

January 2023

Advancing Protective and Promotive Factors through the Magic City Acceptance Academy

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Recommended Citation

Fifolt, M., Gurley, D. K., & White, D. (2023). Advancing Protective and Promotive Factors through the Magic City Acceptance Academy. *National Youth Advocacy and Resilience Journal*, 6(2). <https://doi.org/10.20429/nyarj.2023.060202>

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Advancing Protective and Promotive Factors through the Magic City Acceptance Academy

Abstract

Introduction: In 2021, leaders in Birmingham, Alabama established one of the first LGBTQ-affirming charter school in the United States to serve students who have dropped out, are not thriving in traditional schools, or are enrolled in home-school programs.

Methods: Using deductive analysis, our research team filtered data through the five pre-defined themes of the Youth Thrive Framework: (a) youth resilience, (b) social connections, (c) knowledge of adolescent development, (d) concrete support in times of need, and (e) cognitive and social-emotional competence.

Results: Study findings suggest that MCAA's innovative and adaptive approaches to curriculum, discipline, and student engagement align with the tenets of the Youth Thrive Framework.

Conclusion: While the Youth Thrive Framework was originally designed in the context of the foster care system, we believe the five protective and promotive factors that comprise the framework may be applied to other contexts, such as educational settings, to support health promoting behavior.

Keywords

LGBTQ+ youth, Protective and promotive factors, Youth Thrive Framework, Bullying

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Introduction

Bullying in schools remains a persist problem in the United States (Moore et al., 2017). Students targeted for bullying, intimidation, or violence frequently identify as LGBTQ, non-gender conforming, or *other* based on characteristics of race/ethnicity, religion, immigrant status, sociodemographic status, and/or ability (Colvin et al., 2019). These same students are at increased risk for feeling alienated or isolated from others and may be at greater risk than their peers for dropping out (Wang & Fredericks, 2014).

Based on state and national data (Kann, 2018; Kosciw, 2020) as well as firsthand accounts of student experiences with stigma, anxiety, and intimidation, leaders of Birmingham AIDS Outreach (BAO) launched an effort in 2019 to establish one of the first LGBTQ-affirming charter schools in the United States (Fifolt et al., under review). In this article, we describe the research we conducted regarding the Magic City Acceptance Academy (MCAA) and discuss its use of protective and promotive factors to support student growth and development.

Background

Located near Birmingham, AL, the Magic City Acceptance Academy (MCAA, 2023a) opened in fall 2021 as a public school for students in grades 6 through 12. The goal of MCAA is to support and inspire students to “embrace education, achieve individual success, and take ownership of their future in a brave, LGBTQ-affirming learning environment” (para. 1). According to its vision statement, MCAA was established to “engage students who have dropped out, are not thriving in traditional schools, or are enrolled in home-school programs” (para. 2).

Rationale for MCAA

The MCAA charter school application was developed by BAO and influenced by feedback from staff at the Magic City Acceptance Center (MCAC), an affirming LGBTQ youth

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center established by BAO in 2014 in response to the growing trend of HIV cases impacting youth under 25 years of age. From the outset, MCAA staff members reported a large percentage of youth failing in school, dropping out of school, or claiming to be home-schooled but not actively receiving educational support. Youth also reported excessive bullying and a lack of support from school administrators and teachers, which students often attributed to queer or other marginalized identities.

Ms. Amanda Keller, Director of MCAC, said, “We knew this was a crisis. We knew that education should be a basic right for everyone. That includes just being able to be affirmed and supported and showing up wholly and authentically.” Keller identified multiple challenges students faced in the schools including “blatant homophobia, blatant transphobia, any kind of lack of response to students being bigoted and biased and bullying.”

BAO and MCAA Board Member Dr. Tracee Synco noted that some transgender students were further stigmatized by being directed to only use the bathroom in the teacher’s lounge. Synco also suggested that some students were not eating during the day:

[t]hey were all coming in and they’re starving because they wouldn’t eat when they were at school during the day. Because apparently lunchrooms in some schools, that’s a good spot where they might have gotten bullied if they were identified as LGBTQ or they were allies, they were with friends who are LGBTQ. So, they might not eat all day.

Incidents of bullying and harassment due to identity or identity expression are well-documented in the research literature (Earnshaw et al., 2017; Eisenberg et al., 2017) and further supported by national and state statistics collected by the 2021 Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) National School Climate Survey regarding bullying, harassment, and physical violence (Kosciew et al., 2022). Survey authors reported national statistics of issues

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reflective of those experienced by LGBTQ youth in Alabama such as (a) a lack of intervening by school faculty and staff on behalf of LGBTQ youth in the face of harassment and assault; (b) concerns about school safety in both public and gender-segregated spaces (e.g., locker rooms, bathrooms, cafeteria); and (c) challenges to psychological well-being (i.e., self-esteem, depression).

MCAA as a Charter School

As a charter school, MCAA is a public school, open to all students, and bound by state requirements for meeting academic standards. However, the charter contract allows MCAA to operate with autonomy to make choices regarding curriculum, personnel, and budgets without adhering to certain state regulations. Two features of MCAA that distinguish it from other public institutions include its use of trauma-informed curriculum and restorative justice for student discipline.

Trauma-informed Curriculum

A trauma-informed curriculum is an approach to fostering social-emotional development with practices that support all students, but it is particularly inclusive and responsive to the needs of children and youth who have experienced past trauma. According to Craig (2017), trauma-informed practices allow students to exercise agency while exploring their strengths and identities and developing meaningful, positive relationships with adults and peers. Moreover, it focuses on self-efficacy, emotional awareness, affect regulation, and prevention while also providing students with access to mental health supports. According to Herrenkohl and colleagues (2021), trauma-informed schools:

[P]rovide children with the care, support, and resources they need to recover and work to their potential. Trauma-informed schools seek to increase awareness of trauma exposure

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and trauma symptoms, build supportive school and classroom communities, teach children social-emotional skills, and counteract biases and harsh disciplinary practices that can re-traumatize and cause further harm to students. (p. 7)

As a charter school, MCAA has flexibility to infuse social-emotional learning throughout all content areas, including book selection. However, MCAA is still bound by state requirements for meeting academic standards. Specifically, graduates of MCAA must meet the Alabama College and Career Ready Standards (CCRS) for Math and English Language Arts. These standards are part of the Common Core for the state and provide clear and consistent expectations for students and teachers, regardless of professional pathway after high school.

Restorative Justice

MCAA uses restorative discipline practices as a part of its multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS). Restorative justice is an approach to student discipline that shifts the focus from punishment to reconciliation. As an alternative to traditional discipline actions like suspension or expulsion, restorative justice strives to restore community by creating safe and supportive spaces for students to understand how their actions affect others. Restorative justice acknowledges the role of trauma in student behavior and focuses on future actions rather than past mistakes.

Pickens and Tschopp (2017) observed that a trauma-informed approach in the classroom is rooted in a safe environment, both physically and psychologically. For students, safety is based on a predictable classroom environment where every member feels respected, validated, and heard. Inherent to restorative justice, trauma-informed discipline acknowledges the role trauma may have in behavior and identifies restorative solutions to promote healthier behaviors in the future. According to MCAA school officials, restorative justice allows student learning to

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continue while bringing students back into community as quickly as possible. Dr. Michael Wilson, inaugural principal of MCAA, stated:

[At MCAA], restorative conversations take place, whether it's just with administration and teachers, or just with teacher/student, or maybe they have to have a class circle with the whole class to apologize, but to talk about why things happened and how to make them (decisions) different(ly).

Conceptual Frame

For this article, we used the Youth Thrive Protective and Promotive Factors Framework (Youth Thrive Framework), which focuses on building protective and promotive factors for adolescents and young adults, ages 9-26 years old, particularly the most vulnerable youth (Harper Browne et al., 2015). The Youth Thrive Framework was introduced in 2011 as a strategy for supporting youth and young adults including those involved in intervening public health systems, such as child welfare, juvenile justice, behavioral health, and those who have experienced trauma and other significant challenges (Harper Browne et al., 2015). The Youth Thrive Framework maintains that all young people have strengths, resources, and the capacity for positive growth and development (Shek et al., 2019). According to Zimmerman and colleagues (2013), protective factors reduce the impact of negative life experiences while promotive factors advance healthy development and well-being.

The Youth Thrive Framework focuses on *thriving* as an important counterbalance to the concept of trauma-informed and consistent with the tenets of positive youth development (Harper Brown et al., 2015). The framework comprises the following five protective and promotive factors: (a) youth resilience, (b) social connections, (c) knowledge of adolescent development, (d) concrete support in times of need, and (e) cognitive and social-emotional

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competence. In a previous article, our research team described the role of the school environment in contributing to the protective factor of school connectedness (Fifolt et al., in press); this article focuses more directly on individual and community level supports.

Methods

Our research team conducted a multifaceted phenomenological case study of MCAA. The full case study includes document analysis, observations, individual interviews, and focus group sessions with various stakeholder groups including faculty, staff, administrators, students, and parents. Data reported in the present article represent only a portion of the data collected. Interviews and focus groups were recorded and transcribed by a third-party vendor. Consistent with the current style convention, we used the singular “they” to refer to individuals who self-identified “they” as their pronoun (APA, 2020, p. 120). This study was approved by the University of Alabama at Birmingham Institutional Review Board: IRB-300008486, by the Magic City Research Institute, and by MCAA administration.

For this investigation, the research team used deductive analysis of data based on the five protective and promotive factors comprising the Youth Thrive Framework. In other words, we filtered data through the five pre-defined themes to explore how MCAA supports student growth and development. Consistent with best practices in qualitative research, we used multiple methods of verification to ensure trustworthiness of the data, including peer debriefing, bracketing, and an audit trail (Yin, 2011).

Findings

In this section, we provide definitions of the protective and promotive factors developed by Harper Browne and colleagues (2015); findings are aligned with deductive codes. Where appropriate, we provide direct quotes and source materials to support study findings.

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Youth Resilience

Managing stress and functioning well when faced with stressors, challenges, or adversity; building on individual characteristics, strengths, and interests (Harper Browne et al., 2015, pp. 34-35)

There was consensus among students that MCAA provided them both structure and flexibility in meeting their specific learning needs. One student stated:

A lot of teachers are very willing to talk and set up terms based on your [students'] specific circumstances which makes your learning environment a lot less stressful, I found. And helps you to create a better relationship with your teacher, because there's more lines for open communication.

Likewise, when asked why they wanted to teach at MCAA, one teacher said:

I really wanted to focus on a school where I could make relationships with students, and it seemed to me that that's what this school is about. And I especially think our students may be more vulnerable to certain pressures and certain marginalization than other students in a typical school.

Social Connections

Having healthy, sustained relationships with people, institutions, the community, and a force greater than oneself that promotes a sense of trust, belonging, and that one matters (Harper Browne et al., 2015, pp. 34-35).

Faculty and staff agreed that their priority was to help students succeed, "We're here and we show up every day because we want to be here, and we want to address that trauma." They conceded, however, that fostering positive relationship takes time and frequently requires faculty to teach students how to engage in positive and supportive relationships, sometimes for the first

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time. In response, however, students reflected a positive, future orientation. One student commented:

My teachers have provided more support than I've received from any other area in my life. And I've never felt a sense of community until I've been here. Over the past year and a half, I've learned what it meant to have people that you trust wholeheartedly. People that I would give anything for.

Knowledge of Adolescent Development

Understanding the unique aspects of adolescent development including information on adolescent brain development and the impact of trauma; implementing developmentally and contextually appropriate best practices (Harper Browne et al., 2015, pp. 34-35).

Even before MCAA opened, school leaders prepared teachers through preservice training. One key administrator stated, “We brought the teachers in early, through the summer [of 2021], and they did special trainings on trauma-informed care, and just things we knew our students would be facing.” By utilizing a trauma-informed curriculum, MCAA teachers have an opportunity to provide students the care, support, and resources they need to recover from past experiences and work to their potential.

Regarding her approach to student discipline, one teacher stated:

I was never the teacher that wrote kids up. I was the teacher that called home and talked to parents and invited parents into my classroom. [At MCAA], you're expected to...invite parents into the disciplinary process, in the conversation, and the expectation [is] that you're going to be there for your children.

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Concrete Support in Times of Need

Understanding the importance of asking for help and advocating for oneself; receiving quality services (e.g., health care, housing, education) designed to preserve youths' dignity, provide opportunities for skills development, and promote healthy behavior (Harper Browne et al., 2015, pp. 34-35).

By design, MCAA is intended to engage students who have dropped out or are not thriving in traditional schools, especially students who have been marginalized in their previous educational settings and youth with diagnoses of social anxiety, depression, and anger management. To address student concerns, MCAA is fully staffed by professionals who provide mental and physical health support. MCAA currently employs one nurse, two counselors, a social worker, and a mental health coordinator. Additionally, students can access wrap around health and wellness services through BAO and its affiliate partners including the Magic City Acceptance Center (MCAC), an affirming LGBTQ youth center, the Magic City Wellness Center (MCWC), which provides primary care and services for LGBTQ individuals and their allies; and the Magic City Legal Center, which specializes in pro-bono legal services for the LGBTQ+ community (MCAA, 2023b).

In terms of support, one student shared his thoughts regarding MCAA:

I think this school [MCAA] has chosen to take an approach of student wellbeing instead of...or to put student wellbeing in the top position where I think it belongs. And so [this is] not to say that our school [MCAA] does not value academics at all, but to say that students are functioning much better in environments that support them and accept them. Which is why I think the school functions as well as it does.

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Cognitive and Social-Emotional Competence

Acquiring skills and attitudes (e.g., executive functioning, character strength, future orientation, persistence, and positive emotions) that are essential for forming an independent identity and having a productive, responsible, and satisfying adulthood (Harper Browne et al., 2015, pp. 34-35)

Reflecting on the school's approach to restorative justice, one school administrator asserted:

What we do here is teach them how to restore themselves and to be resilient, because we can't change your circumstances. But what we can do is give you the tools to build resilience within yourself so that any time you're facing adversity, because we can't stop that from coming. And we don't look at those things as we all go through it, but how do we build their toolbox?

One upper-class student described his experiences at MCAA including his plans upon graduation:

In my [previous] school environment involving academics, asking for help just wasn't really normalized, sets you apart from the group, made you seem like the idiot, which made me struggle a lot. And I was convinced that college wasn't for me at that point. And then I came here and I've excelled in calculus and that was just huge for me because a lot of my interests involve places like NASA and these big government institutions. And so getting a good education where I could actually ask for help and have a teacher break things down without my whole class laughing at me, that was really great. And now I'm accepted in a fairly prestigious college.

Discussion

Study findings suggest that MCAA's innovative and adaptive approaches to curriculum, discipline, and student engagement align with the tenets of the Youth Thrive Framework and may provide a template for developing resilient youth. Students, teachers, and administrators consistently talked about the value of mutual respect and the role of trusted relationships in overcoming previous traumas. Equally significant, and consistent with the Youth Thrive Framework, participants discussed the ways in which faculty and staff encouraged students to embrace their multiple identities and to live fully authentic lives.

For students who previously faced bullying, violence, or harassment or for whom a more traditional school model was not a good fit, MCAA offers a student-centered, highly supportive environment in which students can thrive (Sadowski, 2017). Both in theory and in practice, MCAA maximizes protective and promotive factors to build student resilience based on their capacity to grow and develop as adolescents and young adults who can fully participate in a community of engaged learners (McCabe & Anhalt, 2021). These conditions are exemplified by MCAA's implementation of trauma-informed curriculum and restorative justice practices (Parameswaran et al., 2023); staffing to address students' social-emotional needs (Brown et al., 2021), and pre-service training to ensure student wellbeing (Jones et al., 2021). Moreover, MCAA has created a school environment that allows students to feel seen and represented and ultimately, a space that creates conditions to promote community (Steck & Perry, 2018).

Conclusion

While the Youth Thrive Framework was originally designed in the context of the foster care system, we believe the five protective and promotive factors that comprise the framework may be applied to other contexts. MCAA is just one example of how these principles can be

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achieved within an educational setting to support health promoting behavior. We encourage future researchers to explore new ways to employ this framework in other relevant settings.

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