Lost In Space: An Explorative Study of Arrested Emotional Development Among High School Aged Children Post-Pandemic

Michael Anibal Altamirano[1]

ABSTRACT

College enrollment in the United States has continued to decrease since the pandemic. For colleges and universities, the students who are enrolling face unprecedented challenges, which many university leaders need help understanding and managing. The explorative nature of this study is to examine the traumatic environment of the pandemic on high school students, examining how this trauma has led to the suggested rampant arrested emotional development among said students. Arrested emotional development is attributed to rising cases of immaturity, anger, confusion, and suffering among high school students. Furthermore, the study will examine a connection between underdevelopment and the quality of students currently entering higher education. This investigation endeavors to understand the mindset of future university students and to help leaders of these institutions identify and serve future admits. This research methodology will be a principally qualitative approach consisting of primary information gathered from a culturally diverse sample of interviewed parents, teachers, administrators, and social workers based on their observations. Secondary information illustrates a broader and more global view of this problem. The evidence offered within this study explores an emerging issue that is currently under-researched, with the optimism of proposing opportunities for further exploration.

Keywords: Arrested Emotional Development, Leadership, Management, Immaturity, Anger, Confusion, Suffering, High School, Higher Education

[1] Professor, King Graduate School, Monroe College, Bronx, New York, USA. Email: maltamirano@monroecollege.edu

1   INTRODUCTION

The transition from high school to higher education has always been distressing for many aspiring students. The reality of independent learning can manifest in various behavioral, psychological, and social issues. Still, this traditional rite of passage for thousands of incoming first-year students has been navigated successfully for hundreds of years. The transition has not always been foolproof, but the attrition of success has generally been understood and accepted by society at large. This exploration aims to answer its driving research question of whether arrested emotional development is an underlying cause of high school students' deteriorating academic performance and behavior issues.

There is an emerging and alarming rate of recent, ill-prepared, and emotionally unstable high school students transitioning into higher education. The study will focus on one theory intimated by many educators from high school to the university level, which suggests that recent students entering higher education are not prepared to succeed due to issues related to arrested emotional development related to the COVID-19 pandemic (Roffey, 2023). This idea would suggest that students missed out on critical peer interaction and social development because of social isolation, remote learning, asynchronous learning, and the prominence of social media, particularly in the US (Apgar, 2023). Henceforth, students graduating from high school are less socially mature than their counterparts from five years ago.

Arrested Emotional Development occurs when one's maturity development is impaired because of a traumatic event (Sumaili, 2023); resulting in stagnating one's age and development when the trauma occurred (Doran, 2023). Signs of arrested emotional development often manifest in compulsions, greed, immaturity, fear, blame, shame, resentment, rage, confusion, and distress (Jones et al., 2019).

The COVID-19 pandemic has had an impact on people all over the world, in particular students. The exploration of this project will focus on high school aged learners preparing to enter higher education. For two to three years, high school students have had to contend with disruptions such as school closures, remote learning, isolation, and little to no social interaction. It is logical to fathom how these life disruptions have had various adverse effects on the emotional development of many high school students (Benner & Mistry, 2020). It is also essential to remember that not everyone has the same experience or outcomes. All pupils responded differently to the challenges put forth by the pandemic. We will examine shared experiences from participants that emerged throughout this study, such as social isolation, disrupted routines, transitions, stress and anxiety, loss and grief, and increased screen time.

The COVID-19 pandemic was traumatic and abrupt, catching the world by surprise. Universally, from one day to the next, the socialized nature of attending school and participating in social activities was shut down. The pandemic forced high school students to isolate themselves from classmates and social support networks (Camacho et al., 2021). Students had to adjust to a new way of learning and socializing using information technology. Prior to the pandemic remote

learning had been provided as a choice for individuals and students to consider as an option to traditional on-site learning (Oliveira et al., 2021). The idea of being obligated to do so was unfamiliar territory accompanied by an overwhelming lack of student preparedness. According to a study by Pellerone et al., the absence of live interaction and almost zero opportunities to socialize, such as going to the movies, attending parties, and even graduating, influenced high school students' emotional well-being and interpersonal skills development (2023). Studies also suggest a connection between social isolation and health issues, depression, and cognitive decline (Upadhyay & Sandhu, 2023).

Socially developing high school students rely on structure, routines, and familiarity to develop emotional stability and coping mechanisms to deal with traumatic events (Aden, 2023). Pitzer described how a sudden disruption based on a traumatic event such as the pandemic, contributed to lethargy and rebellious outbursts by many high school students (2023). Disrupted routines and transitions were further exasperated because parents and teachers were unfamiliar with the side effects during the time of the pandemic (Jinot & Dosieah, 2023). Now that people are starting to realize the gravity of the situation, therapy, and counseling services are overrun with parents and students seeking help. The sudden transition to remote learning or hybrid models also increased stress and emotional challenges (2023). Part of the evolution from high school to higher education is engulfed in live-in-person learning and group socialization. Missing out on many normal activities existent before the pandemic led to more unexpected stress and anxiety among pupils (Voss et al., 2023).

Most of the world was simply unprepared for the unexpected side effects of the pandemic (Dalton et al., 2023). Uncertainty about the future lead to increased levels of stress and anxiety among the entire population, especially students. Experts, such as Rahman et al., reported that cases of depression were two to three times higher during the pandemic and at the time of transition afterward (2023). Students reported feeling stressed during the pandemic because of an increased workload, lack of academic support, and procrastination, overall feeling unmotivated to do work (Usher et al., 2021). The overall uncertainty regarding the future loomed heavy on many high school students. The idea of succeeding in college when they were having trouble succeeding in high school became a prevailing reality for many learners.

The COVID-19 pandemic was a public health catastrophe. Just about everyone in the world became sick or knew someone who became sick and, in some cases, even died. It is difficult to imagine how high school students felt throughout this. Family members, friends, and famous people were dying at an alarming rate. The combination of misinformation and the unknown resulted in people approaching their own conclusions, especially high school-aged students (Mmanga et al., 2023). Students were not just grieving lost ones; they were also grieving milestones like birthday parties, graduation, and overall disrupted plans.

Many students in isolation self-entertained through social media, watching TV, and spending more time on the computer (Dang & Lench, 2022). Learners relied heavily on technology as a connection to the outside world and for entertainment. A study by Lua et al. suggests that increased screen time can adversely impact overall mental health, emotional well-being, and even sleep patterns (2023). More research on excessive screen time suggests that this activity can

be as addictive as drugs and alcohol. Unfortunately, many parents view this as a harmless vice (Anderl et al., 2023).

Stakeholders like schools, parents, and communities must understand the impact the pandemic had on high school students and their emotional development. Understanding would involve exploring strategies that promote mental health, offer ongoing counseling services, create safe places for expression, and promote opportunities for social interaction and development. These activities could encourage more open communication, honest discussion, and promoting self-care and well-being.

2   LITERATURE REVIEW

Adolescence is a critical phase of human development marked by unprecedented emotional growth and identity formation. However, some adolescents experience obstacles that can be attributed to arrested emotional development, a condition where emotional and social maturation is hindered, often due to adverse experiences or environmental factors. This literature review explores the causes, consequences, and potential interventions related to arrested emotional development among adolescents. It also illustrates the limited research on this topic and the opportunity for future researchers to investigate the topic of this exploration.

2.1   Causes of Arrested Emotional Development

Trauma and Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs):

Research (Felitti et al., 1998; Anda et al., 2006) has shown that exposure to childhood trauma and ACEs, such as abuse, neglect, or household dysfunction, can disrupt emotional development. These adverse experiences may lead to emotional dysregulation, affecting an adolescents' ability to form healthy emotional bonds.

Social Media and Technology:

The omnipresent use of digital devices and social media platforms has raised concerns about their impact on adolescent emotional development. Excessive screen time and social media usage may hinder the development of real-world emotional skills, leading to arrested development (Primack et al., 2017).

Parental Factors:

Parenting styles and parental mental health can significantly influence adolescent emotional development. Authoritarian or neglectful parenting styles, as well as parental depression or substance abuse, can impede the development of secure emotional attachments (Steinberg, 2005).

2.2   Consequences of Arrested Emotional Development

Mental Health Issues:

Adolescents with arrested emotional development are at a higher risk of developing mental health problems such as depression, anxiety, and borderline personality disorder (Sharp et al., 2011). Emotional dysregulation can contribute to these disorders.

Impaired Relationships:

Arrested emotional development can hinder an adolescents' capability to form and maintain healthy relationships. They may struggle with empathy, communication, and conflict resolution, affecting both peer and romantic relationships (Collins et al., 2009).

Academic and Occupational Challenges:

Emotional maturity is essential for success in academic and professional settings. Adolescents with arrested emotional development may struggle with motivation, self-regulation, and coping with stress, potentially impacting their educational and career trajectories (Eccles & Roeser, 2009).

2.3   Interventions and Support

Therapeutic Interventions:

Psychotherapy, particularly approaches like cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) and dialectical behavior therapy (DBT), can be effective in helping adolescents develop emotional regulation and interpersonal skills (Linehan, 1993; Rathus & Miller, 2002).

Parental and Family Support:

Family therapy and parenting programs can address the root causes of arrested emotional development by improving family dynamics and parenting styles (Kazdin & Whitley, 2003).

School-Based Programs:

Implementing social-emotional learning (SEL) programs in schools can promote emotional intelligence and give adolescents the tools to navigate their emotions and relationships (Durlak et al., 2011).

2.4   Summary

Arrested emotional development among adolescents is a multifaceted issue with far-reaching implications for mental health, relationships, and life outcomes. Understanding the causes and consequences of arrested emotional development is crucial for developing effective interventions and support systems to help adolescents overcome these challenges and lead healthier, more fulfilling lives. Further research is needed to explore the most effective strategies for prevention and intervention in this critical area of adolescent development.

3   METHODOLOGY

This exploratory investigation examines the theory of arrested emotional development within the context of high school students preparing to transition into higher education. Therefore, the research question driving this probe is, could arrested emotional development be an underlying cause of high school students' deteriorating academic performance and behavior issues? The data for this examination was compiled from a combination of primary and secondary research. Primary data was obtained from a random group of 23 parents, high school teachers, administrators, and social workers across the United States, identified as "Respondent" and a numerical unit. Secondary research was compiled from data relevant to this project and used to clarify and support the primary research. Participants of this project were given a short questionnaire via direct interview or e-mail. (Appendix 1)

Participants' names, institutional affiliations, and responses are all confidential. The sample was limited to participants with direct experience with students during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. A purposive sampling method was used to ensure representation from diverse educational settings to garner a better understanding of the phenomenon of arrested emotional development within the high school environment.

The exploration is qualitative, as illustrated by the primary research and secondary research was used to support information and findings throughout the study. The research allows for a comprehensive understanding of the issues related to high school students' transition to higher education post-pandemic in a real-world setting. The topic of arrested emotional development post-pandemic has not been extensively researched therefore, secondary research was employed to gather supporting information on student behavior, academic performance, and readiness for higher education. In-depth interviews were conducted with a subset of participants to explore their qualitative insights. Open-ended questions were employed to elicit detailed responses regarding specific challenges and strategies.

Identifying cause and effect represents an important aspect of this exploratory investigation. It is vital to discern factors that cause arrested emotional development, which signifies the effect of the behavior of high school students transitioning to higher education. Other issues emerging from this study include pandemic-related disruptions, virtual learning experiences, social media usage, emotional well-being, student behavior, academic performance, and readiness for higher education.

The data gathered was analyzed to include supporting secondary research and researched patterns of observed behavior. The interview transcripts presented common issues that participants revealed relating to challenges and strategies in support of students. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring their voluntary participation and confidentiality. The research adhered to ethical standards, prioritizing the well-being and privacy of participants.

The study's scope is limited to the perspectives of educators, administrators, social workers, and parents, and the findings may only partially represent the experiences of some students and stakeholders. Additionally, the research may need to capture the full diversity of educational settings and student demographics. The findings aim to inform educational stakeholders, including schools, parents, and communities, about the challenges students face post-pandemic. The research may contribute to more scientific investigation, the development of targeted interventions, and support systems in the future to better enhance the student transition from high school to higher education.

4   REVIEW OF INTERVIEW RESPONSES

The purpose of using structured interviews for this study was to illuminate the experiences, views, opinions, ideas, and issues related to the topic of this study (Islam & Aldaihani, 2022). In the context of this investigation, interviews primarily offered a more profound insight into the social issues of under-performing high school students. Hence, because the topic of arrested emotional development among high school students post-pandemic is under-researched, the interviews provided some familiarity with this phenomenon. Additionally, the interviews proved effective when addressing sensitive topics, allowing participants to verbally articulate their opinions or ideas (2022).

Respondents were initially asked to describe positive and negative changes in student behavior. According to Respondent 3:

> "Yes, there were positive and negative issues post-pandemic. Students had a really hard time getting back into routines. They had a hard time focusing and sitting through classes. There were a lot of behavior issues."

Several respondents echoed Respondent 3 describing how students had difficulty returning to routines post-pandemic. These difficulties could include challenges in adapting to regular schedules and maintaining focus during classes, as supported by Ladson-Billings (2021). Another response to the first question was the presence of current behavior issues among students, suggesting students have exhibited disruptive or problematic behavior such as verbal threats, loud distracting noises, smart phone use during class, and acting in any manner that disrupts the flow of the classroom session.

Respondents also reported a mix of resilience, adaptability, and positive and negative changes. According to respondents, a third of students showed resilience and were able to adapt to a post-pandemic learning environment. A study by Banihashem et al. supports the idea of student resilience, particularly in a blended learning format after the pandemic (2023). Unfortunately, according to observations, most students faced challenges, such as adjusting to routines, behavior issues, resilience and adaptability, and a mix of positive and negative changes in student behavior.

Based on the provided responses to the interview questions, respondents report a high percentage of high school students displaying negative behavior. According to observed behavior, this ranges between 40% - 60%. These observations suggest that a significant portion of students

exhibit negative behavior. According to the information gathered, when students display negative behavior, it is often due to a lack of systems control and strong academic standards. Types of negative behavior observed were lack of motivation, disinterest in classroom participation, and disruptive behavior. It indicates that negative behavior can manifest differently among high school students. Overall, there is an observed high percentage of high school students displaying negative behavior, signifying this could be a priority issue of system controls for teachers and leaders. A study by Herman et al., suggests that the issue of control is exasperated by high teacher turnover however for teachers committed to the career of education, dissonant student behavior can be controlled through focused training (2022). Respondent 12 replied with a statement of,

> "It's frustrating to go to work and not care, but they want us to work miracles with no [pay] increase and with more and more students. I try to do my best with no support, but everyone is overworked and no one feels good. I just do my best, that's all."

Respondents did not distinguish between high-performing or underperforming students when discussing positive student traits. Several of the positive traits reported were enthusiasm for school and social interactions, technological proficiency, and increased independence and responsibility. Respondent 4 contributed the following,

> "Positive traits I have observed from students include increased independence in managing their online learning, improved communication skills through virtual platforms, and a heightened sense of responsibility in meeting deadlines and completing assignments."

Many students have reported being excited to interact with each other again, enjoying attending school events, and appreciating being physically present with each other. This excitement indicates a positive attitude towards socialization and school activities. Post-pandemic students have displayed improved ability to use technology, suggesting they have developed skills and familiarity with digital tools during lockdown. These observations are supported by research published by Guppy et al. (2022). Respondents also identified positive traits such as increased independence in managing online learning, improved communication skills through virtual platforms, and a heightened sense of responsibility in meeting deadlines and completing assignments.

Regarding observed negative traits, respondents cited issues of communication, difficulty concentrating, challenges with attendance and punctuality, anxiety and discomfort in specific environments, behavioral issues, decreased motivation, and apathy. According to respondent 2,

> "They had a really hard time communicating verbally. Getting to school on time was a challenge. They found concentrating difficult. Many students displayed anxiety being around students in loud areas. During the pandemic students who normally received special education, did not. This made their transition back to regular schedules more challenging."

Many students need help communicating verbally and with concentrating. Attendance and punctuality are an ongoing issue. Students are not attending classes as often as scheduled and when they do, they frequently attend tardy. Both issues directly affect the learning environment and the student's academic progress, as McDonald et al. (2023) supported. Another negative issue, which many leaders were unprepared for, was student anxiety and discomfort in educational settings. Vintila et al. describe this as the emotional distress of coping with a new environment within education (2023). This emotional distress is truly an offset of the pandemic and one that not only exists in the high school environment but in higher education and the professional working environment. Respondents also reported behavioral issues in response to this question, which has been a common theme thus far. They report students having a short attention span, needing to move frequently, problems with reading and writing stamina, and cutting class. These behaviors represent challenges in focusing, self-regulation, and commitment to academic responsibilities. Finally, respondents reported rising cases of decreased motivation and apathy, signifying a lack of engagement and enthusiasm, which can also impact learning outcomes and overall academic performance, concepts supported in a study by Cunningham and Cunningham (2023).

Discussing the topic of attention span with participants revealed two common ideas: students having difficulty paying attention and the impact of high-quality instruction. Based on the provided responses, students need help paying attention. Many respondents blame this lack of focus to the emerging use of social media and technology. Many agree that when students pay attention, it is only for a short time, such as 5 to 10 minutes. Respondent 8 added,

> "Student attention varies, and it largely depends on the individual student and their specific circumstances. Some of my students demonstrate high levels of attentiveness during online classes, while others may struggle with distractions or difficulty in maintaining focus. Overall, I do see a decline in attention span."

Another common reason suggested by the participants was the lack of high-quality instruction the students were receiving. Furthermore, many teachers are struggling post-pandemic because many teachers quit or retired during the pandemic, and new teachers must prepare to deal with student behavior issues. Additionally, as illustrated by Robinson et al., teachers are also experiencing increasing anxiety caused by a heavy workload and generally being unprepared to deal with student issues (2023). Generally, there appears to be an inconsistency with student attention span. It is significant to recognize that some students demonstrate high levels of attentiveness and others do not. The issue suggested by many respondents is that there are fluctuating levels of student disengagement during the learning process, further indicating that attention levels will vary among students based on various factors such as the learning environment, personal circumstances, and individual characteristics.

Describing students' academic performance yielded reactions that fell into two distinct categories: students displaying below-average performance and continued struggle and students performing as expected but needing of additional support. Respondent 7 supported this conclusion and also questioned the cause,

> "What we noticed was that their academic performance was below average. Students are struggling to submit their assignments on time. Students also say they are struggling understanding their assignments. I don't know who's to blame, is it the teachers, students, parents, or everyone?"

Observations suggest challenges in meeting academic expectations and comprehending the material for students struggling and performing below average. Respondents further suggested that communication between students and teachers must also be examined further. A study by Kaphie and Rana supports these observations adding that parents should play a critical role in bridging communication gaps (2023). As previously noted, some teachers must prepare to deal with many post-pandemic student struggles.

Then, some students perform as expected, but most require additional support. The participants of this study describe how teachers are working extra to redirect students constantly, regarding their focus, and helping students with communication skills such as reading and writing. Furthermore, it can be interpreted that while some students show promise and other students struggle, almost all students need extra assistance and support to succeed in high school. A study by Richards (2022) illustrates how students must also develop the initiative to seek assistance. However, demographic research suggests that students of under-represented communities (Black and Hispanic) are less likely to seek out help.

Transitioning from high school to higher education comes with challenges. According to the respondents, a few students are ready to transition successfully, but most still need help. What emerged in the responses to this question was a need for more readiness due to deficiencies in social skills, immaturity, and overall academic preparedness. Respondent 14 had a fascinating insight on this topic,

> "Based on my observations, students' readiness for the transition to higher education is a mixed bag. There are two types of readiness, academic and emotional. While some students have demonstrated the necessary academic and emotional maturity to successfully transition to the next level, most others require additional support and guidance to navigate the demands and expectations of higher education."

Most study participants agree that most students lost a significant opportunity to develop, grow, and mature emotionally during the pandemic. While they all seemingly progressed academically, many regressed socially. This regression would explain a deficiency in social skills and immaturity. According to Jones et al., the pandemic caused more overarching issues for students beyond the scope of education, like parents losing jobs, economic insecurity, and food availability (2023). Several participants also noted that teachers and school leaders were very lenient during the pandemic. As a result, many students transitioning to live classes find it challenging to meet academic standards. The study participants also noted that overall, students' performance is not close to pre-pandemic levels. Apart from adequately training new and experienced teachers, schools must provide emotional support resources for the students and embrace that the high school student today is remarkably different from the high school student of five years ago.

The last survey question allowed participants to reflect on their collective experiences and offer advice on student issues beyond the pandemic. Many students struggled to transition to a virtual learning environment at the pandemic's start. Many students are now struggling as they transition to live in class environments. The struggle is not simply academic but also emotional for many students. The idealistic goal for many high school students is to evolve into higher education learners. Unfortunately, many students are attempting to enter colleges and discover they need to be sufficiently prepared. It is important to note that the onus is not just on high school leaders but also on stakeholders within the higher education community. Respondent 3 stated,

> "Students need assistance in all areas. After being virtual for the amount of time most students did, transitioning was difficult. Many students displayed severe anxiety. Teachers must step into a classroom understanding students are facing different obstacles. Setting up academic assistance will be needed so that students can receive the assistance they need. It doesn't just stop in high school. Students going to university need help too."

Respondent 11 echoed the sentiments of Respondent 3 and added,

> "As community caretakers, I would advise colleagues and parents to prioritize open communication with students, providing them with a safe space to express their concerns and emotions. It is crucial to offer support and guidance in helping students navigate the challenges of the post-pandemic era, both academically and emotionally. Encouraging a balance between self-care, regular routines, and academic engagement can also contribute to students' overall well-being and success. Additionally, fostering a sense of community and connectedness, whether through virtual platforms or in-person activities, can help students feel supported and engaged in their learning journey."

Most respondents answered similarly discussing the impact virtual learning had on high school students. Students were among the first to view virtual learning as a disruption whereas, the rest of the population never considered it could be. Bluntly, online learning seemed like the only logical path at the time, as illustrated by Kolyvas and Nikiforos (2023). Educational leaders were well intended, but neither they nor other stakeholders ever considered its disruptive nature to social development. To further exasperate the issue, virtual learning quickly outlined the worldwide socio-economic divide. Technology and accessibility to Wi-Fi is not equal for all. Many urban populations needed more infrastructure to support this technology and many households were without computers. This disproportional reality within under-represented communities is highlighted in a study conducted by Perez (2023). Lockdowns and social distancing further created isolation issues for many children. As students transitioned back to live in- person classes, many experienced social awkwardness, paranoia, and delayed adjustment.

Several study participants discussed the importance of teaching students time management literacy and providing academic support. These same topics were outlined as critical in research conducted by Astatke et al. (2023). Teaching time management enables learners to prioritize tasks, set goals, and allocate sufficient time to study effectively (Ancho, 2023). Time management aids students in submitting their work in a timely manner. Developing this skill can help students increase their confidence and motivation. Teaching and supporting students as they learn these skills will help them manage their time and improve their literacy skills. Supporting

students through literacy training will also support and enhance their critical thinking skills (Pollarolo et al., 2023). They can analyze information more effectively, connect different concepts, and coherently express their ideas, improving problem-solving abilities. By investing in these areas, educators and leaders can create a more supportive and inclusive learning environment that would benefit the entire learning community.

The interview participants' comments included prioritizing open communication and emotional support, balancing self-care routines, and fostering community connections. Encouraging open communication allows students to express their feelings, fears, and struggles, helping to reduce anxiety and stigma around mental health issues (Cogan et al., 2023). Teachers can model open communication, thus displaying emotional support. It is also essential to teach students to support each other through social relationships, creating a network of social encouragement (Karperski & Blau, 2023). For students, this could increase the opportunity of being heard and understood, leading to healthier and more meaningful connections with each other.

Furthermore, encouraging communication would lead to collaborative problem-solving, where solutions can be found with input from all parties involved (Rojas et al., 2023). Students can also be taught self-care practices, such as regular exercise, mindfulness, and adequate sleep. Apart from academics, promoting mental and physical well-being is essential. Balanced self-care routines help students manage stress and prevent burnout (Sawyer, 2023). Prioritizing healthy emotional development will also help foster community connections. A strong community network provides a support system during difficult times and celebrates successes, reducing feelings of isolation. Students will gain a sense of belonging, which can positively impact self-esteem and mental health. Communities generally share resources, knowledge, and experiences, which lead to collective growth and development (Bielaczyc, 2023).

It would be almost futile to argue that today's high school student is remarkably different compared to the high school student from before the pandemic. Five years ago, it was customary to emphasize academic performance. That is no longer the case. As previously illustrated, fostering high school students through the learning process, is more complicated today than ever. Academics is only one part of the modern learning curriculum. School leaders must now be prepared to deal with a wide array of behavior issues and provide professional and emotional support to students who need it. Many school leaders are not prepared for these challenges. They are learning and adapting through the process and challenges. As a result, many high school students are transitioning to higher education and find themselves unprepared for the rigors and expectations of this transitionary level.

5   RECOMMENDATIONS

For the foreseeable future, students will continue to encounter many obstacles. Modern students face unprecedented academic challenges and need emotional support (Aleria & Villocino, 2023). High schools throughout the world are reporting an increasing number of students feeling sad and hopeless, resulting in mounting rates of youth suicide, trauma, stress, self-doubt, and pressure to achieve (Stubbing et al., 2023). From a societal perspective, especially in the United States, there are increasing incidents of school shootings, racial discrimination, and financial insecurity (Reyna et al., 2022). Now, more than ever, community leaders must develop more

programs focused on social and emotional learning and development. If the community does not take responsibility for the development of future leaders now, the issues presented in this explorative study will only become more pronounced.

Most high school teachers and leaders need to gain the expertise to deal with students and their emotional development issues (Watson et al., 2022). Licensed clinical social workers can play an important role, mainly because they have the expertise to work with and support children with developmental issues. These professionals are specially trained in working with high school-aged children (2022). Clinical social workers also understand the complexities of other conditions, such as autism spectrum disorders and ADHD learning disabilities (Corcoran & Wolk, 2023). This knowledge helps them identify specific issues and recommend specific treatment and support. Because many high school students hesitate to ask for help, a trained, licensed social worker can often identify many issues, even before a formal diagnosis is made (2023). An early intervention can often be the difference between success and failure for many students.

One drawback of utilizing more licensed social workers in school systems is the inherent cost of decreasing resources. Having one social worker to help all students, in an average population school of students between the 9th grade and 12th grade, is not enough (Murphy, 2021). As the need for more social workers rises, so does the inherent expense. There would need to be more advocacy from community leaders on behalf of the students to allocate funds for such programs. There must also be collaboration with teachers and parents. Where in which social workers can provide information to help identify potential issues. The heightened communication and collaboration can only increase involvement in high school children's education as communities work toward common goals. This is not to suggest that these communication issues are easy to identify. Every child is different, and many are adept at masking their true feelings. However, there are clear indicators that a problem may exist, such as prolonged sadness, social withdrawal, self-harm/suicide, and violent behavior, and it is during these times that intervention becomes prudent (Zhang et al., 2023).

Parents and teachers spend the most time with children. School leaders can help by educating parents and teachers (Nooruddin & Baig, 2014). Plenty of free literature and pamphlets are available to all that can make a difference in a child's life.

As illustrated by Rahayu & Dong, schools and social workers should collaborate to promote social skills and the development of peer relationships (2023). Developing skills would help all children improve their social interactions and build meaningful relationships with their peers as they all share in the high school growth experience. This intervention can foster a sense of belonging and help reduce feelings of isolation. High school aged children with emotional arrested development issues may exhibit challenging behaviors due to difficulties with communication and emotional regulation (Paley & Hajal, 2022). Intervention plans provide proven strategies to manage and reduce problematic behaviors in school settings while encouraging healthy interpersonal relationships.

Throughout this exploration, it is apparent that the transition from high school to higher education remains a constant rite of passage for many students. For future students to succeed, high schools can only approach the business of education as if the pandemic never happened

(Baxter et al., 2023). High schools need to transform and strategically convert their programs into something very different than what they once were. High school learning must transcend beyond just pure academics and embrace positive social development (Mussallam, 2023). Social development would mean the entire stakeholder community must become more informed and learn from its environment. Equally, institutions of higher learning need to prepare for a different type of incoming student, one that needs to adequately prepare for the rigor of the next academic step (Adebisi, 2022). An incoming first-year student may not be as academically primed as a typical student from five years ago and may not be emotionally able to face the rigors of more advanced learning. Like high schools, colleges and universities must prepare to go beyond academics and assist students with developmental issues.

6   LIMITATIONS

Despite the vital relevance of this exploratory topic, it is primarily qualitative in nature supported by secondary research. Beyond the obvious, the idea of arrested emotional development of high school students would benefit from the support of medical and psychological research. The lack of targeted research on arrested emotional development among high school students post-pandemic, scientific and otherwise, and it is a genuine attempt to explain a phenomenon that many within all levels of education are experiencing, steered this exploratory study. Studying this topic from demographic, geographic, and socio-economic perspectives would yield exciting results, especially for school systems in underserved areas.

7   CONCLUSIONS

Transitioning from high school to higher education has long been a significant challenge for students, marked by a blend of academic, social, and emotional adjustments. However, the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic has introduced new complexities that require immediate attention and innovative solutions. The findings of this exploratory study shed light on the concept of arrested emotional development as a potential factor contributing to the decline in college readiness among recent high school graduates.

There should be continued consideration of the impact of the pandemic on students' lives. The abrupt shift to remote learning, prolonged social isolation, disrupted routines, and heightened uncertainty have collectively contributed to many challenges for high school students. As highlighted by the primary research, these challenges encompass a broad spectrum of behavioral, emotional, and academic issues. The responses from educators and professionals underscore a prevalent concern that many high school students may be entering higher education ill-equipped to navigate the demands of college life.

While it is essential to acknowledge the resilience and adaptability displayed by some students, the consensus among the participants of this study is that a significant portion of high school graduates are experiencing negative changes in behavior, emotional well-being, and academic performance. The disruptions caused by the pandemic have affected students' ability to develop vital social skills, manage emotions, and establish a strong foundation for successful higher education transitions.

To address these pressing issues, a multifaceted approach is essential. Schools, communities, parents, and higher education institutions must collaborate to implement targeted strategies promoting academic and emotional growth. Recommendations stemming from this study emphasize the necessity of licensed social workers in schools to provide specialized support for students facing emotional challenges. These professionals can play a pivotal role in identifying issues early on, offering guidance in educational programs, and fostering a nurturing environment conducive to holistic development.

Moreover, the study highlights the need for increased awareness, communication, and stakeholder collaboration. Programs prioritizing social and emotional learning, peer interactions, and mental health support can help mitigate the adverse effects of arrested emotional development. High schools must adapt their approach, focusing on academic excellence and equipping students with the emotional resilience required for successful transitions to higher education.

Envisioning the future, lessons learned from this exploration serve as a call to action for educators, policymakers, parents, and communities. Today's high school students are future coworkers and leaders. The challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic have illuminated the urgency of addressing emotional development issues alongside academic preparedness. Fostering an inclusive and supportive educational ecosystem would empower the next generation to overcome obstacles, thrive academically and emotionally, and contribute positively to society.

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Appendix 1: Interview Questions

1. Have you noticed an overall positive or negative change in student behavior post-pandemic? Explain briefly.
2. Based on your observations only, what percentage of HS students would you categorize as displaying negative behavior?
3. Briefly list a few positive traits you have observed from students.
4. Briefly list a few negative traits you have observed from students.
5. Are students, in general, paying attention?
6. How would you currently describe your student's academic performance?
7. Based on your observations, are students academically and emotionally ready to successfully transition to higher education?
8. As community caretakers, what advice would you offer colleagues and parents to better assist students?