SOCIAL COMPETENCE IN URBAN ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLS

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Abstract:
This exploratory grounded theory study examined teacher perspectives of social competence in urban alternative high schools. Research questions elicited teachers' conceptualizations of social competence and descriptions of how their views on students' social-emotional behaviors influence pedagogy. The specific school context was behavior-focused alternative schools, which serve a disproportionate number of Black students and students with disabilities. Findings indicated urban alternative high school teachers highly value and prioritize within their classrooms the learning and application of specific social competencies perceived to influence post-high school employability. Implications are discussed.

Keywords: Urban education, alternative education, emotional a n d behavioral disorders, qualitative research, social competence

Introduction

Comprehensively, social competence refers to the myriad of skills with which individuals navigate and fulfill culturally normative social expectations in their interactions with others, such as in schools and communities. A large body of research indicates that acquiring and displaying social competence is predictive of numerous positive outcomes, including school competition and postsecondary education attainment (Hymel & Ford, 2014). Research examining types of social competencies and the impact on student achievement is primarily conducted in traditional school settings. Yet, school districts often supplement traditional schools with alternative placements for students who may require additional academic or behavior supports. Traditional schools are defined by comprehensive curriculums and neighborhood boundaries, while alternative education is considered an umbrella term representing school placements targeting specific populations for reasons of pedagogy or student need (Hodge, Liaupson, Umbreit, & Ferro, 2014; Keaton, 2014). The purpose of this study is to investigate ways in which teachers working specifically in urban alternative high schools think about social competence (e.g., which skills are most important and why?) and the influence their conceptualizations have on pedagogy.

Urban school districts are more likely than suburban or rural districts to provide alternative education and to serve the greatest proportion of students at risk for school failure (McFarland, Cui, & Stark, 2018; Porowki, O'Conner, & Luo, 2014; Verdugo & Glenn, 2006). Lehr and colleagues (2009) posit that a significant number of students experiencing dropout risk are referred to alternative schools, and the data imply a growing trend of reliance upon alternative schools in urban districts to address increasing rates of school failure. Further, evidence suggests urban districts serve significantly larger proportions of students with academic or behavior difficulties compared to suburban and rural (Lippman, Burns, & McArthur, 1996; McCurdy, Kunsch, & Reibstein, 2007). Almost 70% of urban districts offer public alternative schools for students presenting academic or behavior difficulties while only approximately 40% and 35% of suburban and rural districts offer these alternative schools, respectively (Verdugo & Glenn, 2006).

The policies and practices within alternative schools provide students with unique learning and social contexts. For example, students who graduated from an alternative school focusing on behavior remediation identified smaller enrollments, closer and more caring relationships with teachers, and positive behavior supports as significant factors in their success (Zolkoski, Bullock, & Gable, 2016). Additionally, students enrolled in alternative schools often have increased access to targeted academic interventions, which can improve their school achievements (Schwab, Johnson, Ansley, Houchins, & Varjas, 2016). Further, a study of alternative education in two urban districts revealed disproportionate enrollment of non-White students in academic and behavior support alternative schools, indicating equity of opportunity concerns (Perzigian, Afacan, Justin, & Wilkerson, 2017; Wilkerson, Afacan, Perzigian, Courtright, & Lange, in press).

Due to the increasing reliance on alternative schools in urban school districts, and the underrepresentation of alternative education in social competence literature, urban alternative high schools provide a distinctive and important setting in which to examine perspectives of social competence. This research explores how the construct of social competence in urban alternative schools is described and emphasized by teachers. Examining social competence from the perspective of educators who teach in settings designed to serve students needing increased academic and behavior support may help facilitate thinking about ways in which teacher perceptions of social and emotional behavior manifest through pedagogy and the implications for students served in these environments.

Social Competence

This article is centered on the understanding of social competence as the capacity for learning and applying a variety of social and emotional skills, such as effective communication and self-advocacy, across multiple settings (Dodge, Pettit, McClaskey, & Brown, 1986). The importance of social competence in students' development is evidenced by significant scholarship linking the phenomena to healthy child and adult outcomes, such as school achievement and social stability (e.g., Caprara, Barbaranelli, Pastorelli, Bandura, & Zimbardo, 2000; Elian & Haynes, 2008; Gresham, 1986; Wentzel, 2005).

In classrooms, social competence is viewed as a facilitator of group membership and attachment to the academic and social properties of school (Bergin & Bergin, 2009; Zsolnai, 2002). For example, students who demonstrate school-valued prosocial behaviors (e.g., attentive listening or cooperation) are typically regarded as socially competent and are thus more likely to gain peer and teacher approval. Peer and teacher approval is described as an academic enabler by way of providing greater access to friendships, participation, and instruction (Wilkerson, Perzigian, & Schurr, 2013).

Schumaker and Hazel (1984) suggest social competence encompasses multiple interacting abilities, including recognizing social expectations, selecting the appropriate skills needed to meet them, and then displaying the skills accordingly. A fundamental characteristic of this formula is recognition of the relationship between the individual and their social context (e.g., peers and environment). Social competence is not simply enacted through individuals but also those who share the context and sustain expectations put forth in that setting. In school and classroom experiences, social competence hinges on the behaviors that stakeholders (e.g., peers and teachers) value and establish as normal. Because teachers are instrumental to the social character of schools and determining best practices for meeting and maintaining social expectations, they are valuable resources in examination of social competence in education contexts.

Urban Alternative Schools

A comprehensive neighborhood school is considered the traditional high school in which students enroll by default, or by neighborhood boundary. Students attend traditional schools typically based upon the catchment area in which they live. For example, students living in a neighborhood on the East side of an urban center may attend East High School simply because their neighborhood is in the east side catchment area. Traditional schools are characterized by breadth of curriculum and a focus on classroom-based academics. Most secondary students in urban districts attend these comprehensive high schools (Keaton, 2014; Perzigian et al., 2017). Many urban districts operate additional school types under the umbrella of alternative education, which target specific student groups or skillsets.

Previous research categorized alternative education into three categories: innovative, behavior–focused, and academic-remediation (Perzigian et al., 2017, Wilkerson, Afacan, Perzigian, Justin, & Lequia, 2016). Innovative alternative schools offer a particular content focus (e.g., arts and technology). Students choose to attend these schools due to interest rather than issues related to school failure, such as credit deficiency. A competitive application process is often required and there is evidence of female and White student overrepresentation in these settings (Perzigian et al., 2017; Wilkerson et al., in press). Innovative alternative schools are considered permanent placements in which students earn their high school diploma. Behavior-focused alternative schools are designed for behavior support and serve students referred from traditional schools for problematic behaviors and can be temporary placements from which students eventually transition prior to graduating. It is important to note that enrollment in behavior–focused alternative schools is by school referral and sometimes as result of an outsider's suggestion (e.g., social worker or juvenile court judge) rather than student choice. An urban district enrollment analysis revealed overrepresentation of male students, Black students, and students with emotional or behavioral disabilities attending these alternative schools (Perzigian et al., 2017). Academic–remediation alternative schools are designed to serve students in need of academic remediation or academic recovery and there is evidence of differences in student representation in this category as well (Perzigian et al., 2017; Wilkerson et al., in press). These placements may be temporary, as transition back to a traditional school is often the goal. It should be noted that students are referred to academic-remediation alternative schools due to academic need rather than behavior concern.

Although there is research indicating effectiveness of alternative education (e.g., Schwab, et al., 2016; Zolkoski et al., 2016), there is also evidence of mixed results and ineffectiveness of academic-remediation and behavior–focused alternative schools, such as disparate outcomes and difficulty with transitioning back to traditional schools (Jones, 1999). Poorer student outcomes of students enrolled in these placements compared to peers in traditional schools include less credits earned, decreased attendance, lower scores on standardized math and literacy assessments, and increased dropout rates (Carruthers & Baenen, 1997; Carswell, Hanlon, Watts, & O'Grady, 2014; Chiang & Gill, 2010; Dugger & Dugger, 1998; Tenenbaum, 2000; Wilkerson, Afacan, Perzigian, Justin, & Lequia, 2016; Wilkerson, Yan, Perzigian, Cakiroglu, 2016; Wilkerson, Afacan, Yan, Justin, & Datar, 2016).

A recent study concluded that students in behavior–focused alternative high schools attend school less often, have lower grade point averages (GPA), and earn less credits compared to a matched sample of their peers enrolled in traditional schools (Wilkerson, Afacan, Perzigian, et al., 2016).   The relationship between behavior–focused alternative schools and overrepresentation of certain student groups should be noted and is relevant to the current study, especially considering the discrepant outcomes between Black and White students (i.e., achievement gap and education debt), and those with and without disabilities.

Framework of Study

Social contexts during childhood and adolescence are considered vital domains for promoting healthy adjustment and development (e.g., Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Piaget, 1932/1965; Sullivan, 1953).   Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory suggests that children and young adults develop social, emotional, and cognitive skills within tiered social contexts (e.g., schools and families) in which other individuals are models and partners in the acquisition and demonstration of these skills.   According to Bronfenbrenner (1979), school is part of the microsystem –contexts in which the developing individual has significant contact.   A microsystem consists of various relationships developmentally influential for the individual as well as influential to the context.   For example, a teacher's behavior affects the student, and in parallel the student's behavior affects the teacher –and both combine to create the social context.   Guided by this understanding of the influence of teachers on the social context of school, I sought to examine social competence from their perspective and specifically in urban behavior–focused alternative high schools.

Students who experience behavioral difficulties may be referred to an alternative school for increased behavior support, including social and emotional skills –or social competence.   Yet, exploratory or empirical social competence research has not previously been conducted in an alternative school setting.   While behavior–focused alternative schools represent a school context, and thus a facet of the microsystem for many youths experiencing behavioral difficulty, it is a unique context in which to explore teacher perceptions of social competence and the impact on pedagogy.

Teachers are in positions of power to approve, encourage or disapprove of the behaviors and social–emotional skills students bring into schools.   Furthermore, social competence in an education context has teachers in positions to emphasize the competencies they deem most valuable within their classrooms and beyond.   Therefore, I asked teachers to share their personal definitions and perceptions of social competence and report the ways they consider students' social competence in relationship to their teaching practices.   Specifically, I aimed to address the following research questions, with urban behavior–focused alternative schools as the school context:

1.   How do teachers in secondary alternative schools define social competence?

2.   In what ways do teachers in secondary alternative schools perceive social competence to influence their teaching practices?

3.   What value do teachers in secondary alternative schools attribute to their students' social competence?

Methodology

Setting

The study was conducted in a district self-described as metropolitan, or*urban*.   At the time of data collection, all participants were employed in separate behavior–focused alternative high schools.   The district serves approximately 30,000 K-12 students annually, of whom 25% are identified as Black, 50% White, and 20% Hispanic.

Sampling

To establish a pool of possible participants, I employed purposeful sampling procedures, including criterion and reputational sampling (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984; Patton, 1989).   For eligibility, teachers needed at least two years of experience teaching in an alternative school.   Additionally, an expert informant of the alternative education branch of a local district recommended participants with whom I could collect data through snowball sampling.   At the time of sampling, the expert informant was employed as a teacher in a behavior–focused alternative high school.   The expert was chosen for experience and reputation.   He taught in a variety of alternative settings throughout a 15-year professional career and had a wealth of

experience from which to draw while recommending possible participants. Further, he had a reputation in the local alternative education community for excellence in teaching and school leadership, including receipt of a local teaching award and community engagement award. I asked the expert informant for recommendations of at least five possible participants matching my eligibility requirements working in the local district. Following selection of a pool, I contacted the identified, possible participants to explain the study. If consent was received for participation, an interview was scheduled. Four of five recommended teachers consented to participate. Prior to the initial interview, one participant recanted.

Participants

This study included data from four teachers, one of whom served as the expert informant. The expert informant was an acquaintance of the selected participants. However, the participants were only acquainted to the expert informant, and not to the other participants. Any potentially identifiable information about the participants, their specific schools, or specific students with whom they worked were either omitted completely or given pseudonyms.

 Participant 1. Sarah has five years of experience in an academic remediation and behavior–focused alternative high school. Her content area licensure is English and she teaches both English and Social Studies in her current position. Of the four teachers in this study, Sarah's setting is the largest, serving approximately 100 students each year, and is unique in that there are programs within the school designed to serve students referred for poor behaviors as well as students with deficits in academic achievement.

 Participant 2. Paul is a teacher with five years of experience in one behavior–focused alternative high school serving approximately 35 adolescents per year who are involved with the juvenile justice system. He is state licensed in secondary Biology and Broad-Field Science, although he shares teaching responsibilities for English, Health, and Physical Education curricula as well.

 Participant 3. Amy is a teacher with four years of experience teaching in a small behavior–focused alternative school for 9^{th}grade students struggling with the transition from middle to high school. She is state licensed in secondary Math and Computer Science but also holds Broad-Field Science responsibilities. Amy's setting is the smallest in this study, serving approximately 20 students per year.

 Participant 4. Eric served as the expert informant for this study. He is a teacher with 15 years of experience, approximately 10 years of which were in various alternative education settings. At the time of data collection, he was teaching multiple subjects in a behavior–focused alternative school serving 40 students annually. His content licensure is secondary English.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-person semi-structured interviews, with one interview per participant. One follow-up phone conversation was offered to allow for information to be added if desired by the participant. All participants declined to supplement their initial interview. I developed the interview protocol using suggestions outlined by Seidman (2006) for creating structured, yet open-ended interview questions. Interview data were well-suited to this project as I was interested in how teachers define and reportedly emphasize social competence; interviews elicit participants' perceptions and reports of various phenomena in which the researcher is concerned (Heron, 1981; Reason, 1981). Each interview was tape-recorded, transcribed verbatim, labeled with a pseudonym, and saved as a Word document for coding purposes. To ensure clarity with the interview protocol, I conducted a pilot interview with the expert informant. Due to positive response (i.e., nothing about the pilot interview suggested need for interview protocol improvement or modification) I included his interview data as part of the study.

Data Analysis

I approached data analysis in the grounded theory tradition of Strauss and Corbin (1998). The aim of grounded theory research is to generate theory about a social phenomenon. It is a descriptive qualitative methodology in which the researcher identifies patterns in data and uses these patterns to inform creation of theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). A review served as a starting point and I immersed myself in social competence research literature to stimulate my thinking about "properties and dimensions" of the concept (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 45). I began with open coding of my interview data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), supplemented by strategies described as first cycle coding (Saldana, 2009). I identified key words, concepts, and phrases and developed categories that represented chunks of data. Next, I axial coded (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), again supplemented by strategies described as second cycle coding (Saldana, 2009) wherein I identified patterns, and relationships across the participants and developed subcategories which helped illustrate how the larger categories identified by open coding were linked to one another.

Throughout coding cycles, I used analytical memos as forums for exploration of some of the significant coding themes and relationships. Next, I engaged in selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) for which I identified a central category to which the other categories were related. Once identified, the central category became the foundation of a framework aimed at explaining ways in which teachers in behavior–focused alternative high schools conceptualize their students' social competence and how those conceptualizations affect their views or expectations of students and pedagogy. During the coding process, I solicited feedback from two individuals (i.e., professor at the affiliated institution and a qualitative research peer) to ensure validity in my analysis. In grounded theory, it is necessary for the researcher to reflect upon their own positionality within the study to maintain rigor (Engward & Davis, 2015; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This practice, termed reflectivity, is the awareness of the researcher's identity in the construction of knowledge (Finlay, 2002).

I am both professionally and personally interested in alternative education. Prior to a career in academia, I was a high school English and special education teacher working in various alternative schools. I have participated directly in many wonderful as well as challenging experiences with students referred to alternative placements for problematic behaviors and poor academic achievements. Though I wish comprehensive neighborhood schools served all students well, I recognize districts use alternative placements for increased and targeted intervention. Throughout data analysis, I remained aware of my own experiences in alternative schools and took steps to ensure that these experiences did not impact interpretation of data.

Findings

Research Question One

The first research question examined how teachers in behavior–focused alternative high schools define social competence. Many of the interpretations revolve around the construct of social knowledge, which is defined as one's understanding of how to behave or what to do in a variety of social situations (Ames & Ames, 1984; Bursuck & Asher, 1986; Welsh et al., 2001). One example of social knowledge articulated is the capacity for "toughing it out" and engaging in something one may not enjoy as means to an end. Amy reportedly stresses to her students:

"You're not going to love every second of your job. You have to figure out how do you tough it out and make it through the rough stuff you don't like so that you can get your paycheck so you can pay your bills."

Similarly, the participants discussed the ability to "fake it" in undesirable settings or situations —that being able to do so is a social competency. For example, Paul shared that many of his students are unable to "put on a happy face" and that it is difficult to teach his students to even "put on an okay face" during unfavorable experiences. Further, Sarah articulated that social competence is doing what is necessary to get through a system:

"I don't want to encourage kids to be hoop jumpers but I want them to get what they need and sometimes that means figuring out how to jump through hoops."

Likewise, Eric's view of social competence was related to the behavior expectations put forth by society. His conceptualization primarily focused on that which students are expected to do perhaps outside of schools. For example:

"Social competence to me is, 'Can I get along with the world? Am I ready to confront all that which confronts me?'"

Participants discussed self-advocacy and students' knowing how to take the appropriate steps to improve their experiences as critical to social competence. As its own construct, self-advocacy appears throughout education literature as an important skill for students and adults with disabilities to learn and apply in school and community contexts. Indeed, strategies for building self-advocacy are widely incorporated in special education programs (e.g., student-led IEPs).

Research Question Two

The second research question investigated ways in which these perspectives of social competence influences teaching practices. Participants indicated that their schools prioritize improving students' social competence, even at a time and resource cost to academic competence. They articulated that increasing students' social competence is a priority over academic skills due to the nature of why students attend their alternative setting (i.e., problematic behavior). For example, Paul shared:

"I'd say that I feel like it's our charge to improve students' social competence. That's what we're here for, first and foremost to help students with their social competencies."

Paul explained the priority social competence has for him as an alternative educator—although he is a content area teacher, he ultimately perceives his role as one through which to teach students the social competencies they arrive without. He indicated the responsibility of his school is to prepare students for positive social experiences.

Another prominent instructional theme was the teachers' goals related to eventual employment. The concept of employment was threaded throughout responses to the three research questions. Many explanations for emphasizing social competence refer to successful employment as an immediate post-high school outcome. According to participants, employment is influenced heavily by the types of social competencies students acquire while in school, which in this context illustrates the relationships among conceptualizations of social competence, the ways in which pedagogy is thus informed, and the value attributed to being socially competent. Amy said,

"We need to teach them the skills they need to be successful in school particularly in ways that carry over in life. Social competence goes into being able to do things like having the self-discipline to do what you need to do to be successful in life; to do something like hold down a job."

Participants indicated that they engaged both explicit and implicit strategies for teaching social competence. Sarah reported that because many students enter her alternative school lacking interaction skills for working with groups of people, she spends instructional time teaching basic social behavior, such as how to hold conversation:

"I did a lot of direct instruction around that, which was interesting because it's different than other teaching. I mean it was like how to have a conversation and I would make these little cards like, 'Remember to ask questions and everybody talks,' and like they'd sit on the table so there was like this is, 'How you should be behaving in this circumstance with other people to be a productive participant in this conversation' directions."

The above quote also illustrates social competence encompasses remedial social skills, as Sarah asserted conversational skills as content needing to be taught in her setting. It is also interesting to consider what the implications might be of teaching remedial social skills in a high school setting –this is explored further in the discussion.

Similarly, Paul suggests a remedial social skill conceptualization of social competence when referring to perceived differences between alternative and traditional education. He indicated that a major difference in social expectations between his behavior– focused alternative school and the local traditional high school is related to the deficits students bring with them to alternative placements. For example, he articulated that basic social competencies are taken for granted:

"I think a lot of our social skills get down to more concrete things for us. Like a lot of times like we're working on just showing up. Like it's a really important thing we'll tell kids just to be here every day. I think that's a really important thing that gets overlooked."

An identified concern in this study as well as previous literature is the transition from alternative schools. Due to differing curricula and expectations between traditional and nontraditional schools, there is concern whether students are prepared enough for success in a more comprehensive educational environment (e.g., Lange, 1998). Many secondary alternative schools serve as a bridge to yet another secondary school or as a temporary time-out due to problematic behaviors. Because of this, the role of some behavior–focused alternative schools is unique and instruction may prioritize specific transition related behavior skills. To this end, Amy asserted:

"We also have to prepare them for what's going to happen to them when they get into the big high school. They're going to have to have some self-discipline because there won't be anybody holding a bat over their head making them do their work. That's why social competence has to be the focus of our agenda in alternative schools."

Here, Amy illustrated that teachers in alternative settings consider that levels of social support provided to students in behavior– focused alternative schools will fade in transition to a traditional school, and there is risk in failing to scaffold support. Students may transition to a larger school in which they will experience increased student–teacher ratio and reduced time or concern for individualized attention and accountability. Amy further asserted that to prepare students for transition success, social competence skills must be prioritized in alternative schools. Describing social competence instruction as preparing students for what is going to happen next is broadly encompassed by the concept of social knowledge (Ames & Ames, 1984; Bursuck &

Asher, 1986; Welsh et al., 2001). Moreover, the above passage underscores yet again that in some behavior–focused alternative schools, social competence skills hold priority over academic domains.

Research Question Three

The third and final research question explored how teachers in behavior–focused alternative high schools attribute value to their students' social competence. Participants emphasized the importance for students to master social competencies that transcend school settings and are relevant within the community. By illustrating job-related examples, all four participants suggested employment for their students as the assumed post-high school goal. For example, Eric discussed the importance of being marketable:

"Our students are in positions where they're vulnerable. They need all the help they can get when it comes to entering the working world and we can give them that help in our school. We can make sure they leave us with the social competence that will make them desirable. And that's critical."

To further exemplify the intersection of social competence, job preparation, and the purpose of schooling, Amy stated,

"The kids don't need to have geometry proofs to be successful in life; they need to know how to argue something. I always use the example if you want to get a raise at your job: 'Look, this is what I've done for your business, this is how much more money you make because I'm here.' That's a way more important skill than necessarily doing algebra."

The above passages demonstrate two central ideas that manifest throughout the study: Social behavior is perhaps the most critical domain to teach in behavior–focused alternative schools and students attending them may be projected to fill working roles following high school rather than positions as learners in higher education. Further, two participants identified code switching to be a critical social competency to teach their students. Amy again used a job setting to exemplify this:

"We don't expect them never to swear, but if they can learn code switching which is another skill to have, if you can say, 'Okay I'm at a job I have to use a certain specific way of conversing with people. If I sit here and cuss every other word I'm going to be out on my butt.'"

Amy recognizes that students need to know which behaviors are appropriate in various contexts and need the ability to turn off certain behaviors when necessary. By using an employment example rather than post-secondary education, this passage appears to indicate employability as an immediate post-high school goal. She continued,

"My job is to have my kids be successful in the world. And I don't see that as just grades. I see it as can my kid get excited about going out and getting a job and can they hold down that job, or are they going to get fired because they don't show up or are they going to get fired because they cuss at a customer because they can't police their mouth."

Discussion

Data from this study suggest teacher perceptions of alternative education and assumptions about students who attend behavior–focused alternative schools influence the conceptualization and emphasis of social competence in those environments. This research implies that teachers define social competence in relation to their beliefs of the purpose of behavior–focused alternative schools, thereby suggesting teachers' conception of social behavior is influenced by instructional context (i.e., school). The value attributed to social competence and the consequential practices are influenced by the outcomes these teachers project as imminent or desirable for their students. Since employment was reported as the exemplary typical post-high school outcome desired for students, the social competencies articulated and instructed by teachers in the study reflect this perspective. Due to use of employment-related examples exclusively, it appears the sample of teachers are concerned with immediate employability of their students. Additional post-high school examples are not presented, such as vocational training programs or higher education, in describing social competence objectives.

Previous research indicates that students enrolled in behavior–focused alternative high schools earn fewer credits than their matched peers in traditional schools and that some students experience immense difficulty transitioning from an alternative setting to a traditional school (Jones, 1999; Wilkerson, Afacan, Perzigian et al., 2016). Further, Kim and Taylor (2008) noted a major concern with some alternative education practices is the emphasis of merely passing rather than critical learning. For example, in some academic remediation alternative schools credit recovery is a primary aim, yet Kim and Taylor (2008) suggest "quick fix" (p. 23) credit recovery, which includes memorization and regurgitation, teaches the importance of passing rather than

learning. The associations are worth investigating further to determine if relationships exist between teachers' conceptualizations of social competence via survival skills (e.g., "putting on a happy face," "faking it until you make it," and "jumping through hoops) and credits earned. Or, whether the social competence focus of alternative schools may impact the later difficulties associated with transitioning to another school as identified in previous literature.

It is a relevant caution, the disquiet in knowing that students are perhaps falling further behind due to the instructional practices in settings designed to support positive behaviors. For example, what might be consequences of emphasizing social competence instruction, at cost of or priority over academic skills, especially in urban school districts and in settings overrepresented by Black students and youth with disabilities? In previous research, students enrolled in behavior–focused alternative schools earned fewer credits than their peers in traditional schools, which may imply teachers should potentially increase academic content in conjunction with social emotional competence. It is also worth noting that perhaps the primary role of behavior–focused alternative schools is justified in promoting social competence as these skills are associated with increased school achievements.

Considering disparate academic outcomes, issues of overrepresentation, increased reliance in urban districts, and the perceived purposes of behavior–focused alternative schools should be revisited at both policy (e.g., who is referred and why) and practice levels. It bears recognizing the importance of employment, and that many students justifiably and with pride enter the workforce immediately upon graduating high school. The concern is with predestined outcome–or assumption–not whether students choose to pursue employment or higher education. In other words, do views on social competence in some schools factor into issues of tracking toward specific futures? Additional data about the emphasis of employment-related social competencies in traditional schools is needed to confirm this comparison beyond the interview data presented in the current study.

Similarly, data from this study underscore concern with the balance between social and academic skills, if indeed students are referred to alternative schools due to lack of social competence. Should all educators, regardless of type of setting, be responsible for the social and emotional trajectory of their students? It may be a setting-specific issue, which again underpins assumptions about the purposes of alternative and traditional schools and potentially assumptions about students attending each.

Conclusion and Direction of Future Research

An initial and exploratory model explaining ways in which teachers in behavior–focused alternative schools think about and emphasize social competence emerged through this study: Perceptions of the role of alternative education and assumptions about students served in behavior–focused alternative schools influence how social competence is conceptualized and reportedly emphasized by teachers in that context. Alternative educators may consider social competence in a manner tied to the reasons for which they believe alternative settings –specifically in this study behavior–focused alternative schools– are purposed. The value attributed to social competence and the practices employed appear dictated by the outcomes assumed for students, for which teachers in this study provided examples exclusively in job contexts.

Behavior–focused alternative schools tend to serve a disproportionate number of Black students and students with emotional or behavior disorders which give these schools an appearance of de facto segregated settings for specific groups. It is therefore especially relevant which social behaviors are emphasized by teachers and assumed to precipitate which outcomes. While I did not inquire specifically about race or ethnicity, it bears acknowledging that race, ethnicity, and disability status influence the ways in which teachers perceive student behavior and their reactions to those behaviors (see Ferguson, 2000). Future urban alternative school research should examine these demographic variables in concert with beliefs or practices related to social behaviors.

Teachers are in positions of power in schools. They are agents of social behavior, as they have authority to approve or disapprove behavior and choose which competencies to emphasize within their classrooms. Discussions of social competence therefore need to acknowledge issues related to power dynamics. The caution here is that it appears a school context in which there is evidence of de facto segregation (e.g., Perzigian et al., 2017) may not prepare students for the same opportunities as their peers. One might ask, for what futures are we preparing students attending some types of urban alternative schools? Sarah acknowledged that her school's enrollment percentages were "way outta whack" in terms of the disproportionately high number of Black and Hispanic students compared to the same district's regular high school. Additional similar research may reveal further implications if student demographics are included as a unit of analysis.

Noticeably absent from the study is consideration of Individualized Educational Program (IEP) goals or objectives. Three of the four participants noted specifically that they teach students identified as emotionally or behaviorally disabled, yet in thinking about the social competence of their students and their pedagogy, none of the participants articulated concern or relevancy of an IEP. Considering the behavior support purpose of behavior–focused alternative schools and the prevalence of students with

emotional or behavioral disorders, students' IEP goals should factor into instructional decisions. Although the participants made numerous anecdotal comments about their students needing basic social skills, there was no discussion around observational or measurable behavior data that might have informed their instruction. Additional research should include the disability context in examining perceptions of teachers about the consequences of social competence for students and in influence on pedagogy.

A tension meriting further exploration emerged from this study: behavior–focused alternative schools ostensibly serve a purpose in school districts –namely to support students exhibiting problematic behaviors. If this is the case, does it make good sense that these settings prioritize seemingly menial social competencies, as problematic behaviors tend to manifest due to skill deficits? Therefore, reduced academic performance and credit deficiencies might be expected or even accepted as collateral damage in behavior–focused alternative schools if indeed behaviors are improving. Additional research should survey the properties (e.g., consequence) of this tension in-depth and whether deep-end segregated settings of high proportions of students with emotional or behavioral disorders are efficacious in behavioral domains enough to justify poorer academic outcomes.

There are limitations to the findings of this study, including its small scale exploratory nature and lack of randomization. Additional research with a higher number of participants would help significantly to verify and strengthen the identified framework. Generalization of findings would benefit from the support of a larger sample size. The current study collected data exclusively through interviews. Classroom observational data would be helpful for interpreting or confirming the emphasis of social competence for instructional purposes. Because perceptions of phenomena are shaped by experiences, further research could examine the experiences of teachers that impact their perceptions of social competence. It would be informative and applicable to investigate the personal identity of teachers in relation to their views of social competence, student expectations, and the urban alternative schooling context.

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