Bridging the Gap in Youth Mental Health Services: Out-of-School Time Programs as a Means of

Supporting Youth Development Across Contexts

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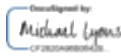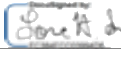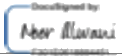
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Project Overview

The current context of youth mental health services and supports in the United States presents an opportunity for novel innovations in service expansion, as well as an intentional and responsible recasting of traditional models of service delivery, with the aim of increasing youth's access to mental health supports. Following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as ongoing systemic oppression and discrimination against marginalized and minoritized groups, the mental health needs of youth have expanded, and continue to expand, reaching an estimated two- or even three-fold increase relative to previous levels of need (NASP, 2020b). This is especially true for those belonging to marginalized groups, which were disproportionately impacted by the dual pandemics of COVID-19 and systemic oppression (Jones, 2021; NASP, 2020a). Policymakers, educators, and leaders in the field of psychology have identified youth mental health as an ongoing priority, as well as a primary means of alleviating some of the negative effects of these dual pandemics (Jones, 2021).

That being said, existing service delivery models for mental health have long been unable to meet the demand and need for services, resulting in an overtaxed and overburdened system (McQuillin et al., 2019), the harmful effects of which typically fall disproportionately on youth and families who have been pushed to the margins (Harris et al., 2020; Malone et al., 2021). While a number of emerging models are in development as a means to bridge the gap in mental health services and supports, including integrated healthcare systems (Harris et al., 2020; Qin & Hsieh, 2020), school-based supports (NASP, 2020a), and task-shifting to more effectively make use of providers' time and training (McQuillin et al., 2019), it is unlikely that a single method will be sufficient to address these long-standing inequities. Rather, a combination of these and other methods, requiring collaboration and coordination across systems and contexts, may be the

essential ingredient, allowing for both an emphasis on prevention and promotion, as well as intervention (Harris et al., 2020; Qin & Hsieh, 2020; Roche & Vaillancourt, 2016; Vaillancourt & Amador, 2014).

Models that capitalize on making more efficient and effective use of existing OST programs and supports form the foundation and focus of the proposed dissertation, with integration of OST programs and supports with existing school-based multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) serving as a hope and long-term focus. Additionally, the services and supports referenced span from universal promotion and prevention practices to more intensive mental health services, supports, and interventions. Given the popularity and widespread support for youth mentoring services as a means of supporting youth academic, social-emotional, and behavioral development (Garringer et al., 2017), the first and second manuscripts focus on measurement of school-based mentoring interactions as a means for understanding implementation and the impact of this common prevention intervention on youth developmental outcomes. To answer these questions, both studies use data from a specific OST program, a school-based mentoring intervention known as the Young Women Leaders Program (YWLP), and explore its effectiveness in promoting these developmental outcomes. These manuscripts were also borne in response to calls for greater ongoing assessment throughout mentoring program implementation, as well as more precise treatment specification of supportive (e.g., non-specific and relationally focused) mentoring interventions (Cavell et al., 2021; Lyons & McQuillin, 2021; McQuillin et al., 2018; Rhodes, 2020).

Consistent with recent calls for mentoring programs to improve impact on youth outcomes (Garringer et al., 2017), in part through more frequent assessment of mentoring processes and youth outcomes (McQuillin et al., 2018), both the first and second manuscript

involved textured assessment of ongoing discussions between mentors and mentees in

unstructured mentoring sessions (e.g., documenting engagement in four relationship-focused

topics and four instrumentally-focused topics). Both of these manuscripts also attempted to

establish links between mentoring processes and a number of academic, social-emotional, and

behavioral outcomes for participating youth. In addition, given a theoretical interest in examining

differential effects of the types of supports offered (e.g., relational/emotional support,

instrumental support; House, 1981; Lyons et al., 2019), as well as the ability of those supports to

promote positive youth development, the second manuscript incorporated and validated a brief

four-item measure of weekly relationship quality. This measure was then used to predict the

likelihood of mentors offering particular types of support (e.g., relational, instrumental), as well

as separately conducting analyses of the associations between overall mentoring relationship

quality and youth outcomes. Collectively, the results of these first two manuscripts suggest that

regular assessment of both the affective (e.g., relationship closeness) and technical (e.g.,

discussion content) components of mentoring is necessary to shed light on the impact of

mentoring on developmental outcomes. The final manuscript expands on this work through a

secondary qualitative analysis of the types of equity-focused social-emotional learning (SEL)

and mental health (MH) supports large school divisions offer youth through OST programs, as

well as means of integrating and expanding those OST SEL/MH supports with in-school

offerings using frameworks such as Comprehensive School Mental Health (CSMH), an eight-

component model of school-based mental health supports introduced by Hoover and colleagues

(2019).

These manuscripts combine to paint both a broad and detailed portrait of the ways in

which OST initiatives, including school-based mentoring (SBM) as one example, support the

social-emotional development of youth, and in so doing, support their academic and behavioral development as well, particularly for marginalized youth and communities of color. Through these manuscripts, the authors hope to reinforce the ways in which OST programs serve as a complementary support for MH and SEL, first on a micro level by exploring the associations between session-by-session discussion topics and relationship quality within a specific OST program, to the macro-level exploration of district-wide initiatives for providing SEL/MH-focused supports through OST programs, within the context of a broader network of universal prevention efforts, targeted supports, and intensive interventions. In addition, the authors hope to embody an equity lens through this series of manuscripts, particularly given the unique features of OST programs that allow for culturally responsive and equitable approaches to CSMH (Hoover et al., 2019). These features include greater alignment than in school spaces in the lived experiences of the OST workforce with the communities served (McKenney, 2021; Simpkins et al., 2017), as well as increased curricular freedom relative to in-school contexts, allowing for more specialized programming targeting developmental processes such as racial socialization and identity development, and are detailed more explicitly in the body of the dissertation, particularly in the third manuscript.

Manuscript One. This study aimed to explore and document patterns in mentoring discussion topics using textured assessment (e.g., a weekly-mentor-reported measure of topics discussed during unstructured one-on-one time with their mentee). OLS regression was used to predict youth outcomes at the end of the intervention based on how often topics were discussed. Consistent with the relational focus of the mentoring program, each of the four relationship-focused discussion topics (e.g., friendships, romantic relationships, family relationships, and relationships with teachers) were more frequently talked about than the academically-focused

topics (e.g., academic skills, academic problems, hopes for the future, and goals). Though effects were mixed, significant improvements in mentee outcomes at the end of the program were associated with increased discussion of three topics: family relationships, academic skills, and hopes for the future. Unfortunately, there were also significant negative associations and a decline in mentee outcomes with increased discussion of six of eight topics. The only topics that did not have any significant negative associations were hopes for the future and friendships.

Possible explanations for these findings include the possibility that the manner in which mentors engage mentees with these conversations (e.g., the affective component of the intervention) was somehow lacking. Other possibilities for the potentially deleterious effects of some of these mentoring discussions are a deficit-focused lens and lack of evidence-based practices and techniques in approaching those conversations, particularly given that findings showed more frequent discussion of a strengths-focused topic such as hopes for the future (e.g., academic aspirations) showed entirely positive associations with developmental outcomes.

In 2021, this manuscript, entitled "Examining heterogeneity in mentoring: Associations between mentoring discussion topics and youth outcomes," was presented as a poster at the Virtual American Psychological Association (APA) Annual Meeting, and as a paper at the Virtual American Educational Research Association (AERA) Annual Meeting roundtable session "Practical Approaches for Youth Mentoring." The paper was then published in the Journal of Community Psychology in 2022.

Manuscript Two. A continuation of the work of the first manuscript, this study aimed to combine textured assessment of intervention content (e.g., discussion topics in unstructured mentoring sessions) with assessment of the affective component of mentoring (e.g., relationship quality or closeness). In order to do so, a brief four-item measure of relationship quality was

validated using a series of confirmatory factor analyses across three timepoints, as well as a measure of concurrent validity. Then, multilevel mixed-effects logistic regression models used average scores from the weekly measure of relationship quality to predict the likelihood of discussing each of the eight discussion topics during unstructured mentoring sessions. Finally, overall relationship quality over the course of the intervention year was used to predict changes in youth outcomes at the end of the program year.

Results supported the use of the four-item measure of weekly relationship quality to assess mentor-mentee closeness at regular intervals. Additionally, increased relationship quality significantly predicted a higher likelihood of discussing all eight developmentally relevant topics, lending support to the importance of monitoring the affective component of mentoring relationships. Finally, an overall measure of relationship quality averaged across the course of a year was not sufficiently able to predict outcomes at the end of the program year, lending support to the need for textured assessment of key intervention foci and youth outcomes at regular, brief intervals.

Manuscript Three. The final study is an extension of the first author's prior research about the effectiveness of supports provided in a youth mentoring intervention for promoting positive developmental outcomes. This research expands upon the previous two papers focused on mentoring by continuing to focus on out-of-school time programs and supports, while situating them in a broader context by attending to broader district-level practices supporting the integration of in-school mental health supports and programming with OST initiatives that promote youth social-emotional development and well-being. Additionally, this third paper both centers and provides a far more in-depth exploration of how these mental health supports and programs advance the goal of promoting more equitable outcomes for marginalized youth.

In order to address these aims, the study involved secondary qualitative coding and analysis of excerpts from 59 interviews with district, school, and program staff, as well as administrators and community liaisons from nine communities, among select additional roles. Select excerpts had already been identified by a larger research team with the holistic code "SEL/MH Supports" prior to inclusion in this study. Participants represent seven large urban school districts and three intermediary organizations across the United States identified as having a demonstrated focus on promoting equitable access to services for youth belonging to marginalized communities.

Findings shed light on the ways in which those involved in support the growth, well-being, MH, and SEL of youth frame their roles and contributions, navigate dynamics related to positionality, power, and privilege, and offer supports to students, families, communities, and other providers in alignment with frameworks such as CSMH (Hoover et al., 2019). Additionally, this is one of the first studies to document the ways in which OST settings provide SEL/MH support to students, particularly with emphasis on equity, inclusion, and evidence-based, culturally responsive practices. Finally, the study lays an exploratory foundation for points of connection, integration, and collaboration between OST and in-school SEL/MH support offerings.

Conclusion

This dissertation and its three studies combine to make the case for OST programs as a context for bridging the gap in access to mental health supports and services for marginalized youth. The first and second manuscripts focus primarily on the effectiveness of a specific OST mentoring program as a context for delivering the types of supports intended to bolster and promote positive youth development, as well as the importance of precise measurement and

treatment specification to evaluate intended effects. The third manuscript builds on the work of

the first two by qualitatively exploring the integration and expansion of the types of SEL/MH

supports offered to youth in the OST context, building on the CSMH framework (Hoover et al.,

2019), as well as complementary frameworks such as Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS;

Malone et al., 2021), in order to explore and establish current practices related to provider roles

in offering SEL/MH supports in OST spaces, as well as integrating with and building on existing

structures for in-school MH and SEL offerings. In conjunction, these manuscripts push the field

one step further in the direction of utilizing novel and responsible methods of increasing

equitable access to culturally responsive and evidence-informed mental health supports.

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Manuscript I: Abstract

Aims. The current study aims to apply a staged approach to document heterogeneity in discussions in mentoring relationships, chiefly, discussion topics from weekly mentoring sessions with undergraduate women mentors (n = 40), then link each of the eight topics (relationships with friends, family, teachers, and romantic relationships, as well as goals, academic skills, academic problems, and hopes for the future) to developmental outcomes for middle school girls (n = 41) who participated in a school-based mentoring program. In doing so, the authors hope to better understand the mechanisms that influence variability in mentoring treatment effects.

Methods. Mentoring dyads engaged in unstructured one-on-one sessions and structured group meetings across the 2018-2019 academic year. The primary predictors for this study are weekly mentor-reported discussion topics and activities addressed during unstructured one-on-one mentoring sessions, with eleven social-emotional, academic, and behavioral outcomes measured via pre- and post-surveys administered by research assistants to mentees during the fall and spring.

Results. A series of eleven path analyses indicate small to moderate associations, both beneficial and negative, between key discussion topics, such as hopes for the future, family relationships, and goals, and several mentee-reported outcomes of interest at the end of the intervention, including extrinsic motivation, life satisfaction, and self-esteem.

Conclusions. Study findings provide information about heterogeneity in mentoring practices to inform how various mechanisms of mentoring (e.g., discussions focused on

relationships, goals and skills, and strengths) influence developmentally-relevant effects for

youth.

Manuscript II: Abstract

Aims. The current study aims to apply a staged approach to document heterogeneity in discussions in mentoring relationships, chiefly, discussion topics from weekly mentoring sessions with undergraduate women mentors (n = 40), then link each of the eight topics (relationships with friends, family, teachers, and romantic relationships, as well as goals, academic skills, academic problems, and hopes for the future) to developmental outcomes for middle school girls (n = 41) who participated in a school-based mentoring program. In doing so, the authors hope to better understand the mechanisms that influence variability in mentoring treatment effects.

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Manuscript III: Abstract

Aims. The current study explores the landscape of mental health (MH) and social-emotional learning (SEL) supports in out-of-school time (OST) settings, as well as points of integration between in-school and OST practices and offerings, with a focus on considerations for equitable and inclusive practice.

Methods. After screening based on inclusion criteria, 59 interviews were conducted and coded by a larger research team to explore a broader set of research questions. Interview participants represent a range of professional backgrounds, with representation from OST program staff, community liaisons, providers, administrators, and district personnel, among others, and were recruited from a diverse and representative sample of nine communities across the United States (seven large urban school districts and three intermediary organizations). The researchers for the current study used a secondary coding approach to analyze excerpts from this qualitative dataset that had already been coded with the holistic code "SEL/MH supports," and applied an abductive approach, using descriptive, values, linguistic, and pattern coding.

Results. Study findings illustrate the numerous ways those involved in offering OST and in-school supports for MH and SEL frame their roles and contributions, facilitate a comprehensive approach to providing instruction, supports, and services to youth, families, and communities, and incorporate equity and inclusion practices to serve marginalized populations.

Conclusions. This study lays the groundwork for continued exploration of equity-focused MH/SEL supports in OST settings, as well as points of integration with existing school mental health (SMH) frameworks. Results offer important context for stakeholder perceptions of the current landscape, as well as barriers and facilitators to continued integration.

Examining Heterogeneity in Mentoring: Associations Between Mentoring Discussion Topics and

Youth Outcomes

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Examining Heterogeneity in Mentoring: Associations Between Mentoring Discussion

Topics and Youth Outcomes

Mentoring is often defined as a relatively flexible and non-specific intervention that

encompasses a wide range of activities designed to support a range of youth outcomes (Cavell &

Elledge, 2014; McQuillin et al., 2018; Rhodes & DuBois, 2008). This flexibility allows mentors

to respond dynamically to the heterogeneous needs facing their mentees. Despite the flexibility

of mentor practices, the specific mechanisms by which mentoring is thought to elicit positive

change have historically been attributed to the strength of the mentor-mentee relationship

(Rhodes & DuBois, 2008; Spencer et al., 2020; Herrera et al., 2011), a theoretical perspective

also known as the *developmental model of mentoring* (Rhodes, 2005). In this study, we examine

the associations between day-to-day mentoring activities – specifically, the topics mentors and

mentees talk about with one another during their one-on-one meetings – and mentee-reported

outcomes at the end of the intervention. In doing so, we aim to demonstrate how heterogeneous

mentoring practices may explain differences in the impact of this service, as well as present

unique challenges for evaluating the effectiveness of mentoring.

Studying Heterogeneity of Mentoring Services

In recent years, researchers have described the challenges and opportunities associated

with youth mentoring programs often defined by heterogenous activities. Although these types of

programs allow mentors to flexibly respond to needs of youth, they can also be difficult to

evaluate – often resulting in small to average treatment effects (McQuillin et al., 2018). To

address this challenge, some have argued for "recasting the mentoring relationship as a context

for delivering prevention-oriented activities and experiences and not as the essential mechanism

of change" (Cavell & Elledge, 2014, p. 29). Still, other researchers have suggested that the

heterogeneity of activities "is not a bug but a feature" of mentoring programs, meaning that by

specifically measuring what occurs during a mentoring session, programs may be able to

capitalize on this heterogeneity in ways that 1) expand access to services and 2) have meaningful

positive effects on youth outcomes (Lyons & McQuillin, 2021).

This variation in structure makes it challenging to demonstrate *treatment construct*

validity, or the extent to which a measure within a study captures the theoretical concept it

intends to measure (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Since the construct of "mentoring" refers to a

range of programs, practices, activities, and settings, it is difficult to know what type of

intervention is truly taking place when a program refers to mentoring practices. Although

mentoring protocols are often intentionally unstandardized, this flexibility in program practices

can also make it challenging to systematically evaluate the efficacy of various mentoring

programs (Cavell & Elledge, 2014; McQuillin et al., 2018; Rhodes & DuBois, 2008).

Given the unique challenges posed by the broad range of activities that are encapsulated by

mentoring, as well as the dyadic nature of it, the importance of preserving the ability of mentors

to engage in a variety of practices with their mentees has been a focus of scholarship (Cavell et

al., 2021), posing a dilemma to both researchers and practitioners. Some researchers

conceptualize the broad range of mentoring activities as problematic at times (McQuillin and

Lyons, 2016; Rhodes & DuBois, 2008). Others also argue that there is a need for greater

specificity in selecting research models to evaluate mentoring programs, as well as rigor in

choosing program practices that are reasonably expected to target particular risk factors (Cavell

& Elledge, 2014). For example, McQuillin and colleagues put forth that "the lack of manuals,

protocols, or standardization does not absolve researchers from specifying the treatment construct" when evaluating mentoring interventions (2018, p. 10). Instead, the authors recommend that future school-based mentoring evaluations include, among other things, detailed descriptions of the contact events between mentors and mentees as a way of increasing treatment specification (McQuillin et al., 2018). The current study is a direct response to this call to action.

Treatment Specification & Effects

Evaluations of mentoring programs, particularly those which employ a purely quantitative approach, have sometimes failed to document what mentors and mentees do together, or in-session content (Mcquillin et al., 2018). This is in part because historically, particularly when addressing non-specific mentoring programs, researchers in the field have placed great emphasis on the quality of the mentor-mentee relationship as the primary mechanism of change, for instance, by way of mutuality, empathy, and trust (Rhodes, 2005; Spencer, 2012), indicating strong relationship quality as perhaps both a necessary and sufficient condition for a positive change in youth developmental outcomes. That being said, an overall shift has occurred in the ways mentoring scholars conceptualize evaluations of treatment effects and the mechanisms of change at play in the mentoring relationship. For example, two recent meta-analyses have enhanced the current understanding of the overall effects of mentoring programs, indicating significant moderate effects of mentoring across a range of programs (Raposa et al., 2019), effects which more than double when programs are divided into non-specific and targeted programs (Christensen et al., 2020). Specifically, researchers found more than two times the effects for programs that encourage mentors to target skills relevant to mentee presenting problems (Christensen et al., 2020).

Session Content

Researchers have previously attempted to facilitate information-gathering about mentor-mentee contact events. For example, Nakkula & Harris (2010) developed two measures for use when evaluating mentoring relationships, the Youth Mentoring Survey (YMS) and Match Characteristics Questionnaire (MCQ). These measures assess both internal or subjective items about the match itself, as well as factors like programmatic support which are external to the dyad, and have divided them based on relational and instrumental components of match quality (Nakkula & Harris, 2010, 2014). The match focus items from these measures are most relevant to the current study. They attempt to capture the balance of time mentors spend on skill-building activities and those that are intended to foster and support the relationship between mentors and mentees, as well as the mentees' desired purpose for the match (Nakkula & Harris, 2010, 2014). However, despite its many strengths, Nakkula & Harris's study (2014) may have captured the perceptions mentors have about their session focus, and not the actual activities they did with their mentees.

This highlights a current gap in the mentoring literature, which lacks both theories and quantitative evaluation studies connecting intervention content, or the activities and discussions mentoring dyads have together, with the outcomes researchers use to measure mentee development and progress. Several qualitative studies, however, offer important insights into the ways in which session content (e.g., activities, discussion topics, relational dynamics) influences youth outcomes (Drew & Spencer, 2021; Keller & Pryce, 2012; Pryce, 2012). When mentors engage in discussions of academics, for example, their role shifts to that of a teaching assistant or tutor, encouraging completion of academic tasks such as homework (Keller & Pryce, 2012).

These types of relationships, while offering some benefit to receptive youth, do not generally

lend themselves to a high level of mentee-reported closeness (Keller & Pryce, 2012), which

some would argue is an important aspect of promoting change (Drew & Spencer, 2021; Pryce,

2012; Spencer, 2012).

      Furthermore, youth showed the most positive outcomes when their mentoring

relationships primarily involved a combination of emotional support and guidance, evoking

personal disclosure from the mentee and guidance from the mentor, and showing significant

reductions in youth's aggressive behaviors and symptoms of depression (Keller & Pryce, 2012).

Dyads whose relationships were primarily based on either academic support or mutual sharing

(e.g., a friendship relational style), as well as those who were disconnected in their relationships

showed poorer outcomes than those who experienced a combination of emotional support and

other forms of guidance (Drew & Spencer, 2021; Keller & Pryce, 2012). Therefore, we would

not expect all mentoring interventions to effect long-term positive change across all aspects of

youth development without taking into consideration how dyads spend their time, and the impact

that those interactions have on the overall quality and impact of the mentoring relationship

(Drew & Spencer, 2021; Keller & Pryce, 2012; Pryce, 2012).

      However, that is precisely how mentoring programs are sometimes evaluated, resulting in

a lack of treatment specification. Regardless of what mentors and mentees actually do together,

programs are generally evaluated by improvements over time on a set of predetermined outcome

measures. In many ways, this lack of treatment specification sets programs up for persistently

small effect sizes in randomized controlled trials (RCTs), a problem that may be exacerbated by

limited attempts to link in-session content to youth outcomes (Mcquillin et al., 2018; Weiss et

al., 2014). In addition to programmatic and structural drivers of variability in treatment effects (e.g., heterogeneity in mentoring practices, limited measures documenting the range of practices actually taking place), inconsistency in effects can also be driven by (1) participant characteristics and (2) variations in intervention efficacy (Weiss et al., 2014). One way to better understand how variability in program effects may be driven by participant characteristics would be to conduct subgroup analyses based on different reasons for referral, as matching the intervention to mentee needs is thought to improve outcomes (Christensen et al., 2020; Lyons & McQuillin, 2021). Another way to better understand the mechanisms driving inconsistency in effects is to leverage measures of in-session content (e.g., discussion topics) to better understand how heterogeneous mentoring practices influence youth outcomes in a school-based mentoring program, which is the focus of the current study.

Youth Developmental Outcomes

Mentoring programs typically aim to promote a range of youth outcomes in several domains, such as academic, social, cognitive, and behavioral functioning, as well as overall health and well-being (Dubois et al., 2011; Herrera et al., 2011; Raposa et al., 2019). These positive developmental outcomes are generally selected due to their relevance to youth functioning, as well as the priorities of funding agencies and other key stakeholders (e.g., risk reduction; Herrera et al., 2011). In addition, when adopting a positive youth development (PYD) framework, developmental outcomes pertaining specifically to youth assets and strengths are emphasized (Lerner et al., 2014), which may include "bonding," social, emotional, and cognitive "competence," and "belief in the future" (Catalano et al., 2004, p.101–102).

The PYD framework (Catalano et al., 2004; Lerner et al., 2014), as well as prior scholarship in the field of mentoring, guided the selection of outcomes for the current study, which aims to assess changes in youth outcomes pre- and post-intervention across three broad domains: academic, social-emotional, and behavioral functioning. The eleven outcomes that were assessed include self-esteem, behavioral engagement, metacognitive awareness, school bonding, future aspirations, relevance of school, family support for learning, extrinsic motivation, peer support for learning, teacher-student relationship, and life satisfaction. In a prior evaluation study, over 90% of mentoring program sites aimed to enhance youth academic performance, closely followed by self-esteem, which 84% of sites which were interested in targeting (Herrera et al., 2011). Self-esteem is consistently targeted by mentoring interventions (Dubois et al., 2011, Karcher, 2005) due to its perceived ability to promote or inhibit other important developmental outcomes, having been linked to mental health concerns such as depression (Orth & Robins, 2013), interpersonal functioning (Harris & Orth, 2019), job satisfaction, and other significant life outcomes (Orth, Robins, & Widaman, 2012).

Within the broader context of a youth's social-occupational functioning, school stands out as an important setting, particularly for school-based mentoring (SBM) programs. For that reason, a youth's school bonding and perceived relevance of school in their lives were both outcomes included in the current study, in addition to a youth's aspirations for the future, which include academic aspirations such as completing high school and attending college. Another important developmental outcome – linked to both the academic and behavioral domains of youth functioning – is metacognitive awareness. Studies of metacognitive awareness have presented mixed findings about the relationship between metacognition and achievement,

presenting metacognition as a form of cognitive self-regulation (Sperling et al., 2002). In

addition, life satisfaction is an outcome that spans across domains as well, reflecting a youth's

social-emotional well-being more globally, as well as their academic functioning (Shek & Chai,

2020). Peer and family support for learning have also been selected as outcomes in this study as

positive relationships youth have with their family and peers have been linked to improvements

in functioning, particularly when those relationships support the youth's goals (Williams &

Anthony, 2015); the same can be said of relationships with teachers, another outcome in the

current study. A less common though important focus in prior studies has also been reducing risk

behaviors and increasing compliance with rules and prosocial behaviors (Herrera et al., 2011),

measured in this study as behavioral engagement and extrinsic motivation.

As there is substantial overlap within the positive youth development literature about the

factors that enhance youth functioning (Catalano et al., 2004; Lerner et al., 2014), the eleven

outcomes measured in the current study crossover into multiple domains of functioning, and are

considered globally, as an interconnected set of developmental outcomes, rather than

individually. While a more narrowly focused conceptualization of academic development may

only include metacognitive awareness and future aspirations as measures of academic

functioning, this study aims to take a more holistic approach to youth academic development,

inclusive of the following youth outcomes measured in this study: behavioral engagement at

school, metacognitive awareness, school bonding, future aspirations, perceived relevance of

school, extrinsic motivation, life satisfaction, the strength of a youth's relationship with teachers,

and perceptions of peers and family support for learning. Behavioral functioning in the current

study includes constructs such as behavioral engagement, which is inclusive of compliance with

rules and engagement in prosocial activities, as well as measures such as extrinsic motivation, or

responsiveness to rewards, and school bonding, or connectedness to the academic environment.

Finally, youth social-emotional functioning is measured by self-esteem, behavioral engagement,

school bonding, future aspirations, family support for learning, extrinsic motivation, peer support

for learning, teacher-student relationships, and life satisfaction.

Current Study

This study examines the impact of session content on a number of behavioral, academic,

and social-emotional outcomes to shed light on the possible associations between mentor-mentee

discussions during unstructured one-on-one meetings, and changes in mentee social-emotional,

behavioral, and academic functioning at the end of the intervention year. Specifically, we

examined the associations between eight common topics discussed among mentors and mentees

(relationships with friends, family, teachers, and romantic relationships, as well as goals,

academic skills, academic problems, and hopes for the future) and eleven outcomes often

targeted within mentoring programs (self-esteem, behavioral engagement, metacognitive

awareness, school bonding, future aspirations, relevance of school, family support for learning,

extrinsic motivation, peer support for learning, teacher-student relationship, and life satisfaction).

Research Questions. Given the exploratory nature of this study, we would like to

understand if patterns exist in the data connecting mentee outcomes at the end of the intervention

year with mentor and mentee discussions during weekly one-on-one sessions. Though the

conclusiveness of findings in this type of exploratory study are limited, particularly when

looking at such a large number of associations, the impetus for this study is to better understand

the role of the conversations that take place during mentoring sessions in facilitating

improvements or declines in youth outcomes by addressing three research questions: First, what do mentors actually discuss with their mentees during a typical mentoring session, and are there meaningful differences among dyads in the time they spend discussing particular topics? Second, if there are differences among dyads in their emphasis on different topics, are these differences associated with relevant youth outcomes that align with session content?

Methods

The Young Women Leaders Program (YWLP)

YWLP is an SBM program for girls that takes place during the academic year. College women participating in YWLP are paired with middle school girls in the community who have been referred to the program. School personnel nominate early adolescent girls based on perceptions of the youth's (1) increased vulnerability to social-emotional, behavioral, or academic challenges, and (2) limited access to other more targeted interventions and supports. Mentors undergo an application process culminating in interviews with program staff. In addition, prior to being matched, mentors and mentees complete a survey describing their interests and desired outcomes from a mentoring relationship. Program staff review the survey responses and provide each mentor and mentee with a match. Upon selection, mentors enroll in a one-year undergraduate-level course which meets weekly, covering topics relevant to youth development, as well as the program curriculum. Additionally, mentors are provided with a handbook covering core mentoring competencies, best practices, as well as program policies and procedures. Mentors also attend planning meetings each week with their group's facilitator, as well as the other mentors in their group, in order to select activities and address any ongoing difficulties.

Meetings take place once per week after school, with all of the mentors and mentees from each school participating in the program engaging in both group activities and one-on-one sessions, in addition to monthly mentor-mentee interactions for at least four hours outside of formal meeting times. College-aged mentors implement the mentoring intervention for two hours per week after school, assisted by graduate and undergraduate women facilitators who lead the group sessions. Group sessions include structured, curriculum-based activities focused on developing the young women's positive self-concept, as well as developing their leadership qualities. Individual mentor-mentee sessions are led exclusively by the college women mentors, and sometimes involve an unstructured "Sister time" primarily dedicated to both building rapport and meeting mentees' individualized needs.

Participants

Data for this study were collected from mentees and mentors during the 2018-2019 academic year at an eastern mid-Atlantic university. Mentees who submitted both parental consent and individual assent forms were asked to complete two surveys, the first in the fall of 2018, and the second in the spring of 2019. Participant data is available for 41 of the middle school girls receiving the mentoring intervention, as well as 40 of the college women mentors they were paired with. For the 41 middle school girls who consented to participate in data collection, both parental consent and participant assent were obtained, while the 40 mentors who consented did so as part of a single-step process. Of the mentors in the sample who provided their racial or ethnic background, 71.0% identified as non-Hispanic White or Caucasian, 12.9% as mixed race/ethnicity, 9.7% as Black or African American, and 6.5% as Hispanic or Latina. An additional 22.5% did not report their race or ethnicity. In addition, mentees were asked to

provide their racial/ethnic background and information related to their family's socio-economic

status, such as their free/reduced-price lunch status and highest level of maternal and paternal

education. Of the mentees included in the sample, 41.5% identified as Black or African

American, 14.6% as Hispanic or Latina, 14.6% as mixed race/ethnicity, 9.8% as non-Hispanic

White or Caucasian, and 9.8% as Asian. An additional 9.8% of mentees did not report their

race/ethnicity. Nineteen mentees (46.3%) reported that they qualified for free or reduced lunch at

school.

Measures

Independent Variables

The session content areas each served as predictor variables in the statistical model of

interest, along with mentees' baseline scores in the fall of 2018 for each outcome measure. Other

covariates in the model included mentee free/reduced price lunch status and mentee attendance.

Although other covariates could have been included as well, given the study's small sample size

and large number of discussion topics included in each model, it was important to be

parsimonious in including additional covariates. Mentee attendance was selected due to its

ability to capture intervention dosage and mentee engagement (Karcher, 2005), while mentee

free/reduced price lunch status was included as a measure of economic disadvantage (Domina et

al., 2018), as prior studies have linked economic disadvantage to disparities in youth mental

health care and outcomes (Hodgkinson et al., 2017). The mean, standard deviation, minimum

and maximum values, as well as the number of observations are included in Table 1.

Session Content. Session content was operationalized as mentor-reported topics

discussed during the mentor and mentee's unstructured one-on-one time, referred to as "Sister

time." The mentor's report of discussion topics were measured each week that mentors met with

their mentees as part of a weekly survey which included many other variables, and totaled 22

time points in the fall and spring of the 2018-2019 school year. The college women mentors

were provided with a checklist of eight possible topics they discussed with mentees during their

on-on-one meeting, or mentoring session. Since mentoring relationships typically include both a

relational and an instrumental component, four of the topics pertained to the mentees'

relationships (e.g. friendships, romantic relationships, family relationships, and relationships

with teachers), while the other four topics were related to the mentees' academics and future

trajectory (e.g. academic skills, academic problems, hopes for the future, and goals). These eight

topics, along with the option to provide an open-ended response as part of the "other" category,

were selected by research team members due in part to their connection to the program protocol,

their relevance to youth development, as well as mentors' descriptions of their sessions to

program staff.

  Mentors were asked "What did you talk about during sistertime?" The checklist format

was selected to facilitate ease of responding, as the survey contained many other measures and

was administered weekly. Mentors could check as many or as few of the eight topics as they felt

were applicable, and if they chose, could write in a response. The relationally-centered topics

included in the checklist measure are: "My little's relationship with her friends," "My little's

romantic relationships," "My little's relationship with her family," and "My little's relationship

with teachers/other adults at school." The included instrumentally-centered topics are:

"Academic skills (e.g., homework, organization), "Academic problems (e.g., low grades, missing

assignments)," "My little's immediate goal/Goal-setting," and "My little's hopes for the future

(career, college, etc.)." To create a predictor from each content area, the number of times a dyad

discussed each topic area was summed in order to generate a value for each dyad between 0 and

22.

Attendance. Consistent attendance was a requirement for mentors as part of their

semester grade, given their enrollment in an undergraduate level class as part of their training for

YWLP. Mentors reported data about both mentor and mentee attendance. Mentee attendance was

calculated as the total number of sessions each mentee attended ranging from 0 sessions attended

to 22 sessions attended.

Free/Reduced Price Lunch Status. Mentee economic disadvantage was operationalized

as whether or not they utilized free or reduced price lunch eligibility at their school. This variable

was coded as 0 if a mentee did not qualify for free/reduced price lunch, or 1 if a mentee did

qualify, indicating purportedly higher levels of economic disadvantage.

Dependent Variables

Outcome measures were selected to represent youth academic, social-emotional, and

behavioral functioning. At least one outcome measure was selected to represent each domain. In

addition, the chosen outcomes are thought to correspond well to the session topics included in

the data. Reliability is reported using Cronbach's alpha (α). Mentees responded to these

measures at two time points, once in the fall of 2018, and again in the spring of 2019. The mean,

standard deviation, and number of missing observations are included in Table 1.

Behavioral Engagement. This measure includes four items that assess students' rule

compliance and pro-social behaviors in school (Fredricks et al., 2005). Items include: "I follow

the rules at school," "I get in trouble at school," "I pay attention in class," and "I complete my

work on time" (T1 α = .63; T2 α = .76). Each item was measured using a five-point response

format, ranging from 1 = never to 5 = all the time. The item "I get in trouble at school" was

reverse coded, and a single mean for this measure was calculated. The overall score is meant to

capture an underlying construct of overall behavioral functioning, which includes both

compliance with rules and engagement in prosocial behaviors.

Life Satisfaction. This self-report measure of life satisfaction, called the Students' Life

Satisfaction Scale (Huebner, 1991), was developed for use for children and adolescents between

ages 8 and 18 (7 items; T1 α = .86; T2 α = .86). The survey asks respondents the degree to which

they agree or disagree with domain-general items such as "My life is going just right" and "My

life is better than most kids'" (Huebner, 1991). Items were measured using a six-point scale (1 =

strongly disagree, 6 = strongly agree), and negatively worded items such as "I wish I had a

different kind of life" were reverse coded. The final score is a mean from all items measuring a

single construct of global life satisfaction.

Metacognitive Awareness. Metacognitive awareness refers to a child's ability to

understand and regulate their own cognitive processes (Sperling et al., 2002). The measure of

metacognition used in this study is the Metacognitive Awareness Inventory, also referred to as

the Jr. MAI (18 items; T1 α = .89; T2 α = .87). Sample items from the Jr. MAI include: "I ask

myself periodically if I am meeting my goals" and "I can motivate myself to learn when I need

to" (Sperling et al., 2002). Each item was measured on a five-point scale, ranging from 1 = never

to 5 = always.

School Bonding. This measure uses the three-item attachment subscale of a measure of

school bonding (Hawkins et al., 1999). The items in this measure are: "I like my school," "I like

my teachers this year," and "I like my class this year" (T1 α = .78; T2 α = .77). Items were

measured using a 4-point scale (1 = NO!!, 4 = YES!!).

Self-Esteem. The self-esteem measure being utilized for this study (DuBois et al., 1996)

included only the subscale related to peer perceptions (8 items; T1 α = .76; T2 α = .89). The

survey included items such as "I feel good about how much my friends like my ideas," "I am as

popular with kids my own age as I want to be," and "I feel good about how well I get along with

other kids" (Dubois et al., 1996). One negatively worded item was reverse-scored (e.g., "I wish

my friends liked me more than they do). Each item was measured using a four-point scale (1 =

strongly disagree, 4 = strongly agree), and the final score was calculated as a mean of all

available items.

Student Engagement Inventory. This measure (Appleton et al., 2006) asks students to

rate the degree to which they agree with items describing their cognitive and psychological

engagement in school (35 items; T1 α = .96; T2 α = .95). Each item was measured with a four-

point scale, which ranged from 1 = strongly disagree to 4 = strongly agree. This instrument

includes six subscales, which are included below, and analyses were performed on subscales

rather than the overall measure.

Future Aspirations. This subscale requires that respondents share the extent to which

they agree with various statements about their future aspirations (5 items; T1 α = .91; T2 α =

.85). Items include statements such as "My education will create many future opportunities for

me" and "I plan to continue my education following high school."

Relevance of School. This subscale requires that respondents share the extent to which

they agree with various statements about the extent to which they see school as relevant to their

lives and aligned with their desired goals (7 items; T1 α = .86; T2 α = .85). Items include

statements such as "Most of what is important to know you learn in school." and "I feel like I

have a say about what happens to me at school."

Family Support for Learning.   This subscale requires that respondents share the extent to

which they agree with various statements about the support they receive from family and

caregivers for their schooling (4 items; T1 α = .87; T2 α = .89). Items include statements such as

"When I have problems at school my family/guardian(s) are willing to help me" and "My

family/guardian(s) want me to keep trying when things are tough at school."

Extrinsic Motivation.   This subscale requires that respondents share the extent to which

they agree with two statements about their extrinsic motivation for learning (2 items; T1 α = .89;

T2 α = .83). The items are: "I'll learn, but only if my family/guardian(s) give me a reward" and

"I'll learn, but only if the teacher gives me a reward." As both items are negatively worded, they

were reverse scored to derive the overall score.

Peer Support for Learning.   This subscale requires that respondents share the extent to

which they agree with various statements about peer support for their engagement with school (4

items; T1 α = .92; T2 α = .92). Items include statements such as "Students at my school are there

for me when I need them" and "Students here respect what I have to say."

Teacher-Student Relationship.   This subscale requires that respondents share the extent

to which they agree with various statements about the strength and quality of their relationships

with teachers and school staff (9 items; T1 α = .93; T2 α = .92). Items include statements such as

"Most teachers at my school are interested in me as a person, not just as a student" and "Adults

at my school listen to the students."

Data Analysis

Analyses followed a staged approach to best address all parts of the research questions. The first step was to determine, through a series of paired t-tests, if there were changes in mentee reports of their functioning across a range of eleven academic, social-emotional, and behavioral outcomes at the end of the academic year. These outcomes were: self-esteem, behavioral engagement, metacognitive awareness, school bonding, future aspirations, relevance of school, family support for learning, extrinsic motivation, peer support for learning, teacher-student relationship, and life satisfaction. Paired t-tests were conducted for each of the eleven outcomes to assess the mean differences in mentee outcome measures from baseline to post intervention. Paired t-tests were selected over other tests, such as analysis of covariance (ANCOVA), as these initial tests are intended to offer a narrow focus on changes in the outcomes without the inclusion of additional data, such as covariates, given that additional data from the textured assessments of session content (i.e., discussion topics) and covariates will be included in later analyses. Due to the large number of paired t-tests, a multiple comparisons adjustment known as the Benjamini-Hochberg (BH) correction was applied to t-test results to reduce the probability of a Type I error, with a chosen alpha level of .05. Results can be found in Table 2.

The second stage of data analysis called for the descriptive analyses of the discussion topics in order to document which topics, on average, mentoring pairs discussed during their unstructured one-on-one meetings. The eight topics that were measured were goals, academic skills, academic problems, hopes for the future, relationships with friends, family, and teachers, as well as romantic relationships. Measures included the mean and standard deviation for the number of times each topic was discussed across the twenty weeks dyads met, as well as the

lowest and highest number of times that a pair discussed each of the eight discussion topics.

These measures offer insight about the ways in which dyads differed in the frequency with which

they addressed various topics across the intervention year.

Finally, a series of eleven path models were used to determine whether differences

among dyads in their discussions of particular topics were connected to each of the eleven youth

academic, social-emotional, and behavioral outcomes measured at the beginning and end of the

program. In addition to the eight predictors corresponding to each discussion topics, the path

models also included three covariates, each controlling for (1) baseline assessments of the

outcome measures, (2) intervention dosage by way of mentee attendance, and (3) mentee

economic disadvantage by way of free/reduced price lunch. Analysis of missing data revealed

missingness was primarily due to a lack of attendance (e.g., a mentee was absent during data

collection). This pattern of missingness was determined to be missing at random (MAR) and was

addressed in part by controlling for mentee attendance. Furthermore, to account for missing data,

all models were estimated using full information maximum likelihood (FIML) estimation.

Huber-White standard errors were used to correct for possible violation of the homogeneity of

variance assumption. Analyses were conducted using Stata/IC 16.

Results

**Were changes observed in mentees' pre- and post-intervention self-report across measures
of social-emotional, academic, and behavioral functioning?**

When testing the change in mentee self-report on several of the outcomes often targeted

by SBM programs, three significant changes were observed from the beginning to the end of the

intervention, as shown in Table 2. First, there was significant change from the beginning to the

end of the intervention in mentees' compliance with rules (Cohen's d = -.66), indicating an

overall worsening in rule compliance among participants. Additionally, similar patterns were

observed with declines in mentees' attachment to school (Cohen's d = -.49), as well as

deterioration in the extent to which mentees perceived school as relevant to their lives and goals

(Cohen's d = -.71). All other changes were non-significant.

How often do mentoring dyads engage in discussions of particular topics over the course of

the intervention year, and are there meaningful differences among dyads?

As shown in Table 1, relationships with friends and family were by far the two most

commonly discussed topics among dyads. On average, mentors and mentees discussed a

mentee's relationships with her friends during approximately 12 of their one-on-one meetings

($SD = 4.34$). Dyads also discussed family relationships frequently, at an average of

approximately 10 of their meetings ($SD = 4.01$). Mentees discussed their relationships with their

teachers during approximately six meetings on average ($SD = 3.56$), as well as romantic

relationships during approximately five of their meetings on average ($SD = 4.43$). Dyads talked

about both goals ($SD = 2.93$) and academic skills ($SD = 3.29$) during approximately five of their

meetings, on average. Dyads also discussed hopes for the future during an average of

approximately four meetings ($SD = 3.48$). Finally, mentoring pairs were least likely to discuss

academic problems, only doing so during three mentoring sessions on average ($SD = 2.62$).

Are differences among dyads in their emphasis on different topics associated with relevant youth outcomes that align with session content?

As shown in Table 3, results of the path analyses indicated that more frequent discussion of particular topics during mentoring dyads' one-on-one meetings were significantly associated with important mentee social-emotional, academic, and behavioral outcomes, even while holding constant mentees' baseline scores on those outcome measures, total attendance throughout the duration of the intervention, and their level of economic disadvantage. As expected, mentees' baseline scores on each outcome measure were significantly associated with every outcome measure at the end of the intervention year, with moderate to large effect sizes (β = 0.45 - 0.87, p < .01), save for extrinsic motivation. More consistent mentee attendance during one-on-one meetings with their mentor was significantly associated with greater compliance with school rules (β = 0.29, p < .05), attachment to school (β = 0.57, p < .05), future aspirations (β = 0.41, p <.05), and reward-based motivation (β = 0.45, p < .05). The final covariate, mentee economic disadvantage, was associated with higher levels of attachment to school (β = 0.28, p < .05), as well as lower levels of compliance with school rules (β = -0.28, p < .01), family support for learning (β = -0.29, p < .05), and extrinsic or reward-based motivation (β = -0.37, p < .001).

Discussion Topics: Relationships

Results of path analyses revealed that when mentors and mentees engaged in additional discussion of three of the four relationally-focused topics (e.g., relationships with family,

relationships with teachers, and romantic relationships), several associations were observed with

outcomes typically targeted by SBM programs (see Table 3). A one SD increase in dyads'

discussion of family relationships was associated with a moderate increase in mentees' extrinsic

motivation ($\beta = 0.55$, $p < .05$), a small increase in mentees' self-esteem related to social

competence amongst peers ($\beta = 0.38$, $p < .05$), as well as a moderate decline in mentees'

attachment to their school ($\beta = -0.48$, $p < .01$). In addition, there were a few significant

associations with the outcomes of interest when mentors and mentees engaged in additional

discussions of relationships with teachers and romantic relationships. Specifically, a one SD

increase in dyads' discussion of teacher relationships was associated with a small decline in the

mentee's self-esteem related to social competence amongst peers ($\beta = -0.33$, $p < .05$), and a

moderate decrease in mentees' reward-based or extrinsic motivation at the end of the program (β

$= -0.47$, $p < .01$). A one SD increase in dyads' discussion of romantic relationships was

associated with a small decrease in mentee-reported life satisfaction ($\beta = -0.24$, $p < .05$) and peer

support for learning ($\beta = -0.26$, $p < .05$), and a moderate decline in mentees' reward-based

motivation ($\beta = -0.50$, $p < .01$). All other associations were non-significant.

Discussion Topics: Academics

Similarly to the relationship-focused discussion topics, there were significant associations

between outcomes of interest and increased discussion of all four topics related to academics

(e.g., goals, academic skills, academic problems, and hopes for the future; see Table 3). A one

SD increase in dyads' discussion of goals was associated with moderate decline in mentee-reported life satisfaction ($\beta = -0.61$, $p < .001$), as well as a small decrease in mentee-reported self-esteem related to social competence amongst peers ($\beta = -0.39$, $p < .001$), compliance with school rules ($\beta = -0.27$, $p < .05$), and perceived relevance of school to their lives ($\beta = -0.36$, $p < 0.01$). On the other hand, a one SD increase in dyads' discussion of academic skills was associated with a moderate improvement in mentee-reported life satisfaction ($\beta = 0.63$, $p < .001$) and future aspirations ($\beta = 0.52$, $p < .05$), as well as a moderate decline in reward-based motivation ($\beta = -0.56$, $p < 0.01$). A one SD increase in dyads' discussion of academic problems was associated with a moderate decrease in future aspirations ($\beta = -0.52$, $p < 0.01$), and a small decrease in life satisfaction ($\beta = -0.35$, $p < 0.01$) and peer support for learning ($\beta = -0.26$, $p < 0.01$). A one SD increase in dyads' discussion of hopes for the future was associated with a small increase in mentees' attachment to school ($\beta = 0.33$, $p < 0.01$) and reward-based motivation ($\beta = 0.38$, $p < .05$). All other associations were non-significant.

Discussion

The present exploratory study aimed to respond to a current gap in the quantitative literature in the mentoring field, wherein limited treatment specification in non-specific programs and a lack of textured assessments of mentor-mentee contact events result in possible underestimation of the effects of mentoring interventions (Cavell & Elledge, 2014; McQuillin et al., 2018). The current study builds on prior research, primarily qualitative, that documents the influence of the activities and discussions mentoring pairs engage in together on the quality of

the mentoring relationship, and on outcomes relevant to youth development (Drew & Spencer,

2021; Keller & Pryce, 2012; Nakkula & Harris, 2014). Given the emphasis of this study on

textured assessments of discussions in mentoring relationships (e.g., contact events), results

aimed to shed light on the technical components of a mentoring intervention (e.g., what was said

and done), and is limited in addressing the more affective or relational components of mentoring

discussions (e.g., how it was said). The authors were interested in responding to the following

questions: What do dyads discuss over the course of the intervention year during their

unstructured one-on-one time, and are there meaningful differences in discussion topic selection

and frequency among dyads? Most importantly, are differences in selection and frequency of

discussion topics associated with changes in youth academic, social-emotional, and behavioral

outcomes?

To respond to these questions, the authors applied a staged approach. Initial assessments

in Table 2 looked at pre- and post-program changes in mentee outcomes without consideration of

any covariates or facets of the intervention (e.g., discussion topics). Findings revealed significant

decline over the course of the year in mentees' compliance with rules, attachment to their school,

and perception of school as relevant to their lives, which does not fully align with prior research

on YWLP (Henneberger et al., 2013). Though decline in academic and behavioral outcomes over

the course of the school year is somewhat normative, prior research has shown some stability

over time in attachment to school for youth matched with mentors in YWLP (Henneberger et al.,

2013). That being said, without having a better understanding of what mentoring sessions

addressed for each dyad, and whether or not these conversations were connected to

improvements or declines in mentee functioning across a range of developmental outcomes, it is

difficult to draw firm conclusions about these findings.

This leads to the second stage of analyses, which involved describing the frequency, on

average, with which dyads addressed each of the eight discussion topics. As described in Table

1, there was substantial variation among dyads in how often they discussed topics. Overall, the

four relationship-oriented discussion topics (e.g., romantic relationships and relationships with

family, teachers, and friends) were addressed more frequently than the four discussion topics

related to mentees' academics and future trajectory (e.g., academic skills, academic problems,

hopes for the future, and goals). This finding is unsurprising given the program's emphasis on

relationship-building and social-emotional development. By far the most frequently discussed

topics were a mentee's relationships with her friends ($M = 11.85$; $SD = 4.38$) and relationships

with her family ($M = 10.05$; $SD = 4.01$). The frequency of conversations about family and friends

aligns with the expected adolescent developmental trajectory, wherein peer relationships become

increasingly important throughout adolescence, and the emphasis on family relationships may

begin to decline. On the other hand, mentees' relationships with teachers ($M = 5.73$; $SD = 3.56$)

and romantic relationships ($M = 5.20$; $SD = 4.43$) were discussed during approximately half as

many sessions as relationships with friends and family. Less frequent discussions of romantic

relationships may be in part because it is likely that the 7th and 8th grade mentees are not all

engaged in romantic relationships yet. Additionally, relationships with teachers likely follow a

similar pattern to the academically-focused topics described below, given the aims of the

program. Of the academic and future-oriented topics, mentee academic skills were discussed

most often ($M = 4.73$; $SD = 3.29$), followed closely by mentee goals ($M = 4.56$; $SD = 2.93$) and

hopes for the future ($M = 4.27$; $SD = 3.48$). Finally, the least frequently discussed topic was

mentee academic problems ($M = 3.39$; $SD = 2.62$). These findings are somewhat consistent with

prior research on YWLP, which has established, through post-intervention interviews, that

mentees report improvements in four areas as a result of program participation: academics,

relational development, self-regulation, and self-understanding (Deutsch et al, 2017). Gains in

relational development and self-understanding were reported most often (Deutsch et al, 2017),

indicating a greater emphasis on relational development in YWLP, and thus relationally-focused

discussion topics, relative to those topics with an academic focus.

Discussion Topics & Youth Outcomes

The final set of analyses, a series of eleven path models examining relations between

discussion topics and each of the eleven youth outcomes at the end of their participation in a

year-long school-based mentoring program, controlling for baseline assessments on each

outcome, as well as intervention dosage and mentee economic disadvantage (see Table 3).

Although effects were scattered across discussion topics and outcomes of interest, it is important

to highlight several key findings. First, increases in the frequency of discussion of three of the

eight topics – family relationships, academic skills, and hopes for the future – were linked to

improvements at the end of the intervention. Specifically, mentees who discussed family

relationships more often with their mentor showed higher levels of self-esteem, as well as higher

levels of extrinsic motivation. This finding aligns with prior research on the protective influence

of positive family relationships on adolescent functioning (Williams & Anthony, 2015).

Additionally, mentees who discussed academic skills more often with their mentor showed

higher levels of life satisfaction and future aspirations. Finally, when dyads discussed the

mentee's hopes for the future more often, youth showed higher levels of school bonding, or attachment to their school, and higher levels of extrinsic motivation. Each of these findings are consistent with the PYD framework and conceptualization of mentoring, which puts forth that an emphasis on youth's strengths and assets is most conducive to enhancing a youth's developmental trajectory (Catalano et al., 2004; Lerner et al., 2014).

Unfortunately, there were also several significant findings indicating decline in youth developmental outcomes over the course of the intervention year. Specifically, increased discussion of romantic relationships among dyads was associated with declines in life satisfaction, extrinsic motivation, and peer support for learning over the course of the school year. Additionally, increased discussions of family relationships were linked to lower self-reported school bonding or attachment to school. Furthermore, increased discussion of relationships with teachers was linked to declines in self-esteem and extrinsic motivation. Though these are disconcerting findings, prior research on YWLP has shown that some normative decline in academic performance, motivation, and self-esteem over the course of an academic year, though historically, participants in the program experienced less decline in self-esteem when compared to a control group (Henneberger et al., 2013).

Of particular concern, however, is the finding related to increased discussion of goals and goal-setting, which was associated with a deterioration in life satisfaction, self-esteem, behavioral engagement, and relevance of school at the end of the year. Similarly, increased discussions of academic problems were associated with a decline in life satisfaction, future aspirations, and peer support for learning. Finally, increased discussions of academic skills were associated with lowered extrinsic motivation for learning. These findings have concerning

implications as it is possible some of the unstructured conversations dyads engage in together may have harmful impacts on youth development. It is quite possible that these less frequent conversations, particularly those related to goals and academic problems, can deteriorate the quality of the mentoring relationship, and lead to worse outcomes for youth.

There are several possible reasons for these findings. A prominent possibility is that these conversation topics and activities (e.g., romantic relationships, relationships with family and teachers, academic problems and skills) lend themselves to deviations from evidence-based practices. For example, it may be more difficult to implement evidence-based and strengths-based approaches such as Motivational Interviewing (MI) or specific praise when discussing some of these topics, as these approaches involve both a technical component, similar to what was measured in this study, as well as an affective and relational component, sometimes referred to as the "*spirit* of MI," which was not accounted for in the current study (Miller & Rollnick, 2013, p. 14). Instead, it is possible that conversations about particular topics, such as goals and academic problems, are currently (1) driven by mentors in a way that inhibits youth voice, (2) may be experienced as discouraging or aversive by a mentee, and (3) could diminish opportunities for more positive and connective interactions that align with the literature on PYD and evidence-based practices. For that reason, it is particularly important that future studies examine both mentor training, specifically related to conversations about behavior change (e.g., goals) and current challenges (e.g., academic problems). It it also important to consider using observational data and qualitative coding of discussions among dyads to assess for alignment with the PYD framework and evidence-based practices, and to explore and document the

affective component of these mentoring conversations (e.g., dyadic relationship quality, "soft skills"), as well as the extent to which those conversations promote or inhibit youth voice.

Implications

Given the heterogeneity in both mentoring practices and reasons that mentees are referred to SBM programs, it is not unusual for programs such as this one to demonstrate mixed or null findings when examining simple change over time in a variety of outcome measures. In a recent analysis, researchers simulated parameters similar to prior randomized controlled trials of mentoring interventions, in order to determine if, due to the structure of these programs, studies "underestimate the true effect mentors have on youth outcomes" (Lyons & McQuillin, 2021, p. 7). The findings of that study illustrated the importance of evaluating mentoring practices rather than entire programs (Lyons & McQuillin, 2021), since programs by nature involve such varied practices for such a broad array of presenting problems. However, when mentor practices align with mentee needs, it is possible to see significant improvements for mentees as a result of these practices (Lyons & McQuillin, 2021). In evaluating the discussion topics mentors engage in with mentees during their one-on-one sessions and linking them to mentee outcomes, the present study allowed us to examine the associations between a specific mentor practice and mentees' change in functioning over time in order to better clarify for whom mentoring may be effective, and why.

Among the key strengths of the present study are the availability of data across both multiple timepoints and informants, as data were collected throughout the course of the intervention from both mentors and mentees. Additionally, this study is among the first within the area of mentoring to evaluate the content of discussions between mentees and their mentors,

and to link that content to mentee outcomes. Furthermore, understanding how topics discussed

during mentor-mentee contact events are associated with mentee outcomes may inform training

considerations. However, in addition to the many strengths of this study, there were also a

number of limitations.

Given the exploratory nature of the study, the large number of associations examined,

and the small sample size, the conclusiveness of findings is somewhat limited. Some of the

methodological limitations to the present study also include a lack of validated measures to

assess the content of discussion between mentors and mentees in school-based mentoring

programs. For that reason, the data about mentor and mentee in-session discussion topics was

gathered by way of a checklist intended to measure the specific behavior (i.e. discussion of a

topic) shortly after the mentoring session was completed in order to reduce recall bias. Despite

these efforts, the checklist measure does not consistently capture more detailed information

about the nature and quality of the mentor-mentee discussion. In addition, the items used to

measure implementation integrity pertain specifically to the structured activities mentors

engaged in with their mentees, and therefore do not apply to the unstructured discussion time

which mentors were told to report discussion topics from. Also, the design of YWLP meant the

study sample was quite small given the scope of the research question of interest and number of

parameters estimated in each path model, meaning the study may be underpowered to detect

significant effects. The presence of possible moderation effects is also of interest to the authors,

but since the sample was underpowered for that level of analysis, such a line of research may

inform future studies. For that reason, it is important to caution results, which cannot be deemed

conclusive, in part due to the exploratory nature of the study. Generalizability is also limited, as

despite being relatively diverse, the sample contains only middle school girls in an eastern mid-Atlantic location.

Finally, since the primary statistical models of interest included many predictors, and the sample size was fairly small, the authors were not able to include many identity-based and demographic characteristics of mentees in the analyses, as well as school and program-level characteristics. Prior studies of this program have demonstrated that undergraduate women cited participating in the program as mentors cited the importance of the structural diversity inherent to the program, and benefitted from both decreased prejudice and greater awareness and acceptance of diversity (Lee et al., 2010).The current study's inability to substantively account for the influence of identity characteristics and the dynamics they create within mentoring dyads not only makes it possible that there was omitted variable bias in this study, but also that a potentially crucial element of mentor-mentee interactions was not captured. It is important to note this limitation in the present study, as researchers have put forth that importantly, "Demographically matched mentors may offer shared life experience that could counter the effects of discrimination and demonstrate possibilities for adolescents' future selves that are less commonly depicted in their everyday lives or the media" (Albright et al., 2017). To address this limitation, future studies linking session content to youth outcomes should attempt to measure the influence of mentor-mentee matching on demographic characteristics in addition to gender, such as race/ethnicity, sexuality, and religion/spirituality. In addition, it could also be important to measure not only the frequency of discussions of identity between mentors and their mentees, but also the nature and quality of those conversations.

Conclusion

This research contributes to the literature on mentoring efficacy by examining the heterogeneity in session content across mentoring pairs in an SBM intervention, and its relationship to positive youth outcomes. This study found that the discussion topics mentors and mentees engage in during their one-on-one meetings as part of a SBM intervention were significantly associated with both improvements and declines in mentee social-emotional, behavioral, and academic outcomes. These findings draw attention to the need to continue to study the particulars of mentoring interventions in greater depth, such as the topics mentors discuss with their mentees, as well as the fact that this information alone is not sufficient to draw conclusions about the extent to which mentors are addressing these topics in ways that are effective, informed by best practices, and supportive of youth voice. Further research is needed to shed light on the so-called "black box" of many mentoring interventions (Tolan et al., 2020). Yet this study builds on prior research to develop greater understanding of how mentors respond to the heterogeneous needs of their mentees, and the associated effects on the youth outcomes of most interest to stakeholders.

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Table 1

Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Obs	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Discussion Topics					
Friends	41	11.85	4.38	0	20
Romantic	41	5.20	4.43	0	16
Family	41	10.05	4.01	0	19
Teachers	41	5.73	3.56	0	15
Goals	41	4.56	2.93	0	14
Academic Skills	41	4.73	3.29	0	14
Academic Problems	41	3.39	2.62	0	10
Hopes for Future	41	4.27	3.48	0	17
Mentee Covariates					
Attendance	41	17.22	4.26	0	22
Free/Reduced Lunch	35	0.55	0.51	0	1
T2 Outcomes					
Behavioral Engagement	35	3.99	0.66	2.25	5.00
Metacognitive Awareness	35	3.54	0.55	2.50	4.59
School Bonding	35	2.48	0.72	1.00	4.00

Future Aspirations	35	3.54	0.48	2.20	4.00
Relevance of School	35	2.91	0.54	1.33	4.00
Family Support for Learning	35	3.39	0.68	1.25	4.00
Extrinsic Motivation	35	3.39	0.61	1.50	4.00
Peer Support for Learning	35	3.02	0.71	1.33	4.00
Teacher-Student Relationship	35	2.74	0.68	1.00	4.00
Self-Esteem	35	3.02	0.64	1.43	4.00
Life Satisfaction	35	4.30	1.02	2.29	6.00
T1 Outcomes					
Behavioral Engagement	35	4.24	0.51	3.00	5.00
Metacognitive Awareness	38	3.66	0.60	1.78	4.94
School Bonding	33	2.87	0.68	1.00	4.00
Future Aspirations	34	3.59	0.61	1.80	4.00
Relevance of School	34	3.14	0.51	1.44	4.00
Family Support for Learning	34	3.38	0.65	1.25	4.00
Extrinsic Motivation	32	3.22	0.74	1.50	4.00
Peer Support for Learning	34	3.11	0.75	1.0	4.00
Teacher-Student Relationship	34	2.74	0.78	1.0	4.00

Self-Esteem	32	3.12	0.49	2.13	4.00
Life Satisfaction	38	4.45	1.10	2.14	6.00

Table 2

Results from Paired t-test: T0 to T1

	n	Mean T0	Mean T1	Cohen's d	Std. Error	t-value	p-value to test difference	BH-Corrected critical value
Life Satisfaction	32	4.47	4.35	-.13	.16	-0.75	.468	.027
Self-Esteem	28	3.11	3.09	-.05	.08	-0.30	.777	.045
Behavioral Engagement	30	4.27	4.02	-.66	.07	-3.65*	.001	.009
Metacognitive Awareness	32	3.62	3.58	-.07	.10	-0.40	.701	.041
School Bonding	29	2.82	2.51	-.49	.12	-2.65*	.014	.014
Relevance of School	29	3.14	2.92	-.71	.06	-3.80*	.001	.005
Future Aspirations	29	3.59	3.60	.01	.11	0.05	.975	.050

Family Support for Learning	29	3.39	3.46	.20	.07	1.10	.280	.023
Extrinsic Motivation	28	3.18	3.39	.25	.16	1.30	.201	.018
Peer Support for Learning	29	3.14	3.10	-.10	.08	-0.55	.581	.032
Teacher-Student Relationship	29	2.76	2.71	-.09	.10	-0.50	.634	.036

Note. * = Following application of the Benjamini-Hochberg (BH) adjustment to control the false discovery rate, result is statistically significant at the 0.05 level.

Table 3

Standardized Results of Path Models

Outcomes	Relationships					Academics			Covariates		
	Friends	Romantic	Family	Teachers	Goals	Acad. Skills	Acad. Problems	Hopes for Future	Mentee Free/ Reduced Lunch	Mentee Sessions Attended	Mentee Baseline Score
Life Satisfaction	.25 (.14)	-.24* (.12)	-.05 (.15)	-.00 (.12)	-.61*** (.16)	.63*** (.15)	-.35** (.13)	-.15 (.14)	-.09 (.12)	-.02 (.13)	.45*** (.09)
Self-Esteem	-.07 (.22)	-.29 (.16)	.38* (.19)	-.33* (.14)	-.39*** (.11)	-.04 (.15)	-.16 (.09)	.17 (.12)	-.19 (.14)	.26 (.18)	.80*** (.08)
Behavioral Engagement	-.17 (.13)	-.15 (.09)	.14 (.14)	.01 (.14)	-.27* (.13)	.03 (.18)	-.16 (.16)	.10 (.13)	-.28** (.10)	.29* (.14)	.75*** (.09)
Metacognitive Awareness	-.01 (.20)	-.03 (.17)	-.07 (.30)	.18 (.24)	-.01 (.15)	-.03 (.28)	-.01 (.16)	.25 (.20)	-.15 (.20)	.06 (.21)	.59*** (.12)
School Bonding	-.04 (.15)	-.20 (.13)	-.48** (.17)	-.08 (.14)	.01 (.11)	.10 (.14)	.06 (.09)	.33** (.13)	.28* (.13)	.57* (.25)	.67*** (.10)
Relevance of School	.01 (.12)	-.26 (.12)	.16 (.18)	.11 (.12)	-.36** (.12)	.02 (.15)	-.19 (.13)	-.04 (.11)	.05 (.10)	.25 (.15)	.78*** (.08)

Future Aspirations	-.37 (.22)	-.15 (.14)	-.10 (.25)	.03 (.15)	-.24 (.13)	.52* (.25)	-.52** (.19)	-.26 (.20)	.03 (.29)	.41* (.19)	.28 (.19)
Family Support for Learning	-.04 (.18)	-.10 (.14)	.19 (.16)	-.15 (.11)	-.17 (.13)	-.14 (.15)	-.03 (.09)	.05 (.13)	-.29* (.14)	.25 (.16)	.87*** (.08)
Extrinsic Motivation	-.16 (.21)	-.50** (.16)	.55* (.27)	-.47** (.16)	-.15 (.18)	-.56** (.22)	-.17 (.18)	.38* (.20)	-.37*** (.11)	.45* (.18)	.48** (.17)
Peer Support for Learning	-.05 (.19)	-.26* (.12)	-.00 (.16)	.08 (.10)	-.22 (.12)	.21 (.13)	-.26** (.11)	.08 (.11)	-.16 (.14)	.03 (.15)	.71*** (.08)
Teacher- Student Relationship	.24 (.14)	-.13 (.13)	-.25 (.22)	.17 (.13)	-.18 (.11)	.03 (.18)	.03 (.14)	.07 (.12)	-.03 (.11)	.05 (.14)	.83*** (.12)

Note. * = $p < .05$, ** = $p < .01$, *** = $p < .001$. $N = 41$ for all analyses.

Mentoring Relationship Quality and Discussion Topics in the School Context

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Relationship Quality, Session Content, & Youth Outcomes in a School-based Mentoring

Intervention

Mentoring as an intervention is intended to promote academic, occupational, psycho-social, and behavioral functioning, primarily for youth, and in large part, by way of a supportive youth-adult relationship (Garringer et al., 2017). The popularity of mentoring in the United States stems from its relatively low cost due to a predominantly volunteer workforce, as well as widespread support across political lines and from a number of sectors (e.g., governments, schools, nonprofit and community groups, religious organizations, among others; Garringer et al., 2017). Yet it is precisely the large scale and rapid growth of the mentoring field that has made it challenging to both evaluate the effectiveness of mentoring and promote implementation of evidence-based practices (Cavell et al., 2021). That said, existing studies evaluating mentoring programs have yielded positive small to moderate effects on key academic and psycho-social outcomes relevant to youth functioning (Christensen et al., 2020; Dubois et al., 20011; Raposa et al., 2019). While these findings offer reason for optimism about the meaningful and positive impacts of many mentoring programs and practices, the modest nature of these effects does not necessarily match the enthusiasm and high level of community demand associated with youth mentoring (Garringer et al., 2017), bringing the field to a "critical juncture" (Cavell et al., 2021, p. 287; Rhodes, 2020; Wheeler et al., 2010).

In an attempt to reconcile the continued interest in and demand for mentoring with the aforementioned empirical findings of persistently modest effects, researchers in the field have responded in a number of ways. Initial responses have included support for developing new programs, as well as improving existing program models and service delivery (Cavell et al., 2021). Additionally, there has been a call for increased methodological rigor in measuring

mentoring outcomes, as well as increased use of assessment data throughout the mentoring

process (Cavell et al., 2021; Lyons & McQuillin, 2021; McQuillin et al., 2018; Rhodes, 2020).

These shifts are collectively aimed at better understanding both how mentoring works best and

for whom. Responding to that question, however, at least in part, requires revisiting the

cornerstone of mentoring itself: the mentor-mentee relationship.

The Nature and Function of the Mentor-Mentee Relationship

The nature and role of the mentoring relationship has come into focus as part of the

discourse surrounding the effectiveness of mentoring, especially given that many mentoring

programs have been rooted in the theoretical tradition of the *developmental model of mentoring*

(Dubois et al., 2011). The developmental model emphasizes the importance of the quality of the

mentor-mentee relationship for promoting healthy youth development (Rhodes 2005, Rhodes et

al., 2006). The prevailing view in the past has been that in mentoring relationships, just as in

teacher-student, parent-child, and psychotherapy relationships, it is difficult to overstate the

significance for youth of the quality of the developmental relationships in their life.

Developmental relationships are those in which relational closeness and collaborative activities

serve to enhance the development of at least one member of the dyad (Li & Julian, 2012).

Indeed, the significance of connected relationships in promoting the well-being of youth is both

well-documented and somewhat self-evident (Banks & Hirschman, 2016; Li & Julian, 2012;

Varga & Zaff, 2018). For example, social connectedness is one of several key factors which

drive health outcomes, and greater connectedness is linked to lower mortality risk (Holt-Lunstad

et al., 2017).

Formal mentoring programs are thought to be one way to promote social connectedness

through positive youth-adult relationships. This strategy is conceptualized by Cavell &

colleagues (2021, p. 287) as "mentoring as an end," a feature of what they dub supportive

mentoring programs. The authors go on to state that

> As means to an end, the mentoring relationship operates as a vehicle by which specific
>
> tools are delivered in service of achieving a particular outcome; as an end to itself, the
>
> mentoring relationship moves to the foreground and is valued, offered, and supported as a
>
> primary goal of prevention. (p. 287)

In offering this "bilateral framework," Cavell, Spencer, & McQuillin are arguing that mentoring

relationships can be thought of as both an intended program outcome, as well as a context or

means through which to serve other meaningful youth outcomes, such as psychosocial

development and academic achievement (2021, p. 289).

The reconceptualization of mentoring relationships as both means and end mirrors the

shifts in program demands and expectations that has taken place over the past two decades

(Cavell et al., 2021; Garringer et al., 2017). Specifically, in a 2016 national survey of mentoring,

44% of programs ranked "providing a caring adult relationship" as one of their four most

heavily-prioritized goals, relative to 77% of programs only five years prior, in 2011, and 100%

of programs surveyed in 1999 (Garringer et al., 2017, p. 2). Instead, key stakeholders are

invested in also seeing positive impacts of mentoring on youth social-emotional development,

mental health, academic performance, and leadership development, among other objectives

(Garringer et al., 2017; Cavell et al., 2021; Sourk et al., 2019). This variability in the goals of

mentoring programs and mentee reasons for referral is reflected in the heterogeneity of practices

that characterizes most mentoring programs, with the exception being programs that are targeted

to particular skills or narrowly-focused goals, rather than non-specific programs, which are more

general in nature (Christensen et al., 2020; Lyons & McQuillin, 2021; McQuillin et al., 2018).

Both non-specific programs, also referred to as supportive mentoring programs, and targeted

programs, which are tailored to specific short-term outcomes, add value and have a place in the

mentoring world (Cavell et al., 2021; Lyons & McQuillin, 2021). That being said, given their

more focused nature and the narrowly-focused outcomes of many targeted programs, researchers

have been better able to document stronger effects of targeted programs relative to those in

which the relationship is the primary end (Christensen et al., 2020).

      The exact nature and role of high-quality mentoring relationships in these differing

program types is still being understood, though prior work suggests there may be a "sweet spot,"

or base level of relationship quality that allows mentors to then leverage their connection to offer

mentees activities that build their skills and allow them to work towards their goals (Lyons et al.,

2019, p. 88). It is important to note that the mentoring relationship is still seen as the context

through which mentoring impacts youth, even in programs that have targeted goals and claim to

have a problem-focused approach (Cavell et al., 2021; Lyons et al., 2019. In these programs,

however, the relationship is simply framed as a necessary, though not sufficient, condition for

meaningful change to occur (Lyons & McQuillin, 2019). Within this revised framework, focus

can shift to measurement of what it means to function as a "'good enough' mentor," with the

ultimate goal of enhancing the "*science of mentoring relationships* and not solely the practice of

mentoring" (Cavell et al., 2021, p. 291).

Measuring Relationship Quality

      Measuring mentor and mentee experiences of relationship quality is a priority given that

previous research has affirmed the importance of mentoring relationship quality in promoting a

number of positive developmental outcomes for youth, as well as documented some risks

associated with poor quality relationships (Bayer et al., 2015; Eby et al., 2013; Lyons &

McQuillin, 2019; Weiler et al., 2019) Additionally, measures of mentor relationship satisfaction have been shown to be somewhat variable over time, indicating that it is important to periodically measure relationship quality throughout the mentoring process (Spiekermann et al., 2020). There are a number of validated measures of mentoring relationship quality, including the Strength of Relationship (SOR) scale used by a number of Big Brothers Big Sisters (BBBS) programs to assess both mentor and mentee experiences of relational closeness (Rhodes et al., 2017), though due to length, they may be challenging to consistently administer. A modified version of the scale linked joint mentor-mentee decision-making to higher reports of relationship quality (Lyons et al., 2021). Subsequent research, however, indicated that mentor and mentee SOR reports were able to predict average program level negative outcomes, such as premature match endings, though not for specific mentoring pairs (Lyons & Edwards, 2022). These findings indicate that programs may still benefit from a brief screening measure that can be administered with relatively high frequency to dyads in order to identify those who may be in need of additional support (Cavell et al., 2021; Lyons & Edwards, 2022; Lyons & McQuillin, 2021).

Additionally, given that relationship quality is only one component of understanding what makes mentoring impactful and for whom, it is important to pair measures of relationship quality with other "textured assessments" of what takes place during sessions themselves (McQuillin et al., 2018, p. 225), as well as link these assessments to youth outcomes, particularly those outcomes that enhance youth well-being and functioning. Ongoing evaluation and assessment of both implementation fidelity and progress towards program outcomes have been established by many researchers as an important means of enhancing the effectiveness of a number of afterschool programs (Chiodo & Kolpin, 2018; Granger et al., 2007; Little, 2014;

Lyon & Bruns, 2019). It is important that programs elect assessments that align with their stated goals and structure as a program (Little, 2014), as well as those that can feasibly be administered on a consistent basis in order to provide programs with feedback about their efficacy and support them in finding ways to be accountable for their intended purpose and implementation (Granger et al., 2007; Lyon & Bruns., 2019). Additionally, for programs such as SBM, which frequently rely on volunteers, it is especially crucial to engage in consistent assessment and evaluation, as results from such measures can be used to enhance ongoing coaching and training of volunteers and program staff, ensuring better implementation fidelity, as well as a more meaningful opportunity to promote intended outcomes related to positive youth development (Chiodo & Kolpin, 2018).

Current Study

The primary aims of the current study are threefold. First, we hope to explore the extent to which items from a short, four-item measure of relationship quality represent a single construct that varies across timepoints. To do so, we performed a series of confirmatory factor analyses across three timepoints: the beginning, middle and end of the intervention year. We also conducted longitudinal invariance analyses to assess invariance across timepoints. Finally, as a measure of concurrent validity, we assessed the relationship between the average of weekly mentor-reported relationship quality and weekly mentor reports of overall relationship quality. We hypothesize that (a) each of the four items will load onto a distinct factor of in-session relationship quality, (b) the measure will vary significantly across timepoints, and (c) across all 24 timepoints of session-by-session data, the weekly reports of in-session relationship quality will be moderately to strongly correlated with the overall mean of dyadic relationship quality over the course of the year.

Secondly, we seek to use a series of eight multilevel mixed-effects logistic regression models to predict the likelihood of dyads discussing eight relationally and academically-focused discussion topics during one-on-one mentoring meetings from both overall mentor-reported dyadic relationship quality, averaged across the course of the intervention year, as well as weekly reports of relationship quality, while accounting for mentee characteristics such as socio-economic status (SES) and academic performance (average grades). Finally, our third aim is to connect these brief assessments of relationship quality, averaged across the full year of data collection, to youth academic, psycho-social, and behavioral outcomes, reported by mentees during the fall and spring of the academic year.

Methods

The Young Women Leaders Program (YWLP)

YWLP is a gender-specific school-based mentoring (SBM) program for girls attending middle school who participate during the academic year. Mentors are undergraduate women recruited to mentor girls in the community who have been referred to the program. The referral process involves school staff, including teachers and counselors, nominating girls who (a) may have been made vulnerable to difficulty with social connectedness, internalizing or externalizing concerns, or challenges with their behavior or academic performance, and (b) reduced access to other sources of support. Program staff review mentor applications and interview prospective mentors. Following selection for the program, staff provide mentors and mentees with a survey about their interests and objectives for participating in the program. Results from the survey inform the matching process, which program staff facilitate. Participating mentors take a year-long undergraduate course to learn the program curriculum and gain exposure to child and adolescent development. Other supports for mentors include the program handbook, which

describes developmentally and contextually relevant practices, mentoring competencies, and information about the program's structure and relevant policies and procedures. Finally, mentors meet weekly with other mentors and a facilitator to plan sessions, choose activities, and address challenges.

During the academic year, mentors and mentees from a number of schools meet weekly afterschool for both structured group activities and unstructured one-on-one time, as well as for a minimum of four hours outside of their regularly scheduled sessions. The two-hour weekly sessions are led by the undergraduate student mentors and graduate and undergraduate-level facilitators who offer activities from the curriculum during whole group time. The structured group curriculum contains components intended to cultivate leadership ability and enhance mentees' self-concept, while one-on-one sessions are typically unstructured opportunities for mentors to build a relationship with their mentee and individually tailor their approach to their mentee's stated goals and needs.

Participants

Data collection took place during the 2018-2019 school year at a university on the East Coast of the United States. Once parental consent and youth assent were documented, two surveys were administered to mentees in the fall and spring to measure a number of developmental outcomes. Based on consent to participate, data for this study are drawn from 41 youth and 40 college-aged mentors. A number of participant demographic characteristics are reported in Table 1. While other data were available, a subset of variables were selected based on their relevance to the current study.

Measures

Independent Variable

Relationship Quality. The predictor of interest is a four-item measure of weekly mentor-reported relationship quality, or perceived dyadic closeness. The measure was administered following each of 20 formal mentoring meeting sessions, as well as four additional meetings during which mentors and mentees met for scheduled activities outside of their weekly session. The four items are based on a measure of working alliance in psychotherapy relationships (Duncan et al., 2003; $\alpha = .88$), though items were adapted to better represent mentoring relationship dynamics. The four items were presented in a likert-type format from 1 = never to 6 = always.

- **Item 1: Friendship –** This week, I felt like my mentee and I got closer as friends.

- **Item 2: Mentee cares –** This, week, my little showed me how much she cares about me (says things, smiles, does things, hugs me, etc.).

- **Item 3: Strong bond –** This week, I felt like my mentee and I had a strong bond (are close or deeply connected).

- **Item 4: Mentee trustworthy –** This week, I felt like I could trust what my mentee tells me.

Weekly relationship quality for each of the 24 timepoints was operationalized as the average value for each dyad across the four items. From this measure, a single overall average relationship quality value was calculated based on each of the 24 occasions mentors and mentees attended. Additionally, after each meeting, mentors were also asked to describe their overall relationship quality by responding to the following item, which was used as a measure of concurrent validity: "How would you rate your relationship with your Little Sister overall (1 being not so good and 5 being great)?"

Covariates

Though a number of covariates could have been included in analyses, small sample size and concerns about sufficient statistical power led to parsimony in covariate selection. Given the impact of systemic and environmental factors on youth functioning, including socio-economic status, it was important to control for youth's level of economic (dis)advantage (Domina et al., 2018; Hodgkinson et al., 2017). Additionally, due to the investment of key stakeholders in youth academic performance, as well as its impact on long-term outcomes, statistical models account for mentees' level of academic functioning prior to being paired with a mentor. Finally, given that estimating post-intervention change requires documentation of past functioning, models also control for baseline scores on each outcome measure. For descriptive statistics of measures, see Table 1.

Average Grades. Mentees were asked to report their final grades in English, History, Math, and Science from the prior year (see Table 1). Responses were coded as 4 = A, 3 = B, 2 = C, 1 = D/F, and an overall average was calculated for each mentee across all four academic subject areas.

Free/Reduced Price Lunch Status. Eligibility for free or reduced lunch was used as a measure of mentee economic disadvantage (see Table 1).

Baseline Outcome Scores. Across all eleven youth outcomes measured in the series of path models chosen to address aim 3 of the study, detailed below, scores from the fall administration of the mentee survey were included as covariates in the models to account for baseline levels of youth functioning prior to beginning the mentoring intervention.

Dependent Variables

Session Content

Textured assessment of in-session activities and discussions included a checklist (yes/no) of eight relationally and instrumentally oriented conversation topics which mentors responded to following each of the 24 times they met with their mentee for unstructured one-on-one time. Mentors are asked to check all of the following topics that apply about the conversation they had with their mentee (referred to as "Little"):

- My Little's relationship with her friends

- My little's romantic relationships

- My little's relationship with her family

- My little's relationship with teachers/other adults at school

- My little's immediate goals/Goal-setting

- Academic skills (e.g., homework, organization)

- Academic problems (e.g., low grades, missing assignments)

- My little's hopes for the future (career, college, etc.)

Mentors are also provided the choice to write in an open-ended response. Topics were chosen by researchers and program staff based on a number of factors, including their relevance to the program's aims and curriculum, youth functioning, and mentor reports to program staff's interactions with mentors.

Youth Developmental Outcomes

A number of measures were administered to mentees during the fall and spring of the academic year to measure their baseline and post-intervention levels of functioning across domains (e.g., academic, social-emotional, behavioral). Means and standard deviations for all

outcome measures across both timepoints are reported in Table 1. Where available, Cronbach's

alpha (α) is reported in the text below to reflect reliability information.

Behavioral Engagement. Four items compose this measure, which is conceptualized as

a reflection of adherence to rules and engagement in pro-social actions (Fredricks et al., 2005).

An example item is "I follow the rules at school," with response options ranging from 1 = never

to 5 = all the time (T1 α = .63; T2 α = .76). One item was reverse coded, and the score was

calculated as a mean of the four items. This measure is included as an outcome to estimate one

aspect of youth behavioral functioning.

Life Satisfaction. The Students' Life Satisfaction Scale (ages 8-18; Huebner, 1991) is a

seven-item measure in six-point likert-type format that presents youth with a series of statements

such as "My life is better than most kids'" (T1 α = .86; T2 α = .86). Some items are reverse-

coded, and the mean score across items is intended to provide a view of a youth's global life

satisfaction.

Metacognitive Awareness. As a measure of cognitive self-understanding and self-

regulation, this measure, known as the Metacognitive Awareness Inventory, or Jr. MAI, includes

items such as "I ask myself periodically if I am meeting my goals" (Sperling et al., 2002; 18

items; T1 α = .89; T2 α = .87). Respondents select choices ranging from 1 = never to 5 = always.

School Bonding. A three-item subscale of a larger measure of connectedness to one's

school, items include "I like my class this year" (Hawkins et al., 1999; T1 α = .78; T2 α = .77).

Response options follow a 4-point scale (1 = NO!!, 4 = YES!!).

Self-Esteem. A single subscale from a larger measure of self-esteem was selected to

measure youth esteem in relation to peer perceptions (DuBois et al., 1996; 8 items; T1 α = .76;

T2 α = .89). Items assess aspects of youth social functioning. For example, one item is: "I feel

good about how well I get along with other kids" (Dubois et al., 1996). Appropriate items were reverse-scored based on wording, and items were presented in a four-point scale format, with choices ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 4 = strongly agree. Overall scores are an average across all available items.

Student Engagement Inventory. A 35-item measure containing six subscales was administered to youth to assess various aspects of their cognitive and psychological engagement in school (Appleton et al., 2006; T1 α = .96; T2 α = .95). Response choices are structured in a four-point likert-type format, with options ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 4 = strongly agree. All six subscales are outlined below, with analyses broken down by subscale as opposed to the overall measure in order to provide more detailed information about mentee engagement.

Future Aspirations. This subscale assesses youth's long-term educational goals, and includes items such as "I plan to continue my education following high school" (5-items; T1 α = .91; T2 α = .85).

Relevance of School. The seven items in this subscale measure a youth's understanding of the extent to which their schooling connects to their life and serves their goals, including items such as "I feel like I have a say about what happens to me at school" (T1 α = .86; T2 α = .85).

Family Support for Learning. This subscale measures youth perceptions of caregiver and family emotional and instrumental support of schooling through items such as "When I have problems at school my family/guardian(s) are willing to help me" (4 items; T1 α = .87; T2 α = .89).

Extrinsic Motivation. Containing only two items, both of which were reverse-scored due to wording, this subscale assesses respondents' reward-based academic motivation through statements such as "I'll learn, but only if the teacher gives me a reward" (T1 α = .89; T2 α = .83).

Peer Support for Learning. This subscale attempts to measure youth perceptions about their peers' level of supportiveness through items such as "Students at my school are there for me when I need them" (4 items; T1 α = .92; T2 α = .92).

Teacher-Student Relationship. The 9 items in this subscale assess respondents' perceptions of their relationships with adults at their school, primarily teachers and staff (T1 α = .93; T2 α = .92). For example, youth are presented with the item "Most teachers at my school are interested in me as a person, not just as a student."

Analytic Approach

Analyses involved a staged approach to address the three primary aims of the study. To first assess the degree to which the items from weekly assessments of relationship quality measure an underlying construct, the authors performed a set of confirmatory factor analyses from data collected at the beginning (Week 1), middle (Week 10), and end of the intervention (Week 20). To address aim 2, the authors used Blimp Studio software to perform multiple imputation to account for substantial missingness in the data (Enders & Hayes, 2022), and Stata/IC 16.1 to run a series of multilevel mixed-effects logistic regression models for each of the eight discussion topics measured weekly. The multilevel mixed-effects logistic regression models were selected given the binary nature of the session content outcomes (e.g., yes/no), as well as the nested structure of the data (timepoints nested within dyads). Weekly mentor reports of relationship quality were centered within dyads around the average of each dyad's weekly relationship quality across all 24 timepoints. Missing data analysis indicated that data are likely to be Missing at Random (MAR). Finally, to address aim 3, the authors used Stata/IC 16.1 to perform path analyses predicting youth outcomes at the end of the intervention year using each dyad's average relationship quality across the intervention year. Given missingness in the data,

the authors used Full Information Maximum Likelihood (FIML) estimation with Huber-White

standard errors to account for possible heterogeneity of variance.

Multilevel Mixed-Effects Logistic Model Notation

$y_{ij} \sim$ Bernoulli(φ_{ij})

logit (φ_{ij}) = η_{ij}

Level 1: $\eta_{ij} = \beta_{0j} + \beta_{1ij} (Dyadic\_Avg\_RQ_{ij}) + \beta_{2ij} (Weekly\_RQ_{ij}) + \beta_{3ij} (Mentee$ $Free/Reduced\ Lunch_{ij}) + \beta_{4ij} (Mentee\_Avg\_Grades_{ij}) + e_{ij}$

Level 2: $\beta_{0j} = \gamma_{00j} + u_{0j}$

Results

Aim 1: Validation of Measure of Weekly Relationship Quality

In order to assess the extent to which a four-item measure of weekly mentor-reported

relational closeness measures a distinct underlying factor that varies across timepoints, we

conducted a series of three confirmatory factor analyses at the beginning, middle, and end of the

intervention (see Table 2 for fit indices). Results are somewhat mixed, with most overall model-

level fit indices in the desirable range. The standardized root mean squared residual (SRMR) is

favorably low for beginning (SRMR = 0.03), middle (SRMR = 0.01), and ending observations

(SRMR = 0.04), with the comparative fit index (CFI) measuring favorably high for all timepoints

(CFI: Week 1 = 0.97; Week 12 = 1.00; Week 24 = 0.95). Root mean squared error of

approximation (RMSEA) is well below typical cutoff points when measured during the middle

of the intervention year (RMSEA = 0.00). It is quite high, however, for the first (RMSEA = 0.25)

and last time point measured (RMSEA = 0.33). Finally, as a measure of concurrent validity,

weekly mentor reports on an item measuring overall relationship quality were moderately to

strongly correlated with each week's average scores based on the four-item measure (range: $r =$ .45 - $r = .83$). Additionally, both measures averaged across all timepoints are moderately correlated ($r = .66$).

Aim 2: Week-by-Week and Overall Relationship Quality as Predictors of Session Content

Model 1

First, results from Model 1, an unconditional mean model, estimate the log odds of discussion of each of the eight session topics (see Table 3). Results from likelihood-ratio test (LR $\chi2$) indicate that for all eight models, all intercept values were significant and negative, excluding relationships with friends, indicating that it is more likely for mentors to report not having discussed the topics measured than it is for them to report having discussed them. For all significant associations, the 95% confidence interval and ratio of the odds across all dyads of a mentor reporting having discussed a topic, relative to the odds of reporting not having discussed it, are as follows: relationships with family (OR: 0.78; 95% CI: 0.64-0.94), teachers (OR: 0.31; 95% CI: 0.24-0.40), and romantic relationships (OR: 0.24; 95% CI: 0.16-0.36), as well as goals (OR: 0.25; 95% CI: 0.19-0.32), academic skills (OR: 0.23; 95% CI: 0.18-0.31), academic problems (OR: 0.15; 95% CI: 0.11-0.21), and hopes for the future (OR: 0.20; 95% CI: 0.15-0.28). The value of all odds ratio values listed above indicate the extent to which, across all dyads, the odds of having discussed a topic *are lower* relative to the odds of *not* discussing it.

Change in Fit from Unconditional Mean Model to Hypothesis-Testing Model

Results from likelihood-ratio test (LR $\chi2$) for Model 1 indicate that for all eight discussion topics, a multilevel mixed-effects logistic regression model is a better fit for the data than a regression model which does not account for the nested structure of the data. Furthermore, relative to the unconditional mean model (Model 1), in the hypothesis-testing model (Model 2),

allowing the effect of relationship quality on discussion topics to vary between and within dyads (clusters) leads to a significant improvement in model fit.

Model 2

When accounting for the predictive effect of both overall average dyadic relationship quality and week-by-week mentor reports of relationship quality, and holding constant mentees' level of economic disadvantage and prior academic achievement, for all eight discussion topics, an increase in weekly mentor-reported relationship quality (i.e., perceived closeness between mentor and mentee) was associated with a significant increase in the probability that dyads discussed each topic (see Table 3). This means that while controlling for dyads' average overall relationship quality, mentee economic disadvantage, and previous mentee academic performance, within the same mentoring dyad, when mentor-reported weekly relationship quality increased by one unit from the dyads' average relationship quality over the course of the year, the likelihood of that dyad discussing each of the following topics increased by the following: relationships with friends (OR: 2.26, 95% CI: 1.93 - 2.65), romantic relationships (OR: 1.95, 95% CI: 1.61-2.36), relationships with family (OR: 2.01, 95% CI: 1.72-2.35), relationships with teachers (OR: 1.61, 95% CI: 1.36-1.91), goals (OR: 1.53, 95% CI: 1.29-1.82), academic skills (OR: 1.51, 95% CI: 1.27-1.79), academic problems (OR: 1.32, 95% CI: 1.10-1.59), and hopes for the future (OR: 2.32, 95% CI: 1.86-2.90).

Findings also provide information, by way of the ICC (see Table 3), about how much of the likelihood of discussing each topic can be explained by weekly fluctuations in mentor-reported relationship quality within the same dyad, as well as how much of the likelihood can be explained by differences in different dyads based on their overall mentor-reported relationship quality averaged across all 24 timepoints. ICC values in our hypothesis-testing model indicate

that about 30% of the chance of discussing romantic relationships is explained by between-dyad differences, whereas about 70% is explained by within-dyad differences. In descending order of magnitude, approximately 19% of the likelihood of discussing a youth's hopes for the future can be attributed to differences between different dyads, while about 81% of the likelihood can be explained by differences within the same dyad. Differences between different dyads explain approximately the following amount of variability in the likelihood of having discussed each topic: academic problems (14%), academic skills (13%), relationships with teachers and other school staff (10%), mentees' goals (9%), mentees' family relationships (8%), and mentees' relationships with their friends (7%).

Aim 3: Relationship Quality as a Predictor of Youth Outcomes

A series of 11 path models predicting youth developmental outcomes from mentor-reported relationship quality (averaged across the intervention year) using FIML concluded with null findings for all eleven outcomes of interest. Effect sizes for all eleven outcomes are quite small, ranging from the smallest effect size for behavioral engagement (.01, SE = .12) and the largest, albeit still small, effect size was found for school bonding (.14, SE = .16). Results for all eleven path models are non-significant, even prior to using methods such as the Bonferroni Correction to adjust for the elevated risk of a Type I error when making multiple comparisons. Given the small sample size, it is likely that models may have been underpowered to detect statistically significant differences.

Discussion

In response to the first aim of the current study, we have explored the psychometric properties of a measure of session-by-session mentor-reported relationship quality. Given the small sample size and some missing data, not all fit statistics were reliable across timepoints;

however, results are promising, particularly for observations assessed during the middle of the intervention. Relatively poorer model fit for the first and last time point measured may indicate that a measure of week-by-week relationship quality may function best once the relationship has already been established, and may serve as more of a measure of overall relationship quality when assessed near the end of a formal mentoring program.

Second, we have attempted to separate the impact of overall mentor-reported relationship quality, averaged across the course of the intervention year, from weekly reports of relationship quality, to predict session content for each week dyads met. We did so while attempting to account for contextual and systemic factors mentee socio-economic disadvantage and baseline academic performance. Results indicate that, for the same dyad, a temporary fluctuation in mentoring relationship quality, namely, a one-unit increase in the average mentor-reported relationship quality on a four-item measure, is associated with a statistically significant increase in the odds that the mentor in that dyad will report having had a conversation with their mentee about a developmentally-relevant topic. The association between a single time point increase in relationship quality and increased likelihood of discussing topics that are pertinent to mentee development held true across all eight topics measured, including a youth's relationships with peers, romantic partners, family members, teachers and school staff, academic functioning, and long-term goals and aspirations. Additionally, results indicate that a substantial portion of variability in session content can be explained by fluctuations in relationship quality within the same dyad from one week to another. This finding confirms the importance of periodically administering textured assessments of mentoring interactions to monitor both variability in mentoring practices, and presumably, effectiveness of the intervention.

Finally, given the importance of conceptualizing relationship quality as both an end in itself, as well as a means to promote several other elements of effective mentoring, we have documented associations between relationship quality and youth developmental outcomes. Unfortunately, when averaged across the intervention year, mentor-reported relationship quality was not a significant predictor of any of the eleven mentee-reported academic, social-emotional, and behavioral outcomes measured at the beginning and end of the academic year. This finding is somewhat inconsistent with prior research (Bayer et al., 2015; Eby et al., 2013; Lyons & McQuillin, 2019; Weiler et al., 2019), as well as the authors' initial hypotheses. While some of these findings may be attributable to measurement factors and study characteristics such as small sample size (documented in greater detail in the limitations section), null findings also serve to reinforce the importance of regular progress monitoring and greater assessment of intervention content in mentoring. Without detailed documentation of what mentors and mentees actually spend their time doing and discussing, including factors that go beyond the closeness and strength of the mentoring relationship, it is difficult to clearly delineate exactly how mentoring works, what it does, and whom it best serves.

Limitations & Future Directions

Limitations to the current study are primarily methodological, and include a small sample size, which may have been somewhat underpowered to detect statistically significant effects on youth developmental outcomes, as well as some missingness in the data. Generalizability is also limited in part by the gender-specific nature of the program, as well as the unique program structure of YWLP, as it involves both group and dyadic activities and processes. Furthermore, sample size again limited the ability to examine the study impacts of a number of systemic and

contextual factors, as well as demographic characteristics of mentors, mentees, and program

staff.

Additionally, given the structure of the data, there is confounding at level two in the

nesting of the data, as both dyadic observations and qualities are inextricably linked with mentor

and mentee characteristics. The longitudinal nature of the data was both a significant strength,

allowing for textured assessments of mentoring interactions, as well as a complicating factor in

running each of the three sets of analyses, since the number of timepoints for mentor and mentee

reports differ substantially. Given that statistical software programs such as Blimp Studio

software (Enders & Hayes, 2022) and Stata/IC 16.1 often perform better when data are perfectly

nested, results may have been impacted, though it is worth noting that multilevel analysis offers

a means to address this nesting structure. Given the clustering of high scores of mentee responses

to a number of the developmental outcome measures, it is possible that ceiling effects may have

also impacted results of the third research question in particular, making it difficult to draw

meaningful conclusions. Finally, we are unable to make causal claims from any of these results,

which limits our understanding of the phenomena documented above to the association level.

Future studies may wish to collect youth outcome data concurrently with brief assessments of

intervention content in order to better document session-by-session variability in mentoring

effectiveness for promoting youth outcomes, as well as the associated practices.

Conclusions

The current study was shaped in response to the evolving discourse among researchers

and stakeholders about the role of the mentoring relationship in impacting youth developmental

outcomes, in addition to and beyond sole emphasis on the strength of relationship itself as the

outcome. Findings have shown the promise of a brief four-item measure in assessing periodic

fluctuations in mentoring relationship quality. The current study also linked results of that

measure across 24 time points to increased likelihood of mentors reporting intervention content

as having included discussion of developmentally-relevant topics. Finally, attempts to link a

general measure of relationship quality over the course of the year to youth developmental

outcomes resulted in null findings, lending support to the importance of periodic brief

assessments of mentoring that better serve to document fluctuations in mentoring practices and

their associations with youth functioning.

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Table 1

Descriptive Statistics

Variable	n	%	n missing
Demographic Characteristics			
Mentee	41		
Race	37		4
Black	17	41.46	
Latinx	6	14.63	
Multiracial	6	14.63	
Asian American	4	9.76	
White	3	7.32	
Arab American	1	2.44	
Free/Reduced Price Lunch Status	35		6
Yes	19	46.34	
No	16	39.02	
Grades Prior School Year (M / SD; 4=A, 1=D/F)	35	3.21 / 0.71	6
Attendance (M / SD)	41	17.22 / 4.26	0
Mentor	40		1

Race	38		2	
Black	4	10.00		
Latinx	2	5.00		
Multiracial	4	10.00		
Asian American	1	2.50		
White	27	67.50		
Age (M / SD)	31	20.00 / 0.82	10	
Relationship Quality (M / SD)	984	4.35 / 1.30	57	
Discussion Topics (% Yes)	960		81	
Friends		51.67		
Romantic		22.71		
Family		43.65		
Teachers		24.79		
Goals		19.90		
Academic Skills		20.31		
Academic Problems		14.58		
Hopes for Future		18.85		
Youth Outcomes (M / SD)	35	Fall Baseline	Spring	
Behavioral Engagement		4.24 / 0.51	3/99 / 0.66	

Metacognitive Awareness	3.66 / 0.60	3.54 / 0.55
School Bonding	2.87 / 0.68	2.48 / 0.72
Future Aspirations	3.59 / 0.61	3.54 / 0.48
Relevance of School	3.14 / 0.51	2.91 / 0.54
Family Support for Learning	3.38 / 0.65	3.39 / 0.68
Extrinsic Motivation	3.22 / 0.74	3.39 / 0.61
Peer Support for Learning	3.11 / 0.75	3.02 / 0.71
Teacher-Student Relationship	2.74 / 0.78	2.74 / 0.68
Self-Esteem	3.12 /0.49	3.02 / 0.64
Life Satisfaction	4.45 / 1.10	4.30 / 1.02

Table 2

Results of Confirmatory Factor Analyses

Timepoint	RMSEA	CFI	SRMR	χ^2	n
Week 1	0.25	0.97	0.03	(2) = 5.76*	32
Week 12	0.00	1.00	0.01	(2) = 0.48*	39
Week 24	0.33	0.95	0.04	(2) = 9.73	37

*Note: * = p $\leq$ .05, ** = p $\leq$ .01, *** = p $\leq$ .001.*

Table 3

Multilevel Mixed-Effects Logistic Models

	Model 1: Unconditional			Model 2: Predictors & Covariates							
Discussion Topics	Intercept	Variance at Dyadic (Cluster) Level	ICC	Intercept	Avg Overall Relationship Quality	Weekly Relationship Quality	Mentee Free/ Reduced Lunch	Mentee Avg Grades	Variance at Dyadic (Cluster) Level	ICC	LR χ^2 (1)
Friends	.12 (.10)	.25 (.10)	.07	-1.11 (.87)	.25 (.15)	.82*** (.08)	-.20 (.23)	.07 (.16)	.26 (.11)	.07	17.73 ***
Romantic	-1.42*** (.20)	1.32 (.40)	.29	-1.66 (1.69)	.22 (.29)	.67*** (.10)	-.21 (.46)	-.23 (.31)	1.40 (.43)	.30	104.64 ***
Family	-.25** (.10)	.22 (.09)	.06	-.83 (.89)	-.07 (.15)	.70*** (.08)	.23 (.24)	.22 (.17)	.30 (.12)	.08	22.67 ***
Teachers	-1.18*** (.13)	.42 (.15)	.11	-3.80*** (1.01)	.24 (.17)	.48*** (.09)	.07 (.26)	.47** (.19)	.35 (.14)	.10	21.45 ***
Goals	-1.40*** (.13)	.41 (.16)	.11	-1.87 (.99)	.26 (.17)	.43*** (.09)	-.46 (.27)	-.15 (.18)	.34 (.14)	.09	18.17 ***

Academic Skills	-1.46*** (.14)	.49 (.19)	.13	-1.76 (1.13)	.08 (.19)	.41*** (.09)	-.44 (.31)	.04 (.20)	.48 (.19)	.13	25.58 ***
Academic Problems	-1.88*** (.16)	.57 (.23)	.15	-2.78* (1.24)	.25 (.21)	.28** (.09)	-.21 (.33)	-.04 (.22)	.54 (.23)	.14	21.05 ***
Hopes for the Future	-1.59*** (.17)	.81 (.27)	.20	-3.44** (1.34)	.41 (.23)	.84*** (.11)	-.29 (.37)	-.01 (.25)	.79 (.28)	.19	46.70 ***

Note. * = $p \leq .05$, ** = $p \leq .01$, *** = $p \leq .001$. Standard errors reported in parentheses. $N = 41$ for all analyses.

Table 4

Standardized Results of Path Models: Average Relationship Quality as a Predictor of Youth

Outcomes

Outcomes	Predictor		Covariates	
	Average Relationship Quality	Mentee Free/ Reduced Lunch	Mentee Average Grades	Mentee Baseline Score
Life Satisfaction	.05 (.14)	.01 (.18)	.02 (.15)	.63*** (.10)
Self-Esteem	.09 (.16)	-.02 (.13)	.03 (.13)	.75*** (.09)
Behavioral Engagement	.01 (.12)	-.15** (.11)	.19 (.14)	.79*** (.09)
Metacognitive Awareness	.07 (.15)	-.14 (.18)	.29* (.14)	.55*** (.10)
School Bonding	.14 (.16)	.22 (.16)	.29 (.20)	.66*** (.13)
Relevance of School	.11 (.12)	.22 (.12)	.17 (.11)	.82*** (.06)
Future Aspirations	.04 (.13)	.05 (.19)	.13 (.20)	.43* (.19)
Family Support for Learning	-.04 (.12)	-.16 (.14)	-.02 (.10)	.84*** (.07)
Extrinsic Motivation	.12 (.15)	-.15 (.17)	.01 (.22)	.03 (.21)

Peer Support for Learning	.10 (.12)	-.07 (.11)	.00 (.11)	.80*** (.07)
Teacher-Student Relationship	.02 (.10)	-.10 (.13)	.14 (.14)	.76*** (.09)

Note. * = $p < .05$, ** = $p < .01$, *** = $p < .001$. $N = 41$ for all analyses.

Pathways to Mental Health Equity: Integrating Out-of-School Time Initiatives with Existing

School Mental Health Infrastructure

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Youth mental and behavioral health needs have been a public health issue in the United States for many decades. The needs and challenges facing youth, families, and communities have been further exacerbated in recent years, in part due to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and as part of a larger context of systemic oppression that disproportionately impacts marginalized youth (Alegria et al., 2010; Jones, 2021). Current mental and behavioral health needs outweigh the existing supports and resources needed to address them, particularly given the limited availability and high cost of supports offered by specialized school and community-based mental health providers (Herman et al., 2021; Lazarus et al., 2021). As part of a holistic approach to student learning and youth development, school districts are well-positioned to offer some of these universal and targeted supports both in school (DeBoer et al., 2022; Malone et al., 2021; National Academies of Sciences et al., 2019; Rossen & Cowan, 2014), and also, as part of out-of-school time (OST) initiatives (Simpkins et al., 2017). However, there is still a need for additional research exploring the provision of universal and targeted supports for youth in the OST space and how these supports can expand on and exist in relation to existing in-school supports. The primary goal of this paper is to explore the barriers and facilitators to the successful integration of OST initiatives with in-school supports, and to identify promising practices that contribute to more significant equity in access to mental health services and supports for marginalized youth.

Guiding Theoretical Framework

Several theoretical frameworks inform the current inquiry into ways in which OST spaces, in addition to and alongside established in-school supports, can promote more equitable mental health outcomes and well-being for youth, families, and communities. Mental health equity is often described in the literature through an ecological model of human development

(American Psychological Association, 2017; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; García Coll et al., 1996), including in the recent Multicultural Guidelines released by the American Psychological Association (APA; 2017) for practitioners to inform various aspects of psychological practice. Additionally, mental health equity has more recently been conceptualized through a public health approach as well (Lazarus et al., 2021; Herman et al., 2021), wherein researchers draw attention to the connection between youth mental health needs and the social determinants of health, or factors that drive health outcomes and disparities (SDH; Alegría et al., 2018; Harris et al., 2020; Malone et al., 2021; National Academies of Sciences et al., 2019). The framing of youth mental health needs as a public health priority is distinct in that it mobilizes several actors outside the traditional mental health service delivery system to take ownership of the change process at a systems level (Harris et al., 2020). This approach implies that a host of social determinants drive disparities in mental health outcomes, many of which can be targeted at a systems level to improve equity in process and outcome (Alegría et al., 2018; Harris et al., 2020).

This public health approach builds on the long history of ecological theories of human development, which emphasize the interactive effects of developmental processes across a number of systems (e.g., microsystem, mesosystem, macrosystem, etc.) in shaping a child's development over time (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; García Coll et al., 1996). Collectively, these approaches point to a prevailing theme: systemic factors drive inequities in health outcomes to a far greater extent than individual differences. It is difficult to overstate the cumulative and multiplicative effects of existing structures and systems in creating large-scale disparities in outcomes for young people and their families, with disparities typically emerging along the fault lines of power, privilege, and intersecting identities (Alegría et al., 2018; Crenshaw, 1991; Deboer et al., 2022; Harris et al., 2020). Thus, a genuine effort to

systematically work towards mental health equity for youth and families requires systematically

increasing access to health-promoting settings including environmental contexts (e.g., schools,

neighborhoods, homes), clean, healthy, and accessible sources of nourishment (e.g., water and

food), education, economic opportunity, healthcare, and so on, while limiting the deleterious

effects of inhibiting factors, such as racism, discrimination, and financial instability (Alegría et

al., 2018; Harris et al., 2020; Herman et al., 2021). Schools represent a context that is well-

positioned to be a promoting or inhibiting environment, depending on a number of factors. Thus,

the school setting is ripe for practices and interventions that, when implemented systematically,

can effect large-scale change on both the processes that impact youth development as well as the

outcomes that result from those processes (Deboer et al., 2022; Hess et al., 2017; Hoover &

Bostic, 2021; Malone et al., 2021).

Mental Health and Social-Emotional Learning (SEL)

A select number of terms and key concepts are relevant to the current study, and while an

in-depth exploration of each is outside the scope of this paper, some essential context is shared

below.

Mental Health (MH) Supports

For the current study, MH supports serve as a broad and inclusive category to capture

how these concepts, including the dual factors of mental illness and well-being (Lazarus et al.,

2021), are currently discussed by educators, administrators, policymakers, researchers, and

school staff (Jones et al., 2016). These supports encompass everything from having a means of

measuring and increasing perceived safety in schools and communities, removing barriers to

safety and belonging (e.g., by promoting racial identity development, enhancing equity and

inclusion efforts in schools and in OST contexts), and tiered supports including preventative

programs, instructional approaches including social-emotional learning (SEL) concepts and

practices, and more tailored offerings such as individual and group counseling intended to target

particular presenting concerns, such as grief and trauma.

Comprehensive School Mental Health (CSMH)

One framework describing the complex and interrelated components of school-based

mental health supports is defined by Hoover and colleagues (2019), and includes eight

components of Comprehensive School Mental Health (CSMH). The core features of CSMH

(2019) are (1) well-trained educators and specialized instructional support personnel, (2) family-

school-community collaboration and teaming, (3) needs assessment and resource mapping, (4)

multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS), (5), mental health screening, (6), evidence-based and

emerging best practices, (7), data, and (8), funding. The aforementioned components are a tool

for capturing the various structural and systemic factors contributing to a scalable approach to

school-based mental health supports, though importantly, for a host of reasons, including

resource limitations and tensions and complexities in the field, particularly around practices such

as mental health screening (Burns & Rapee, 2021), for instance, not all school districts in the

United States adhere to each component of the CSMH model.

Social-Emotional Learning (SEL)

Definitionally, SEL refers to developmental tasks and skills, including identity

development and factors encompassing the values of equity and inclusion (e.g., racial identity

development, sense of belonging, etc.). SEL can also refer to a specific curriculum, practice, or

set of practices intended to promote social-emotional development. Several researchers and

organizations have proposed frameworks that attempt to capture best practices and competencies

in SEL and youth development (Brackett et al., 2019; Jagers et al., 2019; Jones et al., 2019). For

example, a commonly utilized approach to conceptualizing SEL has been put forward and refined by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), outlining five critical competencies for youth social-emotional development: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. SEL competencies have become widespread in the United States, with all 50 states establishing them for Early Childhood/Pre-K, and a significant increase in recent years in the number of states continuing to make use of the competencies in later grades (Dermody & Dusenbery, 2022).

Existing Structures for Supporting Youth Mental Health in the School Context

School districts often adopt frameworks such as Comprehensive School Mental Health (CSMH; Hoover et al., 2019), Wraparound services (Hill, 2020), and the System-of-Care model (Stroul et al., 1986; Vinson et al., 2001). These frameworks sometimes include complementary approaches such as multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) to better serve students' diverse needs, including mental and behavioral health needs (Marsh & Mathur, 2020). MTSS span across levels, systematizing how educators implement universally beneficial and preventative practices, as well as the ways providers screen youth to identify which levels of intervention provide a free appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment for specific students for whom universal prevention practices alone have proved insufficient, though this is only one feature of MTSS (Hoover & Bostic, 2021; U.S. Department of Education, 2010). One of the primary advantages of MTSS for mental health service provision involves its ability to optimize resources through a tiered approach, in which the vast majority of students respond to universal promotion strategies at tier 1, with a smaller percentage identified through universal screening to benefit from more intensive tier 2 and tier 3 services (Hoover & Bostic, 2021).

Furthermore, researchers have advocated for using MTSS to promote social justice and redress

inequities in mental health service provision (Avant, 2016; Malone et al., 2021).

Despite their promise, implementation of MTSS often presents several challenges,

including logistical complications related to resources, availability of providers, and

reimbursement models (Hoover & Bostic, 2021). Furthermore, there are several barriers to

providing culturally responsive and appropriate services within MTSS (Deboer et al., 2022;

Hoover & Bostic, 2021). First, traditional school-based processes to determine eligibility for

special education services have been used to exclude marginalized youth from the general

education curriculum and advanced academic tracks, particularly Black students, by way of over-

representation and inappropriate referral to special education (Kanaya, 2019). Given this history,

as well as mental health stigma, parents and youth may be hesitant to access services,

particularly in the school setting (Hoover & Bostic, 2021;Sabnis & Proctor, 2021). One reason

schools are at risk of recreating and reinforcing oppressive systems is the demographic makeup

of the educational workforce, as there is typically a disconnect between the identities and lived

experiences of students and those of educators and school staff (Deboer et al., 2022). This

disconnect in experiences and identities, coupled with the presentation of MTSS frameworks as

"culturally neutral," when the underlying principles and assumptions may be heavily skewed

towards white middle-class norms and values, presents the possibility that, in reality, some forms

of MTSS implementation may cause harm (Deboer et al., 2022, p. 1225).

Integrating Out-of-School Time (OST) Supports in the School Context

Given the existing benefits and challenges of providing mental health support to

marginalized youth through the school setting, the out-of-school time (OST) context can be seen

as a point of integration and coordination across systems of school, family, and community

(Adams-Bass et al., 2022). OST programs allow for some of the benefits of school-based

services, such as the large number of prevention and promotion afterschool and summer program

offerings, while sidestepping some of the associated drawbacks of school-based services,

including stigma and connection to special education services and school disciplinary practices

(Adams-Bass et al., 2022).

Furthermore, OST program providers have attempted to enhance both the integration of

OST practices with in-school supports, including increasing family and community engagement,

as well as promoting culturally responsive practices and equitable processes and outcomes for

participating youth and their families (Adams-Bass et al., 2022; Simpkins et al., 2017). That

being said, staff and providers are likely to conceptualize and approach their roles in promoting

SEL and mental health differently based on many factors, including disciplinary differences

(e.g., social work, psychology, nursing, counseling, and other fields; Zabek et al., 2023), as well

as the primary context in which they are working (e.g., OST context, community-based

organization (CBO), district office, administrative role, in-school, etc.).

Though current efforts to integrate OST initiatives with in-school support likely involve

shared themes and values across settings and increased collaboration and resource-sharing, future

efforts may involve more intensive and systematic coordination. For instance, Hart and

colleagues (2021) have proposed a conceptual model outlining a possible form of integration of

OST mentoring programs with school-based MTSS. Reasons for this integration include the

perception of mentoring programs as less stigmatizing and more culturally relevant for

marginalized youth and their families than traditional school-based mental health supports, as

well as the added benefit to mentoring programs of the structure, supervision, and data sharing

that could accompany a more formal collaboration with school-based problem-solving teams,

resulting in more efficacious service delivery (Hart et al., 2021). The authors also identified

barriers to the successful implementation of this model, including challenges with teaming, as

well as the possibility that enveloping mentors more fully into MTSS, which at times replicate

and perpetuate inequities, could transfer some of the harmful effects and stigma associated with

school-based mental health offerings to OST staff such as mentors, who were recruited to

promote more significant equity and access to services. While the integration of OST initiatives,

including mentoring and other OST programs, with in-school support services is one possible

pathway towards the provision of more equitable mental health supports, to date, no empirical

study has outlined current practices and gaps in equity-focused OST initiatives, particularly as

they are integrated with district-wide equity efforts, or at the very least, as some points of

connection between in-school and OST supports are established.

Current Study

This study addresses gaps in the literature by examining how large school districts

promote equitable access to mental health supports for youth by integrating district-wide equity

practices in the OST context. In so doing, results provide new knowledge about the strategies

used to coordinate mental health supports across contexts to advance more equitable student

outcomes. Furthermore, the authors also aim to establish where those programs and OST

offerings are situated in the broader landscape of youth services, relative to more standard

offerings for in-school supports. More specifically, given the current context of mental health

service provision in the United States, wherein mental health needs far outweigh the availability

of licensed mental health professionals and other more traditional modes of service delivery

(Herman et al., 2021), the field is at a crucial juncture in which novel approaches to service

expansion must be considered as a means to close the gap, with OST programs serving as one

such means (Lazarus et al., 2021; Harris et al., 2020). The current study uses a qualitative design

to examine how OST programs, often provided by community-based organizations, can serve as

a means to expand the equitable provision of mental health and social-emotional development

services and considers ways to connect and integrate those OST program supports more

effectively into the school context. Given the nascent state of this type of service expansion and

integration, the study addresses the following research questions:

(1) How did staff, across roles, use language to frame and conceptualize SEL practices and

MH supports in-school and in OST programs?

(2) Among large urban school districts across the United States that are leaders in diversity,

equity, and inclusion, what did staff across a number of roles report as current social-

emotional learning (SEL) and mental health (MH) support practices in the in-school and

out-of-school time (OST) space?

(3) To what extent did these practices encompass current norms and best practices in school

mental health, particularly in regard to equity and inclusion practices, as well as practices

from the Comprehensive School Mental Health (CSMH) framework (Hoover et al.,

2019)?

(4) Finally, what attempts, if any, were made to integrate in-school SEL practices and MH

supports with OST practices?

Methods

Sampling

Data for this study were collected as part of a larger, funded project to identify best

practices among large school districts in the United States engaging in coordinating school-based

and out-of-school educational supports to redress educational inequities. An initial review of

publicly available data (e.g., websites and online materials) was used to screen 105 school

districts from across the country for six indicators of equity effort, including (1) an equity

statement, (2) availability of student data, mainly related to (3) disparities in outcomes, and (4)

an emphasis on equity and cultural-responsiveness in policy and intervention strategies, (5)

professional development materials, and (6) curriculum. A team of four researchers screened

districts for inclusion based on a process of double-coding for the presence of the

aforementioned equity indicators. The team discussed disagreements in coding to reach a

consensus. Districts were then included in the study sample if they either (a) demonstrated the

presence of at least 5 of 6 equity indicators, or (b) were nominated for inclusion by experts on

the research team and their colleagues. This initial search yielded 21 districts. Research team

members conducted screening interviews via telephone or video-conferencing technology, and

interviewers provided notes that were used to determine themes. Notes were reviewed by a

primary and secondary reviewer, with the team successfully screening 12 districts that met the

criteria for participation. Of the 12 districts identified, five consented to participate, and two

additional districts were recruited for a more representative sample, alongside three intermediary

organizations providing OST programming.

Participants

The dataset includes 59 interviews with district and school administrators, community

liaisons, and staff of summer learning and afterschool programs across the seven large urban

school districts and three intermediary organizations recruited to participate in the study,

representing nine communities. Districts were selected from the Western, Southern, Midwestern,

and Northeastern regions of the United States, with each district providing between two and nine

interviewees across many roles (e.g., administrators, school and program leadership, community liaisons, and program staff).

Analytic Plan

After each of the 59 interviews was conducted through video-conferencing technology by members of a larger research team, interviews were recorded, transcribed, and cleaned for accuracy. This dataset represents the data corpus for this study. The initial systematic reading of transcripts allowed the research team to produce a set of open codes relevant to a broader set of research questions alongside a priori codes pulled from a review of background literature. In combination, these codes were used to develop a codebook for the first round of data analysis, which was then conducted by research assistants from a larger research team using Dedoose software. Members of the research team met weekly during this process to iterate and refine the codebook and explore questions, eventually generating themes from these codes and presenting results in a broader report.

Of the existing set of codes generated through this first analysis, the first author of the current study analyzed a subset of this data, which included only excerpts from the original set of 59 interviews that had been coded by the larger research team with the primary code of interest: SEL/Mental Health Supports. SEL/Mental Health Supports then served as a holistic code facilitating further data analysis. Given the scope of this paper and the primarily descriptive nature of three out of four research questions, as well as the parameters for the holistic code "SEL/Mental Health Supports" defined by the larger research team in the initial round of data analysis, references to SEL will be defined in a broad and inclusive manner (e.g., formalized curriculum, informal practices, objectives or values associated with SEL and MH, etc.) to

explore how in-school and OST programs report conceptualizing and implementing SEL practices and curricula.

Mirroring the research team's approach, the first author engaged in a systematic reading of the dataset, which included excerpts coded to reference SEL/Mental Health Supports. Additionally, the first author presented a small sample from the dataset to five research team members to elicit additional codes and consulted with a larger research team regarding the organization and structure of this codebook. Through this procedure, which included systematic transcript reading and consultation, the first author and supporting team members produced a new set of open codes alongside a priori codes from background literature and the codebook used to analyze the data corpus, representing an abductive coding process.

For the first cycle of coding, the first author used a combination of descriptive and values coding (Miles et al., 2020; See Appendix A for codes), as well as linguistic coding to capture participants' perceptions as evidenced by their use of language and terminology. In the second cycle of coding, the first author used pattern coding to organize and condense the data into themes. Given the richness of the dataset, these themes were then found to align with existing frameworks, such as the Comprehensive School Mental Health Systems framework (Hoover et al., 2019), to better address the research questions of interest. Results from the second coding cycle are organized by research question and documented in the results section of this manuscript.

Results

How did staff, across roles, use language to frame and conceptualize SEL practices and MH supports in-school and in OST programs SMH and supports?

Participants consistently expressed that SEL and MH supports were important and valuable aspects of the educational experience. Some participants' responses to interview questions indicated that valuing students' mental health and social-emotional development was intrinsic or stemmed from their lived experiences. For other participants, their appreciation for the importance of student social-emotional development, mental health and overall well-being developed over time as well as with professional expertise and training. Finally, at times, providers gained respect for the significance of youth mental health and SEL supports through crisis, whether through local tragedies that participants referenced, some of which influenced district policy and practice, or through emerging trends and large-scale shifts, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and its associated socio-cultural and practical impact.

Staff Roles in Promoting Mental Health & SEL

Participants differed in how they described and framed their role in promoting mental health and social-emotional development. There may be several reasons for the variability in how participants framed their roles and used language that placed value on various aspects of MH support and SEL. For instance, disciplinary differences in participants' training and the scope of their role (e.g., teacher, district administrators, program staff, social worker, community-based organization) informed participants' approach to youth development, as evidenced by the language providers used to describe their perceptions of the supports they offered students and how they contribute to social-emotional development and mental health. Furthermore, disciplinary differences and variability in the degree of contact participants had with individual students and families impacted which aspects of programming they attended to in their responses to interview questions (e.g., specific practices such as mindfulness practices, operational factors such as funding, and aspects of identity development).

Most commonly, those in the sample who held administrative positions and roles that involved less consistent contact with students emphasized the operational and implementation-focused aspects of SEL programming and MH supports in their responses, including barriers to implementation. Examples included ways in which state and district-level policies influence curriculum, as well as how to create consistency across in-school and OST programming while also considering strengths and challenges of current teaming and interprofessional and interagency communication practices. Additional examples included administrators sharing ways to disseminate information from SEL-focused professional development programs to staff who are not present, across teaching, administrative, and other roles. District-level personnel often described considerations related to models of staffing, state and district policies, and training needs as important considerations for effective integration between OST and school-based SEL/MH supports.

Some, though not all, of this variability in how participants framed their contributions to student MH/SEL aligned with the differences in professional roles and disciplines captured in the sample. For example, personnel across a wide range of roles often framed their contributions in terms of how they addressed logistical concerns. Examples include addressing transportation or financial barriers impacting families, and making efforts to carry over accommodations or supports from the school day to OST programs, as well as ensuring OST program staff were apprised of events and incidents from the school day, such as bullying or fighting. Participants across a number of roles also framed their contributions in relation to systems-level change, with those participants using language that indicated an understanding of the ways historical and socio-political contextual factors can inform and guide their values-based and developmentally-focused approach. Others, including providers and those involved in direct instruction, framed

their role more generally in terms of youth development, citing ways they provided opportunities and scaffolding for students to approach and attempt various skills relevant to social-emotional development (e.g., giving conversation stems, group work, etc.). At times, participants who emphasized general themes pertaining to youth development in their responses neglected to directly include language that addressed specific considerations pertaining to equity, cultural responsiveness, and identity-based, socio-political, or contextual factors.

Positionality and Identity

Participants who reported greater alignment with their student population and local communities, typically through an identity or demographic variable that they share, reported that their positionality increased their emotional investment and ability to relate to their students. Participants elaborated that, at times, their positionality led them to place emphasis on specific equity-focused practices, such as those that disrupt cultural stigma surrounding SEL and mental health. For example, when asked about SEL and mental health-related supports offered in the OST space, like many others, one interview participant shared several programmatic practices, such as 15 minutes of "SEL time" at the beginning of the day, as well as discussion groups for middle and high school students, "family circles" at the elementary level, and mindfulness practices, including meditation. This same participant, however, went on to reflect, "Well, and it's crazy because I feel sometimes it's a cultural thing that we're trying to break the cycle of. I come from a Hispanic family, and I know SEL is something that you don't grow up with, and that's our population that we deal with." So, while similar themes were voiced by participants who shared identities and experiences with their population served, especially in terms of evidence-based mental health and SEL practices, these participants reported navigating additional layers of both personal and systemic burdens. They also sometimes conceptualized

their role in ways that encompass a more holistic approach to SEL and mental health, reflecting

on a greater number of ecological and contextual factors impacting their students due to their

lived experiences.

Other equity considerations related to provider and student positionality included ways

that providers attempted to conceptualize student behavior. For providers who referenced student

behavior in their interview, many attempted to use language that contextualized and de-centered

behavior and denoted a shift away from deficit-based perspectives. For instance, some

participants used strengths-based language to provide additional context to a student's behavior,

made reference to "restorative practices," and named specific identities and populations (e.g.,

racial identities, religious groups, sexualities) using strengths-based and professionally

appropriate language. Additionally, a smaller number of providers cited the need for racial

socialization supports, such as the use of an "ethnic studies" curriculum, to promote social-

emotional development. Other supports associated with identity development included cultural

celebrations, which some providers specifically named offering in response to program

demographics (e.g., an Eid celebration when Muslim students were present in the program).

Finally, participant positionality was associated with their perceived power to influence

how MH and SEL are approached in their settings. For example, many providers cited barriers

and constraints to their current provision of MH supports and SEL, such as resource limitations,

understaffing, staff burnout and associated effects, limited availability of professional

development resources, and leadership-initiated modifications to existing practices and policies.

However, there was variability among participants in the extent to which they reported feeling

able to influence existing systems and overcome such barriers, in part due to differing roles and

positions in their respective organizations (e.g., district-level administrators, OST program staff,

etc.), which influence power, privilege, and the scope of influence of participants. Additionally, some participants shared aspirations for changes within their organization's practices and ways to navigate some of the aforementioned constraints. However, there were inconsistencies in the degree to which participants reported meaningful avenues towards making those changes (e.g., reporting a desire for improvement/change, distinct from being able to identify a timeline, structure, pathway, or set of actors in order to facilitate implementation of these changes). **Among large urban school districts across the United States that are leaders in diversity, equity, and inclusion, what did staff across a number of roles report as current social-emotional learning (SEL) and mental health (MH) support practices in the in-school and out-of-school time (OST) contexts? To what extent did these practices encompass current norms and best practices in school mental health, particularly in regard to equity and inclusion practices, as well as practices from the Comprehensive School Mental Health (CSMH) framework (Hoover et al., 2019)?**

Well-Trained Educators & Specialized Providers

Providers frequently cited the availability of specific SEL curricula and training to support students and respond to perceived needs. Additionally, providers commonly referenced some of the associated developmental skills and objectives related to SEL and greater well-being for students (e.g., relationship skills, responsible decision-making, etc.) beyond and including particular frameworks and SEL curricula such as Second Step programs, Culturally Responsive Minds, and Aspen (Committee for Children, n.d.; Qi Learning Research Group, n.d.; The Aspen Institute, n.d.).

Family-School-Community Collaboration & Teaming

School- and community-level collaborative efforts involved partnering with providers, including formal partnerships described similarly to a resource map or referral database. For example, one participant referenced a "partnership platform" as part of their efforts to increase collaboration. This same participant described the platform as "basically a database of all of the different CBOs... that are partnering with schools and what their area of expertise is," including "those that specialize in social-emotional learning and… really trying to elevate their work and connect them with building leaders who are looking for [SEL] in particular." Other collaborative efforts were described similarly by participants, primarily involving connections with community providers and organizations offering more intensive or specialized services for mental health intervention, such as individual counseling.

Family Engagement. Interview participants from both OST programs and in-school and district-level staff reported on several family engagement practices, including ways to increase access to services and address barriers for families (e.g., transportation barriers, financial barriers, etc.). Additionally, a few participants referred to data-collection and progress-monitoring tools, including formal assessments and processes often initiated by leadership (e.g., using formal programs such as Panorama, universal screening, etc.). Additionally, some interviewees referenced more localized, informal data collection and progress-monitoring methods, such as spreadsheets created by school staff and providers, and other informal methods (e.g., provider knowledge of families/communities).

Furthermore, some participants referenced broader themes related to family communication, with one participant sharing how their team will "do follow-ups with families. You know, just try to make that whole connection. I think communication is a big key. We just want to make sure that…our parents know that we're truly invested in their child and not just in

school but afterschool as well." In this way, participants embody a strengths-based approach to partnering with families and engaging in positive communication proactively, in addition to bridging the gap between in-school and OST supports and communication practices.

Needs Assessment & Resource Mapping

Participants referred to formal and informal needs assessment, partly through data collection and surveys, as well as through conversations with parents, families, and providers. Informal needs assessment methods were more frequently cited (e.g., awareness of needs through professional experience, knowledge of communities, conversations with staff, and ongoing engagement with youth, families, and communities). In addition, communities where participants noted having adequate funding, staffing, and resources noted that they had the capacity to more effectively respond to the needs of youth and their families, particularly relative to those in which participants cited significant resource limitations (see funding section below for additional examples). Participants' reporting of formalized resource maps was less common, as they were often either captured in various databases or digital resources or primarily located in providers and CBOs with longstanding histories in their respective communities and knowledge of available resources and supports.

Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS)

Interview participants often referenced the use of tiered supports. Additionally, interview participants reported implementation of several SEL practices at the Tier 1 level (e.g., core SEL instructional practices and preventive behavior management approaches, such as mindfulness or well-being periods, restorative circles, and SEL lessons/instructional time). Some interviewees reported SEL practices that were initiated in a "bottom-up" and top-down manner, both structured and predictable, and some were less structured and more responsive or reactive. Other

interviewees, however, reported that SEL practices were formalized and initiated by leadership at

the program, school, or district level and, albeit rarely, at the state level (e.g., policies). When

describing the need for a higher tier of intervention, interview participants often made reference

to Tier 2 supports, such as various iterations of Check-In/Check-Out (CICO; Drevon et al.,

2019), as well as group counseling, in addition to Tier 3 supports such as referral to school

mental health (SMH) or behavioral health providers.

Mental Health Screening

A small number of participants referenced formalized mental health screening practices,

such as universal screening (Burns & Rapee, 2021), and in doing so, indicated that these

practices were one component of SEL and mental health practices on a continuum that included

first attempting to solidify evidence-based and emerging best practices, including universal

instruction (Tier 1) and Tier 2 interventions. Again, while only a small number of providers

referenced formal screening practices, these included tools such as the DESSA and Panorama

(Aperture Education, n.d.; Panorama Education, n.d.). Some participants referenced screening

tools that are administered as part of an SEL curriculum, as well as "homegrown" (e.g.,

developed internally or at the program or district level) measures such as a Student Well-Being

Survey (SWBS), and less defined means of screening or identifying students in need of

additional supports or referrals.

OST program staff reported benefiting from the opportunity to make referrals and use

community partnerships to connect students to a more targeted level of intervention (e.g.,

SMH/behavioral health provider) based on need and results of things like screening measures.

Additionally, some participants referenced the development of crisis response teams and the use

of "de-escalation" practices, which imply a means through which students are identified and

referred to these teams for additional assessment, intervention, or referral. Some of these

practices for de-escalation and crisis response, as well as trauma-informed supports, for instance,

came as a response to emerging trends based on formal screening and data collection tools, as

well as anecdotal experiences, pointing to themes of presenting concerns such as trauma being

more widespread than previously recognized. This type of adaptation represents one means of

promoting equity, as it places the root cause and accompanying intervention at the system or

contextual-level rather than as a pathology or behavioral issue stemming from a student or group

of students. The evidence for this claim also comes from numerous interview participants using

language that is strengths-based, and attempting in some way through their use of language to

shift focus away from student behavior and behavioral problems to various contextual factors,

for example, as referenced in earlier findings.

Evidence-Based and Emerging Programmatic Activities and Practices

In the OST context, some interviewees reported programmatic practices that they

conceptualized as creating opportunities for social-emotional learning and development (e.g.,

arts programs, athletics, chess/scrabble and similar activities, racial socialization and

mentorship). Additionally, participants reported utilizing various curricula and software to

provide SEL and mental health supports to students, including programs such as Second Step

and Culturally Responsive Minds (Committee for Children, n.d.; Qi Learning Research Group,

n.d.), as well as modified programs or combinations of multiple programs in order to either (1)

better align SEL focused supports across in school and OST contexts, or with district-level

priorities, or (2) attempt to address gaps in programming, whether due to issues such as grade-

banded curricula that present implementation challenges in OST programs that serve multiple

grade levels, or due to program limitations such as a lack of attention to equity issues. Finally,

another emerging trend reflects increased consciousness of systemic barriers to equity, as a large number of participants used language that reflected some knowledge of these systemic factors (e.g., the use of words such as "dismantle" in reference to systems, as well as references to culture and cultural responsiveness, representation in curriculum materials and program celebrations, for example, and differentiation of offerings based on program and community demographics).

Still, some programs offer supports, in addition to or in combination with other organizations and programs, in order to address specific needs or increase access to supports, such as speech and language services. For example, a participant shared utilizing the Culturally Responsive Minds program "in tandem with the Second Step, because [the participant] just felt like equity focus was missing in [Second Step], but when you marry the two [programs] together, then it's a pretty good well-rounded product." The participant went on to elaborate that in addition to offering Second Step and Culturally Responsive Minds, "there's another piece of software that [they're] hoping to pilot… geared to have teachers build deeper relationships with their students on a one-on-one level. And maybe get them talking about things that they wouldn't normally share in the classroom. It is geared toward all of them, but we're thinking about the students who may want to share something but may not raise their hand. The students who need someone to talk to, but maybe that's not the space so here's another avenue for [them] to connect with [their] teacher." Finally, per the participants' report, this same program is engaged in eliciting grant funding in order to provide even more holistic services that further align with their values and objectives, and offer other supports such as "safe spaces" in order to facilitate connections among students with their peers and with adults in the school.

Regardless of the method of initiation of SEL practices (e.g., top-down, bottom-up, or a combination), there was variability in the implementation of these practices. Factors that, per participants' report, presented barriers to implementation of SEL and mental health practices included heterogeneity in staff buy-in, particularly in different levels of organizations and structures, with leadership and district administrators often holding far more buy-in than providers in immediately student-serving roles, as well as less appreciation for the impact of barriers to implementation than those providers. Other variables providers cited as contributing to variability in implementation of SEL and mental health supports involved access to resources (e.g., staffing, time, funding, training), as well as program structure and demographics.

Data Collection & Progress Monitoring

Numerous participants gave specific reference to data collection methods and particular software programs focused on collecting and storing SEL-focused data, including some integration of equity and social-justice-focused measures, such as those focused on belonging and school or program climate. When one participant reflected on their conceptualization of how the equity and inclusion piece served as a core component of their data collection process, they shared that in collaboration with a partner organization to craft an assessment of core components of SEL, including "youth voice and choice, adult youth interactions, youth to youth interactions…as well as cultural responsiveness." The participant elaborated that if a program or organization is "going to do SEL it can't be cookie cutter, and you have to give room for cultural and other differences within social-emotional engagement and, of course, recogniz[e] whoever the provider is…particularly if they do not come from the community of the kids that they're with," directly referencing the importance of provider positionality and cultural awareness in the successful implementation of SEL programming. This same interviewee also spoke to the role of

ongoing engagement with families and communities, sharing that in their standards, "cultural

responsiveness has its own domain…and is woven through the others, because…if your program

does great at engaging, let's say, Pacific Islander youth, but…you have no connections with any

Pacific Islander group, or you don't know anything about the families like, are you really doing

cultural responsiveness? It's not about us coming in wagging our finger, but it's just saying how

do we assess this and then help providers do that so that they can best support their youth

through a culturally responsive social-emotional lens." Though the reflections of this participant

and a number of others shed light on the degree of intentionality and nuance that is required for

thoughtful implementation of culturally responsive practices, such as community engagement

and provider positionality, a theme that was cited less frequently was ongoing progress

monitoring and means of following up on needs that became apparent during the data collection

process, though again, as previously stated, funding and resources, such as adequate staffing,

impacted participants' perceived ability to respond to emerging needs.

Funding

A number of participants shared ways in which funding impacts the SEL/MH supports

available to students and enhances the well-being of program staff and providers due to adequate

staffing and more balanced ratios of providers to students). Participants noted that limited

funding and resources for districts and programs significantly constrained the supports staff are

able to provide students. For example, providers mentioned that limited resources in particular

districts often created an environment where providers and staff are investing significant effort

into addressing barriers and providing supports for students to simply be able to attend school

and OST programs, as well as to meet academic and instructional benchmarks. In such a context,

participants reported limited systemic support and protected time for providers to benefit from

trainings related to practices for promoting SEL and youth MH. The degree to which existing

systems and structures in those districts are already overtaxed leaves even less capacity to

implement family and community engagement practices, for instance, and to undertake the

proactive communication required for effective collaborative efforts among staff.

Yet, participants also reflected thoughtfully on ways in which even with adequate or

close to adequate funding and staffing, "kids still have needs, even with the best of supports that

are there." This participant elaborated that they "had 900 kids in the school and two counselors

[...which was] not sustainable." Along with others, the participant reflected that, in such a

context, it is especially important to"[look] at how are you utilizing the folks in your school,"

indicating that even with variability in staffing and more balanced ratios of providers to students,

it is important to be mindful of task-shifting responsibilities and protecting time for providers to

be able to perform the essential functions of their roles. In this participant's case, for example,

they reported their school leveraging a partnership to hire a staff person whose dedicated role

was to assist students in navigating college access and equity. The participant reported that being

able to task-shift college support to this new provider "was so important because it took some of

that work off the counselors, so that when [they] had an emergency, when a kid was in crisis, the

counselors weren't bogged down and… It also allowed the counselors to keep a closer eye on

[those students]." This case example, among a number of others, illustrates that adequate funding

and staffing may be necessary, though not entirely sufficient, conditions for effective

comprehensive school mental health in both in school and OST settings.

Challenges & Barriers. A number of participants reflected on systemic issues related to

funding that impact the provision of SEL and MH supports in both OST and in-school spaces.

For example, one participant reported on macro-level systemic factors such as "mishandl[ing]"

of federal funds and the "proliferation of charter schools" led to a "crisis moment for the[ir]

district," including the closure of more than 20 school buildings, which in turn affected

"thousands of kids and their families… and it was painful." Another participant reflected on

program-specific structural and systemic issues related to staffing that impact implementation of

SEL and mental health supports in their OST spaces. This participant shared that providers are

often put in the difficult position of "stay[ing] after school because the child might need

support," despite their staff "not get[ting] paid for the extra hours to stay after school." This same

participant shared a sampling of the variety of programs their support team is connected to,

which are each in some way impacted by the dynamic of uncompensated afterschool labor,

including athletics, STEM programs, yearbook, and partner programs such as college access

programs and the YMCA, which provide particular support to students with systems

involvement, such as family involvement with social services.

Finally, another participant reflected on the challenges built into the increased

expectations around SEL/MH programming when those expectations were not associated with an

increase in funding and support from leadership and the district. This same participant

explained"that there's a real lack of support for the unmet needs of students and [those] that live

in our community. And… I know my counselor says that [there are particular…] best practices

for supporting students that have experienced trauma. But… those are time intensive and

resource and personnel intensive best practices and I think that…offering them to us, but then not

providing the resources and support necessary is a real challenge. To extend it and add, are those

supports integrated into after school or summer learning opportunities? I don't actually know."

Through this participants' report, as well as those of others who expressed similar themes, it is

clear that when districts and staff communicate expectations to providers for offering supports

that facilitate student SEL and MH, without also providing adequate support or modifying other

responsibilities in some way, the result can be provider frustration, ambivalence, and uncertainty.

This finding underscores the importance of increased funding, resources, and support for

programs and providers, as well as task-shifting extraneous responsibilities when necessary to

preserve providers' time to attend to the essential tasks of their role.

      Facilitators and Strengths. For participants who perceived their districts to have

resources and support, a number of factors contributed to that perception, including funding

associated with Title I status, for example, as well as funds related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Additionally, a few participants shared the role that grant funding played in their SEL/MH

programming, with one person sharing that they applied "for a lot more health related grants and

[began] really talking more about social emotional learning" which allowed their district to

engage in "a lot of capacity building for evaluation to find tools that could help [...them] tell

[their story…using] the district's own data." This participant elaborated that data from school-

wide surveys captured students' feelings of belonging, as well as their self-perceptions, among

other factors, and using this data allowed their district to demonstrate a need for additional SEL

funding. Others shared ways that receiving input "from parents that it was taking forever to get

into a therapist in town" allowed their district to locate funding "to actually infuse [therapists]"

into their school-based MH support offerings. This participant shared that "Funding was a

critical piece of" being able to address this barrier to MH supports that parents were reporting.

Along with a number of other examples, participants' report consistently indicates that the

availability of adequate funding and resources is crucial to OST programs and districts more

broadly being able to meaningfully respond to the MH needs reported by youth, families, and

communities, and implement associated SEL/MH practices in response to the needs that arise, whatever they may be.

Across Participant Reports

There were consistent themes in the extent to which interviewees noted the need for and importance of SEL practices and mental health supports more broadly, with a number of interviewees referencing the ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic (as well as other, more localized crises) brought attention to the mental health and social-emotional needs of students. **Finally, what attempts, if any, were made to integrate in-school equity-focused SEL practices and MH supports with OST practices?**

Based on the reports of participants, a number of means of integration or connection between in-school and OST practices regarding SEL and mental health or well-being supports. Points of integration between in-school SEL/MH supports included consistency in curricular offerings, shared impacts of policy changes, shared components of school and program structure, staff communication and coordination efforts, as well as continuity in overall framework and approach. Additionally, participants cited a number of barriers to integration, as well as advantages to preserving the unique features and separation between in-school SEL/MH supports and OST program offerings.

Some of the more commonly cited ways the connection between in-school and OST SEL/MH supports is being developed and reinforced include similarities in SEL curriculum content across the in-school and OST space. Some participants cited specific curricula that were modified for use in OST programs, including supports available through partner programs and universities, such as yoga practices and an abridged version of a curriculum focused on understanding and cultivating happiness. In addition to abridged curricula, when adapting in-

school curricular offerings to make them more suitable for OST programs, participants cited

variability in grade banding as a distinct consideration for OST programs. Variable grade

banding practices created both opportunities and challenges for implementation of in-school SEL

curriculum content. For instance, some participants cited serving multiple grade levels in the

same OST program, leading to a need to modify grade banded materials to make them more

accessible to students across a range of ages and grade levels. What became apparent through

participant responses was that though there were attempts to "mimic" in-school approaches to

SEL and MH programming, to an extent, it was nearly always necessary to adapt the materials

and practices to the OST space.

Participants also reported that integration between in-school and OST SEL programming

and MH supports is also facilitated by policy-level changes that cut across schools and programs,

which most frequently manifest in SEL curricular offerings. For example, one participant

describes SEL programming as the "connective tissue" that bridges different OST programs and

connects them to in-school programs, in which a number of SEL offerings have become, per the

words of another participant, seamlessly "baked into curriculum."

Beyond curricular offerings, a number of participants reported meaningful ways in which

staff themselves serve as points of integration across the in-school and OST contexts, particularly

when it came to offerings related to SEL and MH/well-being supports. The most clearly defined

source of integration across the in-school and OST context included specific ways participants

cited attempting to coordinate supports. This included ways staff members tried to "follow kids"

receiving in-school supports through special education, such as an Individual Education Plan

(IEP) to summer school and other OST programs, such as through a spreadsheet, list, or other

tool, in order to provide some degree of consistency in supports. Another participant reported

ways in which providers communicated events from the school day proactively to OST program

staff, such as a fight or bullying incident, for instance, which may impact student engagement

during afterschool programs. This degree of integration was only reported two times, and

participants reported challenges that made it difficult to facilitate such a high level of

communication between providers in the in-school and OST spaces, as most systems are not

designed to support this level of communication, and systemic factors, including legislative

privacy protections such as Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), further

complicate matters.

Additionally, interview participants reported a number of means by which providers'

resources translated from one space to another, as some providers are involved in providing both

in-school and OST supports. For example, one provider who works in both settings reflected that

implementing the training she received in SEL supports and MH strategies "becomes second

nature," such that she instinctively provides those supports in OST settings as well. Other

providers reflected on means through which they share information learned in professional

development and trainings with providers who were not available to attend those trainings,

including passing along knowledge to some of the providers involved in OST programming.

The last means by which in-school and OST supports for SEL and MH were integrated

involves the use of shared frameworks (e.g., Multi-Tiered System of Supports [MTSS]) and

specific approaches to MTSS (e.g., Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports [PBIS]).

Additionally, shared SEL curricula, though with modifications to adapt them to the OST space,

as well as shared learning objectives such as ethnic studies-focused lessons and curriculum,

served to create continuity between in-school and OST approaches to instruction and behavioral

strategies. Finally, some providers reported specific strategies utilized across both in-school and

OST spaces, such as restorative practices, trauma-informed approaches, and de-escalation and crisis management approaches.

(Dis)integration: Unique Features of OST Space as an Advantage. Through the exploration of integration and points of connection across in-school and OST MH supports and SEL approaches and practices, participant responses also evoked themes related to ways in which the settings are distinct. For instance, when asked about points of integration, some participants responded that they did not know of ways in which supports were integrated, indicating that in a number of settings, integration of supports across these contexts may be a long way off, or may not be on folks' minds as a priority.

Finally, some interview participants referenced the advantages of OST programming, such as more freedom and flexibility in the OST context due to reduced academic demands and testing, as well as fewer specific expectations regarding student achievement and limited standardization of curricula. Furthermore, unique features that are more common in the OST settings, such as the mingling of students across grade levels, created unique opportunities for student development. For example, one participant remarked that "the beautiful part…is that it is almost magic to see these big sister big brother kind of relationships happening, these bonds that really just kind of form after school." In this way, it is helpful to note that while meaningful efforts are being made to integrate in-school and OST MH supports, as well as approaches to SEL, there are still a number of ways that each setting retains some unique features. There are advantages to many of those unique features, particularly in the OST context.

Discussion

This study explored how OST programs approach equity-focused SEL/MH supports, including ways in which providers and staff frame the role of OST contexts in doing so, and

encompass ways in which practices reflect and are integrated with how equity-focused SEL/MH

supports are offered as part of in-school spaces. In order to address these questions, the

researchers engaged with a qualitative dataset of excerpts from 59 interviews from a more

extensive study which had been previously coded as reflecting content related to SEL/MH

supports. In consultation with a larger team of researchers, the first author undertook a secondary

qualitative analysis of this dataset. This study represents one of the only explorations of

approaches to equity in SEL and MH supports in the OST space and highlights a broad array of

perspectives and practices.

The current study aimed to expand on existing literature regarding the ways in which in-

school and OST settings can serve as spaces that, in an equitable manner, support and expand on

the resources available to youth, families, and communities for facilitating positive

developmental processes such as social-emotional learning and racial socialization. Consistent

with the literature indicating that school districts are appropriately positioned to offer supports

for youth mental health and social-emotional development (DeBoer et al., 2022; National

Academies of Sciences et al., 2019; Rossen & Cowan, 2014), including OST and community-

based programs (Hoover & Bostic, 2021; Simpkins et al., 2017), across settings, roles, and

geographical regions of the United States, study participants reported that in-school and OST

SEL and MH supports are needed and valued to equitably support student success and to engage

with families and communities in a meaningful way. Many providers could draw connections

between students' mental health and social-emotional development and other more tailored

equity-focused supports, curricula, and interventions, as some participants could see these needs

and developmental processes, such as perceived belonging and racial socialization, as

intertwined, consistent with literature on equitable service-provision as a means of disrupting the

multiplicative effects of intersecting identities and systems that reinforce power and privilege (Alegría et al., 2018; Crenshaw, 1991; Deboer et al., 2022).

Furthermore, key features of systems-level frameworks for providing school-based mental health services and approaches were found to be at least somewhat present in OST spaces. CSMH was selected as an organizing framework in this manuscript, and the eight core features identified in this study as being present in OST spaces included (1) well-trained educators and specialized instructional support personnel, (2) family-school-community collaboration and teaming, (3) needs assessment and resource mapping, (4) multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS), (5), mental health screening, (6), evidence-based and emerging best practices, (7), data, and (8), funding (Hoover et al., 2019). Though CSMH (Hoover et al., 2019) is only one of a number of possible approaches intended to coordinate school-based services, with other frameworks including Wraparound services (Hill, 2020) and the System-of-Care model (Stroul et al., 1986; Vinson et al., 2001), the inclusion of these eight features in at least some OST programs shows promise for the possibility of providing greater points of integration across OST and in school SEL programming and MH supports, offering a broad outline of a roadmap for school districts for providing more comprehensive MH/SEL supports to youth through OST programs, though of course tailored to the needs of each community. Connections to established systems of equitable school-based MH supports and SEL programming can prove useful (Herman et al., 2021, Hess et al., 2017), and can enhance and bolster OST programs, particularly when combined with the unique advantages of the OST context, such as greater alignment between provider identities and lived experiences and those of youth and their families (McKenney, 2021), as well as opportunities to promote cultural responsiveness through program structure and support (Simpkins et al., 2017).

Participants reported that leadership and system-level factors were most often found to play a minimal role in promoting communication, integration, and points of connection across the in-school and OST settings in offerings related to SEL and MH supports. This finding is somewhat consistent with existing literature which emphasizes the roles of program staff and participants in co-creating the experience for more culturally responsive OST spaces (Simpkins et al., 2017). That being said, there were a relatively smaller number of participants in the current study reflecting on how there were some points of integration bridging MH and SEL offerings between in-school and OST space. These connection points included shared curricular materials, shared staff, shared frameworks and approaches to SEL and supporting student behavior, and though less common, proactive communication between in-school and OST staff and providers, consistent with existing literature on means of offering system-level coordination in school-based mental health for more comprehensive and effective service provision (Hill, 2020; Hoover et al., 2019; Stroul et al., 1986; Vinson et al., 2001).

Yet, participants also reported that there are unique features and advantages of OST settings that providers appreciate and wish to maintain boundaries between in school supports and OST. Some of these features include freedom from expectations related to standardized testing as well as a buffer from policy changes related to academics and instructional requirements, and the associated curricular freedom, which in turn offers space for SEL-focused supports. Other features that providers expressed appreciation for regarding OST spaces included the ability to observe students interacting across grade levels, as well as in an array of activities, such as chess and athletics, for instance, allowing for greater understanding of students holistically, as well as the ability to offer tailored supports to increase access and reduce barriers

(e.g., transportation). These findings are consistent with notions of OST spaces that promote inclusive and culturally responsive practice (e.g., Simpkins et al., 2017).

      Study Limitations. There are a number of limitations to the inferences presented in the study. First, this study involved a secondary analysis of an existing qualitative dataset collected by a larger team of researchers for a different set of research questions, meaning that the authors were not present during the screening, data collection, and initial data analysis (e.g., application of the holistic code "SEL/mental health supports") stages. Furthermore, the authors were thus unable to ask interview participants follow-up questions to elaborate on the present findings, and data analysis is constrained to text from participant interviews, relative to the richness of an interactive video-conferencing interview in which researchers are also able to infer meaning from vocal tonality, facial expressions, and gestures. For the current study, the first author also served as the sole coder of the dataset, and though coding was supplemented by substantial consultation efforts, as referenced above, qualitative coding is often enhanced by the availability of additional coders in order to elicit multiple perspectives and assess reliability across raters. Finally, given the nature of the dataset (e.g., interviews with various staff members affiliated with OST, in-school, community-based, and district-level settings), the study can only capture participant perceptions rather than evaluate effectiveness or establish causal effects.

      Conclusion. The present study explored various perspectives on how SEL and MH supports are currently offered in multiple OST contexts, with a particular focus on considerations for equity and inclusivity, as well as points of integration between OST and in-school settings. This area of research is ripe for further exploration and refinement, particularly again, emphasizing equity considerations and the benefits and limitations of integrating OST and in-school supports for SEL and mental health. Specifically, it may be helpful for more evaluative

frameworks to emerge in order to further flesh out best practices for systems and providers to

implement equitable services that promote SEL, MH, and well-being for youth, families, and

communities. Future research is particularly important for those whom existing systems have

disadvantaged, and whom, due to intersecting identities and associated dynamics of power and

privilege, along with environmental and historical contexts and the socio-political landscape of

the United States following the COVID-19 pandemic, have not been served by established

structures and traditional models of mental health service delivery.

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Appendix A: Codebook

Holistic Code from Data Corpus:

- "SEL/Mental Health Supports: Examples of SEL and mental health supports that are embedded in OST and summer learning programs or within the school day. This includes discussion of opportunities to learn about the history and culture of their own, as well as others', racial ethnic groups."

First Cycle Codes (Descriptive; Values):

- Structure/implementation
    - Strengths
        - E.g., "system-wide framework"
    - Limitations
        - E.g., "hodgepodge of activities"
    - Disorganization
- Individual Staff/School/Program Resources
    - Positive
        - E.g., 20+ years experience
    - Negative
        - E.g., burnout
- District/school/program Resources
    - Limitations
        - Unbalanced ratios
        - Knowledge gap among staff/providers
        - Region-specific (e.g., recent tragedy)
    - Assets

- ■ Sufficient number of providers/workforce balanced

- ■ E.g., school personnel, counselors/social workers/school psychologists/nurses, teachers, "behavioral health staff," etc.

- ■ District-specific roles (e.g., "navigators" or "advocates" or "mental health experts")

- ■ Digital offerings (e.g., Canvas or website)

- ■ Specific supports (e.g., "community support hubs" or "yoga/mindfulness" or "restorative circles" or structured SEL curricula/practices)

- ■ Task-shifting efforts (e.g., collaboration between counseling staff and "college access/equity coordinators")

- ■ Collaboration with other offices, intermediary organizations, etc. (e.g., Office of School Culture)

- ■ Region-specific (e.g., equity need for swimming lessons due to proximity to water)

- ● Support of equity efforts/social justice initiatives

  - ○ E.g., racial socialization supports/programming/curricula

  - ○ Policy change (e.g., required hotline numbers on ID cards)

  - ○ Theoretical understanding (E.g., "dismantling systems of oppression")

  - ○ Attempts to support community/impact (e.g., daycare provider income loss)

  - ○ Accommodating/individualizing support based on needs (e.g., students experiencing housing insecurity, neurodiverse students (e.g., ASD diagnosis), English language learners)

- ○ Family engagement practices (e.g., supporting families, for instance those with multiple children; strengths-based family communication)

- Student/family resources

  - ○ Limitations

    - ■ Cost, transportation barriers, food/housing insecurity, language barriers, etc.

  - ○ Assets

    - ■ E.g., funding, transportation cards, partnerships with philanthropic organizations, etc.

- Leadership initiated/top down

  - ○ E.g. "From central office" or "top down"

  - ○ Negative value: E.g., "proposal rejected" or "not supported"

- Expansion efforts/intentions

  - ○ E.g., "building community partnerships" or "designated a committee"

- Mental health supports

  - ○ E.g., "trauma-informed" or "anger intervention" or "grief group" or "suicide prevention"

  - ○ Tiered interventions/MTSS

- Data collection/Progress Monitoring (E.g., student well-being survey)

  - ○ Community/School Prog

  - ○ Formal

  - ○ Provider/Staff (Homegrown)

  - ○ Summer school

- SEL

  - Curriculum

  - Resources (SEL website)

  - SEL practices (e.g., 10 mins in morning and 10 in afternoon for mindfulness

    practice)

  - SEL goals/objectives/value (E.g., "relationship building," proactive prevention of

    behavioral challenges

  - Impact

- Strengths-focus/reframing of behavioral concerns

  - E.g., "big behaviors" or shift away from labeling behavior challenges

- Academics

  - Curricular alignment

  - Negative: Academic Misalignment

- Connection/Integration/Continuity between OST and School

  - This includes lack of integration

- COVID impact

- Funding

- Professional development (E.g., "mental health experts" or district level PD and training)

  - Need

  - Training

- Access to programs

- Environment

- Framing/Identity - "Program or provider"

- Iatrogenic (Language)

  - Program/Staff

  - System

- In school/OST alignment (MH focus)

- Leadership Impact

  - Support

  - Top down/Leadership initiated

- MH Supports

  - MH Intervention

  - MH Need

- MTSS

- Parent Insight - "Parents /Caregivers providing insight into programming"

- Program Demographics - "For both students and staff"

- Program Description

- Promising Practice

  - Intent/desire for expansion

- Social Justice/Equity

  - Absent

  - Accommodation of family/student/local need - me - "Includes representation in texts/curriculum/activities"

  - Belonging

  - Community engagement

  - Family engagement

- ○ Language

- ○ Policy Change

- ○ Racial Socialization

- ○ System change - starting at excerpt 149 - mine - "ways programs reduce/address barriers for families"

- Staffing - "Anything related to staffing of programs"

  - ○ Burnout

  - ○ Understaffing

- Strengths Language

  - ○ Absent

  - ○ Behavior-focused

- Student Influenced - "Decision makers including program features based on what they know / assume they know about students"

- Student Motivations - "Any discussion of what motivates students to participate"

- Student Voice

- Summer school

- Systems/Administration - "Information about the district level administrative structures and organization."

- Types of Programmatic Activities