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Educators' Perceptions of Human Trafficking and Implications for Professional Development

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ABSTRACT

Around 3.3 million young people are trafficked worldwide, with over half subjected to sexual exploitation (*Data and Research on Forced Labour*, 2024). However, little research exists on the role of school-based educators in learning about, preventing, and identifying human trafficking. This study examines educators' knowledge of trafficking both locally and globally. Grounded in critical anti-trafficking frameworks, Schulman's (1987) framework of teachers' knowledge, and Bronfenbrenner and Cici's (1994) Bioecological Model, the study surveyed 205 educators in Central Florida in the United States. Findings show that over 60% had received no training on human trafficking, while 24.3% of those who had training were uncertain about how to report trafficking cases. Educators also expressed a desire for more school-based training and professional development. Implications

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suggest using critical, pedagogical approaches like Ginwright's (2018) healing-centred engagement to enhance educators' understanding and help deter global trafficking networks.

Introduction

In recent years, human trafficking has moved more squarely into the collective American consciousness, garnering attention in both media and scholarship (Albert, 2021). The numbers are staggering: the International Labour Organization (2022) estimated that globally, 27.6 million people are in forced labour, generating $236 billion U.S. dollars in illegal profits every year. According to the same estimates, there are 3.3 million children illegally trafficked across the globe, more than half of them forced into illegal sexual exploitation (*Data and Research on Forced Labour*, 2024). The United States is a top destination for child human sex trafficking, and it is happening, often in plain sight, in communities all around the U.S. (Waters, 2023).

Human trafficking takes many forms, sometimes making it difficult to identify. One form is commercial sex trafficking - including that of school-aged minors - which is often by a pimp, someone who sexually exploits and controls victims (Weitzer, 2015). Pimps often operate within larger systems of societal organization of criminal enterprise, such as gangs and mafias operating locally and globally (Krylova & Shelley, 2023). Another form is familial trafficking, which occurs when someone within a victim's nuclear family or other family member traffics them (Sprang & Cole, 2018). Human trafficking also takes the form of survival sex - often present with runaways, the homeless, those on substances, or people living in poverty - which is the exchange of sex for things needed for survival (e.g., food, water, shelter) (Czechowski et al., 2022). Labour trafficking is forcing an individual

to work against their will. Traffickers use a variety of methods to encourage workers to continue working including corporal punishment and withholding basic needs (International Labour Organization [ILO], n.d.).

It is true that biases exist in every individual and as people, we tend to separate things in discrete categories of Otherness; education scholar Kumashiro (2000) conceptualizes anti-oppressive educational approaches to interrogate, normalize, and disrupt oppressive Othering with regard to identity politics such as race, gender, sexuality, nationality, and social class. With this knowledge, we can begin foregrounding the oppression that occurs not just in society, but also in politics, as national political forces play a role in how human trafficking is combatted, punished, mobilized against, and discursively framed within societies.

Inequalities and Othering between white, black, and migrant individuals are present in the United States. The U.S. is a capitalist country which largely contributes to the violation of human rights and an increase in inequality (Freeman, 2003). Human trafficking often does not always result in criminalization and justice and when justice is served through criminalization, it still does not address the root issue of how trafficking is occurring and what can be done to stop it. This poses the question of whether criminalization is a strong deterrent among perpetrators (Sibanda, 2023). Currently in the United States, mobilization toward anti-trafficking efforts is being thwarted by the alt-right policies and ideologies that are attacking initiatives for diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) (Adrabi & Bowen, 2024). These evasive initiatives and policies are intertwined into the operation of many U.S. institutions, including schools, as the majority of trafficked children in the United States receive education through the United States public school system (Polaris Project, 2020), and school campuses are common places for

traffickers to identify and recruit young people (Gorman & Hatkevich, 2016; Basile et al., 2019).

According to the Standing Committee on the Status of Women, traffickers may target school and university campuses when searching for their victims. Sixteen is the average age of recruitment for a child into human trafficking networks. In addition, middle and high school students were targeted for entrapment into human trafficking networks in the San Diego area, and a study found that 30% of the exploitation of minors in that area (Richie-Zavaleta et al., 2024). Anti-trafficking education in schools is necessary not only for prevention but also for identification. Many trafficked students in the United States attend school (Polaris Project, 2020). There are cases in which trafficked children will attend school, go "home" and participate in some of the "normal" extracurricular activities. The purpose of this is to deceive those a part of the school into thinking that the students have a "normal" life (Love146, n.d.).

However, research has shown that most adults would not recognize a human trafficking victim in their community (Clause & Lawler, 2013). It is only in recent years that discussions surrounding developing intentional focuses on human trafficking knowledge (HTK) and prevention within institutions of U.S. public schooling have taken place (Zhu et al., 2020). This paper presents survey results from 203 in Central Florida regarding their knowledge and perceptions of human trafficking. Educators in this study include teachers, administrators, counselors, social workers, coaches, and other school staff. Statistical analysis reveals that most educators lack training on human trafficking, and those who have received it find it ineffective. This study draws on critical anti-trafficking frameworks, Schulman's (1987) conceptualization of teacher knowledge, bioecological systems

theory (Bronfenbrenner & Cici, 1994), and healing-centred pedagogy (Ginwright, 2018). Analysis of the survey data highlighted that educators' surprise at their limited knowledge prompted emotional responses and a clear desire for more training. This paper concludes with recommendations for systematic professional development on recognizing, preventing, and addressing human trafficking in schools to better protect students and combat the "epidemic" of trafficking (Florida Justice Association, 2023).

Researchers' Positionalities and Purposes

Jason Abram is a biracial white and Asian, transgender man and graduate student in social work at Miami University. Driven by experiences and knowledge of human trafficking and how human trafficking intersects with the institution of schooling in the U.S., Abram conducted the survey research in 2021 when he was a Florida resident. Returning to this research, Abram connected with Dr. Kelli Rushek, whose experience in K-12 public schools and teacher education in both global and U.S. contexts served to contextualize the theoretical and implicative nature in the dissemination of this survey study. Rushek is a white, cisgender woman and assistant professor in the Teaching, Curriculum, and Educational Inquiry department at Miami University. She taught high school English in Chicago Public Schools for ten years between two schools which were systematically hyper-segregated; in those ten years, she was never overtly trained in issues of human trafficking despite many of her former students' adverse experiences within human trafficking networks. When given the opportunity to collaborate on the qualitative, theoretical, and implicative nature of Abram's conducted research, she willingly agreed, as she remembered her and her colleagues' (lack of) knowledge about human trafficking, despite serving a student population that was statistically at-risk for being oppressed by human trafficking networks. Educators have the

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potential to be linchpins in the prevention, intervention, and reduction of networks of human trafficking with American young people, with informed proactive, systematic professional development.

Theoretical Framing

This study explores the intersection of human trafficking and schooling in the U.S. through theoretical perspectives that highlight the interconnected institutional factors that affect those involved while drawing from critical understandings of anti-trafficking efforts, understanding that power, systemic oppression, and privilege undergird all institutional and organizational factors of human existence. Schools and school systems are an organizing principle of children and adolescents, and human trafficking is a globalized "flow" of human movement (Appadurai, 1996), implicated by the oppressive power of the trafficked individual's agency. The classroom serves as a global node where people, ideas, goods, and capital flow in and out (Rushek & Batchelor, Exp. 2025). In developing an argument for more robust teacher professional development about procedural and contextual knowledge-building and meaning-making surrounding human trafficking, we must consider the myriad ways in which systems of globalized human "flows" (Appadurai, 1996) intersect with public schooling with an emphasis on institutional prevention. Therefore, we situate this study within Schulman's (1987) conceptualization of teachers' knowledge as viewed through the nexus of bioecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994) and Ginwright's (2018) healing-centred pedagogy as the educator's approach and framing of trauma as experienced by youth and adolescents in an educator's care.

Critical scholars who hold expertise in human trafficking in the United States and across the globe view the epidemic of human trafficking through critical anti-

trafficking frameworks which critique the carceral, colonial, and neoliberal approaches to trafficking through centring race, migration, labour and gender justice. Kempadoo (2012) argues that critical frameworks for viewing the anti-trafficking movement are needed, as mainstream anti-trafficking efforts often serve the imperial and neoliberal efforts of the United States, in that they overemphasize sex and sex work over labour trafficking, erase the agency and voice of the human actors, and reinforce and reproduce ideologies and practices of a racialized, carceral state. When the labour of sex work (Leigh, 1987) is conflated with human trafficking, the anti-trafficking policies in place criminalize and endanger sex workers (Grant, 2014). According to Shih (2023), much of the logic underpinning the global anti-trafficking industry commodifies the idea of freedom - that it's something that can be bought and sold - and most organizations that are aligned with anti-trafficking movements are complicit in the intersectional oppression furthered by carceral practices. Transnational feminist scholars such as Mohanty (2003) critique the intersectionality racialized, gendered, and nationalistic logic of rescue narratives of and about women, and Hua (2011) highlights how anti-trafficking discourse within human rights frameworks reproduces these racialized, gendered, and nationalistic ideologies. Among most critical anti-trafficking scholars, efforts within human rights frameworks do little to challenge global and societal oppression, as these efforts reproduce the widespread systems-level ideologies that marginalize those who are not Western, white, heterosexual, men.

With training leading to education of members of the general public, the demonstration of skewed trends toward different races and ethnicities, along with racist logic, has put a focus on white children and has neglected others. This makes it increasingly difficult for teachers and others to magnify surveillance and identify

the difference between sex work and sex trafficking leading to an inequal representation of people of colour incarcerated, in foster care, and institutional care, especially when it comes to Black, Asian, migrant, and trans sex workers (United States Department of State, 2021).

Many are familiar with the phrase "see something, say something." This phrase comes from national political efforts to raise awareness for human trafficking. It is important and has saved many people, it is essential to recognize the white supremacist ideologies that could be present in the identification and criminalization of both victims and perpetrators of human trafficking (United States Department of Homeland Security [USDHS], n.d.).

When discussing educators' professional knowledge, it is important to highlight the nuanced, individual variety of knowledge conditions that coalesce into each educator's pedagogical content knowledge, or that knowledge they draw on in their approach to their teaching practice. Many non-educators assume a simplified version of educators' knowledge, namely subject knowledge and general teaching methods; however, Schulman (1987) described seven types of teacher knowledge: knowledge of the content being taught; knowledge of general pedagogy; knowledge of the curriculum; knowledge of pedagogical context; knowledge of learners, including their sociocultural contexts; knowledge of educational aims, purposes, and values; and lastly, and most importantly for the purposes and implications of this study, knowledge of educational contexts. Schulman (1987) delineates the knowledge of educational contexts as a range from interpersonal connections, governance and economic conditions of schooling, and knowledge of the school's community and culture (Shing et al., 2015). However, Schulman's parsing of educational contextual knowledge does not incorporate the vast institutional

networks (Castells, 2010) of our globalized society, and how each individual within a school (student, teacher, staff) is made up of their own nexus of interworking institutional sociocultural exposures and experiences. To deepen the educational contextual knowledge of educators, we turn to Bronfenbrenner and Cici's bioecological systems theory (1994) to understand the intersectional, institutional sociocultural contextualization of each individual that steps before a teacher.

The bioecological systems theory highlights the fluid interplay between an individual and their social and environmental factors - including institutions such as school, church, family, criminal justice, government, etc. in the sociocultural development of an individual's evolution and behaviour. This theory has been used to study many educational phenomena, from childhood resilience (Antony, 2022), student sense of belonging in school (El Zaatari & Maalouf, 2022), and how adolescents fight back against the school-based injustices they face (Rushek et al., Under Review). The bioecological model (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994) highlights complex systems of social relationships that affect an individual's development through concentric spheres of sociocultural experience that incorporates the immediate (i.e., peers, parents, school) and more broad relationships (institutions, policies, ideologies) in degree of the individual's autonomy over them. It is the interaction between and within these spheres that thus affect the development and behaviour of the individual. Namely, it highlights the institutional nexus of sociocultural effect on an individual. The socioeconomic and institutional factors that play into every child's development could be thrown out of homeostasis (Brendtro, 2006), either through experiences with human trafficking or as a catalyst of entering forced labour. The nebulous, fluid, intersectional, systemic bioecological model of an individual thus encapsulates the totality of the educational contextual knowledge that Schulman (1987) outlined. In essence,

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teacher knowledge about institutional systems that affect the students in front of them is requisite knowledge in consideration of human trafficking. When a child enters a classroom, they bring their unique intersectional, institutional individual bioecological model with them.

When engaging in instructional and pedagogical discussions with educators regarding the potential trauma(s) of the young people they serve, it is important that adverse experiences young people face, such as human trafficking, are framed in such a way that the young people are not viewed from a deficit-based perspective, or that their lived experience is reduced to or defined solely by the trauma they have experienced. Ginwright (2015, 2018), in his work with socioemotional learning, has shifted the theoretical understandings of "trauma-informed care" toward "healing-centred engagement." This theoretical approach reframes the socioemotional-focused learning of the young person and their trauma from a standpoint of healing rather than contextualizing the young person *as* the traumas they've experienced. Many schools attempting to implement healing-centred pedagogies often, instead, implement trauma-informed instruction, which often has adverse effects, like reifying what Jesse Jackson called "the soft bigotry of low expectations" (Baweja et al., 2016; Bush, 2006). Healing-centred pedagogies, on the other hand, reinstate the young person's agency and autonomy over the adverse trauma they've experienced, and the onus of educational care goes toward healing trauma rather than merely identifying trauma in young people to explain their school-based learning behaviours. A healing-centred view of young people who have experienced human trafficking will be critical to the education and professional development of educators regarding human trafficking networks.

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Human Trafficking and Schools

Institutions play an important role in spotting and spreading awareness about human trafficking. With established institutions, such as public health offices and schools, a different view and approach are taken. A public health office aware of human trafficking in the community might offer resources (both individual and community) for those who are victims of trafficking, unsure of whether they are or have been trafficked, or those who are at a higher risk of being trafficked (Women's Refugee Commission, n.d.). In schools, evidence shows that students of colour have different and a less positive relationship with teachers as early as kindergarten. Black boys were shown to have a more negative relationship than white or female children (Mai et al., 2021). Many are familiar with the phrase "see something, say something." A school might need more support in understanding the concept of white supremacy and engage in introspection in order to identify with and help eliminate white-supremacy factors.

Much of the current research surrounding schooling and human trafficking focuses on either statistical information gathering or embedding human trafficking content into school curricula (i.e., Rizo et al., 2021; Zhu et al., 2020); however, there lies a significant gap in previous research concerning educators' knowledge and perceptions of human trafficking and the extent and application of that knowledge. School-based social workers often have the training and knowledge to detect and aid youth who may be facing or experiencing human trafficking, but the national shortage of school social work affects potential human trafficking prevention in schools. For example, in the state of Ohio, where Abram and Rushek study and work, there is an average of only one social worker for every 4,854 students, when the recommended ratio is 1:250 (Ohio, 2025). This puts the onus of detection and prevention of human trafficking on other school-based faculty and staff. According

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to the American Federation of Teachers (2023), about half of teachers receive training in child abuse and mandatory reporting; however, other faculty and staff, such as administrators, librarians, counselors, lunchrooms, and janitorial staff do not receive such training. In addition, training on child abuse and mandatory reporting often does not specifically hone on conditions of human trafficking under the child abuse umbrella.

Many times, signs of human trafficking in enmeshed individuals do not exhibit solely typical behaviours, such as fear and withdrawal, but can also exhibit behaviours such as acting outwardly, becoming aggressive, and/or being overly social (Mayo Clinic, 2022). The lesser-known signs as well as common stereotypes hinder the ability for educators to identify victims of trafficking. Once identified, the intervening adult needs to meet the child's needs by providing safety, refuge, and medical attention (Frederick, 2005; ILO, 2006; Macy & Johns, 2011; Rigby et al., 2012; SARI, n.d.; UNODC, 2007; Wolte & Tautz, 2007). However, even if educators are able to identify human trafficking victims, many do not hold the procedural knowledge (Schulman, 1987) of the steps to take when they know or suspect that a child is being trafficked, so if they can identify a victim, they may not know how to intervene.

Many studies focus on the specific situations, examples, misunderstandings, and signs of human trafficking, dismantling misunderstandings about human trafficking (Alliance for Freedom, Restoration, and Justice, 2019). Societal understanding commonly assumes human trafficking victims are mostly teen and young adult females, while in reality, boys make up almost half of the victim population (Roe-Sepowitz et al., 2013). It is important to remember that though any child can be a victim of trafficking, the most targeted groups are those who are

in the foster care system, youth of Colour, and the LGBTQIA+ community (Dierkhising & Ackerman-Brimberg, 2020; Covenant House, 2016; Sprang & Cole, 2018; International Organization for Migration, 2017).

Implementing anti-trafficking education in schools could support the mission to equip and mobilize the public against human trafficking (Levin, 2022). Finigan-Carr and colleagues (2019) posit that if the objective is to eradicate human trafficking, the focus must be shifted from prosecution to prevention. While the authors posit that addressing socioeconomic and oppressive conditions (i.e., bigotry, racism, poverty, heteronormativity, etc.) that underlie the proliferation of trafficking through social welfare programs is of the utmost importance, initiatives that include trauma-informed care training and human trafficking education for agencies that interact with the populations affected by human trafficking is imperative (Finigan-Carr et Al., 2019). There is an abundance of information needed in these professional development trainings to make educators and schools knowledgeable on things they need to look for and do. Resource restraints, funding challenges, and overworked school-based professionals are part of what hinders the development of this training (Basile et al., 2019).

Sex Work

Another aspect that needs to be explicitly, critically addressed in teacher and public training about human trafficking is sex work. Sex work is a term used for a wide variety of consensual sexual activity (Leigh, 1987). Some of these activities include pornography, phone or internet sex, escorting, and other sexual services in exchange for benefits, predominantly monetary. The sex work industry has become gendered, racialized, and complex, leading to discrimination and a question of legal versus illegal sexual activity (Finley, 2023). It is not uncommon for sex work to be

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mistaken for human trafficking as they often occur in similar places and are marketed in similar ways. Sex work is voluntary while human trafficking involved force, fraud, or coercion. It is important to note the minors cannot consent to sexual activity, making that an automatic red flag to suspect human trafficking which in this case would not require force, fraud, or coercion (Grewal Law PLLC, 2019). Some signs that also might indicate trafficking over sex work include the use of minors, evidence of domestic violence (e.g., bruises or cuts), and clear intoxication (Paxton, n.d.). It is crucial to note that it can be immensely difficult to distinguish between the two leading to unnecessary law enforcement responses.

There have been large debates on whether or not sex work should be legal or not. Different states have made claims and arguments for and against sex work being legalized. In the present moment, Nevada is the only one out of the 50 U.S. states that legally allow sex work and it is highly regulated (University of North Carolina, n.d.).

The term sexual humanitarianism encompasses migrants who are problematized, supported, and intervened by non-governmental organizations and institutions based on their sexual orientation and behaviour (Mai et al., 2021). This occurs everywhere and much like other areas, the discrimination of marginalized communities, within the global landscape of sex work and human trafficking, are affected. This includes those in the Black, Asian, migrant, and transgender communities. It is unfortunately not uncommon for individuals in these communities, especially transgender people of colour, to be denied anti-trafficking protections and are rather often mistaken for perpetrators (McGinn, 2014). Transgender migrants and people of colour in the sex industry are more vulnerable to abuse and criminalization from law enforcement and public officials than white

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people (Fehrenbacher et al., 2020). In Louisiana, Black girls account for nearly 49 percent of child sex trafficking victims. This is the case even though Black girls comprise only about 19 percent of the population in that state and with unequal protection under the law, they are at an increased risk of being trafficked (Polaris Project, 2020). In Canada, the Standing Committee on the Status of Women found that black women were more prone to profiling from law enforcement officers than their white counterparts (Standing Committee on the Status of Women, 2024).

According to the United States Department of Homeland Security (U.S. DHS), there are the 4 P's needed to combat human trafficking including, prevention (the reduction of threats), prosecution (law enforcement and national security authorities), protection (assist survivors and provide resources), and partnership (create a security enterprise throughout DHS. The purpose of the implementation of these goals is to reinforce public safety in both domestic and international ways (U.S. DHS, 2020). In addition, organizations like the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and International Organization for Migration (IOM) play a critical role in combatting international human trafficking. International treaties and allyship have helped create a cohesive effort to end human trafficking and increase the number of prosecutions and expand support for survivors (Mehra & Sharif, 2024). There are still operations working with other countries to join the force by enacting their own anti-trafficking laws and increasing victim protection (Demeke, 2024). The United Nations (UN) has expressed a high need for expanding surveillance. There has been an increase in anti-trafficking funding within the last few years, both domestically and internationally. Politically speaking, when left-wing and democratic politicians were in office, the fight for human rights was more of a focus than those right-wing politicians (Schönhöfer, 2016).

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Methods

Data Collection

Abram developed a 21-item survey instrument[1] which consisted of 19 close-ended questions and two optional open-ended questions. The first three survey items inquired into the demographic information about the educators such as age, school level in which they serve, and their employment positioning within the school. The next six questions were labelled as a "pre-quiz" and inquired into the educators' personal understanding and background knowledge of human trafficking, the extent of their knowledge, and if they would be able to identify a victim of human trafficking. The next five questions were developed as a quiz to assess the educator's prior knowledge about human trafficking, this specific five-question quiz was used for triangulation assessment across all respondents. Following this five-question quiz, two self-assessment questions asked respondents to grade their quiz after viewing the answers. The survey ended with four reflection questions, two assessed through a 1–5 range Likert scale, inquiring into the educators' overestimation or underestimation of their perceived knowledge about human trafficking, followed by two open-ended questions about their affective responses to engaging with the survey and the application of HTK. To elicit specific narrative instances from the respondents, the first open-ended question evoked insight from the participant: *Were you surprised by your results, and how do you feel about them?* The second was an invitation to record comments and concerns.

Data was collected anonymously, as these types of surveys are more likely to receive responses with both selected and open-ended questions (Ong & Weiss,

[1] The survey can be requested from the authors.

2000). This survey instrument was also developed for potential standardization across participants for consistent and organized data analysis.

Participant Recruitment

The parameters of the subject population were any educator within the Seminole County Public School District (SCPS) in central Florida. SCPS is the 13th largest school district in Florida, and 57th in the United States, serving 66,729 students and employing over 7,000 educators across 78 schools, and the latest published school racial and socioeconomic demographics (for the 2022–2023 school year) are 44.6% White, 30.1% Hispanic, 14.5% Black or African American, 5.8% Asian, and 5% Multiracial students, and across all enrolled students, 35% qualify for Free and Reduced Price Lunch (*Seminole County Public Schools*, n.d.). A recruitment email with the anonymous survey link was sent to every building principal of each of the 78 public schools within SCPSD with a request to forward and share with their building's educators. After two weeks, the survey was closed, returning 205 respondents. Two respondents did not answer all the questions in the survey instrument, so this study recruited and assessed a sample of 203 educators across 14 public schools in SCPS.

Quantitative Data Analysis

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The 19 close-ended questions within the survey instrument served as the quantitative data, while the two open-ended items beget the qualitative data. After the survey was closed and the 203-educator sample was discerned, the collected data within the online Formstack survey instrument was exported into a data spreadsheet to allow the organization of the responses by timestamp and categorize answers into rows and columns for data analysis. First, a cross-tabular analysis was used to analyze the first three survey items to generate the demographic information for the 203 educators (see Figure 1). Cross-tabular analysis investigates relationships between two variables (White, 2004). Quantitative connections were made and used to deduce findings significant to the goals and implications of this study. The cross-tabular analysis was completed using Microsoft Excel software where calculations were made, and data charts/graphs were created.

Category	Data	
Age	18-29	28
	30-39	55
	40-49	56
	50-59	48
	60-69	15
	70+	1
	N = 203	
Grade Level	Elementary (K-5)	50
	Middle (6-8)	61
	High (9-12)	92
	N = 203	
Position	Teacher	156
	Administrator	13
	Counselor	7
	Other	27
	N = 203	

FIGURE 1: SURVEY RESPONDANT DEMOGRAPHICS

Once the 203 participants' responses had been grouped, quantitative themes were extracted through ANOVA and *t*-tests to statistically analyze the educators' experiences with or without training on human trafficking. These were cross-analyzed with the grade band levels of the educators' positions. When all of the data was coded, *p*-values and means were used to create a table for comparison (see Tables 1, 2, 3, and 4). In the second round of coding, Abram was constantly returning to different

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statistical data tables and juxtaposing their demographic information with the apparent code category (scores, training versus no training), and then recursively

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passing through all the data again with each new insight. Abram passed through the entire data countless times during the second cycle of coding.

Table 1: ANOVA Test Data – Training and No Training

	ANOVA Test			
	Treatments			
	No Training	**Training**		**Total**
N	127	76		203
Mean	2.9213	2.8947		2.911
Std.Dev.	0.9479	1.0143		0.9709

Table 2: ANOVA Test Results – Training and No Training

Result Details				
Source	***SS***	***df***	***MS***	
Between-treatments	0.0334	1	0.0334	*F = 0.03532*
Within-treatments	190.3705	201	0.9471	
Total	190.4039	202		p = 0.851126

Table 3: ANOVA Test Data – Grades Interacted With

	ANOVA Test			
	Treatments			
	Elementary (K-5)	**Middle (6-8)**	**High (9-12)**	**Total**
N	50	61	92	203
Mean	2.7347	2.9839	2.9565	2.9113
Std.Dev.	0.9742	0.9833	0.9598	0.9709

Table 4: ANOVA Test Results – Grades Interacted With

Result Details				
Source	***SS***	***df***	***MS***	
Between-treatments	2.043	2	1.0215	*F = 1.08*
Within-treatments	188.36	200	0.9418	
Total	190.4039	202		p = 0.341568

The *f*-ratio value is 1.08. The *p*-value is 0.341568. The result is not significant at $p < .05$.

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Qualitative Data Analysis

While the methods within this research analysis are mixed between quantitative and qualitative meaning-making, since this study was not methodologically designed to include systematic qualitative data analysis, we follow Cresswell and Plano Clark's (2018) position that this is not inherently a mixed methods study, it just uses mixed methods to make meaning of the collected data. When Abram added Rushek as a collaborator, as a trained qualitative researcher, she saw the depth and impact of the open-ended survey questions and conducted a systematic qualitative data analysis.

Of the population of 203 respondents, 84.9% responded to the open-ended survey item, making the sample population for qualitative analysis 173 respondents. In addition, 27.3% of the population sampled answered the optional comment or concern in the culminating survey item, which was included in the data analysis. Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014) argue that the word data be refined from raw notes and into a text that is clear to the analyst. The qualitative data were placed into a separate organizing spreadsheet for which to code for patterns. Framing the teachers' words as the basis for which to form larger generalizations and theories, and for the fact there is not previously established research on teachers' perceptions of their HTK, Rushek used an inductive reasoning approach. She read through the qualitative sample of 173 responses and noted observations from which she developed initial codes, organized and differentiated around the respondents' surprise by their results. She coded for how respondents mentioned how they had gained HTK and noted when respondents mentioned wanting to develop more HTK. In addition, initial codes highlighted a distinction between those respondents who were surprised by the "nearness" of the issue of human trafficking versus those who saw human trafficking as a larger, global social issue. After developing the

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initial codes (see Table 5), Rushek applied these to an iterative second round of coding, collapsing and broadening these codes as needed. During the second round, she noted the emotional affect within the responses and began coding for emotions observed within the data.

After recursively reading and revising the raw data and ensuring each data item is explained by the codes developed, final codes were applied. The most generative codes for the implications of this work remained in *Surprise By Results*, *HTK Mentioned*, *Needing/Wanting to Develop More HTK*, *Spatiality Mentioned*, and *Emotion Beyond "Surprise" Stated in Response*. Every response in the sample was coded singularly for *Surprise By Results*, but a single respondent's data could be coded

Respondent	20. Were you surprised by your results? AND How do you feel about your results?	21. Other comments/concerns?	INITIAL CODES	SECOND ROUND CODES
152	I was surprised about the question that asked if it's trafficking if there's no coersion...etc.	Good for you for choosing such a practical topic to research. There are endless things to know about this topic. Hopefully, we can be better educated as teachers since young people are commonly targets. However, ANOTHER online class is not effective.	Surprised - at information garnered Wants to develop more HTK: but NOT another online class/module	Surprised by HTK garnered through quiz/survey "Want"
153	no		Not surprised by results - Holds HTK	Not Surprised: Holds HTK
154	Surprised that my answers suggested I knew more than I did.	Surprised that the highest amount of trafficking was labor-related, not sex related. **Unpleasantly surprised** that Florida was #3 in reported trafficking; not a ranking you want to be high in.	Surprised - held less HTK than thought LOCAL Emotion: Unpleasantly suprised	Surprised: held less HTK than thought LOCAL Emotion: Unpleasantly Surprised
155	Not really surprised		Ambivalent Surprise	Ambivalent Surprise
156	What surprised me is that I have thought about this issue occurring locally or at my school.	Good luck with your research.	Surprised - at information garnered LOCAL	LOCAL
157	I was not extremely surprised by my results. However, I do feel **sad** due to living in one of the highest trafficking states	Thank you for doing this research. As a young student for you to be doing this and making it aware to others is extremely commendable. Thank you and best of luck on your project!	Not surprised by results - No/Needs HTK Emotion: Sad Local	Not Surprised: No/Needs HTK Emotion: Sad LOCAL

TABLE 5: SLICE OF INITIAL AND SECOND ROUND CODEBOOK

across multiple codes. The final codes serve as the qualitative data themes and findings outlined below.

Findings

Educators' Lack of HTK Undermines Their Confidence in Identifying Human Trafficking Victims in Schools

All school-based educators in Florida must receive child abuse and prevention training. (*The School District of Lee County*, n.d.). However, quantitative data analysis yielded that the majority of school-based professionals who took the survey (62.7%) reported that they had never received any form of training when it comes to the human trafficking of students in their schools. In the second section of the survey, the five-question quiz, 37.3% of respondents who reported they had received some sort of training scored lower on the quiz than their colleagues who had not received the training by .03 points. Note that there was not a statistically significant difference between the scores of those who have and have not received training ($p=0.851126$ where $p<0.05$). Because there was no significant statistical difference in scoring, the scores are treated as the same. The goal of training would be to increase knowledge and scores, and it is apparent that this was not the case. Due to that, it can be concluded that any training received was not deemed effective for an operational HTK for the educators.

Moreover, qualitative data analysis found that the educators held varying levels of surprise regarding their HTK as compared to their survey results. Of those "Not Surprised" by their results, 19.65% of respondents were not surprised by their score on the survey, as they held HTK, while 20.81% of respondents were not surprised by their results as they did not hold or need HTK. Of those "Surprised" by

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their results, 2.31% were surprised because they held more HTK than they thought (as evidenced by their survey results), 27.75% were surprised because they held less HTK than they thought, and 10.98% noted surprise by the information they garnered from taking the survey. It is worth mentioning that 6.36% of respondents were "Ambivalent" in their surprise, and 13.29% were coded as responding with "Cursory Surprise," meaning their responses did not logically align with the "overestimation" or "underestimation" of the respondent's HTK in questions 18 and 19 in the survey, and for all intents and purposes, were no longer included in the sub-sample of qualitative data analysis. As a respondent stated, "I realize I do not know as much as I should, especially being in a position where I am in constant contact with children who could be victims of these crimes." Emotions that were evident within the responses of the subsample (n=173) toward the topic of human trafficking included *shock*, as in "I was shocked by the percentage of labour trafficking," *alarm*, *disbelief*, *heartbrokenness, helplessness, fear, and sadness*, i.e., "it is a topic that is sad but true we need to be aware about."

What was also underscored in the qualitative data was a heightened emotional response in connection to the "nearness" of the data presented in the survey. With the context of the survey respondent's demographics (Central Florida in the United States), many open-ended responses marked disbelief or surprise at the knowledge they gained from the survey regarding local human trafficking statistics. Respondents coupled strong emotional reactions (fright, surprise, shame) when learning about their state's human trafficking information. Respondents said, "I did not know we were in the top 3 in the States. Scary!" "I was surprised that Florida ranks 3rd in the country. That is scary;" "I had no idea trafficking was that high in our state!!!" and "I am a little ashamed that I don't know much about human trafficking in my own city." Educators were likely to have a strong

emotional reaction if their surprise was coupled with their learning of their local area's human trafficking affliction, as it is "hitting close to home."

In addition, 24.3% of those who had received training on human trafficking specifically had doubts of whether or not they would know what to do if they were to need to report. They either answered with "no" or "maybe" when asked whether they knew what to do if they suspected a child was a victim of human trafficking. One respondent, who noted "I am not surprised, I know I need more knowledge in this area" also mentioned, "I am very concerned that I have zero confidence that I would be able to spot a trafficked child in my classroom." The point of child abuse and prevention training is to help those taking it know how to identify and report (National Head Start Association, 2024). In contrast to identifying, though some identification signs are the same, reporting is usually the same process for abuse/neglect and human trafficking. Depending on the state and district, reports are made to the designated agency no matter what type of abuse has occurred. With

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that high of a percentage not knowing how to do so even after training indicates ineffectiveness.

At the beginning of the survey (pre-quiz section), participants were asked to rate their perceived knowledge of human trafficking using a Likert Scale from one (nothing) to five (everything). As seen in Figure 2, 0% believed that they knew everything and 7.8% believed they knew nothing. In addition, 41% of participants ranked their knowledge at a 1 or 2, and another 41.5% at a 3. That means that over 80% of participants believe they have average or less than average knowledge

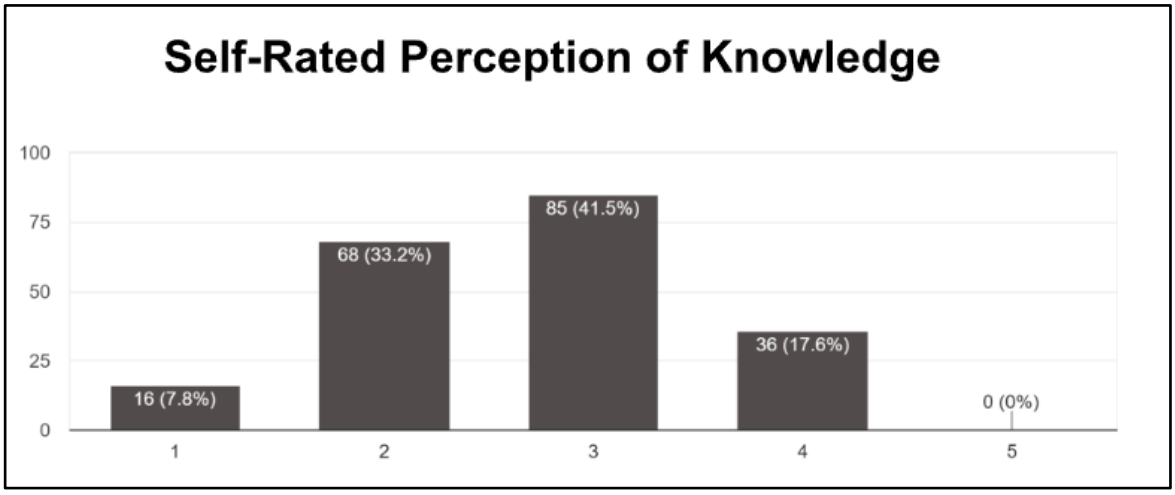

FIGURE 2: SELF-RATED PERCEPTION OF KNOWLEDGE

about human trafficking in their schools. When asked the extent to which they believed they would be able to identify a victim in their classroom, only 15.6% reported that they were mostly or completely confident that they would be able to pinpoint a student as a victim (see Figure 3). Similarly to Figure 2, Figure 3 shows that 5 (100% confidence) is the least common response with a total percentage of 0.5% (one participant).

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In addition, those who received training overall were still unsure about how to identify a victim of human trafficking. Of those who did receive training, only one participant (2.3% out of 44) believed that they could without a doubt identify a victim of human trafficking in their class or school, but this respondent was also a school social worker and not a classroom teacher. 56.8% of those who received training rated their ability at a 3 or lower. Those who did not receive any form of training reported even lower abilities (as expected). 61.6% (out of 159) rated their ability at a 3 or lower.

Counselors working with children and adolescents are specifically trained to identify, support, and advocate for those who are being trafficked, especially those who experience barriers to physical and emotional wellness (Browne-James et al., 2021). Based on the data collected, 100% of counselors received training; however, all 7 still rated their ability to identify as average (3). While it is important to note

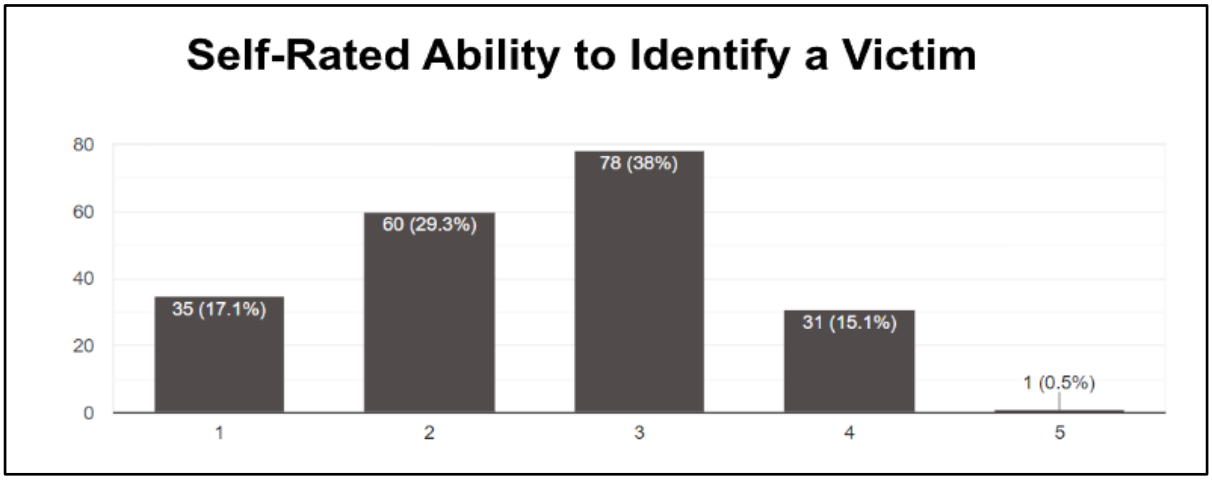

FIGURE 3: SELF-RATED ABILITY TO IDENTIFY A HUMAN TRAFFICKING VICTIM

that the child abuse and neglect trainings are not specific to human trafficking, many of the signs are similar, if not the same. Training specific to human

trafficking is required to acknowledge the additional signs and symptoms that may appear outside of those who are being abused and not trafficked.

Educators Request More Information/Training

Many survey respondents asked for contact to be made and additional information to be shared upon completion of this research. Through our mixed data analysis, it was surmised that 75% of respondents stated that they did not know much about human trafficking or needed more information. When asked about concerns, 56 participants responded with the majority expressing that they were grateful for the survey and learned a lot from the quiz results but still believed that more training and distribution of information was necessary. The qualitative analysis obtained two main results: 1) that 27.75% of the 205 respondents stated they "wanted" (12.72%) or "needed" (15.03%) more training or professional development about human trafficking to best serve their students and communities. Of the emotions coded toward respondents' potential HTK training or professional development, respondents showed *concern*, *feelings of being let down*, *disbelief*, and *hope*. The *hopeful* emotions were not toward the future or eradication of human trafficking but *hope* toward receiving more training to bolster their HTK. For example, respondents said, "I hope there will be opportunities for us to learn more;" "I wish I had known more and hope there will be more trainings related to this in the future;" and "I really hope training is offered in schools soon, for staff and students;" and "I wish the FBI and the police did more to educate parents, teachers, and children."

In addition, studies have shown that mandated reporters who have had education and training about child maltreatment and the reporting process are more effective reporters (Baker et al., 2021). Figure 4 displays the results participants suggested to

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increase their HTK. Online training, the most commonly used form of training, only ranks second in the results. School personnel have shown that they believe that guest speakers and teacher workshops would help enhance their training and knowledge on the subject. In the data analysis, one participant stated that they "would like a guest speaker" and another that "another online training is not helpful," pointing to the care, planning, and framing of the professional development delivery. Other specific topics that were mentioned included:

- Percentage of children who escape from human trafficking
- Percentages of race and ethnicities
- Information about trafficking in the local area
- Statistics and definitions
- How and when to report

Further supporting that current training methods are ineffective, 6 participants who had received previous training expressed that they needed "more" or "additional" training. In addition, 8 participants who had also received training

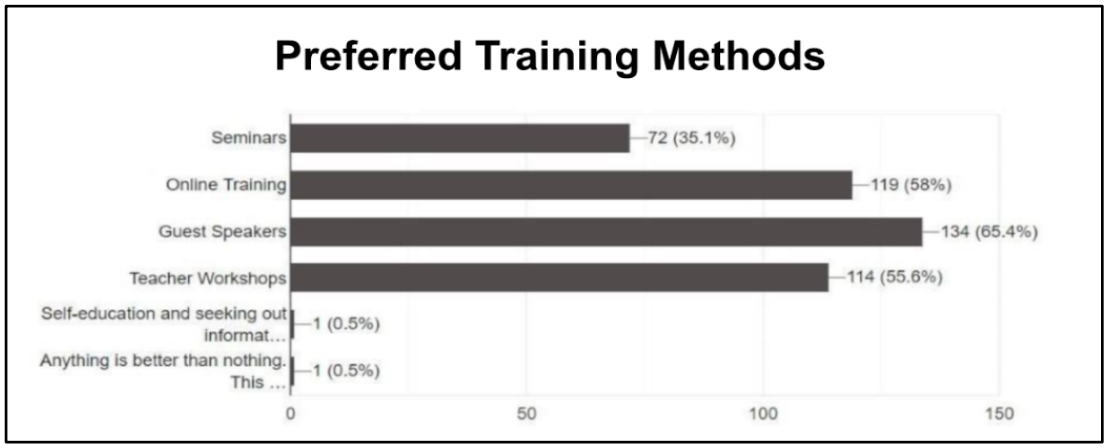

FIGURE 4: PREFERRED TRAINING METHODS

conveyed that they needed more knowledge and education with one directly responding, "I need to know more!!!!!". With these responses from those who have received training, there was an even higher emphasis on the need for more information from those who have not.

Discussion and Implications

The fact that almost 50% the educators surveyed had little to no confidence in identifying a victim of human trafficking is not only an issue within the school system, but for the community as a whole, highlighting the bioecological systems nexus and schooling's place within it. The surprise many educators felt about their lack of HTK, coupled with their voluntary suggestions for the need - nay, demand - for more training and professional development surrounding this topic is notable. Drawing from Rushek's experiences and commonsense observations as a veteran teacher who interacts and researches with preservice, in-service, and former practicing teachers every day, 27.75% of teachers surveyed responding that they need or want more training about human trafficking is significant given the general overwork, burnout, and apathy toward district-or-state mandated professional development or extra certifications. Simply stated, teachers rarely ask for anything extra to add to their overflowing plates. However, the educators' survey responses revealed that the surprise, shock, fear, interest, shame, and general malaise at feeling under-informed about how human trafficking is affecting their students, communities, and global society surpasses their desires for reframing the "doing more with less" educational undercurrent. Surprisingly, they are requesting further training and professional development about human trafficking.

However, when considering mobilizing the American teacher force in the fight against human trafficking, many critical considerations will need to be considered

when developing professional development surrounding this topic. Critical anti-trafficking scholarship highlights the imperial, neoliberal logic grounded in the mainstream anti-trafficking movement (Kempadoo, 2012; Hua, 2011) that mirrors the intrinsic "white savior" logic that is interrogated by critical education scholars. For example, Picower's (2012) concept of "tools of whiteness" explains how white teachers, often under the guise of well-meaning intentions, reproduce white supremacy and racist logic when they believe they are "helping" students of Color and other marginalized youth. Leonardo's (2004) work highlights how whiteness is replicated through the moral self-image of teachers as they position themselves as a benevolent fixer. While the majority of the teachers in the study saw gaps in their knowledge (Shulman, 1987) of human trafficking and wished and/or demanded professional development in order to help identify victims, we must be aware that the benevolence inherent in these majority white teachers wanting to mobilize toward anti-trafficking efforts would mirror the critical research that highlights how this 'white saviorism' underpins white teacher attitudes. Hua (2012) argued how the idea of "rescue" in anti-trafficking discourse reinforces white attitudes; we see the comparison between the discursive framing of rescue within anti-trafficking efforts to mirror that of the 'savior' narrative in teaching. Therefore, specific attention to how the social construction of whiteness affects education as well as human trafficking networks would be imperative; we suggest a pedagogical approach to this training to include challenging white teachers to reframe their profession as teachers away from saviorism and heroship, but as implicated actors in systemic inequity.

Another implication for the training of teachers on human trafficking is delineation and critique of the terms victim and criminal. These terms have been intertwined together and in many cases this causes a disconnect between law enforcement

response, treatment of victims, and the social services available to them. Intersectional characteristics including gender, race, and others can lead to the criminalization of those who do not appear helpless or vulnerable. Law enforcement are not as likely to intervene when the sex worker or trafficked individual is not white (Francis, 2023). A victim of trafficking is more likely to go through carceral punishment from law enforcement officers than referrals to rehabilitation and social services. Our current bureaucratic society gives law enforcement the ability to decide whether to put a victim through the criminal justice system as a perpetrator. Law enforcement officers, often left with the instantaneous decision and little details, must determine whether a victim is a perpetrator or not (Cooper et al., 2024). When considering the professional development of teachers on the larger, systemic issues and oppressions that contextualize anti-trafficking efforts, there would need to be an integrated approach of concurrently conducting anti-bias and diversity training. With the current sociopolitical climate discursively framing DEI initiatives as leftist propaganda, we see anti-trafficking training to be an entry point to subverting the language of DEI training and initiatives, included within anti-trafficking professional development.

In addition, once a victim is identified, it is crucial that they are connected to resources and social services in order for them to recover and heal from any traumas experienced. It is not uncommon for a victim to be arrested and punished by the legal system (Komar et al., 2023). Wrongful carceral punishment will negatively impact the victim and likely add to the trauma they have gone through. Working and partnering with social services and other community resources can make a significant, positive difference for victims – especially those who had previously been wrongfully criminalized. It can promote physical, emotional, and

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psychological safety that a victim has not had (Shorey et al., 2014). One of the main points of new training is to provide information and guidance on identification of trafficking that is, to an extent, individualized. It is important to acknowledge that not every student is going to show the same signs and realize that with every situation, there are going to be differences; however, there are often similarities with these cases. Though we cannot assume that every case will fit into one mold, providing training that takes into account every possibility would not be feasible. Though evidence shows that individualized training could prevent trafficking through interventions (De Shalit et al., 2021), the focus of training is to encompass as many factors as possible including but not limited to behavioral issues, mental health, pathology, and personal histories of as many students as possible.

Training can be complex and there are multiple components that come together to create a cohesive and effective training program. Training asks educators to look for both common and uncommon signs. Common signs might look like wounds that are new or bruises healing in various stages, fear of adults, withdrawal from class, lower academic standing, and truancy. Uncommon signs might include behavioral issues (yelling, shouting, imitating sexual scenarios or what they see at "home"), sleepiness or falling asleep in class, always hypervigilant, or unfocused on their work. It is important to note that not all of these signs indicate human trafficking. A student might always feel sleepy in their morning classes or someone could be withdrawn from an abusive intimate relationship. It is when there is a combination of them or other identifiers that should raise concern and warrant further exploration.

As educators work with young people every day, they must have the knowledge needed to successfully identify and report cases if and when these cases can be

reported to reputable social services and organizations that have the capacity to humanely navigate anti-trafficking efforts. However, in this sociopolitical time, it is imperative this professional development and training must be framed from a healing-centred, systemic-and-not-individual (i.e. Bronfenbrenner & Cici, 1994; Ginwright, 2015) place to raise the contextual educator's knowledge (Schulman, 1987). Any time identification is part of a necessary procedure within an institutionalized system, post-colonial scholars emphasize the importance of critical understandings of power and privilege (Hall, 2013) in the identifiers and those being identified. In addition, Rushek's recent research (forthcoming) has highlighted the dehumanizing experiences young people face when they are being traversed between and within institutionalized systems, such as the education system, the justice system, and to child protective services. It attempts to address the dehumanizing and traumatic experiences of young people caused by continuous jostling within institutions, training and professional development to raise educators' HTK should be framed by Ginwright's (2015) healing-centred pedagogy and critical anti-oppressive approaches (e.g., Kumashiro, 2000) in which the young person is not solely defined by the trauma inflicted from their embroilment in human trafficking networks but as a fully-whole human being. While the educators, in learning one of their students is being oppressed by human trafficking systems, may feel the same emotions they outlined in their survey responses - shock, alarm, fear, sadness - for that young person, they need to frame and act from not just a place of being informed of that trauma but viewing it as potential for humanizing, community-centred healing for what the young person faced.

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Suggestions for Future Research, Practice, and Teacher Professional Development

Because children represent 27% of human trafficking worldwide (Save the Children, n.d.) and educators interact with children every day, there is a substantial need for future research to increase our understanding of what teachers know and understand about human trafficking. The first step of prevention is identification. Having faculty, staff, and educators in schools trained in the identification of signs and the knowledge of what to do when they do identify a situation is crucial.

After a rescue, it is not uncommon for children and youth who have been trafficked to disclose that they have been controlled by more than one force. A child who was sex trafficked might have also been forced to take psychoactive substances. Because they have been through that trauma, it is imperative that we have social and healthcare services and professionals trained to assist them. A well-rounded care team will have a significant impact on the victim. This could include mental healthcare, sexual health, physical exams, and anything else the victim may need to aid recovery (Munro-Kramer et al., 2020). It is important to remember that when treating someone who has been trafficked, assumptions cannot be made. Social work principles relay that the child or youth are the "experts" of their life and story. Educators' and everyone on the treatment team must "meet the child where they are at" meaning different services will be needed depending on the circumstance and the victim. This can all be added to training.

One suggestion is to establish the differences between human trafficking of children in different settings and to utilize localized knowledge, facts, and statistics specific to the schooling area, as highlighted in the emotional responses when coupled with locality. Statistics and situations vary per state. In this study, data was

obtained from schools located in one county and state. Because of the difference in the amount and types of trafficking in each state, research should be conducted expanding this focus area to encompass others which can lead to an increase in the ability to not only identify differences but also tailor the future development of training for educators based on their locational needs.

In addition, there is a gap in research between human trafficking in public and private schools. There is little to no research done on this topic, although we know that most traversal or jostling of young people between different federal systems (i.e. law, justice, the prison industrial complex, child and protective services) stems from the public schooling system (Rushek, Forthcoming). Though training for all educators is important, the gap in research causes difficulty when it comes to trying to tailor training to a specific audience. There are many ways to submit a report either anonymously or named including hotlines, direct agency numbers, in-person reports, and more depending on the area; however, many do not know how to report or when to report in their area or at all. Investigation of child abuse and trafficking can only occur once a situation is identified and reported to the proper departments (e.g. Department of Child and Family Services). Ensuring that educators know how and when to report will increase the likelihood of cases being reported and investigated.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to assess the level of human trafficking knowledge among educators and explore how resources can be better utilized to expand their understanding of the issue. The findings reveal that human trafficking training is neither widely available nor effectively implemented in many K-12 schools. Educators have expressed a strong desire for more comprehensive training and

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information on the topic. As James Baldwin once said, "Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced." The trafficking of minors is a critical issue that must be addressed. This study demonstrates that meaningful change in the deterrence of human trafficking networks is possible through the proper availability and enactment of training and professional development of all school-based educators.

NOTE

Supplementary materials can be requested from the authors.

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