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Recommendations for Educating Youth about Sex Trafficking

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ABSTRACT



The need to educate youth on sex trafficking in the United States has received considerable attention; however, limited research is available to guide development of educational programming for youth. Perspectives from 32 experts in fields connected to sex trafficking and violence prevention were obtained through focus groups and interviews. Questions focused on goals/purposes of educating youth about sex trafficking, content to include in a school-based sex trafficking curriculum for middle and high school students, methods to deliver such a curriculum, and challenges to implementing a sex trafficking curriculum in schools and associated strategies. Experts recommended content on healthy and unhealthy relationships, general information about sex trafficking, factors related to sex trafficking, and identification of safe people and needed resources. Program delivery recommendations focused on delivery approach, format, facilitation, manualization, and integration throughout the school's curriculum. Lastly, experts noted implementation challenges and associated strategies relating to time and space in school curriculum, parents' discomfort with educating their children about sex trafficking, and buy-in from school administrators. Results build on existing literature by providing greater depth and context on educating youth about sex trafficking. Empowering youth with information and resources regarding sex trafficking is important for promoting just, peaceful, and inclusive societies.

KEYWORDS

Sex trafficking; qualitative; stakeholder engagement; education; youth

In 2015, the United States Department of Education released a report encouraging schools to improve awareness, prevention, and response to the sex trafficking of youth (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). In response to this report, several states have enacted laws requiring schools to provide students with sex trafficking education (Florida Department of Education, 2019; Session Law 2019-245, 2019; Assembly Bill 1227, 2017). However, there is a lack of evidence-based curricula for educating youth about sex trafficking.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends using a public health approach to develop violence prevention programs (CDC, n.d.). This approach includes conducting stakeholder interviews and focus groups during both program planning and evaluation (CDC, n.d.; Farrell & Flannery, 2006; Payne & Button, 2009). Engaging stakeholders' knowledgeable about violence prevention (e.g., anti-human trafficking advocates and law enforcement professionals) can provide valuable insight on developing an evidence-informed curriculum, and lead to improved buy-in, community

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capacity, and program sustainability (Leff et al., 2010). To guide efforts focused on developing a promising curriculum for educating youth about sex trafficking, the current study explores the perspectives of expert stakeholders regarding curriculum goals/purposes, content, delivery, and implementation.

Sex Trafficking Terminology

Many terms are used to describe sex trafficking of minors, such as commercial sexual exploitation of children, child sexual exploitation, domestic trafficking, domestic minor sex trafficking, and survival sex (Bath et al., 2020; Dank, 2011; Davidson, 2020; Edwards et al., 2006; Estes & Weiner, 2001; Gerassi et al., 2019; Greenbaum, 2020; Greene et al., 1999; Hornor et al., 2020; O'Brien et al., 2017; Twis, 2020; De Vries et al., 2019; Williamson et al., 2012). For the purposes of this paper, we use the term “sex trafficking” to match language in state policies around sex trafficking education for youth (Florida Department of Education, 2019; Session Law 2019-245, 2019; Assembly Bill 1227, 2017; U.S. Department of Education, 2015). We define “sex trafficking” as the “the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring, or receipt of” youth for the purposes of engagement in commercial sex (United Nations, Office on Drugs and Crime, 2004). Threat, force, or coercion, movement across geographic borders, or the use of a third party are not required under this definition (Davidson, 2020; Greenbaum, 2020).

Educating Youth about Sex Trafficking

Given the amount of time youth spend in school, offering sex trafficking awareness and prevention training in schools is optimal. In addition, traffickers sometimes target school campuses to recruit students into trafficking (Reid, 2016). Thus, students should receive education on the dangers and realities of sex trafficking, and they should have confidence in teachers and other school personnel to protect them and respond accordingly when disclosures are made (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). Importantly, educational efforts should be tailored to include contexts, examples, and details most relevant to youth and their social relationships (Davidson, 2020; Greene et al., 1999; Payne & Button, 2009; De Vries et al., 2019).

A recent review of the literature and programs on educating youth about sex trafficking suggests that sex trafficking dynamics, risks for exploitation, and help-seeking guidance are essential programmatic elements; however, none of the programs included in the review was rigorously evaluated (Gerassi & Nichols, 2017; Rizo, Klein, Chesworth, O'Brien et al., 2019). Acceptability of sex trafficking education is also a concern, as school principals agree that it is a sensitive and controversial topic and might be poorly received by parents (Rizo, Klein, Chesworth, Franchino-Olsen et al., 2021). Addressing potential implementation barriers during program development is important for developing programs that meet the needs of schools (Rizo, Klein, Chesworth, Franchino-Olsen et al., 2021).

In light of the lack of an effective and acceptable gold standard curriculum to educate youth about sex trafficking, more research is needed to inform the development of such programming. As noted above and consistent with a public health approach, experts from diverse professions can supply important input concerning the goals/purposes, content, delivery methods, and implementation strategies that may be helpful in developing and delivering school-based, sex trafficking education programs for youth. Moreover, experts can provide important guidance concerning the acceptability, feasibility, practicalities, and meaningfulness of such programs.

Previous formative research has focused on understanding teen peer and sexual relationships, broadly and with traffickers, as well as identifying and contextualizing grooming tactics (Anderson et al., 2014; Reid, 2016). The importance of engaging youth in sex trafficking prevention, including education on healthy and unhealthy relationships, is evident by multiple interpersonal aspects occurring during this time, such as extending relationships beyond their family unit, obtaining information from peers, and less monitoring from their caregivers. Research has

emphasized including information on healthy and unhealthy relationships in youth sex trafficking education programs, as it could provide youth with the knowledge and skills to identify and prevent sex trafficking recruitment (Anderson et al., 2014; Pierce, 2012; Reid, 2016; Rizo, Klein, Chesworth, O'Brien et al., 2019). Survivors have emphasized the importance of educating youth about sex trafficking as both a prevention strategy, as well as an opportunity to increase access to resources to youth who may be experiencing sex trafficking (Ijadi-Maghsoodi et al., 2018; Rajaram & Tidball, 2016). This study builds upon existing literature by expanding the content areas to include in a program curriculum for youth, as well as providing more detailed expert recommendations on goals/purposes, program delivery, and implementation challenges and solutions. Additionally, this study expands on previous formative research by including experts from a diversity of roles and sectors (Anderson et al., 2014; Ijadi-Maghsoodi et al., 2018; Rajaram & Tidball, 2016; Reid, 2016; Rizo, Klein, Chesworth, Franchino-Olsen et al., 2021). To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study to examine goals/purposes, content, delivery, and implementation recommendations from experts in North Carolina. No previously published studies involve experts from multiple disciplines within this state or region of the United States.

Study Goal and Research Questions

To address the knowledge gaps discussed above, the current study conducted formative research with experts from varying professions to inform development of a school-based sex trafficking education program for youth in North Carolina. Importantly, this study was started because of and guided by North Carolina legislation, with the goal of building evidence around expert perspectives on the new state policy and associated requirements. To address this aim, we gathered opinions from experts in North Carolina working in areas connected to sex trafficking of youth guided by the following four research questions:

- (1) What are the goals/purposes of educating youth about sex trafficking?
- (2) What content should be included in a school-based sex trafficking curriculum for middle and high school students?
- (3) What methods should be used to deliver such a curriculum?
- (4) What challenges should be considered in implementing this curriculum, and what are some strategies for addressing these challenges?

Methods

Participants

Convenience and purposive sampling were used to recruit experts for this study. More specifically, North Carolina experts were emailed invitations to participate in discussions focused on addressing the four research questions. These experts included: school personnel; anti-human trafficking advocates and service providers; state-level leaders in the areas of education, anti-human trafficking, and/or sexual violence prevention; sexual violence providers/advocates/preventionists; law enforcement professionals; legal professionals; researchers in human trafficking; and engaged community members/parents. All study methods were reviewed by the Office of Human Research Ethics at our research team's university (IRB # 17-2160).

Between October 2017 and March 2019, 32 experts attended either a group discussion or an individual interview. Experts included: eleven school personnel; seven anti-human trafficking advocates and/or service providers; six state-level leaders in the areas of education, anti-human trafficking, and/or sexual violence prevention; two sexual violence providers/advocates/preventionists; two law enforcement professionals; two legal professionals; one human trafficking researcher; and one engaged community member/parent. We conducted two individual interviews (all via phone/video

conference) and four group discussions (half in-person and half via phone/video conference). Each group discussion included between three and 14 experts.

Data Collection

Data were collected either in-person, by video conference, or by telephone. Semi-structured group discussions were chosen as the main method of data collection to allow experts to consider multiple ideas and to augment, expand, and potentially disagree with peers' perceptions in real-time. Previous research has documented these aspects of groups discussions as benefits, when compared to individual interviews (Kitzinger, 1995; Morse, 1994; Stewart & Shamdasani, 2014). The group format also provided opportunities to pursue emerging areas of inquiry in response to the research questions (Creswell, 2014). Group discussions were preferred over individual interviews as they provided opportunities to brainstorm and build on multiple perspectives. However, individual interviews were offered to maximize participation among participants who could not attend the group discussions.

For smaller groups, the group discussions followed a traditional focus group format. For larger groups, we used the Charrette procedure, an engaged planning process that provides an alternative to brainstorming (National Charrette Institute, 2020; Samuel et al., 2018; Tague, 2005). In this procedure, subsets of the large group simultaneously brainstorm responses to different questions while one member takes notes. At the end of the allotted time, the notetaker transitions to another subgroup, recaps the previous subgroup's conversation, and the process begins again. Once each subgroup had the opportunity to respond to all questions, notetakers shared all the subgroups' responses with the large group.

Discussions were conducted until data saturation (i.e., no new data or themes identified) was reached (Guest et al., 2006; Krueger, 1994; Morgan, 1997). All study discussions were facilitated using a standardized guide. The guide included each of the overarching research questions along with probes to help stimulate conversation (see Table 1). A standardized notetaking form was also used to take

Table 1. Discussion questions by research question area.

Research Question Area(s)	Discussion Questions	Probing Questions
Goals/Purposes of and Content for Sex Trafficking Education	If you were to develop a curriculum or lesson plan on sex trafficking for middle and high school students, what information would you include?	How might the content differ for middle versus high school students? What types of activities or media resources might you include?
	If you were to develop a case scenario about sex trafficking among youth to use as an educational strategy to teach youth about this crime, based on the sex trafficking cases that you have worked, what would you include in the scenario? ¹	Common circumstances, situation, factors, events, and experiences going on in the life of the youth when the sex trafficking began ¹ How youth become involved in sex trafficking ¹ Relationship between trafficker/perpetrator and youth sex victims ¹ Trafficker/perpetrator tactics to recruit/groom, entrap, and keep youth in sex trafficking situations ¹
Delivering Sex Trafficking Education	How should sex trafficking content be delivered in schools?	Who should teach this content, and how might it fit into a school's overall curriculum? What are some potential challenges to teaching about sex trafficking in schools that will need to be considered?
Implementation Challenges and Strategies to Address the Challenges	What might be parents' concerns related to their children learning about sex trafficking in school? How can parents be engaged to help schools teach youth about sex trafficking?	No probing questions were used for these questions.

¹Only asked of law enforcement professionals.

detailed notes during and after each individual and group discussion. There were multiple notetakers for each session who took notes verbatim, identifying where language was the experts' own. Based on recommended practices for note-based analysis, quotes were extracted when notes indicated the language was the experts' own (Richard A. Krueger & Casey, 2000). Notes were also combined into a single document for each session prior to analysis.

Data Analysis

A case analytic approach was used to identify themes both within and across the discussions (Krueger & Casey, 2014; Miles & Huberman, 1994). First, three coders used an open-ended coding approach to review notes from two of the discussions and developed an initial codebook. Next, these three coders used the codebook to independently review, code, and analyze the remaining discussion notes. The coders remained open to new codes and recommendations that emerged from the data, and they revised the codebook accordingly throughout the process. A fourth coder (the first author) then reviewed and coded each of the discussion groups' notes using the final codebook. The first author and principal investigator met to discuss and resolve any coding discrepancies by consensus.

Once all notes were coded into recommendations, these were sorted based on the research questions. Several strategies were used to enhance the rigor and trustworthiness of the findings, including using multiple coders, creating an audit trail, and examining the data for both similar and different perspectives (Anastas, 2004; Barusch et al., 2011).

Results

Table 2 provides an overview of the experts' feedback on each of the four research questions, along with the subthemes identified within some of these content areas.

Experts' Opinions on the Goals/Purposes of Sex Trafficking Education

Experts shared a number of goals/purposes for educating youth on sex trafficking, including raising awareness, preventing sex trafficking, and increasing access to resources. To raise awareness, experts recommended providing students with definitions, examples, and general information about sex trafficking. Prevention efforts should build on general information about sex trafficking by providing

Table 2. Key recommendations for goals/purposes, content, delivery, and implementation challenges of sex trafficking education for youth.

Research Question Area	Recommendations
Goals/Purposes of Sex Trafficking Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Raise awareness • Prevent sex trafficking • Increase access to resources
Content for Sex Trafficking Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promote change in cultural attitudes • Information on healthy and unhealthy relationships • General information about sex trafficking • Factors related to sex trafficking • Identification of safe people • Identification of needed resources
Delivering Sex Trafficking Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Delivery approach • Format • Facilitation • Manualization
Implementation Challenges and Strategies to Address the Challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Integration throughout the school's curriculum and classrooms • Time and space in the school curriculum • Parents discomfort with educating their children about the sensitive topic of sex trafficking • Buy-in from school administrators

education on related social conditions, as well as other factors, including personal boundaries, consent, bodily autonomy, healthy relationships, and healthy communication. Providing this information to students may reduce their risk for experiencing sex trafficking and promote change in cultural attitudes about sex trafficking.

Experts' Recommendations on Content for Sex Trafficking Education

Experts' recommendations for the content of sex trafficking education addressed the goals previously mentioned and fell within five main content areas: (1) information on healthy and unhealthy relationships, (2) general information about sex trafficking, (3) factors related to sex trafficking, (4) identification of safe people, and (5) identification of needed resources.

Information on Healthy and Unhealthy Relationships

Experts agreed that educational programs for youth focused on sex trafficking should begin by including information on healthy and unhealthy relationships. Experts recommended broadly discussing healthy and unhealthy relationships and connecting unhealthy relationships to the more specific topic of sex trafficking. Further, experts shared that providing foundational information on healthy and unhealthy relationships would help provide a common language for discussing the sensitive topic of sex trafficking. One expert noted, "Content [about] health[y] [and unhealthy] relationships is really important for trafficking, [since] grooming can be very similar for trafficking and sexual violence." Experts highlighted the importance of including specific topics related to healthy and unhealthy relationships: how to distinguish healthy and unhealthy relationships, personal boundaries, bodily autonomy, and consent for sexual experiences.

General Information about Sex Trafficking

Experts noted that programs focused on educating youth about sex trafficking should include general information about sex trafficking, including definitions and how sex trafficking relates to the broader area of human trafficking. In addition, experts recommended including information on the dynamics of sex trafficking. Experts operationalized "dynamics" to include how youth are groomed and recruited into sex trafficking (e.g., social media, romantic partners, friends, and family), as well as the power dynamics used by traffickers to exploit vulnerable youth (defined by immigration status, income, etc.). Experts also suggested including content on sexting and technology use, such as the permanency of the internet, false anonymity, and how certain phone applications are used by traffickers.

Factors Related to Sex Trafficking

Experts shared interest in using a public health approach to acknowledge factors related to sex trafficking victimization. The discussion focused on factors at the individual, interpersonal, and system level. Specific factors mentioned included minoritized sexual identity and orientation, parental poverty, child maltreatment, substance abuse, and gaps in resources and systems. The experts emphasized that while important to acknowledge such factors, the presence of a factor does not mean a person will necessarily experience sex trafficking. Likewise, the integration of such factor information into a program curriculum should be done in a manner that avoids stigmatizing individuals.

Identification of Safe People

The experts discussed the importance of presenting information on how to identify "safe people." Experts defined these as people to whom students could disclose their own or their peers' experiences related to sex trafficking. Experts emphasized that "safe people" may not always be defined by their profession or role, but rather by whether the person is someone the student can trust and go to for support.

Identification of Needed Resources

Experts recommended the inclusion of content on local and national sex trafficking resources. In addition to highlighting these resources, experts noted that the program should clearly mention how these resources support youth experiencing or at risk of experiencing sex trafficking.

Experts' Recommendations on Delivering Sex Trafficking Education

Experts provided various recommendations regarding how sex trafficking education for youth should be delivered. These recommendations centered on five key areas: (1) delivery approach, (2) format, (3) facilitation, (4) manualization, and (5) integration throughout the school's curriculum and classrooms.

Delivery approach

Experts discussed strategies for delivering sex trafficking education. They stressed the importance of presenting content in developmentally appropriate ways. One expert shared, “[It is] important to ensure materials and content [are] age appropriate . . . scaffold the content across a student's education so that more complex topics [e.g., pornography] are addressed in subsequent years.” Experts had mixed feelings on how early sex trafficking education should be provided. Some experts recommended beginning education in elementary school, while others were concerned middle school may be too early, as youth may not have enough life experiences to comprehend various aspects of sex trafficking. Other experts noted middle school may not be too early, as there is often a difference between what youth can comprehend and what adults think youth can understand.

Experts agreed the sensitive nature of sex trafficking requires content delivery with the understanding that some students may have had direct or related experiences (e.g., abuse, running away). Experts also noted that content should be delivered in ways that are interactive and engaging. Experts were asked for examples of activities or media that could be used to present content on sex trafficking and they recommended group discussions, songs, books, videos, and documentaries. Experts also encouraged the use of real-life stories to illustrate how sex trafficking of youth occurs. Experts suggested that anonymized narratives could be drawn from news stories and conversations with professionals in the field, and that they should capture the heterogeneity of sex trafficking experiences, including survival sex and trafficking without a third party. One expert shared, “[Including a variety of stories is important because] if we tell [only] one survivor's story, students will generalize it and think that the issue doesn't apply to them.” Further, experts agreed that content should not be presented in ways that sensationalize sex trafficking or induce fear (e.g., “Make sure kids are armed with knowledge, and don't leave [them] feeling scared and unprepared”).

Format

The experts expressed that sex trafficking education for youth could be delivered in many ways. These include in-person classroom sessions, lunchtime presentations, school assemblies, and online or by technology formats. Notably, experts had mixed feelings on whether education should be provided in single-sex or mixed-sex classrooms, as some dynamics around sex trafficking may be unique to sex and gender. Experts shared mixed-sex settings could be effective if the facilitator were trained on discussing gender-specific dynamics and factors related to sex trafficking.

Facilitation

The experts recommended team facilitation in which one facilitator would deliver the content while an additional facilitator would be in the room to identify and respond to any potential student distress. They also discussed the need for flexibility regarding program facilitation. They felt schools should be able to choose the facilitator who best met their unique needs. However, experts provided some criteria for selecting a facilitator, including being knowledgeable about sex trafficking and sexual abuse, having extensive experience working with youth, and being approachable and non-judgmental.

Potential facilitators mentioned by experts included teachers, guest speakers (e.g., anti-sex trafficking advocates, leaders, and survivors), social workers, school counselors, and school resource officers. Experts had mixed recommendations on the ideal facilitator, recognizing that not all persons in these disciplines would be appropriate. For example, some teachers might not be well-trained on the topic of sex trafficking, certain geographic areas may have limited access to guest speakers, and some school resource officers might not be a good messenger for the curriculum. One expert shared, “[It] could be a problem to have resource officers/police teach this [since] there is a lot of distrust [of police] . . . and resource officers do not always have a trauma informed lens.”

Manualization

Experts suggested that delivery of sex trafficking education for youth would be more successful and consistent across schools if the content were manualized with lesson plans, PowerPoints, worksheets, and other learning materials. They also stressed that the manual should highlight the ways in which the content is aligned with state essential and core educational standards. Experts noted that such alignment could enhance relevance and adoption of the curriculum across schools.

Integration Throughout the School's Curriculum and Classrooms

Experts suggested that content regarding sex trafficking could be integrated into multiple courses (e.g., healthful living, English/literature, social studies, history) to help instill the concepts of how sex trafficking occurs and the possible outcomes associated with it. Course recommendations varied among experts, as some shared how healthful living curriculums are already burdened and successful integration of sex trafficking education in testable curriculum areas (e.g., English/literature, social studies, history) would depend on teacher comfort and require ongoing professional development. One expert shared, “some teachers of core areas might be interested in teaching about trafficking . . . accordingly, sample lesson plans that are mapped across core areas might be a way to integrate some of this content that’s delivered into the broader curriculum.” The experts also recommended using developmentally appropriate visual aids, such as posters, inside and outside of the classroom as another way to engage youth with content.

Experts’ Thoughts on Implementation Challenges and Strategies to Address the Challenges

Experts discussed multiple challenges to consider when implementing a sex trafficking curriculum and proposed solutions to overcome these challenges. These challenges and corresponding solutions fell within three key areas, including: (1) time and space in the school curriculum, (2) parents’ discomfort with educating their children about the sensitive topic of sex trafficking, and (3) buy-in from school administrators.

Time and Space in the School Curriculum

Experts agreed that school schedules are already crowded and overwhelming, so adding a new topic into the schedule could cause difficulties for educators. Experts recommended that curriculum developers and providers partner with the schools to identify the courses in which the sex trafficking material could be most feasibly integrated. This feedback included aligning content with the educational essential standards and designing the sex trafficking curriculum to fit into the standard times available for course delivery (e.g., 45-minute classes, etc.).

Parents’ Discomfort with Educating Their Children about the Sensitive Topic of Sex Trafficking

Experts also recognized that parents may not be supportive of sex trafficking education. One expert noted, “[A parent might] hear the word sex and immediately shut down. [They] might be living in a bubble and [do] not want to admit it is something that can be happening here or in their home.” Experts discussed how educating parents on the topic of sex trafficking and sharing curriculum materials with parents might help improve parental buy-in. One stated:

[It is] important to convey that we are not condoning sex or showing them sexual acts or pornography, but helping kids understand what constitutes as sex trafficking [and] sexual exploitation (such as a boyfriend asks for naked picture and then distribut[ing] it).

When asked about ways to engage parents to help schools teach youth about sex trafficking, experts discussed a variety of delivery formats for parent education ranging from sending a booklet home on how to engage their child in conversations about sex trafficking to providing a workshop, series, or multi-day training hosted by teachers or the PTA. In addition, experts recommended an opt-in/opt-out option for parents who do not want their child to participate in the curriculum, which could be explained in a form sent home with youth at the beginning of the year.

Buy-in from School Administrators

Experts discussed obtaining buy-in from local education agencies or school administrators as a challenge to educating youth about sex trafficking, partially due to the sensitive nature of sex trafficking. Ongoing professional development training on sex trafficking of youth for school professionals was recommended as a first step to gaining their acceptance on the need to educate their students about sex trafficking. In addition, if the state's educational standards include a focus on educating students about sex trafficking, that information should be reviewed with the school administrators. As one expert noted, "Make sure to [show how the curriculum responds to the academic standards and legislation], let them know [if] they aren't following the law and offer to help." Experts also recommended that school officials be aware that implementing a sex trafficking curriculum could increase student disclosures of sex trafficking and related issues (e.g., sexual abuse). Therefore, the schools should contact agencies involved in helping students who have been trafficked (e.g., Department of Social Services, law enforcement, family law attorneys, counselors, residential homes, and healthcare professionals) prior to the implementation of the curriculum.

Discussion

This study aimed to address gaps in our understanding of how best to educate youth about sex trafficking and inform the development of a sex trafficking educational program by gathering opinions of experts working in areas connected to sex trafficking of youth. Findings from focus groups and interviews identified recommendations related to goals/purposes, content, delivery, and implementation.

Goals/Purposes of Sex Trafficking Education

Existing formative research has identified raising awareness, preventing sex trafficking, increasing access to resources, and changing cultural attitudes as potential goals/purposes of sex trafficking educational programs for youth (Anderson et al., 2014; Ijadi-Maghsoodi et al., 2018; Pierce, 2012; Rajaram & Tidball, 2016; Reid, 2016; Rizo, Klein, Chesworth, Franchino-Olsen et al., 2021). Our findings confirm these goals/purposes as essential components of a sex trafficking educational program for youth. In addition, this study supplements existing literature with concrete content, delivery, and implementation recommendations to achieving these goals/purposes from a diverse group of experts.

Content for Sex Trafficking Education

Previous literature has identified information on healthy and unhealthy relationships, general information on sex trafficking, factors related to sex trafficking, identification of safe people, and identification of needed resources as components of existing sex trafficking education programs for youth (Anderson et al., 2014; Jordan et al., 2013; Lux & Mosley, 2014; Perdue et al., 2012; Pierce, 2012; Reid,

2016; Rizo, Klein, Chesworth, O'Brien et al., 2019; Williamson & Baker, 2008). This study further validates the inclusion of these content areas in sex trafficking education programs and adds to the limited literature of formative research about topics to include in sex trafficking education programs (Anderson et al., 2014; Reid, 2016; Rizo, Klein, Chesworth, O'Brien et al., 2019). While specific examples were not discussed, experts mentioned there are system and societal factors which can cause trafficking. This aligns with existing literature identifying systematic oppressions, such as racism, poverty, and homophobia/transphobia, that can create circumstances and situations leading to sex trafficking (Baker, 2015; Holger-Ambrose et al., 2013; Twis, 2020; Xian et al., 2017). Notably, content recommendations aligned with the goals/purposes shared by experts and emphasized the importance of including information about the dynamics of interpersonal settings of youth, such as recognizing minoritized groups, identifying safe people, and school environments. These findings can inform development of trauma-informed, survivor-centered sex trafficking educational programs tailored to youth.

Previous formative research on this subject included high school students, school principals, survivors, and social service providers (Anderson et al., 2014; Reid, 2016; Rizo, Klein, Chesworth, O'Brien et al., 2019). The experts included in this study build upon these formative studies by expanding the diversity of roles and sectors connected to sex trafficking.

Delivering Sex Trafficking Education

Recent work has highlighted the need to train school staff and facilitators delivering sex trafficking or violence education to ensure school personnel are prepared to respond appropriately to student questions and adequately meet student needs (Jagdish Khubchandani et al., 2013; J. Khubchandani et al., 2017; Rizo, Klein, Chesworth, Franchino-Olsen et al., 2021). As found in previous publications, experts in this study recommended that potential facilitators – once well-trained about sex trafficking – could include classroom teachers, school counselors, school social workers, or guest speakers from outside the school (Anderson et al., 2014; Rizo, Klein, Chesworth, Franchino-Olsen et al., 2021; Rizo, Klein, Chesworth, O'Brien et al., 2019). Experts also emphasized the need for educational materials to be developmentally appropriate and potentially integrated across multiple courses, such as health education, English/literature, and social studies. Notably, experts had mixed recommendations on multiple delivery aspects, including how early sex trafficking education should be provided (e.g., elementary, middle, high school), whether education should be provided in a single-sex or mixed-sex classroom, ideal facilitators, and which subject areas would be most appropriate to integrate sex trafficking education. These findings support the need for sex trafficking educational programs to be manualized with clear and complete instructional materials while also customizable for school districts to adapt program delivery aspects to meet their community's needs. Importantly, experts noted student experiences should be considered when delivering a sex trafficking educational program. This finding supports existing literature which emphasizes the need for a trauma-informed, survivor-centered approach in educational programming for youth (Gerassi & Nichols, 2017; Ijadi-Maghsoodi et al., 2018; Rajaram & Tidball, 2016; Reid, 2016).

Implementation Challenges and Strategies to Address the Challenges

Experts recognized the difficulty of adding sex trafficking education into an already full curriculum schedule and recommended aligning such education with existing essential standards while also creatively integrating this material into existing courses. The challenge of overcoming parental discomfort and seeking buy-in and engagement of parents has been discussed in other literature, and these expert recommendations align with previous work in encouraging schools to work with parents to increase their awareness of sex trafficking by providing accurate information about the issue and sharing the curriculum materials (Langford, 2020; Rizo, Klein, Chesworth, Franchino-Olsen et al., 2021). Beyond parental buy-in and engagement, these findings emphasized a clear need to obtain buy-

in from school administrators and professionals. To ensure school personnel understand the importance of sex trafficking education and are appropriately prepared for student distress and disclosures, experts recommended providing ongoing professional development trainings on the issue while emphasizing that schools are required by law to implement sex trafficking education. Additionally, in order to ensure school personnel are able to handle disclosure in a coordinated manner, schools should be connected with local and state-level agencies that can respond and provide care to students who have experienced sex trafficking.

Limitations

Limitations should be considered when interpreting this study's findings. Experts were recruited from a single southeastern state. It is possible different results would be obtained in other geographic regions, with varying amounts and types of experts working in sex trafficking among youth populations. While experts represented multiple sectors, agencies, and types of positions, there were few sexual violence providers/advocates/preventionists, law enforcement personnel, legal professionals, human trafficking researchers, and engaged community members or parents. In addition, no students participated in this study. Importantly, we did not require experts to disclose whether they were a survivor; however, we are aware that survivors engage in this work professionally. Moreover, our team has engaged in additional efforts to partner with and incorporate the perspectives of people with lived experiences during questionnaire development, focus groups/interviews, interpretation of findings, and preparing this manuscript. This paper seeks to add to current expert perspectives in the literature, recognizing the combined findings from these studies is more likely to include a diversity of experiences.

Implications

Despite these limitations, this study adds essential information to the growing body of literature on sex trafficking education programs for youth. Findings from this study reflect perspectives of experts across a wide range of disciplines, recognizing that aspects of delivering sex trafficking education in the school setting, such as demands of educators and busy schedules/curriculum, have implications throughout the community. Expert recommendations from this study can provide schools and communities with preliminary guidance on responding to policies requiring sex trafficking education of youth. Results can also be helpful to existing and future sex trafficking education programs on how to improve upon or design an evidence-informed curriculum with a public health approach, tailoring educational efforts to more effectively reach youth, and contextualizing youth relationship dynamics (Anderson et al., 2014; CDC, n.d.; Farrell & Flannery, 2006; Leff et al., 2010; Payne & Button, 2009; Pierce, 2012; Reid, 2016; Rizo, Klein, Chesworth, O'Brien et al., 2019). Education should be customized for various age groups (e.g., middle versus high school students) and address root causes of sex trafficking, in addition to educating youth about factors related to sex trafficking. Importantly, curriculums for educating youth on sex trafficking should also be based on a combination of expert recommendations, the best available empirical science, and lived experiences of trafficked survivors. Findings from this study can also inform existing and future local and school policies on content requirements and delivery recommendations, while incorporating implementation strategies to mitigate or prevent potential challenges in delivering the program. This can help optimize implementation of sex trafficking education programs for youth in school settings.

Future research should expand upon these findings with samples of experts from other states, as well as a national sample of experts, and explore variations in response by other characteristics (e.g., geography, community awareness, state policy). There is also a need to include the perspectives of larger samples of students, parents, and survivors on educating youth about sex trafficking. Future research could explore how experts define sex trafficking, as well as expert motivations for developing an educational program for youth, comparing states with and without state legislation requirements.

The natural variation of state legislation requirements could also present opportunities to explore the effects of legislative requirements on changing broader cultural beliefs and attitudes about sex trafficking. Future research could also explore how curriculum content could be strengthened to better address trafficking situations without a third-party exploiter or facilitator. In addition, there are opportunities to explore expert recommendations from this study related to goals/purposes, content, delivery, and implementation strategies for educating youth about sex trafficking in greater detail through targeted discussions with diverse groups of experts and exploration of how responses may vary by personal and/or professional background.

As noted by experts, ensuring that schools are prepared to appropriately respond to student distress and disclosures, as well as having facilitators who are well-educated on sex trafficking, is essential. Additional research is needed on school identification of and response to sex trafficking, as well as content and delivery of school personnel training to inform practice and curriculum recommendations. There is also a lack of literature on the evaluation of existing sex trafficking education programs for youth. Future research should explore expert opinions on desired outcomes of sex trafficking educational programs for youth, as well as include robust evaluations of existing programs to optimize the impact of these programs through continuous quality improvement.

Conclusion

As states enact policies requiring sex trafficking education for youth, there is a continued need to ensure that communities are prepared with an evidence-informed curriculum. Such a curriculum is essential for promoting just, peaceful, and inclusive societies. This is the first study to present opinions from a diverse group of experts working in fields connected with sex trafficking among youth on goals/purposes, content, delivery, and implementation challenges and strategies to consider when developing curriculum. The depth and context of our findings expand results from existing formative literature and create opportunities for tailored, youth-centered educational approaches about sex trafficking which incorporating youth interpersonal dynamics. The expert recommendations outlined in this paper can provide preliminary guidance to inform sex trafficking education programs for youth.

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Declaration of interest statement

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