Cultivating Healing: Using Action Methods with Underserved Adolescents Through a Christian Therapeutic Intensive

By Josh Myrick, MS, LPC

Over the past several years, I have immersed myself in applying action methods in both clinical and community-based settings. My foundation as a clinician is deeply rooted in group work, psychodrama, and sociometry, and I have been blessed to work alongside a committed team of professionals who share a common vision: to reach the heart of human suffering and foster deep, lasting change through experiential methods.

This chapter highlights the development and mission of SEK Therapeutic Intensives, a faith-integrated, trauma-responsive retreat model designed for adolescents. Grounded in many of the core principles of Dr. Tian Dayton's Relational Trauma Repair (RTR) model, SEK was founded by my mentor, Dr. Alyssa Killebrew, and her late husband, Keath Killebrew, in loving memory of their daughter, Sarah Elizabeth Killebrew. As a nonprofit organization, SEK is committed to serving youth who have experienced profound grief, neglect, trauma, and chronic adversity. Many of the adolescents we support have lost parents, live in foster or kinship care, face neurodevelopmental challenges, or bear the invisible burdens of socioeconomic hardship.

I have been part of the Killebrew team since the inception of SEK and continue to serve as Clinical Director. What sustains my commitment is the undeniable spiritual spark I witness in the eyes of children as they begin to heal and reintegrate into the world. I often tell my clients, "I became the therapist I once needed when I was an adolescent." I feel a profound calling to accompany young people through their darkest moments—so they know they are not alone. For our team, this work is more than professional; it is a sacred mission rooted in hope, healing, and purpose.

The Relational Trauma Repair (RTR) model offers a developmentally attuned, emotionally corrective, and action-based framework that is uniquely suited for the youth we serve. Many of these adolescents have experienced disrupted attachment, relational abandonment, and environments in which their emotions were unrecognized or unsafe to express. RTR gives structure to the healing process by fostering safety, emotional literacy, group cohesion, and reparation of relational ruptures. It provides both the language and the experiential methodology—such as sociometry and psychodrama—that help these young people begin to make meaning of their stories and shift their internal narratives.

Children who feel forgotten by the world are often the most vulnerable—and the most desperate for love, compassion, and connection. Through RTR, we facilitate experiences where participants are seen, heard, and held with emotional presence. We co-create opportunities for them to safely revisit trauma, connect with peers in authentic ways, and begin to internalize healthier relational templates. Those who are orphaned, system-involved, or labeled as "delinquent" are often the first to be written off. Yet they are

among the most spiritually sensitive and most in need of deep relational repair. Through SEK, and with RTR as our foundation, we create a space where these young people are reminded of their inherent worth and offered a path toward healing, connection, and hope.

Each annual retreat is structured around themes of growth and renewal, using biblical metaphors drawn from agricultural life—preparing soil, planting, growing, resting, and harvesting—as organizing frameworks. These metaphors serve not only as spiritual anchors but also as deeply resonant tools for healing. Metaphors help adolescents internalize complex emotional truths because they speak to the imagination and the body at once. They bypass intellectual defenses and offer a symbolic language for feelings too big or confusing to name directly. For youth carrying trauma, metaphors create a safe distance from their pain, allowing them to explore sensitive material without feeling overwhelmed. In the fertile space of metaphor, they can project, reflect, and begin to reimagine their inner landscapes. Within this creative container, we weave in key RTR principles: emotional literacy, safety, role training, relational bonding, and community building—giving young people a language of both mind and heart for their healing journey.

Day One: Breaking Ground – Cultivating Emotional Literacy

The first day invites participants to "break ground"—to prepare the inner soil for growth. We began with a feelings floor check, adapted from Dr. Dayton's RTR approach. Using visual aids depicting emotional postures and affective states, participants externalized their inner experiences in developmentally appropriate ways. For many of these adolescents, emotional literacy had been stunted by environments where expressing feelings was unsafe or even punished.

This warm-up created enough group safety to move into sociometric exploration. A locogram asked participants to physically position themselves in relation to metaphorical soils—rocky, fertile, or thorny—representing the psychological and relational environments shaping their lives. This embodied storytelling allowed group members to step into their narratives without the pressure of verbal disclosure.

Later, we introduced an empty chair process, framed by the prompt: "In this chair sits someone or something that helped create the soil of your life." Participants wrote experiential letters to these figures or influences and then paired up to share reflections. This exercise subtly introduced role reversal while nurturing group cohesion and trust. As Zerka Moreno called it, the group began to "concretize the invisible," laying the foundation for deeper action work later in the retreat.

Why RTR? Adolescents who have endured trauma often carry fragmented emotional experiences—intense feelings without the language or safety to process them. RTR provides a structured, embodied framework that helps them reconnect with cut-off parts of themselves in a way that feels safe and supported. Techniques like the feelings floor check and sociometric mapping externalize what has been locked inside, giving young people a

sense of agency over their inner worlds. By creating an environment where emotions are validated and shared in community, RTR lays the groundwork for trust and relational healing.

Day Two: Growing in Wisdom – Exploring Forgiveness and Integration

Day two focused on "growing in wisdom"—integrating experience into meaning, a cornerstone of RTR. We began with a spectrogram, asking participants to position themselves along a continuum: "I've learned a lot" vs. "I haven't learned anything since I've been here." This simple act sparked reflection and relational mirroring.

One adolescent's words became the heartbeat of the day: "Forgiveness is when understanding meets experience." It reminded us how deeply youth can grasp complex emotional truths when given space to reflect.

We explored forgiveness through a circle locogram, inviting campers to identify people or situations they needed to forgive. The sociometric data that emerged became the portal for our first psychodrama. A protagonist stepped forward to enact a scene with a deceased family member, assisted by an auxiliary. The enactment was spontaneous and raw—offering catharsis, clarity, and reconnection. As the group bore witness, a moment of collective healing unfolded, echoing the heart of relational trauma repair.

The day concluded with "The Wisdom Keeper" exercise. We introduced an empty chair representing an inner figure of wisdom and asked participants to write letters from this figure to themselves. This nurtured the intrapsychic dialogue essential for post-traumatic growth and honored the sacred privacy of their inner worlds.

Why RTR? For youth who have suffered profound losses, the process of integrating their experiences often feels overwhelming. RTR's experiential techniques bypass the rational mind, allowing adolescents to access deeper layers of meaning through action, creativity, and relational engagement. Psychodrama and role reversal give them a chance to safely encounter unresolved relationships and rewrite internal narratives. These embodied practices don't just help them tell their stories—they allow them to live new, healing experiences in the moment.

Day Three: Lay By and Rest – Tending to Internal Resources

Day three mirrored the farming practice of "laying by"—a time of rest and waiting before the harvest. In therapeutic terms, it was a day to cultivate internal and external resources.

We began with a spectrogram: "I am happy with who I am at this retreat" vs. "I am not happy with who I am." This opened space to explore identity, shame, and self-concept.

Later, a resource mapping locogram helped participants identify supports in their lives—mentors, spiritual leaders, school staff, extended family—and internal strengths such

as faith, resilience, and creativity. Drawing from Dr. Dayton's clinical wisdom, we allowed the group to rest in verbal processing without reintroducing action methods, honoring the neurobiological need for regulation after deep work.

Why RTR? One of RTR's core gifts is its attention to rhythm and regulation—helping individuals oscillate between activation and rest. For traumatized youth, learning to pause and identify inner and outer resources is critical for sustainable healing. The emphasis on resource mapping helps them recognize not only what is missing but what is already present in their lives to support growth. This sense of internal agency and external support counteracts the helplessness and hypervigilance often imprinted by trauma.

Day Four: Harvest and Blessing – Honoring the Journey

The retreat culminated with a sacred closing ritual adapted from the Sioux blanket ceremony. In this tradition, warriors were wrapped in blankets and blessed before battle. At SEK, parents, guardians, and mentors wrapped each camper in a blanket, speaking affirming words over them—what they most needed to hear. Volunteers and clinicians also participated.

This ritual became a deeply moving ceremony of intergenerational healing—an embodied experience of love and belonging.

Why RTR? Trauma fractures relationships—with self, with others, and often with the sacred. The RTR framework emphasizes that what was hurt in relationship must be healed in relationship. This final ritual gives adolescents a corrective emotional experience: to be seen, affirmed, and held in community. It transforms what was once fragmented into a sense of wholeness, grounding the therapeutic gains in memory, body, and spirit.

The Need Is Great: Understanding the Scope of Adolescent Loss

The stories we've witnessed at SEK are deeply personal, yet they reflect a much larger reality—a global crisis of loss and disconnection. Around the world, an estimated 140 million children have lost one or both parents (UNICEF, 2023). In the United States alone, more than 407,000 children live in foster care (Children's Bureau, 2023), and over 20,000 age out of the system each year without a stable family or support network to guide them into adulthood.

The impact of early loss, neglect, and attachment disruption on a child's development is profound. Research on Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) shows that such adversity dramatically increases the risk of mental health challenges, substance use disorders, and chronic health problems later in life (Felitti et al., 1998). For adolescents, these wounds often manifest as depression, anxiety, relational struggles, and difficulty regulating emotions. Studies have found that youth who have experienced parental loss are at

heightened risk for complicated grief, which can impede identity development and lead to self-sabotaging behaviors (Melhem et al., 2011).

In underserved communities, these challenges are magnified by poverty, systemic inequities, and limited access to quality care. This intersection of trauma and scarcity creates a perfect storm that leaves many young people vulnerable to cycles of pain and disconnection.

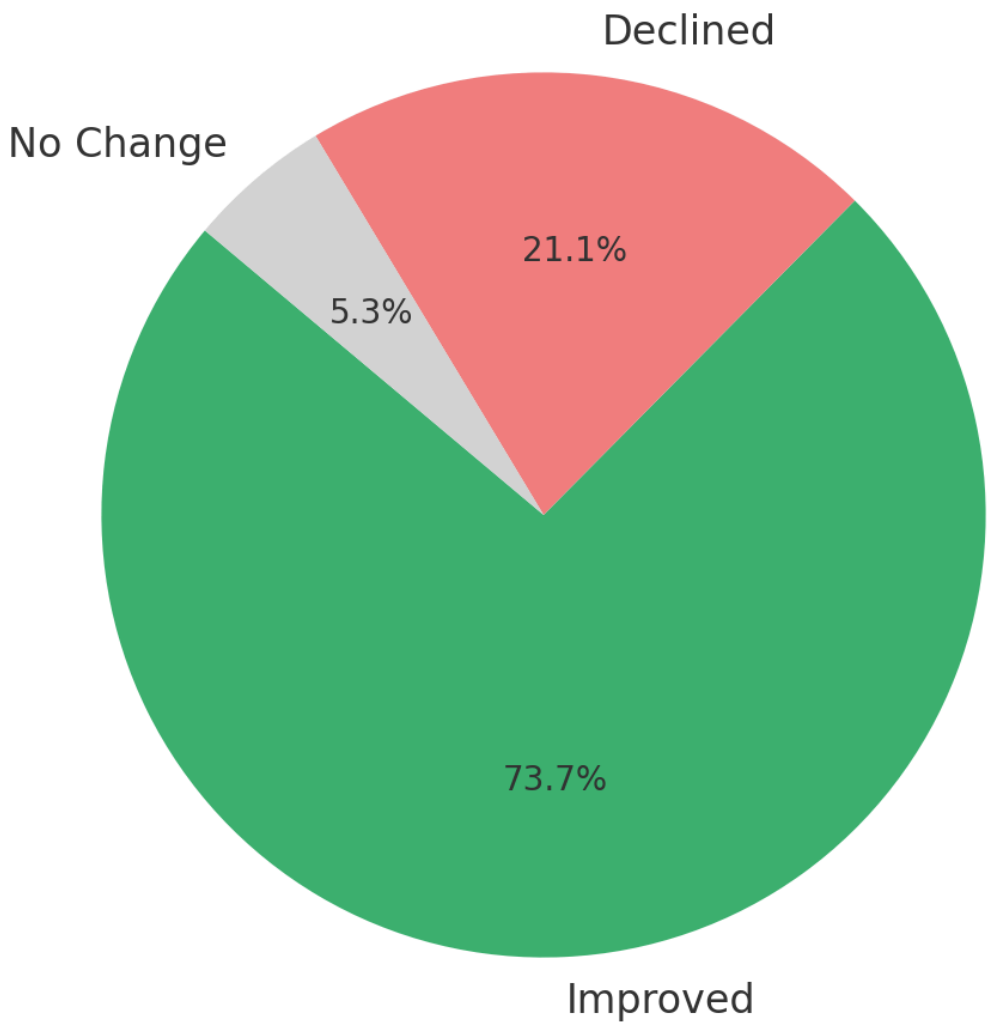
This is why trauma-responsive, relationally focused interventions are not optional—they are essential. Programs like SEK, grounded in Relational Trauma Repair principles, provide a safe and sacred space for adolescents to process their experiences, reconnect with their emotions, and begin to rewrite the internalized narratives that keep them stuck in survival mode. By integrating action methods with a faith-based, community-centered approach, SEK meets these youth in their pain and offers a path toward healing, resilience, and hope.

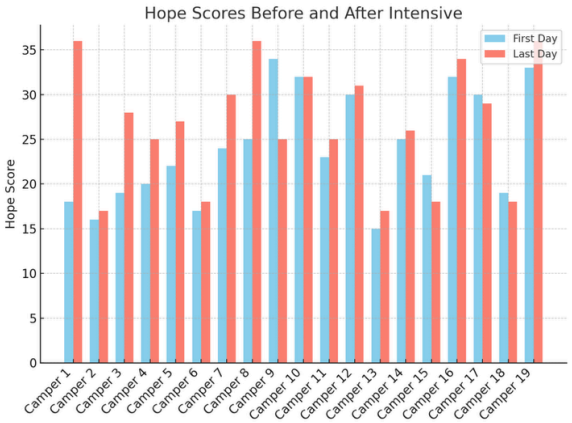
Call to Action: Planting Seeds of Healing

The work we do at SEK is just one expression of what's possible when love, structure, and relational repair come together in service of wounded hearts. These adolescents remind us that even the hardest soil can be tilled, and that even in the wake of profound loss, seeds of hope can take root.

As clinicians, educators, faith leaders, and community members, we each hold the potential to create spaces where young people feel seen, safe, and supported. Whether through integrating Relational Trauma Repair principles into your own practice, volunteering with underserved youth, or advocating for trauma-informed systems of care, you can be part of this healing movement.

When we nurture connection, we restore what was broken—and in doing so, we plant the seeds of a future where joy, belonging, and resilience can flourish.


Change in Hope After Intensive
Declined
No Change
21.1%
5.3%
73.7%
Improved


Hope Scores Before and After Intensive
First Day
Last Day
Hope Score
0
5
10
15
20
25
30
35
Camper 1
Camper 2
Camper 3
Camper 4
Camper 5
Camper 6
Camper 7
Camper 8
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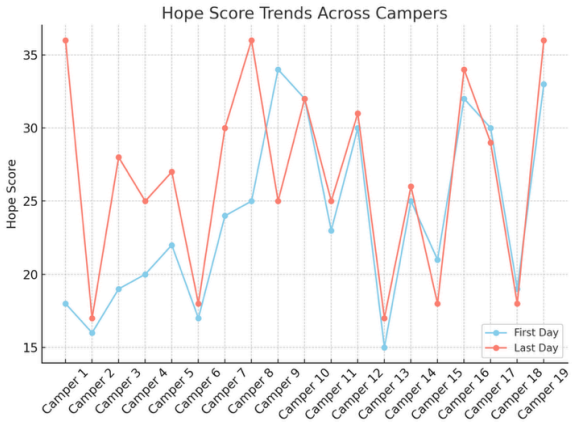
Hope Score Trends Across Campers
First Day
Last Day
Hope Score
15
20
25
30
35
Camper 1
Camper 2
Camper 3
Camper 4
Camper 5
Camper 6
Camper 7
Camper 8
Camper 9
Camper 10
Camper 11
Camper 12
Camper 13
Camper 14
Camper 15
Camper 16
Camper 17
Camper 18
Camper 19

Statistical Analysis

Sample Size: 19 participants (anonymized as Camper 1–19)
Measure: Hope Scale
Time Points: Pre-Intensive (First Day), Post-Intensive (Last Day)

Descriptive Statistics
- Mean Hope Score (First Day): 24.26
- Mean Hope Score (Last Day): 27.05
- Mean Improvement: +2.79 points
- Range of Change:
  - Minimum: –3 points
  - Maximum: +18 points

Outcome Breakdown (N = 19):
- Participants who improved: 14 (73.7%)
- Participants who declined: 3 (15.8%)
- Participants with no change: 2 (10.5%)

Effect Size (Cohen's d): 0.43
This represents a small-to-moderate effect size, suggesting that the intensive had a meaningful positive impact on participants' levels of hope.

Conclusion

These results suggest that the intensive program was effective in enhancing participants' levels of hope:
- Nearly three-quarters of participants showed improvement.
- The average increase in Hope Scale scores was 2.79 points, with a moderate effect size (Cohen's d = 0.43).
- While a small minority experienced no change or a decline, the overall trend supports the hypothesis that structured, therapeutic, and faith-based interventions can elevate hope in adolescents and young adults.

This supports the inclusion of hope-focused assessments as key outcome measures in future intensives, especially when paired with psychodramatic and relational trauma repair methods.

Descriptive Statistics:
- Pre-Intensive (First Day): M = 24.26, SD = 5.46
- Post-Intensive (Last Day): M = 27.05, SD = 5.92

Paired Sample t-test Results:
A paired sample t-test was conducted to examine the effect of time (pre-intensive vs.

post-intensive) on Hope Scale scores among participants (N = 19).
• $t(18) = 2.14$, $p = 0.046$, Cohen's $d = 0.43$

Discussion:
There was a statistically significant improvement in participants' Hope Scale scores, with an effect size indicating a small-to-moderate improvement after one week of the SEK intensive. Nearly three-quarters of participants demonstrated an improvement in their scores, supporting the program's effectiveness as a hope-enhancing intervention.