Stories Teachers Tell about Building Relationships and Trauma: A Narrative Study

Stories Teachers Tell about Building Relationships and Trauma:

A Narrative Study

A Dissertation Presented

BY

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DEDICATION

To my parents, Marilyn and Richie Tannenbaum, who instilled in me a love of learning and a belief that I could do anything I set my mind on. Your assumption that I was going to college and your *nachas* at each milestone meant the world to me. Thank you for raising us in a home filled with warmth and love.

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hunting, childrearing, and the pandemic. Thank you for your unwavering support. I love you.

ABSTRACT

Stories Teachers Tell about Building Relationships and Trauma:

A Narrative Study

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Students who are exposed to trauma are expected to come to school. Trauma negatively affects the students' ability to form relationships and learn. Therefore, teachers must build strong and supportive relationships with students with trauma. Three humanities teachers at a suburban high school were interviewed multiple times using a narrative inquiry approach. A narrative was developed that interwove their stories, highlighting commonalities and differences. Through an iterative process of analysis, using narrative and paradigmatic modes of analysis, five themes recurred that were common to all three participants: building relationships with students is an effective pedagogy for engaging students; using the curriculum, humanities teachers connect with students through interactive lessons; in order to support students, teachers need strong, caring relationships with their colleagues; when teachers see and react to each student as an individual, they are better able to meet the student's unique needs; and in addition to treating each student as an individual, teachers implement practices they believe will help all students. This dissertation explored the experiences of three teachers who believe they

have built relationships with their students, how they experience these relationships, and how they describe them. Their stories may inform others' practices.

Keywords: Trauma-informed, narrative inquiry, high school, teachers

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CHAPTER I

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Introduction

Children can be exposed to horrific events. An estimated 66% of children report being exposed to a traumatic event by age 16 (Greeson et al., 2014). In 2019–2020, more than 2.3 million children were screened by child protective services in the United States and were found to be maltreated or at risk of being maltreated (Administration on Children Youth and Families [ACYF], 2022). Children are the victims of abuse, witness terrorist attacks, and experience hunger and homelessness, all experiences that may be classified as trauma (Chafouleas et al., 2016; Cole et al., 2009). Some children react negatively to trauma; others do not appear to be adversely affected by it. For this dissertation, "students with trauma" refers to those who have been exposed to trauma and display symptoms of trauma exposure. Children with trauma come to school and are expected to learn. When children experience trauma, their capacity to build healthy relationships, as well as their ability to learn, may be negatively affected (Brunzell et al., 2016; Burke Harris, 2018; Chafouleas et al., 2016; Cole et al., 2009; Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018; NCTSN, 2008; Tishelman et al., 2010; Yohannan & Carlson, 2019). Relationships are important in the learning process (Brunzell et al., 2016; Chafouleas et al., 2016; Cole et al., 2009; Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018; Hill, 2001). To meet the needs of students, teachers must build strong and supportive relationships to effectively teach students with trauma, a skill that is not always apparent or easy to do. Teachers who build relationships with students have stories to tell that may

inform the practice of teaching students with trauma. Building and sustaining relationships may be a challenge for teachers; relationships may vary from teacher to teacher and classroom to classroom. This dissertation explored the experiences of three teachers who believe they have built relationships with their students, how they experience these relationships, and how they describe them. Their stories may inform others' practices.

Relationships and Learning

In 1986, Kleibard (2004), in describing the history of education in the United States, wrote, "A great deal of attention has been lavished on the question of who went to school but relatively little on the question of what happened once all those children and youth walked inside the schoolhouse doors" (pp. xvii–xviii). Since then, a great deal of research has focused on the inside of the schoolhouse. One of the things that has been discovered is that learning is a social process. Darling-Hammond and Cook-Harvey (2018) reported that "optimal brain architecture is developed by the presence of warm, consistent relationships; positive experiences; and positive perceptions of these experiences" (p. 5). They elaborated that supportive relationships are the foundation for development and learning.

Similarly, Tyack and Cuban (1995) stated that the goal of school reform is to make positive relationships between students and teachers more common. "This suggests that the major aim of reform is to improve learning, generously construed as rich intellectual, civil, and social development" (p. 136). Furthermore, Darling-Hammond and Cook-Harvey (2018) shared that when children have conversations with adults, their brains develop. Conversations can help students grow in cognition and linguistics more

than a teacher talking merely to a class (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018). Ultimately, an effective classroom is one where students engage with others and learn to build trusting relationships. Engagement and relationships enable students to learn.

Therefore, an effective pedagogy, especially a method of teaching targeted at teaching students with trauma, needs to include relationships, both teaching students how to develop them and teachers' fostering relationships with students. Brunzell et al.'s (2016) review of the literature reported that effective interventions for students with trauma-focused on repairing students' regulatory abilities and addressing the deregulatory response, as well as developing strong student-teacher relationships. This pedagogy helps students identify their feelings, regulate their responses, and develop healthy relationships. Healthy relationships between students and between students and teachers are a large part of an effective classroom for students with trauma. Just as Freire (1970/2018) did not define one way to teach the oppressed, it appears there is no single way to define an appropriate pedagogy to teach those with trauma given the vast number of pedagogies in this area (e.g., Brunzell et al., 2019; Chafouleas et al., 2016; Cole et al., 2009). What is apparent, however, is that adept teachers should be able to combine the elements of an effective classroom and build relationships with students in order to use a pedagogy that is effective for teaching students with trauma.

Trauma and Learning

Rallis et al. (1995) recognized that "Children carry their lives with them into the classroom" (p. 8). The field of education has been evolving, whereby students with trauma are now a recognized population, and research is starting to address how to teach these students. Additionally, the global pandemic of COVID-19 and the renewed focus

on social justice in the spring of 2020 have touched a significant number of students, as well as the faculty who interact with them. Exposure to trauma and traumatic events can negatively affect school performance (e.g., Cole et al., 2009; Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018; Tishelman et al., 2010). Brunzell et al. (2016) reported that children who have experienced trauma are two and a half times more likely to fail a grade, have lower assessment scores, have disabilities that may negatively impact their schooling, and are more likely to be suspended. Tishelman et al. (2010) found that children show the consequences of trauma exposure across stages of development. They reported that sexually abused teenagers are found to have lower academic skills, more behavioral and social difficulties, and are more likely than their peers to avoid school (Tishelman et al., 2010). Children who have been exposed to trauma have lower attention spans, less ability to concentrate, poorer organizational skills, and more difficulty with abstract reasoning (Cole et al., 2009; Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018; NCTSN, 2008; Tishelman et al., 2010; Yohannan & Carlson, 2019). Burke Harris (2018) found in her medical practice that students who had four or more adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) were 32 times as likely to have learning or behavior problems in school. Students with trauma histories are more likely to need special education services and have behavioral challenges that can lead to disciplinary referrals and suspensions (NCTSN, 2008; Tishelman et al., 2010; Wamser-Nanney & Vandenberg, 2013). There is a strong relationship between trauma and negative outcomes in school that leads to the question: what is the most effective way to teach students with trauma?

In 2005, Cole and colleagues published *Helping Traumatized Children Learn*, a ground-breaking guide and apparently the first book of its kind to address this topic.

Since then, the literature has grown to include the domains that are affected by trauma: self-regulation, academic, physical, and relationships (Tishelman et al., 2010), as well as research to create and support trauma-informed schools (Brunzell et al., 2016; Chafouleas et al., 2016). What is missing, however, are details that tie all the components of trauma-informed schools together and the evidence of their influence. The literature does not highlight how teachers build positive relationships, the structural components building leaders use to foster staff-student relationships or the policies that create and support trauma-informed schools. This study closes that gap in the literature.

Trauma-Informed Schools

Teachers who are effective at working with students with trauma may turn their rooms into trauma-informed classes. Together, trauma-informed classes may become trauma-informed schools. Walton-Fisette (2020) defined trauma-informed as "a setting where stakeholders have acquired some knowledge about childhood trauma and are versed in related strategies" (p. 10). Ristuccia (2022), on the other hand, defines trauma-informed as therapeutic-based support for individuals in which the participant looks back to determine pathology. Trauma-sensitive, on the other hand, helps students succeed by looking forward and providing safe and supportive schools and communities (Ristuccia, 2022).

This research uses the term trauma-informed the way Walton-Fisette (2020) uses it, as a whole group approach, as opposed to Ristuccia's (2022) term that better describes therapy. I argue that trauma-informed schools should be better able to help students with trauma to access the curriculum and learn. Current research should demonstrate that students who have experienced trauma and attend trauma-informed schools are more

likely to have better learning outcomes. The field of trauma-informed schools is so young, though, that this assumption has not been tested. Thus far, studies that examine the impact of trauma-informed schools focus primarily on staff and their response to trauma-informed professional development (PD). There is a dearth of data about how teachers form relationships with students and how that influences their practice.

Furthermore, research focused on student outcomes is small and not generalizable (Cohen & Barron, 2021). Since students are considered vulnerable participants in a research study (Rallis & Rossman, 2012), the ethical way to research student-based outcomes should begin with teachers. As a way to proceed cautiously, a researcher could begin by focusing on teachers to formulate a research project that uses students as participants. Asking students the wrong questions can retraumatize a student who already has been affected by trauma. Therefore, the research does not yet support the assumption that students with trauma have better learning outcomes if they attend schools that are trauma-informed.

A recent review of the literature revealed four groups of researchers who addressed various approaches to working with students with trauma, each offering a different framework (Brunzell et al., 2016; Chafouleas et al., 2016; Cole et al., 2009; Tishelman et al., 2010). Cole and colleagues wrote *Helping Traumatized Children Learn* and proposed the "Flexible Framework" to enable schools to become trauma-informed. Chafouleas et al. connected trauma-informed care and multitiered service delivery for the prevention and intervention of emotional and behavioral outcomes for students with trauma. Tishelman et al. explained the four domains of trauma to create a trauma lens for school psychologists to use when evaluating students. Finally, Brunzell et al. articulated

trauma-informed positive education (TIPE) as an approach to helping students with trauma to learn. Although these frameworks are now more than ten years old, there are still scant studies about the efficacy of these approaches. These studies may form the basis for creating trauma-informed schools.

Helping Traumatized Children Learn, originally written in 2005, was a report and policy agenda that was a project of the Massachusetts Advocates for Children in collaboration with Harvard Law School and The Task Force on Children Affected by Domestic Violence (Cole et al., 2009). Based on common factors for competent children, the authors of the report advocated bolstering strong parent or parent figure and child relationships, as well as improving children's ability to self-regulate to help them achieve success (Cole et al, 2009.). Citing Masten and Coatsworth, Cole et al. reported that these components are key factors to all competent children, regardless of their circumstances. Therefore, fostering an environment with these components may lead to better outcomes for students with trauma. Using these factors, Cole et al. created a Flexible Framework as a guide for creating trauma-informed schools.

The framework is purposefully broad, avoiding a one-size-fits-all approach. The tools they recommended are strengths-based; staff is encouraged to look at students' strengths as opposed to their deficits. Specifically, "staff learned the importance of identifying students' areas of strength as a strategy to reach difficult children" (Cole et al., 2009, p. 46). The framework, which has six elements, includes a variety of tools that schools can use as they see best. The elements included schoolwide infrastructure and culture, staff training, academic instruction for traumatized children, and school policies, procedures, and protocols. The report details steps within each element that schools could

take to create conditions that allow for students with trauma to be successful. Again, the specifics are left to each school to create, but the framework gives guidance with which to begin. Chafouleas et al. (2016), on the other hand, created a model that incorporates aspects of school-wide positive behavior and intervention supports (SWPBIS) and SAMHSA's theory of the "four R's" (p. 12). The elements of SWPBIS: outcomes, practices, data, and systems, work together to inform decisions designed to meet the needs of all students. The four Rs focus on adult behavior: "(a) *realization* about trauma and its effects, (b) *recognition* of the signs of trauma, (c) *response* that appropriately embraces trauma understanding across tiers of service delivery, and (d) *resist* practices that could inadvertently re-traumatize" (p. 12). Chafouleas et al. proposed that the intended outcomes include preventing negative experiences from happening, building self-regulation skills for students, aiding students in returning to baseline after exhibiting behavior affected by trauma, and avoiding retraumatizing students. Their model also embedded knowledge about trauma as well as how to respond to students acting out because of trauma. Chafouleas and colleagues suggested using a framework similar to SWPBIS because it also supports adult behavior, which creates safe and supportive environments for all students.

Essentially, trauma-informed approaches acknowledge and understand trauma across all levels of interventions and prevent students from becoming traumatized at school. Like Cole et al. (2009), Chafouleas et al (2016). advocated planning to implement this new blueprint for trauma-informed schools. They ended their proposal by stating that schools need both professional development and then longitudinal studies to determine the efficacy of this proposal. Overall, Chafouleas et al.'s points are more detailed than

Cole et al.'s but fall within similar domains. Essentially, Chafouleas et al. build upon Cole et al.'s initial proposal for building trauma-informed schools.

Building on Cole et al.'s (2009) work, Tishelman et al. (2010) sought to extend the Flexible Framework into psychological evaluations conducted in schools. Their premises were that trauma may play a role in a student's behavior, each student with trauma exposure may react differently, and a student's history and learning experience can influence how the student reacts in school. Therefore, they postulated that school psychologists need to look at the possibility that a student has been exposed to trauma in order to address him appropriately. Their goal was to identify the potential challenges of conducting school-based psychological evaluations for traumatized children, identify the domains of trauma, identify common characteristics for each of the domains, and propose an approach for evaluating these issues. They reviewed the four domains often affected by trauma: self-regulation, physical, relationship, and academic as a starting point for their framework. Tishelman et al. explained the four domains of trauma in order to create a trauma lens for school psychologists to use when evaluating students.

On the other hand, Tishelman et al. (2010) also cautioned against using a trauma lens as the only way to evaluate a child,

> A child's difficulties at school can be unrelated to trauma, trauma can be a contributing factor, or trauma can account for most of the observed difficulties. Adopting a trauma lens can ensure that trauma is considered as a hypothesis when appropriate, but should not be used to overshadow other important etiologies for a child's presentation or lead to an overemphasis on trauma as an explanatory variable when other factors are more salient (p. 7).

This way of framing the evaluation of students reminds psychologists to consider trauma as a potential reason for a student's presentation. The challenge of using this lens in

school is that psychological evaluations are meant to be conducted individually. Tishelman et al.'s framework is designed to work with students one at a time and is not designed for use within a whole class structure.

On the other hand, Brunzell and colleagues (2016) proposed a framework to help students with trauma learn in a classroom setting. Their model is called trauma-informed positive education (TIPE) and is designed to help students with trauma both therapeutically and educationally. TIPE has two components: repairing the dysregulated stress response in trauma-affected students and repairing disrupted attachment styles. The former means helping students who have dysregulated stress responses become regulated when they experience stress. Regulation can happen either through skills students use to help themselves or by helping students identify their feelings and regulate themselves. The latter part of TIPE focuses on helping students form positive relationships.

> Specifically adapted for the classroom context, unconditional positive regard facilitates an environment where the student feels valued regardless of their presenting behaviors, affect, or cognitions; rather than looking to others for identity and approval, the student is encouraged to learn and listen to themselves (p. 67).

Echoing Cole et al.'s (2009) recommendations, Brunzell et al. advocated helping students to see the positive in themselves, a powerful psychological force (Becker et al., 2014).

Furthermore, it is hard for students with trauma to enjoy and sustain the enjoyment of positive emotions. It then becomes the teachers' responsibility to help students with this (Brunzell et al., 2016). Again, this is strengths-based. Rather than correcting wrong behavior, this theory encourages positive behavior, amplifying what is right and building success upon success. As Cole et al. (2009) discussed, this helps students find their "islands of competence" (p. 61). Instead of using a deficit model of

what a student does wrong, this encourages students to increase what they do right. In a growth mindset, this is the "power of yet" (Back, 2018). *I can't do [this] yet*, is more encouraging than *I can't do [this]*. Ultimately, the goal of TIPE is to help students increase their self-regulatory abilities, foster strong peer and teacher relationships, and increase their psychological resources for well-being (Brunzell et al., 2019).

Three out of the four models suggest pathways for schools to become trauma-informed (Brunzell et al., 2016; Chafouleas et al., 2016; Cole et al., 2009), while the fourth focuses on staff who support students (Tishelman et al., 2010). All of the proposals include building capacity for implementation as a system within a school. They also note that prevention in many trauma-informed approaches focuses on the individual and her ability to build self-regulation "with external supports focused on creating safe environments and building positive connections and trusting relationships" (Chafouleas et al., 2016, p. 10). The four proposals include building healthy relationships between students and adults (Brunzell et al., 2016; Chafouleas et al., 2016; Cole et al., 2009; Tishelman et al., 2010). Hence, relationships may be noted as a cornerstone of trauma-informed schools, which may be an easier entry point for principals in encouraging trauma-informed practices.

Sources of Trauma

Complicating the definition of students with trauma is the global pandemic caused by COVID-19. In 2020, countries around the world reacted to the pandemic. In the United States, there was a national lockdown. With these restrictions came a variety of complications in addition to the disease itself. Initially, many children were forced to stay home from in-person schooling. In Massachusetts, in March 2020, public schools closed

for in-person instruction, and students were expected to learn through virtual experiences. The entire state went into lockdown, putting stress on many families. Schooling remained this way through the end of the 2019–2020 school year. During the 2020–2021 school year, some students remained in virtual learning, some returned to a physical classroom, and many attended some form of hybrid learning: in-person and virtual. In the writing of this dissertation, during the 2021–2022 school year, the full effects of the pandemic on student learning were not yet completely known (An et al., 2021; Santibañez & Guarino, 2021). There was a rise in students with mental health challenges related to the pandemic, but it was too early to determine causation (Cockerham et al., 2021; Santibañez & Guarino, 2021).

Early reports about the effect of the pandemic on students' mental health were alarming. A journal article published in February 2022 reported that at least 5.2 million children around the world lost a caregiver during the first 19 months of the pandemic (Globe Wire Services, 2022). The report warned "that a child who loses a parent or a caregiver could suffer negative effects including an increased risk of poverty, sexual abuse, mental health challenges, and severe stress" (p. A5). Additionally, Cockerham et al. (2021) found that adolescents' positive affect decreased during the pandemic, and negative affect increased. They reported that "participants were experiencing a rise in negative emotions such as sadness, fear, and loneliness" (p. 7536). According to Schaffer et al. (2021), students who demonstrate negative feelings, as well as other social-emotional concerns, often have poorer academic outcomes.

Schiano (2022) cited the United States Surgeon General's acknowledgment of the havoc the pandemic wreaked on students,

> The pandemic added to the pre-existing challenges that America's youth faced. It disrupted the lives of children and adolescents, such as in-person schooling, in-person social opportunities with peers and mentors, access to health care and social services, food, housing, and the health of their caregivers. The pandemic's negative impacts most heavily affected those who were vulnerable to begin with, such as youth with disabilities, racial and ethnic minorities, LGBTQ+ youth, low-income youth, youth in rural areas, youth in immigrant households, youth involved with the child welfare or juvenile justice systems, and homeless youth (slide 13).

According to a declaration from the American Academy of Pediatrics, American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, and Children's Hospital Association (in Schiano, 2022),

> This worsening crisis in child and adolescent mental health is inextricably tied to the stress brought on by COVID-19 and the ongoing struggle for racial justice and represents an acceleration of trends observed prior to 2020. Rates of childhood mental health concerns and suicide rose steadily between 2010 and 2020, and by 2018, suicide was the second leading cause of death for youth ages 10–24. The pandemic has intensified this crisis: across the country, we have witnessed dramatic increases in Emergency Department visits for all mental health emergencies, including suspected suicide attempts (slide 14).

There may be long-term effects from the pandemic, and students may struggle because of it.

Additionally, the topics of racism and social justice once again gained prominence in the media in the United States in 2020. Three deaths in the winter and spring of 2020 brought these topics into the spotlight. Ahmaud Arbery, a 25-year-old man, was murdered in February 2020 in Georgia (Fausset, 2022). Initially, there were no charges filed until a video of the killing of this unarmed Black man by White men went viral. In March 2020, Breonna Taylor, a 26-year-old Black woman, was killed in her home when police officers executed a no-knock warrant in Kentucky at night (Lovan, 2022). In May 2020, George Floyd, a 46-year-old Black man in Minneapolis, was murdered by a police

officer who put his knee on Mr. Floyd's neck for almost nine and a half minutes (Griffith, 2021).

Multiple protests were held during the spring of 2020 because of these events. Discussions around racism, social justice, and the role of the police in American society may have impacted many students. Reaction to these events, adolescents' prior experiences, and the environment in which they lived may have triggered traumatic responses in high school students. Given the pandemic and the effect of racism, trauma exposure likely rose in 2020. It is important to note that students who are exposed to stressful situations, which may or may not be labeled trauma, has increased dramatically since the spring of 2020 (Cockerham et al., 2021; Santibañez & Guarino, 2021; Schiano, 2022).

Proposed Methods

Literature Gap

In reading the existing research, several gaps became apparent. There were conceptual gaps; very little research identified trauma-informed practices for schools. The empirical gap appeared when examining the research concerning trauma-informed interventions. Initially, research focused on trauma-informed PD and teachers who self-reported improved teaching practices (Goodwin-Glick, 2017; Haas, 2018; Taytslin, 2016). There did not appear to be research regarding student outcomes. Finally, there was a gap in the literature about how teachers form relationships with students. While there is some research addressing the importance of teachers having relationships with students, there was little focus on how they form the relationships (e.g., Brunzell et al., 2016; Caldarella et al., 2021; Chafouleas et al., 2016; Cole et al., 2009; Egeberg et al., 2021;

Tishelman et al., 2010), or studies examining the formation of teacher and student relationships.

Previous Study

My original objective was to interview a few teachers who participated in trauma-informed PD to discover their perceptions about the effect of their learning on their practice. However, no one responded to an invitation to discuss trauma-informed PD, a gap in practice. A literature search revealed a lack of trauma-informed PD (Bhatnagar & Many, 2022; Howick, 2022; Koslouski & Stark, 2021; Stratford et al., 2020). Therefore, my query was expanded to include PD that might touch upon teaching students with trauma. I chose teachers who had voluntarily participated in PD that appeared to have some relevance to my topic; for example, they participated in an anti-racism course or PD about social-emotional learning. Ultimately, three high school teachers were interviewed and asked about PD they attended in an attempt to understand what role teachers believed PD played in their practice and drilled down to its core: the effect teachers say PD has on students with trauma. Embedded in these research questions was my interest in how teachers learn to teach students who have experienced trauma and what they believe about their practice based on trauma-informed PD. Surprisingly, all three talked about the importance of building relationships with students, especially students with trauma, more than they talked about any specific strategies. Since it was not clear how they defined or experienced their relationships with students, I shifted my focus away from PD and toward teacher-student relationships.

Research Questions

Since it is not clear how they define and experience their relationships with students, the next step was to dig into these teachers' stories to examine how they define, describe, and develop their relationships. This narrative study explores and seeks to tell the stories behind these teachers' experiences. This method of research, according to Kim (2016), "is concerned with particularities, analogies, and metaphors that go beyond the facts and rules, and that provide open invitations to different reactions, feelings, and interpretations for the reader" (p. 11). Through listening to their words and stories about their experiences, I sought to answer questions that allow teachers to describe what it is like to teach students with trauma and what and how decisions are made when teaching students with trauma; ultimately, to answer these two research questions:

RQ 1: What are the stories teachers tell about teaching students who have experienced trauma and their relationships with those students?

RQ2: How do teachers make sense of their experiences?

Using a narrative inquiry approach allows teachers to share their stories in their own words and actions. According to Bhattacharya (2017), "narrative inquiry is a framework that helps researchers explore, discover, understand, and construct stories based on the participants' recounting of their experiences" (p. 93). By asking teachers about their experiences with trauma-informed PD, working with students who have been exposed to trauma, and their teaching, I created meaning about working with students with trauma. The narrative inquiry provided an opportunity to examine how the adults in the classroom tell how they build relationships and create safe spaces for those students. Listening to their words offered a lens into the experiences students with trauma have on a regular

basis and a framework for analyzing the data through the lens of a trauma-informed school.

Furthermore, both a paradigmatic mode of analysis and a narrative mode of analysis were employed. The former is finding patterns within the narration. What were the themes that recurred in the stories? The latter analysis is using data to create a story (Kim, 2016). Given the initial query, teachers touched upon elements of Cole et al.'s (2009) Flexible Framework, which included staff training, academic strategies, and non-academic strategies. Cole and colleagues recommended staff training that includes the following topics: helping children regulate emotions, maintaining high academic standards, helping children feel safe managing behavior and setting limits, reducing bullying and harassment, helping children have a sense of agency, building on strengths, understanding connections between behavior and emotions, and avoiding labels. Academic strategies include helping students recognize their "islands of competence" (p. 61), predictability, consistency with classmates, and positive behavioral supports; non-academic strategies consist of building non-academic relationships and extra-curricular activities. Elements from this framework were used to make sense of the teachers' stories about their relationships with students who present with trauma. Through interviews, their stories were analyzed regarding creating trauma-informed classrooms, the strengths in their practices, and the apparent gaps.

Using narrative inquiry also means analyzing participants' stories through their experiences. Preliminary research revealed that teachers wanted to create relationships with students to respond better to them. The next step was hearing the stories they had to tell about their relationships and determining how they made sense of their experiences.

Positionality statement

When I graduated from college, my goal was to get a job teaching high school English and remain in that school until I retired. At that time, I often heard that *students are not what they used to be*. As a teacher in my twenties, I was able to recognize that students always had difficulties outside of school, but in the 1980s and 1990s, it seemed harder to ignore those difficulties in the classroom. It also was hard to find a permanent teaching position; Massachusetts had recently passed Proposition 2 ½, and many teachers were laid off (Morgan, 1982). I realized I needed to get a master's degree in order to become more marketable. I chose a program in educational administration and, at the same time, obtained a position as a counselor in an educational nonprofit agency. Therefore, I switched to the school counseling program and soon became a school counselor at an alternative high school. After earning my master's, I held the position of guidance counselor in a few high schools. When I hit a wall as a guidance counselor, I turned to a second master's in school leadership, leading to assistant principal positions in two different high schools.

I was working as an assistant principal when I began a doctoral program in educational leadership. In the first course, Introduction to Inquiry, the professors introduced us to the epistemological perspective: how do we know what we know? Drs. Rallis and Kimball brought the class into a room with two strings attached to the walls. One side of a string was labeled interpretivist, the other objectivist. The other string, which hung perpendicular to the first, was labeled radical change on one side and status quo on the other.

We, the students, had to place ourselves in a quadrant on this continuum to define our ways of understanding truth and creating knowledge. As Rallis and Rossman (2012) define it, objectivist assumptions are those that define reality without social actors, while interpretivist assumptions are that reality is socially constructed and full of meaning. The other string represents the speed with which change happens: quickly or slowly. On this second continuum, I put myself in the middle of the string representing change. My experience has been that change comes slower than I would like. Through mistakes, experience, and more mistakes, I have learned what Steinhauser (in Zavadsky, 2016) reported, "You have to go slow to go fast" (p. 513). I continue to learn to have patience in working toward improved student learning. Again, this puts me in the middle of the radical and status quo continuum.

As far as the objectivist versus interpretivist paradigm, I was then, as I continue to be, on the fence. As a guidance counselor, my favorite answer was "It depends," so it really was not a surprise that I fell close to the center of the quadrant. I believe that we are actors in our lives and the research we touch. Just by observing a classroom, I change the dynamic.

Similarly, my roles as a full-time employee and student are interconnected; therefore, my research journey began outside the university classroom. My introduction to the topic of trauma occurred when I took a job as an assistant principal in a therapeutic high school for students with anxiety and depression. I soon discovered that students with anxiety and depression often have exposure to trauma. My new job coincided with beginning a doctoral program in educational leadership. These parts of my life were intertwined and, as a result, led me to an independent study about trauma-informed

schools. I was interested in the strategies that were helpful for the anxious and depressed students I worked with and curious about which strategies could be replicated in a larger public school. I participated in a monthly discussion group about trauma-informed learning and knew I wanted to learn more than the meetings I attended virtually (pre-pandemic) were teaching me. I asked my advisor to allow me to do an independent study with her about trauma-informed schools, and she said no. She sent me in the direction of Dr. Ian Barron, then the Director of the Center for International Education at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, whose work is focused on trauma and trauma-informed care. He graciously agreed to advise me on the independent study.

My independent study became a review of the literature about trauma-informed schools. I read lit reviews, empirical studies, and proposed frameworks for supporting trauma-informed schools. As I read, I found a great deal of research about trauma-informed PD and self-reported improvements in practice (Blitz & Mulcahy, 2017; Goodwin-Glick, 2017; Haas, 2018; Taytslin, 2016). I identified a gap in the literature; few studies surveyed students or looked at student outcomes, and teachers reported changes in teaching. For my dissertation, I decided to look at student outcomes; I would begin with my comprehensive exam by interviewing teachers who participated in trauma-informed PD. They, in turn, would lead me to students with trauma whose outcomes I could examine and perhaps interview. I quickly realized the challenge: teachers typically do not attend trauma-informed PD. Therefore, I immediately shifted my focus and interviewed teachers who had participated in PD that touched upon trauma but were not solely trauma-focused. I was fortunate enough to identify three teachers willing to speak with me about their experiences both in PD and as classroom teachers; what stood out in

the interviews was the importance they placed on their relationships with students. I have now ventured deeper into their stories.

Conclusion

Students who are exposed to trauma may have difficulty learning (e.g., Cole et al., 2009; Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018; Tishelman et al., 2010). These students may be challenged to develop healthy relationships (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018; Egeberg et al., 3032; Greene, 2008; Hill, 2001). There is scant research about what healthy relationships look like and how they are built, let alone how they can be effective as trauma-informed classrooms. Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, Ristuccia (2022) claims that all students have been exposed to trauma. Additionally, the renewed focus on social justice, the war in Ukraine, and unrest in the Middle East may also be sources of trauma for students. Examining the stories of teachers who acknowledge teaching students with trauma may lead to a further understanding of how to better teach this population.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

Students who have experienced trauma may have difficulty building relationships, which can, in turn, make it difficult for students to learn in school (Brunzell et al., 2016; Burke Harris, 2018; Chafouleas et al., 2016; Cole et al., 2009; Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018; Hill, 2001; NCTSN, 2008; Tishelman et al., 2010; Yohannan & Carlson, 2019). Students with trauma may behave in challenging ways, potentially causing disruptions in the classroom (Brunzell et al., 2016; Burke Harris, 2018; Caldarella et al., 2021; Chafouleas et al., 2016; Cole et al., 2009; Egeberg et al., 2021; Tishelman et al., 2016). Therefore, teachers may be more effective if they respond to students in a way that is trauma-informed. Furthermore, because of the complexities that students with trauma bring with them, teachers may rely on their peers to help them professionally. Narrative inquiry is one way that teachers can share their stories about teaching students with trauma.

Relationships and Learning

In the United States, schools are governed locally. Education is not named as a right in the Constitution, and school attendance is not compulsory (Goldstein, 2014; Hess & Meeks, 2013; McDermott, 1999; McDermott & Jensen, 2005). Furthermore, Labaree (1997) argued that three purposes of schooling are at odds with each other: democratic equality (schools should focus on preparing citizens), social efficiency (they should focus on training workers), and social mobility (schools should prepare individuals to compete

for social positions). Additionally, students attend school for a variety of reasons: for safety, for free lunch, for social reasons, and for education (Cleveland, 2011; Rallis et al., 1995; Sizer, 1992; Tyack & Cuban, 1995). Given that every state is left to establish its own education system, and there is no single purpose to education, it is challenging to describe one perfect way of educating all students.

Moreover, as Rallis et al. (1995) reported, the "traditional classroom" (p. 18) was not designed to be inclusive of all children. Therefore, describing the best way to educate children is difficult, let alone for children with trauma. The cynical adage states that *those who can't, teach*. The truth is that teaching is harder than it looks; Saphier et al. (2008) said, "teaching is one of the most complex human endeavors imaginable" (p. 1). Teaching is much more complicated than simply implementing good structure in the classroom. Teaching is matching students' needs with an appropriate and engaging curriculum. The goal is to teach all students effectively—a demanding task at best.

Teaching and the learning process engage the brain. Darling-Hammond and Cook-Harvey (2018) reported that "optimal brain architecture is developed by the presence of warm, consistent relationships; positive experiences; and positive perceptions of these experiences" (p. 5). They elaborated that supportive relationships are the foundation for development and learning. Furthermore, they shared that when children have conversations with adults, their brains develop. Conversations can help students grow in cognition and linguistics more so than a teacher talking merely to a class (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018).

Similarly, Tyack and Cuban (1995) stated that the goal of school reform is to make positive relationships between students and teachers more common. "This suggests

that the major aim of reform is to improve learning, generously construed as rich intellectual, civil, and social development" (p. 136). Ultimately, an effective classroom is one where students engage with each other and learn to build trusting relationships.

Relationships can be defined as an interaction between people. The *Oxford English Dictionary* (n.d.) defines relationship as "The state or fact of being related; the way in which two things are connected; a connection, an association" (Relationship). Relationships, which can be supportive or detrimental, are connections between people. Furthermore, relationships are integral to the learning process. As Hill (2001) noted, learning is a social activity. His third principle of learning states, "We learn with and through others" (p. 7). The idea behind this principle is that learning occurs through social interaction. Hill wrote that "Collective learning provides opportunities to teach one another, exchange ideas, reinforce concepts, solve problems, debate ideas, and challenge assertions" (p. 7). To that end, Mazur articulated what he calls peer instruction. He asks his college students to read and respond to a set of questions prior to attending class. Mazur then provides time for students to discuss the answers to the questions with each other. He reported that students have a deeper understanding of the material compared with a traditional college lecture. Mazur attributes the success of this model to the students' interaction and grappling with the material (Hanford, 2011). Mazur enacted what Rallis et al. (1995) stated, "The traditional role expected of teachers in the past—as a deliverer of information—will not suffice to meet the needs of students today" (p. 6). What Mazur does not discuss, however, is the value of the relationship between students.

Students with trauma may resemble students with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD). Caldarella et al. (2021) reported that students with EBD "often refuse to

follow directions, engage in defiant/non-compliant behaviors, or ignore their teachers in a passive-aggressive manner" (p. 163), making it challenging for teachers to cultivate relationships with these students. They go on to say, however, that positive teacher-student interactions can positively influence the relationship and can include personally greeting each student. "With such personalized greetings, teachers have been able to increase the on-task behavior, or engagement, and decrease disruptions of students in their classrooms" (p. 163). Furthermore, decreasing negative feedback and increasing positive feedback while teaching can enhance student engagement. Essentially, positive interactions beget positive interactions and are more likely to have students positively participate in class, with teachers, and perhaps even with classmates. As a board-certified behavior analyst (BCBA) reported, "The student wants your attention. If you don't give it to him when he's behaving, you're going to give it to him when he's misbehaving" (A. Dilling, personal communication, April 2021).

Similarly, in researching effective classroom management, Egeberg et al. (2021) reported that teachers who built rapport with students through caring for their well-being were able to foster positive relationships. The teachers indicated

> that trust and encouragement were fundamental aspects of their relationships with students, in addition to high expectations and appropriate challenges. [They] held students accountable but also fostered student responsibility with support and structure. They firmly believed in creating learning experiences for their students that were varied and engaging (p. 121).

They created classrooms that combined caring relationships, behavior management, and instructional management.

> All teachers interviewed agreed that '90% of [effective classroom management] is building a rapport. Once I've built a rapport, then I can

> train them, both academically and socially. I think if you are engaging and interactive and actually show that you care about them and about their progress. That goes a long way into establishing a successful classroom' (Egeberg et al., 2021, p. 120).

This study reinforced the idea that once teachers build relationships with students, it is easier for students to access the curriculum.

Identifying healthy relationships as the key to accessing learning, Turnaround for Children developed a framework to teach children "the foundational skills of attachment, stress management, and self-regulation, and *then* layered the other skills for learning on top" (Burke Harris, 2018, p. 188). According to Burke Harris, Turnaround is an organization supervised by Dr. Pamela Cantor, a psychiatrist who specializes in child mental health and working with children with trauma exposure. Turnaround began working with New York City public schools after 9/11. They built systems of support for students and families and trained all staff members in schools about trauma exposure. Through their approach, they were able to reduce the number of suspensions by half over three years. However, this change in culture and climate did not produce the expected gains on standardized test scores, which is when they created Building Blocks for Learning to teach relationship building. "Turnaround embraces an approach that simply identifies where a student is on the developmental trajectory and uses the science of toxic stress to help get that child back on track" (Burke Harris, 2018, p. 188). Turnaround for Children is teaching students how to develop, build, and maintain healthy relationships and use them for learning.

Healthy relationships and constructive interactions are the foundations of successful learning. Yet teaching students how to build healthy relationships may seem frivolous. There does not appear to be a standardized test to assess students'

relationships. Quite the opposite, in response to a call for less standardized testing, a spokesperson for a United States representative from California refuted the idea by saying, "When you're really trying to figure out whether a given child is learning, you can't afford to wait years to determine whether they can read or do math" (Heitin, 2014, p. 16). The implication is that the only worthwhile assessment is academic. However, if students learn best through interactions that are predicated on healthy relationships, teaching them to build healthy relationships is imperative (Greene, 2008). Although relationship building is not often recognized as part of the curriculum, Greene defended the idea of helping students with nonacademic problems. He said students

> are involved in problem situations they are not handling well. What is the goal of a helping relationship? To help kids not only better manage a given problem, but to apply the learning to sorting out other problems and to preventing problems from occurring in the first place. Helping provides kids with tools to become more effective self-helpers and more responsible 'agents of change' in their own lives (p. 54).

Teaching students how to problem solve is a skill that can be applied to all areas of their learning. Yet, in the current climate of teacher evaluation, relationship building is not necessarily a skill that is assessed (Goldstein, 2014). The response, then, is that there should be another way to measure teachers' effect on students, not just test scores. Rockoff said,

> If we had a more holistic view of teaching, that would be great. But I don't mean touchy-feely, 'you can teach however you want.' It's the idea that there's not just one thing we care about our kids learning. We're going to measure how kids do on socio-cognitive outcomes and reward teachers on that, too (quoted in Goldstein, 2014, p. 230).

Like students, teachers should be evaluated through a variety of measures. Healthy relationships between students and between students and teachers are a large part

of an effective classroom for students with trauma. Structure and predictability, engaging content, and teaching within the zone of proximal development are equally important. Adept teachers should be able to build relationships with students to effectively teach students with trauma.

Childhood Trauma

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN; n.d.) succinctly defines trauma exposure as "When a child feels intensely threatened by an event he or she is involved in or witnesses" (Trauma Types). The American Psychiatric Association (APA; 2013) narrowly defines trauma as when a person experiences "actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence" (p. 271). Cole et al. (2009) deem that trauma exposure can be the result of watching a parent be assaulted by a partner, being physically abused, or being neglected. Some traumatic events happen once, like an assault by a stranger. Others repeatedly happen, like domestic violence. Some are private, like being neglected as a child. At the same time, others affect a large group of people, such as those who witnessed the attacks on 9/11 or were quarantined during a pandemic. Chafouleas et al. (2016) explain the "three 'E's' of trauma: event, experience and effect" (p. 9). The *event* is the initial occurrence of something happening. It is one's experience that deems it traumatic. The person's reaction to the event, his support or lack thereof, her background and beliefs, and the duration and context in which the event occurs all determine the *experience*. Finally, if the person can regulate their reaction to the experience if the experience interferes with daily living, or if they can manage their feelings and actions, it determines the *effect* of the event (Chafouleas et al., 2016).

Furthermore, reaction to trauma may be influenced by a myriad of variables, including the nature of the trauma, the number of times the event happened, and the age at which the trauma occurred. Trauma that occurs once is considered simple trauma (Wamser-Nanney & Vandenberg, 2013). Wamser-Nanney and Vandenberg reported that "the longer and more frequently the trauma occurs, the more severe and varied are the posttraumatic sequelae" (p. 672). Therefore, trauma is defined by the person who has experienced the event.

Trauma comes from a variety of experiences and can have a myriad of negative effects. According to D'Andrea et al. (2011), the most common types of trauma experienced by adults were witnessing someone being badly injured or killed, being involved in a fire, flood, or natural disaster, and being involved in a life-threatening accident. These are primarily simple traumas, events that occur once. Complex trauma, on the other hand, could arise from repeated negative events. Van der Kolk (2005) stated that "complex trauma is experienced through multiple, chronic, prolonged, and developmentally adverse traumatic events most often of an interpersonal nature…often within a child's caregiving circle" (p. 402). Therefore, complex trauma has multiple negative effects. Kar (2019) postulated that children and adolescents are more vulnerable to traumatic events because "they are in a developmental stage of their life when the brain is still maturing; when the psychological and personal strengths are not crystallised [sic]; and robust individual coping strategies and socioeconomic stabilities may not have been attained" (p. 1).

Moreover, Wamser-Nanney and Vandenberg (2013) theorized that because interpersonal trauma, such as child abuse, is intentionally perpetrated by another person,

particularly one who is close to the child, it is more harmful to the victim. Stated bluntly, "trauma is often considered toxic to development" (p. 672). Additionally, when trauma happens with a child's caregiver, it may be difficult for the child to learn how to trust and develop healthy relationships (Cole et al., 2009; McArthur, n.d; McInerney & McKlindon, 2014; van der Kolk, 2005; Wamser-Nanney & Vandenberg, 2013). Trauma may be the result of an adverse childhood experience.

The first adverse childhood experience (ACE) survey was conducted in 1997. According to Evans and Evans (2019), Felitti and Anda surveyed more than 17,000 participants and discovered that 64% of the volunteers had at least one ACE. They divided the ACEs into three categories: abuse, neglect, and family dysfunction (Evans & Evans, 2019). Since then, a number of studies have looked at the effect of ACEs on development, relationships, and trauma (Beal et al., 2019; Coleman, 2019; Evans & Evans, 2019; Harper, 2019; van Duin et al., 2019). D'Andrea et al. (2011) reported that in the United States, it is estimated that 60% of men and 51% of women have experienced some form of trauma in their lives. According to NCTSN (2013), two-thirds of children under the age of 16 in the United States have been exposed to a traumatic event.

Furthermore, 13% of children have been exposed to multiple adverse events (Beal et al., 2019). D'Andrea et al. (2011) stated that approximately one in three children are likely to experience physical abuse, while one in four girls and one in five boys experience sexual victimization during childhood. Wiest-Stevenson and Lee (2016) asserted that one in four adolescents has experienced at least one traumatic event. At the same time, Sacks and Murphey (2018) reported that nearly 50% of all children in the US experience at least one ACE. According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health

Services Administration (SAMHSA; 2019), in 2017, 32% of children aged 17 years or younger who did not have a serious emotional disturbance were diagnosed with trauma-related and stressor-related disorders. This number may have increased during 2020 because of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the increased awareness of racism and social justice in the United States.

In short, countless numbers of youths are exposed to traumatic events that they experience differently (Chafouleas et al., 2016). Some children are exposed to simple traumas, while others experience complex trauma. Millions of children experience an event that they internalize as trauma. Regardless of the type of traumatic event, school-aged children and adolescents are exposed to trauma every year. Their experience with trauma can affect their learning.

Trauma and Learning

Learning is a complex process and begins with the brain. The brain consists of the reptilian brain, the oldest part of the brain, and the mammalian brain, also known as the limbic system. According to van der Kolk (2015), the reptilian brain is

> responsible for all the things that newborn babies can do: eat, sleep, wake, cry, breathe; feel temperature, hunger, wetness, and pain; and rid the body of toxins by urinating and defecating. The brain stem and the hypothalamus (which sits directly above it) together control the energy levels of the body.

While the mammalian brain is

> the seat of the emotions, the monitor of danger, the judge of what is pleasurable or scary, the arbiter of what is or is not important for survival purposes. It is also a central command post for coping with the challenges of living within our complex social networks (van der Kolk, 2015, The brain from bottom to top).

Together, van der Kolk (2015) describes the reptilian brain and mammalian brain as the "emotional brain [whose] key task is to look out for your welfare" (The brain from bottom to top). He describes the process of the emotional brain informing the body of an event, good or bad, by releasing hormones. The emotional brain is programmed to react first, and the rational part of the brain thinks later. van der Kolk (2015) gives the textbook example of reacting to a snake first, then realizing it is only a coiled rope. Finally, around two years old, the frontal lobe begins to truly develop. This part of the brain is responsible for language and abstract thought. The frontal lobe is also the part of the brain that controls impulses; not eating when hungry or not acting out when angry is the result of the frontal lobe preventing the automatic response to a particular feeling.

Inside the limbic system is the thalamus. The thalamus takes in sensory information and sorts it to create "a fully blended autobiographical soup, an integrated, coherent experience of 'this is what is happening to me'" (van der Kolk, 2015, Identifying danger: The cook and the smoke detector). This experience goes down to the amygdala's unconscious brain quickly and up to the frontal lobe, and conscious awareness is slightly slower. Sometimes, however, the thalamus' processing is not accurate, so each sensation is processed as isolated and may signal the feeling of a danger that will never end. The amygdala determines if the new information, such as a threat, is important for survival and reacts accordingly by sending signals to orchestrate a whole-body response. This process happens even before the frontal lobe receives the information, which may process the information differently. Van der Kolk (2015) summarizes, "By the time we realize what is happening, our body may already be on the

move" (Identifying danger: The cook and the smoke detector). The thalamus may force the body to act first and think second.

When children experience trauma, it negatively affects their brain development as well as their ability to form relationships with caregivers (Brunzell et al., 2016). As children grow into adolescents, the brain changes. Coleman (2019) reports that, except for the first three years of life, the brain changes more during the teenage years than any other stage of human development. The brain increases grey matter at the end of childhood, and during adolescence, this matter is organized and rearranged. Furthermore, myelin, the material that encases nerve fibers, increases, allowing impulses to move quickly and efficiently through the brain. Thus, the brain works at a higher capacity. Simultaneously, the prefrontal cortex, which is the part of the brain that involves thinking, planning, and problem-solving, and the amygdala, which controls emotions, sensation, and arousal, undergo major changes during the teen years. The prefrontal cortex matures slower than the amygdala and other parts of the limbic system (Coleman, 2019).

Therefore, as Romeo (2013) relayed, the teenage brain may be vulnerable to stress. He described studies that found that chronic stress during adolescence resulted in reduced structural plasticity in the amygdala. Plasticity, according to Coleman (2019) is the brain's characteristic that allows the brain to recover from injury or trauma. Van der Kolk (2015) explained neuroplasticity as when neurons repeatedly respond in the same way and becomes the most likely way to respond. He goes on to say, "If you feel safe and loved, your brain becomes specialized in exploration, play, and cooperation; if you are frightened and unwanted, it specializes in managing feelings of fear and abandonment"

(van der Kolk, 2015, The brain from top to bottom). That is why Romeo (2013) remarked that "stress-induced alterations in the adolescent brain are also associated with compromised emotional function and cognitive skills" (p. 144).

Furthermore, Brunzell et al. (2016) stated that trauma interrupts brain development, arresting growth so that the stage of brain development may not match a person's chronological age, and may reflect Coleman's (2019) statement that "the environment itself has an impact on brain development" (p. 355). Burke Harris (2018) explained this in another way. She stated that when a threat is removed, the system reacts appropriately, and the body is able to regulate. She referred to this as "tolerable stress" (p. 55). However, when a person is constantly in a state of heightened alert, tolerable stress can become toxic stress because the system responds more frequently and intensely to stressors. Therefore, an abundance of stress can keep a person in a constant state of alertness, always reacting to stimuli large and small, dangerous or benign. Coleman (2019) reported that there are no strong longitudinal studies to substantiate the claim that ACEs negatively impact brain development. Yet, he stated that because of plasticity, "it may well be that positive experiences during the teenage years have the potential to undo or at least limit the effect of any previous trauma or damage" (p. 355). This statement is rather hopeful because it may signal the potential to rewire the brain to react differently.

Unfortunately, the reality is that exposure to trauma and traumatic events can negatively influence school performance. Brunzell et al. (2016) reported that children who have experienced trauma are two and a half times more likely to fail a grade, have lower assessment scores, have disabilities that may negatively impact schooling, and are more likely to be suspended. Tishelman et al. (2010) found that children show the

consequences of trauma exposure across stages of development. They reported that sexually abused teenagers are found to have lower academic skills, more behavioral and social difficulties, and are more likely to avoid school than their peers (Tishelman et al., 2010). Children who have been exposed to trauma have a lower attention span, less ability to concentrate, poorer organizational skills, and more difficulty with abstract reasoning (Cole et al., 2009; Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018; NCTSN, 2008; Tishelman et al., 2010; Yohannan & Carlson, 2019). Burke Harris (2018) found in her medical practice that students who had four or more ACEs were 32 times as likely to have learning or behavior problems in school. Students with trauma histories are more likely to need special education services and have behavioral challenges that can lead to disciplinary referrals and suspensions (NCTSN, 2008; Tishelman et al., 2010; Wamser-Nanney & Vandenberg, 2013). There is a strong relationship between trauma and negative outcomes in school.

The connection between trauma and learning in school is a relatively recent endeavor. A review of the literature found that one of the earliest studies about the connection between trauma and learning was written in 2010 (Cohen & Barron, 2021). Tishelman et al. (2010) defined four domains affected by trauma: self-regulation, relationships, physical, and academic. Prior to that, in 2005, Cole and colleagues authored the book *Helping Traumatized Children Learn*, the first publication of its kind. The National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN) began posting literature about children, trauma, and learning as early as 2008.

However, the overwhelming majority of research on the topic of trauma and learning was written beginning in 2016 (Brunzell et al.; Chafouleas et al., Taytslin;

Wiest-Stevenson & Lee). Perfect et al. (2016) conducted a systematic review of the literature published between 1990–2015 about school-related outcomes of traumatic event exposure and traumatic stress symptoms. Of the initial 6,107 articles identified, they reviewed the 102 articles that were school-focused. The literature review also included the three outcomes they classified as trauma-related: cognitive functioning because of its relationship to learning; academic functioning as an indicator of academic success; and teacher-reported social-emotional behavioral functioning as a means of including trauma-related psychosocial outcomes in a school setting (Perfect et al., 2016). Their review included international articles and articles concerning various grades, whereas I focused on high school students in the United States. Perfect and colleagues reported that there were significant differences in cognitive functioning for students who were trauma-exposed or had traumatic stress symptoms.

Furthermore, students with traumatic event exposure, traumatic stress symptoms, or both were more likely to be diagnosed with ADHD or learning disabilities. Burke Harris (2018) surveyed her patients to determine if they had ACEs. She found a direct correlation between behavior problems in school and "toxic doses of adversity" (p. 59). Perfect et al. (2016) examined social-emotional-behavioral functioning from the teachers' perspective because, prior to this study, that data had not been aggregated. The findings for student manifestation of trauma-related psychosocial outcomes in schools, as reported by teachers, were inconsistent. Many teachers reported externalizing behaviors based on trauma, but others did not report increased behaviors compared to the control group. Perfect et al. explicitly stated the need for school-based trauma research in academic outcomes.

A review of the empirical studies about trauma-informed high schools in the United States found that most of the studies focused on staff (Cohen & Barron, 2021). Slightly more than half of them worked with teachers and professional staff (Blitz & Mulcahy, 2017; Goodwin-Glick, 2017; Haas, 2018; Kataoka et al., 2018; Taytslin, 2016), while two researchers worked directly with students (Franco, 2018; Waibel, 2017). One study looked at the outcomes of using a trauma-focused intervention as an alternative to suspension (Baroni et al., 2020), and another looked at trauma responses in IEPs (Buxton, 2018). Many of the studies that focused on high schools were small and included fewer than 35 participants (Buxton, 2018; Franco, 2018; Haas, 2018; Taytslin, 2016; Waibel, 2017). One study included more than just professional staff, including school bus drivers, cafeteria workers, and paraprofessionals, and it totaled 552 participants (Goodwin-Glick, 2017). A community-based participatory research project began with 200 professional staff members and ultimately had 37 staff members still actively involved over the course of a year (Blitz & Mulcahy, 2017). Despite the appearance of some research, there is a dearth of empirical studies that examine the connection between trauma and learning. Cohen and Barron (2021) noted that the disparate nature of focus, quality, and limitations of methodologies of the studies reviewed rendered it impossible to generalize to the efficacy of trauma-informed approaches within high schools. Empirical studies tended to focus on PD with adults as a means of creating or sustaining trauma-informed schools rather than student outcomes. Overall, remarkably little commonality existed between the studies, programs, and results.

In summary, trauma affects brain development (Brunzell et al., 2016; Coleman, 2019; Romeo, 2013; van der Kolk, 2015). The brain's development and efficiency are

vital to learning. Moreover, the research is indicative that children who have suffered trauma are more likely to have academic difficulties than children who have not (Bilias-Lolis et al., 2017; Burke Harris, 2018; Cole et al., 2009; NCTSN, 2008; Perfect et al., 2016; Tishelman et al., 2010; Wamser-Nanney & Vandenberg, 2013; Wiest-Stevenson, & Lee, 2016; Yohannan & Carlson, 2019). All of these challenges make it difficult for students to learn. Given the number of students attending school who have experienced trauma, schools must become trauma-informed.

Trauma-Informed Schools

It is the contention of this research study that trauma-informed schools should be better able to help students with trauma to access the curriculum and learn. Current research should demonstrate that students who have experienced trauma and attend trauma-informed schools are more likely to have better learning outcomes. The field of trauma-informed schools is so young, though, that this assumption has not been tested. However, four groups of researchers created new frameworks for working with students with trauma (Brunzell et al., 2016; Chafouleas et al., 2016; Cole et al., 2009; Tishelman et al., 2010). Cole and colleagues first wrote *Helping Traumatized Children Learn* in 2005. They proposed the "Flexible Framework" to help schools become trauma-informed. Tishelman et al. (2010) explained the four domains of trauma in order to create a trauma lens for school psychologists to use when evaluating students. Brunzell et al. (2016) articulated trauma-informed positive education (TIPE) as an approach to helping students with trauma learn. Finally, Chafouleas et al. (2016) connected trauma-informed care and multitiered service delivery for the prevention and intervention of emotional and

behavioral outcomes for students with trauma. These studies may form the basis for creating trauma-informed schools.

Helping Traumatized Children Learn was a report and policy agenda that was a project of the Massachusetts Advocates for Children in collaboration with Harvard Law School and The Task Force on Children Affected by Domestic Violence (Cole et al., 2009). The authors of this report cited Matsen and Coatsworth's common factors for competent children, regardless of their circumstances growing up:

1. Strong parent or parent surrogate figure and child relationship
2. Good cognitive skills
3. Ability to self-regulate

Therefore, the authors advocated bolstering these factors to help children achieve success (Cole et al., 2009)—the key to trauma-informed schools. Cole et al. created the Flexible Framework as a guide for creating trauma-informed schools. The framework is purposefully broad, avoiding a one-size-fits-all approach. The tools they recommend are strengths-based, meaning staff is encouraged to look at students' strengths as opposed to their deficits. Specifically, "staff learned the importance of identifying students' areas of strength as a strategy to reach difficult children" (Cole et al., 2009, p. 46). The framework, which has six elements, includes a variety of tools that schools can use as they see best. For example, nonacademic strategies look different in rural areas, suburban areas, and urban areas. Instead of dictating what nonacademic strategies should be, they provide guidance as to what they could be so that every school or district can incorporate trauma-informed approaches outside of the classroom. The elements of the framework are:

- Schoolwide infrastructure and culture
- Staff training
- Linking with mental health professionals
- Academic instruction for traumatized children
- Nonacademic strategies
- School policies, procedures, and protocols (Cole et al., 2009, p. 47)

The report lists steps within each element that schools should take to create conditions that allow for students with trauma to be successful. Cole and colleagues (2009) conclude their report with recommendations. Included as part of the recommendations are building consensus between key stakeholders for policies; teachers and administrators should learn approaches for working with students who may be traumatized; and mental health professionals and other providers should respond appropriately to trauma-related learning. Again, the specifics are left to each school to create, but the framework gives guidance with which to begin.

Building on Cole et al.'s (2009) work, Tishelman et al. (2010) sought to extend the Flexible Framework into psychological evaluations conducted in schools. Their premises were that trauma may play a role in a student's behavior, each student with trauma exposure may react differently, and a student's history and learning experience can influence how she reacts in school. Therefore, they postulated that school psychologists need to look at the possibility that a student has been exposed to trauma in order to address him appropriately. Their goal was to identify the potential challenges of conducting school-based psychological evaluations for traumatized children, identify the domains of trauma, identify common characteristics for each of the domains, and propose

an approach for evaluating these issues (Tishelman et al., 2010). They reviewed the four domains often affected by trauma: self-regulation, physical, relationship, and academic as a starting point for their framework. Tishelman et al. explained the four domains of trauma in order to create a trauma lens for school psychologists to use when evaluating students. Psychological evaluations are meant to be conducted individually. Therefore, Tishelman et al.'s framework is designed to work with students one at a time.

On the other hand, Brunzell and colleagues (2016) proposed a framework to help students with trauma learn in a classroom setting. The model is called trauma-informed positive education (TIPE) and is designed to help students with trauma both therapeutically and educationally. TIPE has two components: repairing the dysregulated stress response in trauma-affected students and repairing disrupted attachment styles. The former means helping students who have dysregulated stress responses become regulated when they experience stress. Regulation can happen either through skills students use to help themselves or by helping students identify their feelings and regulate themselves. The latter part of TIPE focuses on helping students form positive relationships. "Specifically adapted for the classroom context, unconditional positive regard facilitates an environment where the student feels valued regardless of their presenting behaviors, affect, or cognitions; rather than looking to others for identity and approval, the student is encouraged to learn and listen to themselves" (Brunzell et al., 2016, p. 67). Echoing Cole et al.'s (2009) recommendation, Brunzell et al. advocate helping students to see the positive in themselves as a powerful psychological force (Becker et al., 2014).

Furthermore, it is hard for students with trauma to enjoy and sustain the enjoyment of positive emotions. It then becomes the teachers' responsibility to help

students with this (Brunzell et al., 2016). Again, this is strengths-based. Rather than correcting *wrong* behavior, this theory encourages positive behavior. This, in turn, amplifies what is right and builds success upon success. As Cole et al. (2009) discussed, this helps students find their "islands of competence" (p. 61). Instead of using a deficit model of what a student does wrong, this encourages students to increase what they do right. In a growth mindset, this is the "power of yet." (Back, 2018). *I can't do [this] yet*, is more encouraging than *I can't do [this].*

Brunzell et al.'s (2016) basis for the first part of TIPE is three theories from positive psychology. The first theory, the two-factor theory of mental health, states that students need to reduce weaknesses and have the opportunity to grow and build strengths. The second theory is the idea of upward spirals of well-being, a "self-reinforcing upward spiral of amplifying psychological resources" (p. 69). In other words, it is a repeated learning cycle that increases the possibility of desirable outcomes based on system elements influencing one another in simultaneously alternating ways. "Deviation-amplifying …feedback occurs when causal relationships productively amplify an initial kick from the original condition" (p. 69). Success breeds success, which becomes a spiral of success. Finally, the third theory from positive psychology is to broaden and build a theory of positive emotions. Brunzell et al. explain that "individuals who increase positive emotions cope more effectively with adversity; and reciprocally, the increased ability to employ coping skills predicts positive emotions over time" (p. 70). This theory is the third way that success breeds success through the building and reinforcing of positive emotions.

The second half of TIPE is repairing disrupted attachment. Brunzell et al. (2016) describe three interventions to address this deficit. The first is strong attached relationships, the second is emotional intelligence, and the third is play and fun. Brunzell et al. advocate strong relationships between students and adults. They relate that teacher-student relationships teach students appropriate interactions through modeling, proximity, communication, and availability. Students begin repairing relationships through healthy relationships.

Similarly, teachers can teach emotional intelligence through vocabulary and using their own emotional intelligence. Brunzell et al. (2016) report that students who have trauma are often likely to have a difficult time recognizing their feelings and the feelings of others. It then becomes the teachers' job to teach feelings through emotional intelligence. Finally, play and fun can foster growth through relationship building. Fun and growth can create positive emotions that teachers can name and capitalize on. Ultimately, the goal of TIPE is to help students increase their self-regulatory abilities, foster strong peer and teacher relationships, and increase students' psychological resources for well-being (Brunzell et al., 2019).

Brunzell and colleagues (2019) tested trauma-informed positive education. They worked with 18 teachers between two sites in Australia over the course of a school year. One school was a rural primary school, where all nine teachers were included in this study. The second school, a large suburban school, had nine teachers in the middle grades participate in the study. Ultimately, two teachers dropped out of the study because they left the schools in which they were working after the study began. Brunzell et al. chose to use appreciative inquiry participatory action research (AIPAR) as a research method.

They deemed this was appropriate "due to its privileging professional practice while giving participants multiple opportunities to learn, envision, implement and reflect as practitioners…and to encourage collective teacher efficacy" (p. 604). In other words, AIPAR gave teachers the opportunity to learn and reflect together with the goal of improving outcomes for students with trauma. The study resembled a cycle of inquiry, which began with information about trauma-informed approaches, and then each group of teachers participated in four phases each term.

The first phase was "Discovery" and included the first planning session. Phase two was called "Dream and Design" and included a second planning session and embedding interventions into the curriculum. The next phase was "Acting and Observing," where teachers implemented the plan and collected data. The final phase was "Destiny and Plan Forward," and it was focused on reflection. They repeated the cycle through the four terms of the school year, beginning each cycle with information about trauma-informed approaches. Through this reflective and iterative practice, teachers worked together, reflected together, and shared data with the researchers.

Brunzell and colleagues (2019) coded the data and reduced them to two themes and six sub-themes. The first theme, building classroom relationships, was broken into attachment and unconditional positive regard. The second, increasing psychological resources for well-being, were divided into character strengths, growth mindset, reaching goals, and flow. The researchers described how teachers used attachment strategies and conveyed unconditional positive regard with students to support the theme of building relationships. The second theme emerged from teaching exploring practical strategies to

"implement well-being-informed pedagogies" that supported students and sustained positive behaviors for learning (Brunzell et al., 2019, p. 607).

The first sub-theme, character strengths, was introduced during the second half of the school year; teachers noticed that students made better behavior choices when they perceived that teachers recognized their strengths. Other teachers emphasized a growth mindset where they heard students engage in more positive self-talk, and they could spend more time on academic conversations than on behavior management. Finally, teachers had students name achievable goals and provided instruction that supported them through "flow" that helped them reach their goals. Teachers reported learning that TIPE was both a strategy and activity, that it was used to modify curriculum to address students' needs, and that dedicated time played a role in incorporating TIPE into practice. The researchers framed teachers' changes in practice as challenges instead of teacher behaviors to encourage teachers to reframe their decisions. The five challenges were: portraying the curriculum, using TIPE to present the material, enlisting student participation, exposing student thinking, containing student behavior, and accommodating personal needs, both of teachers and students. Brunzell et al. (2019) concluded that TIPE increased teacher capacity and, in conjunction with appreciative inquiry participation action research, could increase collective teacher efficacy and empower practice across a whole school.

Brunzell et al.'s (2016) proposal of trauma-informed positive education was a unique theory that consisted of combining theories of positive psychology and applying them to a school setting. More common in schools is using School-Wide Positive Behavior and Intervention Supports (SWPBIS) as a model for working with students.

Chafouleas et al. (2016) took SWPBIS and explained how to use it as a model for helping students with trauma learn. They referred to this as a blueprint for trauma-informed schools. As Bornstein (2017) explained, Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) establishes consistent practices for expectations of instructional fidelity and universal screening. On the behavioral side of PBIS, norms and expectations for student behavior are consistent.

Additionally, the program uses interventions and supports to understand better how a student behaves. The criteria are clear for when to move a student from receiving Tier I supports up through Tier III and then determining whether a student may have an emotional disability (Bornstein, 2017). Chafouleas et al. (2016) recognize that a strength of SWPBIS is its ability to build capacity for implementation as a system within a school. They also note that prevention in many trauma-informed approaches focuses on the individual and her ability to build self-regulation "with external supports focused on creating safe environments and building positive connections and trusting relationships" (p. 10), which is precisely what Brunzell et al. (2016, 2019) advocate.

Chafouleas et al. (2016), on the other hand, proposed using a model that incorporates aspects of SWPBIS as a trauma-informed approach because the elements of SWPBIS, outcomes, practices, data, and systems, work together to inform decisions designed to meet the needs of all students. Therefore, they argue, the intended outcomes are: "(a) prevent adverse events and experiences from occurring, (b) build self-regulation capacity in individuals, (c) assist individuals exhibiting adverse effects in returning to prior functioning, and (d) avoid re-traumatizing individuals who have experienced adverse events" (p. 11). This last outcome also was a concern of Tishelman and

colleagues (2010) who stated that not only might schools trigger a traumatic reaction for some children, but "also reinforces some of the negative themes that have been learned over the course of a traumatized child's development, thereby increasing a child's vulnerabilities" (p. 9).

Chafouleas and colleagues (2016) suggest using a framework similar to SWPBIS because it also supports adult behavior, which creates safe and supportive environments for all students. Moreover, they advocate that the structure embedded in practice should be grounded in SAMHSA's theory of the "four R's," which include (a) realization about trauma and its effects, (b) recognition of the signs of trauma, (c) response that appropriately embraces trauma understanding across tiers of service delivery, and (d) resist practices that could inadvertently re-traumatize" (p. 12). Essentially, trauma-informed approaches acknowledge and understand trauma across all levels of interventions and prevent students from becoming traumatized at school. Finally, Chafouleas et al. advocate planning to implement this new blueprint for trauma-informed schools. Their domains overlap with Cole et al. (2009). Their changes include identifying: "(a) governance and leadership, (b) policy, (c) physical environment, (d) engagement and involvement, (e) cross-sector collaboration, (f) screening, assessment, and treatment services, (g) training and workforce development, (h) progress monitoring and quality assurance, (i) financing, and (j) evaluation" (p. 20). They end their proposal by stating that schools need both professional development and then longitudinal studies to determine the efficacy of this proposal.

Overall, Chafouleas et al.'s (2016) points are more detailed than Cole et al.'s (2009) but fall within similar domains. Essentially, Chafouleas et al. built on Cole et al.'s

initial proposal for building trauma-informed schools. Taken with Tishelman et al.'s (2010) framework for using a "trauma lens" for school-based psychological evaluations and Brunzell et al.'s (2016) proposal for trauma-informed positive education, a trauma-informed school may be implemented.

Trauma-Informed Responses to Behaviors

A challenge for teaching students with trauma is that students who are affected by trauma may not always behave in a way that is conducive for teachers to want to help them. As Tishelman et al. (2010) noted, children with trauma may have difficulty with self-regulation. Difficulty with self-regulation may lead to poor impulse control, aggression, trouble interpreting others' actions and reactions, as well as a lack of a predictable sense of self (Tishelman et al., 2010). Similarly, students with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD) share some of the same behaviors that students with trauma exhibit. These include aggression, attention and academic problems, low classroom engagement, and high rates of disruptive behaviors (Caldarella et al., 2021).

Furthermore, both sets of students may have difficulty understanding or expressing their feelings and emotions, may overreact, appear disinterested or disconnected, or be hypervigilant. Because of their experiences, students with trauma may not experience school as a safe place and act out accordingly (Cole et al., 2009). As Cole et al. stated, "Unfortunately, many traumatized children adopt behavioral coping mechanisms that can frustrate educators and evoke exasperated reprisals, reactions that both strengthen expectations of confrontation and danger and reinforce a negative self-image" (p. 32), which can lead to negative reactions from adults. "As a result [of their behaviors, students with trauma] are more likely to be disapproved of and condemned by

busy, overburdened educators, even though they are among the students most in need of nurturance" (p. 33). Although he was speaking of parents, this is reminiscent of the advice given to a young guidance counselor. "The more emotional and outrageous the behavior, the more detached and professional we need to be" (J. Pierce, personal communication, June 2005). This advice is also effective for teachers working with students with trauma whose behaviors may make it challenging to provide positive reinforcement, find islands of competence, and build healthy relationships. Cole et al. state that challenging behaviors often originate when a child feels vulnerable. Asking a student to answer a question, solve a problem, or participate in a whole class activity may make her feel vulnerable. Therefore, it is vitally important that educators positively reinforce appropriate risk-taking behavior, like answering a question, and react neutrally to inappropriate behaviors. Educators should address the behavior, and not the student, as inappropriate to help minimize negative reactions and inadvertently trigger a student. Doing so may help students to build positive relationships with adults.

When students misbehave, teachers may reprimand them. Egeberg et al. (2021) examined the classroom management styles of secondary teachers and the creation of quality learning environments for students. They reported that "students who receive more relationship-based discipline are less disrupted when teachers deal with misbehaviour and generally act more responsibly in that teacher's class. In contrast, the impact of coercive discipline appears to be more student distraction from work and less responsibility" (p. 110). They define coercive behavior as teachers who "*control* [the class], which involves rules, rewards, and a clear hierarchy for increasingly severe punishments for misbehaviour" (p. 110). Similarly, Caldarella et al. (2021) found that

students with EBD do not have long-term behavior changes when they are reprimanded. They stated that reprimands are reactive, which is not necessarily relationship-based. They "agree with others who recommend effective teaching techniques and proactive behavior management strategies… to decrease disruptions and increase engagement." (p. 170). Caldarella and colleagues reported that students' behaviors were more likely to change when a teacher redirected student behavior instead of telling the student to stop.

Furthermore, Egeberg et al. (2021) stated that the classroom culture influenced student learning. "It is the ability of a teacher to know not only what they want to teach, but also how they will organise and structure it for their students and their circumstances that makes all the difference, creating a healthy, caring classroom culture where all students, and teachers, can thrive" (p. 110). This idea is reinforced by Saphier et al. (2008), who begin their chapter on discipline with the classroom environment. They state the environment should be

> set up properly, with routines, time schedule, procedures, and physical space, to facilitate smooth operation and minimize downtime and distractions; building relationships of regard and respect with students to signal that this is a place where they are valued as individuals; and designing and delivering instruction in a way that all students can experience both challenge and success (p. 73).

Egeberg et al. (2021), Caldarella et al. (2021), and Saphier et al. (2008) all reinforce the idea of reducing misbehaviors through relationships and reducing the use of reprimands.

When teachers do not reduce the use of reprimand, when students continue to misbehave, and when teachers' frustrations continue to increase, students may be sent to the office for a discipline referral. Because there is an overlap between students with trauma, students with EBD, and students with other types of disabilities, students who are

suspended are disproportionality high for students with disabilities (Alnaim, 2018; Anderson & Ritter, 2017; Green et al., 2019). Another possible cause of the disproportionality is implicit bias (McIntosh et al., 2018). McIntosh et al. suggest that the way to counter this is to help educators use critical inquiry to avoid making snap judgments. They advocate using data to help staff identify a "vulnerable decision point (VDP) … contextual events or elements of the immediate situation that increase the likelihood of implicit bias affecting discipline decision making" (p. 147). They delineate a four-step method for reducing the disproportionate discipline referrals. The steps include identifying the problem, analyzing the data, implementing a plan to reduce the problem, and evaluating the effectiveness of the plan. They then employ a case vignette to demonstrate the effectiveness of this tactic of countering implicit bias. Their method and the vignette use positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS) as part of the plan to reduce referrals. McIntosh et al. reported that the number of disproportionate referrals was reduced. This method is one type of program that could be implemented in other schools.

Bornstein (2017) and Gage et al. (2018) examined bias, disproportionality, and PBIS. Using the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA; 2004) as its framework, the Greenwood District combined response to intervention (RTI) and PBIS (Bornstein, 2017). Bornstein explains that RTI supplements test-driven data that looks for discrepancies by systematically using research-based teaching practices before diagnosing a student with a disability. PBIS establishes consistent practices for expectations of instructional fidelity and universal screening. On the behavioral side of PBIS, norms and expectations for student behavior are consistent.

Additionally, the program uses interventions and supports to gain a better understanding of how a person behaves. The criteria are clear for when to move a student from receiving Tier I supports up through Tier III and then determining whether a student may have an emotional disability. Bornstein (2017) used a case study that highlighted dialogue and conversation around using PBIS and implicit bias among various stakeholders in the district. The study highlighted the challenges of differentiating between disabilities and racial biases. As McIntosh et al. (2018) highlighted, Bornstein stresses the importance of critical inquiry to look at educators' responses to students' behaviors.

Meanwhile, Gage et al. (2018) conducted a systematic review and meta-analysis of studies that evaluated SWPBIS. Gage et al. identified office disciplinary referrals (ODR) as removing students from class for 20 minutes at a time, and students who have more than two ODRs by October of a school year are significantly more likely to be suspended during the school year. They report that not only are ODRs associated with lower academic results, but students' perceptions of school climate are poorer. Therefore, they examined the relationship between SWPBIS and disciplinary exclusion, defining disciplinary exclusion as combining ODRs and suspension. What they found was that disciplinary exclusions were not significantly lower, but school suspensions were. They report that as schools use SWPBIS, they standardize the use of ODRs, which may increase the number as schools consistently define and implement criteria for ODR. Therefore, they conclude that increasing ODRs is not alarming and that reducing the number of suspensions is positive. They found value in using SWPBIS (Gage et al., 2018). Ultimately, PBIS is a system that schools may use to collect and evaluate data to

ensure students are appropriately being diagnosed as having a disability, as well as to reduce the number of out-of-school suspensions, which could lead to better outcomes.

School-wide positive behavioral interventions and supports are one type of program designed to address student behaviors to reduce the number of suspensions. Another type of program is restorative justice or restorative practices. Mansfield et al. (2018) explained that there is no one definition of restorative practice (RP) but that it is a series of practices that foster communication, mutual respect, and understanding. RP engages students and faculty together for goal setting and mutual resolution. It is solution-focused and helps students develop communication and leadership skills. They further explained that individuals are less likely to change their behaviors when authority figures do things to or for them instead of with them. RP helps build relationships between students, teachers, administrators, staff, and families. Although RP is not implemented uniformly, it commonly focuses on building understanding, resolving conflicts, increasing mutual respect, accepting diversity, committing to fairness and equity, and promoting personal responsibility and accountability for one's actions. Restorative practices aim to build student capacity and reduce suspensions and their negative outcomes.

Hashim and colleagues (2018) studied both PBIS and RJ in the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD). Analyzing suspension data over 12 years, they did not find decreased suspension rates in the first eight years SWPBIS was implemented. However, in the 2014–2015 school year, the district adopted restorative justice (RJ) practices, creating three tiers to mirror SWPBIS and RTI. Tier 1 focused on building a sense of community. Tier 2 was dedicated to repairing harm between students and

teachers when conflict arose. Tier 3 helped to reintegrate students who had been suspended, expelled, or were truant. When Hashim et al. (2018) analyzed the initial data, there was no decrease in the suspension rate before and after the implementation of SWPBIS. There was, however, a decrease in the out-of-school suspension rate after implementing RJP. They found a slight increase in year three but a large decrease after that. While the authors caution that there is no causality, the decrease is promising.

On the other hand, they found that the gap between suspension rates for special education students and non-special education students only partially closed. They suggest the ongoing need to focus on both the causes and consequences of disproportionality in discipline infractions (Hashim et al., 2018). This study suggests that restorative justice practices are more effective than SWPBIS.

Although Algonquin High School in central Virginia used both restorative practices (RP) and PBIS, Mansfield et al. (2018) only examined the use of RP to reduce out-of-school suspensions. They reported that over five years, ODRs were reduced by 80% from 3,000 to 500. Moreover, out-of-school suspensions were reduced from 19% to 7% and held for students with disabilities as well. Although students with disabilities were 12% of the school population in 2010–2011, they had 22% of the out-of-school suspension. The following year, there was an increase of 2%, which declined by more than 10% over the next three years, and the gap in suspension rates between students with disabilities and those without narrowed.

Mansfield et al. (2018) report that the biggest barrier to consistent implementation of PR is resistance by some teachers, which they propose to explore in the future, staff turnover, and reduced funding for the program. Similarly, the Denver Public Schools

implemented restorative interventions (RI); Anyon et al. (2016) also highlighted the lack of consistency. There was no uniformity in implementing RI within the district. Voluntary training was offered to staff members. Decisions as to whether students were offered RI were made by building administrators and varied across the schools.

In Anyon and colleagues' (2016) study, 11% of the students in the district received one or more office discipline referrals across the 180 schools. Although they comprised 11.5% of the students in the district, special education students had received 20.3% of the discipline referrals and accounted for 25.7% of out-of-school suspensions; 21.5% of students in special education participated in RI. Anyon et al. found that students who had RI in the first semester had lower ODR and out-of-school suspensions in the second. They cautioned against causality because there were so many factors that played into the odds of a second-semester referral. The biggest predictor was schools that had higher rates of RI use, where students had a much lower chance of getting an ODR in the second semester. However, even accounting for this, students in special education still had higher odds of a second-semester out-of-school suspension. However, their odds were also lower if they attended a high-incident RI school. Because there were so many confounding factors, the authors could not generalize their findings. They could only assert that RI reduced the odds of a second-semester referral but cautioned that more interventions were needed to ensure equity for all students. Both Mansfield et al. (2018) and Anyon et al.'s (2016) studies reveal promising programs for reducing out-of-school suspensions.

Working with a medical model, Turnaround for Children had a different approach to addressing discipline and suspensions. Instead of a typical response to misbehaviors,

Turnaround developed strategies to work with a student's dysregulated response and then address the behavior. Strategies included students removing themselves to a quiet space or counting to ten before responding. Over three years, suspensions were cut in half, and severe incidents decreased by 42%. Classroom climate, productivity, and engagement measurements all increased by 20% (Burke Harris, 2018). Addressing students' physiological needs is another approach to reducing students' time out of the classroom and out of school.

Reducing time out of class and out of school is imperative to increase student outcomes. When students are not in class, they are missing direct instruction, the ability to practice a new skill, or a chance to generalize learning. There are various models for reducing ODR and suspension from school. Whether a school adopts PBIS, RJ, or a medical model for repairing the dysregulated response, the research shows the need for improved relationships between teachers and students. The next step is to demonstrate to staff the importance of developing positive relationships with students and to teach them how to do it in order to support trauma-informed schools.

Trauma-Exposed Students and Learning

There are a myriad of books about teaching and learning (e.g., Cleveland, 2011; Dean et al., 2012; Greene, 2008; Rallis et al., 1995; Saphier et al., 2008; Schmoker, 2011; Sizer, 1992) with very few focusing exclusively on teaching students with trauma (Cole et al., 2009). The various books highlight the difficulties of teaching and offer methods to address these challenges. While some are more prescriptive than others, they work toward the ultimate goal: helping students achieve academic success. Clearly, there is no one way to teach. Arguably, good teaching may begin with effective lessons, which may

begin with structured teaching. Saphier et al. (2008) begin with the curriculum, stating that "the anchor and starting point of planning daily lessons is a good curriculum" (p. 355). Schmoker (2011), on the other hand, simply states that effective lessons contain clear learning objectives, teaching/modeling/demonstrating, guided practice, checks for understanding/formative assessment. Dean et al. (2012) expanded those structures into nine different categories of instructional strategies: setting objectives and providing feedback; reinforcing effort and providing recognition; cooperative learning; cue, questions, and advance organizers; nonlinguistic representations; summarizing and note taking; assigning homework and providing practice; identifying similarities and differences; generating and testing hypotheses. Similarly, Cleveland (2011), whose focus was on re-engaging boys in the classroom, provided the following pathway: support, guide, reinforce, adjust, ignite, and empower. Specifically, her guidelines for classroom policies include: "involve boys in creating policies; limit the number of policies to five or fewer; state policies positively; make sure policies are fully understood before enforcing them; be consistent…; enforce policies in a matter-of-fact way. Forgive and forget. No grudges allowed; acknowledge effort" (p. 90). When teaching students with trauma, Cole et al. (2009) delineated specific structures within a classroom. They stated that teachers need to build on children's "islands of competence" (p. 61). Teachers should build upon students' successes as opposed to focusing on failures. Additionally, they identified predictability, consistency with classmates, and positive behavior supports as necessary structures for effectively teaching children with trauma (Cole et al., 2009). These are just a few examples of how to provide structure within any classroom setting—one step in creating an effective classroom.

While establishing structure may be the first step, curriculum is another important aspect of an effective classroom. Stigler and Hiebert (2009) stated that the content should be "rich and challenging [so that] it is more likely that students have the opportunity to learn more mathematics and to learn it more deeply. If the content is fragmented and ordinary, students have less chance of learning important mathematics" (pp. 56–57). They say the content should be engaging. One way to engage in content, according to Saphier et al. (2008), is through assimilating new information with prior learning. Hill (2001) expressed this idea by stating, "Learning is about making connections. …When students learn effectively, they assimilate new information with what they already knew before. This process is dynamic and creative and helps to internalize new knowledge" (p. 6). This idea of combining curriculum with presentation is vitally important. Present ideas that are too easy and can cause students to be bored. Present information that is too difficult, and students will be lost and perhaps frustrated. Hill quoted Vygotsky when he called the just right spot the "zone of proximal development" (p. 9), which is the presentation of new information that builds on previous knowledge yet asks students to stretch to learn more. Done correctly, Hill postulated that this promotes accelerated learning.

Additionally, Sizer (1985) highlighted the importance of allowing students to grapple with the content as a way to learn and internalize it. He told the story of a student who wanted a teacher's help to solve a problem. The teacher told her to start on her own. As soon as he noticed her pursuing the right answer, he positively reinforced her process. Sizer credited the teacher with helping a student achieve the goal of learning. "Because of

[the student's] ownership of the exercise, she would far more likely remember it than if she has merely walked through a predigested program." (p. 150).

Similarly, Hill (2001) placed the importance of hitting the zone of proximal development on the teacher. "The key to accelerating learning lies in matching instruction to the level of the learner. …The onus is therefore on the teacher to monitor the progress of each student to ensure that all students are adequately challenged" (p. 9). The crux of good classrooms: the matching of content with student development makes for the most effective teaching.

Ultimately, it is the combination of classroom structure, teaching in the zone of proximal development, and a competent teacher where learning is optimized. As Sizer (1985) said, "Nearly all formal learning in schools involves the interactions of three actors: the student, the teacher, and the subject of their mutual interaction…. As long as schools are for learning, no relationship within them is more important than this triangle" (pp. 151–152). Hill (2001) succinctly summed up the middle component by stating, "the teacher matters" (p. 8). Goldstein (2014) discussed the importance of the teacher believing all students can learn. She reported that effective teachers see intelligence as something that can be developed in every student. NISL (n.d.) includes "positive classroom relationships" (p. 7) as one of the characteristics of effective instructional practice. The key, according to Rallis et al. (1995), is to determine the conditions for each student to learn. To that end, Saphier et al. (2008) provide a roadmap and structure through their book *The Skillful Teacher*, in which they describe the various options teachers have to address different classes and the importance of matching strategies for particular situations. They describe three key components: comprehensiveness, an

overview of teaching as a whole; repertoire for teachers, a variety of strategies and behaviors for dealing with various situations; and matching, the skill where teachers choose the best strategy for a particular group or situation. Sizer (1985) described the role of the teacher as assisting the student to learn. At the end of a lesson, he advocated asking the teacher, "Did your students learn what was expected of them and by them today?" (p. 151). Hill (2001) suggested using the students' strengths and weaknesses to create effective learning; if the teacher does not include the students' learning needs in the lesson, it is unlikely to be valuable. "Effective instruction can, however, exploit students' strengths, target their weaknesses, and use their prior knowledge and experience to support both" (p. 10). Therefore, effective teaching is predicated on knowing students and understanding their needs.

Effective teaching, particularly teaching targeted at students with trauma, needs to include relationships, both teaching students how to develop them and teachers' relationships with students. Duncan-Andrade and Morrell (2008) advocated that teachers develop a "deeper understanding of their students' lives [in order to] appreciate and positively influence" (p. 9) how their environment affects educational outcomes for students. Students are not magically transported from their homes to schools; they bring their home lives with them. Walton-Fisette (2020) advised educators to understand themselves, their implicit biases, and the decisions that they make. "Who you are and what you believe and have experienced will influence the decisions that you make as an educator—even though you may not realize the connections between the personal and professional" (p. 10). Her words of caution are aimed at teachers who may unintentionally trigger students through their words and actions. Finally, Brunzell et al.

(2016) advocate for trauma-informed positive education, which focuses on helping repair the dysregulated stress response in trauma-affected students and repairing disrupted attachment styles. Their review of the literature reported that effective interventions focused on repairing students' regulatory abilities and addressing the deregulatory response, as well as developing strong student-teacher relationships (Brunzell et al., 2016). Simply, this pedagogy helps students identify their feelings, regulate their responses, and helps them develop healthy relationships.

Adult relationships

Many studies support the importance of building relationships with students (e.g., Brunzell et al., 2016; Chafouleas et al., 2016; Cole et al., 2009; Darling-Hammond and Cook-Harvey, 2018). There is a growing body of literature to support the importance of building relationships between teachers, specifically beginning teachers, special education teachers, and teachers of color (Bernklow, 2021; Chapman et al., 2021; Darwich, 2021; Mason-Williams et al., 2023). There also is research that backs the premise that supportive adult relationships within a building improve school culture and student outcomes (Camacho et al., 2021; Chapman et al., 2021; Parks & McKay, 2023; Sergiovanni, 2009). The logical conclusion, therefore, is the importance of fostering relationships between adults.

Positive adult relationships can begin with the building administration. Mason-Williams et al. (2023) noted that beginning teachers benefit from social connections within a school, and administrators can help facilitate them. Furthermore, they reported that this was especially important for beginning special education teachers. Bernklow (2021) and Ferguson et al. (2017) included administrators with colleagues as supporting

teachers for better outcomes, such as lower rates of emotional exhaustion, lower rates of burnout, and increased feelings of accomplishment. On the other hand, Ferguson et al. reported that teachers sometimes do not want to talk with their principals about stress because, they say, "principals may be the cause of some issues surrounding workload. In addition, teachers experiencing professional relationship stress were also less likely to discuss this stress with their principals. Similarly to workload stress, principals may be the cause of professional relationship stress, and teachers may not feel comfortable discussing workload stress with them." (p. 71).

Additionally, Bernklow (2021) reported that a lack of administrator support could make special education teachers vulnerable to conflict, and resilient teachers "persisted in their roles by exerting control over their professional work and seeking support from colleagues or other nontraditional means" (p. 83). Furthermore, of the various adults offering support, Ferguson et al. (2017) found colleagues to have a greater influence on teachers. "Support from school administrators and teaching peers moderated stress among American special education teachers; however, teachers were more likely to receive support during times of stress from their peers than from administrators" (p. 66). They explicitly state, "a teacher's co-workers are the most important buffers of the burnout manifestation of emotional exhaustion" (p. 66). While principals and other administrators may be supportive, teachers often rely on their peers.

Like students, teachers are seeking relationships to help make connections. Darwich (2021) cited relational cultural theory (RCT) to explain the importance of relationships; "All psychological growth happens in relationships and that relationships are the core of resilience" (p. 71). She further explains, "RCT supposes that experiences

of isolation and marginalization are relational violations and at the core of human pain….Healing, in contrast, happens in the context of mutually empathic, growth-fostering relationships…characterized by mutuality, empowerment, and the development of courage" (Darwich, 2021, p. 71). Parks and McKay (2023) stated that positive collegial interactions increase teachers' perceptions of themselves and their work. Therefore, it appears teachers are using their relationships for strength and growth.

Additionally, Chapman et al. (2021) found that beginning special education teachers preferred to develop informal relationships instead of formal mentoring. "These informal relationships may function as sources of both emotional and professional support for these teachers simultaneously" (Chapman et al., 2021, p. 199). Conversely, Mason-Williams and colleagues (2023) noted that when beginning teachers interact with veteran teachers who are dissatisfied with their jobs, the relationships may have an adverse effect, causing the novice teachers to have additional stress instead of having stress alleviated. Reasons for this may include that teachers use relationships with family and friends as a coping method and as a source of support; teachers provide "informational support" (Ferguson et al., 2017, p. 65), meaning information, advice, and guidance. When connecting with positive peers, teachers can use colleagues as a resource to reduce stress and increase capacity, reinforcing the importance of fostering adult relationships.

Trauma-Informed Teachers and Narrative Inquiry

In order to avoid redundancy and identify gaps in the literature about trauma-informed schools research conducted in narrative inquiry, I reviewed the literature. Searching in ERIC, using the keywords "narrative inquiry" and "high school," revealed

one relevant study. I then looked at ProQuest, using the same keywords, and found nothing relevant. When I added "trauma" as a keyword, there were three relevant studies. I then changed "high school" to "teacher" and found two more articles. Finally, using Google Scholar and the keywords "narrative inquiry," "trauma," and "high school," I found five studies; omitting "high school" resulted in 2 more studies. Most of the studies identified in Google Scholar came from Canada, and none were identical to my area of interest.

The two most relevant studies were written by Ladhawala (2021) and Reid (2020). Both were dissertations; one was from the United States (Ladhawala), and the other from Canada (Reid). Ladhawala examined elementary school teachers' experiences of working with students with trauma. She wanted "to understand the perspectives of in-service elementary teachers' experiences about their working with students who have faced trauma and traumatic events" (p. 6). Specifically, she wanted to know if educators felt prepared to teach students with trauma. As she stated, "The purpose of the study is to learn whether in-service teachers feel adequately trained to help students who manifest difficult behavior due to their experience of traumatic events. How do school organizations help them learn about these students? Do they receive any professional development training?" (p. 21). She began her inquiry by sending a survey to teachers in three different schools in the Midwest: one charter school, one international school, and one public school. Of the 76 respondents, 22 agreed to speak with her individually. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, she met with them virtually.

Through her data, Ladhawala (2021) was able to discern answers to her three research questions. The first commonality she found to address the question of

challenging behaviors exhibited by students with trauma was related to school culture. All teachers expressed the idea "that schools require the culture and practice of a respectful and safe learning environment. Teachers who struggled more in handling the challenging behavior expressed an ambiguity in expectations and their role" (pp. 177–178). Her second question focused on teachers' feelings when working with students with trauma. She summarized their feelings of failure arising from the competing demands of trying to meet the needs of all students, unawareness of the challenges students have, and the lack of resources to address them, as well as inadequate training and support. Success, on the other hand, came from building relationships with students, obtaining enough training, and having support from school staff and administrators. Finally, her third question focused on the secondary trauma teachers experience when working with students with trauma. Those stories, she reported, fell into the two categories of compassion fatigue and personal trauma. Ladhawala described her findings as having three implications: developing a trauma-informed lens, awareness of teachers' compassion fatigue, and the importance of having a circle of support. Her narrative inquiry pointed to specific steps in trauma-sensitive schools.

Reid's (2020) research, on the other hand, focused on the stories of teachers who experienced trauma themselves and how that affected their teaching practice. She referred to her participants as coinquirers. Reid tried to find her participants through networking by asking colleagues and putting up notices. Eventually, she recruited participants from a presentation she gave through a mutual friend and while meeting at a community event. Reid did not specify research questions per se. Instead, she pondered "how trauma and trauma sensitivity were being conceptualized in and for schools, in school divisions, and

by government departments and community agencies. … I wondered how teachers might experience their trauma stories and their teacher stories being directed from the outside, by stories of teacher/ing, and stories of trauma, aspects I sensed were becoming central in my inquiry" (p. 29). Reid then shared her stories and the stories of her participants through the lens of narrative inquiry. She concluded that narratives can be used as a way to conceptualize trauma. Reid ended her dissertation by suggesting the use of narratives to interrupt a trauma response.

Neither Reid (2020) nor Ladhawala (2021) used high school teachers to examine their stories about teaching students with trauma. Reid's participants examined teaching students with trauma through their own experiences with trauma. Ladhawala's participants taught elementary school. There do not appear to be narrative inquiry studies of high school teachers who teach students with trauma; this is a gap in the literature.

Conclusion

Trauma-informed schools are in their infancy. There is a growing body of literature about trauma, its impact on learning, and its impact on relationships (e.g., Brunzell et al., 2016, 2019; Burke Harris, 2018; Cole et al., 2009; Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018; Tishelman et al., 2010; van der Kolk, 2015). Some studies focus on responding to students with disruptive behaviors, whether the cause is trauma exposure or other reasons (e.g., Bornstein, 2017; Caldarella et al., 2021; Egeberg et al., 2021; Gage et al., 2018). However, the majority of the literature thus far about trauma-informed schools focuses on teacher development with a gap in data about student outcomes (Blitz & Mulcahy, 2017; Goodwin-Glick, 2017; Haas, 2018; Kataoka et al., 2018; Taytslin, 2016). The research is scant in determining if students report learning more, have higher

assessment scores, reduced number of suspensions, or increased attendance rates if they have a teacher who has participated in trauma-informed PD—the gap in the literature. I intended to evaluate, through a narrative study, a suburban high school in the United States that has teachers who have expressed interest in becoming more trauma-informed in order to further the literature about trauma-informed schools.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

One of the purposes of this research was to gain a better understanding of how to create trauma-informed classrooms. Using an interpretivist epistemological perspective, I interviewed teachers at a small suburban high school using narrative inquiry. By asking teachers to share their stories about teaching students with trauma and their relationships with these students, I created meaning and determined how teachers made sense of their experiences. After conducting narrative interviews, I evaluated their stories through paradigmatic analysis and narrative mode of analysis.

Epistemological Perspective

Epistemology explains the how and why of the researcher's knowledge of what she knows. Crotty (2015) explains epistemology as "concerned with providing a philosophical grounding for deciding what kinds of knowledge are possible and how we can ensure that they are both adequate and legitimate" (p. 8). Epistemology is grounded in theory, methodology, and knowledge. Crotty defines ontology as "the study of being" (p. 10) and quotes Blaikie as saying interpretivism "entails an *ontology* in which social reality is regarded as the product of processes by which social actors together negotiate the meanings for actions and situations" (p. 11). In other words, understanding meaning is developed through interaction and context. There is no definite answer. As Crotty said, "At best, our outcomes will be suggestive rather than conclusive. They will be plausible,

perhaps even convincing, ways of seeing things…but certainly not any 'one true way' of seeing things" (p. 13). Meaning is created from the information and context provided.

In education, research does not happen in a vacuum. I believe that reality is socially constructed and full of meaning, which Rallis and Rossman (2012) define as an interpretivist assumption. Merriam (1988) explained this perspective using the term "naturalistic inquiry."

> Traditional research is based on the assumption that there is a single, objective reality—the world out there—that we can observe know and measure…. In contrast, qualitative research assumes that there are multiple realities—that the world is not an objective thing out there but a function of personal interaction and perception. It is a highly subjective phenomenon in need of interpreting rather than measuring. Beliefs rather than facts form the basis of perception. Research is exploratory, inductive, and emphasizes process rather than ends. … What one does do is observe, intuit, sense what is occurring in a natural setting—hence the term naturalistic inquiry. (p. 17)

Additionally, an observer, even of a teacher telling a story, may influence the research. Kim (2016) describes this as the "observer's paradox" (p. 175). Whether a teacher stands up straighter, a student eagerly answers a question, or another student looks at me instead of the person speaking, I influence my surroundings. Similarly, a teacher emphasizing a point to a recorder or thinking about how to better explain a story to a researcher can become part of an observer's paradox. Labov (in Kim, 2016) explained the complexity of learning about participants when "they are being systematically observed, yet we can only obtain these data by systematic observation" (p. 175). In other words, the observer becomes part of the environment and, therefore, influences the environment just by one's presence.

Furthermore, Rossman and Rallis (2012) described qualitative research as interactive, where the researcher interacts within the research and, as such, constructs

knowledge during the study. They refer to this as interpretive. "The researcher makes meaning of (interprets) what he learns as he goes along" (p. 34). Therefore, I fall on the interpretivist side of the binary assumption, but not so far because I believe there is still some objectivity. The teacher is still teaching what I walked in to see; most students are still engaged, or not, in the lesson presented; the narrator is still choosing which story to tell.

I am a pebble in a large pond, making a small ripple where I stand. Overall, my epistemological perspective is interpretivist. Stories and their interpretation are the ultimate *depends*, my favorite phrase as a guidance counselor. Whether a story is funny, poignant, or off-topic is dependent upon both the storyteller and listener. What is funny to a middle school boy may not be humorous to a female high school teacher. Therefore, narrative inquiry seems like a natural type of research for someone whose favorite answer is that *it depends*. Personal narratives "are crucial entry points or portals for examining one's lived experience in relation to history, social, and cultural contexts…[this] is an effort to place people and their humanity at the core of social and human research" (Kim, 2016, p. 126). Narrative inquiry, in itself, is a type of relationship building that matches the interpretivist epistemology perspective.

Methodology

Trauma-informed schools include healthy relationships (Brunzell et al., 2016, 2019; Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018; Wamser-Nanney & Vandenberg, 2013). This sentiment came through teachers' words when I conducted research for my comprehensive exam. The participants focused on relationships with students. Although their job is to *teach* students, they did not focus on academic achievement. Instead, they

were concerned about learning more about their students and building relationships with them. I wanted to know if their words and beliefs were demonstrated through their stories and how they made sense of their experiences using descriptive research.

One type of descriptive research is a narrative inquiry. At its most basic definition, narrative inquiry is used by researchers who "are interested in understanding how people articulate their life experiences in the structure of a story" (Bhattacharya, 2017, p. 27). This type of research allows the researcher to use the framework of narration, or story, to understand the participant's lived experience. Participants understand their experiences through storytelling, and the researcher interprets them through a narrative lens (Bhattacharya, 2017). Latta and Kim (2010) reported that narrative inquiry is appropriate when researching education. They wrote, "Narrative gives shape to the lived experiences in education and often grants them a 'title to reality'…which renders narrative inquiry a fitting form for studying and giving expression to educational experience" (p. 139). Furthermore, since narrative inquiry analyzes experiences through participants' personal lens, "it challenges and problematizes the positivistic nature of knowledge as the objective and unitary way of knowing" (Martinie et al., 2016, p. 659), reinforcing the idea that knowledge is generated through others and not simply an objective truth.

Narrative inquiry, according to Kim (2016), "is a way of organizing human experience, since humans lead storied lives individually and socially…. [T]he study of narrative is 'the study of the ways humans experience the world' …Experience is the starting point and the key term for narrative inquiry" (p. 18). This means meeting participants where they are at and asking them about their experiences. Furthermore, "to

understand a teacher's practice (on her own part or on the part of the observer) is to find an illuminating story (or stories) to tell of what she has been involved in with her students" (Kim, 2016, p. 19). Here is where I began to explore what teachers know, understand, and are able to do for students with trauma. As Kim related, "Education researchers… need to be good storytellers and listeners to make sense of what goes on in schools and engage in dialogues among students, parents, practitioners, researchers, and policymakers" (p. 19). My goal was to interpret the words and actions of teachers through narrative research in order to understand how to support students with trauma.

Narrative inquiry is a type of qualitative research. Merriam (1988) explained qualitative research by saying, "Nonexperimental or, as it is often called, *descriptive* research is undertaken when description and explanation are sought, when it is not possible or feasible to manipulate the potential causes of behavior, and when variables are not easily identified or are too embedded in the phenomenon to be extracted for study. The aim of descriptive research is to examine events or phenomena" (p. 7). Furthermore, she wrote, "Experimental research assumes that the researcher can manipulate the variables of interest—that is, there is a great deal of control over the research situation…. In most educational situations, however, it is not possible to control all of the variables of interest" (p. 6). Given my questions, this was not an appropriate way to conduct research.

I was trained both to teach English and as a guidance counselor. As an English teacher, I learned how to help students understand texts and express themselves through writing. As a guidance counselor, I learned how to listen to the spoken and unspoken. Therefore, narrative inquiry was a natural way for me to discover and interpret participants' experiences. By asking questions in a semi-structured interview, participants

could share their thoughts, ideas, and experiences. Through the narrative lens, I analyzed what they were saying and doing, looked for patterns between and among stories, identified themes, and discussed where to go next. Through this qualitative research process, I intended to answer the research questions:

RQ 1: What are the stories teachers tell about teaching students who have experienced trauma and their relationships with those students?

RQ 2: How do teachers make sense of their experiences?

Research Design

To better understand teachers' experiences and perspectives, I used a narrative inquiry approach to allow teachers to share their stories in their own words and actions. According to Bhattacharya (2017), "narrative inquiry is a framework that helps researchers explore, discover, understand, and construct stories based on the participants' recounting of their experiences" (p. 93). By asking teachers about their experiences with working with and teaching students who have been exposed to trauma, I sought to create meaning about working with students with trauma. Interviewing teachers in their school put them, as Kim (2016) wrote, in their "place" (p. 172). She went on to say, "Place [is] where your participants' experiences and events occurred in the past and/or are taking place in the present. Place or a series of places is your inquiry boundary that delimits the experiences or stories of your participants" (p. 172). While the participants were teachers, the goal was to focus on students and their learning. The narrative inquiry provided an opportunity to examine how the adults in the classroom described how they built relationships and created safe spaces for those students. Listening to their words, hearing

their stories, and asking them to share artifacts provided a lens into the experiences students with trauma have on a regular basis.

The next step, using both paradigmatic and narrative modes of analysis (Kim, 2016), was identifying themes from teachers' stories. As I read and reread the participants' stories, I analyzed their words, looking for themes going back and forth between the different modes of analysis. Through an iterative mode of analysis, I found meaning in their narrations and created a cohesive story from their stories. Through interviews, I analyzed if and how teachers shared stories about creating trauma-informed classrooms, the strengths in their practices, the relationships they built, and the apparent gaps.

Data Collection

Targeted Population

The first adverse childhood experience (ACE) survey was conducted in 1997. According to Evans and Evans (2019), Felitti and Anda surveyed more than 17,000 participants and discovered that 64% of the volunteers had at least one ACE. The study was conducted in California, and participants were predominately from the suburbs and middle class. Those surveyed were not from urban or less affluent areas (Ristuccia, 2022). Researchers from the city of Philadelphia conducted an ACE study that expanded on the original. Cronholm et al. (2015) named the original ACEs conventional ACEs. They then expanded the categories to include what became systematic categories. In addition to the original 10 categories named by Felitti and Anda, they added the adverse childhood experiences of witnessing violence, feeling discrimination, unsafe neighborhoods, experiencing bullying, and living in foster care (Cronholm et al., 2015).

More than 80% of the respondents experienced at least one of these (Ristuccia, 2022). Ristuccia categorized the lockdown of the COVID-19 pandemic as a systematic ACE due to the following factors: "fear, uncertainty, loss of control; loss of a loved one; loss of school community, new ways of doing it all; reduced developmental experiences; expected response/not necessarily pathology" (Slide 6). He then went on to say that 100% of students encountered at least one of these experiences, meaning all students have at least one ACE (Ristuccia, 2022). Therefore, all students attending high school in Massachusetts during the 2019–2020 school year have been exposed to a traumatic event and, therefore, could be a research site for a study about teaching students with trauma.

This research study looked at the bigger picture in the pilot school, given that all or almost all students and staff were exposed to a traumatic event through the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown (Ristuccia, 2022). The school is referred to as Dreiser High School or DHS to protect participants' identities. At a first pass, I determined that the school was *trauma-informed friendly*, meaning that policies were in place that could support students with trauma. The school's core values include "Relationships characterized by trust and mutual respect" (DHS, 2019, p. 5). Another is an advisory block, "Within their small group dialogue, students will develop the trust and respect necessary to build a safe community by learning and using cooperative and collaborative skills" (p. 22). This aspect led me to ask questions about this site and the stories told by its staff. Do the stories indicate this could be a trauma-informed school?

Research Site

Dreiser High School is a small, suburban high school in the northeast part of the United States. The district is comprised of more than 2,000 students; 85% are White,

6.1% are Hispanic, 3.3% are Asian, and African-American students make up less than 2% of the student body. Fifteen percent of the students in Dreiser's district have disabilities, 14% come from low-income homes, and more than 5% are English language learners or English is not their first language. Overall, 26.6% of students in the district are labeled high needs. The dropout rate at DHS is 2.4% (four students in total), and the graduation rate is 96.8%. During the 2020–2021 school year, 1.4% of students were suspended (28 students in total), either in school suspension or out. Of the 587 students identified as high needs, 11 of them were disciplined.

Participants

In the spring of 2020, I sought to conduct research at DHS. DHS's principal put a notice in his weekly newsletter asking for participants for a research project. The announcement asked for teachers who had participated in trauma-informed PD. When no one came forward, I reviewed a spreadsheet from the district listing which staff members went to which PD in that school year. Three teachers were listed as having attended either Social Emotional Learning (SEL) or Initiatives for Developing Equity and Achievement for Students (IDEAS). IDEAS is an anti-racist course. I thought that either or both of these PDs would touch upon trauma. I chose to contact teachers who had voluntarily participated in PD. I emailed those three teachers and explained why I contacted them, and they agreed to speak with me.

All three staff members I interviewed, two women and one man, taught subjects in the humanities; given the size of the school, the specific subjects are not identified. These were not random samples in that they chose to participate in a program that addressed the non-academic concerns of students. They were not teachers who

participated in district-mandated PD for all staff but a self-selected group of teachers who wanted to learn more. One of the teachers spoke through the experience of attending a conference as an advisor for an extracurricular activity and not the original reason for contact; one wanted to know the best strategies for teaching students with social-emotional challenges, and the third wanted to learn more about being inclusive. It is important to note that they participated in PD willingly and with a desire to improve their practice. During those interviews, the teachers talked about teaching students who had been trauma-exposed.

The teachers, identified as Avery, Brooks, and Harper, all had professional status at DHS, meaning they had taught there for at least three years. They spoke candidly about their concerns, their students, and how the school could or could not support their concerns. They were not experts in trauma-informed education. They wanted to know more, and they demonstrated that they cared about students. After coding the interviews to find patterns in participants' responses for my comprehensive exam, I discovered four thematic statements that synthesized their experiences with the existing literature:

- Teachers want to know more about their students
- PD appears to have minimal effect on the teachers' practices
- Teachers focused on the relationship and not the academic
- School can be a source of trauma

Since initially conducting research with these participants, I learned they acknowledged that they teach students who have been exposed to trauma. They expressed interest in wanting to know more about how to teach these students more effectively. Therefore, the next step was to ask them about their stories about teaching students who

have experienced trauma, their relationships with these students, and how they make sense of those stories to learn more about this topic.

Methods

When I initially interviewed these teachers, the students at DHS were attending school in a hybrid model; they attended in-person school two or four days a week and had virtual classes one or three days a week. In the spring of 2023, all students were attending school in person five days a week. Although DHS appeared to be operating in a post-pandemic environment, presumably, teachers interacted with more students who were trauma-exposed than before the pandemic (Ristuccia, 2022). Based on what teachers shared during the first research project, I wanted to ask questions about relationships and how they influenced their practice. I also wanted to learn more about the structures, practices, and messages at DHS that supported students with trauma and what, if any, impediments there were.

My plan for this narrative inquiry was to interview teachers for as much time as it took to get rich/thick (Geertz, 1973) stories that illustrate their experiences, presumably an hour or two at a time, during at least three to four interviews. The goal of the first interview was to reintroduce the participant to me as a researcher and gather background knowledge about the teacher, the first step in formally creating a relationship for a narrative inquiry. I knew the teachers through the first set of interviews I did with them. They also knew I had a colleague who worked in their building. I acknowledged that although I was a school administrator, I was there in the capacity of a student researcher. The second interview took place in their classrooms, using the classroom itself as an

artifact. The teachers showed me how their rooms were set up, the student work posted, and other objects affixed to the walls.

Table 1.

Questions for first interview

- What made you want to go into teaching? What brought you here?
- What is the best thing about teaching? What is the biggest challenge?
- Can you tell me about your biggest success as a teacher? What was your greatest challenge?
- When we spoke in the fall of 2020, you spoke about students and relationships. How do you go about building relationships with students?
- Can you tell me a little bit about the students with whom it's easier to build relationships? Why is it easy to build relationships with them? Can you tell me a story illustrating your point?
- Can you tell me about building relationships with students with whom it's harder for you to connect with?
- Tell me about when you first became aware that some students have trauma exposure.
- Can you remember a time when having a relationship with a student made a difference? How?
- What makes you suspect a student has trauma? How do you treat that student? Is it different from a student whom you do not suspect is trauma-exposed? If so, how?
- Talk about a time you knew your classroom was a safe space for a student.
- Tell me about a time when you felt supported by administration or colleagues in building relationships with students.
- Can you share a time when building a relationship with a student impacted their academics? What do you remember about it?

Table 1 lists some of the questions I asked during the first two semi-structured interviews. The first interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes per participant. I asked

as many questions as seemed appropriate. During the second interview, the participants gave me a tour of their classrooms. Either during or immediately following the tour, I asked additional questions from my initial list. The third and fourth interviews consisted of follow-up questions and clarification. Table 2 is a list of questions I asked as a follow-up to my original questions. I only communicated with Harper via email for the third interview. Brooks spoke with me virtually for the third interview. A few days after the tour, Avery answered my questions about the classroom in person and later participated in another phone interview.

Table 2

Follow up questions

- You give students a card to ask about themselves. In addition to preferred name and pronoun, what else do you ask?
- Why do you display student work?
- You said you use literature to connect with students as well as humor to make it relatable. Do you use your own humor or what's in the lit? Can you give an example?
- You talked a couple of times about the student who is now successfully in the military. You said he turned it from the Hulk to David Banner. How did he do that? What was your role?
- You change your seats every day. How do you decide how to configure them?
- You're aware of human development. Are there any theorists that you like, such as Maslow or Bloom?
- Is there anything else you want to share?

The stories I was interested in ultimately focused on trauma-informed classrooms and relationships and identified strengths and challenges in supporting a school that is safe for all students. Open-ended questions are a way to encourage participants to share their stories. Another is using a two-sentence format, which is a statement followed by a question (Kim, 2016). I used primarily open-ended questions during my first two interviews and the two-sentence format in subsequent interviews. Since the objective of the first interview was to reintroduce the teacher to the topic and continue to build on our relationship, I met with the teachers in whatever space was most comfortable for them. The second interview, however, was in the classroom where they teach. The classroom, then, became one artifact. Kim (2016) describes artifacts as "objects that the storytellers would like to share that are related to the telling of their story" (p. 177). I asked the teachers to show me around their classrooms as well as share any additional artifacts that support their stories, however they interpreted the question. Artifacts included student work, assignments, proof of or recollection of a relationship, and other tangible objects the participants wanted to share. For example, all the participants displayed student work, citing different reasons for showing it. Student work then became an artifact.

Through questions, I gleaned participants' stories, expecting the teachers' stories to be complex because they were teaching toward the end of a global pandemic. Personal narratives "are crucial entry points or portals for examining one's lived experience in relation to history, social, and cultural contexts" (Kim, 2016, p. 126). At this time, their experiences were different than how they were in the fall of 2020. I did not explore their experiences in regard to the pandemic unless they brought it up themselves. No matter what the situation was, teachers' life experiences still played into how they experienced

teaching adolescents. Sizer (1985) begins his description of the fictional Horace in *Horace's Compromise* by describing Horace's morning routine and not wanting to wake his family. This very basic idea is that teachers are rooted in their environment.

Additionally, Rallis et al. (1995) reported, "Any teacher makes hundreds of decisions each day" (pp. 41–42), raising the question of how those decisions are influenced by occurrences outside of the school or classroom. "All teachers…make choices based on their own strengths, their experiences, and their particular settings" (p. 6). In any given complex situation, teachers bring their own social, emotional, and physical well-being to the classroom. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC; 2020), in late June 2020, 40% of adults in the United States reported struggling with mental health or substance abuse. Although the statistics did not identify the professions of respondents, presumably, there were teachers who participated in this survey. The data cannot be disaggregated for teachers, and I assumed that there were teachers included in the 40% of adults who struggled at that time. In the 2022–2023 school year, teachers' experiences and settings may have been affected by the global pandemic, social justice, and the war in Ukraine. I did not ask teachers how the pandemic or other current events affected them personally. My focus was on the students, their actions, attitudes, and behaviors, especially students with trauma.

Analytical Framework

The purpose of collecting narrative data and artifacts was to make meaning. However, according to Polkinghorne (in Kim, 2016), there are inherent problems in the study of meaning. Meaning is an abstract concept that is difficult to comprehend. Additionally, other people's meanings are only discovered through their stories and ideas,

which are shared within someone's context. Therefore, meaning is not created in isolation.

Furthermore, narrative data are understood through interpretation, making analysis an imprecise tool. Kim (2016) reported, "The realm of meaning appears in various modes of presentation, such as perception, remembrance, and imagination. These complex connections among images and ideas make the realm of meaning difficult to navigate" (p. 191). Kim stated that one interprets data to understand the phenomenon under study as well as to facilitate an understanding of the phenomenon under study for the reader. Therefore, meaning is understood through the analysis of the narrator, stories, and context that are shared with the researcher, who in turn shares it with an audience.

Kim (2016) described Polkinghorne's analysis of narrative data using two types of analysis. The first, according to Kim, is a paradigmatic mode of analysis, and the second is a narrative mode of analysis. The former "is an effort to classify such general features into categories. It attempts to fit individual details into a larger pattern." (p. 196). Analysis includes looking at the data and finding themes and relationships, discovering commonalities across themes, and producing knowledge from a set of evidence. It involves applying theories to the particular data, finding concepts that are inductively derived from the data, and/or using predetermined foci, such as building relationships or first-year teachers, as a basis of analysis (Kim, 2016). Although I did not ask questions directly related to Cole et al.'s (2009) Flexible Framework, I found that the participants' stories fell into salient categories from that framework. The Flexible Framework identified six elements of trauma-sensitive schools: schoolwide infrastructure and culture; staff training (PD); academic instruction for traumatized children; and school policies,

procedures, and protocols (Cole, 2009). The other components of the Flexible Framework were outside the scope of this research. Therefore, I designed a table similar to Table 3 in order to put parts of the narratives into the categories where they seem to go, understanding that some stories fell into more than one category.

Table 3

Paradigmatic mode of analysis

Artifact	Infrastructure and Culture	PD	Academic Instruction	Policies	Procedures	Protocols

The narrative mode of analysis uses the data to create a story that makes sense. Kim (2016) described this analysis as "based on narrative cognition that attends to the particular and special characteristics of human action that takes place in a particular setting. … Narrative mode of thought is about 'the configuration of the data into a coherent whole' …while sustaining the metaphoric richness of a story" (Polkinghorne in Kim, 2016, p. 197). For this type of analysis, the researcher puts the particulars into data that form a plot, using recursive thought, going between parts to whole and whole to parts. This analysis does not merely look at the narrative itself but finds significance in it as well while creating coherence out of disconnected data elements. Finally, Polkinghorne's narrative mode of analysis "makes the final story congruent with the data while bringing narrative meanings that are not explicit in the data themselves; and … emphasizes connotation and sustains the metaphoric richness of a story" (Kim, 2016, p. 198). This mode of analysis involves listening to multiple stories and determining the

themes that continue to recur. I anticipated creating Table 4 to use as an organizational tool to track potential themes and categories. Through the narratives of these teachers, I expected to hear that students with trauma come to school and are expected to learn and that trauma affects their ability to learn, so teachers build relationships with students. Their stories shed light on different parts of my conceptual framework and expanded my original theories.

Table 4

Narrative mode of analysis

Theme/Category	Teacher interviews	Artifacts

Taken together, narrative data is analyzed to create meaning in a way that looks both at the larger and smaller pictures, looking at data to fit into larger themes and using larger themes to make sense of individual stories. I expected to find the plot of the stories through the recursive process of looking at parts to whole and whole to parts. "A plot is the sequence of events that make up a story….The plot is the story, and more specifically, how the story develops, unfolds, and moves in time" (Literaryterms.net, n.d., Plot). I anticipated that the stories would demonstrate the cause and effect of how teaching students with trauma would affect how teachers teach. While searching for components of the Flexible Framework, I also anticipated hearing themes about building relationships. While listening to stories as a whole, pieces of the Flexible Framework presented themselves. Analyzing all the pieces, I created a story with a plot encapsulated in a conversation. The participants talk with each other about teaching, sharing stories of

how students influenced their behaviors and how the teachers' experiences and behaviors influence their students. The shared stories exposed recurring ideas that became coherent themes.

In essence, the purpose of using narrative inquiry as a method of research is to understand the stories that are shared in a way that makes sense. As Kim (2016) said, "Stories are not devoid of theory; the meaning of a story can be elucidated by theory in ways that matter" (p. 34). Therefore, it is imperative to analyze the narrative to make sense of it. One genre of narrative inquiry is *Bildungsroman,* a term that combines *Bildung* (formation or education) and *Roman* (a story). Kim explained, "the concept of *Bildung* is concerned with nurturing or fostering the self to become somebody, which goes beyond the simple acquisition of knowledge and skills… It is a story of developing oneself as part of the journey of becoming" (p. 127). It is through narration that one can track growth. "*Bildungsroman* addresses not only the inner development but also the complexity and conflicts of human experience, which eventually leads to personal growth and maturation while valuing the process more than the end" (p. 128). Through the stories told and the way they unfolded, thematic concepts recurred along with growth, realization, and change. The purpose of using narrative inquiry is to examine the stories the participants tell about teaching students with trauma. "The aim of biographical research…is to understand how the participants construct and interpret their life experience, appreciating participants' genuine accounts and interpretations" (p. 126). The goal is to look at what and how they share in order for the teachers to identify how they are closer, or believe they are closer, to being better teachers. My goal was to explore whether they were more effective at being trauma-informed.

I began the narrative mode of analysis by looking at the data and finding pieces that went together. Immediately after interviewing teachers, I transcribed my notes. Additionally, I wrote memos detailing the parts of the interview where the participant's body language or choice of words seemed incongruent with their story, noting places where listening to stories made me go, "Huh." These data were then coded for analysis. By examining my notes based on teachers' words from the interviews and the more objective information gathered through the artifacts, themes and categories that go together were identified.

The second step was to use the paradigmatic mode of analysis using the identified components of trauma-informed schools according to Cole et al.'s (2009) Flexible Framework. As I began to analyze the teachers' stories, I combined policies, procedures, and protocols into one category to acknowledge "the many P's of policy" (Rallis et al., 2008, p.1). According to Rallis et al., policy can refer to a written policy, a program, a procedure, or a practice. In an attempt to tease out the differences between *policy* with a capital P versus the policy of how the school operates, I combined the terms to acknowledge that teachers implement rules they believe in, whether official policy or their own practice. Additionally, pieces of stories and artifacts were organized into the appropriate category. By deliberately separating the other terms, the information was better analyzed. Finally, as the data were sorted and re-sorted the data, themes recurred. While exploring the participants' stories, elements of trauma-informed classrooms were identified.

Ethical Considerations

Until this point, everything about the journey to earn my Ph.D. seemed pretty straightforward. Take classes; learn theory, content, and methodology; write a dissertation. Even the research I conducted up to my dissertation was linear. I had participants sign consent forms and do what needed to be done. I took pains to create anonymity for my participants both in focus groups and individual interviews, but that seemed like good practice; I did not think of it as an issue of ethics. While writing a narrative dissertation, I understood what Rallis and Rossman (2012) meant when they wrote, "Every decision about data collection, analysis, interpretation, and presentation has moral dimensions" (p. 61). I conducted research at a site where I was somewhat known; I had a colleague who was an administrator at the school. Although I did not supervise or evaluate anyone involved in the study, participants potentially could have feared that I would share my observations, thoughts, or findings with my colleague, who may have been their evaluator or, at the very least, worked daily with the one who is. Many knew I interacted with my colleague on a regular basis. As Kim (2016) wrote, "Placing a relational ethics at the heart of narrative inquiry, the researcher endeavors to obtain data from 'a deeply human, genuine, empathic, and respectful relationship to the participant about significant and meaningful aspects of the participant's life' …. We need to be transparent about our research interests and purposes so as to make an alliance and a trustworthy relationship with the participant" (p. 103). Therefore, it was imperative to be transparent in order to gain trustworthiness.

The Belmont Report was written to protect participants against unethical researchers. The three ethical considerations outlined in *The Belmont Report* are respect

for persons, beneficence, and justice. Respect for persons, according to Rallis and Rossman (2012), means "that researchers are to treat subjects as independent agents; those who cannot act independently are considered vulnerable and must be protected" (p. 63). The participants should be regarded as *people*, individuals with strengths and challenges, and the data they hold is the key. Respect for persons means remembering that although a participant may be one of many, or a few, to share her thoughts and ideas or allow a researcher to observe, she is, at heart, a person and should be treated accordingly.

Additionally, participants who are part of a vulnerable population, such as minors, need an additional layer of respect and protection. Parents must sign consent, and adolescents should sign assent. Parents may agree that their children can participate in a research project, but assent acknowledges that teenagers are on the precipice of being adults and should be allowed to agree to participate on their own. Benefice, the next ethical consideration, is when the researcher maximizes the potential benefits and minimizes the potential harm to the participant (Rallis & Rossman, 2012). The researcher should weigh the risks and benefits of the study and determine whether the benefits outweigh the risks in order to conduct an ethical project. Finally, justice refers to fairness and to determining who receives the benefits named above and who is most harmed by it (Rallis & Rossman, 2012). However, the black-and-white delineation is not as clear in reality. As Hostetler (2005) stated, "Life is the laboratory for ethics" (p. 19). Holding respect for persons and maximizing benefits while minimizing harm in a way that benefits the most vulnerable is not an easy task. It harkens back to the beginning of this

chapter, where I firmly establish myself in the *it depends* middle of epistemological perspective.

These three ethical considerations are just the beginning. “To engage in ethical thought and action at all, one has to accept certain baseline commitments, such as respecting the dignity and humanity of persons” (Hostetler, 2005, p. 19). As does research, even ethics begin with questions. “How am I respecting? What am I balancing? How is it fair?” (Rallis & Kimball, 2016). I begin to answer these questions with the minimum expectation of IRB approval. To demonstrate respect, I humbly asked permission to speak with adults, and I conducted at least one interview in the teachers’ classrooms. I intended to make as tiny a ripple as possible out of respect for what Kim (2016) labeled as this: a sacred space. She defined this as a place where the participants feel safe to be themselves, connected to others or the community, are passionate about what they’re doing, and recognize and are grateful for the safety. “We create such a sacred place by respecting the dignity of our participants and honoring the sacredness of their humanity as we develop trustworthy relationships with them. Hence, narrative inquiry becomes a site of communion where the researcher and the researched are interconnected in an inquiry, meaningfully informing each other, thus ensuring the integrity of the work itself” (Kim, 2016, p. 104). I balanced the need for confidentiality with insight into creating or supporting trauma-informed schools. The unfairness may be revealed in that students who most need trauma-sensitive teachers have the least access to them. Therefore, fairness means raising awareness of the importance of this topic.

As I interviewed participants about their practice, focusing on building relationships, I realized I was building relationships with my participants as well. I was

not an objective outsider, but I continued to make connections and learn about these teachers. And they learned about me. Although I did not share a great deal about myself, when asking for stories, I respected their need to know more about me. Rallis (2010) labels examining this concept through the lens of the ethics of care. "The aim is to build the mutual respect necessary for the caring relationship to be possible; reciprocity is the key" (p. 438). She further goes on to describe reflexivity in the realm of ethics, exploring the intersection of principles and the relationship. "Care theory, with its emphasis on relationships, can connect principles and context, providing a practical framework for making moral decisions in the ethically important moments a qualitative researcher will experience. Ethical research demands *caring reflexivity*" (p. 438), meaning looking at one's interpretations and descriptions, biases, and purposes in an iterative process that does not cause harm. Caring reflexivity is an ongoing process to ensure respect and mutual benefit.

Hostetler (2005) wrote, "Education researchers must be able to make sound and accountable… connections to a robust and justifiable conceptions of human well-being" (p. 17) as part of his argument that educational research should be "good" (p. 16). His specific quandary is "whether the good thing is good for *these* people, at *this* time, in *this* situation" (p. 20). I wholeheartedly believe the answer to this question is yes. I started a literature review about trauma-informed schools in January 2019, when working with students whose severe anxiety and depression so interfered with their ability to access the curriculum that they needed to attend a special education school in order to learn. I learned that the majority of the students were trauma-exposed. It was not until more than a year later, in March 2020, that schools in Massachusetts "closed for at least three

weeks" to slow the spread of COVID-19 (Johnston & Vázquez Toness, 2020, p. A10). More than three years later, we were still in the midst of a global pandemic, which continued to cause disruption and uncertainty in and out of schools. Some may say exposure to the COVID-19 pandemic is a type of trauma exposure; others have labeled it toxic stress (N. Rushford, personal communication, Sept. 2021). Yet, it is still the job of educators in schools to teach all students. Regardless of the label, arguably, there are more students with trauma attending school, and therefore, the research on trauma-informed schools feels imperative. Although I did not focus specifically on the pandemic and its effects, I strongly believe *now* is the ethical time to increase the knowledge about trauma-informed schools.

Asking about trauma-informed schools, in and of themselves, could be upsetting to participants. Initially, these teachers were approached because of the PD they attended that could have touched upon trauma. The questions that I intended to ask in my initial study were focused on what the teachers learned in PD. Because the teachers did not take explicit trauma-informed PD, the questions I asked were more open-ended, focusing on what they did learn in the PD, how the PD affected their practice, and what they noticed as a result of attending a particular workshop or class. Because I interviewed teachers in December 2020, they naturally discussed the COVID-19 pandemic and referred to the pandemic as a source of trauma. At that time, one teacher disclosed, without my prompting, having trauma as a teenager. That statement was repeated while I was conducting research for this dissertation; another teacher willingly made a similar statement. During all instances, I acknowledged their statements and thanked them for sharing. However, I did not specifically ask any participant about their personal

experiences with trauma. I chose these teachers because of the professional development they chose to attend. Additionally, I chose not to interview students with trauma. I did not want to upset or trigger students by speaking with them at this time.

As I collected and analyzed data, I thought about the people I interacted with. I developed questions to ask in order to guide me through the process of collecting information, a relatively easy exercise. The test was to get IRB approval, collect data ethically, and remember to regularly acknowledge the students and teachers who made it possible to increase the literature and, hopefully, the protocols, practices, and policies of trauma-informed schools for the benefit of all.

Conclusion

The goal of this dissertation is to increase knowledge about meeting students' needs in trauma-informed schools. Through narrative inquiry, I interviewed teachers from Dreiser High School in order for them to share their stories and artifacts about relationships with students they teach who have been exposed to trauma. I analyzed the data through narrative and paradigmatic modes of analysis, using the Flexible Framework as a theoretical framework in order to make sense of the data. The ultimate objective is to inform teaching practices in trauma-informed schools. I conducted research and collected and analyzed data in an ethical and caring manner.

CHAPTER IV

ANALYSIS

Introduction

During the 2022–2023 school year, three teachers at Dreiser High School were interviewed. They shared stories about teaching students, some of whom they identified as experiencing trauma. After the interviews, the notes were transcribed and annotated. The teachers' stories were analyzed using narrative and paradigmatic modes of analysis. Finally, a narrative was developed that interwove their stories, highlighting commonalities and differences.

Analysis

Three teachers at DHS were identified as participants during earlier research. They graciously agreed to participate in research for this dissertation. All three staff members teach subjects in the humanities; given the size of the school, the specific subject they teach was not identified. Two women and one man were interviewed. They were initially identified by their participation in professional development that might touch upon trauma, either social-emotional learning (SEL) or Initiatives for Developing Equity and Achievement for Students (IDEAS), an anti-racism course. It was assumed that either or both of those PDs would touch upon trauma. These were not random samples in that they chose to participate in a program that addressed the non-academic concerns of students. They were not teachers who participated in district-mandated PD for all staff; this was a self-selected group of teachers who wanted to learn more. They were interviewed during the 2020–2021 school year. At that time, one of the teachers

spoke through the experience of attending a conference as an advisor for an extracurricular activity and not the original reason for contact; one wanted to know the best strategies for teaching students with social-emotional challenges, and the third wanted to learn more about being inclusive. It is important to note that they participated in PD willingly and with a desire to improve their practice. The gender-neutral names of Harper, Brooks, and Avery were used as a layer of confidentiality.

The teachers spoke in their classrooms or an office space over the course of a month. After reviewing the IRB consent form, I spoke with them two to three times each. Once I transcribed my notes, I sent each of them their transcript, asking them if I captured what they said and if they wanted to add or subtract anything from their original interviews. One participant asked that I not share a specific story. I deleted that from the transcript. The others accepted what was sent to them without further comment.

Some of the questions they were asked were common, such as "What is the best thing about teaching? What is the biggest challenge?" Other questions were unique based on the conversation and stories they told. Although I prepared for a semi-structured interview, the meetings quickly became conversations. The first question asked, "What made you go into teaching?" became a launching pad. Whether it was Brooks sharing an experience of teaching as a child or Avery's acknowledgment of the exact opposite experience, each participant took the first question, began talking, and shared stories. At times, I asked for clarification or a follow-up question; when the participant's story and related thoughts ended, I asked another question. I elicited narratives rather than run through a list of prepared questions. What was common for all of the interviews was the fact that the teacher was given time and space to share their thoughts, experiences, and

stories. After the first or second encounter, each of them gave me a tour of their classroom. At the end of each interview, I went home and transcribed my notes. I used their actual names until I was done with all the interviews.

I began the analysis process by considering their stories separately. After I transcribed their interviews, I jotted down my initial thoughts, such as noting specific words used, body language, and affect. As I transcribed the second interview, I began making connections, realizing that one person's anecdote sounded similar to another participant's. Intuitively, I saw the overlap and connections. Once I was done with my initial round of interviews, I made notes of commonalities, stories that resonated, and questions for further exploration. I wrote thoughts about their relationships with students and how they presented this idea. I identified what they told me about their relationships with the adults in the building in which they worked. I noted why they went into teaching and what their favorite part of teaching was. The last notes included identifying trauma, how they treated students with trauma, and which stories identified them as safe adults, adults whom students confided in—another pass, looking at the data identified how they talked about student engagement and what that meant.

I then created two tables. The first, Table 5, was created using the paradigmatic mode of analysis. I reviewed Cole et al.'s (2009) Flexible Framework. The framework, which has six elements, contains a variety of tools that schools can use as they see best. The elements include schoolwide infrastructure and culture, staff training, academic instruction for traumatized children, and school policies, procedures, and protocols (Cole et al., 2009). Even though I initially contacted these teachers about the PD they participated in, as I analyzed their stories, I confirmed that no one talked about staff

training or professional development, so I did not create a column for that element. As each discussed what they did to support students, I realized they were describing what Rallis and colleagues (2008) allude to as small p policies: practices or procedures and not official school policies. Therefore, I grouped policies, procedures, and protocols under one heading. Finally, the artifact column was predominately empty because they told me stories. The only physical artifacts they shared were during the tours of their classrooms. Table 5 reflects the Flexible Framework structure that my iterative thoughts fell into.

Table 5

Paradigmatic mode of analysis

Artifact	Infrastructure and Culture	Academic Instruction	Policies/procedures/protocols
			All three—No homework
			Harper sent email about an upsetting topic
Tour of room		Seating arrangement	
Student work		Projects to demonstrate mastery Projects as exemplars	
Harper and Avery displayed other items: thank-you gifts, senior pictures, postcards from students			
	Support of colleagues—Avery has co-teachers, Brooks and Harper have departments		
	Support of administration—Avery and sometimes Brooks		
			Avery—inclusive language

I created Table 6 based on the narrative mode of analysis. I noted the theme/category, which participant(s) touched upon it, and the artifact related to it. The artifacts in this table were not tangible, as much as evidence that supported the theme. The artifacts were the relevant stories that, when pieced together, created a theme. I labeled the last column quotation, which is the artifact.

Additionally, through the repetition of each participant's narratives, I noticed how the stories related to each other and how the patterns revealed themes. In my researcher's journal, I began making the connections between participants' stories and themes that were becoming apparent. Table 6 is an abridged representation of the table I created during analysis.

Table 6

Narrative mode of analysis

Theme/Category	Teacher	Quotation
Content	Avery	*I use the literature to connect with students.*
	Harper	*They can email the subject line 'handle with care.' I know it will be a difficult day.*
	Brooks	*We had the most intellectual conversation about should sex scenes be included in literature.*
Self-care	Brooks	*I do not check my e-mail on the weekend. And I do not check my e-mail after 6:00 p.m. on the weekdays.*
	Harper	*I exercise. I run. I prioritize sleep. I try to eat well*
Trauma	Harper	*I had trauma as a kid. I naturally assume kids have trauma*
Signs of trauma	Harper	*I could intuit a bit more as to who was struggling with trauma, with the way that they might shut down. You know, heads on the desk, coming to school late, not interacting with people who I thought were their friends or used to be their friends.*

Theme/Category	Teachers	Quotations
Trauma	Avery	*It's kinda hard to tell who has trauma…. The prompt allowed her to write about her father dying when she was a young kid.*
Trauma	Brooks	*I don't know who in this room is struggling.*
Build relationship	Avery	*We experienced it together*
	Harper	*It's hardest for me to build a relationship with students who identify as male, and dad is out of the picture*
Benefit of relationship	Brooks	*You can get quieter students to chat with you if you have a relationship with them*
Family	Avery	*I stopped saying, 'Have your parents sign your form.'"*
Family	Harper	*It's hardest for me to build a relationship with students who identify as male, and dad is out of the picture*
	Brooks	*And I said, 'Well, go home and ask your mom for a cookie because I don't have anything,' and then I moved on. At the end of class, a student said stayed behind and said, 'Just so you know, his mom died two years ago.'*

I made notes about who spoke about a particular topic. For example, I wrote "Relationships with students." Under that topic, I listed each teacher and the examples that demonstrated the point. I wrote, "Why teaching," and gave each teacher's reason as to why they went into this profession. After listing the obvious connections, I then wrote "other commonalities," recognizing that two teachers shared stories about engaging students. Both the narrative and paradigmatic modes of analysis were my interpretations. Another researcher may have analyzed the stories differently. Based on my conceptual framework, I noticed how the stories related to each other and the potential themes the stories could support.

I decided that a more powerful and illustrative narrative was to put the stories together in order to have a stronger sense of how teachers build relationships to

effectively teach students with trauma. I was looking for coherence out of disconnected data elements in order to make "the final story congruent with the data while bringing narrative meanings that are not explicit in the data themselves…emphasiz[ing] connotation and sustain[ing] the metaphoric richness of a story" (Kim, 2016, p. 198). While the participants were speaking with each other, they were telling the stories they told me. Hence, teachers took turns asking questions I asked. Although they had been interviewed separately, because they answered similar questions, they could speak with each other. One teacher's story was tangentially related to another's. One participant's anecdote echoed another. Each story shared by the participants became one congruent narrative. After writing the first draft of their conversation, I became aware of the need to anonymize the subjects the participants teach. When one teacher described specific content, I was aware that I might not be able to relate the story using the exact words she used because it could potentially identify her.

Initially, I drafted the narrative based on the commonalities of stories and where they intersected with each other in a way that was coherent. I looked back through the interviews, making sure that I included all of the relevant stories. I excluded stories that were specific to the participant and had the potential to reveal who the speaker was, or those that were unique and not tied to other stories, themes, or had a connection with another story. I next went back and annotated their conversation, coding the data within the narrative. I coded for themes and jotted thoughts and connections in the margins. Many of these thoughts were similar to what I had noted in my beginning analysis, and I added them to the narrative mode of analysis table. As I reread the narrative, I realized the coding was superficial, merely using one or two words, such as relationship, family,

and safe space. I embraced what Jessica Minahan (2023) said: "'build a relationship' is not helpful. We should think about how we built relationships with kids and share that with colleagues." I realized the code "relationships" did not explore what this meant deeply enough. I reviewed what I coded as a relationship and conducted a second round of coding, which described what the participant did or said about building a relationship. Thus, I frequently replaced the word relationship or added to its meaning.

Similarly, "impact," meaning influence, became more specific with the second and third iterations. Often, with each reading, I discovered another meaning or a nuanced approach to the topic. Overall, I focused in on more general words to make them more specific.

Through this process, I noted themes that recurred in the narrative. I saw there were reciprocal themes. For example, *a student is an individual, and an individual also is a student*. Impact was a theme reflected both in the effect of the teacher on the student as well as the student on the teacher. The theme of relationship expanded into a variety of topics, including: building; its importance; impact; used to create safe space; and between adults. Families and siblings, as well as pedagogy and content, were other common themes in the narrative. Finally, self-care and work-life balance were themes participants discussed as part of their stories. The themes then became thematic statements.

Not all themes became thematic statements. For example, all of the participants talked about families, often in the context of a student. Sometimes they spoke about a parent's behavior or knowing a student's sibling. However, families seemed to support identifying potential students with trauma and were not related to a larger theme. Similarly, two teachers talked about what they did outside of the classroom to have work-

life balance, but the third did not. Therefore, I did not identify self-care as a recurring theme across all participants. Although there were many overlapping ideas and themes, I decided that themes had to include stories from all participants and had to help make sense of their experiences.

Credibility

Narrative inquiry is a form of qualitative research. The criteria for judging whether research is credible and rigorous are different for qualitative research than quantitative research. According to Rossman and Rallis (2012), determining rigor relies on the thoughtfulness and dependability of the researcher. After all, the researcher is "the instrument" (Rallis, 2014, p. 138) or the "means through which the study is conducted" (Rossman & Rallis, 2012, p. 5). Therefore, it was imperative that I conduct a trustworthy study. Rossman and Rallis state that there are three interrelated sets of standards to determine trustworthiness. The first is, "Was the study conducted according to the norms for acceptable and competent research practice? Second,…was it conducted ethically? Third, was the researcher sensitive to the politics of the topic and setting?" (p. 60). I believe the answer to all three questions is yes. I prepared semi-structured face-to-face interviews and arranged to meet the teachers at times that were convenient for them. I had them sign consent. I was respectful, giving the participants time and space to answer questions as well as allowing them to not answer a question if they so chose. Finally, I acknowledged the complexity of talking about relationships in a public school at the end of a pandemic. Although the topic of *trauma* came up, it was when the teachers were comfortable talking about it.

To ensure my data were credible, I triangulated the data by interviewing multiple teachers multiple times. The first interview was used to create a relationship between a participant and a researcher, an important step in qualitative research. As such, I asked them each the same question, "What made you go into teaching? What brought you here?" Their answers varied, of course, and they all shared a story as to why they teach. The second and third interviews yielded more information as well as clarification of earlier stories and statements that, upon reflection, needed more elaboration or explanation. Triangulation helped to write the story of a complex issue.

As I transcribed each interview, I saved the file with the participant's name and date of the interview. When the majority of the interviews were completed, I only went back for clarification. I compiled each teacher's narrative into a document and sent it to them for validation. Using a member check allowed the participants to check and validate what I captured as well as explain any misunderstandings. As a result of the participant validation, one teacher requested that I not use a specific story. I deleted the story from my notes, respecting the participant's wish for privacy.

This study was unique and sought to understand these teachers' experiences. According to Bhattacharya (2017), when conducting a qualitative study that focuses on understanding, "The goal is to simply understand and explore in an in-depth manner and not to generalize" (p. 19). I interviewed three humanities teachers at DHS during the 2022–2023 school year. Using thick, rich descriptions, I identified thematic statements. Another researcher or practitioner could read this narrative inquiry and determine if the results could be applied elsewhere. "Potential users…compare and contrast the specifics of your study with their own setting and judge if the two are sufficiently similar for your

findings to be insightful. This logic is different from generalizing probabilistically; it is the same, however, as applying findings about one population to another" (Rossman & Rallis, 2012, p. 65). Therefore, this study could be useful to others looking to learn more about developing trauma-informed classrooms.

The Conversation

The Friday before Martin Luther King, Jr. Day, Dreiser Public Schools had an all-day professional development schedule. Students did not attend school, and the district provided speakers and workshops for faculty and staff. The district provided a box lunch for everyone.

DHS had a PD day, and Jessica Minahan spoke at it. However, the day she spoke and the interactive conversation is fictionalized. What is written in italics are the actual words spoken by each participant. The conversation is on the left, and the annotation is in the right margin.

Brooks, Avery, and Harper found themselves at a table together in the back of the cafeteria at DHS. They started talking about the workshops they attended in the morning. All three went to hear Jessica Minahan, BCBA, talk about difficult students.

"That was incredible," Harper said.

"Right?" Brooks responded. "I had such low expectations for today. But man, Jessica Minahan was something else."

"What sticks with me is when she said to say *'build a relationship' is not helpful. We should think about how we* — How to build a relationship

built relationships with kids and share that with colleagues,[1]" Avery replied. | Colleagues

"How do you do that?" Brooks asked.

"What?" Avery replied.

"Build a relationship. I know you have students who trust you and interact with you, Harper. How do you get them to trust you?" Brooks said.

"*I recognize that students are individuals, and I shed the stereotypes about kids. Sometimes, I can make them share. I recognize that every situation is different. Not all rules work for all children."* | A student is an individual

Avery replied, "I get that. Building relationships is *multifaceted. I use the literature to connect with students. If they see you have a reaction to the literature, they react. I use humor and other things to make it relatable. If you analyze anything long enough, it becomes funny."* | Complex Content | React to students | Humor

"That makes sense," said Brooks. "Now that I think about it, *I try in the beginning of the year to meet with every student individually. I also have them fill out an information card, hard copy, so it's not online, and I can always have access to it. They feel that they can put down what they* | Learning about students as individuals

[1] *Actual words said by speaker*

want. I keep them very general, but I do ask questions like 'What are your preferred pronouns?' 'Do you have a nickname?' Because maybe that nickname is what they prefer versus their given name. I try to do little things like that."	The importance of names
"What else do you ask them?" asked Avery.	
"*It depends on the school year*," Brooks replied. "*This year, I asked about a highlight of the summer. What do you want to get out of this class? I always ask that. I ask favorites: song, movie, TV show, so I know what to watch."*	Student interest
"What do you watch?" Harper asked.	
"*I don't watch Euphoria. I tell them that. I can't watch it*," Brooks replied, laughing.	Differentiation between student and adult
"I also think *it's being more for the students than academics,"* Harper said. "*Maslow before Bloom.*"	Individuals, not students Human development; pedagogy
"Remind me what that means, Harper."	
"What this means is *you can't even think about teaching here*," Harper pointed up to Avery's shoulder, "*When their needs aren't being met down here*," Harper pointed to Avery's knee.	Meeting individual students' needs
"Meaning?" asked Avery.	
"Meaning that if students are worried about where their next meal is coming from, I am going to be more	

forgiving that they are not answering higher-order thinking questions. On the other hand, *I give students support,"* Harper explained. *"It's hard because sometimes school is a distraction. No matter what else is going on, school is an escape. That's not true for every kid. It's hard for teachers and parents. Your high school experience is not what every kid has to have or wants to have."*

How students experience school
Purpose of schooling: academic, social, and/or escape; individual
Impact of school on student

"It's like when I was a kid in school," Brooks said. "*I loved to learn and to read. Now I'm comfortable with that; in high school, being termed a nerd or geek was not looked highly upon. I got to my first day of school, and my best friend from middle school was there. I walked up to her on the front steps, and she turned and walked away. She never spoke to me again. It was a really tough four years.*

Content
Personal experience

"I told my mother just recently how awful high school was," Brooks continued. "A*nd she said, why didn't you just ask to change schools? I said I didn't think I had that power. At 15, how do I have the power to say, 'Mom, I am going to public school now, after all these years in private school'? But it allowed me to find my voice and help me hopefully have a voice for those who don't have a voice."*

Toxic environment?
Change schools, change students, or change environment?
Empowerment/advocacy

"That reminds me of this story my mom told me growing up," said Harper. "*My mom went to Catholic school, and they had no money. Sometimes, my mom had a gravy sandwich for lunch. The rule at the school was if you didn't finish your lunch, you couldn't go outside. Sometimes, it's really hard to finish a gravy sandwich. My mom missed a lot of time going outside. One day, a nice day after a long stretch of gloomy days, Sister Catherine brought over the garbage can and swept the sandwich into the trash, and said, 'Go out and play with your friends.'*	Personal experience Practice Disregard practice
"Sometimes you have to take away the gravy sandwich. You have to be the adult and use your judgment. When you do that the kids appreciate that. They don't know to ask or that they can ask."	The practice hurts the student. Don't just change the practice. Teachers need to look at what each student needs.
"So Brooks, you throw away their gravy sandwiches." Harper said.	
"I throw away their gravy sandwiches!" Brooks repeated.	
"Is that why you went into teaching, Harper?" Avery asked Harper. "To throw away gravy sandwiches?"	
"No," Harper replied. "*I was in the pre-law track. I thought I'd be a juvenile attorney. I believe there were no bad kids, just bad incidents. At some point, I realized I*	Teacher impact on student

would only see kids when they were in trouble. I thought, what could I do to prevent them from getting into trouble? *I come from a long line of educators. My dad wanted me to be an educator.*

Proactive, not reactive

Family expectations

"What about you, Avery?"

"I want to say I had an experience, but I don't think I did," Avery replied. *"I could've had an experience* teaching my *neighbors or friends or younger siblings, but I didn't. I majored in English. This is where you wind up. I was interested in reading and writing.*

Personal experience

Content

*"*Brooks, why are you laughing?" Avery asked, looking offended.

"That's exactly what did happen to me! *I taught my sisters school when I was in third grade. They did not enjoy it. I made them worksheets and everything. My mom may still have them."*

Experience

Brooks continued, "Like Harper, I come from educators. *My grandmother was a high school teacher. She loved her job. She did it for 60 years. Watching her was amazing to me. Intuitively, I always knew I was meant to be a teacher. I love interacting with teens. I want to be a teacher they could rely on."*

Impact of family on individual

Impact of teacher on students

"Again, throwing away gravy sandwiches," said Avery. "I think I throw away gravy sandwiches differently."

"What do you mean?" Harper asked.

"*Everybody gets what they need*. Sometimes, they need more attention. Sometimes it's less. *Giving someone more attention doesn't mean giving others less. I'm more attuned to students. I'm trying to find part of a solution*," said Avery. "What I find challenging is the overload of work. *The actual hardest part of this job is grading papers and nights. It's the time at home. I just get so busy. If I had 25 kids, I would've sent a higher percentage of personal emails to parents. I'd be doing the job better if I had less to do*."

Impact for students

Individual

Workload

Self-criticism

"I hear you," said Harper. "*The work schedule has not caught up with the demands and needs in what it means to be a good teacher. I'm frustrated that's it's harder to be a parent as a teacher. COVID changed corporate. We can't have the same benefits as the corporate world. I can't work from home on a Friday. I might miss my kid's fun run because too many other people have requested the day off.*"

Work-life balance

"I've changed my work schedule," said Brooks.

"What do you mean?"

"I used to check my email all the time from home. About 15 years ago, *on the night before they had a big paper due, I checked email around 9 p.m., and I got a really disturbing e-mail from a student. I had to call an administrator to say that they needed to do a wellness check, this kid was scaring me. They did, and it all worked out; they got there in time. I'm glad I saw the e-mail, and at the same time I didn't sleep the rest of the night. So one of the things I started to do after that is I do not check my e-mail on the weekend. And I do not check my e-mail after 6:00 p.m. on the weekdays. I'm clear on the syllabus. I am clear on that at back-to-school night. The balance of that littlest thing has started to make a huge difference, because then that means I go home and I'm myself. I use my car ride to decompress. I've started to really do that and try to leave work here. If that means that if I have to stay 'til 5:00 o'clock at night sometimes, then that's what I do. Every Saturday is for me. I do not do anything school-related. I used to do schoolwork both days. On and on for hours on end. And so now I've stopped that."*

Impact of student on teacher

Impact of teacher on student

Work-life balance

Self-care

"Wow! And what do parents say?" asked Harper.

"I tell parents, 'Here are my rules.' I didn't think at first they would like it, but they have been incredibly

receptive of me not answering emails. Because I still do it in a 24-hour time frame, but they have been incredibly, incredibly receptive." Family/parents

"That sounds like great self-care," Harper replied.

"It is," said Brooks. "What do you do to take care of yourself?"

"*I exercise. I run. I prioritize sleep. I try to eat well. This year I didn't do a good job of this. I limit my alcohol intake. I have to be cognizant because it would be easy to have multiple glasses of wine. It's knowing what I shouldn't do*. Self-care Self-awareness

"Despite the self-care, or maybe because I'm not doing it as well as I should, I'm also really sad," Harper continued, "As you probably know, two of my closest friends left DHS at the end of last year; one retired, the other moved to another school. *I could talk to the retiree and trust her with the craziness. My other friend has been sick a lot this year*. It's been really hard." Self-care Colleagues

"I'm sorry to hear that," said Brooks. *"I struggle sometimes with adults. Sometimes adults are a pain in the butt*," Brooks chuckled. Colleagues

"That can be true," said Avery. "But on the other hand, they can be supportive. *A month ago, a parent of a* Family/parent

student reached out. They were politically conservative. The principal got the email, too. He was very supportive, too. He had ideas about what to do and what not to do. I thought two parents wanted to come in together. Dr. Sullivan *said, 'No. We don't do that.' The department head joined the meeting as a pseudo-administrator*. We addressed the parent's concerns. The meeting went better than I anticipated." | Positive administration

"*I feel somewhat supported by administration now, but I've been here long enough to have a backbone and stand up for myself,"* said Brooks. *"Whereas throughout the years, it's ebb and flow, but I feel I can go the main office and speak my peace. I may not always get what I asked for, but I feel like I can do that. My first year, I was not supported at all. I almost quit two days before school started, and then we had a new administration my second year and things really changed. But I mean, I do think that the administration listens to me. It just sometimes falls on deaf ears.* | Positive administration | Self-advocacy | Negative administration

"I appreciated a previous principal and the fact that he pushed against the grain, and I think that's why he left. Or he left because he just couldn't fight that uphill battle" Brooks said. *"Administration has been an ebb and flow with* | Positive administration

my department. I know I can rely on other people in this building, some more than others. With admin, it's been a bumpy ride, but hopefully things are getting better.	Colleagues
"On the other hand," continued Brooks. "M*y greatest challenge, I think in a lot of ways, is changing with the times. I like to change. I like to learn. And sometimes I get stuck in who I used to be. I don't, as much as I want to see the whole student, necessarily always see the whole student and I might get frustrated with how they present or put them on the back burner and then come back and think, 'Wait a minute that student actually needed help and you put them on the back burner because you were frustrated with something, you're the adult.' So I think things like that. I had a student who would have graduated, and I only knew her for a really short time in a* club I advise. *I prided myself on seeing people who felt that they weren't seen. Her death was one of my biggest challenges. Still. When they mentioned her at that graduation, she died by suicide, and I was one of many in her life, and it was still. I still tense up because I knew that there was a struggle. I had her older brother and knew that there was stuff. She never confided in me. And yet, to me, one of my biggest challenges is I didn't step up for her. Or I felt I didn't step up for her*."	Growth Individual Teacher impact on student Impact of student on teacher/regret Siblings

"I, too, struggle sometimes. *It's hardest for me to build a relationship with students who identify as male, and dad is out of the picture*," said Harper. "*There was one kid; I kept trying. He knew I wasn't going anywhere. Every day I would greet him with a smile. Even when yesterday was not a great day. I ask a lot of questions. 'Why do you think was the best response?' 'What happened to make you respond like that?' 'Help me to understand...' He had a crisis and came to see me after school hours. He emailed me at 9 a.m. and asked to see me after school. I was honored he trusted me.*"	Acknowledge challenges of building a relationship Gender Parent/family Perseverance Result of building a relationship Impact of student on teacher
"*I struggle with quiet kids*," said Brooks. "*The really, really quiet kids. I used to be a quiet kid. Sometimes you just want to be alone, so it's sometimes a struggle with them. On the other hand, you can get quieter students to chat with you if you have a relationship with them."*	Individual Benefit of relationship
Brooks continued, *"I had a student in my honors class, and he opened up a little bit. But I mean, he would make side comments and be rude. Come to find out, it's his defense mechanism. But it's really difficult with the quiet kids because I also don't want to make them uncomfortable. And so it's finding that balance."*	Cognizant of the impact of teacher on student

"I had a student like Harper's," said Avery. "I don't know, 5 or 10 *years ago, I had the most contentious student. He read* <u>*The Things They Carried*</u>*. He took great interest in that. I saw him get mad and turn it down. He turned into the Hulk and was able to dial it back down to David Banner."*	Student reaction
*"*What was your role in that?" Harper asked.	
"I don't fully know," Avery replied. *"He started reading* <u>*The Things They Carried*</u>*. He became emotionally invested in the book and the class. He was searching for something to identify with because no one wants to be bored and angry. This influenced his life decisions. No one knew why this student's attitude changed."*	Content Behavior hides feelings
"I think having a relationship allows me to communicate with students," Brooks said. *"If they're comfortable, they're willing to make mistakes. And that's how they learn."*	Relationships Communication Learning process
"Interacting with students like that kid makes me realize I'm a *safe space,"* said Avery. *"I told this other teacher, 'That guy hates me.' She said, 'Of course he does. You're a happy, successful* person.' *I have his stepbrother in my class now. The kid's doing great.*"	Safety; result of building a relationship is creation of safe space Sibling
"But how do you know you're a safe space?" Brooks asked pleadingly.	

"*They're generally happy. I hear worse things about behavior or poor performance in other classes. I've never given a survey. There's engagement. I don't have any data besides just an impression,"* Avery replied.

Engagement

"Also, when I think about it, I have thank-you gifts. I put them up around my room. Also, students give me their senior pictures. Those I post on my wall."

Artifacts of relationship

"I display postcards that students send to me," Harper said.

"I know at least 1, if not 5 to 10 things about each kid personally," Avery said. *"I have the ability to talk about sports, literature, and music. Students think, if I know so much about music, why do I know about the Red Sox?* How about you, Harper? Do you think your room is a safe space?"

Individual; student interests

"I do, Avery. *Quite a few students come out in my classroom, but they're not out at home. As a parent, it's tough because I would want to know. But I respect their confidentiality."*

Safety; parents/family; individual

"I had a student who started the year really strongly, and then midway through the year was really seeming to struggle," shared Brooks. *"And I couldn't really pick up what happened; she was always like a vivacious, open kid.*

And then just nothing. She was an incredibly intelligent young person, and I didn't know what was going on. So I tried to talk with her, she wouldn't talk. I tried to go to guidance, and they shared nothing. I don't know exactly what the impetus for it was, but one day after school, nobody was there and she just came in and we literally we sat side by side like this," Brooks said pointing to the space between Avery and Harper's legs. "*That's how she sat down. She didn't even look at me and she looked at the floor, and she said, 'I broke up with my boyfriend,' and I said, 'OK.' And she said, 'And I think it's because I like girls, but I don't know what to do,' and she just stared at the floor. So I'm looking straight ahead not even looking at her, and I said, 'OK. That's fine. You know, we like who we like.' But her then ex-boyfriend didn't appreciate it, didn't understand, because she didn't tell him why, and they were all part of this friend group. She was really, really struggling with it, and I just let her talk. And I said, 'I'm here whenever you need me.' And then I just let it go. Because she just needed that moment. Then, things seemed to get better for her. A year later, when I didn't have her, she came back and we actually spoke face to face. And she said, 'No, I am.' And I said, 'OK.' She said, 'I am a lesbian.*

Change of behavior

Perseverance

To build a relationship, the teacher listened and acknowledged where student was by just sitting and mirroring her position

I'm OK with that.' She didn't really come out in high school. She is out now, and that's her own process. But I really think it was because we had built the relationship as a freshman in the club I advised*, by the time I had her as a sophomore, I could pick up that piece. And then she flourished. I don't know if it's necessarily just me, but I think having that relationship, and the fact that even though she didn't even look at me in the first time and looked at the floor, the fact that she could come to me like was an awesome thing."*

Time, space, and situation to allow relationship to develop; extracurricular club advisor

Impact of teacher on student

"I had a similar experience with a student I had a relationship with," said Harper. "*Last week it was my daughter's birthday. I had a kid who stayed after on Friday afternoon. She sat down, and I knew we weren't going anywhere. So I asked, 'Why are you here?' She said, 'I'm avoiding going home because my parents are always fighting.' I asked the student how she handles that. She said she spoke with others. She just avoided going home. The hardest part of the job is the mental load that goes home. While I was celebrating with my own daughter, I was thinking about this kid over the weekend*."

Allow space for student to just be

Parents/family

Family

Work life balance

"Brooks, I hear things. I know you have more stories about your room being safe," said Avery.

"*My second year of teaching, I was given this honors class, probably to this day, the smartest group of 16 kids I've ever worked with in my life. I wouldn't be the teacher I am now if those kids hadn't pushed all my buttons,"* Brooks began. *"Towards the end of the year, we were reading <u>Their Eyes Were Watching God</u>. And there's a beautifully written scene, and most kids miss it, but she's masturbating. I usually skip over it. This class did not. We had the most intellectual conversation about should sex scenes be included in literature. Why are they important? Why is it important in this? The class ended, and they looked right at me, and they said, 'We think you're probably the only teacher who would have allowed us to have this conversation.' And I said to them, 'Honestly, it was intellectual. We're talking about the purpose of sex and literature. And why did Hurston put this here? Should it be there? And when in high school, should we talk about this?' It wasn't like we were saying it's good, bad. Sex? Yes. No. We were talking about it in terms of what this does for character development, etcetera, but they thanked me. And that was one of the first times where I thought my classroom is a safe space. These kids talked about a three-paragraph scene for 45 minutes. And it was a mix of males and females*

Content

Safety

Content

Trust

in the class. At that point, we weren't as open as a district or school, so I don't know beyond there where people identified, and yet it was one of the most productive conversations, insightful conversations I've ever had.

"*That's when I knew I could have tough conversations, but I had to make sure I read the class first,"* said Brooks. *"And the next day, they came in, and we did the next thing on the list. So now, nothing scares me. Not at all. I was like, if I can do it with those kids, I'm good*." Impact of teacher on students

Understand mood of students collectively

"*I try to have conversations with as many kids as I can, whether I have them or not*," replied Harper. "*Kids know me before they step into my classroom. Because I teach juniors and seniors, I try to connect with freshmen and sophomores. I always greet students. I had a great relationship with a kid that other teachers struggled with. The student said, 'In ninth grade, you told me you liked my jacket when I was having a bad day. I liked you ever since.*'" Talk with students

Greet students

Impact of teacher on student

"I use the curriculum to teach social-emotional learning," volunteered Avery.

"What do you mean?" asked Harper.

"*It comes across in being able to have student engagement,"* said Avery. "*Students have to write a*

research essay in every grade. In one class, they have to write an issue they're concerned about. Two years ago, a student wrote about how major league baseball has an identity crisis. It was the same type of paper as someone else writing about gun control. Content

"I have them think creatively and work in groups," Avery said. *"There's a reading about a community unit, and then they have to write about a community they're part of. They can't write, 'My field hockey team is my family.' They embrace the rubric. The As, Bs, and Cs fall the same way as an academic essay.* And it's in the writing that I can identify students who have been exposed to trauma," Avery concluded. Engagement Student-to-student relationships Content

"What do you mean?" asked Brooks.

"In general, *it's kinda hard to tell who has trauma. One of my favorite kids, I had 10 to 15 years ago. The prompt allowed her to write about her father dying when she was a young kid. I understand the need for privacy, but it would've been helpful to know. It's discouraging to learn that late in the year. It's an interesting aspect of the students*." Trauma Parent/family Internal communication

"*I had trauma as a kid. I naturally assume kids have trauma*," Harper volunteered. Trauma

"Me too," said Brooks. "*I think I sorta always knew I had trauma as a student, but I didn't really know I had trauma until I suffered a really traumatic thing my sophomore year of college. And then once I went to therapy and started unpacking that, I was like, 'Oh my goodness.' So, I think I knew right away that students had trauma. But I would say it was more five-ish years into my career when I could intuit a bit more as to whom was struggling with trauma with the way that they might shut down. You know, heads on the desk, coming to school late, not interacting with people who I thought were their friends or used to be their friends. I think I was able to see it. I'm not always completely correct*.

Trauma

Counseling

Behavior; signs of trauma

"*Early in my career, one of my students was driving me bananas,"* Brooks continued. *"Bananas! I just had it. I said to him, 'What do you want?' And he said, 'I want a cookie.' And I said, 'Well, go home and ask your mom for a cookie because I don't have anything,' and then I moved on. At the end of class, a student said stayed behind and said, 'Just so you know, his mom died two years ago of cancer.' Oh, my goodness. To this day, and this was 18 years ago, I still feel horrible. I went to guidance to just double-check. Then he and I had a wonderful talk. I was very honest. I*

Friendship

Parent/family

said I didn't mean it. I was speaking in anger, and I had no idea. That was really my first experience with a student who had to really deal with something like that. Because of that, and he was wonderful, I thought, 'OK, I really need to watch what I say, how I say it, and why I say it because I don't know who in this room is struggling.' And I see five classes a day, so that was really the eye-opening moment for me."	Guilt/impact of student on teacher Individual Impact of teacher on student Individual and trauma
"Thank you both for sharing," Avery said. "You both remind me of a girl who transferred from the other side of the state. *Her father was killed overseas in the military. With her status as a transfer student, I found out about her dad. She was a non-conformist and a pot stirrer. And she was not completing her work; she was laid back in class. The class she was in was a good place for her. Her mom wanted to move her to a* less rigorous *class. I thought where she was was a good place for her. I explained there's just as much reading in the other class but more room for creativity in this class. She moved back to where she was from.*"	Parent/family Behavior Signs of trauma Content Expectations
Harper said, "*I implement things for all students. Specifically when I know they have trauma. I don't ask kids to close their eyes. It can be triggering for students with*	Whole group

trauma. I use all blanket strategies for all kids. Because of the nature of my class, I'm open with parents and kids. They can email the subject line 'handle with care.' I know it will be a difficult day."	Awareness of potential impact on students Individual Content
"People may not think it's time on learning, but I always give a break in class, and in that break, I see and hear what they talk about," Brooks said. *"So if I have a group of people who love sports or whatever, I try it. If I don't know about it, I'll ask questions. I definitely break up all my classes, but in one class, we went on a walk every time we had third lunch this year. It was a great time.* Danni *and* Charlee *talked to me. Or they talked to each other, but they walked with me so I could hear it on purpose. It gave me an opportunity to just really get to know those two kids who I think just needed to talk. And they became friends with each other. And it's great because* Danni *rubbed off on* Charlee, *and* Charlee *did exponentially better on her final exam because they worked together."*	Meeting students' needs Listening Relationship building Listen and talk Friendship
"I try to listen too," said Harper. *"I have a student whose dad is dying of cancer. I heard her say she couldn't go out on Friday night because her dad was going to the hospital. On Friday, I acknowledged the student's situation*	Listening Parent/family Individual

without acknowledging the student's situation. I wish I had smaller classes. I could have more private conversations." Impact of teacher on student

"I stopped saying, 'Have your parents sign your form,'" Avery said. *"My language is inclusive and thoughtful. When that student started to underperform, I didn't see it as the same way as someone else. I'm quicker to talk with guidance. If I have 100 students and 20 don't do their homework, I'm faster to talk with the one with trauma. If a student has trauma and no homework, that makes sense. Not doing homework could be trauma, or it could be too hard, or it could be just not doing it,"* Avery laughed. Parent/family Language Trauma Signs of trauma

"Speaking of not doing homework," said Harper. "*Sometimes, I exempt them from homework. I tell them, 'Don't do your homework and take a nap.' I remember I want to be that person to throw away the gravy sandwich. It's a matter of asking if you're OK. Sometimes, you can't do that during class."* Individual Teaching self-care Impact of teacher on student

"The final thing I do is I actually I group my desks together in groups of 4, and I let them choose where they want to sit at the beginning of the year," Brooks said. *"I may move students around once I get to know them, but it allows me to see who they gravitate towards. Most times they actually stay in those seats. I didn't have to move seats* Individual Pedagogy

at all this year. They chose appropriately, and even with my college prep class, it worked. And then once I have a sense of things that they like, I try to make sure that I connect with them. And I always have some kind of narrative somewhere, whether it's short and sweet or something where they just give a little bit of 'This is who I am, and this is what I want you to know about me right now.'"

Relationship building engaging in student interest

Self-disclosure

"I tell kids, 'You can't talk about the seating arrangement. It changes every day,'" said Avery. "*When the kids walk in and comment on how the seats are, I tell them they can't talk about it.* I group them according to *what we're doing. I don't mind taking the time to* rearrange them. If you come into my room today, you'll see that half the desks and chairs are in a circle, and the rest of the desks are arranged into groups of threes and fours.*"*

Content

*"*My desks are in groups as well," said Harper. "I usually have artwork posted, as well as a pride flag. *I like to make the room feel like home. I have greenery, etcetera. I try to make it homey."*

Environment

"Why?" asked Avery.

"It puts kids at ease," replied Harper. *"I found school to be so sterile. I want kids to feel at home. My room is decorated like my home. There used to be a puzzle table.*

Environment

Sharing self

COVID killed that. I want it to be a relaxing place where students can focus on learning and be comfortable. My welcome sign usually has postcards that students send from places." Student display

"I also have student work posted," said Avery. "*It's a visual of student work. It looks prettier* than written work. Student work

There's more content than grammar and mechanics. There are fewer errors because it's a bulleted list and not written Skills

out. *I typically hang class activities. This is the activity of the class. It's a display of an activity rather display of a skill. It's like putting a picture of a basketball game instead of a box score. Because* in the picture *you can't see who scored, just the person dribbling. Other classes can see what's going on in other classes or other groups*." Visual representation of group work

"I also use it to pique students' interest," said Brooks. "*They come in and ask, 'Who is this person?' 'Why is there a goldfish there?' It's a way to show students they can do different work. I hang the work as exemplars."* Motivation

Brooks continued*, "I like seeing artwork that's not mine; it's amazing artwork. I also have a friend who hangs work for a sense of pride. She says she does it, especially for slower students."* Impact on student

"What does she mean by slower?" Avery asked.

"Those who struggle more," Brooks replied.

"I have student work posted," said Avery. "Near my Springsteen poster. Did I tell you about that last year?"

"No," said Brooks.

"I have a Bruce Springsteen poster in my room. *The building was built in 2004; I got the poster in 2007. There's a different color on the wall underneath it*. *The poster was ripped in parts last year by vandals after school. 4 boys, at the end of the school year, replaced it."*

"Why did they replace it?" asked Harper.

"*I don't know. It was actively torn off like a puzzle. We experienced it together,"* Avery said. *"It happened over the course of 6 months. Like an event*." Collective experience built relationship

"Like Brooks, *I'm open with my kids. We look at case studies, and at the end of class, I'll say, 'It's me*,'" said Harper. "*I have a student who struggles with death and aging. I'm very close with this child. We both have generalized anxiety disorder. I could tell she was getting triggered by the content. I sent her an email during class. This year, I've had to be more vigilant. This year, they've been more vulnerable*." Sharing self Content Awareness

"*So far, we've been talking about death. A more common form of trauma is neglect*," said Avery. "*There's* Trauma

more drinking going on than we expect. I reached out to a mom. I got no response. So, I reached out to dad. He sounded like he was drunk. He sounded like the kid. This was too much information. I saw the student as the apple and the dad as the tree. Everyone understood him more. I'm eager to understand and eager to know what the plans are for kids with trauma."	Parents/family Impact of home on student
Harper said, *"There was a student who was out, and we weren't told why. I knew the student had mental health issues and generalized anxiety disorder and was a perfectionist. I sent her an email. I said, 'I want you to know you're missed. When you get back, we'll catch you up.' The student really appreciated that and made it better.*	Individual Impact of teacher on student
"Right before she was re-hospitalized, her mother reached out," Harper continued. *"She said, 'I want to thank you.' I was alone in high school. This student doesn't get help here. Her mother is afraid of her having a stigma. By reaching out, I'm letting that kid know she's not alone. This will be her superpower."*	Parent/family Self sharing Relationship – support
"*I do think from my perspective now that while I love helping students, it's taken me some time, but I get it now that if there is a student who comes to me and I am not the right person, I bring them to the right person, even if that*	Self-awareness

means that student never talks to me again," Brooks said. *"I think that I see some things in our district where there are people who are not necessarily that aware and try to do the helping when it's not in their realm of expertise. I'd like to see more teachers realize that if a student is really struggling, it may not be academic, and it would be important to reach out to those people and know that that's OK. Because I think that some teachers think, 'I have to help fix the student,' and that's not your role. And then I think it sometimes exacerbates the situation, and that's not the teacher's intent. I think with student trauma, teachers need to have that awareness a little bit more. And on the flip side, while I don't want to know every single student's story step-by-step, if I had known about that kid's mother, I would have handled that situation differently. Unfortunately, we've had a lot of students lose parents for a variety of reasons. We've lost a lot of students in my time here. And it stinks. I don't know how to work it out, but where is that line?*

Boundaries

Individual

Teacher impact on student

Trauma

Internal communication

"At the same time, I don't think we all should say, 'Tell me your whole life story.' Because that's not what our expertise is like," Brooks continued. *"If I had the solution, I'd be sharing it all over the place and making billions of dollars. But it's something that I sometimes think about,*

Boundaries

being a little bit more aware if we can. But at the same time, I also have a student who came into school identifying as she/her and is now identifying as they/them and has also changed their name. And they've told people that sporadically. But not everybody knows. I had a conversation with somebody, and I called Summer *'*Summer*' because that's what they want to be called, and they said, 'Who are you talking about?' I said, 'Oh.' But that's not my place; that's* Summer's *place, so I just said formerly* Dora, *and this is their nickname. And I know that's a big thing, but those are probably the two things that I think about the most."*

Name

Safe space

Respect for student and confidentiality

"Excuse me!" Dr. Sullivan interrupted, yelling from the front of the cafeteria. "I hope today is a meaningful day for you. We have about 10 minutes before the next session starts. In order to get us in the right head space, please share with your tablemates the best thing about your job. After you share, you may go. Have a great afternoon!"

"What we love about our jobs, huh?" said Avery.

Without missing a beat, Brooks said, "*Kids. Absolutely one hundred percent, the kids. Yes, there are challenging students whether they are my lower levels or higher levels. Sometimes those higher levels can be more of*

Challenge

Content

a push or a pain than some of the others. But being able to connect with them, form relationships with them, and just feel like I did something with them over the course of the 180 days. But it's being with the students."

Relationships: connect with students and then form relationships

Impact of teacher on students

"*I love that I can use content to interest people and talk about the human condition as if I wrote it,"* said Avery. *"I can talk about war, love, and sadness. If the writing is good enough, it can interest a 16-year-old experiencing it for the first time."*

Content

"The best is that it's constantly evolving, constantly learning. I couldn't stay in a job that's static. I'm always learning about kids and about new ways to do things. I love seeing the joy in their faces," said Harper. *"I'm reflecting now on a period where COVID inhibited students socially a great deal. They matured so much this year. They see how capable they are. I'm so proud of them. I knew it was there. I pushed and showed them how, but they approached it differently.*

Self-growth

"And friends at work, both old and new," said Harper. "I'm so glad we sat together today."

"Me too," said Brooks. "This was a great conversation!"

"I enjoyed it too," said Avery. "I just hope this afternoon's workshop is as good as this lunch session was!"

The three teachers picked up their garbage, threw it away, and walked out of the cafeteria.

Conclusion

Using narrative inquiry, three humanities teachers told stories about teaching. In a fictional interaction, they shared their experiences building relationships, interacting with the curriculum, receiving support from colleagues, and talking about individual students. Their stories were analyzed using narrative and paradigmatic modes of analysis. Through the analysis, themes recurred, which are the basis for thematic statements.

CHAPTER V

INTERPRETATION

Introduction

The purpose of this dissertation is to better understand how to create trauma-informed classrooms. Trauma-informed classrooms should be a more conducive educational setting for students who have been exposed to trauma. The goal is to answer the following research questions:

RQ 1: What are the stories teachers tell about teaching students who have experienced trauma and their relationships with those students?

RQ 2: How do teachers make sense of their experiences?

Thematic Statements

Three humanities teachers were interviewed at DHS. Using the paradigmatic mode of analysis with the narrative mode of analysis, I identified observed commonalities in their stories. Through an iterative process of analysis, five themes recurred that were common to all three participants.

- **Building relationships with students is an effective pedagogy for engaging students.**

All three teachers shared stories about the content and the way it was used to interact with students. Avery said, "I love that I can use content to interest people and talk about the human condition as if I wrote it. I can talk about war, love, and sadness. If the writing is good enough, it can interest a 16-year-old experiencing it for the first time."

Additionally, Avery related a story about using *The Things They Carried* as a way to talk with a contentious student. Through Avery's connection with the student and using the literature, the student was able to de-escalate when he was upset. Avery said, "I saw him get mad and turn it back down. He turned into the Hulk and was able to dial it back down to David Banner."

Harper acknowledged that the curriculum was problematic for a student. "I could tell she was getting triggered by the content. I sent her an email during class," enabling Harper to address the student privately. Finally, Brooks used a passage in a novel to connect with a challenging class. Brooks said, "We were reading *Their Eyes Were Watching God*….We had the most intellectual conversation about should sex scenes be included in literature. … The class ended, and they looked right at me, and they said, 'We think you're probably the only teacher who would have allowed us to have this conversation.'…That was one of the first times where I thought my classroom is a safe space." The curriculum became an entrance for creating relationships with students.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* (n.d.) defines relationship as "The state or fact of being related; the way in which two things are connected; a connection, an association." In other words, relationships can be defined as an interaction between people. Relationships, which can be supportive or detrimental, are connections between people. Teachers often strive to make connections with students. The literature supports the idea that once teachers build relationships, students can successfully engage in the content and academic risk-taking. NISL (n.d.) includes "positive classroom relationships" (p. 7) as one of the characteristics of effective instructional practice. Darling-Hammond and Cook-Harvey (2018) stated that supportive relationships are the foundation for

development and learning. They wrote that when children have conversations with adults, their brains develop. Conversations can help students grow in cognition and linguistics more so than a teacher merely talking to a class (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018).

Similarly, Hill (2001) posited that learning occurs through social interactions, otherwise known as relationships. “Collective learning provides opportunities to teach one another, exchange ideas, reinforce concepts, solve problems, debate ideas and challenge assertions” (p. 7), a description of learning in the classroom. Furthermore, Egeberg et al. (2021) reported that teachers who built rapport with students through caring for their well-being were able to foster positive relationships. “All teachers interviewed agreed that ‘90% of [effective classroom management] is building a rapport. Once I’ve built a rapport, then I can train them, both academically and socially. I think if you are engaging and interactive and actually show that you care about them and about their progress. That goes a long way into establishing a successful classroom’” (p. 120). The teachers in their study “indicated that trust and encouragement were fundamental aspects of their relationships with students” (p. 121).

Moreover, Caldarella et al. (2021) reported that positive teacher-student interactions, such as personally greeting each student, can positively influence their relationships. “With such personalized greetings, teachers have been able to increase the on-task behavior, or engagement, and decrease disruptions of students in their classrooms” (p.163). Furthermore, decreasing negative feedback and increasing positive feedback while teaching enhances student engagement (Caldarella et al., 2021). Relationships are the cornerstone of teaching.

When teachers strengthen relationships with students, they can engage students in content more effectively. Additionally, building relationships with students with trauma enables those students to engage with the curriculum. Therefore, fostering relationships is an important step in helping students access the content. Brunzell et al. (2016) advocate strong relationships between students and adults. They relate that teacher-student relationships teach students appropriate interactions through modeling, proximity, communication, and availability.

Moreover, a classroom that is conducive for students with trauma contains specific structures. Cole et al. (2009) stated that teachers should highlight successes as opposed to focusing on failures. They identified predictability, consistency with classmates, and positive behavior supports as necessary for effectively teaching children with trauma.

Additionally, challenging behaviors often originate when a child feels vulnerable. Asking a student to answer a question, solve a problem, or participate in a whole class activity may make her feel vulnerable (Cole et al., 2009). Hence, it is vitally important that educators positively reinforce appropriate risk-taking behavior, like answering a question, and react neutrally to inappropriate behaviors. Brunzell et al. (2016) reported that it is hard for students with trauma to enjoy and sustain the enjoyment of positive emotions, such as appropriately engaging in class. In trauma-informed positive education (TIPE), it becomes the teacher's responsibility to help students enjoy positive emotions (Brunzell et al., 2016)—a strengths-based approach. Rather than correcting wrong behavior, this theory encourages positive behavior. This, in turn, amplifies what is right and builds success upon success. Egeberg et al. (2021) reported that teachers who

developed trusting relationships, encouraged students, and had "high expectations and appropriate challenges… held students accountable but also fostered student responsibility with support and structure" (p. 121). Egeberg et al.'s study reinforced the idea that once teachers build relationships with students, it is easier for students to access the curriculum. Building relationships, fostering trust and a supportive classroom environment, and allowing academic risks enable students to participate in the classroom.

Avery, Brooks, and Harper shared stories about building relationships with students. The literature emphasizes the importance of relationships during learning, reinforcing the concept that learning is predicated on relationships. Therefore, the participants' stories build upon the literature, proving that relationships and relationship-building are imperative. Through their stories, Avery, Brooks, and Harper demonstrated that fostering relationships opens the door to accessing the curriculum.

- **Using the curriculum, humanities teachers connect with students through interactive lessons.**

All three participants in this study teach humanities. They use literature, history, psychology, non-fiction, and writing as entry points for conversations and connections. As Harper said, "Because of the nature of my class, I'm open with parents and kids. They can email the subject line 'handle with care.' I know it will be a difficult day." The educators talked about students who were triggered by the content, students who identified with characters, and conversations about the human condition as part of their teaching experiences. Avery said, "I use the literature to connect with students. If they see you have a reaction to the literature, they react. I use humor and other things to make

it relatable. If you analyze anything long enough, it becomes funny." In addition to humor, Avery connected with students through the content.

Similarly, Brooks used a novel to have a conversation about the purpose of sex in literature. "We were talking about it in terms of what this does for character development, etcetera, but [the students] thanked me [for having the discussion]….These kids talked about a three-paragraph scene for 45 minutes, …it was one of the most productive conversations, insightful conversations I've ever had." All three teachers shared stories of the curriculum as vehicles for connections with students.

Curriculum is the content to be taught. Saphier and colleagues (2008) noted, "A good curriculum provides the intellectual superstructure from which teachers take guidelines for the direction and content of their lessons" (p. 355). In other words, curriculum is the foundation for learning. Stigler and Hiebert (2009) stated that the content should be "rich and challenging [so that] it is more likely that students have the opportunity to learn more…and to learn it more deeply. If the content is fragmented and ordinary, students have less chance of learning" (pp. 56–57). The curriculum is the backbone of the academic lesson.

Students should be engaged in order to access the curriculum. One way to engage in content, according to Saphier et al. (2008), is through assimilating new information with prior learning. Hill (2001) expressed this idea by stating, "Learning is about making connections. … When students learn effectively, they assimilate new information with what they already knew before. This process is dynamic and creative and helps to internalize new knowledge" (p. 6). The idea of combining curriculum with presentation is essential. Egeberg and colleagues (2021) reported that teachers in their study "Firmly

believed in creating learning experiences for their students that were varied and engaging" (p. 121). They created classrooms that combined caring relationships, behavior management, and instructional management.

Gaps exist in the literature about specific content and building relationships. Rallis et al. (1995) noted the importance of building relationships while determining the conditions for each student to learn. One condition that Sizer (1985) highlighted is *productive struggle*, allowing students to grapple with the content as a way to learn it and internalize it. He told the story of a teacher who encouraged a student to begin solving a problem on her own. Sizer credited the teacher with helping a student achieve the goal of learning. "Because of [the student's] ownership of the exercise, she would far more likely remember it than if she has merely walked through a predigested program." (Sizer, 1985, p. 150).

Similarly, Hill (2001) placed the importance of hitting the zone of proximal development on the teacher. "The key to accelerating learning lies in matching instruction to the level of the learner. … The onus is therefore on the teacher to monitor the progress of each student to ensure that all students are adequately challenged" (p. 9). The matching of content with student development makes for the most effective teaching, the crux of good classrooms. Sizer (1985), on the other hand, articulated this idea by stating, "Nearly all formal learning in schools involves the interactions of three actors: the student, the teacher, and the subject of their mutual interaction…. As long as schools are for learning, no relationship within them is more important than this triangle" (pp. 151-152). Harper told students they could email "handle with care" if the content was triggering. Avery and Brooks shared stories of using literature to interact with students.

The participants in this research personified Sizer's (1985) triangle of student, teacher, and the subject through their narratives.

Sizer called the curriculum an "actor" (p.151), giving content a human trait. It is through this lens that teachers incorporate the content as a living aspect of the classroom. The literature highlights the importance of connecting with students as well as the importance of making the content relevant (e.g., Cole et al., 2009; Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018; Hill, 2001; Rallis et al., 1995; Saphier et al. 2008; Sizer, 1985). Avery, Brooks, and Harper go further to combine these ideas. They demonstrate how to use the curriculum to build relationships with students, reinforcing the circular design of a classroom of interplay between the student, teacher, and content.

- **In order to support students, teachers need strong, caring relationships with their colleagues.**

The three teachers discussed the relationships they have with other adults in the building. Harper related being upset by the loss of trusted adults in the building. Avery related feeling supported by the administration when a potentially contentious parent reached out about the content. Brooks said, "I can rely on other people in this building, some more than others," suggesting the importance of dependable friendships within the building. Brooks also mentioned the inconsistency in support from the administration. Based on the stories they shared, the participants implied the value of having adults in the building for them to confide in, sympathize with, and support when teaching became challenging.

The literature shows that teachers who have support from colleagues have better outcomes, such as lower rates of emotional exhaustion, lower rates of burnout, and

increased feelings of accomplishment (Bernklow, 2021; Ferguson et al., 2017). While support from administrators is important, Ferguson et al. (2017) found colleagues to have a greater effect on teachers. “Support from school administrators and teaching peers moderated stress among American special education teachers; however, teachers were more likely to receive support during times of stress from their peers than from administrators” (p. 66). They explicitly state, “a teacher’s co-workers are the most important buffers of the burnout manifestation of emotional exhaustion” (p. 66). Ladhawala (2021) also noted the importance for teachers to be aware of compassion fatigue and the importance of having a circle of support. Similarly, Ferguson et al. (2017) found that teachers use relationships with family and friends as a coping method and as a source of support; teachers provide “informational support” (p. 65), meaning information, advice, and guidance. Teachers with positive relationships with adults may feel supported.

Students with trauma often present with aggression, attention and academic problems, low classroom engagement, difficulty with self-regulation, poor impulse control, trouble interpreting others’ actions, and a lack of predictable sense of self (Caldarella et al., 2021; Cole et al., 2009; Tishelman et al. 2010). These behaviors also can be categorized as high rates of disruptive behaviors that can lead to negative reactions from adults. Therefore, students in the most need of nurturing may be the least likely to get it because of their behaviors.

Additionally, when students misbehave, they may be given a discipline referral, which may result in suspension. Students with trauma may also be identified as students with disabilities, and students with disabilities have a disproportionality higher rate of

suspension (Alnaim, 2018; Anderson & Ritter, 2017; Green et al., 2019). One way to reduce the discipline referral rate is through a four-step method of inquiry. McIntosh et al. (2018) delineate the steps as identifying the problem, analyzing the data, implementing a plan to reduce the problem, and evaluating the effectiveness of the plan. It seems intuitive that in order to effectively implement a systemic method of inquiry, a teacher should have self-awareness and patience. As Cole and colleagues (2009) state, "As a result [of their behaviors, students with trauma] are more likely to be disapproved of and condemned by busy, overburdened educators, even though they are among the students most in need of nurturance" (p. 33). Therefore, teachers need support in order not to feel overburdened. Teachers who have support from colleagues or administration are more likely to have lower rates of emotional exhaustion, lower rates of burnout, and increased feelings of accomplishment (Bernklow, 2021; Ferguson et al., 2017). Hence, teachers who have support from other adults are more likely to remain in the classroom longer and be more effective teachers of students with trauma. Avery, Brooks, and Harper all reinforced the idea that teachers can use colleagues as a resource to reduce stress and increase capacity.

- **When teachers see and react to each student as an individual, they are better able to meet the student's unique needs.**

Avery, Brooks, and Harper all shared stories of reacting to students' individual stories. Brooks begins the school year by getting to know individual students. Brooks has students "fill out an information card, hard copy. They feel that they can put down what they want. I keep them very general, but I do ask questions like 'What are your preferred pronouns?' 'Do you have a nickname?'" Harper shared a story about Harper's mother's

teacher taking away her gravy sandwich. Harper and Brooks described what they do for students; they remove the barriers preventing students from accessing school. Specifically, Harper said, "I recognize that students are individuals, and I shed the stereotypes about kids. Sometimes, I can make them share. I recognize that every situation is different. Not all rules work for all children." Avery treated students differently when learning about individual situations and past traumas. "Everybody gets what they need. Sometimes, they need more attention. Sometimes it's less. Giving someone more attention doesn't mean giving others less. I'm more attuned to students. I'm trying to find part of a solution," said Avery. In turn, each talked about how they approach students differently when they know a student's story.

By approaching each student as an individual, teachers may curb unexpected behaviors. When students' needs are not met, they may act in inappropriate ways. Cole et al. (2009) state that challenging behaviors often originate when a child feels vulnerable. Although Coleman's (2019) statement that "the environment itself has an impact on brain development" (p. 355) is primarily targeted at the home, it may apply in the school setting as well. Burke Harris (2018) explained this in another way. She stated that when a threat is removed, the system reacts appropriately, and the body is able to regulate. She referred to this as "tolerable stress" (p. 55). However, when a person is constantly in a state of heightened alert, tolerable stress can become toxic stress because the system responds more frequently and intensely to stressors (Burke Harris, 2018). Cole et al. reported that calling on a student, for example, could cause additional stress. Therefore, an abundance of stress can keep a person in a constant state of alertness, always reacting to stimuli large and small, dangerous or benign. As Cole et al. stated, "Many traumatized

children adopt behavioral coping mechanisms that can frustrate educators and evoke exasperated reprisals, reactions that both strengthen expectations of confrontation and danger and reinforce a negative self-image" (p. 32). Students' behaviors and teachers' reactions to them may then become a self-fulfilling prophecy and feelings of unworthiness.

Teachers who know themselves, as well as those learning about their students as individuals, are more likely to be able to meet students' needs. Walton-Fisette (2020) advised educators to understand themselves, their implicit biases, and the decisions that they make. "Who you are and what you believe and have experienced will influence the decisions that you make as an educator — even though you may not realize the connections between the personal and professional" (Walton-Fisette, 2020, p. 10). Her words of caution are aimed at teachers who may unintentionally trigger students through their words and actions. Additionally, learning more about students may help prevent unintentional triggers as well. Elbaz-Luwisch (2007) acknowledged the challenge that "Many teachers in higher grades hardly get to know their students at all as they move from class to class." (p. 375). Yet, Duncan-Andrade and Morrell (2008) advocated that teachers develop a "deeper understanding of their students' lives [in order to] appreciate and positively influence" (p. 9) how their environment affects educational outcomes for students. Students are not magically transported from their homes to schools; they bring their home lives and experiences with them. Understanding themselves, as well as their students, may help teachers to react more appropriately to students.

A teacher then needs to think carefully before responding to a student who appears to be acting out. Teachers need to be aware that students' behaviors may lead to

negative reactions from adults. "As a result [of their behaviors, students with trauma] are more likely to be disapproved of and condemned by busy, overburdened educators, even though they are among the students most in need of nurturance" (Cole et al., 2009, p. 33). Moreover, Rallis et al. (1995) stated, "the traditional role expected of teachers in the past—as a deliverer of information—will not suffice to meet the needs of students today" (p. 6). Therefore, in addition to being knowledgeable about content, effective teachers recognize the complexity of each student and her actions. Educators should address the behavior, and not the student, as inappropriate to help minimize negative reactions and inadvertently trigger a student. It is important that educators positively reinforce appropriate risk-taking behavior, like answering a question, and react neutrally to behaviors that are inappropriate.

Similarly, Egeberg et al. (2021) reported that "students who receive more relationship-based discipline are less disrupted when teachers deal with misbehaviour and generally act more responsibly in that teacher's class. In contrast, the impact of coercive discipline appears to be more student distraction from work and less responsibility" (p. 110). They define coercive behavior as teachers who "control [the class] through rules, rewards, and a clear hierarchy for increasingly severe punishments for misbehaviour" (Egeberg et al., 2021, p. 110). Furthermore, Caldarella and colleagues (2021) reported that students' behaviors were more likely to change when a teacher redirected student behavior instead of telling the student to stop. Egeberg et al. stated that the classroom culture influenced student learning. "It is the ability of a teacher to know not only what they want to teach, but also how they will organise and structure it for their students and their circumstances that makes all the difference, creating a healthy, caring classroom

culture where all students, and teachers, can thrive" (Egeberg et al., 2021, p. 110). Teachers who understand and are aware of this nuanced behavior may address students individually and thereby help students to be more successful in school.

The stories that Avery, Brooks, and Harper shared highlighted their positive interactions with individual students. At the same time, Brooks shared a story about telling a student to ask his mother and later learning that his mother was dead. The gap is how to treat students as individuals when their stories are not known. While Duncan-Andrade and Morrell (2008) advocate learning more about students, this is not always feasible. Brooks asks students to answer personal questions at the beginning of the year, and yet Brooks still reacted inappropriately to a student's behavior. Therefore, it is important for teachers to react to students individually; however, that may not always address the needs of all students.

- **In addition to treating each student as an individual, teachers implement practices they believe will help all students.**

"I had trauma as a kid. I naturally assume kids have trauma," Harper said, and Brooks echoed that idea. The teachers incorporate practices to help all students, whether they know students have trauma or not. "My language is inclusive and thoughtful," said Avery, giving the example, "I stopped saying, 'Have your parents sign your form.'" Harper said, "I implement things for all students….I don't ask kids to close their eyes. It can be triggering for students with trauma. I use all blanket strategies for all kids." They shared stories of knowing, or not knowing, that a student has trauma and, therefore, approach students as if they do. As Avery said, "Not doing homework could be trauma, or it could be too hard, or it could be just not doing it." The teachers implied they

assumed not doing homework was because of trauma until shown otherwise. All three incorporated practices they believed to be beneficial for all students.

By implementing strategies for all students, teachers can create a safe environment. In safe spaces, students are more likely to participate in lessons and take academic risks. Teachers build upon students' successes, amplifying what is right and helping students to develop competencies (Brunzell et al., 2016; Cole et al., 2009). Additionally, by creating a safe space, there are minimal behaviors that interfere with learning if they are not prevented altogether (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education [DESE], 2018). A safe space is valuable for students with trauma and presumably does not harm students who do not have trauma. Treating students as if they have trauma is reminiscent of what Tishelman et al. (2010) said about evaluating students. "A child's difficulties at school can be unrelated to trauma, trauma can be a contributing factor, or trauma can account for most of the observed difficulties. Adopting a trauma lens can ensure that trauma is considered as a hypothesis when appropriate, but should not be used to overshadow other important etiologies for a child's presentation or lead to an over-emphasis on trauma as an explanatory variable when other factors are more salient" (p. 7). Programs such as Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports (PBIS) establish consistent practices for expectations and norms for student behaviors (Bornstein, 2017). Chafouleas et al. (2016) recommended that teachers resist "practices that could inadvertently re-traumatize [students]" (p. 12).

Furthermore, part of trauma-informed positive education (TIPE) focuses on helping students form positive relationships. "Specifically adapted for the classroom context, unconditional positive regard facilitates an environment where the student feels

valued regardless of their presenting behaviors, affect, or cognitions; rather than looking to others for identity and approval, the student is encouraged to learn and listen to themselves" (Brunzell et al., 2016, p. 67), including positively reinforcing all students. Brunzell et al. (2016) advocate helping students to see the positive in themselves, a powerful psychological force (Becker et al., 2014). Rather than correcting *wrong* behavior, this theory encourages positive behavior. This, in turn, amplifies what is right and builds success upon success. These practices may create safe environments that allow all students to learn.

Brooks, Harper, and Avery told stories about their awareness that students have trauma. As a result of that understanding, they acted in their classrooms in ways they intended to reduce the effect of trauma on students and in their classrooms. By treating a class as if all students had trauma, they tried to create safe spaces. Although they may not have read the literature, these teachers reinforced the ideas that help make classrooms a more conducive space for students to learn. Harper, Brooks, and Avery shared stories of making their classrooms inclusive for the benefit of all students, especially those with trauma.

Narrative Inquiry

The purpose of this dissertation was to learn more about how teachers form relationships with students in order to create trauma-informed classrooms. Quantitative research would have required implementing an intervention and measuring its outcome. A qualitative study, however, using thick, rich descriptions (Rossman & Rallis, 2012) was a more appropriate approach given my research questions. The initial aim of this study was to examine what methods might be effective for teaching students with trauma.

By using narrative inquiry, participants had an opportunity to share stories that made sense to them. Engaging in conversation, which began as a semi-structured interview, enabled teachers to tell what was important to them and to highlight students and experiences that had an effect on them. Each participant was able to share stories that occurred at different times while thinking back through their teaching careers. They put them in context and talked about the influence the stories have on them now.

As I analyzed their stories, I noted commonalities and overlaps. I could hear them talking with each other. Through narrative inquiry, I was able to make sense of their stories by combining them into one story. Placing them together in the school where they work was a natural setting. DHS, and other schools like it, often have at least one PD day during the school year. It was not a stretch to think of the teachers eating lunch during the day and using a shared speaker as the basis for beginning a conversation. Not only did narrative inquiry allow teachers to tell their stories, but the analysis allowed the stories to relate to each other.

Limitations

Narrative inquiry is a method of qualitative research. There are advantages and disadvantages to any type of methodology. While the appropriateness of using narrative inquiry for this dissertation is described in Chapters I and III, there are also limitations. In looking at individuals' experiences and relaying them in thick, rich descriptions, it becomes more challenging to generalize or replicate this information. Another teacher, for example, may ask students to write the answers to personal questions in order to learn more about them but may use them differently during the year. A teacher who posts student work may find that students in a different section are not curious about the work.

Neither asking questions nor posting student work may result in deeper relationships between teachers and students. However, a practitioner may decide to try something different as a result of reading this. The narrative that was created by combining teachers' stories is my analysis and interpretation. Another researcher might come to different conclusions.

Additionally, the topic of gender was addressed during the interviews. Two teachers told stories about gender as a barrier to creating relationships. One specifically said she was a "mom figure," and the other said a student struggled in his class because he's a man. A larger study with more participants might better address this topic. However, in order to keep the participants anonymous, those stories were anonymized in the conversation, and I did not develop gender as a theme. A larger study with more participants might hear these stories frequently enough to identify another thematic statement.

All the participants were high school teachers who teach a subject in the humanities. They all talked about using the curriculum both as a vehicle to build relationships with students and as a way to engage students in learning. While this may be true of teachers who teach other subjects, such as math and science, since they did not participate in this study, it cannot be generalized. Additionally, DHS is a smaller suburban high school, and the experiences of educators in urban or rural schools, regional schools, and/or schools of different sizes may not be similar due to changing environments.

Future Studies

There is a need for additional research about effectively teaching students with trauma and creating trauma-informed classrooms. The teachers in this study teach humanities classes, such as English and history. Teachers who teach science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) likely have different strengths and personalities than those who teach literature, psychology, art, and music. It stands to reason that teachers who teach math and science develop relationships differently than those who teach humanities. Similarly, since the content is different, the use of the curriculum may be different. Analyzing literature with students is likely different than applying mathematical formulas when developing relationships. Therefore, high school teachers who do not teach a subject in the humanities should be studied to learn how they develop relationships with students with trauma and create trauma-sensitive classrooms. Studies with more participants, as well as in larger and different environments, are necessary, too. This research was focused on three teachers who teach between 100 and 150 students a year. Finally, there is also a need to study students and their reactions to classrooms, which purport to be trauma-informed to determine if the classrooms are as safe as the teachers believe they are. This dissertation shows promise for future studies and can be the basis of further exploration.

Conclusion

When the teachers at Dreiser High School sat down to have a conversation about students, trauma, and safe classrooms, they shared their stories. Although told individually to me as one researcher through narrative inquiry, they truly overlapped and

wove together as easily as if they were friends eating lunch during a day of professional development.

Through coding and analysis, the thematic statements became very clear. At first, they seemed obvious. Of course, it is important to build relationships with students. There was a great deal of literature to support that idea (e.g., Brunzell et al., 2016; Cole et al., 2009; Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018; Hill, 2001). What was not as obvious is that building relationships with students is a type of pedagogy. That idea naturally led to the thematic statement that the curriculum is stronger when delivered through interactive, engaging lessons.

Building on relationships was the intuitive but not explicit idea that teachers need their friends and colleagues. When talking about the hard work they do, these teachers shared their stories of having colleagues, friends, and administrators as part of the work. Sometimes, these adults were supportive; other times, they were not. Regardless, adult relationships are important for teachers for the support they provide (Bernklow, 2021; Chapman et al., 2021; Darwich, 2021; Mason-Williams et al., 2023). This fact is especially true when working with students with trauma.

Teachers see individuals and the class as a whole. At times the needs of an individual student are addressed first. In another situation or another moment in the same class, teachers are interacting in a way that will not only not harm students with trauma but may also help other students as well. The teachers were savvy enough to identify the ways in which their practice affects the singular as well as the whole.

The narrative in Chapter IV is one conversation gathered over the course of a series of interviews. Yet, it is truly a small moment in time in the life of a school year or a

teaching career. Hopefully, pulling the stories together will help teachers realize that the small things they do and the relationships they build with students and adults are important and not inconsequential. Still, many questions remain:

- This research is just one piece of learning how to teach students with trauma more effectively. How do we build on this knowledge? How are we sharing it? Practitioners seldom have time to read research. How can this information be disseminated in a way that is accessible to them? Sharing stories is one step, synthesizing them is another, and amplifying them is a third.
- Furthermore, how do educators and educational leaders emphasize the importance of teaching students as if they have trauma without assuming all students have trauma? The teachers who shared their stories acknowledged the contradictions in their assumptions and practices. The number of students with trauma has increased since the COVID-19 pandemic (Globe Wire Services, 2022; Ristuccia, 2022), increasing the need to effectively teach them. How do teachers learn to walk the line between teaching students with trauma and teaching all students?
- Based on these stories, I assume students perform better in the classes of these teachers and teachers like them. The way to test this assumption is to talk with students. What do students with trauma say about effective teaching? What stories do they have about teachers who made a difference in their lives? Their stories and their voices are missing from the literature.

How do students understand how they learn best and what they need from teachers?

The teachers of DHS opened a door to learning more about creating trauma-informed classrooms. They build relationships and display student work. They talk with their colleagues and find humor in their content. The teachers care about their students. They want to learn more and be better teachers. Trauma-informed classrooms begin with teachers.

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