

DISSERTATION

ANALYSES OF K-12 HUMAN TRAFFICKING AWARENESS AND PREVENTION
EDUCATION (HTAPE) CURRICULA FOR ELEMENTS OF CULTURAL
RESPONSIVENESS, TRAUMA-INFORMED CARE, AND ECOFEMINIST PRINCIPLES

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ABSTRACT

ANALYSES OF K-12 HUMAN TRAFFICKING AWARENESS AND PREVENTION EDUCATION (HTAPE) CURRICULA FOR ELEMENTS OF CULTURAL RESPONSIVENESS, TRAUMA-INFORMED CARE, AND ECOFEMINIST PRINCIPLES

This dissertation investigates human trafficking awareness and prevention education (HTAPE) for youth in Denver and Aurora, Colorado, where cultural and trauma-related factors increase vulnerability. Using ecofeminism to frame systemic causes, culturally responsive teaching to assess educational relevance, and trauma-informed care to guide practice, the study critiques existing HTAPE curricula. Findings indicate limited attention to trauma manifestations, cultural contexts, and teacher preparedness. Recommendations call for integrating these theoretical frameworks to design comprehensive and equitable curricula that empower educators, promote resilience, and more effectively protect youth from exploitation.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Human trafficking is a crime of pandemic proportions among our world's child population (International Labour Organization et al., 2022), with estimates that a child is sold into trafficking every two minutes (Safe House Project, 2024). In the United States (U.S.), 300,000 children, a number heavily believed to be underestimated, are commercially sexually exploited every year (Safe House Project, 2024). Females are at greater risk for being trafficked, with two thirds of victims being girls (Save The Children, n.d.). Further, young Girls of Color face a uniquely intersectional fate, with Black, Hispanic, and Indigenous females trafficked at rates disproportionately greater than their representation in the U.S. population (Rights4Girls, 2018). LGBTQ+ populations experience similar overexploitation (Greenbaum et al., 2025).

With the most frequently trafficked victims between the ages of 12 and 14 (National CASA/GAL Association for Children, n.d.), there is a “severe and urgent need” to implement human trafficking awareness and prevention education programs in K-12 schools (Reid et al. 2024). Traffickers themselves are now recruiting youth on school grounds and through social, school-based connections (Department of Education of New Jersey [DOE NJ], 2022; California State Board of Education, 2019; Williams et al., 2018), emphasizing the need to empower our youth with methods for self and peer protection. While there have been movements to better train school personnel to recognize signs of trafficking in their students, symptoms can easily go unnoticed and be shrugged off or reported as defiant or withdrawn behavior. This ignorance becomes particularly common when teacher education is not equipped with trauma-informed care or culturally relevant training and practices.

While human trafficking is a ubiquitous phenomenon, there are a few areas within the U.S. where it concentrates, including the state of Colorado. Colorado contains three of the top 100 cities per capita in the U.S. where trafficking is reported most frequently. The state hosts a number of risk factors for trafficking, including its high demographic proportions of People of Color and Immigrants/Newcomers, its extensive travel infrastructure, frequent tourism, and large urbanized spaces. While many high-risk states and cities share common risk factors (e.g. urban, high proportion of People of Color), there are additional demographic and contextual factors that make trafficking unique to particular places. As best practices in education call for when educating youth on any topic, human trafficking awareness and prevention education (or HTAPE) curricula should be developed in response to the particular culture/s of the communities they are being administered to as a means of empowering youth to better understand and take action against trafficking as it uniquely occurs in their environment.

While K-12 HTAPE programs are a novel development being required in some states and implemented in individual districts elsewhere, little to no headway has been gained into analyzing exactly what each curriculum incorporates into learning. In a country that has perpetuated the white-washing of history and erasure of race within academic instruction (Gay, 2000), it is imperative these curricula be evaluated for their cultural responsiveness. This is especially vital, given the youth most vulnerable to trafficking belong to groups most often underrepresented and ignored in K-12 instruction. Further, per recommendations from several academics, these curricula should be implemented in a trauma-informed manner, due to the delicate nature of the topics and risk for traumatization and retraumatization while engaging with content in classrooms (DOE NJ, 2022; Albert, 2021). Pressingly, HTAPE curricula should be developed and administered keeping in mind the community and youth targeted for education,

and in a manner that emancipates students from traditional, generalized instruction so they might feel qualified to catalyze change within their schools and neighborhoods.

The purpose of this project involved understanding the accessibility of K-12 human trafficking awareness and prevention curricula, their presence of culturally responsiveness and trauma-informed care elements, and incorporation of discussions around race and ethnicity as risk factors. This study is significant because it addresses an urgent educational and social justice need: ensuring that the very youth most vulnerable to trafficking are not left invisible within the curricula designed to protect them. While HTAPE programs are beginning to emerge in K-12 schools, little is known about how well these programs incorporate cultural responsiveness, trauma-informed practices, or explicit recognition of race and ethnicity as key risk factors. Without such elements, curricula risk reproducing the very erasures that perpetuate systemic inequities and silence the voices of marginalized students. By analyzing the accessibility, cultural responsiveness, and trauma-informed grounding of HTAPE curricula, this project seeks to fill a critical gap in both scholarship and practice. Ultimately, the findings aim to guide the development of more equitable, community-rooted curricula that not only educate but also empower students to recognize, resist, and prevent trafficking in their own contexts.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

According to the U.S. Department of Justice (2020), human trafficking is defined as: ...a crime that involves compelling or coercing a person to provide labor or services, or to engage in commercial sex acts. The coercion can be subtle or overt, physical or psychological. Exploitation of a minor for commercial sex is human trafficking, regardless of whether any form of force, fraud, or coercion was used.

In the U.S., one in every 156 people is enslaved through trafficking (Williams et al., 2018).

While trafficking occurs across the country, it was most frequently reported in 2023 in the following states: California (11.73% of total cases), Texas (9.36%), New York (4.28%), Illinois (2.80%), Georgia (2.73%), Ohio (2.68%), Michigan (2.64%), Missouri (2.59%), North Carolina (2.44%), and Pennsylvania (2.29%) (NHTH, 2024).

Human trafficking disproportionately affects youth, People of Color, girls and women, and LGBTQ+ adolescents. The average age of sex trafficking victims is 12 (Office of the Attorney General for the District of Columbia, 2024; California State Board of Education, 2019). Studies show and support that People of Color, particularly Black, Indigenous, and undocumented Immigrant youth, are trafficked at rates significantly higher than their representation in the population (Greenbaum et al., 2025; Wahab et al., 2024; Clark-Ibáñez & Hall, 2023; POLARIS, 2020; Salas & Didier, 2020; Reid et al., 2019; Rights4Girls, 2018). Women make up 82% of the cases reported to the National Human Trafficking Hotline (NHTH) in 2023 (NHTH, 2024), and 96% of all sex trafficking victims are girls and women (The Inter-Agency Coordination Group Against Trafficking in Persons [ICAT], 2017). Additionally,

LGBTQ+ youth are at a heightened risk for their increased likelihood of running away, homelessness, and abuse (Greenbaum et al., 2025).

Numerous risk factors increase a person and/or place's vulnerability to trafficking. These include poverty, economic distress, war, a lack of social/economic safety nets, government corruption, criminal activity, and gender inequity (Reid et al., 2024). The DOE NJ (2022) and Fedina et al. (2019) further identify racial or ethnic minority status as a significant risk factor. Additional community-based risk factors involve urbanization, as urban environments are often linked to higher crime rates and more venues where sex trafficking occurs (e.g., massage parlors, downtown areas, public transportation stops) (Kakar, 2022).

The process of recruitment and enslavement into trafficking is complex, generally involving relationship-building and grooming by traffickers (DOE NJ, 2022). Recruitment often begins with psychological manipulation and/or the formation of a trauma bond, which is developed within romantic, friendship, or familial relationships. Coercion, fraud, or force is then used to maintain control over the victim. Examples of these tactics include sextortion, exploitation of immigration status, threats of violence toward the victim's loved ones, and debt bondage (coercion); false promises of work or lying about identity (fraud); and kidnapping, forced drug use or criminal activity, and physical abuse (force) (DOE NJ, 2022).

Human Trafficking as a Demonstrated Issue of Race, Ethnicity, Nationalism, and Gender-Based Violence

Despite the rhetoric surrounding who can be a victim of human trafficking, labor and sex traffickers disproportionately target and enslave people of color. The phrase "Anyone can be a victim" is commonly used by national and government organizations. While true, this statement overlooks and erases those who are statistically most vulnerable to trafficking. Women and

children are the most common targets (Salas & Didier, 2020). ICAT (2017) identified “root causes” for this phenomenon related to historical gender-based discrimination and its ongoing perpetuation. These causes include gender inequality in the workplace, gender-blind policies, cultural norms that normalize violence, and vulnerability during humanitarian crises.

Despite the common image of trafficking victims as white, middle-class women and children (Minnesota Office of Justice Programs & Minnesota Statistical Analysis Center, 2019), statistics show that Girls and Women of Color are disproportionately vulnerable. Consider the following statistics:

- The West Coast Children’s Clinic reported that of the young girls trafficked, 1 in 3 are African American (Salas & Didier, 2020).
 - Among sex trade survivors across the U.S., 94% of sex trafficking victims were female, 40% were Black, and 24% were Latinx (Rights4Girls, 2018).
 - The same report from Rights4Girls (2018) found that Native American women make up 40% of those trafficked in South Dakota
 - Black women accounted for 66% of victims trafficked between 2012 and 2016 in Cook County, Illinois, and 50% of individuals sold online for sex in Nebraska were Black women.
 - In Florida, youth human trafficking reports from 2009 to 2015 showed that 49.5% of victims were Black girls, 36.8% were white girls, and 13.4% were Hispanic girls (Reid et al., 2019).
 - In Louisiana, Black youth represent 49% of sex trafficking victims, despite making up only 19% of the population. In King County, Black youth account for 84% of trafficked victims, while Black people comprise just 7% of the population (Polaris, 2020).
- While these statistics are compelling, they represent just a small snapshot of the gender-

and race-based violence defining human trafficking. Demographic statistics regarding trafficking victims are often reported without including race, and many Girls and Women of Color who are trafficked or go missing are ignored. As a result, reported numbers and percentages about trafficking victim breakdowns by race can vary depending on the source. However, consistent data shows that human trafficking is more prevalent in cities with larger populations of People of Color compared to the national average (Open Data Soft, n.d.). In 2017, the cities with the most human trafficking reports per capita included Washington D.C., Atlanta, GA, Orlando, FL,

Miami, FL, Las Vegas, NV, Sacramento, CA, St. Louis, MO, Baton Rouge, LA, Columbus, OH, and Richmond, VA (NHTH, 2017). Additionally, six of these cities are also major metropolitan areas with large Immigrant populations (Background Checks.org, 2020).

Race as an Erased Factor Influencing Trafficking Risk

Reports from the NHTH, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Center for Public Policy Studies (e.g., Georgia), U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants, state-specific reports from the Office for Women's Health, Department of Public Instruction, United Nations 2020 Global Report, International Labour Office, and the Family and Youth Services Bureau have addressed myths surrounding human trafficking, yet fail to mention race as a risk factor or provide demographic breakdowns of victims and survivors by race (Human Trafficking Courts, 2024; NHTH, 2023; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2020; Office on Trafficking in Persons, n.d.; International Labour Office, n.d.; Family and Youth Services Bureau, n.d.). Interestingly, the Anti-Human Trafficking 101 training for school staff, developed by the Department of Public Instruction, included a detailed breakdown of victims by gender identity and sexual orientation, but did not address race, and still maintained that human trafficking can "happen to anyone" (Student Services Prevention and Wellness, 2020). The U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants stated that human trafficking occurs regardless of race, but the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BOJ) noted that Black individuals are more likely than white individuals to be trafficked, stating: "Based upon cases where race was known, sex trafficking victims were more likely to be white (26%) or Black (40%)" (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2011). A misinterpretation of this data could lead readers to believe that white people are more frequently victims of sex trafficking. This report also claimed that Black and Hispanic men were

more likely to be traffickers, contradicting other sources that report white men as the more frequent perpetrators (Rights4Girls, 2018).

In 2020, POLARIS identified the consistent absence of state-reported statistics on race and human trafficking, which allows for the erasure of Women of Color (POLARIS, 2020). The article stated that without consistent or government-provided statistics, claims that Women of Color are more likely to be trafficked are deemed unsupported, unquantifiable, and thus unscientific. Blackwood (2021) also expressed concern about the erasure of missing and trafficked Girls and Women of Color, particularly the difficulty in gathering state or government statistics on missing and murdered Indigenous women. However, Canadian data showed that Indigenous women make up 50% of all trafficked victims while comprising only 4% of the population (Blackwood, 2021). Blackwood (2021) highlighted several government reports that either neglected to address race in relation to missing women or reported the data as inaccessible.

Studies by Cook, Gerassi, and others have demonstrated the erasure of race in discussions about trafficking risk. For example, Cook et al. (2022) examined racial data collection disparities among sex trafficking victims in the U.S. by government agencies and task forces. They identified a lack of research into racial bias in anti-trafficking efforts and argued for a Critical Race Praxis to guide public health initiatives. Healthcare providers interviewed in this study revealed that most focused on economic and family factors putting survivors at risk, without acknowledging the role of racist structures. Similarly, Gerassi et al. (2022) concluded that most providers did not consider racism as a contributing factor to the trafficking of Women of Color. In an intersectional, qualitative study, Gerassi (2020) found that Black women perceived white women to receive preferential treatment and services after sexual exploitation. This aligns with arguments by Greenbaum et al. (2025), who highlighted that systemic racism and colonialism are

key factors contributing to the lack of access to services and the challenges faced by Women of Color in their recovery.

Researchers are making efforts to combat this erasure. Millar and O'Doherty (2020) used an intersectional and critical analysis framework to investigate claims of racial and gender bias in law enforcement when prosecuting survivors of sex trafficking in Canada. They called for changes in data collection to highlight the disproportionate persecution of Survivors of Color and challenge law enforcement stereotypes. Olson-Pitawanakwat and Baskin (2021) also applied an intersectional perspective, arguing for improved responses to trafficking, especially for Indigenous women, girls, and transgender women. Their research addressed historical components that perpetuate sexual violence toward marginalized women, particularly by white men, as well as the historical barriers to funding Indigenous researchers working to address these issues.

Phenomena Making It Easier to Traffic People of Color and Women

To understand why human trafficking is more prominent among Communities of Color, particularly targeting Girls and Women of Color, researchers and educators must examine the intersecting influences of chattel slavery and colonialism, historic and contemporary criminalization and sexualization, biases among first responders, media influence, capitalism, and inconsistencies in K-12 sex education on human trafficking risk, reporting, and community awareness.

Chattel Slavery. As previously explained, human trafficking is a form of labor and/or sex slavery. Some of the earliest forms of slavery in the U.S. stemmed from the first-known purchase of African peoples in 1619. According to Hannah-Jones et al. (2019), colonists in Jamestown, Virginia, purchased between 20 and 30 enslaved Africans from pirates who had stolen them from

Portuguese slave ships. This transaction catalyzed the institution of chattel slavery, which persisted until the passage of the 13th Amendment in 1865. Enslaved Africans were stripped of their human rights according to legal slave codes, making it illegal for them to marry, meet in private groups, or learn to read. They had no legal right to their own children and could be raped, tortured, or murdered by their enslavers without legal consequences (Hannah-Jones et al., 2019).

Despite the abolition of slavery, these legally upheld discriminatory practices permeated the legal system, creating loopholes that continued to criminalize and enslave Black people in America. New laws criminalized practices common in Black life, such as walking beside a railroad, speaking loudly around white women, or selling products after dark (Pollard, 2012). "Pig Laws" escalated many misdemeanor offenses to felonies, while vagrancy laws dictated that if a person could not prove employment at any given moment, they could be jailed (Pollard, 2012). The criminalization of Youth of Color in schools and their propagated enslavement into the U.S. prison system are two widespread methods used today to criminalize being a Person of Color starting in childhood (Mowen, 2017; Malone & Malone, 2015). These systems are reinforced by myths and biases that perpetuate racism.

Historically Perpetuated Racist and Sexist Myths. The historical hypersexualization of Black women, rooted in the Jezebel myth, remains a stereotype still widely applied to Girls of Color, particularly Black girls, today (Dodd & Schroeder, 2025; Butler, 2015). Butler (2015) argued in the *UCLA Law Review* on the racial roots of human trafficking that the connection between race and sex trafficking is often ignored, and the institution of racism has partially allowed the sex trade to thrive in the U.S. The Jezebel myth portrays Black women as sexually immoral, lustful, wicked, and religiously disobedient in the eyes of Christianity.

Black women today are stereotyped as modern Jezebels, and, as Butler (2015) explained, this bias has led to the over-prosecution of Black women and youth as "prostitutes" who supposedly willingly partake in the sex trade, rather than recognizing them as victims of modern slavery. In the early 20th century, this stereotype was so ingrained that laws were created to protect white women from interracial relationships with Black men by hyper-policing their sexuality, while allowing the sexual exploitation of Black women by white men. Then, as now, victims and survivors of sex trafficking are often misinterpreted as criminals. This accumulation of historical events, laws, attitudes, and myths has created a country that is systemically racist at its core, enabling the disproportionate denial of safety and preventative services to Women of Color and increasing their vulnerability to trafficking (Greenbaum et al., 2025).

North American Colonialism. The historical and ongoing systems of colonization created the structure for and continue to support violence, exploitation, and sexual trafficking of Indigenous Women. In particular, homelessness, legal gaps, cultural and racial stereotypes, and economic marginalization are products of colonization that enhance the vulnerability of Indigenous Women to sex trafficking (Hill et al., 2022). Historical dispossession of land and contemporary patterns of poverty among Indigenous populations increase levels of homelessness and henceforth increase exposure to traffickers. Impoverished conditions dually make Indigenous women vulnerable through desperation for shelter, food, and other basic necessities, making them reliant upon traffickers. Many reservations lack clear laws and jurisdictional power to convict non-Indigenous perpetrators. Similar to the ways Black women are hypersexualized, cultural stereotypes have painted a picture of Indigenous women as sex icons, normalizing sexual violence toward them (Hill et al., 2022). In sum, these factors promote the disproportionate targeting of Indigenous Women by human traffickers.

Criminalization of Survivors and Victims of Sexual Exploitation. Contemporary literature supports the idea that girls and women, particularly of Color, continue to be shamed and prosecuted for acts of sexual violence committed against them. Black girls face unique stigmatization as a result of bias informed by the Jezebel myth, being hypersexualized and blamed for assaults against them (Dodd & Schroeder, 2025). Arthur and Down (2019) described how survivors of sexual exploitation in childhood are more vulnerable to grooming and coercive tactics. In the U.K., the law is often unclear about distinguishing between consent and coercion in cases of sex slavery. In the cases of sexual exploitation in Rotherham, Oxfordshire, Oldham, Derby, Huddersfield, and Newcastle, where nearly 1,500 girls were exploited, victims were described as promiscuous, "asking for it", and enjoying the risk and "glamour" of their roles (Arthur & Down, 2019). In the U.S., Cole, Sprang, and Leistner (2020) investigated judges' attitudes toward children up for prosecution in sex work and trafficking cases, identifying a similar lack of empathy. The authors concluded that judges often held more punitive perspectives toward survivors, with male judges expressing more severe attitudes.

Similar to the infamous school-to-prison pipeline, where Youth of Color are disproportionately criminalized and penalized for minor behaviors, resulting in their removal and stigmatization in schools (Malone & Malone, 2015), there is an existing sexual-abuse-to-prison pipeline. Many survivors of sexual assault exhibit aggression, emotional outbursts, or substance abuse to cope with trauma (Arthur & Down, 2019). These behaviors are often punished in schools rather than addressed with restorative measures. Youth of Color are more frequently criminalized in schools, facing punishment, law enforcement referrals, and suspensions (Mowen, 2017; Malone & Malone, 2015), while Girls and Women of Color are more likely to be sexually assaulted (Richie & Eife, 2021). This dual victimization feeds the criminalization of girls of

color in schools and increases their dependence on traffickers and groomers for emotional, financial, and security needs.

Biases Among Law Enforcement. There exists a culture of bias toward criminalizing Girls and Women of Color and victimizing white women who go missing, are suspected of being trafficked, or experience violence. This bias is reflected in both data collection by law enforcement and media coverage (or lack thereof). Two examples in data collection suggest either 1) a desire to portray white women as more victimized and Men of Color as criminals or 2) unconscious bias against recognizing Girls and Women of Color as victims.

Ohio's 2020 Attorney General Report on potential human trafficking victims reported that 68% of victims were white, while 22% were Black (Ohio State Government, 2020). The report also noted that 62% of suspected traffickers were Black. It is important to note the terminology used: "potential victims" and "suspected traffickers." Upon closer investigation, this data was collected by local law enforcement agencies, which passed along reports based on their own judgment, leaving room for bias (intentional or not) in determining what cases were likely to be real trafficking.

Media Influence. Williams et al. (2018) identified human trafficking as a practice rooted in and supported by globalization, capitalism, and media influence. The media plays a role in law enforcement's bias to more frequently refer potential trafficking cases when white women are victims, and it shapes public perception, leading people to believe white women are more frequently targeted. The media disproportionately covers missing white women compared to missing Women of Color, a phenomenon referred to as "missing white woman syndrome" (MWWS) (Hill et. al, 2022; Sommers, 2016). Even when Black individuals are covered in the news, the amount of coverage is less than that given to white women (Sommers, 2016).

Stillman (2007) highlighted the severity of this bias, citing a case in Canada where the killing of a beloved whale received more media attention than the murders and disappearances of over 32 Indigenous women. Blackwood (2021) found that 30% of murdered Indigenous persons received news coverage, compared to 51% of white people, and only 18% of Indigenous *women*, specifically, received coverage. This disparity in media attention for young, white, middle-to-upper-class women obscures the violence more frequently faced by Girls and Women of Color. This media bias may influence law enforcement's tendency to prioritize victimizing white women while allowing the denunciation of Women of Color who report trafficking.

Capitalistic Gains. Drain (2018) argued that sex trafficking is not only enabled but exacerbated by capitalism. First, Drain reinforced the role of media as a cultural shaper of ideals around sex, gender roles, and the sex trade. Drain described the media as a capitalist-driven commodifier of women's bodies, portraying them as exploitable and normalizing the sex trade. This cultural conditioning shapes public perceptions, leading to victim-blaming and shaming, and allows traffickers and sex buyers to profit.

Globalization also plays a significant role in the perpetuation of human trafficking, with Drain (2018) and Williams et al. (2018) describing how global capitalism creates economic disparities that make certain populations more vulnerable to trafficking. Women, particularly those in lower economic classes and marginalized racial/ethnic groups, face systemic oppression that limits their access to resources, making them more susceptible to trafficking. Drain (2018) further identifies the imbalance of power between economic classes and between men and women, arguing that capitalism sustains oppression against women by creating wage gaps, economic dependency on men, and limited opportunities for financial independence, all of which increase the risk of exploitation, including human trafficking.

Human trafficking is not only perpetuated through economic structures of profit but is also sustained by cultural processes that normalize exploitation. Under capitalism, the commodification of labor, of bodies, and of services makes it possible for exploitation to seem routine or even benign in everyday life, whether through supply chains relying on forced labor, or popular culture that reduces human beings to objects of consumption. Cultural artifacts (fashion, media, advertisements, entertainment) help shape what is deemed acceptable, what is invisible, and what is marginalized. For instance, imagery or costumes that depict sexualized roles for children (as pimps, escorts, etc.), while often dismissed as "just dress-up" or humor, could contribute to desensitization to commercial sexual exploitation.

Inconsistencies in the Delivery of and Messages Around Sex Education in the U.S. Sex education in K-12 schools provides a potential avenue for integrating lessons on awareness of grooming and coercive tactics used by traffickers to enslave vulnerable youth (Greenbaum et al., 2025). However, inconsistencies across the U.S. in states and school districts regarding the implementation and content of sex education programs create barriers to educating students on how to protect themselves and others. Only six states in the U.S. include discussions of healthy relationships, sexual assault, or consent in their sex education programs (Shapiro & Brown, 2018), and of these six, three require comprehensive sex education in their public school districts (Wilimitis, 2021). A lack of comprehensive sex education has been linked to unsafe sexual behaviors among teenagers, including lower condom use and less frequent contraception use (American Academy of Pediatrics [AAP], 2024; Phipps, 2008). These behaviors contribute to higher rates of sexually transmitted infections and unplanned pregnancies (AAP, 2024; Phipps, 2008), and youth without adequate sex education may be more vulnerable to sexual violence (Phipps, 2008). Given that Girls and Women of Color are more likely to be trafficked and to

experience relationship and sexual violence (Richie & Eife, 2021), it is essential that human trafficking awareness and prevention programs are implemented to specifically address unhealthy relationship practices, grooming tactics, and red flags of sexual coercion.

Human Trafficking in Colorado

Colorado had three major cities ranked among the top 100 cities with the most calls per capita about human trafficking between 2007 and 2016: Denver, Aurora, and Colorado Springs (NHTH, 2017). In this same report, these cities also ranked in the top 100 for the most confirmed cases of human trafficking. The NHTH (2021) has been tracking statistics specific to Colorado for over 15 years. Since 2007, nearly 5,000 signals (phone calls, texts, emails, etc.) have been received reporting trafficking incidents, with 1,299 cases of trafficking and nearly 2,600 identified victims in the state (NHTH, 2021). In 2021, 602 signals were received, over 200 of which were from trafficking victims or survivors. That same year, 150 cases of trafficking were identified, involving 240 victims/survivors. Of these reports, 106 cases specifically involved sex trafficking. Race and ethnicity demographics were not collected in the Colorado cases by the NHTH.

A more recent report from the Laboratory to Combat Human Trafficking (LCHT) in 2023, titled *A Report on Trust, Equity, and Effectiveness in the Anti-Trafficking Movement*, served as a 5-year follow-up to previous LCHT studies. The LCHT (2023) provided county-specific statistics and described Colorado's efforts, successes, and barriers in combating human trafficking. The report showed that 67% of all human trafficking reports in Colorado came from five counties: Adams, Arapahoe, El Paso, Denver, and Jefferson. Aurora is located in Arapahoe County, and Denver, Adams, and Jefferson counties surround Aurora to the north, northeast, northwest, west, and southwest. El Paso County includes Colorado Springs. From

2011 to 2023, 170 identified cases of sex trafficking occurred in the four counties including and surrounding Aurora and Denver.

Colorado's demographic, environmental, and infrastructural characteristics contribute to the state being a hotspot for trafficking. Approximately 35% of the population consists of People of Color (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022), and 10% of Colorado's population are Immigrants, with Immigrants representing 12% of Denver's population (Office of Trafficking in Persons, 2023). This review has previously established, with several pieces of evidence, the increased likelihood that People of Color are more likely to become victims of trafficking than white individuals. The LCHT (2023) report further supports the claim that the high proportion of Immigrants in Colorado increases the frequency of trafficking in the state.

The LCHT (2023) identified Colorado's undocumented communities as a key reason human trafficking thrives in the state. Undocumented individuals are often afraid to report human trafficking incidents due to fears of facing prosecution for their legal status. In cases where Immigrants are victims of domestic violence as part of a human trafficking situation, women are similarly afraid to report abuse. Additionally, the LCHT (2023) report discussed tourism as a contributing factor to the prevalence of trafficking in Colorado, as tourists unknowingly support businesses that rely on the labor of enslaved individuals. Colorado's extensive highway infrastructure also facilitates trafficking, enabling traffickers to move victims quickly in any direction. Major highways, such as I-70 and I-25, along with Denver's International Airport positioned conveniently East of Denver and Aurora, allow for swift escapes.

Colorado Efforts Against Trafficking

Colorado has made significant strides in policy to combat human trafficking. State legislation on trafficking began in 2006 and was revisited in 2014 with House Bill 14-1273, which altered state human trafficking criminal statutes to better align with national laws (LCHT, 2023). The LCHT (2023) report also highlights policies that have made resources more available to survivors, sought justice for victims, and held traffickers accountable. With the majority of sex trafficking cases occurring in and around Aurora and Denver, and with these cities being on the national radar for the most reports of human trafficking, there is a recognized need for improved education, policy, and training efforts.

In 2021, a report by Shared Hope (2021) ranked Colorado's response to human trafficking. On an A-F scale, Colorado received a D grade. Criminal provisions were the only somewhat positive aspect, as the state has moved forward in policy development to address human trafficking. For example, victims under the age of 18 are granted protections to avoid charges related to prostitution. However, Colorado was criticized for its poor identification and response to survivors/victims, its lack of survivor-centered criminal justice tools, and its shortcomings in prevention education and training.

While sex education could serve as an avenue for discussing human trafficking in Colorado (its risks, signs, etc.) the administration of sex education across K-12 school districts is highly inconsistent. In Colorado, comprehensive sex education is required to be taught in its entirety if it is to be offered at all. In other words, if a school or district cannot commit to teaching all aspects of a comprehensive sex education curriculum across secondary grade levels, it cannot be taught at all. The Colorado Health Institute (2019) confirmed that schools in lower-income regions are less likely to offer sex education. The organization also reported that trends of sexual assault and dating violence among teenagers have not improved between 2009

and 2017, despite a decrease in teen pregnancies in the state. This is especially problematic given that Youth of Color are more vulnerable to sex-based violence and trafficking. In addition to sex education, human trafficking prevention education is also lacking in the urban areas most vulnerable to trafficking (Kakar, 2022).

Human Trafficking Education as a Means of Prevention

Until recently, community awareness education about human trafficking has been a public health strategy aimed at raising awareness of the warning signs. Public education efforts have largely included the development of distributable materials (both digital and print), such as infographics, “toolboxes” with information about warning signs and how to intervene in suspected trafficking cases, awareness videos, and survivor stories. Some of the organizations producing these resources include the Department of Homeland Security (2022), the U.S. Department of Justice (2020), the United Nations (2023), the Office on Trafficking in Persons (2023), the NHTH (2022), the LCHT (2024), and various local, state, and national government and nonprofit organizations. Organized, required training on human trafficking awareness has been prevalent among first responders, K-12 educators, and other roles (e.g., bus drivers, hospital workers) where individuals frequently interact with children and vulnerable populations.

Unfortunately, previous efforts to educate the public about human trafficking have left both trained personnel and communities with misconceptions, while youth remain unaware of their risks and how to protect themselves. A study conducted on first responders' misconceptions found that they misperceived who can be a victim and who is most frequently targeted (Peterman-Benton & Benton, 2024). Researchers also identified the media as a contributing factor to the perpetuation of common misconceptions surrounding human trafficking. Bryant and Landmann (2020) reviewed 90 awareness campaigns, concluding that their impact was limited

because education efforts lacked a clear, community-specific message. Reid et al. (2024) also criticized campaign materials for lacking empirical evidence of their effectiveness.

Why Use K-12 Schools as an Avenue for Human Trafficking Awareness and Prevention

Education

“There is a severe and urgent need for human trafficking prevention programs” in schools (Kabbash & Ronis, 2021; Reid et al., 2024). The average age of sex-trafficked victims is 12 (Albert, 2021). While youth cannot be prostituted by legal definition (Albert, 2021), Williams et al. (2018) identified the average age of youth being sold for sex as 13. Youth as young as nine are targeted for trafficking, and their physical, emotional, and social developmental challenges during adolescence only make them more vulnerable (Williams et al., 2018). Schools themselves have become popular recruiting grounds for groomers and traffickers (DOE NJ, 2022; California State Board of Education, 2019; Williams et al., 2018). In a central Texas high school, one in five students reported being approached or trafficked at school (Pooler et al., 2022). Traffickers also target venues where youth are commonly found, including shopping malls, restaurants, parks, group homes, and social media (DOE NJ, 2022).

“As school staff members interact with our youth daily, by educating themselves on risk factors and behavioral indicators of trafficking, as well as knowing how to respond if there is a suspicion of trafficking, they are in a unique position to identify potential victims and connect them to needed supports” (DOE NJ, 2022).

Youth are strategically targeted by traffickers. Common factors that put youth at “disproportionate risk” for trafficking include a history of abuse/neglect, social disconnection, and stigma or exclusion (National Human Trafficking Training and Technical Assistance Center, n.d.). Traffickers lure victims by promising basic necessities such as food, clothing, housing,

love, and attention (U.S. Department of Justice, 2017). Educators and school staff, through their consistent interactions with students, are in a unique position to recognize behavioral changes and warning signs of trafficking, such as unexplained injuries, pregnancy, substance abuse, new tattoos, illness, contradictory stories, difficulty concentrating, depression, anxiety, guilt, shame, defensiveness about those causing harm, excessive need for contact with someone for updates, accompaniment by an adult who will not let them speak, and homelessness, among others (National Human Trafficking Training and Technical Assistance Center, n.d.).

The most effective way to reach a large number of youth with prevention education is by incorporating curricula into public school systems (Donohue-Dioh et al., 2020). K-12 human trafficking awareness and prevention programs could be tailored to address human trafficking issues prevalent in a particular school community, as Bryant and Landmann (2020) recommend. By implementing these programs, communities can reach the majority of youth, as students spend most of their time in school. With half of all trafficked individuals being under the age of 18 (Office of the Attorney General for the District of Columbia, 2024), and trafficked youth often reporting that they did not realize they were being trafficked at the time (Albert, 2021), awareness and prevention programs should be implemented as a strategy to reduce the epidemic of school-aged youth being trafficked in the U.S.

Current K-12 Human Trafficking Awareness and Prevention Education Efforts

The push for K-12 education on human trafficking prevention was reinforced through the reauthorization of the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA). Initially enacted in 2000, the TVPA aims to combat human trafficking through protection, prevention, and prosecution (U.S. Department of Justice, 2023). Protection focuses on Immigrants and undocumented victims, prevention involves task forces to fight trafficking, and prosecution emphasizes holding

perpetrators accountable for crimes such as forced labor, sex trafficking of children, and trafficking through force, fraud, or coercion (U.S. Department of Justice, 2020). The TVPA has undergone eight reauthorizations, with the 2005 reauthorization specifically recognizing women and children as more frequent targets of human trafficking, thus supporting the need for awareness and prevention education in schools (U.S. Department of Justice, 2023).

There were several other human trafficking laws enacted throughout the 2010's. The Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act (2013) amended the Social Security Act to better prevent child trafficking via changes in foster care planning and reporting runaways (Congress.gov, 2014). This Act did not include any public education efforts. The Justice for Victims of Trafficking Act (2015) developed tougher penalties for perpetrators and “victim-centered” support (Congress.gov, 2015). This act additionally required mandatory training for federal employees, healthcare workers, and law enforcement (NHTH, n.d.). The Frederick Douglass Trafficking Victims Prevention and Protection Reauthorization Act (2018) criminalized attempts to commit trafficking and required perpetrators pay restitution to victims/survivors (The United States Department of Justice, n.d.). This Act included fund grants for the education and training of teachers, school staff, and child welfare workers. The National Action Plan to Combat Human Trafficking (2021) emphasized the four P's of prevention, protection, prosecution, and partnership, with a focus on promoting racial and gender equity through focus on marginalized communities (The White House, 2021). This plan called for nationwide awareness campaigns and emphasized training first responders, educators, and healthcare and social workers.

Since the enactment of these laws and their awareness campaigns for public education and mandated training, a few states with high human trafficking reports have started requiring

human trafficking awareness and prevention education in K-12 settings. In 2017, California became the first state to incorporate such programs, mandating annual education in grades 6-12 (California Department of Education, 2023). Florida followed in 2019, requiring annual education across all grades K-12 (Solodev, 2022). Most recently, Georgia passed a bill requiring annual human trafficking awareness and prevention education in grades 6-12 (Georgia General Assembly, 2021). Tennessee also requires discussion of trafficking as part of its eighth-grade social studies standards (Tennessee State Government, 2017).

Both Florida and California's Departments of Education recommended national curricula for human trafficking prevention, with Florida recommending *Born2Fly* and California recommending *PROTECT*. Another national curriculum, *Love146*, is also available for K-12 youth. While research on the effectiveness of these programs in youth is still limited, some studies show promising results. For example, the *My Life My Choice* program for at-risk female youth showed decreases in substance abuse and delinquency, as well as increased awareness of commercial sexual exploitation. The *Phoenix Program*, developed for Native American female youth, demonstrated effectiveness through survey responses. The *Ending the Game* curriculum for trafficked youth showed increased knowledge of trafficking, improved self-worth, and a positive attitude.

Human Trafficking Awareness and Prevention Education for Colorado Youth

Despite Colorado's high rates of human trafficking reports and several risk factors that make youth in the state vulnerable to trafficking, the state currently does not have K-12 requirements for human trafficking awareness and prevention education. This may be due, in part, to Colorado's laws surrounding sex education. The closest approach Colorado's public schools currently have to teaching preventative education on human trafficking is through

educating students about unhealthy relationships and grooming signs. However, data on the extent to which sex education is implemented in Denver Public Schools (DPS) is difficult to find. Aurora Public Schools (APS), however, has newly required that all 5th, 7th, and 8th-grade students receive comprehensive sex education (Metzger, 2016). APS is also a licensed district using the *Love146* anti-trafficking education program, although it is unclear how extensively this program is utilized in the classroom (Nest Educators, 2024).

While there is a lack of district-wide human trafficking awareness and prevention programs in K-12 schools, many organizations offer tools related to education and victim resources in Colorado's trafficking hotspots (Denver, Aurora, and Colorado Springs). Some of these organizations include Aurora Freedom, Generate HOPE, Colorado Organization for Victim Assistance (COVA), Covered Colorado, and the LCHT. Additionally, reports indicate the following human trafficking education and awareness curricula are being (or have been) applied in K-12 schools: *iEmpathize* in some Aurora, Denver, and nearby suburb schools; *Empower Youth* in some schools in Denver, Aurora, and nearby suburbs; *My Life My Choice* in Denver; and the *Aware Program* and *A21 Campaign* in Colorado (NEST Educators, 2024).

Human Trafficking Awareness and Prevention Education Curriculum Recommendations

Although many human trafficking awareness and prevention programs have not been evaluated for effectiveness, some general recommendations ensure content delivery is developmentally appropriate, culturally responsive, and trauma-informed. The DOJ in NJ (2022) recommend a three-part approach to preventing youth trafficking. They emphasize that education and training for school personnel and students should be the primary prevention strategy. Best practices for schools include ensuring that curricula are 1) research-based, culturally competent, and survivor-informed; 2) involve collaboration with community stakeholders; and 3) use pre-

and post-evaluation methods to assess the curriculum’s effectiveness. NJ’s Department of Education (DOE) recommends that all students receive awareness and prevention instruction twice per year, totaling 90-120 minutes. This instruction should include information on how youth can seek help for themselves or a friend (DOE NJ, 2022). Youth showing increased risk factors or behavioral indicators should receive tier 2-3 interventions (DOE NJ, 2022). The tier two approach is largely rooted in social-emotional learning (SEL) instruction, focusing on healthy relationships and digital citizenship (DOE NJ, 2022).

The third-tier approach, outlined by NJ’s DOE (2022) and supported by Clark-Ibáñez and Hall (2023), calls for educators to build empowerment in students through more targeted instruction on human trafficking awareness and prevention, as well as community engagement. This deeper approach is recommended for middle and high school students. Examples of this instruction include watching documentaries, reading state and UN reports on trafficking, attending local community meetings, consulting prevention-focused websites, or speaking with survivors, law enforcement, or representatives from relevant organizations. Regardless of the activities used, instruction should be victim-centered, provide space for student voice, and offer opportunities for youth to become agents of change in their communities. The DOE NJ (2022) argues that this approach will ultimately help students become “better reporters and supporters of peers with characteristics that traffickers are known to exploit.” Students can engage in creating and disseminating community awareness materials such as public service announcements, posters, art displays, and student/family/community-led events and extracurricular activities (DOE NJ, 2022).

Human trafficking awareness and prevention education should be both culturally responsive and trauma-informed (Greenbaum et al., 2025; Clark-Ibáñez & Hall, 2023; DOE NJ,

2022; Albert, 2021). However, in order to address racial, ethnic, and immigration-related risks realistically, programs need stronger foundations in social justice (Zhu et al., 2020). Geneva Gay (2000), a pioneer of culturally responsive teaching, encouraged educators to embrace discussions of traditionally controversial social issues, including racism, sexism, power inequities, historical cruelty, and the corruption of societal systems. To teach human trafficking awareness and prevention with discussions about race, sex, trauma, racism, and gender-based violence, students need to develop the skills to engage in difficult conversations using social-emotional learning (SEL) tools acquired in the classroom. Lange and Young (2019) recommended helping youth move from a space of “unspeakable to unthinkable” when discussing challenging topics. A curriculum that promotes dialogue and encourages questions is crucial.

Additional human trafficking awareness and prevention education practices include survivor group dialogues and spatial narratives. Survivor group dialogues (either through external organizations or incorporating students' experiences with gender-based discrimination) are recommended as tools to help transform trauma into strength (Lange & Young, 2019). Other recommendations include encouraging peer-to-peer discussion throughout the human trafficking awareness and prevention instruction, using a social justice approach. Spatial narratives are a culturally responsive teaching technique used to empower students within their communities. Schlemper et al. (2023) investigated how students' spatial narratives (perceptions of their environment through stories) changed after learning about their neighborhood's social injustices through a culturally responsive lens. Their study found that students were empowered with tools to better understand their community and act for justice. Ultimately, Schlemper et al. (2023) concluded that the activities helped students visualize “potential for improvement,” showing how

knowledge of one's community can be an invaluable tool for empowerment. Clark-Ibáñez and Hall (2023) also support the value of storytelling.

Additional Needs for Human Trafficking Awareness and Prevention Education

Implementation in K-12 Schools

Training and education for all school personnel is crucial for identifying suspected cases of trafficking and responding appropriately when trafficking is confirmed (Reid et al., 2024; DOE NJ, 2022). A minimum of 2-4 hours of educational training is recommended, which should include tools for identifying cases, policies for responding, and plans for supporting the child (DOE NJ, 2022). Schools and districts must also develop and implement policies and procedures for handling suspected and identified trafficking cases (Reid et al., 2024).

Although access to robust mental health staff may be financially limited in some settings, it is recommended that schools hire a mental health team to support children involved in trafficking. Regardless of available staff, an identified primary support person for trafficking survivors is strongly recommended. Also, previously established relationships with adults in the school are impactful, as students are more likely to come forward when they have a trusted adult to confide in (Reid et al., 2024). Schools should additionally be rooted in trauma-informed care practices, with all staff trained to recognize and respond to trauma (Downey & Greco, 2023).

Training for and collaboration with social workers is also recommended. Wanab et al. (2024) called for justice-oriented training, emphasizing that understanding structural oppression is essential for recognizing how trafficking and violence-related survivor narratives are erased for marginalized youth. They also advocate for a school-wide approach to trafficking prevention that integrates social worker presence, survivor-centered education, community-based work, and critiques of education models used by law enforcement. Greenbaum et al. (2025) further

recommend a multidisciplinary prevention plan that includes a broad range of stakeholders, such as pediatricians and immigration attorneys.

School personnel should further provide awareness materials to families (Reid et al., 2024; DOE NJ, 2022; Donohue-Dioh et al., 2020). These materials should include information on how to protect children online and how to differentiate between healthy and unhealthy relationships. Education for families can be delivered through fact sheets sent home or training sessions offered outside the normal school day (DOE NJ, 2022). Tidball & Rajaram (2017) emphasize the importance of offering materials in multiple languages, especially given that limited English proficiency and Immigrant status make individuals more vulnerable to trafficking.

Several risk factors, behavioral indicators, and myths specific to school-aged youth are important for school personnel and families to be aware of. Risk factors can include: history of abuse, assault, maltreatment; lack of healthy relationships; lack of strong support systems; having a disability; immigration status; low self-esteem; unmet need for love/attention; history of mental illness/substance abuse; lack of structure/stability in education or home settings; poverty; involvement with social services; out-of-home placements; juvenile justice system involvement; and marginalization due to race, sexual orientation, or gender identity (DOE NJ, 2022). Behavioral indicators that suggest a student may be involved in trafficking include: lying, inconsistent stories, secrecy; fear for their own or loved ones' safety; exhaustion; withdrawal or isolation; physical signs of abuse; suspensions, expulsions, or frequent absences; substance abuse; sudden possession of expensive items; multiple phones; sudden changes in appearance/hygiene; branding marks/tattoos; reluctance to return home; negative self-talk; seeking inappropriate levels of love, attention, or affection; hypersexualized behavior; engaging

in sex for basic needs; recruiting peers; self-advertising on social media; working unusually long hours; lack of control over money or ability to quit a job; being underpaid or unpaid; deferring personal decisions to a boss; absence of work permit documents; living with a non-parent employer; and having an employer listed as a caregiver. This list underscores the need for school personnel to have formal training in trauma-informed care.

It is also important for school personnel to recognize misconceptions about trafficked youth and challenge their biases. “There is no such thing as a child sex worker” (DOE NJ, 2022), as child prostitution does not exist due to the legal prohibition of prostitution for individuals under 18 (Albert, 2021). When under the age of 18, sex performed under coercion, force, or fraud is trafficking. A controlling trafficker is not even a requirement for sex trafficking, and any sexual self-promotion does not imply consent for commercial sex involving someone under 18 (DOE NJ, 2022). School personnel should report any suspicion of these circumstances and connect youth with additional mental health support and resources. Finally, it’s important to recognize that many trafficked youth continue their day-to-day lives as normal, and a student who seems “normal” while attending school may still be returning to a trafficker.

Denver and Aurora Youth: Multifold, High-Risk Populations

Despite numerous recommendations that curricula be culturally responsive and trauma-informed for all students, these approaches are critical when addressing the demographics of Denver and Aurora youth, given their compounded risks for trafficking. DPS (2022) consists of about 70% students of color, while APS (2023) is made up of about 80% students of color. Approximately 37% of DPS students speak English as their second language (Denver Public Schools, n.d.), and 42% in APS (APS, 2023). Between July 2023 and January 2024, Denver and Aurora welcomed over 6,000 migrant students (Brundin, 2024), a number that

increased from approximately 2,400 in January 2024 to more than 3,500 in July (Marrero, 2024). This influx of new migrants is higher than in any other large U.S. city not situated along the U.S.-Mexico border (Marrero, 2024). Additionally, both Denver and Aurora are urbanized areas, as defined by the U.S. Census Bureau (n.d.), further increasing their geographical risks.

Denver and Aurora youth are not only vulnerable to trafficking due to the large demographic of People of Color and Immigrants in the cities, their urban nature, their travel infrastructure, and high tourism, but also because of their high rates of reported mental illness and behavioral risk factors for trafficking susceptibility. Trauma caused by adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) has been identified as the most common public health issue among youth (Albert, 2021), and there is a correlation between having ACEs and trafficking risk (Tidball & Rajaram, 2017). ACEs can include experiencing or witnessing violence at home or in the community, having a family member attempt or successfully commit suicide, substance abuse, and mental health struggles (U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2024). In the Healthy Kids Colorado (HKC) 2023 survey, among the age group most at-risk for trafficking, the following results were found: 26.1% of youth were bullied; 10.9% were physically assaulted in partner relationships; 16.3% were verbally abused in partner relationships; 22.6% identified as struggling with their mental health most the time or always in the last 30 days; 73.9% experienced death of a family member or close friend; 24.2% drank more than a few sips of alcohol; 14% used a vape; and 6% used marijuana.

Restatement of Research Significance

Human trafficking awareness and prevention programs targeting school-aged children have been identified as a primary tool for preventing youth human trafficking. The most effective way to maximize the number of children and youth reached by prevention education and

awareness is through the incorporation of curricula into public school systems (Donohue-Dioh et al., 2020). Given the high trafficking risk among youth in Denver and Aurora, due to a variety of compounding factors, a one-size-fits-all curriculum is insufficient. Human trafficking awareness and prevention curricula, particularly in high-risk areas, must be implemented thoughtfully and contextually. Because youth in Aurora and Denver are at heightened risk for trafficking due to racial, cultural, geographic, and trauma-related factors, I recommend that curricula be both culturally responsive and trauma-informed. To critically analyze curricula for their cultural and trauma-informed needs, I will apply an ecofeminist framework, which will naturally integrate an intersectional and context-specific lens throughout this study.

Theoretical Framework

In this study, the theory of ecofeminism will frame the “why” of the project. In other words, an ecofeminist approach will help explain why feminist and ecological principles, and their intersections, are essential when analyzing issues related to human trafficking. While the overall approach to this project will be grounded in ecofeminism, I will also leverage the theories of culturally responsive teaching (“the what”) and trauma-informed care (“the how”). Since human trafficking awareness and prevention content is recommended to be both culturally responsive to the community it serves and informed by an understanding of trauma (DOE NJ, 2022), these theories are crucial when analyzing curricula.

Ecofeminism

Ecofeminism, rooted in deeply defined feminist principles and an understanding of intersectional influences on marginalization and disenfranchisement, is a powerful framework for understanding human trafficking as an issue involving gender, race, nationalism, immigration, geography, and capitalism. A critical approach like ecofeminism is essential for explaining

human trafficking, given the significant disparities in who is trafficked and why. Ecofeminism is traditionally defined as the intertwined oppressions of women and the environment and the connections between femininity and nature (Warren, 1990). It has also been described as a scholarship emphasizing care, love, and friendship in relation to the natural world (Daly, 1994). Correctly practiced, ecofeminism does not claim that women are “biologically or metaphysically closer to nature” (Griffin, 1997). Rather, it examines how both nature and women have been similarly dominated and exploited (Warren, 1990).

The connection between the exploitation and profiteering of nature and the suppression of women was first articulated in 1974 with the publication of Françoise d'Eaubonne's *Ecofeminisme* (Ranc, 2022). Ecofeminism gained significant attention in the 1990s, particularly with the involvement of women in environmental governance. Initially, the focus of ecofeminism was more on activism than academic scholarship (Foster, 2021). By the 2000s, ecofeminism had become a less prominent discipline, particularly as society increasingly turned to male-dominated fields such as economics, engineering, and science for solutions to environmental issues (Foster, 2021).

In 1997, Warren redefined ecofeminism to include those marginalized by race and economic status, not just women, and explored the connection between their subjugation and the exploitation of the non-human environment. Griffin (1997) similarly discussed how ecofeminism seeks to “illuminate” the oppression of women and the social construction of gender. Warren continued to argue that failing to connect the oppression of nature and women “produces an environmental ethic that lacks the depth necessary to be truly inclusive of the realities of persons who, in dominant Western culture, have been intimately tied with that exploitation.” Without

acknowledging this connection, we fail to see how the gendering (feminizing) of nature perpetuates its domination.

The popularity of ecofeminism waned in the late 1990s and early 2000s due to several criticisms. One critique was the misunderstanding that ecofeminists argued for an innate connection between nature and women, despite major scholars (e.g., Warren, Griffin) clarifying otherwise. Another criticism was that ecofeminism began to frame all ecological and environmental issues as women's issues (Harding, 2006), making the field overly broad.

More notably, ecofeminism faced criticism for predominantly supporting a white feminist ethic. This criticism stems from the movement's early development in response to a white women's environmental movement in the 1980s, 90s, and 2000s. Many ecofeminist scholars, such as Vandana Shiva, Ynestra King, Dorceta Taylor, Eliane Potiguara, Deane Curtin, Andy Smith, Noel Sturgeon, and Adrienne Elizabeth Christiansen, argued that ecofeminism offers a unique perspective on the intersectional components (e.g., race, language, immigration, economics) influencing the exploitation of both women and the environment. However, these writings were insufficient to maintain ecofeminism's position as a major academic discipline.

Defining Ecofeminism for Human Trafficking Research

When applied true to its definition, ecofeminism offers a unique perspective on human trafficking, an epidemic shaped by geography and ecosystems, sustained by capitalism, and supported by discriminatory structures. Due to its inherently intersectional nature, ecofeminism can help explain how race, ethnicity, language, immigration status, gender, and ecosystem all complexly intertwine to influence an individual's vulnerability to trafficking. In this study, I will apply Warren's 1997 definition of ecofeminism, which emphasizes the roles of race, ethnicity, language fluency, and nationality in shaping individuals' vulnerability to trafficking.

Additionally, I will integrate a more defined focus on the “eco-” aspect to consider environmental and geographical contexts as they relate to trafficking. I will also incorporate perspectives from intersectional and Black feminist ethics. Lastly, I held onto the traditional, somewhat forgotten and less frequently applied emphases on ethics and love, given this work's intended application with youth in K-12 education.

Ecology and Ecofeminism. Ecology is defined as “the study of the relationships between living organisms, including humans, and their physical environment” (The Ecological Society of America [ESA], 2018). Ecology focuses on relationships between living and non-living beings, as well as context. Applying an ecofeminist approach to human trafficking awareness and prevention will involve emphasizing the geographical and environmental spaces of the school, the surrounding community, and the individual student factors that influence vulnerability to trafficking.

Intersectional, Black, and Daly’s Ethical Feminist Perspectives. Ecofeminism’s intersectional feminist practice is valuable for understanding the erasure of Women of Color who are trafficked. Dodd and Schroeder (2025) discuss the unique ways Black girls and women are sexualized and criminalized for being sexually exploited. In a critical discourse analysis of three human trafficking policies, Dodd and Schroeder (2025) found that the *Frederick Douglass Trafficking Victims Prevention and Protection Act* and Georgia’s anti-trafficking statute were colorblind, completely omitting race, ethnicity, and culture. They concluded that this omission perpetuates systemic oppression and called for culturally responsive, feminist-aligned efforts toward prevention. A Black feminist ethic not only helps us understand how myths about Girls of Color contribute to their disproportionate targeting by traffickers, but also how these beliefs are embedded in law, allowing the exploitation to continue.

Daly (1994) outlined the ethical considerations of ecofeminism, arguing that ecofeminists have a responsibility to: 1) identify intersections between nature's and women's domination; 2) avoid and deconstruct social dualisms; 3) consider context; and 4) provide evidence of ecofeminist practices in theory. Daly's (1994) ethical considerations align with the ESA's emphasis on relationships and context in ecology. Daly and intersectional ecofeminists, such as Hesse-Biber and Yaiser (2004), also rejected the universalization of women's experiences and resist categorizing oppression into black-and-white dualisms. The fourth component Daly (1994) discussed supports my argument for embedding ecofeminism in pedagogy and utilizing it as a framework for publications.

Ecofeminism and Love. bell hooks (2004) wrote that “a genuine feminist politics always brings us from bondage to freedom, from lovelessness to loving,” expressing the vital role love plays in feminist ethics. Her notions on love align with Daly's ethical arguments on ecofeminism's responsibility for intersectional consideration. In *All About Love*, hooks (1999) defines love as a complex combination of care, commitment, knowledge, responsibility, respect, and trust. Alison Jaggar (2014), like hooks, acknowledged the importance of love in social research, arguing that life without emotion is devoid of meaning. hooks', Daly's, and Jaggar's emphasis on emotion and love supports the call for a trauma-informed approach to human trafficking awareness and prevention education.

Leela Fernandes (2003), like Daly, discussed the importance of ethical accountability from a spiritual perspective. Fernandes argued that researchers have a spiritual responsibility to respond in a transformative manner after witnessing others' suffering. She asserted that witnessing suffering “opens the soul” to compassion, love, and justice, making educators

ethically and spiritually responsible for guiding youth toward an understanding of the unique individual and contextual factors that increase their vulnerability to trafficking.

In alignment with the theories of Warren, Hesse-Biber, Yaiser, Daly, hooks, Jaggar, Fernandes, and the ESA, ecofeminism applies the intersectional lens between marginalized peoples and ecological exploitation to address issues of race, sex, gender identity, nationality, immigration status, economic status, social-emotional capacity, and language proficiency. Ecofeminist scholars should: 1) build trust and respect with those unjustly treated in society; 2) commit to a body of work rooted in awareness of individual and theoretical epistemologies; 3) take responsibility for respectfully and accurately sharing the stories of others; and 4) exercise compassion and care in their work. When considering human trafficking awareness and prevention education, an ecofeminist ethic rooted in these principles will demonstrate respect for victims and survivors, encourage critical thought, and guide culturally responsive and trauma-informed pedagogy.

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy and Teaching

Culturally responsive teaching theory will function as the “what” of this work, guiding the analysis of human trafficking awareness and prevention curricula for their culturally responsive content. This ensures future alignment between the community and the curriculum utilized. Geneva Gay’s (2000) theory of Culturally Responsive Teaching was derived from Gloria Ladson-Billings’ 1995 framework of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy. Ladson-Billings (1995) argued that culturally responsive education should be viewed within the cultural context of the students, rather than simply inserting cultural studies into the classroom. She compared her theory to critical pedagogy but emphasized that culturally responsive pedagogy focuses on the collective rather than the individual. However, by utilizing student culture “as a vehicle for

learning,” students are ultimately empowered to be themselves. Three criteria grounded Ladson-Billings’ framework: 1) students must be academically successful, 2) students must become and stay culturally competent, and 3) students must grow in their critical consciousness and challenge societal norms (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Gay’s (2000) theory of culturally responsive teaching described learning for ethnically diverse students as more relevant and effective when using their “cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles.” Six tenets defined her theory, including that culturally responsive teaching is: 1) validating, 2) comprehensive, 3) multidimensional, 4) empowering, 5) emancipatory, and 6) transformative. Validating teaching means the classroom teacher acknowledges student experiences as valid truths, values differences as assets, holds respect and appreciation for student differences, and works to mitigate power imbalances. Comprehensive teaching involves a holistic focus on academics, critical social consciousness, cultural competence, and activism. Multidimensionality values varying perspectives, diverse teaching tools, and cross-content curriculum. Empowering teaching emphasizes the use of personal knowledge and experience, viewing students as experts while upholding high expectations. Emancipatory teaching frees students from mainstream education’s constraints, focuses on the development of authentic knowledge, and fosters connections with the community. Transformative teaching helps students become social critics, stimulates decision-making, and inspires possibilities for youth (Gay, 2000).

Gay (2000) also heavily emphasized the component of care in culturally responsive teaching, which aligns with its focus in ecofeminism by Daly and Fernandes. A culturally responsive teaching approach puts ethical, emotional, and academic responsibilities on both the teacher and ethnically diverse students. The teacher-student relationship must be rooted in

respect, honor, integrity, sharing, and belief in the possibility of achievement (Gay, 2000). Shevalier & McKenzie (2012) also supported the inclusion of care and ethics in culturally responsive teaching. Using Noddings' Care Theory, they highlighted the importance of care-modeling as a strategy for distinguishing between caring about and caring for others. Caring for others (e.g. providing clear communication, giving attention, engaging in self-reflection, and modeling content knowledge) demonstrates respect and appreciation for cultural diversity, encourages ethical behavior, and helps students engage with peers (Shevalier & McKenzie, 2012). They concluded that, through a caring lens, culturally responsive teaching practices can "sustain values related to human conduct."

In addition to Gay's tenets, there are other recommendations for teaching in a culturally responsive manner. Gay (2002) argued that teachers should analyze instructional materials for their authenticity, complexity, and purpose when engaging with texts, illustrations, activities, role models, and content sources. Essentially, she recommended teachers approach the curriculum with a critically conscious mindset. The "symbolic curriculum" is another strategy that helps students learn content knowledge, skills, and personal morals (Gay, 2002). Classroom displays such as bulletin boards featuring ethical practices, achievement recognitions, role model pictures, and classroom expectations serve as tools to instill values, knowledge, and lessons. A validating and empowering strategy when developing these displays includes incorporating student voice in their design and content.

It is important to acknowledge Paris' (2012) development of Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy (CSP). Paris critiqued Ladson-Billings and Gay's work, arguing that relevance and responsiveness are not enough to ensure that cultural and language practices are maintained in the classroom. To address this, he developed CSP to build upon student assets rather than

assimilating or erasing them. While CSP is valuable for K-12 human trafficking awareness and prevention education, especially in terms of social justice and critical consciousness, culturally responsive teaching provides the focus needed for human trafficking awareness and prevention education. Specifically, it emphasizes the importance of *responding to* the horror of human trafficking, particularly as it disproportionately affects marginalized youth in a manner largely unaddressed. Integration of CSP principles is still relevant and expected within Gay's original tenets, and content should be *sustaining* with intention, encouraging dialogue on critical social topics and liberating youth by empowering their voices, creativity, and involvement in community action.

Teacher Preparation Recommendations for Applying Culturally Responsive Teaching Practices

A curriculum framed by culturally responsive teaching would be difficult to implement without extensive teacher training, self-reflective practices, and potentially shifts in attitudes, beliefs, and values traditionally embedded in hegemonic educational practices. Gay (2000) identified one major barrier to multicultural education: teachers with non-multicultural backgrounds leading diverse classrooms. She explained that teachers often believe they are knowledgeable about multicultural education based on what they have learned from popular culture and media, which tends to be “superficial” and “distorted” (Gay, 2000). She recommended that teachers seek deeper understanding through multicultural education theory and research on different ethnic groups' contributions across academic, social, and political contexts. Bonner et al. (2018) further stressed the importance of individual teacher self-examination, including the need to recognize personal biases, prejudices, and stereotypes when framing content through a culturally responsive lens.

Trauma-Informed Care

"Children experiencing trafficking endure many multifaceted traumas and suffer acute and chronic physical and psychological consequences" (NCSSLE, 2021 in Peck et al., 2024). Therefore, the “how” of administering human trafficking awareness and prevention curricula should be trauma-informed. This is crucial to prevent re-traumatizing survivors (Albert, 2021) and introducing new trauma to youth learning about their community’s unique vulnerabilities. When analyzing curricula for cultural responsiveness, a trauma-informed care approach should be a central part of the analysis.

Defining Trauma

An individual is considered to have experienced trauma following a single or series of events that threatened or caused physical or emotional harm, leading to negative effects on their physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Service Administration, 2014). Trauma can stem from events such as violence, rape, assault, experiences during war, witnessing violence, neglect, poverty, discrimination, and oppression (Institute for Family Violence Studies at Florida State University [FSU], 2017). The effects of trauma can manifest in both short- and long-term ways. Common short-term responses to trauma include trouble sleeping, agitation, hypervigilance, sensitivity to loud noises or being startled, feeling misunderstood by loved ones, and withdrawal from social relationships (Institute for Family Violence Studies at FSU, 2017). Long-term effects include reliving traumatic events through memories, substance abuse, anger, anxiety, defensiveness, and difficulty managing emotions, concentrating, focusing, and thinking clearly (Institute for Family Violence Studies at FSU, 2017).

When trying to understand trauma's impact on youth, it is important for educators to consider how trauma affects a student's development. Awareness of the frequency and timing of trauma in a student's life helps educators understand how trauma may manifest in the child's behavior (Downey & Greco, 2023). The nature of the teacher-student relationship also plays a key role in understanding how trauma will affect the child, as responses to trauma are highly individualized (Downey & Greco, 2023). Common manifestations of trauma in school-aged youth include sadness, crying, irritability, difficulty focusing, self-destructive and attention-seeking behaviors, trouble sleeping and eating, nightmares, changes in academic performance, suicidal thoughts, depression, withdrawal, guilt, shame, and difficulty connecting with peers (Institute for Family Violence Studies at FSU, 2017).

With the large influx of Immigrants into Denver and Aurora, CO, educators must also be aware of how trauma manifests in this group. Refugees, for example, may experience fear for their lives, anxiety, uncertainty, loneliness, and a loss of social connections (Bajwa et al., 2020). It is important to recognize these Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), such as social isolation, substance abuse, and feelings of being misunderstood, as risk factors for grooming and trafficking.

Trauma Theory

Trauma theory was formalized through the work of scholars such as Caruth (1996), who emphasized that trauma is not defined solely by the event itself, but by the way it disrupts time, narrative, and meaning. Trauma is often understood as an experience that overwhelms one's capacity to process and integrate it, resulting in fragmented recollection and emotional dysregulation (Herman, 1992). In educational contexts, trauma theory underscores how exposure to violence, loss, or systemic oppression may affect learners' sense of safety, belonging, and

agency. Recognizing these effects is crucial when addressing sensitive content such as human trafficking, as students may carry both personal and intergenerational trauma into the classroom. While trauma theory illuminates how pain and survival shape learning and behavior, trauma-informed care extends this understanding into practice, offering an applied framework that guides educators in creating learning environments that are safe, empowering, and healing-centered for all students.

Theory of Trauma-Informed Care

The Institute for Family Violence Studies at FSU (2017) argues that all human service providers should apply a trauma-informed care framework. Trauma-informed care recognizes four essential approaches for service providers: 1) realizing the prevalence of trauma, 2) recognizing how trauma affects everyone involved, 3) responding by putting knowledge into practice, and 4) resisting retraumatization. This approach acknowledges that most individuals have experienced trauma in some form. By adopting trauma-informed care, service providers understand that trauma is personalized and that addressing it requires strong, supportive relationships between provider and recipient. Failing to address trauma can harm mental health and exacerbate existing trauma. When applied correctly, trauma-informed care allows survivors to regain control and empowerment, avoiding blame and shame. The Institute for Family Violence Studies at FSU (2017) highlights the importance of contextual, cultural, and gender-sensitive understanding, safety for both the survivor and the service provider, peer support, providing voice and choice to empower survivors, and building a survivor-provider relationship based on trust, transparency, collaboration, and mutual respect.

When applied in K-12 schools, trauma-informed care frameworks target the whole school and require a culture of flexibility, extensive support for both students and staff, and safety

(Downey & Greco, 2023). Changes must be school-specific, fostering a compassionate culture among teachers, staff, and school leadership (Downey & Greco, 2023). Without the entire school community adopting a trauma-informed care approach, it is difficult for teachers to play a meaningful role in long-term healing for students experiencing trauma.

With proper support from the school, teachers play a critical role in mitigating trauma responses and promoting healing. Relationship-building between teacher and student is key to helping youth work through traumatic stress (Downey & Greco, 2023; Norrish et al., 2023; Brunzell, Waters, & Stokes, 2015). Norrish et al. (2023) list several “needs” youth require from their teachers, including safety, self-regulation, sensory needs, relational and attachment needs, academic and social-emotional learning needs, voice and empowerment, strength, and cultural needs. Teachers can help meet these needs by: 1) providing structure and predictability, 2) avoiding triggers known to specific students, 3) building students’ capacity to manage and respond to trauma, 4) utilizing students’ strengths and areas of expertise, 5) offering breaks and fidget tools, 6) providing consistent and nurturing care, 7) setting achievable goals to foster a growth mindset, 8) including students in decision-making, and 9) providing opportunities for community service (Norrish et al., 2023).

When discussing topics of gender-based violence, many people respond negatively or resist the conversation (Lange & Young, 2019). As sexual and physical violence are common triggers of trauma, educators must emphasize the avoidance of re-traumatization when teaching human trafficking awareness and prevention. Bajwa (2020) and Lange and Young (2019) recommend sticking to factual information and presenting definitions and evidence-based statistics to introduce sensitive topics. This approach helps raise awareness in a minimally

emotional way before addressing how human trafficking specifically harms individuals and communities.

Teacher Preparation Recommendations for Applying Trauma-Informed Care Teaching Practices

Before implementing a human trafficking awareness and prevention curriculum, teachers must self-assess their ability to effectively administer and facilitate the content. Teachers need to predict, understand, and manage their own responses to the material. Students heavily rely on teachers to model responses to traumatic stress, and a child's sense of safety, calmness, and self-regulation is directly influenced by the teacher's responses to the same stressors (Van der Kolk, 2005, as cited in Downey & Greco, 2023). Secondary traumatic stress (STS), or "emotional exhaustion," can occur in teachers after working with youth who have experienced trauma (Attwood, 2024). STS may compound the challenge of building relationships with survivors of trauma and teaching about human trafficking.

Awareness is the first step toward caring in a trauma-informed manner (Lange & Young, 2019). Educators need to be aware of their students' trauma histories and triggers before teaching about human trafficking. Teachers must establish strong, positive relationships with their students prior to introducing such sensitive topics, which is why human trafficking awareness is not recommended for the beginning of the school year. Teachers must be able to recognize subtle signs of trauma responses (e.g., agitation, withdrawal, disinterest) and help students process these reactions.

One criticism of trauma-informed care is the difficulty of ensuring students' physical, cultural, psychological, gender, racial, and ethical safety (Norrish et al., 2023). When teaching students with diverse intersecting identities, it can be challenging for teachers to create a safe

environment if they do not fully understand the students' experiences. This issue is compounded by the lack of focus on trauma related to racial, ethnic, and cultural discrimination, despite being an integral part of trauma-informed care. Trauma often compounds in schools that serve predominantly marginalized youth, as traditional Western educational norms and values can make school itself a traumatic environment (Petrone & Stanton, 2021). A focus on how trauma uniquely manifests in Youth of Color, Girls of Color, and Immigrant students is essential for understanding their unique academic needs when facilitating human trafficking awareness and prevention education, particularly in Denver and Aurora, CO school systems.

Conclusion of Theoretical Considerations and Framework Applications

There is an inherent connection between the theoretical applications of ecofeminism, culturally responsive teaching, and trauma-informed care. All three emphasize a deep understanding of communities and individuals, relationship development, mutual respect, social justice, the empowerment of marginalized groups, and intersectional understanding. Just as the implementation of a human trafficking awareness and prevention program requires whole-school efforts, the effective integration of culturally responsive teaching and trauma-informed care also necessitates training for all school personnel and school-wide responses that are both culturally responsive and trauma-informed. These frameworks are essential for making a meaningful impact on youth.

The connections between intersectional feminism, cultural responsiveness, and trauma have been emphasized in previous studies. Blitz et al. (2020) called for the adoption of "culturally responsive trauma-informed pedagogies" (cited in Petrone & Stanton, 2021). Schimke et al. (2022) also recommended programs that are both culturally relevant and trauma-informed, particularly for Immigrant students. Lange and Young (2019) further advocated for the

integration of gender into curricula, suggesting that it helps students identify power imbalances in their lives and promotes unlearning violence as a societal norm imposed on women.

An approach to human trafficking awareness and prevention education that integrates culturally responsive teaching and trauma-informed care, analyzed through an ecofeminist lens, can effectively address the racial, gender, ethnic, immigration, and contextual factors embedded in human trafficking patterns. This integrated approach weaves together love, compassion, interpersonal relationships, and individual growth with community improvement. It minimizes the constraints associated with addressing racial, ethnic, and gender influences on trafficking practices, while maximizing the benefits of both personal and community betterment. This approach also highlights the importance of relationship development both in and outside the classroom. The creation and implementation of a human trafficking awareness and prevention program should involve an ethnically, racially, linguistically, and gender-diverse group of professionals who collaborate to create content tailored specifically for the community in which the curriculum will be applied.

Chapter 3: Methods

This project aimed to help answer the following research questions:

1. What is the accessibility of K-12 human trafficking awareness and prevention curricula?
2. How culturally responsive are existing K-12 human trafficking awareness and prevention curricula?
3. In what ways are existing K-12 human trafficking awareness and prevention curricula trauma-informed?
4. In what ways do existing K-12 human trafficking awareness and prevention curricula discuss race/ethnicity as a risk factor to trafficking?

Purpose and Overview

In this study, I analyzed four human trafficking awareness and prevention curricula for their cultural responsiveness and presence of trauma-informed aspects. A deductive thematic analysis approach was used, applying *a priori* codes derived from established frameworks in culturally responsive pedagogy, trauma-informed care, and ecofeminist theory. The intention of this work was not to critique individual programs, but rather to provide recommendations for modification of existing and design of future K-12 human trafficking awareness and prevention curricula to meet the needs of youth populations.

Curriculum Selection Criteria

Curricula were selected based upon three criteria: content specificity, intended audience, and accessibility. The curriculum must be explicitly identified as a human trafficking awareness and prevention program. While some SEL and health programs address related topics such as grooming, healthy relationships, and sexual abuse, only those that were framed around human

trafficking were included. The curriculum must be designed for a K-12 school-aged audience, rather than a specific subgroup (e.g. only girls). Lastly, the curriculum must be free and accessible online. This requirement was based on ethical concerns about capitalistic exploitation and intellectual property rights within anti-trafficking education. Programs requiring costly subscriptions, licensing, or trainings were excluded in order to highlight materials that educators can freely and equitably access.

Curricula initially considered included *Love146*, *PROTECT*, *A21*, *AWARE*, *Prevention Project*, the *Lights Curriculum* by Unitas, *Empower Youth*, *Born2Fly*, *Project Starfish*, and *It Stops With Me*. These were identified via NEST Educators and Google searches. Programs like *Love146* and *PROTECT* were desirable due to their visibility and adoption in Colorado schools (NEST Educators, 2024). However, most of these curricula were inaccessible without high financial cost or licensure requirements. For example:

- *Love146* required a \$750 initial training plus annual payments.
- *PROTECT* required a \$997 facilitator training and \$12 per educator access.
- *A21* required a \$120 online training before accessing materials.
- *AWARE* was fee-based and designed for individuals aged 15+.
- *Prevention Project* materials ranged from \$200-\$450.
- *Lights Curriculum* did not include public access or information about accessibility and were unresponsive to email inquiry.

Due to these barriers, these curricula were excluded from analysis.

Curricula Sample

Four curricula met all selection criteria, including *Born2Fly*, *Project Starfish*, *Empower Youth*, and *It Stops With Me*. Each had distinct but straightforward access processes. *Born2Fly* required online registration and responded approximately three weeks later with curriculum materials via email. *Project Starfish*'s lesson plans were available as direct downloads on its website. *Empower Youth* offered a free facilitator's guide downloadable directly from its website. *It Stops With Me* provided free access to its four-session curriculum online, with additional

materials (facilitator’s guide and student worksheets) available via email request. Together, these four curricula offered a diverse set of content lengths, subject focus areas, and instructional tools. Importantly, all met the inclusion criteria and yielded a robust set of data for coding and thematic analysis.

Predetermined Codes

A priori codes were developed based on established theoretical frameworks, allowing for a deductive approach to analysis. Two codes were created to represent each of the six tenets of culturally responsive teaching and each of the four principles to trauma-informed care. Three groups of codes were also created to reflect the components of ecofeminism significant to understanding the context of human trafficking vulnerabilities (e.g. who, where/environment, and feminist critique). Table 1 lists all codes by theoretical tenet/principle, and table 2 includes definitions and description for each code.

Culturally Responsive Teaching (Gay, 2000) Codes

Each of Gay’s six tenets was represented by two sub-codes (12 total codes):

- Validating: student identity; classroom identity
- Comprehensive: critical social consciousness; cultural competence of community
- Multidimensional: cross-curricular integration; multimodal delivery
- Empowering: student voice/application; high expectations
- Emancipatory: authentic knowledge; community liberation
- Transformative: social critique; action orientation

Trauma-Informed Care (IFVS, 2017) Codes

Each of the four trauma-informed approaches was represented by two sub-codes (8 total codes):

- Realizing prevalence of trauma: trauma recognition; trauma’s impact on vulnerable groups
- Recognizing effects of trauma: survivor-centered design; trauma manifestation
- Responding appropriately: coping/skill-building; agency/preventative action
- Resisting retraumatization: trauma-sensitive language; supportive environment

Table 1: A-priori codes organized by theoretical frames.

Frameworks	Codes	Sub-Codes
Culturally Responsive Teaching	Tenet 1: Validating	A. Student identity B. Classroom identity
	Tenet 2: Comprehensive	A. Critical social consciousness B. Cultural competence of community
	Tenet 3: Multidimensional	A. Cross-content B. Modalities of learning
	Tenet 4: Empowering	A. Personal knowledge/ideas B. High expectations
	Tenet 5: Emancipatory	A. Authentic knowledge/freedom from mainstream education B. Community connectedness
	Tenet 6: Transformative	A. Inspire possibility B. Social critique
TIC	1. Realizing prevalence of trauma	A. Trauma recognition B. Impact on vulnerable populations
	2. Recognizing how trauma affects all individuals involved	A. How trauma manifests B. Victim/survivor-centered
	3. Responding by putting knowledge into practice	A. Skill-building/coping Mechanisms B. Empowerment/agency to resist trafficking and take preventative action
	4. Resisting retraumatization	A. Safe and supportive environment B. Trauma-sensitive language
Ecofeminism to Highlight Myths/Erased Truths	1. Who is trafficked	A. Ethnicity B. Age C. LBGTQ+ identity D. Homelessness E. Abuse/violence F. Social factors

		G. Mental health factors H. Race I. Sex J. Immigrant/Newcomer Status K. Language
	2. Where does trafficking happen	
	3. Critical Questionables	
Key Words/Phrases	1. “culture” 2. “race” or “racism” 3. “anyone can be a victim”	

Table 2: Code definitions.

Code	Definition/Description
Student identity	Consideration/incorporation of individual student experiences, feelings, interests, etc.
Classroom identity	Activities facilitate formation of inter-student connections and foster relationship development.
Critical social consciousness	Curriculum includes instruction that raises awareness of and critiques social injustices.
Cultural competence of community	Curriculum integrates content and conversations relevant to community culture and dynamics.
Cross-content	Curriculum connects human trafficking awareness and prevention education content with different content standards.
Modalities of Learning	Diverse application of activities and learning modes.
Personal knowledge/ideas	Students are seen and included in activities as experts of their own experiences and community.
High expectations	High expectations for students are communicated.
Authentic knowledge/freedom from mainstream education	Nontraditional education content is shared with youth (<i>e.g. pornography as a factor that can promote sex trafficking</i>); teaching human trafficking via survivor stories.
Community connectedness	Activities are integrated within community; community visits/performances; use of community resources; relationship development with community stakeholders.

Inspire possibilities	Curriculum identifies program goals/objectives with intent to inspire youth; youth are motivated to be agents of change within their communities.
Social critique	Students are actively engaged in discussions, research, projects, and/or presentations involving social critique.
Trauma recognition	Recognizing curriculum content as potentially trauma-triggering; identification of risk factors for trauma.
Impact on vulnerable populations	How trauma uniquely impacts differentially susceptible groups; explicit identification of who is more vulnerable to human trafficking.
How trauma manifests	Impact of trauma on survivors; symptoms that manifest as a result of trauma.
Victim/survivor-centered	Consideration of victims/survivors' experiences (<i>e.g. use of survivor stories; harm to survivors/victims at the forefront of the problem</i>).
Skill-building/coping mechanisms	Providing youth with resources to better understand healthy relationships, trafficking risk, and how to cope with trauma. Explicit teaching of the signs someone is being trafficked or someone is a trafficker.
Empowerment/agency to resist trafficking and take preventative action	Providing youth with resources to take action within the community.
Safe and supportive environment	Preparing youth, classroom, teacher, and school to respond in the event trafficking is suspected; school-wide resources for youth (<i>e.g. counselors</i>); allowing voluntary participation in trauma-triggering activities; creating space for sharing and respect among peers.
Trauma-sensitive language	Use of non-trauma-triggering language; avoidance of survivor/victim shaming/blaming; appropriate use of terms "victim" and "survivor".
Eco_Who_Ethnicity	Describing/representing in storytelling groups of a particular ethnicity as vulnerable to human trafficking.
Eco_Who_Age	Describing/representing in storytelling groups of a particular age as vulnerable to human trafficking.
Eco_Who_LGBTQ+	Describing/representing in storytelling groups of a particular sexual orientation or gender identity as vulnerable to human

	trafficking.
Eco_Who_ Homelessness	Describing/representing in storytelling homeless persons as vulnerable to human trafficking.
Eco_Who_ Abuse/Violence	Describing/representing in storytelling survivors of abuse/violence as vulnerable to human trafficking.
Eco_Who_ Social Factors	Describing/representing in storytelling individuals experiencing social/familial instability as vulnerable to human trafficking.
Eco_Who_ Mental Health Factors	Describing/representing in storytelling individuals experiencing mental health disorders or emotional distress as vulnerable to human trafficking.
Eco_Who_ Race	Describing/representing in storytelling groups of a particular race as vulnerable to human trafficking.
Eco_Who_ Sex	Describing/representing in storytelling groups of a particular sex as vulnerable to human trafficking.
Eco_Who_ Immigrant/Newcomer	Describing/representing in storytelling immigrants/newcomers as vulnerable to human trafficking.
Eco_Who_ Language	Describing/representing in storytelling individuals with limited English language proficiency as vulnerable to human trafficking.
Critical Questionables	Curriculum content considered “questionable” or in need of further critique through an ecofeminist lens.
Key Word- culture	Use of the word “culture” in the curriculum.
Key Word- race/racism	Use of the words “race” or “racism” in the curriculum.
Key Phrase- anyone can be a victim	Use of the phrase “anyone can be a victim” in the curriculum.

Ecofeminist Framework Codes

Thirteen codes were created to reflect vulnerabilities and critical aspects of human trafficking within ecofeminist theory. These included:

- Vulnerabilities (the “who”): ethnicity, age, LGBTQ+ identity, homelessness, abuse/violence, social isolation, poor mental health, race, sex, immigrant/newcomer status, and language

- Context (the “where” or “ecosystem”): discussion of trafficking environments
- Critical: feminist critique or problematic content (“critical questionables”)

Keywords, Phrases of Interest, and Coding Software

To further support analysis, the following keywords and phrases were tracked during coding: “culture,” “race,” “racism,” and “anyone can be a victim.” These terms were included due to their relevance to the project’s focus on systemic vulnerabilities, erasure of marginalized identities, and the (in)visibility of cultural responsiveness. All coding was completed using MaxQDA software. MaxQDA allowed for color-coded tagging of documents, easy retrieval of coded excerpts, and organization of codes by theory and curriculum.

Process of Analysis

Each curriculum was read three times, once for each theoretical lens (culturally responsive teaching, trauma-informed care, and ecofeminist theory). All coding for one curriculum was completed before moving on to the next. In addition to coding theory-aligned content, logistical details including the curriculum’s published description, target age range, length, date of publication, and publisher location were collected.

After coding, I used MaxQDA’s export features to compile all coded segments by curriculum and theory. I then calculated code frequency per curriculum and across curricula to determine which codes were most and least commonly represented. Using Canva Pro, I generated visual representations of the findings, including pie charts and conceptual maps, to help illustrate the raw statistics of each code per curriculum and summarize initial findings (e.g. which codes and theories were more/less common in each curriculum).

Raw data (number and content of coded sequences) were then analyzed to begin identifying patterns unique to each individual curriculum. Coded segments were sifted through, identifying content that appeared multiple times throughout each curriculum, in addition to the

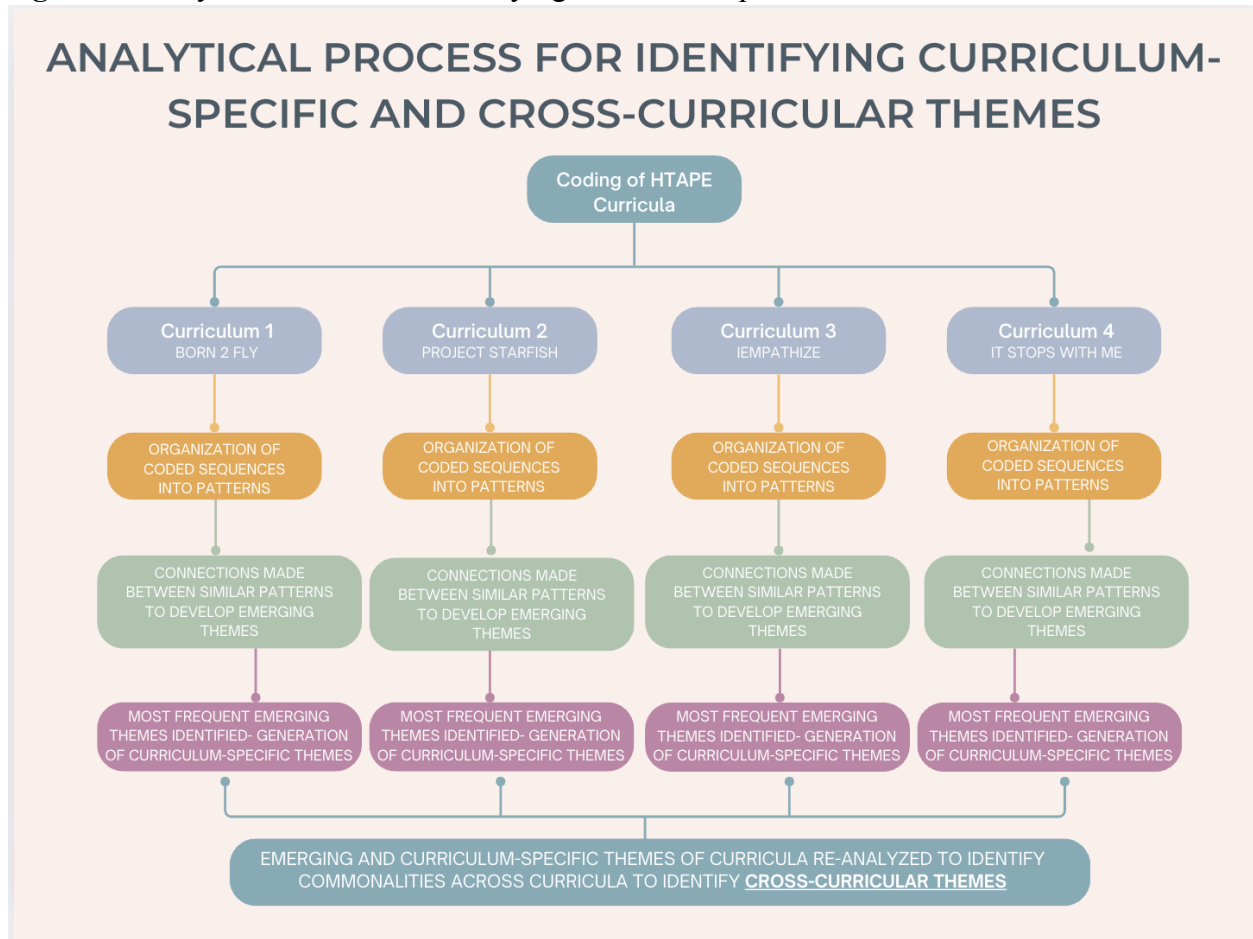
types of content coded for each theory. Those patterns were then compiled and searched through to identify themes among the patterns. In some cases similar patterns were combined to create a single theme, while in other cases strongly represented patterns became their own theme. A visual concept map was created using Canva Pro to illustrate these themes and supporting examples.

After identifying patterns and generating themes within each curriculum, findings were synthesized across curricula to establish cross-curricular themes. Cross-curricular themes were only identified if the theme could be represented with examples from each curriculum. These were also mapped visually using Canva Pro. Figure 1 illustrates the process of thematic identification from individual curriculum to cross-curricular themes.

Validity Considerations

While collecting data and conducting analysis, I carefully considered several factors related to validity, including researcher bias, transparency in the coding process, credibility of interpretations, and the transferability and confirmability of results. As a current K-12 educator in a high-trafficking-risk community with years of academic and professional experience in culturally responsive and trauma-informed teaching practices, as well as personal values rooted in effective pedagogy, I was mindful of how my background could influence the selection, coding, and critique of curricula. To maintain an objective and professionally critical lens, I kept a research journal for ongoing personal reflection and consulted with trusted professional colleagues to gain perspectives on the objectivity of my writing. These colleagues helped me identify potential areas where my biases may have shaped interpretation, and they offered insight into how to move forward in ways that honored both the data and the communities represented.

Figure 1: Analytical Process for identifying curriculum-specific and cross-curricular themes.



This reflective and collaborative process helped ensure that my analysis remained grounded in the evidence rather than overly shaped by personal experience and bias.

My transparency throughout the coding process, along with my expertise in culturally responsive, trauma-informed, and ecofeminist frameworks, supported the credibility of my interpretations. I used clearly defined markers to determine what constituted each code and documented my rationale for identifying patterns and finalizing both curriculum-specific and overarching themes. These explicit definitions and explanations contribute to the transferability and confirmability of my results. Future researchers should be able to apply my coding system to the same curricula and conclude similar findings, or use the framework to evaluate new curricula

for their cultural responsiveness, trauma-informed features, and alignment with ecofeminist principles.

Reliability Considerations

In addressing reliability, I focused on consistency in coding, the clarity of code definitions, maintaining records of decision-making processes, and ensuring stability in coding over time. To support consistency while coding across a two-month period, I created explicit definitions for each code, including examples of scenarios that fit within each category. When uncertainties arose, such as difficulty determining which code best applied to a given curriculum segment, I recorded these dilemmas in my research journal and documented how I resolved them. This record allowed me to revisit previous decisions and apply the same reasoning to similar situations later in the analysis, contributing to overall consistency. While inter-rater reliability was not employed in this study, the clarity of code definitions and the consistent application of coding practices enhanced stability. These practices also support replicability for future researchers seeking to apply the framework in similar or new contexts.

Ethical Considerations

A key ethical consideration in this study was whether to identify the names of the four curricula analyzed. After careful reflection, I chose to include curriculum names in order to increase the usefulness and applicability of the research for educators and curriculum developers. Naming the curricula allows educators to make informed decisions about which programs may best meet the needs of their students and communities, as well as how to adapt specific components to align with trauma-informed and culturally responsive practices. Additionally, many of the curricula are highly distinctive in structure, language, or design, rendering them easily identifiable even if pseudonyms were used. While no student data or sensitive personal

information was involved in this study, I remained attentive to ethical research practices by presenting findings respectfully and constructively. The purpose of naming is not to critique individual programs or developers, but to offer transparent insights that support stronger, equity-centered anti-trafficking education.

Chapter 4: Results

Results presented in this chapter are organized first by individual curriculum, with a summary of curriculum information, raw data, and themes. After presentation of all curriculum-specific results, cross-curricular data is presented (raw data and themes). Lastly, conceptual themes are shared to conclude recommendations for future modification and application of existing human trafficking awareness and prevention education (HTAPE) curricula as well as design of new HTAPE programs.

Born2Fly Curriculum

Born2Fly is an international HTAPE curriculum developed in 2010. It includes four sub-curricula that vary by target age group and religious affiliation. The *Born2Fly wordless book and curriculum* is designed for young children, with an apprentice track for teenagers. The *Soaring Higher* curriculum, also geared toward elementary-aged youth, is framed within Christianity's "Song of Solomon" (Born2Fly, 2023). Both of these versions are available in 12 languages. The curricula for teens include *Dream Big* and *Dream Big with God* (the "Song of Solomon"-inspired version), which are available in only three languages: English, Thai, and Afrikaans. Each curriculum ranges from 58 to 70 pages and contains six sessions that can be flexibly implemented over days, weeks, or months. *Born2Fly* has been adopted in 65 countries (Born2Fly, 2023).

Raw Analysis Results

Born2Fly results reflect a combination of all four sub-curricula. Table 3 provides raw data on the number of coded segments per theoretical tenet for *Born2Fly* and all other curricula. Within the culturally responsive teaching framework, the most frequently coded tenets were

Table 3: Number of codes assigned to each curriculum by theoretical tenet/principle.

	<u>Coded Tenets/ Principles</u>	<u>Curricula</u>			
		Born2Fly	Project Starfish	It Stops With Me	Empower Youth
Culturally Responsive Teaching	Validating Tenet	149	7	8	21
	Comprehensive Tenet	48	12	2	9
	Multidimensional Tenet	55	30	7	26
	Empowering Tenet	109	14	8	13
	Emancipatory Tenet	32	44	9	2
	Transformative Tenet	45	65	28	12
Trauma-Informed Care	Realizing Prevalence of Trauma Principle	33	37	12	14
	Recognizing How Trauma Impacts All Individuals Principle	12	17	7	6
	Responding by Putting Knowledge Into Practice Principle	97	54	30	37
	Resisting Retraumatization Principle	48	7	8	8
Ecofeminism	Who	25	44	27	12
	Where	2	7	2	0
	Critical Questionables as Framed Through Ecofeminism	58	11	2	5

validating and *empowering*, with 149 and 109 segments, respectively. The *multidimensional* tenet appeared 55 times; *comprehensive* was coded 48 times; *transformative*, 45 times; and *emancipatory*, 32 times.

For the trauma-informed care framework, the most frequently applied principle was *responding by putting knowledge into practice*, with 97 coded segments. *Resisting retraumatization* appeared 48 times, and *realizing prevalence of trauma* was coded in 33 segments. The least frequently coded trauma-informed principle was *recognizing how trauma impacts all individuals*, with 12 coded instances.

In the ecofeminist framework, the code *who* was applied 25 times, while *where* appeared only twice. A total of 58 segments were coded as *critical questionables*, indicating content flagged as critically concerning from an ecofeminist perspective. The identified critical questionables are described next.

Promoting Retraumatization Via Victim Blaming. The curriculum encourages blameful narratives, such as suggesting that “patience and determination are essential to keep from being trafficked,” or asking, “What wrong choices did Kim’s mother make?” after sharing a survivor story about a girl trafficked under the false promise of opportunity.

Bias in the Form of Misandry. Males are frequently portrayed as the primary enablers of trafficking through pornography and activities like attending parties with strippers. For example, the curriculum references “going to a fraternity party or bachelor party with strippers” as a way people support trafficking, while failing to acknowledge similar behaviors in female or gender-neutral spaces where males are also exploited. Curriculum developers recommend gender segregation when teaching human trafficking awareness and prevention. Additionally, the curriculum highlights male confusion around intimacy, particularly in the *Soaring Higher* and

Dream Big with God curricula, stating that marriage is a “difficult concept for youth to understand, particularly boys and young men.”

Intentional Race Ignorance. In *Soaring Higher* and *Dream Big with God*, the curriculum interprets the verse “I am dark but lovely” not as a reference to skin color (a distinction clearly made by writers), but as symbolic of beauty and self-perception. This interpretation ignores broader sociocultural understandings of the verse, particularly its use in Black protest literature and as a reclamation of beauty in the face of racism (Wabyanga, 2021). Instead, the curriculum promotes a Eurocentric, colonial interpretation that purposefully erases racial context.

Use of Religion as a Fear Tactic. The curriculum suggests that Christianity offers protection from trafficking, with statements like, “relying on Jesus... will help them stay safe and make their dreams come true,” and “having a close friendship with Jesus can help keep them from being trafficked.” This messaging implies that non-Christian youth may be at greater risk, which can alienate or shame those outside the Christian faith.

Table 4 displays the proportions of each tenet/principle relative to the total number of coded segments for all four curricula. Of all coded segments in *Born2Fly*, 61.4% reflected culturally responsive practices. Within that, *validating* and *empowering* made up 20.9% and 15.3%, respectively. Trauma-informed care principles were present in 26.6% of segments, with *responding by putting knowledge into practice* comprising 13.6%. Ecofeminist codes accounted for 11.9% of all codes, while *where* (a reflection on place and trafficking) represented only 0.3%.

Curriculum-Specific Themes

A total of ten themes emerged from patterns across the *Born2Fly* curricula. Each is titled and described below, with supporting quotations from the curricular texts.

Table 4: Proportions of each tenet/principle coded relative to the total number of coded segments for all four curricula.

	<u>Coded Tenets/ Principles</u>	<u>Curricula</u>				<u>Across Curricula</u>
		Born2Fly	Project Starfish	It Stops With Me	Empower Youth	
Culturally Responsive Teaching	Validating Tenet	20.9	2	5.3	12.7	6.6
	Comprehensive Tenet	6.7	3.4	1.4	5.5	3.6
	Multidimensional Tenet	7.7	8.6	4.7	15.8	10
	Empowering Tenet	15.3	4	5.3	7.9	5.7
	Emancipatory Tenet	4.5	12.6	6	1.2	6.9
	Transformative Tenet	6.3	18.6	18.7	7.3	14.8
	Total:	61.4	49.2	41.4	50.4	47.6
Trauma-Informed Care	Realizing Prevalence of Trauma Principle	4.6	10.6	8	8.5	9.1
	Recognizing How Trauma Impacts All Individuals Principle	1.7	4.9	4.7	3.6	4.5
	Responding by Putting Knowledge Into Practice Principle	13.6	15.5	20	22.4	19
	Resisting Retraumatization Principle	6.7	2	5.3	4.8	4
	Total:	26.6	33	38	39.3	36.6
	Ecofeminism	Who	3.5	12.6	18	7.3
Where		0.3	2	1.3	0	1.1
Critical Questionables as Framed Through Ecofeminism		8.1	3.2	1.3	3	2.7
Total:		11.9	17.8	20.6	10.3	15.8

Theme One: Student input and collaborative discussion is not only important but encouraged positively. Patterns supporting this theme were most frequently coded under the

validating and *empowering* tenets of culturally responsive teaching, and the *responding by putting knowledge into practice* principle of trauma-informed care. *Born2Fly* integrates regular opportunities for classroom-based discussion and sharing of personal experiences tied to curriculum content, with prompts like, “What is a dream you will work hard for?” and “How do you help with dishes after your meal?” The facilitator’s guide also provides strategies to elicit and affirm student contributions, such as: “In discussion time, be very encouraging; take time to point out what is positive about each person’s responses...”

Theme Two: Children are a disproportionately targeted and highly vulnerable group for human trafficking. Patterns contributing to this theme were coded under multiple theoretical frameworks, including the *who* of ecofeminism; the *emancipatory* tenet of culturally responsive teaching; and the trauma-informed care principles of *responding by putting knowledge into practice*, *recognizing how trauma impacts all individuals*, and *resisting retraumatization*. *Born2Fly* is transparent with youth about their vulnerability to trafficking. For example, facilitators are encouraged to share with teenage students the statistic that “1.2 million children under the age of 18 are trafficked each year around the world”. They also share stories of victimized youth.

Theme Three: Building knowledge of human trafficking and response skills. This theme emerged from patterns coded as *emancipatory* in culturally responsive teaching and the trauma-informed principles of *responding by putting knowledge into practice*, *recognizing how trauma impacts all individuals*, and *resisting retraumatization*. The curriculum encourages the creation of classroom posters that include definitions, statistics, and facts about trafficking, as well as guidance for responding to various trafficking scenarios. Examples include: “What do

traffickers look like?”, “How can you tell the difference between a trafficker and a real friend?”, and “What are the lies that traffickers tell?”

Theme Four: Teaching methods to cope with fear around HTAPE and seeking help.

This theme was informed by patterns coded exclusively under trauma-informed care principles. Recognizing the potential for fear or trauma-triggering responses, the curriculum includes strategies such as, “Have children write down their fears and then together with the children look for noble verses that counter those lies.” Non-religious coping recommendations are also included in a section titled *The Fine Line Between Awareness and Fear*.

Theme Five: Preparing educators to recognize signs of fear, abuse, or discomfort.

Similar to Theme Four, this theme underscores *Born2Fly*'s effort to mentally prepare educators for disclosures or behavioral signs of trauma. It was developed from patterns coded under the *validating* tenet of culturally responsive teaching, and the trauma-informed care principles of *realizing the prevalence of trauma*, *recognizing how trauma impacts all individuals*, and *resisting retraumatization*. For example, prior to introducing a true trafficking story, facilitators are advised: “Before you share it with the class, please reread the notes under ‘How to select and train teachers,’ step 4, about triggers and trauma. Please be sure you have discussed this with program administrators so that you can help students and teachers.”

Theme Six: Masking victim-blaming as high expectations. This theme emerged from conflicting patterns- some coded as *empowering* within culturally responsive teaching, and others coded as *resisting retraumatization* but also revealing anti-trauma-informed practices. A quote that encapsulates this tension is: “How can knowing that you are valuable keep you from being trafficked?” While the curriculum seeks to boost self-worth as a protective factor, it risks

implying that greater self-confidence could have prevented victimization, thereby unintentionally promoting victim-blaming.

Theme Seven: Critiquing societal norms with elements of misandry. *Born2Fly* integrates critiques of systems that normalize trafficking, particularly through media like pornography, aligning with *emancipatory* and *critical* ecofeminist principles. However, the curriculum frequently positions young boys and men as the primary contributors to these harms, suggesting gender segregation rather than examining underlying systems or offering tools for youth of all genders to navigate relationships and sexual development in healthy ways.

Theme Eight: You should adapt the curriculum based on your country, culture, language, and students... but how? Patterns supporting this theme were primarily coded under *ecofeminist* principles and the *validating* and *comprehensive* tenets of culturally responsive teaching. *Born2Fly* frequently encourages facilitators to adjust content based on cultural context: “This curriculum is used all over the world, so we have tried to make it as general as possible... you will need to customize it for your own culture by adding specific examples.” However, without clear guidance, this expectation may overwhelm educators lacking training in culturally relevant pedagogy.

Theme Nine: Building self-esteem vs. promotion of Westernized “me” culture. This theme illustrates a tension between the *validating* tenet of culturally responsive teaching and *anti-ecofeminist* framing. The curriculum consistently centers self-worth and individuality: “How can your belief that you are unique, valuable, and worth loving make a difference in your life?” While these affirmations may empower students, they reflect Western ideals of individualism that may not align with collectivist or community-centered cultural values, thereby not making it a curriculum that is generalized for the *whole* world.

Theme Ten: Creators’ bias permeates the curriculum. This theme represents a broader pattern of *anti-ecofeminist* content seen throughout the curriculum. Despite its international use, *Born2Fly* reveals underlying cultural, religious, and gender-based biases that permeate its design, even while it claims general applicability across global contexts. From creating only a religious version rooted in Christianity, to its framing in Western culture, to its recommendations for gender segregation and inconspicuous male shaming, the curriculum is not written from a culturally or religiously broad or objective perspective. Even the non-religious formats of the elementary-aged curriculum (*Born2Fly*) used the term “repentance” to teach youth about feeling sorry for something you have done, although the term is primarily used in religious contexts and refers to remorse for sin.

Project Starfish Curriculum

Project Starfish is a school-based sex trafficking prevention initiative created in 2021 by Arizona State University’s Office of Sex Trafficking and Intervention Research (STIR) (Project Starfish, n.d.). The program includes eight interdisciplinary lesson plans targeting middle and high school students, spanning content areas such as photography, theatre, poetry, journalism, social justice, English/language arts, history, and economics. Each lesson ranges from 6 to 15 pages and is designed to be implemented over a single class period (approximately 50-60 minutes).

Raw Analysis Results

Project Starfish results reflect coding across all eight lesson plans. Within the culturally responsive teaching frame, the *transformative* and *emancipatory* tenets were most frequently applied, with 65 and 44 coded segments, respectively. This was followed by the

multidimensional tenet (30), *empowering* (14), *comprehensive* (12), and *validating* (7). Notably, *validating*, considered foundational to culturally responsive pedagogy, was minimally present.

In the trauma-informed care frame, the principle of *responding by putting knowledge into practice* was the most frequently coded, with 54 segments. The principles of *realizing the prevalence of trauma* and *recognizing how trauma impacts all individuals* followed with 37 and 17 coded segments, respectively. *Resisting retraumatization* appeared only seven times, indicating limited attention to avoiding harm in instructional practice.

The ecofeminist frame showed 44 segment assignments for the *who* component and only seven for *where*, with the latter found exclusively in the theatre lesson. Eleven segments across various lessons were categorized as *critical questionables*, highlighting content that raised concern through a critical ecofeminist lens. These questionable segments are described below.

Minimizing trafficking as a human rights violation. The economics lesson listed trafficking's harms primarily through an economic lens, considering government, financial, and criminal impacts as heavy burdens rather than centering the humanity of victims and survivors. They list the negatives of human trafficking in order, as follows: “increased criminal activity (i.e. drugs, violence, weapons); economic strain on government to arrest and prosecute traffickers; communicable diseases; and loss of value of individuals as human beings”.

The social justice lesson plan provides only a surface-level critique. Although framed as a social justice framed plan, the lesson does not critically examine structural systems that perpetuate human trafficking. It identifies trafficking as a social justice issue “through the use of force, fraud, and coercion victims must perform sexual acts for money”, but fails to address bias and discriminatory systems that disproportionately increase vulnerability for certain groups.

Glorification of the “pimp” role. The poetry lesson plan asks students to write poems from various stakeholder perspectives related to human trafficking, including that of a “pimp” or perpetrator. This contradicts guidance in the theatre lesson plan, which explicitly advises: “Avoid playing the trafficker. As students are learning about trafficking, we don’t want any stereotypes about traffickers to be perpetuated, and we do not want the ‘pimp life’ to be glorified.” This dichotomy straddles the controversial normalization of mimicking and downplaying a dangerous and dehumanizing criminal profession.

Warning students to avoid high-risk areas without providing context. The photography lesson plan directs students to “take a series of photos that they feel represent the issue of sex trafficking” while cautioning them not to visit areas with high volumes of prostitution or to photograph people. However, the curriculum offers no guidance to help instructors discuss local trafficking hot spots or broader geographic patterns, leaving a gap in contextual understanding and risking student safety.

The “anyone can be a victim” framing. The curriculum notes: “Victims can be male, female, transgender and of any race and sexual orientation, and of any age - including under the age of 18.” While accurate, this framing overlooks research showing that some populations are disproportionately affected due to systemic inequities.

Of all coded segments, 49.2% reflected culturally responsive teaching principles, led by the *transformative* (18.6%) and *emancipatory* (12.6%) tenets. Trauma-informed care principles accounted for 28.6%, with *putting knowledge into practice* comprising the largest share (15.5%). Ecofeminist codes made up 22.2% of all codes, led by the *who* component (12.6%). The *validating* culturally responsive teaching tenet, *resisting retraumatization* trauma-informed care principle, and *where* of ecofeminism each represented only 2% of total codes.

Curriculum-Specific Themes

A total of ten themes emerged from patterns across the *Project Starfish* lesson plans. Each theme is titled and described below, with quoted supporting examples from the curriculum.

Theme One: Emphasis on Knowledge Building Through Self-Driven Research. This theme reflects *comprehensive* and *emancipatory* tenets of culturally responsive teaching. Seven of the eight lesson plans explicitly prompt students to conduct independent research on human trafficking, including local initiatives, organizations, laws, history, and survivor stories.

Theme Two: Inspiring Community Agents of Change. The theatre, journalism, photography, and English/language arts lesson plans each state their goal to inspire youth. For example, the journalism plan aims “to demonstrate the power of journalism to tell a story, raise awareness, and inspire social action” and “to inspire students to be active participants in community change.” This reflects *transformative* teaching and *putting knowledge into practice*.

Theme Three: Performance-Based Learning and Awareness Building. Performance and presentation are used as engagement tools in the theatre, poetry, photography, and journalism lesson plans. Supported by *emancipatory* and *multidimensionality* codes, these plans elevate performance as both learning and advocacy. The theatre plan describes its one-act student plays as “a great exercise to perform in front of a large audience... to raise awareness and educate others on the issue of sex trafficking.”

Theme Four: Insensitivity Toward Victims and Survivors. *Anti-ecofeminist* and *promoting retraumatization*, some lesson plans include insensitive language or framing. For example, the economics plan lists “loss of value of individuals as human beings” as a seemingly lesser consequence of trafficking compared to economic impacts. The theatre plan relies heavily on the term “victim” (e.g., “victim cards” for student plays). The history plan references the 1904

suppression of “white slave traffic” while omitting the documented sexual exploitation and enslavement of Black women during chattel slavery, erasing the disproportionate violence faced by Women of Color.

Theme Five: Inconsistencies in Trauma-Informed and Culturally Responsive Practices. While some plans are *ecofeminist* and *resist retraumatization*, others cannot be described that way. Previously noted discrepancies include the glorification vs. rejection of the “pimp” figure in the poetry and theatre plans. Varying levels of societal critique, trauma sensitivity, and cultural consideration are present. The theatre, journalism, social justice, poetry, and photography plans incorporate trauma-informed care and culturally responsive teaching, while the English/language arts plan shows minimal trauma-informed coding, and the history and economics plans show few culturally responsive practices. Only the theatre plan incorporates an *ecofeminist* perspective, emphasizing context and intersectionality.

Theme Six: Alignment with National and State Standards. Each lesson plan lists content-specific standards on its first page, supporting the *multidimensionality* of *Project Starfish*’s design.

Theme Seven: Inclusion of Supplemental Learning and Application Resources. All lesson plans, to varying degrees, include resources and websites for deeper engagement, reflecting *multidimensionality* and *putting knowledge into practice* within both culturally responsive and trauma-informed frameworks.

Theme Eight: Fostering Critical Consciousness of Unique Vulnerabilities. Unique to the theatre plan, this theme incorporates *ecofeminist*, *comprehensive*, and *transformative* practices, as well as the principle of *realizing the prevalence of trauma*. Students are asked to explore how identity, environment, family structure, and financial instability impact vulnerability

to trafficking. For example: “What was the client’s culture? How did this impact his/her trafficking situation?” This plan models the depth of intersectional consideration lacking in others.

Theme Nine: Arts and Storytelling as Tools for Learning and Expression. This theme includes *multidimensionality, empowering, emancipatory, recognizing how trauma impacts all individuals, and putting knowledge into practice* codes. The theatre, photography, journalism, and poetry plans emphasize artistic expression as a means of emotional processing and advocacy. For example, the photography lesson highlights “photovoice” as a method used in community-based research to “bring a voice to marginalized peoples.” As the theatre plan models vulnerability-focused discourse, these artistic plans model creative expression that elevates youth voices.

Theme Ten: Realistic Depiction of Vulnerabilities in Survivor Stories. Ecofeminist and trauma-informed in nature, this theme supports *realizing the prevalence of trauma*. The theatre, poetry, and English/language arts plans feature stories based on real survivor experiences. The theatre plan includes character cards with details such as age, gender, ethnicity, and recruitment context. These cards are “developed from real stories of high school students who experienced a sex trafficking situation.” Similarly, the poems in the poetry lesson plan detail emotional, physical, and contextual experiences by survivors.

It Stops With Me Curriculum

It Stops With Me is a four-session curriculum primarily delivered virtually and intended for teenagers. Created in 2015 by Unlock Freedom, its stated goal is to help youth recognize their personal value and potential to create change (Stop the Movement, n.d.). Each session consists of videos accompanied by discussion questions outlined in a facilitator guide.

Raw Analysis Results

Within the culturally responsive teaching frame, the *transformative* tenet appeared most frequently, with 28 coded segments. Other code frequencies included *emancipatory* (9), *empowering* (8), *validating* (8), and *multidimensional* (7). The *comprehensive* tenet was coded least frequently, with only two segment assignments. In the trauma-informed care frame, the most frequently assigned principle was *responding by putting knowledge into practice*, with 30 coded segments. Other trauma-informed care codes included *realizing prevalence of trauma* (12), *resisting retraumatization* (8), and *recognizing how trauma impacts all individuals* (7). Under the ecofeminist theoretical frame, the *who* of ecofeminism was coded 27 times, while the *where* was coded only twice. Additionally, two segments were coded as *critically questionable*. The contexts of these critical questionables are described below.

Downplaying the Vulnerability of Girls and Women in Trafficking. The curriculum describes girls and women as “only slightly” more frequently trafficked. However, global, national, and local statistics consistently show a significant gender disparity (as outlined in the literature review).

Framing Trafficking as Primarily an American Issue. While *It Stops With Me* acknowledges that human trafficking occurs globally, the content largely focuses on its impacts within the United States. This emphasis risks conveying that youth should primarily care about human trafficking because it affects Americans.

Trauma-informed care and culturally responsive teaching codes were assigned at similar rates, making up 38.5% and 41.9% of all codes, respectively. Ecofeminist codes accounted for 19.6%. The most frequently assigned individual codes across all frameworks included

responding by putting knowledge into practice (20.3%), *transformative* (18.9%), and the *who* of ecofeminism (18.2%).

Curriculum-Specific Themes

A total of ten themes were identified from emerging patterns in the *It Stops With Me* HTAPE curriculum. Each is titled and described below with quoted supporting examples from the curricular texts.

Theme One: Contradiction of the usual, with race identified as a vulnerability factor while gender is not. “Gender and sexuality can contribute to vulnerability, because girls have been more at-risk than boys, although only slightly.” This statement reveals a contradiction between ecofeminism and anti-ecofeminism: while sexuality and gender are acknowledged as risk factors, the curriculum frames them only as possible contributors and contradicts well-supported statistics showing that girls and women are significantly more at risk. Conversely, the curriculum does recognize race as a marginalization factor making People of Color more at-risk for trafficking.

Theme Two: Early preparation by curriculum and educators for impact and safety. This theme, informed by *realizing prevalence of trauma* and *resisting retraumatization*, reflects the curriculum’s provision of tips and resources for reporting suspicions or knowledge of human trafficking. It recommends that this information be shared with students before teaching content, but presents it repeatedly following the conclusion of each unit.

Theme Three: Youth need to be critically stimulated to ask questions around hegemonic topics. The curriculum uses *emancipatory* and *transformative* rhetoric to inspire and motivate youth, including statements such as, “Take a stand against pornography, take a stand against sexualized culture.” Informed by ecofeminism and *realizing prevalence of trauma*, the

curriculum emphasizes identifying gendered power imbalances that foster a hypersexualized culture often placing women in submissive and vulnerable roles.

Theme Four: Curriculum paints a picture of the environmental, social, and cultural contexts in which trafficking thrives. Developed from ecofeminist, *emancipatory*, and *realizing prevalence of trauma* patterns, the curriculum openly addresses contexts that increase vulnerability, including mental health risk factors, social and familial isolation, and cultural, language, and immigration influences. Immigrant victims/survivors are described as “often not fluent in English and lacking documentation,” which traffickers may weaponize through threats of exposure.

Theme Five: Traffickers as manipulators who prey upon the vulnerable. Informed by ecofeminism, trauma-informed care (*realizing prevalence of trauma, resisting retraumatization, recognizing how trauma impacts all individuals*), and the *emancipatory* tenet of culturally responsive teaching, the curriculum explains trafficking through the equation “Vulnerability + Method of Manipulation = Exploitation.” Survivors and victims are not blamed; perpetrators are clearly identified as predators who target at-risk individuals.

Theme Six: Understanding trafficking and learning empathy through survivor stories and personal/peer experiences. Questions such as, “Is it difficult or easy for you to personalize or relate to this information? Why do you think that is?” encourage reflection while listening to survivor stories. Multiple recreated survivor narratives help students see the diverse ways people are manipulated into and held within trafficking. This theme reflects culturally responsive teaching’s *validating* and *emancipatory* tenets, as well as the trauma-informed principle of *recognizing how trauma impacts all individuals*.

Theme Seven: HTAPE needs to balance teaching empathy for helping others in harmful situations with valuing one’s self-worth. Guided by the *validating* and *empowering* tenets of culturally responsive teaching, and trauma-informed principles of *trauma sensitivity* and *putting knowledge into practice*, this theme identifies the curriculum’s balance between empathetic practices and self-esteem building. “It’s so important that we don’t allow the mindset of ‘it’ll never happen to me or someone I know’ or ‘it doesn’t concern me, so who cares’ to overrule our ability to notice what’s going on around us.” The curriculum also notes that “flawed self-image and limited self-confidence often go hand-in-hand with adolescence, which obviously can make young people more vulnerable to the manipulation of predators.” Because of this, the curriculum recommends incorporation of a self-confidence lesson/activity and provides one as an example.

Theme Eight: Emphasis on debunking the myth that trafficking does not happen in America. “What if the land of the free is the home of the slave?” This line from the opening curriculum video illustrates the program’s effort to highlight trafficking in the U.S. and challenge misconceptions about its occurrence domestically. While ecofeminist in exposing U.S.-based trafficking contexts, the statement is anti-ecofeminist in its failure to acknowledge the historical enslavement and imprisonment of People of Color in the U.S., framing this as a new revelation rather than a continuation of oppression.

Theme Nine: Purpose of the curriculum is to inspire and empower youth to use their unique social connections to change the world. Supported by the *empowering*, *emancipatory*, and *transformative* tenets of culturally responsive teaching, the curriculum recognizes the distinctive capacity of youth to influence awareness efforts.

In each session we've discussed the importance of why you need to be educated about this issue and the issues which surround it. The obvious reason is that the average age a person is first trafficked is 13, but there's another reason we have directed our mission toward young people—influence.

Youth's deep engagement with social media is framed as a tool for reaching vulnerable peers.

Theme Ten: Community action is necessary for closure. The curriculum highlights the *emancipatory* practice of providing a community action project or event as closure after learning about trafficking, especially when students discover it occurs in their own communities. “This subject matter is intense and, if not properly concluded, can leave students feeling overwhelmed and helpless to make a difference.” Suggested projects include community action plans, essay contests, letters to policymakers, social media campaigns, and other public initiatives.

Empower Youth Program Curriculum

iEmpathize, an organization with a branch based in Boulder, Colorado, was founded in 2007. In 2013, it launched the *Empower Youth Program*, an anti-exploitation curriculum designed for teenagers and centered on developing empathy for victims and survivors of human rights abuses (iEmpathize, n.d.b). The program consists of five sessions that can be taught in either 25- or 60-minute increments.

Raw Analysis Results

Within the culturally responsive teaching frame, the *multidimensional* (26) and *validating* (21) tenets were coded most frequently, followed by *empowering* (13), *transformative* (12), and *comprehensive* (9). The *emancipatory* tenet was least represented, with only two coded segments. In the trauma-informed care frame, *responding by putting knowledge into practice* was the most frequently coded principle (37). This was followed by *realizing prevalence of trauma*

(14), *resisting retraumatization* (8), and *recognizing how trauma impacts all individuals* (6). For the ecofeminist theoretical frame, *the who* was coded 12 times, while *the where* was never applied. Five segments were coded as *critical questionables*, which included the four descriptions below.

Use of “real man” and “real woman” terminology. While intending to address gender stereotypes and cultural sexualization, the curriculum states, “Lead students to a discussion of how things like gender stereotypes, sex in advertising, and pornography create false definitions about what it is to be a real man or a real woman,” reinforcing problematic rhetoric without clarifying its definition.

Uncritical praise of U.S. anti-trafficking efforts. An activity option invites students to write about “how an organization in the United States is making a difference in the issue of human trafficking.” Given the nation’s shortcomings, particularly regarding child trafficking, this risks ignoring systemic failures and is a missed opportunity for youth to consider solutions to current problems.

Underground Railroad metaphor without racial context. The Polaris Project is compared to the Underground Railroad, but the curriculum fails to connect this to the historical and ongoing enslavement of People of Color in the U.S. and gives minimal attention to their disproportionate vulnerability.

“Anyone can be a victim” framing. “Human trafficking victims can be of any age, gender, ethnicity, religion, and economic group. Similarly, traffickers can be any age, gender, and ethnicity, and of any economic group or religion.” While true, this oversimplifies risk and overlooks research showing certain groups face higher vulnerability.

Final statistics from the *Empower Youth* analysis demonstrate the proportion of codes by each theoretical frame. Culturally responsive teaching made up 50.4% of *Empower Youth* codes, trauma-informed care accounted for 39.3%, and ecofeminist codes comprised 10.3%. The most frequent individual codes were *putting knowledge into practice* (22.4%), *multidimensional* (15.8%), and *validating* (12.7%).

Curriculum-Specific Themes

A total of eight themes were identified from emerging patterns in the *Empower Youth* curriculum.

Theme One: Creating space for deep connections to students' personal lives.

Drawing from the *validating* tenet and the trauma-informed principles of *recognizing how trauma impacts all individuals* and *putting knowledge into practice*, this theme reflects frequent incorporation of student voice and experience. From reflecting on personal feelings of empathy and apathy to applying relationship survey tools, the curriculum actively engages students' personal and social lives and emotional health.

Theme Two: Setting high expectations for youth relationships and safety. Facilitators are encouraged to tell students to “set a high standard” and “be picky about the people you choose to be close to.” Rooted in *empowering*, *validating*, and *putting knowledge into practice* codes, this approach equips students with tools for informed, socially and emotionally intelligent relationship choices, supporting overall well-being and potentially preventing manipulation into trafficking situations.

Theme Three: Descriptions of socially and mentally vulnerable youth groups.

Focusing on the *who* of ecofeminism, the curriculum states, “Research demonstrates that students with a history of homelessness, neglect, separation from family, or abuse are more at

risk for exploitation.” While it primarily addresses mental, social, and familial risk factors, it briefly acknowledges the role of racism in increasing vulnerability.

Theme Four: Empathy as a framework for teaching HTAPE. An empathy-centered approach, this theme reflects *recognizing how trauma impacts all individuals* and *resisting retraumatization*. The curriculum prompts youth to consider the needs of others experiencing risk, trafficking, or recovery: “We don’t have to go through the hurts and pains alone, and we don’t have to let others go through hurts and pains alone either.”

Theme Five: Classroom collaboration and collective contribution to make a difference. Emerging from *emancipatory* and *validating* tenets and *putting knowledge into practice*, the curriculum emphasizes teamwork: “Inspire them by reminding them that individually we can make a big impact in someone’s life, but collectively, we can make a big impact in a lot of people’s lives.” Activities are predominantly whole-class or small-group based, supplemented by moments of individual reflection.

Theme Six: Describing those trafficked as victims/survivors of manipulation, freeing them of blame. Reflecting the principles of *recognizing how trauma impacts all individuals* and *resisting retraumatization*, the curriculum maintains an anti-victim-blaming stance: “It isn’t their fault if they’ve been deceived” and “We don’t want to inflict them with feeling more shame.” Students are encouraged to “empathize with [survivors] about how difficult discernment can be.”

Theme Seven: Creating space for critical dialogue. Through *comprehensive*, *transformative*, and *empowering* practices, the curriculum encourages discussion of how cultural sexualization (particularly the differential sexualization of males and females) heightens vulnerability for girls and women. In one part of the curriculum, students are presented with and asked to consider the following:

In our society, a guy who dates a lot of women is just a ‘player,’ while a woman who dates a lot of guys is considered ‘slutty.’ ‘Player’ suggests having a good time, and seems desirable. ‘Slutty’ suggests something trashy and undesirable. How does this inequality create injustice?

Theme Eight: Creating a safe classroom environment through expectations, protocols, and flexible participation. Built from the *validating* tenet and the trauma-informed principles of *putting knowledge into practice* and *resisting retraumatization*, this theme emphasizes establishing clear response protocols. “It is essential to have a response protocol worked out with your administration and counseling staff prior to beginning the curriculum.” The program also accounts for varying comfort levels, stating, “If you are not comfortable participating, you are welcome to step aside quietly and rejoin us in just a few minutes following the exercise.” These examples highlight how the program considers the seriousness of student safety while implementing the curriculum and beyond.

Cross-Curricular Data, Patterns, and Themes

Additionally presented in table 3 are the percentages of each principle coded across all curricular codes. In total, 47.6% of codes represented culturally responsive teaching, 36.6% of codes represented trauma-informed care practices, and 15.8% of codes were ecofeminist. The most frequently coded tenet/principle was trauma-informed care’s *responding by putting knowledge into practice* with 19% of all codes falling under that principle. The next most frequently applied code was the *transformative* tenet in culturally responsive teaching, making up 14.8% of total codes. The three least applied codes included ecofeminism’s *where* principle and *critical questionables*, along with culturally responsive teaching’s *comprehensive* tenet,

comprising 1.1%, 2.7%, and 3.6% of codes. *Resisting retraumatization* was the least frequently coded principle of trauma-informed care, making up only 4% of codes.

Cross-Curricular Themes

After identifying patterns and themes unique to each individual curriculum, all patterns across curricula were reviewed to identify commonalities. Seven themes emerged, representing patterns present in all curricula, whether addressed at a surface level or in depth. These themes can help researchers and curriculum designers generalize what components of HTAPE are consistently utilized across freely accessible programs. Specific evidence from each curriculum supporting each theme is presented in Table 5.

Theme One: Curricula do not “sugar-coat” the realities of human trafficking (Emancipatory; Resisting Retraumatization). All curricula addressed difficult and often omitted topics from mainstream education content such as survivor stories, cultural sexualization, and gender stereotypes. *Born2Fly*’s adolescent curriculum (*Dream Big*), *Project Starfish*’s poetry lesson plan, and *It Stops With Me* all integrate survivor narratives containing challenging details. *It Stops With Me* and *Empower Youth* explicitly encourage facilitators to engage students in open conversations about the harsh realities of trafficking and the social norms that perpetuate it.

Theme Two: Curricula are highly diverse in activities, resources, and content (Multidimensional; Validating; Resisting Retraumatization). All four curricula incorporate a variety of instructional approaches, including collaborative work, creative expression, independent research, tool/resource use, and optional presentations. *Born2Fly* emphasizes class discussions, arts-and-crafts projects, and reflective journaling. *Project Starfish* includes

Table 5: Examples and evidence from curricular texts illustrating cross-curricular themes.

Themes	Supporting Evidence from <i>Born2Fly</i>	Supporting Evidence from <i>Project Starfish</i>	Supporting Evidence from <i>It Stops With Me</i>	Supporting Evidence from <i>Empower Youth</i>
Theme One	"After three or four nights of thirty or forty customers raping her and torturing her tiny body..."	"My pimp picks me up hours later, Driving me to hell once again. Not pleased at the money I got, He hits me..."	"We urge you not to shy away from the topics that are difficult to discuss."	"Lead students to a discussion of how things like gender stereotypes, sex in advertising, and pornography ..."
Theme Two	"...have students compare responses and discuss them as a group."	"Have each student write a short poem from the viewpoint of the group they were assigned."	"Create a PSA or some other type of artistic expression that can be used to spread awareness."	"In an open space, set up a series of obstacles by placing tape or string on the floor to indicate areas that are 'off limits'."
Theme Three	Curriculum does not list high risk areas locations (cities or places within cities) where trafficking takes place.	Curriculum lists examples of where trafficking takes place, including schools, but fails to include/explain geographic vulnerabilities.	Curriculum lists examples of where trafficking takes place (e.g. bus stops) but fails to include <i>schools</i> as an example.	Curriculum does not list high risk areas locations (cities or places within cities) where trafficking takes place.
Theme Four	" Invite people from the community (family members, teachers or school representatives, community leaders)..."	"The class can decide if these performance pieces will be used outside the classroom to raise awareness and educate peers..."	"The service learning component of this curriculum is very important."	"...consider creating a class project to give the students a chance to empathize within a particular community."

Theme Five	“Letting both the teachers and youth know that these reactions exist is important so that re-traumatizing does not occur during the sessions.”	“DO NOT go down to an area where there is a high volume of prostitution activity and begin taking pictures, DO NOT take photographs of people, etc. ”	“We would like to thank you for stepping out and recognizing a topic that is difficult to address...”	"For some students, the topics will be completely foreign. For others, it may hit quite close to home.”
Theme Six	"Trafficking: A real victim’s story"	"To explore the power of the sex trafficking victims, distribute the five poem(s)"	"Based on true stories"	“...do an internet search for a story about human trafficking in your region.”
Theme Seven	"You may think porn is innocent, but many adults and all children in porn are forced into it... So if you are buying or watching porn, what does that mean?"	"Challenge students to think about how the factors provided in each victim card influenced the trafficking situation."	"Does slavery still exist today? Compare slavery in the 1800’s to modern-day slavery. How has slavery evolved over the centuries?"	"Lead students to a discussion of how things like gender stereotypes, sex in advertising, and pornography ...”

performance-based activities, artistic projects, and opportunities for public events. *It Stops With Me* and *Empower Youth* blend video instruction with discussions and individual reflection, while *Empower Youth* additionally incorporates games and personal assessment tools for real-life application.

Theme Three: Curricula fail to identify and explain the “where” of human trafficking (Anti-Ecofeminist; Anti-Realizing Prevalence of Trauma). Geographic context is underexplored across all programs. *Project Starfish* mentions high-risk city locations (e.g., bus

stops, schools) but does not examine broader geographic influences. *It Stops With Me* notes that the U.S. is a trafficking “hot spot” and identifies certain city-level areas of risk, but omits schools entirely. *Born2Fly* and *Empower Youth* do not address common geographic or community-specific locations where trafficking is more frequent.

Theme Four: Curricula encourage community integration and action (Responding by Putting Knowledge Into Practice; Emancipatory; Transformative). Each curriculum contains activities designed to connect learning to community engagement. *Born2Fly* encourages inviting families and community members to a completion ceremony. *Project Starfish* integrates performance and presentation activities into most lesson plans, often recommending that these be expanded into whole-school or community awareness events. *It Stops With Me* suggests projects that involve contacting policymakers, organizing awareness campaigns, and leveraging social media. *Empower Youth* recommends students develop personal action plans and includes the option for a concluding community project, though it does not provide a model example.

Theme Five: Curricula emphasize resisting retraumatization (Responding by Putting Knowledge Into Practice; Realizing Prevalence of Trauma; Resisting Retraumatization). All curricula demonstrate awareness of the sensitive nature of HTAPE content and advise facilitators to be trauma-aware. *Born2Fly* recommends discussing common emotional responses, such as fear, to normalize students’ feelings. *It Stops With Me* warns that students may feel overwhelmed or helpless without closure activities and stresses the importance of having a clear response plan for disclosures. *Empower Youth* cautions that while the content may feel irrelevant to some students, it may reflect another’s lived experience. While *Project Starfish* does not include a general disclaimer, its photography lesson plan includes specific

guidance for ensuring community sensitivity and avoiding photographing individuals without consent.

Theme Six: Curricula incorporate victim/survivor stories (Recognizing How Trauma Affects All Individuals; Emancipatory). Three curricula-*Born2Fly*, *Project Starfish*, and *It Stops With Me*-integrate survivor narratives directly into instruction. *Born2Fly's Dream Big* includes a story about a mother manipulated into sending her daughter away for education, only for her to be sold into sex slavery. *Project Starfish's* poetry lesson plan features works written by survivors. *It Stops With Me* uses dramatized reenactments of real stories. *Empower Youth* does not embed survivor stories but encourages educators to seek and share relevant local narratives.

Theme Seven: Curricula create space for critical dialogue (Comprehensive; Emancipatory; Transformative; Realizing Prevalence of Trauma). All curricula are designed to prompt discussion on cultural stereotypes, societal norms, and systemic factors that increase vulnerability to trafficking. *Born2Fly* addresses gender stereotypes and normalized sexualized behaviors that contribute to trafficking. *Project Starfish* incorporates conversations on intersectionality and victim-shaming. *It Stops With Me* and *Empower Youth* explore how individuals can be manipulated into unhealthy relationships, emphasize that victims are not to blame, and address cultural norms (such as sexualized media) that normalize exploitation.

To summarize, findings revealed significant variation in the degree to which each curriculum embodied culturally responsive and trauma-informed principles, with *Born2Fly* and *Empower Youth* showing stronger alignment than *It Stops With Me* and *Project Starfish*. Cross-curricular themes highlighted the need for survivor-informed, community-specific, and

relationally grounded approaches that avoid retraumatization, challenge bias, and center diverse student identities.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Each curriculum contains notable strengths and shortcomings related to its depth of culturally responsive, trauma-informed, and ecofeminist elements. This chapter will first present analysis summaries of each curriculum. The remainder of the chapter will be organized according to ten recommendations for the future of human trafficking awareness and prevention education (HTAPE) design and implementation. Each section will include curricular evidence supporting the need for the recommendation, as well as immediate applications for modifying existing curricula to meet the awareness needs of communities rich with multiculturalism and multilingualism, Immigrant and Newcomer populations, and racial and religious diversity.

Curriculum Analysis Summaries

Born2Fly

Summarizing results presented in the previous chapter, frequent codes reflected Born2Fly's strength as a validating and empowering curriculum, while lacking in its recognition of how trauma impacts all individuals and ecofeminist principles of environment and context. From a culturally responsive teaching perspective, *Born2Fly* aligns well with the cultural and community context of students. The curriculum includes numerous activities that foster self-awareness and personal growth through collaborative discussions, independent reflection, and peer interaction. It employs a variety of instructional methods to support student engagement and accommodate diverse learning styles. However, despite its strengths in promoting self-exploration, *Born2Fly* lacks opportunities for students to participate in transformative community-based projects, which are significant to culturally responsive pedagogy (Gay, 2000).

In terms of trauma-informed care, *Born2Fly* is largely considerate of potential triggers and is sensitive to the emotional safety of students. The curriculum anticipates common fears and risks of re-traumatization, and it avoids graphic or overly distressing content. However, it falls short in offering clear strategies or content on how youth might respond to, or be supported during, trauma-related experiences. There is limited emphasis on building self-regulation skills or fostering resilience in children who may have already experienced trauma.

Analyzed through an ecofeminist framework, *Born2Fly* reflects some awareness of systemic vulnerabilities, particularly the disproportionate risks faced by women and girls. However, this framing is undermined by several troubling patterns. The curriculum frequently promotes gender essentialism and includes instances of mysandry, portraying boys and young men in a negative light or engaging in gender-based shaming. Its gender-segregated approach to instruction reinforces binary thinking and may alienate students who do not conform to traditional gender roles. Additionally, *Born2Fly*'s overt Christian framing offers students a sense of safety that is conditional upon religious devotion, which may be problematic in secular or interfaith educational contexts and risks excluding or marginalizing non-Christian students. This approach can also contribute to victim-blaming, suggesting that protection from trafficking is contingent upon personal moral or religious choices.

Project Starfish

Chapter four presented the most frequent codes representing Project Starfish were transformative, emancipatory and putting knowledge into practice; few codes belonging to the tenets/principles of validating, resisting retraumatization, and environment (where) were represented. From a culturally responsive teaching perspective, *Project Starfish* integrates national content standards and offers a wide range of diversified, interactive activities. Students

are frequently encouraged to collaborate, create awareness campaigns, and engage in community-oriented projects, aligning with culturally responsive goals of activism and empowerment. However, the curriculum lacks an intentional focus on helping students make personal or cultural connections to the content. This omission limits opportunities to validate students' lived experiences, values, and knowledge systems, key recommendations of culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogy (Paris, 2012; Gay, 2000; & Ladson-Billings, 1995).

In terms of trauma-informed care, the curriculum does not demonstrate strong alignment with best practices. None of the lesson plans include structured approaches for creating emotionally safe learning environments or fostering trust through relationship-building. There are no suggested protocols or disclaimers recommending community-building prior to engaging with sensitive topics related to trafficking, a practice considered necessary given the sensitive subject matter (Lange & Young, 2019). One area of strength lies in the curriculum's emphasis on student empowerment through knowledge acquisition. Lessons frequently aim to build students' awareness of trafficking-related facts and encourage them to challenge the normalization of sexual violence. While this supports skill-building, the lack of attention to emotional safety and readiness undermines the potential for deeper learning and personal reflection.

Viewed through an ecofeminist lens, *Project Starfish* presents a mixed picture. The arts-based lesson plans (poetry, theater, photography, and English and language arts) emphasize elevating marginalized voices and using creative expression as a pathway for resistance and awareness. These components reflect ecofeminist values, especially in their consideration of intersecting vulnerabilities and systemic oppression. However, other components fall short. For example, the history lesson plan centers on early 20th-century efforts to combat the trafficking of white individuals, while omitting the historical and ongoing exploitation of Black, Brown,

Indigenous, and Immigrant communities. This omission represents a significant erasure of racially driven labor and sex trafficking and contradicts ecofeminism's core tenets of intersectionality and historical accountability.

It Stops With Me

It Stops With Me is an emancipatory curriculum that recognizes the prevalence of trauma, and is largely considerate of the *who* of ecofeminism. The *where* of ecofeminism was largely underrepresented in the curriculum. From a culturally responsive teaching standpoint, *It Stops With Me* excels in promoting civic action as a form of empowerment. It emphasizes the importance of community-based responses to human trafficking and uses this focus to offer students a sense of closure after confronting difficult material. Notably, the curriculum frames trafficking as a national issue, centering the U.S. context as a way to underscore the urgency for local action. Although the American-centric framing may help students relate to the issue, it risks suggesting that we need only empathize with problems that impact us directly, and that if human trafficking were not occurring in the U.S., it would be less deserving of attention or action. Additionally, the curriculum offers limited guidance for educators on how to tailor lessons to local realities, which can reduce cultural relevance at the community level.

In terms of trauma-informed care, *It Stops With Me* is largely action-focused, encouraging youth to engage in project-based activities as a coping strategy when learning about the horrors of human trafficking. This can be a strength, particularly in helping students feel empowered rather than helpless. However, the curriculum does not provide educators with sufficient support or strategies for recognizing and responding to signs of trauma in students. It also lacks clear recommendations for creating emotionally safe learning spaces or for preparing students to encounter difficult, potentially triggering content.

Viewed through an ecofeminist lens, the curriculum shows commendable attention to a broad range of marginalized groups that are often overlooked in mainstream education. It encourages learners to critically examine systemic conditions that contribute to exploitation and vulnerability. However, it notably downplays the gendered dimensions of trafficking, referring to females as only “slightly more” vulnerable. This framing contradicts well-established research and minimizes the gendered nature of trafficking, which is essential to an ecofeminist understanding of the oppression and systemic harm underscoring this crime.

Empower Youth

Empower Youth was largely multidimensional, validating, and practical with its frequent codes in putting knowledge to practice. The curriculum was weak in its representation of comprehensiveness and environmental context (ecofeminism’s *where*). From a culturally responsive teaching perspective, *Empower Youth* incorporates a variety of activity types to engage diverse learners. Instructor prompts encourage regular critical dialogue, and the curriculum seeks to motivate collective responsibility and care. However, while it gestures toward community involvement, the curriculum does not include structured opportunities for students to engage in larger-scale or community-based action. Instead, it remains focused on individual and peer-level reflection within the classroom setting.

In terms of trauma-informed care, *Empower Youth* shows considerable sensitivity to the needs of survivors. Lessons are designed to promote empathy, reduce victim-blaming, and build student confidence in their ability to positively impact themselves and others. One area for improvement lies in educator preparation: the curriculum offers limited guidance on recognizing signs of trauma in students or strategies for responding when trauma manifests in classroom

contexts. This gap may leave teachers underprepared to support students who are personally affected by the content.

Viewed through an ecofeminist lens, *Empower Youth* acknowledges multiple intersecting vulnerability factors, including gender, race, and mental health. These intersections are thoughtfully integrated into lesson content and dialogue. However, a core element of ecofeminist theory, the importance of *place* and environmental context, is notably underdeveloped. The curriculum does not address the spatial dimensions of trafficking, such as geographic regions or specific community sites (e.g., schools or public transit), where trafficking risks are heightened. This omission limits students' understanding of how trafficking operates within physical and social environments.

Recommendations for the Future of HTAPE Curriculum Design and Implementation

Based on the analyses of each curriculum's strengths and areas of improvement, as well as identified themes within and across curricula, ten recommendations have been posed to elevate the future of HTAPE design and instruction facilitation and implementation within the frameworks of culturally responsive teaching, trauma-informed care, and ecofeminism. Each recommendation will be discussed by first sharing curricular examples that catalyzed the need for the recommendation, followed by examples for modification to meet the needs of culturally, racially, and linguistically diverse communities, such as those in Aurora and Denver, Colorado.

1. Balance Empathy and Empowerment

The theme of balancing empathy and empowerment appeared across multiple analyzed curricula, though the degree and method of emphasis varied. *Born2Fly* illustrates, even in its name, the focus on uplifting children to protect themselves, doing so in a way that reinforces their self-worth and value. Similarly, *Empower Youth*, again emphasized in its title, motivates

youth to want to make a difference through empathetic consideration. In contrast, *It Stops With Me* recognizes the importance of self-esteem building as a means to prevent human trafficking. Taken together, these curricula demonstrate the central role of empathy and empowerment in trafficking prevention education. At the same time, they reveal the risks of misapplication, underscoring the need for careful, developmentally appropriate, and culturally sensitive integration of these practices.

Curricular Evidence Supporting the Recommendation

In the *Born2Fly* curriculum, self-worth is consistently centered as a protective factor against trafficking. A quote that encapsulates this is: “How can knowing that you are valuable keep you from being trafficked?” While affirmations such as “How can your belief that you are unique, valuable, and worth loving make a difference in your life?” may empower students, they also risk implying that greater self-confidence alone could have prevented victimization, thereby unintentionally promoting victim-blaming. Moreover, the curriculum reflects Western ideals of individualism that may not align with collectivist or community-centered cultural values, limiting its generalizability across diverse contexts.

By contrast, *It Stops With Me* integrates empathy more explicitly through survivor stories and reflective questioning. Prompts such as, “Is it difficult or easy for you to personalize or relate to this information? Why do you think that is?” encourage students to connect personally with survivor narratives, which illustrate the diverse ways people are manipulated into and held within trafficking. This approach reflects culturally responsive teaching’s validating and emancipatory tenets, as well as trauma-informed principles of recognizing how trauma impacts all individuals. The curriculum also underscores the dangers of flawed self-image and limited self-confidence during adolescence, noting how these vulnerabilities can increase susceptibility to predators. To

address this, it recommends and provides a self-confidence lesson/activity, further grounding the theme of empowerment in practical instruction.

Similarly, *Empower Youth* effectively integrates both empathy and empowerment, engaging students' personal and social lives as well as their emotional health. From reflecting on feelings of empathy and apathy to applying relationship survey tools, the curriculum actively prompts youth to consider the needs of others experiencing risk, trafficking, or recovery. For example, the statement, "We don't have to go through the hurts and pains alone, and we don't have to let others go through hurts and pains alone either," highlights the curriculum's emphasis on shared responsibility and community care.

Theoretical Connections and Concerns

The analysis of empathy and empowerment across curricula underscores key theoretical insights from the literature. Culturally responsive teaching emphasizes building a culture of care (Shevalier & McKenzie, 2012; Gay, 2000), which is supported through the empathetic practices in *It Stops With Me* and *Empower Youth*. The latter further reflects culturally responsive principles by providing students with concrete tools to apply in their own lives, thereby fostering empowerment. The use of survivor stories, recommended as a strategy for cultivating strength from trauma (Lange & Young, 2019), is evident in *Born2Fly* and *It Stops With Me*, with *Empower Youth* also advocating for this approach.

However, concerns arise when applications diverge from trauma-informed care principles. A central tenet of trauma-informed care is to avoid victim-shaming by recognizing that victims are manipulated and coerced (Family Violence Studies at FSU, 2017). While *It Stops With Me* and *Empower Youth* align with this principle, *Born2Fly* risks undermining it by implying that greater self-worth alone could have prevented victimization.

Modification Recommendations for a Diverse Population

Looking forward, several modifications can strengthen the balance of empathy and empowerment in HTAPE curricula, particularly for diverse urban communities such as Aurora and Denver, Colorado. First, survivor stories should be consistently integrated into instruction, aligning with recommendations to use lived experiences as a means of fostering empathy and awareness. Local stories are recommended to communicate how this content is close to home, and to foster empathy for students' own community members. Additionally, in Colorado, among the age demographic most targeted for trafficking, recent data indicate that 22.6% of students reported struggling with their mental health most or all of the time within the past 30 days (HKC, 2023). This highlights the importance of embedding self-esteem and self-worth instruction within standard social-emotional learning curricula, regardless of whether an HTAPE program is implemented. Such integration would not only promote resilience and mental well-being broadly but would also serve as a preventative measure by decreasing youth vulnerability to trafficking.

2. Improve Financial, Digital, and Linguistic Accessibility

As detailed in Chapter Three, many HTAPE curricula cost money to implement, whether access to the curriculum itself is not provided until payment or travel to receive implementation training is required, there are very few free curricula meant for general classrooms. Despite the curricula analyzed in this study being financially accessible, a few digital errors led to issues with access to supporting videos for *It Stops With Me* and *Born2Fly*. Additionally, not all curricula can meet the diverse linguistic needs of cities like Aurora and Denver.

Curricular Evidence Supporting the Recommendation

Many prevention curricula require payment or costly training: Love146 required a \$750 initial training plus annual payments; PROTECT cost \$997 for facilitator training and \$12 per

educator access; A21 required a \$120 online training before accessing materials; AWARE was fee-based and designed for individuals aged 15+; Prevention Project materials ranged from \$200-\$450; Lights Curriculum did not include public access or information about accessibility and were unresponsive to email inquiry.

Turning to the curricula in this study, *Born2Fly* reveals linguistic barriers as, in Aurora, primary languages spoken by students are often not supported. For Aurora specifically, the City's Language Access Plan identifies that roughly 32% of Aurora residents speak a language other than English at home. Of those, 62.6% speak Spanish; the next largest groups speak Asian and Pacific Islander languages (12.1%), Indo-European languages (11.9%), and other languages (13.4%) including languages such as Korean, Mandarin, Vietnamese, Amharic, Tigrinya, Nepalese, Burmese, Russian, and French. Only *Born2Fly* and *Empower Youth* had accessible curricula in Spanish, but even *Born2Fly*'s teenage curriculum *Dream Big* was not available in Spanish.

Project Starfish and *It Stops With Me* similarly additional accessibility constraints. *It Stops With Me* suffers from digital access issues (videos were not loadable on certain servers, a reality I experienced at my school in Aurora) that impede instruction. *Empower Youth* has non-functional account/log-in issues, indicates an existing account when none was made, and when "forgot password" is used, never sends the password-reset email. These barriers impeded my ability to access digital content supporting print facilitator guides, and would henceforth prevent educators from utilizing the full curricula.

Theoretical Connections and Concerns

The accessibility concerns highlighted across curricula resonate with theoretical recommendations on multilingual and intersectional approaches to prevention. Tidball and

Rajaram (2017) emphasize the importance of offering instructional materials in multiple languages, noting that limited English proficiency and Immigrant status can heighten vulnerability to trafficking. Yet, curricula provide limited language options, underscoring the gap between theoretical recommendations and practice in diverse contexts like Aurora and Denver. Ecofeminist frameworks further stress the need to account for intersectional factors, particularly the ways urban environments and financially strained communities face disproportionate trafficking risks. Ensuring that prevention curricula are financially accessible, therefore, is not only a matter of equity but also of targeting the populations most in need of support.

Modification Recommendations for a Diverse Population

Looking ahead, modifications to HTAPE curricula must prioritize accessibility if they are to meet the needs of the youth most at risk. Current pricing structures, often involving costly licensure, training fees, or travel, create disproportionate barriers for underfunded urban schools, which are frequently located in areas with elevated trafficking rates. Even among the free curricula analyzed in this study, access was inconsistent, with materials hidden behind multiple sign-ups or hindered by nonfunctional video links. If HTAPE programs are to be serious about prevention, content should be freely available to schools and communities without financial or technical obstacles. In addition, language accessibility is essential.

At a minimum, Spanish should be consistently offered given its prevalence across the United States; however, in Immigrant-rich and linguistically diverse cities such as Aurora and Denver, a multitude of language options is necessary. Expanding beyond English-only curricula not only reflects theoretical recommendations on multilingual responsiveness but also ensures that prevention programs are equitably reaching the populations they are designed to serve.

3. Eliminate Monocultural Frameworks

Although several HTAPE curricula describe themselves as cross-cultural, the analysis revealed a persistent reliance on Western and U.S.-centric frameworks that limit their broader applicability. Particularly for a curriculum like *Born2Fly*, which prides itself on being a global curriculum, this is evident in its individualistic framing, ignoring that majority of the countries listed as applying the curriculum in real life are collectivist societies (Bulgaria, Kenya, Nepal, Romania, Russia, Thailand, South Africa, Uganda, Phillipines, and India). Created in the U.S., both *Born2Fly* and *It Stops With Me* demonstrate nationalistic bias in the design of their curricula; this is most concerning in *Born2Fly's* case, where the curriculum is specifically designed for worldwide application.

Curricular Evidence Supporting the Recommendation

In *Born2Fly*, the curriculum consistently centers self-worth and individuality, as reflected in prompts such as, “How can your belief that you are unique, valuable, and worth loving make a difference in your life?” While affirmations like these may empower students, they reflect Western ideals of individualism that may not align with collectivist or community-centered cultural values. Additionally, *Born2Fly* offers two curricula framed in Christianity, and no other faith, despite being applied in countries where Christianity is not the dominant religion (e.g. Nepal, Thailand, India). As a result, the curriculum is not generalized for global or multicultural contexts in which community interdependence, rather than individualism, is emphasized.

Similarly, *It Stops With Me* demonstrates monocultural framing in its treatment of trafficking. Although the curriculum challenges myths that trafficking does not occur in the U.S., its approach risks conditional empathy by implying that trafficking only matters because it happens “here.” For instance, while the program acknowledges trafficking as a global issue, the content largely frames it as a primarily American problem, suggesting to youth that the issue

deserves attention mainly due to its national impact. Such framing can unintentionally narrow students' sense of empathy and responsibility, rather than fostering a global perspective on human exploitation.

Theoretical Connections and Concerns

The theoretical foundations of culturally responsive education emphasize teaching within the cultural contexts of students and validating their lived experiences as assets. Ladson-Billings (1995) argues that culturally responsive education must be situated in the cultural realities of learners, yet *Born2Fly* inserts U.S. cultural ideals of individualism and Christianity wherever it is taught, limiting its responsiveness in collectivist, community-centered, or religiously different contexts. Similarly, Gay (2000) highlights that validating teaching requires acknowledging student experiences as truths, valuing differences as assets, and actively mitigating power imbalances. Were these principles enacted, collectivist orientations could be leveraged as strengths, connected to empathy, and used to foster meaningful prevention education.

It Stops With Me risks reinforcing monocultural perspectives and negates Ladson-Billings (1995) recommendation that content should facilitate growth of students' critical consciousness and willingness to challenge societal norms. Although the program raises awareness about trafficking, its framing encourages students to adopt an American-centered focus, perpetuating a societal norm that prioritizes U.S. issues over global ones, even though trafficking is equally or more prevalent in many other regions.

Modification Recommendations for a Diverse Population

Future modifications to HTAPE curricula should eliminate monocultural frameworks by broadening both content and framing. While *It Stops With Me* raises awareness by centering trafficking as an American issue, this perspective risks reinforcing nationalistic empathy and the

false belief that trafficking outside the U.S. is primarily a distant or foreign phenomenon. To counter this, educators should intentionally supplement lessons with survivor narratives and case studies from both domestic and international contexts. Such dual framing reinforces that trafficking is simultaneously a local and global crisis, experienced in diverse and often intersectional ways.

In Denver and Aurora, the presence of Muslim communities is substantial and speaks to the necessity of offering curricula beyond exclusively Christian frames. There are about 70,000 Muslim Coloradans, with many concentrated in Aurora and southeast Denver (Sentinel Colorado, 2021). *Born2Fly*'s reliance on Christian-based content overlooks these communities' experiences and beliefs, meaning that many students who do not identify with Christianity may feel alienated or excluded. Additionally, many Immigrant families in Denver and Aurora come from collectivist societies, where values of interdependence, community care, and relational identity contrast with the individualism emphasized in several curricula.

Failing to acknowledge the diverse perspectives prevalent in Aurora and Denver not only marginalizes students' lived realities but also limits the potential for prevention education to resonate meaningfully. Materials rooted exclusively in Christianity, individualism, or nationalism perpetuate harmful narratives: that trafficking is only worth addressing when it impacts developed countries; that self-empowerment is only valid within specific belief systems; and that safety from trafficking is only deserved when one adheres to particular religious beliefs. Reframing curricula to reflect multiple cultural and religious lenses would not only increase relevance for diverse students but also build the global empathy necessary for authentic prevention.

4. Highlight Identities to Reduce Risk

One of the most concerning gaps across HTAPE curricula is the failure to explicitly name and address the identities most at risk of trafficking. While some programs acknowledge that “anyone can be a victim,” this framing oversimplifies vulnerability and obscures research showing that systemic inequities disproportionately impact People of Color, Immigrant families, and women and girls. Despite some curricula naming increased vulnerability, they often do so subtly or mention it only once, failing to reiterate the significant impact identity has on risk. By failing to center these realities, curricula risk leaving high-risk youth unaware of the structural factors that heighten their vulnerability, and lose out on the opportunity to build their empowerment to self and peer-protect.

Curricular Evidence Supporting the Recommendation

In *Born2Fly*, this absence is particularly evident in multiple ways. The curriculum promotes gender segregation, which research shows often reinforces outdated stereotypes and disproportionately targets low-income, minority communities (American Civil Liberties Union, 2004). Such models rely on harmful generalizations, such as the assumption that boys, particularly Boys of Color, are inherently more aggressive, while simultaneously failing to address the unique vulnerabilities of Girls of Color, who face significantly higher risks of trafficking.

Additionally, *Born2Fly* introduces retraumatizing victim-blaming narratives, such as suggesting that “patience and determination are essential to keep from being trafficked,” or asking, “What wrong choices did Kim’s mother make?” after recounting a survivor’s story. These approaches not only distort the realities of victimization but also obscure the systemic forces that create risk. Finally, intentional race ignorance is evident in the curriculum’s treatment of biblical texts. For example, in *Soaring Higher* and *Dream Big with God*, the verse “I am dark

but lovely” is interpreted as symbolic of beauty and self-perception rather than a direct reference to skin color. This erasure ignores the verse’s significance in Black protest literature as a reclamation of beauty in the face of racism (Wabyanga, 2021) and instead reinforces a Eurocentric, colonial interpretation that strips away racial context.

Project Starfish also illustrates this theme of erasing at-risk identities. While its inclusion of the statement “victims can be male, female, transgender, and of any race and sexual orientation” is factually accurate, the “anyone can be a victim” framing overlooks research that demonstrates how systemic inequities disproportionately impact particular groups. Similarly, in its economics lesson, the curriculum foregrounds national economic consequences before addressing individual survivor impact.

It Stops With Me further highlights the consequences of failing to integrate identity-based vulnerability. The curriculum downplays gender disparities, describing girls and women as “only slightly” more frequently trafficked, despite global, national, and local statistics consistently demonstrating that females, and especially Women and Girls of Color, face significantly higher risks. Accurate, research-based data on vulnerability would not only align with ecofeminist and trauma-informed approaches but would also provide students with a clearer understanding of who is most at risk and why.

Finally, *Empower Youth* demonstrates similar blind spots. The curriculum employs an Underground Railroad metaphor when discussing the Polaris Project, yet fails to contextualize the metaphor within the history and ongoing realities of enslavement and exploitation of People of Color in the United States. In doing so, it misses the opportunity to explicitly connect trafficking to racialized systems of oppression, past and present. Additionally, its “anyone can be a victim” framing, stating that “human trafficking victims can be of any age, gender, ethnicity,

religion, and economic group”, oversimplifies the issue and erases the disproportionate risks faced by specific populations.

Theoretical Connections and Concerns

The gaps identified in these curricula stand in direct tension with established theoretical frameworks. Feminism, at its core, resists gender segregation; ecofeminism instead promotes intersectional awareness, which would be better supported through integrated classrooms that reflect diverse experiences. Ecofeminist theory also emphasizes the importance of naming intersectional vulnerabilities, a principle that aligns with culturally responsive teaching’s call to make these realities explicit in instruction so that youth are empowered to protect themselves.

Trauma-informed care likewise stresses avoiding victim-blaming narratives by recognizing that victims are manipulated and coerced, rather than responsible for their exploitation (Family Violence Studies at FSU, 2017). Yet, several curricula perpetuated blameful framings that risk retraumatization. Finally, as Gay (2000) and Ladson-Billings (1995) argue, culturally responsive teaching requires fostering students’ critical consciousness so they can challenge societal norms and inequities. The activities across the curricula analyzed here did not promote this growth, missing an opportunity to help students recognize and resist the systemic conditions that elevate their risk.

Modification Recommendations for a Diverse Population

Future modifications to HTAPE curricula must explicitly address the disproportionate targeting of females, particularly Girls of Color, by traffickers. While many programs adopt empowering, action-oriented approaches, their failure to highlight identity-based vulnerabilities undermines prevention and risks perpetuating erasure. In districts such as Aurora and Denver, where Youth of Color represent a significant portion of the student population (Aurora Public

Schools [APS], 2023; Denver Public Schools [DPS], 2022), educators must actively resist the silencing of gender- and race-based violence by including relevant statistics in instruction, along with explanations rooted in historical and anti-racist frameworks that help understand why such silence and erasure is perpetuated today.

Dodd and Schroeder (2025) further caution that race-neutral frameworks are inherently harmful, because they fail to protect those most at risk, particularly Black girls in welfare and juvenile justice systems. Educators can counter this harm by integrating accurate trafficking statistics, such as those outlined in this study's literature review, and engaging students in critical discussions about who is most at risk and why. This approach fosters transparency and equips youth to recognize, name, and resist systemic patterns of discrimination and exploitation.

As Dodd and Schroeder (2025) reinforce, recognizing structural harm is itself a trauma-informed practice, particularly when confronting the neglect and criminalization of Youth of Color. Moreover, as Gay (2000) and Ladson-Billings (1995) recommend, fostering critical consciousness requires the creation of activities and projects that unpack why intersectional identities are often minimized or erased in curricular spaces. Such work helps liberate students from whitewashed narratives that obscure their vulnerability and instead empowers them with awareness and agency.

5. Name Risk Realities

While many HTAPE curricula acknowledge trafficking as a serious issue, they often fail to directly name the specific realities that place youth at heightened risk. Student-aged populations represent one of the groups most vulnerable to trafficking, and these risks are compounded by racial inequities, immigrant status, and gender-based vulnerabilities. Geographic factors, such as proximity to major highways, urban centers, and Immigrant-rich communities,

further intensify exposure and risk. Yet rather than equipping youth with a transparent understanding of these realities, some programs minimize or obscure the severity of trafficking by offering false safety messaging, for example, implying that certain protective behaviors or individual traits can fully eliminate vulnerability. Naming risk realities clearly and accurately is therefore essential, not only to foster informed awareness but also to counter harmful narratives that downplay the systemic and structural conditions shaping risk.

Curricular Evidence Supporting the Recommendation

In *Born2Fly*, safety messaging is frequently framed through religious language that implies individual faith is a primary determinant of protection. Statements such as, “relying on Jesus... will help them stay safe and make their dreams come true,” and, “having a close friendship with Jesus can help keep them from being trafficked” suggest that Christianity itself serves as a safeguard. While the curriculum likely intends to offer encouragement, this framing risks alienating or shaming non-Christian youth and presents trafficking prevention as a matter of personal morality rather than systemic awareness. Even more concerning, such messaging implies that belief or “good behavior” can guarantee safety, which minimizes the coercive realities of trafficking and risks retraumatizing survivors.

Project Starfish similarly demonstrates the pitfalls of vague or incomplete messaging. In its photography lesson plan, students are directed to document trafficking through images while being cautioned against visiting areas with high volumes of prostitution. Yet, the curriculum provides no framework for discussing geographic risk factors, such as how trafficking is concentrated near highways, hotels, or Immigrant-rich communities. Without this context, students are left without the tools to understand local realities, and the safety warning becomes disconnected from prevention education.

Additionally, the curriculum minimizes trafficking's human impact by framing it primarily as an economic burden. In the economics lesson, harms are listed in the following order: "increased criminal activity (i.e. drugs, violence, weapons); economic strain on government to arrest and prosecute traffickers; communicable diseases; and loss of value of individuals as human beings." By placing human dignity last, the curriculum risks reinforcing the idea that trafficking is more concerning for its financial and criminal effects than for its devastating impacts on survivors.

While Empower Youth avoids some of these pitfalls, it too leaves important realities unnamed. The curriculum emphasizes emotional and relational health but does not integrate place-based context that would help students connect the issue to their own environments. Introducing discussions about where trafficking commonly occurs- including local hotspots, community settings such as schools, and regional geographic factors- would more effectively equip students to recognize risks in their daily lives. Without such grounding, prevention remains abstract and disconnected from the realities youth may encounter.

Theoretical Connections and Concerns

The theoretical frameworks underpinning this study emphasize that naming risk realities is essential for authentic prevention. Ecofeminism highlights the importance of intersectional awareness, yet curricula that overlook geographic and community settings prevent youth from fully understanding how context shapes vulnerability. This omission diminishes students' ability to recognize systemic risk factors and undermines the transformative potential of culturally responsive teaching, which Gay (2000) argues should empower and validate learners by situating instruction in their lived realities.

Similarly, trauma-informed care principles are compromised when trafficking risks are framed primarily as financial burdens or criminal justice concerns rather than as violations of human rights. Such framings conflict directly with the second and fourth principles of trauma-informed care: recognizing how trauma affects all individuals and resisting retraumatization (Family Violence Studies at FSU, 2017). By dehumanizing the impact of trafficking, curricula fail to meet these principles and instead risk retraumatizing survivors or fostering disengagement among students.

Modification Recommendations for a Diverse Population

Future modifications to HTAPE curricula should frame safety messages with sensitivity to the trauma many students carry while providing transparent explanations of both geographic and identity-based risk factors. Youth have the right to understand why their communities (and in many cases, their identities) may put them at greater risk. Such transparency not only fosters empathy for survivors but also deconstructs victim-blaming narratives and equips students with knowledge and self-advocacy skills. This framing supports trauma-informed practices by emphasizing that manipulation, coercion, and abuse are never the victim's fault.

To achieve transparency of geographical risk, curricula should incorporate discussions about where trafficking occurs most frequently, with special attention to high-risk environments such as K-12 schools. In urban areas like Aurora and Denver, risk is amplified by demographic and geographic realities: high Immigrant populations, urban density, significant tourism, and large proportions of Youth of Color. Acknowledging these factors makes prevention education locally relevant and responsive. When students understand that trafficking may occur near transit hubs, certain businesses, or even within school grounds, they are better positioned to protect themselves and their peers.

6. Recenter Purpose of HTAPE Programs

The central purpose of HTAPE is to prevent youth from being exploited, yet many curricula fail to communicate this purpose clearly. As discussed in the previous recommendation, the omission or minimization of student vulnerabilities not only leaves youth uninformed about their own risk but also undermines the very reason these programs exist. The average age of trafficked youth is 12-14 (National CASA/GAL Association for Children, n.d.); and traffickers are increasingly targeting youth through social media and peer- and school-based connections (DOE NJ, 2022). When curricula fail to highlight these sobering realities, students may not understand why trafficking prevention education is relevant to them, thereby weakening engagement and reducing the protective potential of HTAPE. To fulfill their true purpose, curricula must explicitly connect prevention education to the lived risks of student-aged youth.

Curricular Evidence Supporting the Recommendation

Among the programs analyzed, *Born2Fly* was the only curriculum that included statistics explicitly highlighting the vulnerability of children to trafficking. While this acknowledgement is important, its isolation underscores a broader concern: the near-complete absence of risk framing in the majority of curricula. Without direct engagement with the realities of who is most at risk and why, these programs risk becoming abstract exercises rather than life-saving educational tools. By not naming child risk, curricula obscure the very rationale for their existence and leave students without a clear understanding of why trafficking prevention matters to them personally.

Theoretical Connections and Concerns

The lack of explicit risk framing within most HTAPE curricula undermines several theoretical foundations. Culturally responsive teaching is intended to be both empowering and transformative, providing students with knowledge that validates their lived realities and equips

them to act (Gay, 2000). When curricula fail to acknowledge the heightened vulnerability of youth, they withhold precisely the information needed to make prevention education meaningful and liberatory. This omission is also inconsistent with trauma-informed care, which requires sensitivity to the lived experiences of youth and transparency about risks in order to avoid retraumatization and foster resilience. Finally, from an ecofeminist perspective, neglecting the age-influenced vulnerabilities of youth ignores a critical intersectional factor in trafficking risk, thereby obscuring structural inequities rather than naming them. By failing to center the realities of student-aged risk, curricula compromise both their theoretical grounding and their practical effectiveness.

Modification Recommendations for a Diverse Population

Future modifications to HTAPE curricula should explicitly re-center purpose by naming the realities of youth vulnerability and clearly explaining why prevention education belongs in schools. Given that traffickers increasingly target students on school grounds and through peer networks, curricula must highlight schools as high-risk environments and equip students to recognize warning signs, identify manipulative behaviors from adults or peers, and build peer accountability protocols that promote safety and support. Curricula must also be transparent that youth are the most targeted demographic, with an average victimized age of 12. Without this clarity, students may struggle to internalize the urgency of prevention education, weakening engagement and reducing the protective potential of HTAPE.

7. Move From Trauma-Aware to Trauma-Responsive

An essential component of trafficking prevention education is preparing both youth and educators to respond appropriately, whether to potential trafficking scenarios or to trauma disclosures that may surface during instruction. While awareness is critical, knowledge without

responsive strategies leaves students and teachers underprepared to act in ways that ensure safety and minimize harm.

Curricular Evidence Supporting the Recommendation

Born2Fly demonstrates a stronger approach in this area by actively encouraging students to consider how to recognize and respond to trafficking scenarios. The curriculum integrates classroom activities such as creating posters with definitions, statistics, and facts about trafficking, as well as direct prompts that ask, “What do traffickers look like?”, “How can you tell the difference between a trafficker and a real friend?”, and “What are the lies that traffickers tell?” These exercises not only reinforce awareness but also equip students with practical tools for responding to potential risks. Additionally, *Born2Fly* provides teachers with explicit modeling for how to respond when students express fear during lessons, offering example activities to help minimize anxiety while maintaining engagement. In these ways, the program balances awareness with responsive preparation, aligning closely with trauma-informed and empowerment-oriented approaches.

Empower Youth provides a strong response protocol outline to guide a school through suspected trafficking events. They provide recommendations on how to seek medical, human and family, and law enforcement services. They also provide the human trafficking hotline number for adults and students. Lastly, they provide suggestions on how to verbally respond to students so as not to pass judgement onto the child.

By contrast, *Project Starfish* and *It Stops With Me* reveal significant gaps. Neither program provides educators with explanations of how trauma may manifest in students, whether through withdrawal, aggression, sudden emotional changes, or other behaviors. This omission leaves teachers unequipped to recognize and respond to trauma disclosures or to the emotional

impacts that may arise during sensitive lessons. Without explicit preparation, well-intentioned instruction risks retraumatizing students or leaving them unsupported in moments of vulnerability.

Theoretical Connections and Concerns

The importance of preparing youth and educators for trauma responses is strongly grounded in existing theory. Gay's (2000) emphasis on culturally responsive education highlights the need to empower students with tools for self-awareness, peer-awareness, and strategies for protecting both themselves and others. This aligns with the third principle of trauma-informed care (*responding by putting knowledge into practice*) which calls on educators to translate awareness into concrete, supportive action (Institute for Family Violence Studies at FSU, 2017).

At the same time, teacher preparation is a critical but often overlooked factor. Before implementing human trafficking awareness and prevention education (HTAPE), teachers must self-assess their ability to effectively facilitate such sensitive content. As Van der Kolk (2005, as cited in Downey & Greco, 2023) notes, students rely heavily on teachers to model responses to traumatic stress, and a child's sense of safety, calmness, and self-regulation is directly influenced by the teacher's own reactions. If educators are unprepared to recognize or manage trauma responses, both their students' and their own, they risk undermining the very empowerment and safety that HTAPE programs seek to build.

Modification Recommendations for a Diverse Population

HTAPE educators must be able to recognize manifestations of trauma and retraumatization, especially considering the percentage of Colorado youth who report having experienced violence or abuse by middle school. This is not unique to the state: more than two-thirds of youth nationwide are estimated to experience at least one traumatic event by age

16, with about one-third facing multiple or compounding traumas (Dierkhising et al., 2013; SAMHSA). Approximately 40% of U.S. children are direct victims of violence (U.S. Department of Justice, 2020). While formal professional development in trauma-informed practices is strongly recommended, the ability to notice trauma responses often hinges on teachers knowing their students deeply. Trust and familiarity allow educators to recognize deviations from a student's typical behavior, which is often the first sign of trauma, trafficking, or mental distress. As outlined in this paper's literature review, understanding trauma manifestations and classroom triggers is essential for ethical and effective delivery of HTAPE instruction.

Among the curricula analyzed, *It Stops With Me* and *Project Starfish* lack explicit guidance for educators on recognizing trauma responses in students. The trauma-informed recommendations outlined earlier in this paper apply equally here and should be used to supplement both curricula. While all of the analyzed programs mentioned trauma to some extent, they do not adequately prepare teachers to respond to trauma as it arises in instruction. A key recommendation is for curricula to provide educators with concrete strategies for recognizing signs of trauma and retraumatization when presenting emotionally heavy content. For instance, a list of trauma signs and symptoms at the beginning of the curriculum would support educators in preparation and delivery. However, this information should not be limited to educators. In alignment with HTAPE's goal of empowerment, students themselves should also be taught the signs and symptoms of trauma. Doing so can help them understand and normalize their own reactions to difficult material (Norrish et al., 2023), as well as recognize distress in peers and respond supportively.

Finally, HTAPE programs must move beyond trauma-informed toward trauma-responsive practices. Educators need guidance not only on recognizing signs of trauma, triggers, or trafficking, but also on how to respond effectively. Schools should establish a campus-wide protocol before implementing HTAPE, including: (1) a support system (e.g., counselors) for referrals beyond tier-one teacher support; (2) a reporting chain connecting educators, counselors, administrators, and law enforcement; and (3) a clear plan for supporting students directly impacted by trafficking (Reid et al., 2024; DOE NJ, 2022). All school staff, not just HTAPE instructors, should receive this training, as trafficking-related conversations and disclosures may emerge in any part of the school environment once instruction begins. If schools have the capacity, it is strongly encouraged classroom teachers to integrate the school’s mental health and counseling team in content delivery. It is also important to utilize these professionals in responding to trauma when the situation becomes greater than the teacher’s skill set or responsibility.

8. Normalize Difficult Discussions and Face Historical and Contemporary Realities

Across the analyzed curricula, there was a consistent tendency to either oversimplify or avoid fully confronting the historical and contemporary realities that make certain populations more vulnerable to trafficking. Rather than normalizing honest, critical discussions about systemic inequities, many lessons relied on surface-level treatment, whitewashed historical narratives, or narrow gendered framings.

Curricular Evidence Supporting the Recommendation

In *Born2Fly*, students are discouraged from questioning harmful cultural norms and instead encounter shaming approaches, particularly when addressing pornography and strip club attendance. For example, the curriculum references “going to a fraternity party or bachelor party

with strippers” as a way people support trafficking, but does not acknowledge gender-neutral or female-centered contexts where males are exploited. This selective framing risks reinforcing misogyny by positioning males primarily as enablers of trafficking, while failing to account for their victimization. The curriculum also recommends gender segregation when teaching trafficking, and its *Soaring Higher* and *Dream Big with God* units highlight “male confusion” around intimacy, framing marriage as a “difficult concept for youth to understand, particularly boys and young men.” These approaches reinforce gender stereotypes rather than fostering nuanced, inclusive dialogue.

Project Starfish highlights similar gaps. The History lesson plan provides a timeline project that does not sufficiently connect the legacies of slavery to contemporary forms of human trafficking. Without such context, the lesson risks reinforcing whitewashed historical narratives. Additionally, while the social justice lesson plan introduces trafficking as a social justice issue, its framing is overly superficial. The lesson identifies trafficking as “through the use of force, fraud, and coercion victims must perform sexual acts for money,” but it does not interrogate the discriminatory systems and structural inequities that make some communities disproportionately vulnerable.

In *Empower Youth*, attempts to challenge cultural sexualization and gender stereotypes at times reproduce harmful rhetoric. For example, the curriculum directs teachers to lead students in discussing “what it is to be a real man or a real woman” without problematizing or deconstructing that phrasing. Such language risks reinforcing rigid gender binaries. Additionally, an activity invites students to write about “how an organization in the United States is making a difference in the issue of human trafficking,” but this uncritical framing misses the opportunity to examine systemic shortcomings in U.S. anti-trafficking efforts, particularly its ongoing failures

to address child trafficking. Instead of critically confronting these realities, the activity risks positioning the U.S. as a leader in anti-trafficking, reinforcing nationalistic narratives rather than encouraging students to envision new, transformative solutions.

Theoretical Connections and Concerns

Situating historical truths within human trafficking prevention is essential for helping youth understand how systemic structures of oppression continue to perpetuate exploitation today, an approach largely supported by intersectional feminism and ecofeminist frameworks. Culturally responsive pedagogy also emphasizes the importance of addressing difficult content head on. Gay (2000) argued that empowering teaching requires using students' personal knowledge and experiences as legitimate expertise while holding them to high expectations. Further, emancipatory teaching frees students from mainstream education's constraints by fostering authentic knowledge and stronger community connections, while transformative teaching helps students become social critics, make informed decisions, and imagine new possibilities for justice. When HTAPE curricula avoid or oversimplify conversations about historical and contemporary inequities, they fail to enact these culturally responsive principles and instead perpetuate whitewashed or incomplete narratives.

Similarly, Ladson-Billings (1995) highlights the importance of developing students' critical consciousness so they are prepared to challenge societal norms. By not naming systemic inequities such as racism, sexism, or classism within trafficking, many curricula deprive students of the opportunity to critically examine the realities that place certain groups at heightened risk. Trauma-informed care also calls for educators to recognize how trauma affects all individuals and to avoid retraumatization in instructional settings (Institute for Family Violence Studies at FSU, 2017). Presenting false or whitewashed historical narratives risks retraumatizing Students

of Color by erasing or diminishing the lived experiences of their communities. Recognizing these harms is therefore essential to fostering both healing and empowerment in the classroom.

Modification Recommendations for a Diverse Population

One of the most problematic elements of *Born2Fly* is its framing of pornography consumption as a moral failure. While the curriculum is correct to highlight connections between pornography and trafficking, this topic must be addressed without shame, particularly toward boys, who are often socialized into early exposure before they understand consent or emotional safety (Peter & Valkenburg, 2016). Rather than blaming youth, educators should center evidence showing that mainstream pornography can involve coercion, underage actors, and nonconsensual acts (Owens et al., 2012; DeKeseredy & Corsianos, 2016; National Center on Sexual Exploitation, 2024). Facilitators should guide critical discussions that: (1) examine the normalization of pornography in culture; (2) analyze its potential harms, including exploitation of performers and unhealthy perceptions of intimacy; and (3) provide nonjudgmental pathways for students to reflect, seek support, and develop media literacy skills.

In *Project Starfish*, the economics and history lesson plans require significant revisions to align with trauma-informed and culturally relevant pedagogy. In the economics lesson, trafficking is primarily described in terms of financial costs and societal burdens, which risks retraumatizing survivors and minimizes the core human impact. Trafficking must instead be framed as a violation of human rights, not merely as a contributor to drug economies, lost productivity, or law enforcement strain. Reframing lessons through a survivor-centered lens demonstrates compassion and avoids normalizing structural violence (National Children's Alliance, 2023). The culminating economics activity, which currently asks students to review trafficking-related laws and their effectiveness in reducing “negative externalities,” could be

strengthened by pushing students to critique the effectiveness of those policies. Suggested expansions include: researching gaps in local or national policies, interviewing community advocates, and proposing reforms that better serve vulnerable groups. These changes transform the assignment from a basic policy review into an exercise in critical consciousness, increasing cultural relevance and trauma sensitivity.

Similarly, the history timeline project should be revised to reflect the true evolution of trafficking, including systemic racial and cultural oppression. The current version omits critical events and policies that shape today's trafficking landscape. Suggested additions include: the history of enslavement by Spanish colonizers beginning in 1492, chattel slavery, and the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo; labor exploitation of Immigrants in the U.S., such as the Bracero Program; and key youth-centered and survivor-informed policies like the Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act (2013) and the Justice for Victims of Trafficking Act (2015). While these additions will require educators to conduct additional research to contextualize events, they are vital for facilitating historically accurate, trauma-aware, and inclusive conversations.

More broadly, HTAPE programs must rethink how they frame trafficking and address the ignorance surrounding it. Curricula should directly confront the social constructs that normalize the sexualization of girls and women, especially Women and Girls of Color, erase race as a risk factor, and perpetuate victim-blaming narratives. To counter these harms, HTAPE should foster students' critical consciousness and encourage them to examine why trafficking happens and who is most affected. Educators can begin by presenting research-based facts, including the disproportionate targeting of Girls and Women of Color in the U.S. Building from this foundation, students can engage in critical conversations about the historical and modern

sexualization of Black women, the frequent neglect of missing Women and Girls of Color, the normalization of violence in pornography, and the persistence of harmful assumptions that victims are at fault for their own exploitation. These discussions are emotionally heavy, but necessary. They require educators to examine their own biases, acknowledge the historical and intersectional roots of oppression, and respond to student distress in a trauma-informed and supportive way.

9. Make Relationship-Building Intentional

While presented ninth in this list of recommendations, its implementation should come prior to most other recommendations. Teacher-student and peer-peer relationship building is crucial for authentic engagement in and learning of HTAPE content, given its capacity to provide a greater sense of safety for youth in the classroom, and thus facilitating greater likelihood of sharing stories, respectful responses to student sharing, empathy for others' experiences, and learning from one another. Across the curricula, the extent to which relationship-building was prioritized varied widely, and in some cases was completely or nearly absent.

Curricular Evidence Supporting the Recommendation

In *Born2Fly*, relationship-building practices are consistently integrated into the curriculum. Students are encouraged to share their personal thoughts and experiences through prompts such as, “What is a dream you will work hard for?” and “How do you help with dishes after your meal?” These activities allow students to reflect on their lived experiences and connect them to the curriculum in a culturally responsive way. The facilitator’s guide also models affirming strategies, including reminders to “be very encouraging” and “take time to point out what is positive about each person’s responses,” reinforcing an intentional focus on student validation and trust.

Project Starfish also demonstrates an awareness of the need for relationship-building but requires more explicit sequencing. The curriculum would benefit from encouraging teachers to facilitate community-building and trust-centered activities early in the year, ideally before introducing human trafficking content. If that is not possible, additional relationship-building exercises should be incorporated immediately before the trafficking unit to establish a greater sense of safety discussing trauma-triggering topics within the classroom environment. The curriculum does encourage personal connections to the material by promoting discussion strategies that validate student perspectives and support reflection. These strategies strengthen engagement and align with culturally responsive teaching but lack consistent emphasis on preparing the classroom climate beforehand.

It Stops With Me includes surface-level questions, such as, “What warning signs have you seen in your own experience or a friend’s experience?” These provide opportunities for individual reflection but do not intentionally foster rich group discussion or deeper relational connections among students. As a result, the curriculum misses opportunities to build a strong classroom community before tackling difficult topics.

By contrast, *Empower Youth* more effectively integrates relationship-building practices. Through activities that prompt students to reflect on empathy and apathy, alongside tools for analyzing their own relationships, the curriculum connects directly to students’ personal and social lives. This approach allows youth to practice relational awareness and emotional health in ways that build a supportive classroom foundation for difficult conversations.

Theoretical Connections and Concerns

Relationship-building is central to culturally responsive teaching, trauma-informed care, and ecofeminist values. Gay (2000) emphasized that the teacher-student relationship must be

rooted in respect, honor, integrity, sharing, and a belief in students' capacity for achievement. Similarly, caring for others through clear communication, attentive listening, self-reflection, and modeling content knowledge demonstrates respect for cultural diversity, fosters ethical behavior, and helps students engage authentically with their peers (Shevalier & McKenzie, 2012). These practices establish a classroom culture where students feel validated and supported before engaging with challenging subject matter such as human trafficking.

Trauma-informed care also underscores the importance of strong, supportive relationships in addressing trauma. The Institute for Family Violence Studies at FSU (2017) highlights that trauma is highly individualized, requiring personalized responses rooted in trust. The teacher-student relationship plays a key role in shaping how youth experience and process trauma, particularly when it arises from classroom instruction (Downey & Greco, 2023). Relationship-building is therefore not optional but foundational: educators must cultivate connections that allow them to recognize subtle signs of trauma responses (e.g. agitation, withdrawal, or disinterest) and respond with sensitivity. Research consistently shows that strong, positive teacher-student relationships help youth work through traumatic stress and build resilience (Downey & Greco, 2023; Norrish et al., 2023; Brunzell, Waters, & Stokes, 2015).

Finally, ecofeminist scholarship also reinforces the importance of care, love, and relational connection, extending these principles to human relationships as well as to the natural world (Daly, 1994). Applying these values in HTAPE contexts means prioritizing relational pedagogy that emphasizes care, empathy, and mutual respect as central to prevention education.

Modification Recommendations for a Diverse Population

The *Project Starfish* curriculum can be significantly improved by strengthening its attention to classroom relationships, cultural connection, educator trauma preparedness, and

content reframing, particularly in the history and economics lesson plans. If the curriculum is implemented at a flexible point in the school year, it is recommended to delay introduction until students have established strong classroom relationships and a sense of community. On average, this process takes approximately four to six weeks when educators intentionally incorporate relationship-building activities (Hamre & Pianta, 2006; Jones et al., 2018). For this reason, human trafficking awareness curricula are not recommended at the very beginning of the school year. In settings where flexibility is not possible, such as electives, educators should begin with intentional community-building exercises before easing into more sensitive material.

Foundational relationship-building practices may include structured check-ins, identity-based writing activities such as “*Where I’m From*” poems, co-created classroom agreements, regular restorative or community circles, and team-based problem-solving challenges. These approaches align with trauma-informed education frameworks, which emphasize psychological safety, predictability, and student voice as critical elements for processing emotionally difficult topics (NCTSN, 2017; Brunzell et al., 2015). By cultivating trust and shared understanding first, educators can create conditions where students engage with content on exploitation and trafficking in ways that are empowering rather than retraumatizing.

To help students personally connect with curriculum content, educators can implement journaling or discussion prompts that invite them to reflect on their own lives (e.g., “*What does trust look like in a friendship or relationship?*” or “*How do we keep each other safe in our community?*”). Content can also be localized by discussing real cases or researching known trafficking hotspots in the Aurora-Denver area. Other strategies include using restorative or community circles to explore vulnerability and social responsibility, encouraging storytelling

through survivor narratives or creative mediums such as theater and poetry, and offering anonymous question boxes or digital surveys so students can share concerns safely.

Ultimately, human trafficking content cannot be taught effectively or ethically without strong, pre-existing relationships between teachers and students and among peers. Research demonstrates that students are more likely to identify a trusted adult and report concerns when meaningful educator connections are in place (Reid et al., 2024; FSU, 2017). Furthermore, teachers who know their students well are better positioned to recognize subtle signs of trauma or victimization (Downey & Greco, 2023). Peer relationships are equally critical, as students are more willing to engage in whole-group discussions and pose difficult questions when they feel supported by classmates. Lange and Young (2019) emphasize that frequent dialogue and questioning are essential for addressing sensitive topics; this kind of open engagement is only possible when the classroom culture is built on safety, trust, and relational depth.

10. Centralize Communities As Part of Culture

Across the curricula, there was inconsistency in how, or whether at all, students were given the opportunity to extend their learning into community-centered projects. While some programs highlighted the importance of inspiring action, many lacked concrete, structured opportunities for students to apply their knowledge in ways that foster both awareness and change.

Curricular Evidence Supporting the Recommendation

In *Born2Fly*, the absence of a culminating community project represents a missed opportunity. While the curriculum held a graduation-like ceremonial experience upon completion of the program that invited community members, the curriculum would be significantly

strengthened by the inclusion of an action-oriented, student-led project that applies classroom learning to real-world issues.

Project Starfish offers a stronger model by explicitly positioning students as agents of community change. Its lesson plans in theatre, journalism, photography, and English/language arts are designed not only to engage students in learning but also to inspire action. For instance, the journalism plan emphasizes “the power of journalism to tell a story, raise awareness, and inspire social action” and encourages students “to be active participants in community change.” Similarly, performance-based learning strategies in theatre, poetry, photography, and journalism elevate advocacy through creative expression. The theatre plan specifically frames student one-act plays as opportunities “to raise awareness and educate others on the issue of sex trafficking,” reflecting the emancipatory and transformative teaching codes identified in this study.

It Stops With Me encourages students to consider action projects, such as developing action plans, writing essays, composing letters to legislators, or producing public service announcements. However, these activities are not built directly into the curriculum and remain optional suggestions. Without structured integration, the program risks losing momentum at the critical point of moving from awareness to action.

Empower Youth also falls short in this regard. While its classroom-based discussions and relational activities are strong, the program does not extend its framework to include opportunities for community action. Adding service or advocacy-based projects would empower students to apply their learning to authentic community contexts.

Theoretical Connections and Concerns

Centering communities within human trafficking awareness and prevention education aligns closely with the emancipatory goals of culturally responsive pedagogy. As Gay (2000) explains, emancipatory teaching frees students from the constraints of mainstream education, instead emphasizing the development of authentic knowledge and the fostering of connections with their communities. By situating learning within real-world action, students move beyond passive understanding toward empowered engagement with issues that affect them directly.

This emphasis also aligns with student developmental needs outlined by Norrish et al. (2023). The authors identify several critical needs youth require from educators, including safety, self-regulation, relational and attachment needs, and opportunities for voice, empowerment, and cultural connection. Providing structured opportunities for community service and advocacy directly addresses these needs by creating pathways for students to exercise agency, build resilience, and translate classroom knowledge into collective action.

Even *It Stops With Me* acknowledges the importance of closure through community engagement, noting: “This subject matter is intense and, if not properly concluded, can leave students feeling overwhelmed and helpless to make a difference.” Its suggested projects (community action plans, essay contests, letters to policymakers, social media campaigns, and other public initiatives) demonstrate the value of community-centered activities as both a pedagogical strategy and a necessary emotional safeguard for students navigating such difficult material.

Modification Recommendations for a Diverse Population

To address *Born2Fly's* and *Empower Youth's* lack of closure through community engagement, educators in Aurora and Denver can leverage powerful local opportunities. For example, teachers might partner with iEmpathize, whether using the *Empower Youth* curriculum

or not, to host a school-wide event where youth educate peers and families about trafficking prevention (iEmpathize, n.d.a). Similarly, students could collaborate with the RiNo Art District, a grassroots nonprofit in Denver, to develop a themed call for artists, with application fees donated to an anti-trafficking organization (RiNo Art District, 2025). This type of project allows youth to channel creativity into activism while raising public awareness. Schools can also form partnerships with survivor-focused nonprofits, such as the Laboratory to Combat Human Trafficking, Generate Hope, Lotus Foundation, or the Denver Anti-Trafficking Alliance, enabling students to fundraise, organize clothing drives, or create empathetic cards for survivors.

Educators may also draw on the DOE NJ (2022) activity recommendations, which include public service announcements, chalk art installations, poster campaigns, or family/community-led events that promote awareness and advocacy. These projects both supplement classroom learning and extend its impact into the community.

Engaging youth in community-integrated closing projects is also consistent with a third-tier prevention approach, which extends beyond awareness to action (DOE NJ, 2022). Such engagement empowers youth to recognize and report signs of trafficking in their peers, reinforcing HTAPE's protective purpose. At minimum, all middle and high school HTAPE programs should conclude with a community-centered project, ensuring that instruction not only informs but also mobilizes students as agents of prevention and change.

The Future of K-12 Human Trafficking Awareness and Prevention Education

Human Trafficking Awareness and Prevention Education is not just an academic aspiration, but a moral imperative. As this project has shown, current curricula demonstrate meaningful strengths in trauma sensitivity, learner engagement, and foundational knowledge. Yet, gaps in geographic contextualization, community integration, cross-cultural responsiveness,

and trauma response infrastructure leave youth underprepared to confront one of the most urgent crises facing their generation.

Addressing these gaps requires an intentional synthesis of culturally responsive teaching, trauma-informed care, and ecofeminism. Together, these frameworks form a powerful, interdependent foundation: culturally responsive teaching ensures that learners see their lived experiences and cultural contexts reflected in prevention education; trauma-informed care safeguards emotional well-being and fosters trust, safety, and healing-centered engagement; and ecofeminism expands the conversation to include systemic intersections of power, exploitation, and environmental inequity that mirror and sustain trafficking conditions. In collaboration, these theories strengthen one another. When united, they yield a robust, critical, and humanizing approach to HTAPE that empowers learners to recognize, resist, and transform the conditions that allow trafficking to persist.

If trafficking continues to infiltrate schools, neighborhoods, and digital spaces where young people live and learn, then prevention education must rise to meet that reality, with transparency, critical consciousness, and unwavering commitment to accessibility and empowerment. Educators, policymakers, curriculum developers, and community stakeholders must recognize HTAPE as a form of life-saving education. This work is not optional, nor is it peripheral. It is central to youth safety, equity, and justice. The next generation deserves to be armed not only with facts, but with the tools to recognize, resist, and rebuild a world where trafficking cannot thrive.

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