Exploring Underlying Dimensions of Social Connectedness in the Experiences of Suspended Young People from Ethnically Diverse Populations in the USA

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In the USA, out-of-school suspension leaves numerous young people in transition, caught between the school and their communities. A limited body of literature neither documents the experiences of suspended young people from ethnically diverse populations nor provides insight into the spaces they occupy. This study used an exploratory mixed methods design to identify psychological, social and spatial dimensions of social connectedness in the experiences of suspended young people participating in a community intervention. The study aimed to explicate social connectedness as a protective factor and how underlying dimensions of social connectedness construct sites of recovery for suspended young people. © 2017 John Wiley & Sons Ltd and National Children's Bureau

Keywords: community spaces, economically disadvantaged, ethnic minority, mixed methods, social connectedness, young people.

Introduction

A common narrative in the USA and countries like Canada, England and Australia is school suspension practices sever the social connections young people have with peers and adults in school (Brown, 2007; Carpenter and Ramirez, 2007; Hemphill and others, 2010; National Center for Education Statistics 2012; Ontario Human Rights Commission 2014). Countries with a history of ethnic discrimination continue to rely on punitive school suspension practices that leave a disproportionate number of young people from ethnically diverse populations in transition between their communities and school. Limited access to positive alternatives to out-of-school suspension further agitates young people's sense of social connectedness and remains a catalyst for engagement in risk-taking behaviour such as further truancy (Fenning and Rose, 2007; National Center for Education Statistics, 2012; Skiba and others, 2011). While a burgeoning body of literature documents the adverse effects of school suspension (Daly and others, 2010; Decker and others, 2007; Losen and Martinez, 2013; Theriot and Dupper, 2010), a limited body of research neither examines the experiences of short-term suspended young people nor provides insight into the spaces they occupy.

This study aims to broaden understanding of community spaces suspended young people from ethnically diverse populations access and how these settings restore their sense of social connectedness. Community spaces, in response to the decimation young people encounter from suspension, can serve as a point of recovery (Henderson and Green, 2014; Henderson and McClinton, 2016). Explicating their role in the lives of suspended young people may
yield promising practices for agents working with marginalised child and adolescent populations. This study will contribute to a nascent body of literature by employing a sequential exploratory mixed methods design to investigate underlying dimensions of social connectedness in the experiences of a sample of young people attending the Boomerang Program, USA and identify its role in promoting recovery. The study concludes with a discussion of findings and implications on translating social connectedness across the social ecology of young people from ethnically diverse populations.

Social connectedness in spaces of recovery

Recovery assumes individuals engage a response mechanism through either accessing support or resources to reduce physical or psychological disruption. School suspension is a disruption in the lives of many young people and, unfortunately, a majority are African American and Latino and experience disruption continuously (Brown, 2007; Carpenter and Ramirez, 2007; Skiba and others, 2011). A number of young people do not have the economic resources or support needed to recover from this disruption and attack against their sense of social connectedness. Thus, building social connectedness depends on targeting underlying dimensions and demonstrating their role in promoting recovery among ethnically diverse and suspended young people.

Barber and Schluterman (2008) posited that social connectedness hinges on the quality of relationships young people form in an environment and the degree to which those relationships elicit favourable attitudes and positive affect. In this definition, the authors outline psychological and social dimensions play a role in the cognitive processes adolescents employ to appraise a built environment from the relationships within. Research suggest young people develop a sense of social connectedness when they interact in spaces where relationships predicate value and provide critical resources like academic and social support (Henderson and McClinton, 2016; Whitlock and Powers, 2008). Moreover, a body of literature indicates that adult relationships in community spaces model the cognitive and behavioural strategies that reduce the tension young people from ethnically diverse populations encounter in oppressive systems (Jones and Deutsch, 2011; Whitlock and Powers, 2008). Case and Hunter (2014) suggest adult relationships can ‘facilitate adaptive responding’ (p. 261) by transmitting the cognitive strategies young people need to buffer attacks against their self-concept. Young people who are able to develop strong relational and emotional ties with adults receive reinforcement and are able to build a positive sense of self and efficacy towards accomplishing tasks (Case and Hunter, 2014; Ginwright, 2007; Whitlock, 2007). A study conducted by Jones and Deutsch (2011) demonstrated that positive adult relationships allow young people to project a more favourable future orientation and aspirations. Social connectedness, clearly, underlies the critical cognitive, relational and emotional regulatory skills young people need to thrive (World Health Organization, 2015).

Social connectedness is dependent on the built environment and relationships providing e-resources young people need at various points in development. Youth must appraise their encounters as beneficial and see them as a link to other needed resources. For example, Whitlock and Powers (2008) suggested that community spaces serve as critical junctures during out-of-school time for young people to develop a sense of belonging and participate in organised recreational activity. Ginwright (2007) argued that community spaces build internal assets among young people by cultivating activism and their sense of civic engagement. Other bodies of work also suggest these built environments are spaces where ethnically diverse adolescents congregate to share community traditions and fulfil basic needs such as hunger and safety (Chaskin, 2009; Ginwright, 2007; Güney, 2013).
A community space reflects the ‘geographic locations...where youth sculpt real and imaginary corners for peace, solace, communion, personal and collective identity’ (Fine and others, 2000, p. 132). Social connectedness hinges on the relational and emotional ties young people develop with the built environment (Barber and Schluterman, 2008). Schatzki (1991) posited that the built environment provides the nexus for human activity; a place where young people congregate to access resources and develop relationships. Community spaces are situated and accessible in the neighbourhoods of ethnically diverse populations and serve as points of recovery as young people enter and exit over time (Blakeslee, 2011; Greiner and Sakdapolrak, 2013; Hazarika and Cohn, 2001). It is in the built environment young people activate a point of recovery when they interact in relationships that reinforce autonomy and strengthen adaptive coping responses (Case and Hunter, 2012; Fine and others, 2000; Ginwright, 2007; Güney, 2013; Henderson and McClinton, 2016; Whitlock and Powers, 2008). Therefore, the spatial dimension of social connectedness explicates this ‘geographic location’ and serves as a physical space young people enter to engage recovery at various points in their development (Blakeslee, 2011; Greiner and Sakdapolrak, 2013; Hazarika and Cohn, 2001).

Methodology

This study employs a sequential exploratory mixed methods design (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2011; Nastasi and others, 2007) in order to identify underlying psychological, social and spatial dimensions of social connectedness in the experiences of suspended young people from ethnically diverse populations in the Boomerang Program, USA. Figure 1 illustrates the mixed methods design, emphasising the qualitative phase followed by the quantitative phase. Thematic analysis aims to articulate psychological and social dimensions of social connectedness through positive affect, relationships, and perceived benefits and resources. Descriptive analysis aims to explore the extent to which participants continued to access Boomerang as a point of recovery over two subsequent years (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2011; Hesse-Biber, 2010). The protocol and design was approved by the Institutional Review Board and reflects ethical guidelines on human subjects’ research.

A description of boomerang

Boomerang began in 2006 as a community initiative aimed to support the transition needs of short-term suspended students attending middle and high schools. Located in a mid-sized school district in the Southeast region of the USA, the programme imbues a philosophy that recognises the strengths and assets of young people through positive behavioural supports and provides a

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safe space to congregate and receive academic and social support. The initial point of contact with Boomerang occurs from school referrals to its suspension programme. The intake process entails completing a risk-assessment and The Tree visualisation activity. The tree activity requires participants to draw a tree and identify strengths and assets as roots, goals, aspirations in the leaves, and lightening as challenges or barriers. Directors share the visualisation activity with a caregiver and school representative when participants transition back to school.

Participants, initially, spend as little as 3 days to up to 10 days for school violations such as disrespect to fighting and substance use. The programme models a traditional school day, beginning 8:30 am and ending around 3:30 pm and, on average, serves between 5 to 10 participants a day and about 175 annually. Most participants in the programme self-identify as a member of an ethnically diverse group (e.g. African American and Latino) and are from households whose annual income is below the USA poverty threshold (70%). Morning and afternoon activities comprise group sessions that focus on affirmations, self-reflection and workshops on healthy relationships and conflict. Participants also receive academic support that allows them to complete missed assignments from school, receive tutoring and participate in recreational activity. Although participants must wait 30 days to return to the suspension programme, they can, however drop in for counselling, tutoring or attend other after-school activities such as reunions or the career readiness programme.

Participants

The qualitative analysis explored transcripts from a subsample of young people who participated in interviews from a previous study examining resilience and social connectedness (Anonymous 2016). All participants received parental consent and assent. Thirteen participants completed interviews and self-identified as a member of an ethnically diverse group (e.g. Black/African American, Latino or Hispanic). Interviews represented 13 per cent of the sample from the previous study; an independent t-test revealed no significant differences between participants and the larger sample (n = 102) in terms of age, household income and school attendance. Table 1 provides an outline of participant demographics; average age of participants was 16.9 years (SD = 3.5) and 54 per cent were female. On average, participants travelled about 4.7 miles to get to Boomerang.

Table 1: Demographics of interview participants (n = 13)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Individual interviews</th>
<th>Group interviews</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Interview number</strong></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender (%)</strong></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>1 (8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age, M = 16.8</strong></td>
<td>11</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>School level (%)</strong></td>
<td>High school</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Middle school</td>
<td>1 (8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Race/ethnicity (%)</strong></td>
<td>Black/African American</td>
<td>3 (23%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>White/European American</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hispanic/Latino</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Distance travelled (miles), M = 4.7</strong></td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>8.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N/A = Not applicable.
Data collection and analysis

Qualitative

Thematic analysis aimed to identify specific code structures from transcripts of individual and group interviews and field notes from site visits. Transcripts focused on the experiences of participants in Boomerang and the ways in which the programme helped them deal with school and family challenges. Barber and Schluterman’s (2008) articulation of social connectedness guided the deductive analytic approach and organising themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006). To ensure consistency in theme development, three independent coders who had expert knowledge in qualitative analysis and did not have any knowledge or experience with Boomerang reviewed transcripts. The analysis required coders to identify codes that responded to specific questions, such as what are some expressions of emotions in this setting. The selective coding process revealed 38 unique codes; the research team reviewed codes for discrepancies and aimed to organise codes into identified themes. Codes where at least two of the coders agreed were retained into a final list of 33 codes for the study (inter-coder agreement = 87.8%; Cohen’s kappa = 0.07). Codes were organised to reflect underlying psychological and social dimensions of social connectedness and remaining codes were retained for future purposes. Field notes provided a detailed description of Boomerang and context for codes.

Quantitative

In order to operationalise points of recovery, the lead author documented the number of contact points participants had with Boomerang for two subsequent years. Data were collected from Boomerang’s database, which tracks attendance in programmes. As mentioned, Boomerang provides other programming to include counselling, community service and the career readiness programme. The study captured this spatial dimension of social connectedness by generating a binary code to indicate either 0 = Did not return or 1 = returned over the two subsequent years and calculated distance (i.e. miles). We aimed to evaluate points of recovery through the number of times participants returned to Boomerang following their participation in the suspension programme. A simple correlation aimed to reveal whether distance, academic and behaviour challenges provided significant variations in contact points.

Results

Qualitative results

Findings aim to demonstrate how psychological and social dimensions underlie social connectedness and their role in facilitating recovery for suspended young people. Primarily, the themes presented discuss how Boomerang provided a space for participants to engage with caring and supportive adults, experience a sense of autonomy and freedom, and access supportive services in both academic and social domains. We assign an alias to all participants but describe specific ethnic and age descriptors. Collectively, we found participants appraised Boomerang as a ‘life-changing’ experience. Experiences in Boomerang translated into participants reorienting their thinking and behavior as well as their relationships with adults and peers.

Positive affect

There were 12 unique codes comprising positive affect, to include fun, enjoyment, less angry and feeling freedom. We assigned the theme positive affect to codes that emphasise the particular emotions participants mentioned in interviews or used to describe their experience in Boomerang. Participants discussed how staff provided emotional support at a point when
they were struggling with challenges to include unfair treatment of conflict with parents. Sonya, a 13-year-old Hispanic female, mentioned Boomerang made her feel welcomed and supported:

They actually like support you and you can tell them anything. They make you feel welcome and make you feel like you are needed in this world.

Sonya’s words emphasise the sense of belonging and relevance of feeling valued as critical dimensions of constructing adolescents’ sense of social connectedness. The work of Lee and others (2001) indicated that adolescents often express this sense of connectedness as the subjective awareness they develop when they feel valued and affirmed.

Some participants expressed feeling angry all the time prior to their encounters with Boomerang, sometimes due to their personal experiences or school and mentioned staff modelled anger management strategies. For example, the middle-school female group, comprised of two Latinas and one African American, discuss how they changed their attitudes towards confrontation:

I have a really bad attitude towards everybody, always got angry over some things (un hunh, me too)...I always wanted to get into a fight...[Boomerang] made me realize that taking your anger out on something like [that] is just stupid and a waste of your time...it’s not worth it (concur).

In this quote, female participants from the high school discussed how Boomerang helped them with some of their challenges with anger and frustration.

I used to curse out teachers but my attitude and I was very angry and had anger (P1)... Having nobody to listen to me and to talk too and they sees things from my point of view more than parents and teachers (P2).

Participants mentioned laughing with staff and staff accepting their individuality and granting opportunities to experience a sense of freedom. In our findings, participants reflect what Case and Hunter (2014) described as self-enhancing processes, where they have opportunities to reduce emotional tension in prosocial ways.

Positive relationships

There were 13 codes included under the theme positive relationships; codes included group activity, cohesion, sense of security and building relationships. Positive relationships are one of the most critical components to recovery for suspended young people in this study because they provide positive mental models of adults and transmit messages that affirm personal identity and purpose (Case and Hunter, 2014; Cuervo and Wyn, 2014). Boomerang aimed to cultivate comradery with adults; staff fostered connections with participants during academic and recreation time. Programme staff rotated throughout morning and afternoon sessions, sharing personal stories and constant praise.

Some participants even mentioned having prior conflict and Boomerang created spaces for them to solve conflict and strengthen peer relationships. In the middle-school group interview, two females commented:

Boomerang helped me and her relationship...she used to yell at me (yeah I did)...and still does at times and I get why. We used to be close then start[ed] fighting a lot and now we’re like closer than before. I trust her.

This was an exchange between an African American and Latina; they laughed at their memories and discussed how they both were able to defeat a staff member in basketball.
Remembrance of their time together in Boomerang created a personal bond between each other and staff.

Participants also indicated Boomerang helped them improve familial relationships. Bringing a primary caregiver or parent into the programme provided an opportunity for participants to share The Tree and express their hopes and aspirations. One of the participants in the middle-school female group articulated changes in her familial relationships:

I have a positive attitude now. Umm I trust my mom... I trust my sister... I know that my mom will support me with anything I do and I'll support her in what she does.

**Perceived benefits and resources**

We identified 17 codes under the theme perceived benefits and resources. We identified participants benefited from human resources (staff and volunteers) and social resources (e.g. recreation, food and academic support). Participants expressed the value of having access to social support managing academic work and working through family and other peer conflict. The findings also suggest participants gained skills and knowledge from participating in Boomerang. One participant mentioned her growth from The Tree activity,

I like the tree and it's your goals and strengths, you have to grow from the ground all the way up [into a] beautiful tree and like it is just to show you how you can grow.

Modelling how young people can grow and mature was evident in morning routines where participants pulled quotes from a box and related the quote to their life. These activities cultivated kinship among participants where they were able to see similar histories and experiences with peers. Many participants commented on how the experience influenced decision-making. Nelson reflected on past mistakes and his ability to make better choices:

Now I choose my decisions more wisely...about work, my actions...before I used to make a lot of dumb decisions and that[s] why I would always get in trouble, fights...now I don't make those dumb decisions anymore.

Participants valued academic support and tutoring; time allowed them to gain confidence and, to some extent, begin to generate future aspirations. Deanna, a 17-year-old African-American female discussed her history in the programme:

If it wasn't for Boomerang I would be...still have had a mental breakdown and me and my mother [would] still be beefing...I would have failed last semester and not be here to graduate. So, I am getting out of school now 'cause of Boomerang.

Participants discussed a desire to return. For example, Nelson, an African American male, mentioned, ‘Like...that I would want to go back but not like be in trouble. Just go back to visit’. Returning to Boomerang provided some resources and benefits to participants. Kevin, a 15-year-old African-American male commented:

You can definitely go back to Boomerang...they help you with your problems. Yea, if you willing to come out and tell them.

This particular finding was important as we moved to the quantitative phase of the study; we anticipated participants would return to Boomerang as a point of recovery for two subsequent years.
Quantitative results

The quantitative findings provide a glimpse into the frequency of recovery points and the extent of these connections to Boomerang over time. On average, those who did not return to Boomerang travelled further \((M = 6.2 \text{ miles})\) than those who returned \((M = 5.0 \text{ miles})\). We explored the relationship between distance travelled and number of contact points; results revealed no significant relationship, \(r = -0.37, P = 0.11\). In addition, there were no significant relationships between academic and behaviour challenges and contact points. Only 8 of the 13 returned in the subsequent years; Table 2 provides case profiles. Participants returned to Boomerang to access counselling services, attend reunion and complete community service; however, the majority returned in subsequent years due to suspension (75%). The number of contact points ranged from 2 to 4 over the subsequent years; Deanna returned for both years. A review of those who returned suggests the majority were African American and female and had more academic and behaviour challenges than those who did not return.

Discussion

Schools sever the connections young people have with adults and peers in school through suspension and, without accessible and supportive spaces, young people will encounter challenges in promoting recovery and personal and academic growth (Daly and others, 2010; Losen and Martinez, 2013; Theriot and Dupper, 2010). Nelson and Prilleltensky (2005) suggested that recovery occurs when individuals have opportunities to achieve personal goals, experience hope and connect with others during points of disruption in their lives. The point of disruption, suspension, can have adverse effects for young people from ethnically diverse populations who already exhibit academic and behavioural challenges (Fine and others, 2000; Theriot and Dupper, 2010). Understanding the underlying dimensions of social connectedness and the ways in which community spaces enable young people to construct a sense of belonging and survive despite efforts to dispossess them is critical to practitioners and advocacy research. Our findings demonstrated strong emotional and relational ties drive social connectedness and provided exchanges for suspended young people to retool themselves with the cognitive and behavioural strategies needed to counter oppressive systems and devaluing (Case and Hunter, 2012). Munson and others (2010) argued that young people often need to be aware of a steady presence of an adult in order to deal with the daily stressors they encounter when they are in transition.

Strong relationships were critical in Boomerang and created encounters where adults modelled pathways for participants to uncover and recognise their strengths and assets. As mentioned, participants indicated improving their interactions with not only their peers but also family. Our analysis found participants used concepts such as joyful, happy and comfort as they reflected back on their experience. These specific emotions became central to fostering acceptance and a nurturing environment. Participants entered Boomerang to encounter quotes that read, ‘You are the hero of your own story’ or complete the tree activity; these visualisation strategies played a role in their value orientation and shaping more positive attitudes towards adults and peers.

Moore (2014) argued that young people often marginalised by the school system rarely have opportunities to feel included and successful in school. Boomerang became a counter-space to this narrative, providing participants with opportunities to experience success and inclusion. The quantitative phase revealed, to some degree, participants who returned to Boomerang were more at risk for academic and behaviour challenges. For example, Boomerang was a critical space for Deanna, a 17-year-old African-American female. She had the highest number of contact points \((n = 4)\) and also exhibited more academic and behaviour...
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Initial suspension</th>
<th>Miles travelled</th>
<th>Academic risks</th>
<th>Behaviour risks</th>
<th>Annual household income</th>
<th>Returned to Boomerang yr. 2</th>
<th>Returned to Boomerang yr. 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Amber</td>
<td>AA</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Possession of drugs</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>&lt;$25 000</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deanna</td>
<td>AA</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Assault on faculty</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>&lt;$25 000</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kevin</td>
<td>AA/H</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Skipping school</td>
<td>8.7</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>&gt;$50 000</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kofi</td>
<td>AA</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Profanity, disruption and skipping school</td>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>&lt;$25 000</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lydia</td>
<td>H</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Sexual harassment</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>&lt;$25 000</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ron</td>
<td>AA</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Skipping school and disruption</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>&lt;$25 000</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
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<tr>
<td>Shelly</td>
<td>AA</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Possession of drugs</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>&lt;$25 000</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sonya</td>
<td>H</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Instigating a fight</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>$25 000</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
risks. Through her interview, Deanna mentioned how Boomerang tapped into her strengths and began to facilitate a more favourable relationship with her mother. Furthermore, Deanna and other participants expressed a future orientation, demonstrating Boomerang may be a catalyst for young people to finish school. In this space, they felt valued and motivated to improve their behaviour and attitude.

Collectively, these findings suggest Boomerang may be a transient space for suspended young people who represent ethnically diverse populations; a space where they feel safe and are able to access support and resources, to include both academic and social. Boomerang, more broadly, creates a space for young people to participate in prosocial behaviour and gain strategies that reduce conflict and tension. Boomerang recovers their school disruption and reengages their physical and psychological self. Findings revealed these underlying dimensions of social connectedness and demonstrate a recovery process where, to some degree, young people rebuild and develop new possibilities (Fine and others, 2000; Park, 2004; Zeldin and others, 2013).

Limitations

Our findings may generate some insight into the experiences of suspended young people in a community space, but there are some limitations in translating these experiences back into their family and school. Participants spoke rather highly of Boomerang but this experience contrasted the encounters they had in the public school system. In addition, our analysis revealed a majority of participants returned to Boomerang due to receiving a suspension in the subsequent years. Directors attempted to work with referring school districts to reduce suspension yet they remained in an uphill battle, continuing to see a significant number of young people, who were African American and Latino, return for suspension for the same arbitrary offences. Public school systems must be willing to challenge the discriminatory and disempowering practices that continue to funnel a disproportionately number of ethnically diverse students out of school through suspension. We acknowledge this work becomes challenging for community agencies when they encounter bureaucratic obstacles and deficit narratives that reduce the capacity of young people to thrive. One participant, Kevin, mentioned, ‘Everything happened was like not fair . . . but I still took it like a champ’. Boomerang and other community agencies must navigate the pervasive discipline practices in school and ‘like a champ’ hold on to the subtle wins they obtain when participants continue to connect with them and change their orientation towards their future, school and family. Public schools and practitioners can learn from the practices found in Boomerang and the ways they reengage suspended young people and build adult relationships. Focusing on the underlying dimensions of social connectedness can reframe the social ecology of young people from environments that disempower to empower.

In this study, we acknowledge some inherent limitations in our methodology. Interviews occurred with a select group of participants who represented about 8 per cent of Boomerang’s annual participation. Although analysis revealed no significant demographic differences between participants in the study and larger sample, we acknowledge individuals may experience Boomerang differently. Our thematic analysis took a deductive analytic approach using Barber and Schluterman’s (2008) description of social connectedness. The analysis, a prior perspective, may not capture other salient themes. We also understand the quantitative analysis was descriptive in nature and relied on attendance reports to operationalise recovery points or returns. Following data collection, Boomerang staff indicated glitches in tracking attendance. Boomerang relies on participants to check in and complete attendance logs; staff indicated some did not complete the log. Our findings may in fact have underreported contact points and, potentially, could have yielded a higher number of contact points.
Conclusion

Community spaces, whether temporary or permanent, offer solace to suspended young people from ethnically diverse populations and opportunities to rebuild assets, cultivate a positive value orientation, and form new connections through positive relationships and resources (Anonymous, 2014; Case and Hunter, 2014; Fine and Ruglis, 2009; Whitlock, 2007). Young people rely on community spaces to rest their bodies and engage in points of recovery; dimensions of social connectedness reveal the ways in which this recovery manifests in their lives. Social connectedness is an indicator of well-being and continues to function as a protective factor for young people (Daly and others, 2010; World Health Organization, 2015). Boomerang must continue to be a champion and identify ways to reach beyond the borders of their programme and into schools and families in order to strengthen their capacity to reduce hostility and create more opportunities for young people to develop and grow. Schools must eradicate the silos, and community agencies like Boomerang must work in partnership to train and implement strategies that counter a deficit narrative of ethnically diverse young people and reconnect their bodies and mind back into the education pipeline.

Disclosure

The authors acknowledge this work is original content.

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