two-years period, four groups were formed. While over 60 parents participated in the training, only those who have remained to the end were able to take the survey. Due to the interactive and integrated nature of the training, parents were able to discuss, ask and answer questions related to the

themes. They were able to make connections between the twenty-six themes. Not only did the parents fill out the anonymous survey but some parents also volunteered to video record a testimonial and few others wrote a supportive letter with their names on it.

### ***Data Analysis***

The first three questions on the survey were on a scale between 1 to 10 (1 is the worst and 10 is the best). The 4th and 6th questions were open ended for qualitative input about what they gained from the training. How did it differ from other trainings they may have experienced in the past? What is the perceived value of this training? Appendix 1 shows the questions on the anonymous survey.

Looking at the all the rating responses, there were no scores below 5 on the first three questions. Therefore, the percentage of responses were put in three categories by combining 5/6 for medium level, 7/8 for moderate level, and 9/10 for high level. The percentage of responses on the scale were reported in the chart below.

The qualitative responses added to the scaled responses. The participants were able to explain their thoughts and feelings about the training. The survey was anonymous to encourage honest feedback. Some responses were brief while others were detailed. The repeated themes were grouped together. The responses were categorized in four areas: 1. The benefit of the

training (e.g., It made me realize the everyday behaviors I have and how they affect my children.) 2. Comparison with other trainings (e.g., The difference is the length of time and the depth to which the subject was covered.) 3. Recommendation to others (e.g., I think this training should be mandatory for all parents.) 4. The value of the training (e.g., life skills which all adults must learn, high impact, invaluable to become good parents).

<b>Question 1</b>	High	Moderate	Medium
How helpful was the class in understanding your beliefs and values impacting parenting?	84% rated 9/10	9% rated 7/8	6% rated 5/6
<b>Question 2</b>	58% rated 9/10	28% rated 7/8	12.5% rated 5/6
How much did you learn to put into practice?			
<b>Question 3</b>	94% rated 9/10	3% rated 7/8	3% rated 5/6
Would you recommend this learning opportunity to other parents?			

Parents reported that the training was effective because it was comprehensive and organized in a way that was easier to remember. It was practical so they can apply the concepts immediately. It helped them to understand their pattern of behaviors. They were able to make the connection between their interaction style and emotional intelligence.

## RESULTS

The highest percentage was in recommending this program to other parents with 94%. The next highest percentage is how helpful the training series were in understanding beliefs and values that impact parenting with 84%. However, putting the knowledge into daily practice was at 58% of parents rated at the high level, 28% rated at the moderate level, and 12.5% rated at the medium level. Compared to other areas, this was most challenging but still greater than the score of 5 out of 10. With increased knowledge and awareness, the daily practice may improve over time for some parents.

Parents generally felt that the comprehensive training was unlike any other training they have experience with its focus on emotional intelligence development. It was well organized in a thematic way for better recall and application. The thirteen sessions may seem long but parents expressed that it was worth it at the end of the training.

On the qualitative questions, parents have expressed themselves at a different level of their awareness in the continuum. Some people were familiar with good practices through other trainings, press, and exposure. They all agreed that it is helpful to be reminded. Other parents were actively trying to apply the concept learned at home. It was evident in their weekly reporting out of what they tried and the effectiveness of it. Some parents face greater challenge when they don't have the support system at home to practice new way of doing things.

All the parents who consistently participated expressed their appreciation for the training and the positive impact it had on their family and children. It was highly valued because they have seen the positive change in their children, family interactions, and self growth. It allowed parents to reflect and focus on self-improvement. As the parents change, kids saw the difference in their parents.

Although the goal was to educate parents because they are the primary influencer and care-giver in the position of authority, these parents have expanded on the idea. Not only parents of all ages but teachers would benefit from the training. They encouraged the use of social media for global influence and connect parents with common interests to support one another. The value of this comprehensive and extensive training was equivalent to a certificate or a college level course. Parents highly appreciated the knowledge they have gained and thought it was priceless, golden, immeasurable, etc.

Here are some quotes from parents' letters:

*"This class gave me the opportunity to look at my kids differently and help me to understand what is going on and how to deal with different situations. The instructor used the alphabet to connect with different topics which helps to have it stick with you ....it helped me to remember and use this in future life situations. This is not only for how to parent your children but can be used to help with other relationships as well. The instructor*

*fostered a very positive and optimistic environment which helps with discussing the material for better understanding and using it outside the classroom".*

*"The course really helped me to acknowledge and practice new ways to be more positive and flexible. During adverse situations, as a parent, it's so easy to see only the problems, and focus on them. Children are creative and make better choices, when parents care by their patience and guidance. Within this A-Z module, you can take meaningful steps towards emotionally intelligent parenting everyday life".*

*"Almost every class I found myself saying "Of course that makes sense, what a wonderful suggestion, why have we never thought of that before?!? .... On top of all the wonderful advice, it is also comforting and helpful to hear first hand accounts of other parents that are struggling with similar issues."*

These parents identified themselves on their letters to help with the promotion of the A to Z of Emotionally Intelligent Parenting classes. It was offered two years in a row as a result.

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## **DISCUSSION**

The value of this comprehensive parent education on emotionally intelligent parenting is undisputed. In the past ten

years, researchers have found the connection between parenting style and emotional intelligence. Parenting style is often the result of the cultural experiences of the parents' environment. The focus on parent education is needed because parenting sets the foundation for emotional well-being. Anwer, Masood, Younas & Ahmad (2019) found emotional warmth in parents to be a significant predictor for resilience and emotional intelligence. The parents who participated in the training reported improvement in their relationship with their children and other relationships. Parental warmth is promoted through emotionally intelligent parenting.

The harmful impact of authoritarian parenting (use of punitive methods, power and control to manage their children) has been well documented. With increased awareness, there is a movement away from such practices. Yet, there is no adequate or comprehensive training on what to do instead. Authoritative and "positive demandingness" parenting appears to have positive emotional outcome (Alegre, 2011). Emotionally intelligent parents demonstrate guidance, care, warmth and consistency. Step-by-step training and education are needed to understand the connection between one's beliefs and values that perpetuate traditional behaviors. An alternate way of thinking needs to be learned and practiced to change the norms, values, and interaction patterns. It will ultimately lead to creating an environment in which children can thrive emotionally. As more researches point to the positive outcomes of emotionally intelligent parenting, the court system is also evaluating the parenting potential based on emotional intelligence when

deciding in custody disputes (Posthuma, 2016). This suggests that the organization at the meso-systems level that impacts the family, value the emotional intelligence of parents in child care.

It is up to the adults in children's lives to promote emotional intelligence and create a better future for our children. We know the history of human experiences and have seen the impact of beliefs and values that have been perpetuated over generations. Some people are more awareness than others depending on where they are in the progression. However, everyone can benefit from reminders, lessons, discussions, and examples of how emotionally intelligent parenting works. Looking at the chart, the majority of the parents who participated in the training saw the connection between their beliefs and values on their behaviors. They tried to practice the concepts in their everyday lives. They shared their experiences each week and felt the support of others in the group. Through the class, they found out that they were not alone in their struggles; the participants had questions and concerns in common. These parents felt it was worth the time and effort to attend regularly.

### ***Limitations and Future Direction***

The participants were a self-selected group. They were interested and motivated to learn about the topic. The outcome may be different if the training were required.

The duration of the training at a school setting may have caused some parents to drop out. The time commitment was extensive and life event kept some parents from participating all 13 sessions.

The ex post facto method could be limiting because the data analysis occurred years later when considering the presentation at the Oxford-Symposium for School Based Family Counseling.

Administrative support is critical to make it available at school during school hours. The enthusiasm has diminished as the leadership changed.

A longitudinal study could investigate the long term impact of a comprehensive training when parents support one another and maintain the knowledge and practice each day. Developing a support network via social media is a possibility.

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## **CONCLUSIONS**

Academic excellence alone is not enough to meet the demands of the twenty-first century global community. As the school systems embrace the need to integrate social/emotional learning in education, the path forward can look very different. It is clear that schools cannot do it alone when the children are coming from home environments that hold different sets of values. Therefore, a comprehensive parent education offered at

school for all parents will provide access to parents who cannot afford expensive workshops or conferences. This type of training has never been done during school hours, but overwhelming number of parents expressed the need for it. One of the benefits of having the training during school hours is that parents did not have to worry about childcare in the evenings. It was a new idea that worked only when administrators made it a priority. Institutional barriers could impede a comprehensive training and time needed for the training can be in conflict with other school priorities. One of the ways to overcome the barriers is through grassroots enthusiasm to raise awareness about the importance and the need for a comprehensive training on emotionally intelligent parenting. The parents who went through the journey highly valued the experience. The purpose of this article is to add their voices and support for a proactive and comprehensive training for anyone who cares about the future of our children.

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## **APPENDIX 1**

### Emotionally Intelligent Parenting and Lifestyle Class

#### **FEEDBACK**

1. On the scale of 1-10 (1 is the worst and 10 is the best), how helpful was the class in your understanding of your beliefs and values impacting the way you parent?
2. On the scale of 1-10 (1 is the worst and 10 is the best), how much did you learn to put into practice the skills that promote emotional intelligence?

3. On the scale of 1-10 (1 is the worst and 10 is the best), would you recommend this learning opportunity to other parents?
  4. Please add what was different about this class that helped you to be an emotionally intelligent parent?
  5. Would you recommend this class to other parents?
  6. What would be the estimated value of this type of learning opportunities?
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## 11 PARENTS' AND TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF EDUCATIONAL GOALS: IN THE EYES OF THE BEHOLDER

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Nurit Kaplan Toren

Oranim College of Education & University of Haifa, Israel

### ABSTRACT

*There is broad agreement that family and school are the most significant social institutions and factors affecting children's development. The present manuscript focuses on the relations between parents and kindergarten teachers as reflected in parents' and k teachers' rating of educational goals. Research on parents' educational involvement is based primarily on reports from a single source: the parent, the child, or the teacher. This study is based on the voices of parents and k teachers.*

*The study examined parents' and k teachers' priorities regarding eight early childhood education goals, set by the Israeli Ministry of Education. Participants were 209 parents and 182 k teachers. Results indicated identical priorities in the goals that parents and k teachers attributed to themselves. Priorities differed, however, when attributed to the other (parents' attributions to k teachers and k teachers' attributions to parents).*

*Conclusions: results showed that although parents and k teachers had similar education's goal preferences, they were unaware of*

*the agreement between them. These findings highlight the need for improving the communication between parents and k teachers. Moreover, School Based Family Counseling practitioners should be aware of the different voices and consider the different perspective and unique viewpoint of each partner in the session among k teachers and parents.*

**Keywords:** *Communication, Educational goals, Kindergarten, Teachers' parents' perceptions*

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Positive correlation between parental involvement and students' wellbeing and achievement has been found from early childhood to elementary school (Ma, Shen, Krenn, Hu, & Yuan, 2016), junior high school (Kaplan Toren 2013; Kaplan Toren & Seginer, 2015), and high school (Wang & Sheikh-Khalil, 2014). Parental involvement consists of two dimensions: home-based activities, such as discussions with the child, emotional support and nurturing motivation, monitoring the child's progress, helping with homework, and providing extracurricular enriching activities; and school-based activities, such as volunteering at school or participating in scheduled conferences. Overall, the family environment has a significant effect on the student's life, but parents are not alone in child-rearing process; their immediate partners are teachers and the education system. Therefore, student engagement in learning is shaped primarily by

parents through the "home environment", and parental involvement is an alterable variable that can be influenced by school and teacher practice (Coleman, 1998; Patel & Stevens, 2010) and classroom claimant including teacher–student relationship, peer relationship, and educational atmosphere (Kaplan Toren & Seginer, 2015). While teachers and parents rarely find themselves in conflict with one another, one reason for such conflict is that, while the family focuses on the child as an individual, the school focuses on the child as a member of a group. The present study seeks to answer three questions: what the parents' and k teachers' education goals are? whether parents and k teachers have similar perceptions regarding to educational goals? and what do k teachers' and parents' belief the other partner (parents or k teachers) education goals are?

Given that the environments in which students grow up are likely to have a strong influence on the development of their beliefs and behaviors, there is a need to investigate the diverse points of view of k teachers and parents, and to capture their voices. Studies have shown that perceptions held by parents, teachers, and students concerning students' academic abilities affect parents' involvement and teachers' facilitation of school programs encouraging involvement (Patel & Stevens, 2010). The degree to which parents, teachers, and students believe to be responsible for learning and academic achievement affects students' behavior and motivation, and it is therefore an important component of the students' success (Peterson, Rubie-Davies, Elley-Brown, Widdowson, Dixon & Irving, 2011). There is reason to believe that teachers and parents have different

perceptions of parental involvement in school. Whereas parents perceived themselves as those who initiate contact with the school, teachers perceive parents as more passive (Kaplan Toren & Kumar, 2020). Regarding the responsibility for students' educational and social academic aspects, teachers and parents agree that parents are responsible for addressing the children's special needs and making sure that they arrive at school on time and with the required equipment. But teachers believe that they are responsible for reporting on the students' educational and social aspects and share responsibility with parents only with regard to the child's emotional aspects (Addi-Raccah & Greenstein, 2016). Among middle-school parents and teachers, the differences between parents and teachers are not sharply delineated. Researchers found agreement regarding the importance of monitoring the children's academic performance and of constructive teacher-parent communication but found disagreement on the role of discipline and the use of extracurricular programs (Barge & Loges, 2003).

In early education, it cannot be assumed that teachers and parents universally share common perceptions of educational goals. Two studies in early education in Australia reflect teachers' and parents' dissatisfaction with teacher-parents relations and early childhood environment. Teachers pointed out the lack of reciprocity in teacher-parents relations, lack of communication, uncertainty regarding pedagogic expectations, and parental hostility (Mahamood, 2013). By contrast, parents perceived kindergarten services as unresponsive to their unique needs and unavailable for their

children (Harris & Tinning, 2012). The differences between k teachers' and parents' perceptions are reflected in their different attitudes toward educational goals. k teachers tend to ascribe more importance to promoting the children's social skills, physical health, and general wellbeing than their knowledge and academic skills (Lin, Lawrence & Gorrell, 2003; Sverdlov & Aram 2016). Parents, however, tend to rate the importance of general knowledge and social behavior higher than do teachers (Grace & Brandt, 2006; Hatcher, Nuner & Paulsel, 2012).

A possible explanation for these differences is that in Western countries, the approach to teacher training is guided by values which promote natural learning processes and socioemotional empowerment.

### ***Hypotheses***

The following hypotheses formulated concerning the similarities and differences between k teachers' and parents' perceptions regarding educational goals.

Hypothesis 1. K teachers value children's social skills more than parents do.

Hypothesis 2. Parents value the fostering of children's academic skills more than k teachers do.

Hypothesis 3. K teachers' and parents' rating of the other's educational goals differ from their own ratings.

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## METHODS

### *Participants and procedure*

Snowball sampling technique was used to collect data by online self-report questionnaires that were sent to a sample of k teachers and parents. 209 parents (90% mothers) of children who attended kindergarten participated in the study. Family size: 11% of the parents had one child, 39% had two children, 39% had three children, and 11% had four children. Family status: 84% of the parents were married and 2.2% divorce. Parents education: 22% of the parents graduated from high school, 46% held a Bachelor's degree, 22.6% a master's degree, and 9.4% doctoral degrees. Residence: 56% of the parents lived in the city, 31.4% in rural villages, and 12.4% in a kibbutz. Most of the parents (88.3%) were born in Israel, 7.9% immigrated from the former Soviet Union, and the rest immigrated from South America and Europe.

A 182 female k teachers participated in the study. Their level of education varied: 44.7% were in their first or second year of study for a MA degree in early education program, 44.2% held a Bachelor of Education degree, and 11.1% held teacher training college certification. The teachers' age ranged from 25 to 61 years (mean = 41 SD 9.3); Most of the teachers were born in Israel 74%, and 26% immigrated between 1965 and 2002. The teachers' years of experience ranged from 1 to 36 years (mean = 15.6 SD 9.04); Residence: 57% of teachers lived in the city, 35.4% in rural villages, and 7.5% in a kibbutz.

## ***Instrument***

*Teachers' rating of the goals of kindergarten questionnaire (Sverdlov & Aram, 2016).* Based on documents published by the Israeli Ministry of Education as the early education core curriculum (Ministry of Education, Sport and Culture, 2006, 2007, 2008). Teachers and parents were presented with eight goals: (a) fostering physical development; (b) developing general cognitive skills; (c) developing social communication skills; (d) imparting legacy and tradition, (e) promoting literacy and mathematics skills; (f) fostering positive self-esteem; (g) developing curiosity and (h) developing learning habits.

K teachers and parents were asked to rate the eight goals three times: first they rated the importance of the eight goals from their point of view on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 = not important at all to 5 = very important. Next, k teachers and parents were asked to rate the three most important goals, once from their own perspective and once from the perspective of the other (the parents' perception of the k teachers' perspective and vice versa).

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## RESULTS

Overall, mean scores and standard deviations (Table 1)

**Table 1. Means, standard deviations, medians, and Z-test results for k teachers' and parents' goals ratings.**

Goals	k teachers' perceptions (n=182)		Parents' Perceptions (n=209)		Z
	Mean (SD)	Median	Mean (SD)	Median	
(a) Fostering physical development	4.55 (.70)	5.00	4.42 (.76)	5.00	-1.71
(b) Developing general cognitive skills	4.40 (.77)	5.00	4.44 (.73)	5.00	-.62
(c) Developing social communication skills	4.82 (.51)	5.00	4.75 (.54)	5.00	-1.54
(d) Imparting legacy and tradition	4.19 (.79)	4.00	4.10 (.93)	4.00	-.56
(e) Promoting literacy and mathematics skills	4.23 (.79)	4.00	4.14 (.86)	4.00	-.63
(f) Fostering positive self-esteem	4.88 (.45)	5.00	4.81 (.47)	5.00	-2.27*
(g) Developing curiosity	4.83 (.51)	5.00	4.77 (.53)	5.00	-1.51
(h) Developing learning habits	4.64 (.68)	5.00	4.48 (.72)	5.00	-2.50*

\*p < .05

showed that k teachers and parents attributed a high level of importance to all eight goals, ranging from important (4) to very important (5). A Mann-Whitney test for k teachers' and parents' rating of the eight goals showed two significant differences. k teachers scored higher on goal (f) "Fostering positive self-esteem," and parents scored higher on goal (h) "Developing learning habits" (Table 1). Both k teachers and parents scored lower on goal (d) "Imparting legacy and tradition".

The third hypothesis focused on k teachers' and parents' rating their three most important goals. Results indicated identical priorities for goals that parents and k teacher attributed to themselves: Fostering positive self-esteem was perceived by k teachers and parents as the most important goal, followed by developing curiosity and social communication skills.

An innovative aspect of the present study was the analysis of k teachers' perceptions of parents' rating of educational goals, and *vice versa*. k teachers and parents attributed to the other two identical goals: fostering positive self-esteem and developing social communication skills. In addition, k teachers attributed to parents the goal of promoting literacy and mathematics skills, and parents attributed to K teachers the goal of developing learning habits (Table 2).

**Table 2. The sum of k teachers' and parents' ratings of the three most important goals (in percentages) for themselves and for the other.**

Goals	K teachers' rating (n=182)		Parents' rating (n=209)	
	For themselves	For parents	For themselves	For teachers
(a) Fostering physical development	21%	14%	25%	30%
(b) Developing general cognitive skills	11%	33%	14%	37%
(c) Developing social communication skills	69%	48%	66%	64%
(d) Imparting legacy and tradition	8%	19%	14%	36%
(e) Promoting literacy and mathematics skills	11%	58%	8%	26%
(f) Fostering positive self-esteem	86%	54%	78%	57%
(g) Developing curiosity	74%	22%	50%	41%
(h) Developing learning habits	33%	42%	29%	50%

In sum, as expected k teachers scored higher on social competence goal (Fostering positive self-esteem) and parents scored higher on academic skills goal (Developing learning habits). However, k teachers and parents rated the same three educational goals as being most important, but they attributed different goals to the other. Both parents and k teachers attributed to the other a goal of acquiring knowledge and developing academic skills.

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## **DISCUSSION**

Findings of this study shed light on the similarities and differences between the perceptions of k teachers and parents. Although previous studies have found differences between k teachers and parents in ranking educational goals, in the present study, k teachers and parents tended to rate similarly the importance of promoting socioemotional abilities, but they were not aware of the agreement between them.

Examination of these findings suggests the need for a school-based family counselor (SBFC) (a) to clarify and improve the mechanisms of direct and indirect teacher-parent communication, and (b) to be aware of diverse perceptions and their effect on students' behaviors and success.

## **Teacher-Parent Communication as a Core Practice**

According to the theory of overlapping spheres of influences, students learn more when parents and teachers recognize their shared goal and responsibility for student learning and work together (Epstein, 1995; Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2010). For example, when educators communicated effectively with families and involved them in activities focused on the students' behaviors, schools reported fewer disciplinary actions (Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2010).

Therefore, one of the main goals of the SBFC should be to focus on strengthening teacher-parent partnerships by improving their communication skills. With this goal in their mind, SBFC should develop and implement positive and productive teacher-parent interactions and provide guidance for cultivating communication channels. Talking to parents is an important task that teachers do daily but, it is also a challenging encounter (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2004; Walker & Dotger, 2012). For example, some parents do not speak or read the local language, and not all families can attend school meetings. Moreover, teacher-parent meetings are perceived as being shaped by differences between participants' emotional involvement. In addition, teachers and parents know the child from different perspectives and over differing periods (Major, Seabra-Santos & Martin, 2015). Teachers and parents play different roles in and out of the school system, therefore they differ in their responsibilities for supporting the child (Katz, 1984; Keyes, 2004).

In the present study, k teachers and parents agreed on the importance of kindergarten educational goals, but they were not aware of this agreement. To develop awareness of the other's perceptions, teachers and parents need to communicate.

Researchers identify three facets of teachers' parents' communication competence: creating a positive interpersonal relationship, solving problems in conversation, and structuring the conversation. A recent study of 677 German mathematics teachers indicated that according to the teachers' report, only 24% showed a high level of communication competence with parents, and 24% exhibited a focus on problem solving in communication with parents (Gartmeier, Gebhardt & Dotger, 2016). In early education, k teachers' and parents' overall relationship and communication take place during daily contact in the morning and afternoon, when parents drop off and pick up their children. In a qualitative study in Norway that looked at parents' and caregivers' perspectives of their partnership, most parents and caregivers were satisfied with their overall partnerships but suggested that it would be better if the routines of daily communication improved (Britt Drugli, & Mari Undheim, 2012). Considering this finding, the development of effective communication skills requires structured processes and opportunities for practice (Kaplan Toren & Buchholz Holland, 2019).

In sum, teacher-parent communication is a core practice within family-school partnerships. SBFCs can support teacher-parent communication in different ways. For example, SBFC can

create opportunities for teachers to share and reflect on their parent-related experiences.

### **Listen to Diverse Voices**

The findings of the present study stress the importance of both k teachers' and parents' perceptions in achieving a comprehensive picture of k teachers' and parents' attribution regarding to kindergarten educational goals. Parents and k teachers are the most important informants concerning young children' cognitive, social-emotional, and behavior assessment. The literature suggests several reasons for disagreements between teachers and parents. For example, teachers and parents play different roles in the child's life. Moreover, there is greater agreement between parents and teachers on externalizing problem behaviors of the children than on internalizing ones, mainly because externalizing problem behaviors are more visible and easier to observe than internalizing ones (Winsler & Wallace, 2002).

Therefore, SBFCs should expect some level of disagreement between teachers and parents as well as agreement. To gain a broader understanding of the child's development and behaviors and of teacher-parent relationship characteristics, in the course of counseling, SBFCs should consider the different perspectives and take into a count the unique viewpoint of each partner: teachers and parents.

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## REVIEWERS

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Buchanan Thomas, PhD.	George Fox University, USA
Buchholz Holland Carol, PhD.	North Dakota State University, USA
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