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"Throw Dat Hat!": Educational Experiences, Attainment, and Aspirations of Adolescent Female Trafficking Survivors in a Residential Facility

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Abstract: This study addresses the gap in research on the educational experiences of adolescent human trafficking survivors, with a focus on their past, present, and future educational experiences and goals. Its objective is to inform the best practices for educational programming within female adolescent residential care centers in the United States. Drawing on a subset of data from a broader mixed-methods case study conducted at the Allasso House residential facility, this research involved 11 current residents. The data sources included case files detailing their past educational experiences, assessments of their current educational achievements, and interviews exploring their future aspirations. The findings reveal key themes related to the residents past risk factors, current educational successes and barriers, and tensions in setting future goals. Most of the residents expressed a desire to attain high school equivalency, identifying financial stability as a primary motivation. They also aspired to form healthy families, while placing significant value on material success. Unlike studies that define success primarily through survival, sobriety, and the avoidance of re-trafficking, this research highlights the broader aspirations of these adolescents, emphasizing the critical role of education in general wellbeing, risk mitigation, and future success. This study underscores the importance of prioritizing educational attainment and long-term aspirations in future research and in the design of residential programs for adolescent survivors of trafficking.

Keywords: adolescent trafficking; educational experiences; educational attainment; future aspirations; sex trafficking

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1. Introduction

Human trafficking, a severe form of exploitation that involves the use of force, fraud, or coercion to obtain some type of labor or commercial sex act, has become a global epidemic with devastating consequences. Victims of this crime, predominantly women and children, often face significant mental health challenges, including post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, and anxiety, as a result of the trauma they have endured (Chambers et al. 2024; Murnan et al. 2024; Perry et al. 2023; Ravi et al. 2022). In this context, education has emerged as a critical protective factor that can help mitigate the negative impacts of human trafficking and empower survivors to rebuild their lives (Clawson and Goldblatt Grace 2007).

Residential care facilities dedicated to female adolescent trafficking survivors play a crucial role in providing safe havens for healing and rehabilitation. The most recent national survey of residential programs for victims of sex trafficking noted that there were 33 residential care centers in the United States (Reichert and Sylwestrzak 2013). To the best of our knowledge, there has not been a national survey on residential programs since 2013;

however, the Institute for Shelter Care hosts a national shelter landscape map on its website. In 2024, of the 216 open and active shelters in its United States database, 70 (32.4%) programs serve minor victims (Institute for Shelter Care n.d.). These facilities prioritize separating victims from their abusers while offering essential resources and support to empower them to build independent lives that are free from exploitation. Beyond addressing their immediate needs, such as shelter and safety, these facilities focus on fostering emotional and mental wellbeing and access to education.

The extant literature predominantly focuses on assessing the risk factors, treatment requirements, and services rendered in such institutions (Clawson and Goldblatt Grace 2007; Hickle and Roe-Sepowitz 2018; Ide and Mather 2019). Despite the substantial information available, a crucial gap remains concerning educational practices in residential care facilities catering to female adolescents who have experienced sex trafficking victimization. Little research exists on adolescent survivors' previous educational attainment, present educational status, and future aspirations (Fedina et al. 2019; Franchino-Olsen 2019). This research is lacking even though education is highlighted as a "factor needed for success" for survivors (Clawson and Goldblatt Grace 2007, p. 8). Education can help reduce disparities that heighten trafficking survivors' vulnerability to further harm (Hopper 2017) and is understood as a basic need for victims in the research (Hogan and Roe-Sepowitz 2023; Vollinger and Campbell 2022). The purpose of this study is to underscore the significance of education for risk mitigation and the general wellbeing and future success of female adolescent survivors of human trafficking in a residential facility

Our research questions focused on the residents' past, present, and future educational experiences and goals. This study, set in the Gulf South of the United States, lays the groundwork for educational best practices in female adolescent residential care centers in the United States by examining the following research questions: (1) What were the prior educational experiences of survivors? (2) What educational needs, strengths, and weaknesses are identified, including special needs and accommodations? (3) What are the survivors' long-term and short-term educational goals? (4) What are the survivors' visions for their future success? By exploring these questions, this study aims to provide a roadmap for improving educational outcomes and empowering female adolescents who have experienced trafficking victimization to reach their full potential.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Human Trafficking Defined

The Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act (TVPA, United States Department of State 2000) was enacted in the United States, renewing policy and practice focusing on the experiences of children and adults victimized through sexual exploitation and sex trafficking:

> Sex trafficking is the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, obtaining, patronizing, or soliciting of a person for the purpose of a commercial sex act in which a commercial sex act is induced by force, fraud, or coercion, or in which the person induced to perform such act has not attained 18 years of age. (22 U.S.C. § 7102(11)(A))

This aligns with the international definition established by the United Nations Protocol to Prevent, Suppress, and Punish Trafficking in Persons (Doherty and Harris 2015). Notably, United States law specifies that for those under 18, no proof of force, fraud, or coercion is required to establish their victimization. Among vulnerable populations, adolescent survivors of human trafficking face unique challenges and risks. Recent research has highlighted the critical role that education can play as both a risk and protective factor for these young individuals (Ladd and Weaver 2018; Lutya 2010).

2.2. Residential Care Centers

In the absence of specialized care centers, victims of sex trafficking are frequently placed in shelters that are ill equipped to meet their unique needs (Recknor et al. 2023).

These shelters are primarily designed for individuals experiencing domestic violence, homelessness, or substance abuse and lack the resources and understanding to adequately address the complex trauma and challenges faced by trafficking survivors (Reichert and Sylwestrzak 2013). Victims of sex trafficking require more than just basic necessities, such as food and shelter; they need specialized support, including counseling, job skills training, education, and assistance in developing essential life skills (Reid 2008). Recognizing this critical gap, service providers and law enforcement officials working on the frontlines began to advocate for the development of dedicated facilities that could provide comprehensive, long-term care tailored to the specific needs of trafficking survivors (Clawson and Goldblatt Grace 2007; Ide and Mather 2019). Residential facilities, also known as safe houses, provide victims of sex trafficking with a safe and supportive environment away from their exploiters. These centers offer various residential treatment and training programs to empower survivors to build a life independent of exploitation (Ide and Mather 2019).

2.3. The Importance of Education

The educational experiences and needs of females in adolescent residential care centers in the United States have been an area of growing concern in recent years. Research has consistently shown that children in residential and foster care tend to fall behind their peers academically, often leaving school with few or no qualifications (Clemens et al. 2017; Font and Palmer 2024; McGuire et al. 2021; Stone 2007). Education can also play a role in addressing the root causes of human trafficking, such as poverty, gender inequality, and a lack of economic opportunity (Gacinya 2020; Gezie et al. 2021; Ortega et al. 2022; Russell 2014; Twis 2019). Victims of human trafficking often find themselves isolated and trapped in a cycle of exploitation with limited options for breaking free (Hagan et al. 2021; Pascual-Leone et al. 2017). However, research suggests that improved levels of education and employability can provide victims with more opportunities to rebuild their lives outside of sex trafficking victimization (Gibbs et al. 2015). In a review of three residential programs that serve adolescent sex trafficking victims, the majority (68% of 201 clients in the three programs) reported needing educational support. Educational support was the fifth top area of need at intake, behind crisis intervention, safety planning, sexual health, and food or clothing (Gibbs et al. 2015).

Notably, some victims of sex trafficking may need to address lingering educational obstacles, such as obtaining their high school equivalency credentials or pursuing postsecondary education (Hammond and McGlone 2014; Lutya 2010). These educational goals can be complicated further by the trauma and instability experienced during their exploitation. Additionally, many adolescent survivors may have interrupted educational trajectories, including school absences or drop-outs, which can limit their future opportunities (Gibbs et al. 2015).

2.4. Education as a Risk and Protective Factor for Human Trafficking

To the best of our knowledge, the current research does not delve into the specifics of education as a stand-alone topic as both a risk and protective factor for adolescent survivors of human trafficking. While the causal relationship between education and human trafficking is a complex and multifaceted issue, there is growing evidence that a lack of access to quality education can be a significant risk factor for individuals (Franchino-Olsen 2019). Researchers have maintained that poor education, a lack of job skills, and limited employment opportunities are substantial barriers to being able to leave sex trafficking victimization on the commercial sex market. Individuals with limited educational opportunities may face more significant challenges in securing stable employment and maintaining a sustainable livelihood, rendering them more vulnerable to the false promises and coercive tactics of human traffickers. Moreover, traffickers often seek out communities where large portions of the population possess low levels of educational attainment (Rosenblatt 2014). This is particularly true for marginalized groups, such as women and girls, whose

access to education may be further constrained by sociocultural norms and gender-based discrimination (Rao and Sweetman 2014).

Providing education and addressing educational potential can lead to better outcomes, such as employment opportunities and social reintegration, for individuals who have experienced trafficking (Clawson and Goldblatt Grace 2007; Hickle and Roe-Sepowitz 2018; Reid 2014; Reid and Piquero 2014; Tsai et al. 2021; Twis 2019). Education plays a crucial role in empowering individuals and communities, providing opportunities for their social and economic advancement, and reducing their vulnerability to exploitation. Increased educational opportunities can provide individuals with the knowledge, skills, and resources to recognize the warning signs of trafficking and to avoid or remove themselves from exploitative situations. Moreover, education can provide individuals with the knowledge and skills to understand their rights, make informed decisions about their own safety and wellbeing, and access support services (Lesak et al. 2023).

Clarke et al. (2012) highlight the pervasive lack of education among victims of sex trafficking. Their study found that most women who entered prostitution as adults had completed high school or higher education, whereas the majority of those who were victimized as adolescents had dropped out before finishing high school. The authors propose that school attendance may serve as a protective factor against sex trafficking victimization, while dropping out is linked to a heightened risk. This aligns with findings by Reid (2014), who demonstrated that educational attainment, particularly high school completion, significantly reduces the risk of persistent exploitation. A retrospective study on the risk and resiliency factors among females who experienced sex trafficking revealed that exploitation had ended by adulthood for over 66% of those who had completed at least a high school education. In comparison, only 13% of those exploited into adulthood had finished high school. Supporting vulnerable girls in completing their education may therefore serve as a protective measure against future trafficking victimization, as education is strongly associated with both the prevention of and resilience against sex trafficking (Reid 2014; Reid and Piquero 2014).

There is a paucity of research highlighting positive outcomes within residential settings (Ide and Mather 2019). Ide and Mather (2019) note that there are very few assessment frameworks or models upon which to judge residential homes and subsequent services for sexually trafficked survivors. They assert that similar assessment instruments are applied within homelessness and domestic violence survivor settings, but they do not attend to the specialized nature of sexually trafficked survivors. Further, the most common indicators of residential success concentrate on basic needs and surviving, such as "not returning to the life" (p. 161). Currently, there is no universally accepted measure by which to judge residential homes for sexually trafficked survivors, and many tools do not include education as part of their measures of success.

DiPrete Brown and Bintliff (2015, 2024) aim to fill this gap by designing a framework to identify the key contexts, quadrants, and dimensions of wellbeing for trafficking survivors. Using an iterative and generative process guided by the lived experiences of sexually trafficked survivors over several years in various contexts and in conjunction with community health professionals and social workers, they identified 11 dimensions of wellbeing for trafficking survivors (DiPrete Brown and Bintliff 2015, 2024; Vatne Bintliff et al. 2023). The "daisy model" (DiPrete Brown and Bintliff 2024) includes four quadrants: lifelong health, interconnection, thriving, and freedom and safety. Within these quadrants, the 11 dimensions (petals) of wellbeing are organized around *Self* at the center, shown in Figure 1. Reading the 4W LIFT Model of Wellbeing figure clockwise, within the lifelong health quadrant, the dimensions of wellbeing include *fair and just community, basic needs, and care for the Earth*. Within interconnection, the three dimensions are *engagement, belonging, and mutual care*. Rather than merely "surviving, the next quadrant is thriving, which includes wellbeing measures such as *purpose, voice and expression, and growth and flourishing*. Finally, freedom and safety highlight the need for *freedom from harm, engagement, and personal safety*. While the daisy model also allows for the incorporation of dimensions of wellbeing, represented by

concentric circles, across contexts such as family, peers, relationships, informal community, formal community, environment, and global, given the insular nature of Allasso House, those are not applicable in this context.)

DIMENSION	DEFINITION
Free from Harm	I am able to live, move from place-to-place, play, and learn free from harm, such as bullying, fear, or intimidation.
Personal Safety and Bodily Sovereignty	I feel safe, protected, and free in my body, mind, and spirit. I have ownership over my own body.
Care for the Earth	I care for soil, water, plants, animals so that we all have what we need and so that the environment is protected in the future.
Basic Needs	I have food, shelter, health care, water, sanitation, a healthy and safe environment, and education that meets my personalized needs.
Fair and Just Community	I live with rules that are clear and fair. They allow me to be treated justly and to treat others justly.
Engagement	I actively participate within my community in various ways.
Belonging	People recognize and accept me for who I am. I feel like I belong.
Mutual Care	I have trusting relationships with people that care for each other.
Purpose	I participate in activities that feel significant and meaningful.
Voice and Expression	I feel free, able, and motivated to tell people about my identity, opinions, and beliefs.
Growth and Flourishing	My daily life offers ongoing opportunities to flourish and grow.

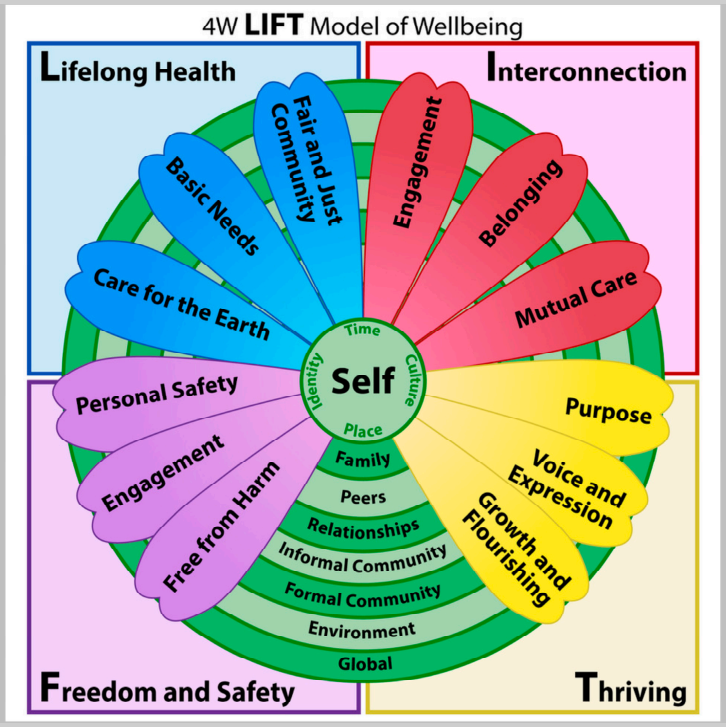


Figure 1. The 4W LIFT (lifelong health; interconnection; freedom and safety; and thriving) Model recognizes multiple dimensions of wellbeing, which enable people to sense and express more specific and contextualized understandings of their lived experiences. These dimensions have been shaped by the voices of women and children in a variety of contexts in multiple countries around the world (DiPrete Brown and Bintliff 2024, p. 6).

While the interplay between education and human trafficking is complex, the available evidence strongly suggests that improving access to quality education, particularly for marginalized populations, can be a powerful tool in the fight against this heinous form of exploitation. As policymakers and residential care centers continue to address the multifaceted challenges of human trafficking, the centrality of education in prevention and empowerment must remain a key priority.

3. Methodology

As part of a more extensive mixed-methods case study, the research team engaged in an inductive qualitative analysis of the educational intake information from a residential home of survivors of sex and/or human trafficking.

3.1. Context/Participants

The context for this research is Allasso House (a pseudonym), a residential religious facility for adolescent human trafficking survivors aged 0–18 and located in the Gulf South. Its mission is to deliver a model program of recovery and rehabilitation for female youth victims of human trafficking. Allasso House is a state-licensed group home and allows long-term placements, during which the average child resides for 157.29 days (SD = 247.59; range: 3–1850 days). Allasso House receives referrals from, including but not limited to, the state Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS), the Office of Juvenile Justice (OJJ), Child Advocacy Centers, the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI), Homeland

Security, and family members, as well as many local organizations. The facility is accredited by the National Trafficking Shelter Alliance, is supported by a religious organization and operated by religious and lay individuals and is in a rural setting. It offers mental health and substance abuse therapy and medical and dental care, as well as academic assessments and educational services implemented by a full-time, certified teacher employed by the facility. Allasso House has an in-house, full-time therapist on staff as well.

Due to safety concerns and to ensure separation between victims and perpetrators of human trafficking, as well as to ensure a focus on healing, residents' interactions with the greater community are limited. Group outings are supervised, with the majority of their interactions on a weekly basis being with medical providers, in the community library, and in church services on Sundays. Off-site chaperoned recreational opportunities are provided, such as fishing, bowling, and visiting the county fair. While it is a religious-based facility, there are no religious requirements for admission, and religious activities are available but are optional.

Due to our varied expertise in the human trafficking field and K-12 education, our research team was invited by the original program manager to engage in research at this residence. We utilized a subset of data from a more extensive mixed-methods case study on the residential facility. For this article, the participants were 11 current residents (Appendix A) of the facility, ages 11 through 16, at the time of intake.

3.2. Data Collection

Our data included educational intake data on the 11 participants, including their educational files, initial academic placement scores, outside diagnostic testing, and educational interviews; these data were collected as part of the intake process at Allasso House, pre-dating our research partnership. The main source of the data for this article was the educational interviews. The purpose of these interviews and testing is to aid the Allasso House staff in meeting the educational needs of the residents while they live in the facility. The facility's certified teacher constructed the interview, and she administers it to all new residents; she also supervises the online assessment for the academic placement scores. The intake interview (Appendix B) includes 12 open-ended questions about the residents' educational experiences, favorite and least favorite subjects, known accommodations, perceived educational strengths and weaknesses, and future educational goals and plans. These interviews are not recorded; the teacher takes notes as a student talks, capturing their words as closely as possible within quotation marks to denote their exact wording.

To share the data with the research team, the teacher assigned a numerical code to the interview notes, scores, and prior educational files; the associated names were unavailable to the researchers, making the responses anonymous to the team.

3.3. Data Analysis

Our team of five researchers (Authors 1–5) first interpreted (Saldaña 2009) the responses through a combination of two types of first-round coding (Saldaña 2009): initial coding (Charmaz 2006) and values coding (Saldaña 2009; Stake 1995). Initial coding allowed us to break down the data to closely examine, compare, and contrast the pieces (Saldaña 2009). Combining this with values coding allowed us to focus on the participants' educational values, beliefs, attitudes, and perspectives (Saldaña 2009). This combination of first-round coding methods helped us focus on the participants' experiences in this case study. Our team's first-round coding process was as follows: First, we individually and manually coded the interview notes from one participant. Then, we discussed our codes for that participant together. Finally, we gathered all the created codes into one document together under the interview question. We coded all 11 interviews in this manner, ending with over 300 first-round codes that included values such as "school is boring", "social connections", "ignoring discrepancies", "school attendance is not mandatory", "having a good attitude is a goal", "nursing is a good career", "money is success", and "value helping parents financially".

During first-round coding, all researchers were encouraged to engage in memoing (Saldaña 2009) to capture their interpretations, thinking, and theorizing, making our coding process as transparent as possible. This transparency allowed for individual reflexivity (Saldaña 2009) and trustworthiness within our individual coding process (Stake 1995). Our memos were the starting points of discussions as we moved into the second round of coding.

For our second round of coding, we employed pattern coding (Saldaña 2009). The research team input the first-round codes into a digital matrix (Saldaña 2009) to identify themes and patterns across the coded data (Guba and Lincoln 1994; Miles and Huberman 1994). We originally created the matrix according to the interview questions, listing the question, the participant ID #, and our first-round codes.

All second-round coding was conducted as a group across eight sessions; these sessions lasted between one and three hours. When a consensus existed across our independent coding, we kept the codes intact. When there were disagreements in our interpretations, we discussed our thinking, and memos and evidence from the interviews, as well as data from the educational reports and placement assessment scores, until we reached a consensus. As we analyzed the codes for the patterns, we combined the first-round codes into larger categories. For example, we combined the codes "helping parents financially" and "money is success" into the pattern code of "financial independence". We reorganized the digital matrix as we consolidated the codes into categories. The digital matrix allowed us to reorganize the codes easily as we interpreted and synthesized them into categories and themes within the research questions. We synthesized the second-round pattern codes into 18 overarching themes (Appendix C) that gave meaning and coherence to the data, consolidating and harmonizing the essence of the survivors' educational experiences into coherent and meaningful wholes (DeSantis and Ugarriza 2000). Finally, we organized the 18 themes into 4 findings that directly corresponded to our research questions. This team-based approach to synthesizing the codes increased the dependability and trustworthiness of both our coding and findings (Cascio et al. 2019).

4. Findings

We have four main findings from this research study. First, the residents had negative experiences of school and teachers overall and exhibited discrepancies between their perceived grade levels and their actual educational attainment. Second, the residents require multiple educational supports, including behavioral interventions, socio-emotional regulation, multimodal instruction, special education services, and academic enrichment. Third, the residents vocalized short-term and long-term educational and professional goals, yet they needed work to set aligned, achievable goals. Fourth, while the residents described success as having money, they also described success as having security and other positive affective qualities.

RQ 1: What are the survivors' prior educational experiences?

The most salient theme across the data is that these survivors have been exposed to many negative school experiences, including troubles with teachers. Most of the young women described school as "boring", unnecessary, "a waste of time", and/or a place of "failure". Only one of the young women, originally from South America, expressed a positive view of school, and she only attended through the second grade. Four survivors described teachers who they felt had specifically "targeted" them, making them feel unwelcome. As one student described, "school makes me feel yucky", and another stated that they even returned to Allaso House due to "not liking teachers". Another student blamed her educational difficulties on one teacher, stating, "I had a bad teacher and that is why I am behind in school". This same student even had a physical altercation with a teacher that led to her expulsion on the basis that "the teacher hit and screamed at me first". Another student described herself as "The El Chapo" of her junior high.

Coupled with these negative feelings about school was a recurring theme of educational instability for these survivors. Switching schools multiple times was common, with

one survivor having been in four school systems in the space of one year. Most of the young women had attendance problems, sometimes staying home to have "quiet time" or because "no one was around to make [them] go to school". Many described running away once or more or their admittance to a "behavior hospital"; both situations led to long periods of school absences. The young women also had a high course failure rate, especially as they moved into intermediate elementary and middle school grades.

The area of biggest concern when analyzing the data was the discrepancy between the survivors' ages, the grade levels that the survivors considered themselves to be in, and their educational attainment levels according to their school records and placement scores. Some survivors placed themselves into a grade level between one and four grades higher than the grade they had completed and/or the grade level that their placement scores indicated. For example, one survivor stated she believed she "belonged in twelfth grade due to starting kindergarten a year early", but the last grade in which she had officially attended school was the ninth grade. However, only one survivor placed herself in a grade lower than her placement scores and educational files indicated, stating that she believed she belonged "in the fourth grade instead of the sixth grade". Only two of the survivors agreed that the grade level that she had last attended was the grade level in which she should be placed in; one student explained that she belonged in "eighth grade" because she "left eighth grade due to an altercation with a teacher". The second student placed herself in "second grade" because she had "left [school] due to the cost" at seven years old. While the survivors all noted that they needed to "make up" some learning, the majority did not place themselves in their last known grade level achieved, nor in the grade level of their placement assessment. These discrepancies suggest that the survivors do not grasp fully the complex correlation between grades, testing achievement, attendance, and age for academic placement; instead, they rely on traditional age norms for grade level placement.

However, even with these negative educational experiences, the survivors did have some positive associations with school. Notably, many of the young women talked about school as means for finding belonging and friendship, two key needs that they expressed they desired for themselves and their future (see more about this in finding 4). The young women often described school as their place to find a "circle of friends", especially in co-curriculars like "band" or "track", which was their motivation for attending when they were failing or having other negative school experiences.

RQ 2: What are the survivors' educational needs?

When analyzing the data for the survivors' educational needs, including their self-perceived needs, there were five points of discussion. First, all the survivors expressed the need for educational enrichment beyond using a computer for online modules and assessments in English Language Arts (ELA) and math. For example, the participants described themselves as "artistic" and "creative" and noted that art classes were not available to them currently. The young women talked about being artistic and creative; several shared their love of STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) and social studies and expressed a desire to go beyond the online learning required to earn credits toward a high school equivalency.

Second, all the survivors expressed a need for support in ELA, including reading, writing, or both. Their placement test scores support this need, as all the young women tested below their ages in ELA, with their average scores placing the young women at late elementary/early middle school levels. While most of the survivors did not recognize their overall educational attainment as being lower than expected of their ages (see finding 1), they did recognize their need for growth in reading, especially those who were English learners. For example, some asked for "hands-on" experiments and "visuals" to go along with traditional online learning on the computer.

Third, many of the survivors expressed their need for behavioral support and/or interventions to help them succeed in their education. Some noted that they need support for attention, such as a "separate room" for testing, while others requested interventions

for developing "positive study behaviors" and the ability to be involved in "group work" instead of all independent learning.

Fourth, at the root of their need for behavioral support and interventions, the survivors indicated a need for socio-emotional learning and regulation support. Issues with motivation to do work and resiliency to keep trying when failing to learn new material, and feeling frustrated with the learning were all struggles of the survivors. Other socio-emotional factors that were salient in the interviews were the need to handle anxiety about school, especially "test anxiety" and "jealousy" when others succeed.

Finally, while the survivors did not express this need, we saw the issue repeated across their intake files and interviews: they have an urgent need for the consistent identification and application of special education services. Within the interview data, all 11 participants noted needs that qualify under special education, from behavior support and English language learning to learning disabilities. The intake diagnostics confirmed that all 11 participants qualify for special education; however, some of their cases were undiagnosed in previous school settings, and in no case did a survivor have consistent reporting of special education services in their intake file. Much of this aligned with the participants' moving in and out of schools and districts, leading to inconsistent general educational services throughout their lives as well. Overall, their educational needs were consistently unmet—yet clearly voiced.

RQ 3: What are the survivors' educational goals?

After analyzing the data, we found three key themes about the survivors' educational goals. First, the majority of the survivors have aspirations of future school achievement. All of the young women also reported the goal of earning a general education diploma (GED) or a high school diploma; as one participant enthusiastically communicated, they want to "Throw dat hat!".

Second, the survivors hoped to attend college or complete vocational training in the professional fields of their choice. Most also expressed aspirations to earn degrees or "certifications" in fields that would allow them to serve their communities and help others. For example, four survivors stated that they wanted "to become a nurse", with one survivor specifying that she wanted to be a "sexual trauma nurse" or a "social worker". Additionally, some survivors were interested in other healthcare professions, such as physician assistant, therapist, or mental health counselor. Social work was another field of interest, as were careers in the creative beauty industry, such as tattoo artist, hair stylist, nail technician, and/or aesthetician. Notably, several expressed aspirations to become entrepreneurs, owning their own businesses for financial independence; for example, one survivor stated that she wanted to become a "CEO businesswoman". From the data, there was a clear direction that these survivors are interested in pursuing fields that are primarily centered around caregiving and helping roles.

Third, the survivors need support in developing aligned, achievable goals and scaffolding their actions to achieve these goals, much like other adolescents. The survivors have a disconnect between where they are academically and where they aim to be. One survivor's goal was to spend one hour per day on schoolwork, which is insufficient for someone whose attainment is two grade levels below her age. Additionally, another young woman noted that she aimed to attend class and complete classwork 25% of the time. Allotting this time and percentage to schoolwork daily is not likely to produce the results that the survivors anticipated. There is a noticeable mismatch between the goals they set and the amount of time and effort they perceived as necessary to make these goals a reality.

It is evident that while many of them have set lofty and inspiring goals for their futures, the survivors often struggled with outlining the concrete steps needed to achieve these ambitions. The intake interview included a section prompting the survivors to describe the "baby steps" necessary to reach their overarching goals. For example, six of the survivors indicated a big goal of being either a "business owner" or a "nurse", and all six had small goals of also "[making] better grades in school", but many left the "baby steps" goal completely blank. For those who did attempt to fill out this section, the tasks they listed

were frequently unrelated to their stated goals. For example, one survivor listed becoming a "nurse" as a big goal and completing "an hour of [online coursework] a day" as a small goal, but stated as a baby step that she wanted to "get her 9th grade recovery credits". As is common in adolescents, this suggests a lack of guidance or knowledge about the practical steps required to achieve their dreams. For instance, a survivor aspiring to become a nurse might not identify necessary subjects such as studying science or gaining relevant volunteer experience. Instead, they noted generic actions like "study hard" or "help people", which, while positive, do not provide a clear, specific roadmap to their desired dreams.

RQ 4: What are the survivors' definitions of future success?

For many of the young women, their vision of success is intricately linked to financial stability and security. The notion that "money equals success" was a common theme, underscoring the importance of economic independence and the ability to provide for themselves and their families. Specific material items were mentioned, such as having a "nice car" or their "own home"; several specifically mentioned wanting a "big house" as a signal of their success in life.

Their vision of success is multifaceted and extends beyond mere financial gain. Stability and security are paramount components of their vision of success. Having lived through periods of extreme instability, these survivors yearn for a "safe" living environment, as opposed to homes where they previously felt "unsafe" due to "yelling" and/or "fighting". Stability encompasses a predictable, safe life, free from the threats and uncertainties they once faced. Security involves both "physical safety" and emotional wellbeing, ensuring that they are protected from further harm and supported in their healing process. Broader, affective elements of success were also noted, such as the desire to feel "happy" or "accomplished" in life. Ultimately, their vision of success is a holistic blend of financial independence, personal safety, and emotional fulfillment.

5. Discussion

Other studies have reported on residential facilities and defined the success of programs as having residents who are "not dead, not high, not trafficked" (Ide and Mather 2019, p. 161). We, however, aim to define success in a more positive and affirming manner. Below, we discuss our findings in relation to the descriptors of the *4W Lift Model of Wellbeing*, highlighting the indicators of survivor wellbeing within our findings (DiPrete Brown and Bintliff 2024).

Rejecting a deficit model of adolescent trafficked survivors, we seek to highlight the promising aspects of survivor wellbeing revealed by the data. Previous research regarding residential homes for sexually trafficked survivors has addressed education in general terms, but only a few works have indicated education as a factor for success within their programs (Ide and Mather 2019). The application of educational data provides more specific outcomes for wellbeing within an educational context. This study contributes an understanding to the extant literature that targeted education within residential homes supports survivors' current and future wellbeing. The *4W LIFT Model of Wellbeing* (DiPrete Brown and Bintliff 2024) offers a measure for gauging the aspects of wellbeing of the 11 adolescent survivors. From the 11 wellbeing dimensions delineated within the Model of Wellbeing framework, our data and themes reflect five dimensions: *fair and just community, engagement, belonging, purpose, and mutual care experiences* (DiPrete Brown and Bintliff 2024). Most of the dimensions fell within the interconnection quadrant. Due to the limited educational data for this study, as well as its controlled residential context, we focus our discussion solely on these quadrants and dimensions.

5.1. Fair and Just Society

The dimension *of fair and just society* refers to equitable access to services and reciprocal, just treatment (DiPrete Brown and Bintliff 2024). Allasso House's focus on education services, such as computer-based instruction and a full-time certified teacher, provides several social protections. According to the data, the adolescents understood that they

needed more educational support than were provided within their previous educational experiences. Just and equitable treatment within education at Allasso House needs to be developed further, as the residents require consistent access to special education services. Additionally, the residents recognize their strengths in areas such as creativity, athletics, academics, and personal qualities like persistence and caring; all should be interwoven within their educational experiences. Connecting creative outlets to educational experiences is a crucial experience for survivors. This assertion aligns with Reid's (2008) argument that victims of trafficking require more than just basic necessities as they build a community of educated survivors who are no longer targets of traffickers due to their level of educational attainment (Rosenblatt 2014).

5.2. Engagement

The dimension of *engagement* (DiPrete Brown and Bintliff 2024) within the model is defined as how survivors engage within their community in valuable and meaningful ways. Within Allasso House, engagement within the community is modeled regularly: the religious caregivers are all trained nurses, the residents attend regular doctor's appointments, and case workers come from the community to carry out various therapies with the residents. Food is donated by local community food pantries, and clothing is also donated to the residents by the community. Visits to the community library are part of the educational services provided and offer appropriate, albeit limited, engagement with the community. While physical safety is critical, other avenues for community engagement that would help prepare Allasso House's residents for success after they leave the facility would be beneficial to empower the survivors to build a life independent of exploitation (Ide and Mather 2019). This finding contributes to the literature on education by arguing that community educational engagement is a factor in wellbeing; for example, additional experts in education would be beneficial community partners for the survivors.

5.3. Belonging

Another dimension in the framework is *belonging*. This is defined as *people recognize me and accept me for who I am* (DiPrete Brown and Bintliff 2024). Belonging is crucial, as survivors need to integrate into social systems. The Allasso House residents expressed a strong desire for social connections within an educational setting and saw school as an avenue to develop and sustain social connections and make friendships. With more hands-on and interactive educational opportunities, Allasso House could use education to enhance developing social connections and friendships, fostering the sense of belonging and community that survivors felt in their previous school settings. This research contributes to the literature by underscoring the need for social workers and educators to work together to help create communities of belonging in schools for students with trafficking risk factors and in residential homes for trafficking survivors, focusing particularly on social and emotional learning (Rosenblatt 2014).

5.4. Purpose

The dimensions of *belonging* directly influence the sense of *purpose* among survivors, as outlined in DiPrete Brown and Bintliff's (2024) framework. The *purpose* dimension indicates how a survivor's ability to have meaningful engagement with an individual passion or interest has a positive impact on their education or growth. It is also important in this dimension for a survivor to be able to identify a source of meaningfulness and satisfaction in activities that help to promote growth and success. In Allasso House, the adolescent survivors were able to identify their strengths within specific school subjects, creativity, and athleticism. The survivors also recognized personal affective qualities like "persistence" and "caring". Moving forward, all caregivers working with adolescent survivors should intentionally model planning and goal-setting processes to bridge the gap between the current lived experience of survivors, their individual strengths, and their stated goals.

This type of purpose-oriented education builds resilience, a previously identified key factor for the prevention of trafficking victimization (Reid 2014; Reid and Piquero 2014).

5.5. Mutual Care Experiences

One of the last dimensions from the wellbeing framework that our study identified in our Allasso House analysis was the dimension of *mutual care experiences*. This dimension defines mutual care as how survivors feel about the care they are receiving and whether that level of care is reciprocated by the people the survivors feel they need most in their lives now (DiPrete Brown and Bintliff 2024). Within our data, the survivors expressed a need for mutual care experiences: first, they demonstrated disdain for prior educational experiences in which they did not feel care from educators and expressed their preferences for future caregiving and helping professions, in which they would provide care for others. One potential avenue for enhancing mutual care within residential facility education is to provide cooperative learning opportunities and perspective-taking activities in which the residents can build mutual care. By providing hope and focus on future mutually caring careers, education can play a role in empowering survivors to be advocates and address the root causes of human trafficking, such as poverty, gender inequality, and a lack of economic opportunity (Gacinya 2020; Gezie et al. 2021; Ortega et al. 2022; Russell 2014; Twis 2019).

Understanding and expanding upon all the dimensions of wellbeing can inform interventions in residential contexts aiming to enhance survivor outcomes, particularly in terms of education. Our findings underscore the importance of tailored support systems for educational opportunities in fostering stability, security, and success for survivors. Moving forward, addressing these dimensions comprehensively and in an integrated manner is essential for improving their long-term educational outcomes.

5.6. Limitations

The limitations of this research are related to aspects of the methodology, context, and data collection. This study's sample is small, with 11 participants from a single residential facility. This limits the generalizability of its findings to other contexts or populations, as the experiences of these residents may not represent the experiences of all adolescent survivors.

The data analyzed were collected before the research team's involvement, meaning we did not design the interview questions or participate in the data collection. The primary goal of the intake interviews was educational placement, not research, which may have limited the depth and focus of the responses. Since the facility's certified teacher conducted the interviews and supervised the academic assessment, there is potential for bias in how the interviews were conducted or how the responses were interpreted, especially without direct researcher involvement during the data collection. Additionally, the intake interviews were not recorded; instead, the teacher took notes while the students spoke. This may have led to some inaccuracies or a loss of detail, as it relied on the teacher's ability to capture the exact words and meaning of the participants. This limitation could affect the richness of the data and the depth of the analysis.

This research focused on educational aspects of the participants' experiences, potentially overlooking other important dimensions of their recovery and wellbeing, such as psychological, social, or emotional factors. The narrow focus on the educational intake forms might not have fully captured the holistic experiences of the participants.

These limitations highlight potential biases, challenges in the richness of the data, and issues of generalizability that should be considered when interpreting this study's findings.

5.7. Implications and Conclusions

Our research findings stress the need for future research to focus on the long-term educational outcomes for survivors, exploring how educational interventions and enrichment can support survivors' aspirations best. Additionally, policy efforts should aim to provide consistent, specialized educational services and support to trafficking survivors, ensuring that their unique needs are met across different educational and residential settings. In

sum, the findings imply that a multi-dimensional approach—addressing their academic, socio-emotional, and vocational needs—will be essential in helping adolescent trafficking survivors achieve long-term success and independence.

Education is a cornerstone for enhancing wellbeing among survivors of trafficking and marginalization, providing them with the tools, support, and community connections necessary for a stable and fulfilling life. We do not place blame on schools, teachers, or caregivers within residential facilities; instead, we encourage residential home facilities to offer a plethora of diverse educational encounters to meet the individual educational needs of adolescent survivors. We also invite teachers to volunteer as tutors in residency programs, usingtheir educational expertise to turn education into a part of survivors' resiliency—not just a risk factor. We urge teachers and school leaders to look for educational risk factors within their student populations, especially within transfer students with special behavioral and/or socio-emotional needs. We advocate for federal and state funds to be allocated to regular training of in-service and pre-service teachers on risk factors in education; the signs of human trafficking showed up early in these survivors' lives. Further research will delve into more narrative data to include interviews and educational interventions with the adolescent survivors to provide support for them to attain their personal and educational aspirations.

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Appendix A. Participant Demographics

Age		
	N	%
12	1	9.1%
14	2	18.2%
16	5	45.5%
17	1	9.1%
18	2	18.2%
Race		
	N	%
African American	6	54.5%
Caucasian	3	27.3%
Hispanic	2	18.2%
State		
	N	%
Illinois	1	9.1%
Louisiana	9	81.8%
Virginia	1	9.1%

Appendix B. Educational Intake Interview Questions

1. General summary of school experience
    a. Where did you attend school?
    b. When did you attend school there?
    c. What is your overall attitude toward school?
2. What accommodations have you received in the past?
3. What are your favorite subjects?
4. What are your least favorite subjects?
5. How do you learn best?
    a. Learning styles?
    b. Activities?
6. What grade do you believe you belong in?
7. What is the last grade you attended in school? What details can you share about that grade?
8. Strengths and weaknesses
    a. What are you good at?
    b. What do you struggle with?
9. What are your big goals?
10. What are your small goals?
11. What baby steps are you going to take to reach these goals?
12. What is your personal vision of success?

Appendix C. Eighteen Pattern Codes Synthesized by Research Question

Educational experiences of survivors

1. Negative school experiences/teacher experiences
2. Discrepancy between their ages/educational attainment/expectations of grade level
3. Educational instability
4. School as means for belonging/friendship

Self-perceived educational needs, including special needs and accommodations, of the survivors

5. Behavioral support/intervention
6. Enrichment: artistic/creative, STEM, social studies
7. Support in ELA/reading/writing
8. Socio-emotional regulation support
9. Multiple modes of instruction
10. Consistent identification and application of special education services

Educational goals of the survivors

11. Lacking the ability to set aligned, achievable goals
12. Graduating high school and further schooling/training
13. Helping professions as desirable
14. Entrepreneurship as independence
15. Lofty goals without a path

Vision of success

16. Money equals success
17. Stability and security allow for economic independence
18. Emphasize affective elements of success

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