

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

THERAPEUTIC BOARDING SCHOOL EDUCATION AND AT-RISK
ADOLESCENTS A SUSTAINABILITY STUDY OF ADOLESCENT STUDENTS
EXPERIENCING EMOTIONAL AND BEHAVIORAL DISORDERS WHO
PARTICIPATED IN A COMPLETE ENVIRONMENT DESIGNED TO ACHIEVE
BALANCED AND INTEGRATED SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL HEALTH WITH
ONGOING INTELLECTUAL MATURITY AND CIVIC RESPONSIBILITY

By

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The at-risk adolescent faces critical behavioral, learning, and social-emotional challenges. Research discovered increases in academic underperformance and failure, violence, substance abuse, and a range of mood disorders. Treatment included private therapy, in-patient treatment, pharmacology, or a combination of all three modalities. Therapeutic boarding schools as a treatment option have been available since 1968. However, data reflecting the effectiveness and sustainability of therapeutic boarding school education and treatment were limited. Therefore, two critical questions were asked: Does the therapeutic educational setting create conditions that allow the at-risk adolescent to learn, heal, and thrive? Do these same conditions advance sustained growth and development regarding integrated academic progress and social-emotional health?

The Academy at Swift River, a therapeutic boarding school, was the subject of this research. Enrolling students presented multiple diagnoses. The *Post-Graduate Sustainability Survey* (PGSS), a pilot instrument, and the *Behavior Assessment System for Children-SRP-A* (BASC), a national norm, were used for data collection. Statistical analysis of the PGSS pre- and posttreatment academic constructs scored consistently high at $M = 3.77$ on a Likert-style scale. Emotional-social constructs reflected favorable results with $M = 4.43$. Mean t scores generated by the BASC reflected similar growth, with a $t = 50.53$ representing interpersonal relationships, locus of control, self-esteem, and self-reliance. The PGSS and the BASC generated data that were statistically and clinically significant at $p \leq .05$ and $p \leq .01$.

Noteworthy exceptions were discovered. Scores addressing alcohol use and substance abuse reflected minimal impairment on daily life activities. Actual behaviors indicated a different pattern. Of the sample, 73% reported using marijuana, 46% reported using cocaine, and 23% reported abuse of prescribed medications. Pretreatment data indicated 23% versus 31% of the posttreatment sample reported adjudication issues, including possession of a controlled substance, domestic violence, and assault on a police officer.

Results indicate that students completing the ASR program between September, 1998 and December, 2001, realized important gains in education, overall health, and the ability to thrive physically, mentally, and emotionally. The complete environment the academy created advanced and sustained social-emotional health as hypothesized. However, competing conditions within the greater community compromised the gains students realized at graduation