SHARING STORIES OF DEVELOPMENT: HOW SCHOOL LEADERS PERCEIVE
DEVELOPING A TRAUMA-INFORMED SCHOOL

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ABSTRACT

This narrative inquiry explored how educational leaders perceive the development of a trauma-informed school. A trauma-informed school acknowledges the impact of trauma and responds by integrating effective practices, programs, and procedures to build resilience. Because of the rising numbers of students having adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), the problem addressed by this study was the lack of targeted skills school staff need to help students mitigate trauma. Further, this qualitative study fills the gap in literature by providing the lived experiences of educational leaders in developing trauma-informed schools. Through narrative research, semistructured interviews, which lasted up to 60 minutes, were individually conducted with five educational leaders who worked in trauma-informed schools in Maine. Data analysis included restorying the interview transcripts and coding the data. Each narrative was sent to participants for member checking to ensure accuracy. Restoried narratives were examined in depth and revealed the following themes: connections, readiness for change, and availability of time. Key findings showed connections are the foundation of a trauma-informed school to foster belonging. Readiness for change among staff is necessary for professional development to be meaningful, and time is essential to engage in the work. Success is measured by whole-child well-being over test scores. Implications suggest a collaborative, whole-school approach may promote a student's daily resilience.

Keywords: adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), trauma-informed schools, professional development, social–emotional learning (SEL)

DEDICATION

This dissertation stands as a testament to the unwavering support and sacrifices I have received throughout this journey.

To my parents, you will always be my biggest fans and foundation of support. Thank you for each morning phone call and your messages of support. You have always believed in me.

To my family, the early mornings filled with quiet determination, the sidelines of bustling soccer games, basketball courts, and swim meets each doubled as impromptu research and writing spaces. All these moments offered me your unwavering commitment to my aspirations.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In the state of Maine, nearly 1 in 4 high school students have experienced three or more adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), as noted by the 2021 Maine Integrated Youth Health Survey (MIYHS; Maine Department of Health and Human Services [MDHHS], 2021), which reported an increase in ACEs since 2019 (MDHHS, 2019). ACEs result from traumatic events children have experienced and could include physical, emotional, and sexual abuse; physical and emotional neglect; and household dysfunction, such as caregiver mental illness, physical abuse in the home, divorce, incarcerated relative, and substance abuse (Felitti et al., 1998). Subsequent studies have expanded ACEs to include additional adversities in the child's environment that can alter their feeling of safety and stability at home (Rossen, 2020). Children who have endured ACEs are more likely to struggle in school academically and have behavioral challenges, including the ability to focus on instruction and self-regulation (Murphey & Sacks, 2019). To combat the impact of ACEs, it is necessary to focus on the development of the whole child during the school experience to increase positive outcomes (Frey et al., 2019). School staff can work with all students to learn strategies to build resilience against the impact of ACEs. Although the prevalence of trauma-informed schools has grown, there remains a wide range of systematic implementation of trauma-informed practices (Rossen, 2020). School leaders would benefit from collaborative learning regarding what trauma-informed schools are and how they are created (Rossen, 2020).

Research on ACEs has been conducted for decades (Felitti et al., 1998; Frey et al., 2019; Rossen, 2020). Exposure to ACEs has been correlated to negative health outcomes in adulthood (Felitti et al., 1998; Webster, 2022), as research has shown a high number of ACEs is associated with an increased likelihood of experiencing negative health impacts such as heart disease,

diabetes, or cancer (Felitti et al., 1998). Beyond the negative impact of higher numbers of ACEs on adult health, children who have experienced a higher number of ACEs than their peers are more likely to present with behaviors that may limit their academic growth (Felitti et al., 1998; Frey et al., 2019).

Children in the state of Maine have experienced trauma in connection with ACEs (MDHHS, 2019, 2021). In 2019, 20% of high school students in Maine reported experiencing four or more ACEs; by 2021, that number had increased to 25% (MDHHS, 2019, 2021). In other words, 1 out of every 4 high school students has experienced more than four ACEs. According to the MDHHS (n.d.), MIYHS data support the development of public policy in favor of trauma-informed resources and other trauma mitigating responses in Maine schools.

The focus of this study was on Maine school leaders and their ability to drive change in the education setting when creating a trauma-informed school. A trauma-informed school is an educational institution that acknowledges and comprehends the far-reaching effects of trauma on students, faculty, and the entire school community (National Child Traumatic Stress Network [NCTSN], 2018). Many students arrive at school every day and struggle emotionally and behaviorally (Rossen, 2020), but support can be put in place to better meet the needs of students served (Eller & Hierck, 2022). One of those supports can be a trauma-informed school environment; such an environment can promote safety, trust, and empowerment with the goal of fostering resilience and supporting the healing process (NCTSN, 2018). Trauma-informed schools prioritize students' well-being and emotional needs by implementing strategies and practices that promote positive mental health and academic success (NCTSN, 2018).

Effective professional development for school staff is necessary to transition to a trauma-informed school (Thomas et al., 2019). Trauma-informed practices are strategies used to create

environments infused with awareness to trauma exposure, responsiveness to the impact of trauma, and mindfulness of using resources that encourage healthy development and support when trauma occurs (Margolius et al., 2020). Those professional development opportunities equip all staff to implement trauma-informed practices and use the tools necessary to mitigate the impact of ACEs on students by building resilience (Herrenkohl et al., 2019). School leaders can initiate a transition to a trauma-informed school by requiring professional development for school staff (Eller & Hierck, 2022; Rossen, 2020).

School leaders can respond to the impact of trauma their students have experienced through schoolwide professional development for all staff that focuses on a foundational awareness of ACEs and the integration of trauma-informed practices (Eller & Hierck, 2022; Rossen, 2020). Consistent implementation of trauma-informed practices may help create an environment in which staff recognizes and responds to trauma, thereby increasing the resiliency in the youth (Thomas et al., 2019). In addition to the implementation of trauma-informed practices, school staff may also learn more about social–emotional learning (SEL) through professional development.

The integration of SEL into curriculum can empower students to navigate various situations they may encounter (Frey et al., 2019) because SEL focuses on supporting student development of life skills such as empathy, emotional intelligence, and goal setting (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL], n.d.-a). SEL skills are crucial for student learning, and they can benefit all students, including those who have not been affected by adverse childhood experiences (Keane & Evans, 2022). Trauma-informed schools can promote student learning by implementing strategies to mitigate the impact of trauma while

affording opportunities to increase resilience and grit and allowing them to learn (Eller & Hierck, 2022).

Definitions of Key Terms

Adverse Childhood Experiences. Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) are potentially traumatic events that occur in childhood and may include violence, abuse, and family environments with mental health or substance use problems (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2021).

Social−Emotional Learning. Social−emotional learning (SEL) is the process by which all youth and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to create healthy identities, manage emotions, achieve goals, demonstrate empathy, establish and maintain relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions (CASEL, n.d.-b).

Trauma-Informed Teaching Practices. Trauma-informed teaching practices are strategies used by youth-serving systems and professionals to create environments infused with awareness of trauma exposure, responsiveness to the impact of trauma, and mindfulness of using resources that encourage healthy development and support when trauma occurs (Margolius et al., 2020).

Statement of the Problem

Due to an increased rate of ACEs impacting students, the problem addressed by this qualitative narrative research was school support staff have been unable to provide necessary, targeted assistance to help students build resilience and learn coping strategies to combat the impact of ACEs (Murphey & Sacks, 2019; Rossen, 2020). Schools have become a safe place to support students who experience ACEs; however, school personnel have varying expertise in addressing student needs (Hunter et al., 2021). School support professionals (e.g., counselors, social workers, and even school nurses) have different levels of formal educational training when

it comes to understanding the impact of ACEs (Bachmann & Bachmann, 2018; Hertz, 2020). Furthermore, these professionals' daily interactions with students are not consistent, which can reduce the effectiveness of the staff in assisting students to build resiliency (Bachmann & Bachmann, 2018; Hertz, 2020). Teachers, administrative assistants, educational technicians, and school administrators are just a sample of school personnel who interact with students, yet they often lack best practice skills to meet the needs of students they serve; school counselors or social workers cannot be the only answer (Hertz, 2020). McInerney and McKlindon (2014) emphasized establishing a trauma-informed school necessitates fundamental changes in the mindset of all staff members. This shift involves fostering essential modifications in school culture and climate and laying a strong foundation of additional support in curriculum and necessary interventions.

Professional development can inform school staff how to respond to and mitigate the negative impact of ACEs while supporting student learning and creating a positive school climate (Guarino & Chagnon, 2018). Public schools are ideal for this type of work, as children are required to attend school 180 days (i.e., about 6 months) per year for a minimum of 5 hours per day (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.). Students who have been exposed to three or more ACEs are more likely to fail in school, perform lower on standardized tests, have behavioral challenges, and exhibit an increased number of special education referrals than their peers (Felitti et al., 1998; Offerman et al., 2022; Rossen, 2020). For these reasons, school leaders have exhibited a sense of urgency to find ways to support these students. Without additional support, children who have experienced ACEs (e.g., abuse, neglect, and dysfunctional home environment) often lack the necessary coping mechanisms to overcome the impact of resulting

trauma (CDC, 2021). Furthermore, the impact of resulting trauma can be compounded depending on the number of ACEs a child has experienced (CDC, 2021).

Although significant research is available regarding ACEs, few studies have examined the experiences or perspectives of school leaders who engage in organizational changes toward the development of a trauma-informed school. The available literature and published research have supported and validated the negative impacts of ACEs, including their impact on student learning (Felitti et al., 1998; Rosen et al., 2022). Due to the number of children in school and their increasing needs, the public school provides a natural environment in which to provide professional development for staff on the use of trauma-informed practices. Given the prevalence of ACEs across the country and in the state of Maine, research has identified the need to develop trauma-informed schools (MDHHS, 2019, 2021; Offerman et al., 2022).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this narrative inquiry was to explore how educational leaders perceive the development of a trauma-informed school. The term trauma-informed school was generally defined as a public school setting in which all staff have acquired some knowledge about ACEs and are versed in strategies to mitigate their impact (Souers & Hall, 2019). Trauma-informed schools are equipped to respond to the needs of students by integrating effective practices, programs, and procedures into all aspects of the organization and culture (Overstreet & Chafouleas, 2016). Educational leaders are those individuals who can influence a change in organizational culture and lead staff to create a trauma-informed school. Mezirow's (2009) theory of transformative learning was used as the framework for the development of research questions and was used to guide the research. I sought to understand how school leaders describe

the development of a trauma-informed school, inclusive of practices, programs, and procedures used.

Research Questions and Design

This narrative inquiry explored public school leaders' perceptions of developing a trauma-informed school. Purposeful sampling was used to recruit participants who self-identified as educational leaders in the state of Maine and were developing or had developed a trauma-informed school. Semistructured interviews were used to gain detailed information from five participants who met the identified criteria. Using relevant literature on the impact of ACEs for children and the need to develop trauma-informed schools to mitigate their impact, the following questions guided the study:

Research Question 1: How do trauma-informed school leaders describe necessary practices, programs, and procedures to support the cultivation of students' resilience and mitigate the impact of ACEs?

Research Question 2: How do trauma-informed school leaders make informed decisions about staff professional development to expand understanding toward the implementation of a trauma-informed school?

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

This study focused on my personal interest in public education, specifically school districts in which there had been an identified goal of being a trauma-informed school. My professional experience included working in a high-poverty school district where the needs of students are substantial. Each year, my school district has a transient population of students due to gentrification of the city and the seasonal nature of housing and rental housing in southern Maine, which has made affordable housing difficult to find (Graham, 2021). The average home

in my work community was built in 1941 and has less than 1,100 square feet, which may not be enough space to raise a family. It can be a struggle for some students to attend school on a consistent basis. These students may have experienced any number of ACEs, yet they are still expected to attend class and learn mathematics when, for example, some have not slept the night before, have not eaten, and have no safe place to live. School leaders are able to transform the school experience for students they serve by providing professional learning for staff to become trauma informed, which would allow them to be responsive to students' needs by implementing trauma-informed practices and SEL curriculum (Offerman et al., 2022).

Trauma research in the healthcare field and feedback from patients have informed services needed in our communities and have elicited deep consideration of policies and practices for traumatized individuals (Center for Substance Abuse Treatment, 2014). Trauma-informed care (TIC) has extended beyond healthcare and has been implemented in various systems, including public schools. Harris and Fallot (2001) developed a TIC framework based on trauma theory that emphasizes the impact of traumatic experience on individuals' psychological, emotional, and physical well-being. The implementation of TIC can equip staff to address the complex needs of trauma survivors and promote a comprehensive and holistic approach to healing (Harris & Fallot, 2001).

The conceptual framework used in this qualitative narrative inquiry focused on the use of Harris and Fallot's (2001) TIC framework when designing a trauma-informed system. Trauma theory, according to Harris and Fallot (2001), emphasizes the negative impact of traumatic experience on individuals' psychological, emotional, and physical well-being. The theory recognizes trauma can have profound and long-lasting effects on individuals' lives, often resulting in symptoms such as posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, depression, and

impaired interpersonal relationships (Harris & Fallot, 2001). The implementation of TIC can support school staff in addressing the complex needs of trauma survivors by promoting a comprehensive and holistic approach to healing (Harris & Fallot, 2001). According to Harris and Fallot (2001), areas of focus for creating a trauma-informed system include: (a) administrative commitment to change, (b) training and education, and (c) review of policies and procedures. When considering these areas of focus, a school building and the employees who work in it are essential to creating a trauma-informed system.

Harris and Fallot (2001) believed individuals who benefit from trauma-informed systems may not be aware they have experienced traumatic events; however, without the implementation of trauma-informed practices, these individuals are at a higher risk of being retraumatized (Harris & Fallot, 2001). Additionally, when all staff members receive trauma training, the trauma-informed message can spread throughout the system or school and create a safe environment for all trauma survivors (Harris & Fallot, 2001). It is essential for school leaders to commit to providing welcoming and tailored services that meet the unique needs of those impacted by trauma (Harris & Fallot, 2001).

In addition to the conceptual framework, this study used a theoretical framework based on Mezirow's (2009) transformative learning theory, a well-established theory in adult education. Transformative learning theory emphasizes adults must adopt a fresh perspective when encountering new information and incorporate reflection and dialogue in the process. Mezirow (2009) defined transformative learning as "learning that transforms problematic frames of reference to make them more inclusive, discriminating, reflective, open, and emotionally able to change" (p. 22). In the context of trauma-informed practices, transformative learning theory involves self-reflection and necessitates adjustments in pedagogical approaches.

In a school system, adults are equipped with the power to make change, yet that power requires them to learn new strategies to work with students who have experienced ACEs. When learning about ACEs and trauma-informed practices, adults cannot rely solely on their previous understanding of schooling; instead, they must allow new information to reshape their viewpoint, which can lead to better informed decisions. For teachers, reflecting on teaching practices can be a crucial step in integrating this new learning (Mezirow, 2009).

Assumptions, Limitations, and Scope

Qualitative research maintains assumptions that reality is socially constructed and there is no unique observable reality (Merriam & Tisdell, 2017). Narrative methodology, in particular, relies on "the experiences as expressed in lived and told stories of individuals" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 67). As such, retold, or restoried, narratives are assumed to be a representation of the stories participants have told (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). As an example, Riessman (2008) explained researchers can transcribe the same interview into different types of stories depending on the context. These collections of stories, then, require a collaborative approach between the participant and the researcher (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Assumptions in this study were the statements I, as the researcher, believed were true (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018). I assumed individuals who self-identified to participate would be educational leaders in a trauma-informed school in the state of Maine. I also assumed participants would share accurate, honest, and reflective information about their lived experiences. Additionally, I assumed trauma-informed public school leaders in Maine would be willing to participate in this study and share detailed and descriptive stories regarding the creation of a trauma-informed school. Furthermore, assumptions in this study also included the

effectiveness of trauma-informed practices in mitigating the impact of ACEs and the willingness of school leaders to drive change.

Roberts and Hyatt (2019) defined limitations as characteristics of a study over which the researcher has limited or no control. The decision to use a qualitative narrative research methodology was a study limitation because the data collected were bound by the stories participants shared (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). These data were collected from only five participants to uncover details about participants' lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Bloomberg and Volpe (2018) argued a small number of participants may be appropriate in a qualitative study if the descriptions are detailed and descriptive stories are told. I acknowledged there were other educational leaders in trauma-informed schools from whom I would not collect data; however, selecting five participants allowed for a larger, collective story to be shared. Finally, the study was also limited by the questions posed in the interview and the skills I possessed as an interviewer.

Purposeful sampling allows the researcher to select individuals and sites from which to learn about or understand a central phenomenon (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Purposeful sampling also allows the researcher to determine specific criteria for participation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Public school personnel in leadership positions were intentionally chosen for participation because of their knowledge of trauma-informed practices and their ability to effect change in schools. In addition, this study focused on schools in the state of Maine because I was deeply invested in the public schools system in Maine. Requests for participation identified participation criteria and were circulated to current building leaders in the state of Maine via email.

As with any qualitative study, I brought my own biases into the study. I limited bias by employing systematic measures such as a clearly defined narrative methodology. I used member checking by sharing the restoried narratives with participants to ensure the accuracy of their stories (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Member checking allowed participants to review restoried data from the interviews and verify their voices were represented accurately (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019).

Rationale and Significance

Rationale and significance refer to the justification for why a study is important and why it matters (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Felitti et al. (1998) described the correlation between ACEs and negative health outcomes for adults. With more than 173,900 students enrolled during the 2022–2023 school year, Maine public schools are an ideal location to work on building resilience in youth to mitigate the impact of ACEs (Maine Department of Education, n.d.). The development of trauma-informed schools and implementation of trauma-informed practices can provide students with the necessary tools to protect them from negative impacts of ACEs (Perez, 2021). A trauma-informed school creates consistency and stability in the daily learning environment for students (Stokes & Brunzell, 2019) and provides full staff training, so staff members have the knowledge to support and mitigate the impact of trauma. Because administrative assistants, custodians, and bus drivers can provide stability and predictability in the school day, all staff should have trauma-informed knowledge to encourage whole-school support (Stokes & Brunzell, 2019).

Professional education opportunities to develop trauma-informed knowledge need to be provided for all staff (Perez, 2021; Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2014). Learning experiences should be delivered in a trauma-informed manner, in

which the presenter is aware of educators' needs for professional learning (Koslouski &
Chafouleas, 2022). Consistent and effective professional learning is necessary for school
improvement and change (Rossen, 2020).

Summary

Public school teachers and staff have an opportunity to support students as they learn how
to navigate the impact of ACEs, and school personnel require support in learning how to best
meet the needs of their students (Guarino & Chagnon, 2018; Rossen, 2020). Students who have
experienced the impact of ACEs can benefit from additional support in learning how to mitigate
their effects (Eller & Hierck, 2022). This qualitative narrative study explored Maine public
school leaders' perceptions of developing a trauma-informed school by answering the following
questions: (a) how do trauma-informed school leaders describe necessary practices, programs,
and procedures in supporting the cultivation of children's resilience to mitigate the impact of
ACEs; and (b) how do trauma-informed school leaders make informed decisions about trauma-
informed professional learning offered to expand staff understanding toward the implementation
of a trauma-informed school?

Varying definitions of a trauma-informed school exist; however, there are clear indicators
on the outcomes of students who have experienced ACEs and the impact of ACEs on school
success (Blodgett & Lanigan, 2018). I used a qualitative methodology with a narrative inquiry
research approach to learn from trauma-informed school leaders in Maine who believed they had
established a trauma-informed school. School leaders were invited to share perspectives
regarding the implementation of practices, programs, and procedures to mitigate impact of ACEs
in the school setting, which may include SEL, resiliency building, or trauma-informed practices.

Finally, I also sought to uncover the professional development strategies employed by school leaders to support the transformational learning of school staff.

This study was motivated by the need to address the impact of ACEs on students and the lack of preparedness among educators in supporting students who have experienced trauma. This study contributed to research on the development of trauma-informed schools and how to improve outcomes for students impacted by ACEs. As with any research study, there were identified assumptions, limitations, and scope (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). I assumed participants in this study would be Maine educational leaders from trauma-informed schools and provided honest, introspective accounts. I also assumed these school leaders would be open to participating and sharing detailed narratives about creating trauma-informed school. An additional assumption was trauma-informed practices could mitigate the impact of ACEs. Limitations included the small sample size and the focus on school leaders in the state of Maine. The scope of this study was to explore school leaders' perspectives in developing trauma-informed schools.

Chapter 2 provides an in-depth description of the conceptual and theoretical framework and extensive research findings from current literature in the areas of ACEs, resiliency, professional development, trauma-informed practices, and SEL. The literature review discusses the framework for the development of trauma-informed schools and the role of school leadership in providing support for staff who work with students who may have experienced trauma. In Chapter 3, the methodology and the research design of this study are provided in detail. This chapter includes an explanation of how participants were selected, how interviews were conducted, and how data were interpreted. Chapter 4 reviews and analyzes the findings and

includes the participants' restoried narratives. Chapter 5 presents interpretations, importance, and

implications of the findings.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The focus of this study was educational leaders' ability to drive trauma-informed change at the school in which they work. The transition to a trauma-informed school requires effective professional development and practice (Guarino & Chagnon, 2018; Stokes & Brunzell, 2019). In addition, school staff must understand the potential impact of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and the need to implement social–emotional learning (SEL) and trauma-informed practices to build resilience in students (Scott et al., 2021).

Many children have been exposed to ACEs (Carlson et al., 2020; CDC, 2021; Offerman et al., 2022), which may include physical and emotional abuse, neglect, mental illness in the caregiver, and domestic violence (CDC, 2021; Rossen, 2020). According to the Maine Integrated Youth Health Survey (MIHYS), the number of high school students in the state of Maine who have experienced three or more ACEs increased from 20% in 2019 to 25% in 2021 (MDHHS, 2019, 2021). Students who have experienced ACEs may exhibit behavioral and emotional challenges, including managing their own behavior and ability to focus during class (Rossen, 2020; Sacks & Murphey, 2018). These students may also exhibit a lack of engagement with school in general (Rossen, 2020).

Unfortunately, the impact of ACEs can last decades. Research has demonstrated the higher the number of ACEs a child has, the greater the risk for negative outcomes in adulthood (Felitti et al., 1998; Webster, 2022). Felitti et al. (1998) found over half of study participants (52%) reported having experienced one or more childhood traumas. Additionally, the higher a participant's ACE score, the higher the likelihood the participant would experience negative health impacts as an adult, such as heart disease, diabetes, or cancer (Felitti et al., 1998). These

findings suggested a need to address ACEs prior to adulthood by providing strategies to teach youth to build resilience.

School staff can work with students to learn strategies to build resilience against the impact of ACEs (Rossen, 2020). By integrating SEL into the curriculum, school personnel can help children develop life skills such as empathy, emotional intelligence, and goal setting (CASEL, n.d.-b). SEL skills are as essential for student learning as academic information and can benefit all children, even those who are not impacted by ACEs directly (Frey et al., 2019). School staff members who demonstrate awareness of trauma-informed practices, SEL, and the need for resilience can help create an environment that recognizes and responds to trauma, resulting in increased resilience in youth (SAMHSA, 2014). Implementing strategies to mitigate the impact of trauma and increase resilience can also benefit children as they grow into adulthood.

This chapter addresses ACEs, resiliency, trauma-informed practices, and professional development needed to support the development of a trauma-informed school. First, I connect the impact of ACEs on a child's ability to learn with the strategies (i.e., trauma-informed practices) school staff can consistently implement to increase student resilience. Next, I discuss the framework for developing trauma-informed schools and the role of school leadership in providing support for staff who work with students who have experienced trauma. Finally, this review focused on the benefits and barriers to developing a trauma-informed school model and the necessary steps to follow toward full implementation. I obtained literature in this review through online databases such as Education Resources Information Center, Education Database, and Google Scholar. Additional literature from professional organizations, such as Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development and CASEL, was obtained from my personal

library. Common search terms included adverse childhood experiences, trauma-informed schools, professional development, social–emotional learning, and resiliency.

Conceptual and Theoretical Frameworks

In this study, I focused on public school leaders' perceptions of developing a trauma-informed school and the practices, programs, and procedures implemented to support that development. As participants in the study, educational leaders were given the opportunity to share their stories and personal perspectives on the development of a trauma-informed school. The conceptual framework for this study conveys why this study was important and provided a clear connection between my research questions, the scholarly literature, and my methodologies (Ravitch & Riggan, 2017).

Personal Interest

This study explored public education, focusing on school districts that have strived to be trauma-informed. In my experience in a high-poverty district, student needs are significant. I have worked in a school system where gentrification and seasonal housing fluctuations make affordable housing scarce, leading to a transient student population. Many students face challenges with regular attendance due to adverse experiences. However, school leaders can improve the educational experience by training staff to be trauma-informed and enabling them to address students' needs effectively.

Topical Research

This study employed qualitative methodology with a narrative inquiry research approach to learn from school leaders in Maine who believe they have established a trauma-informed school. Grounded in TIC and supported by trauma theory (Harris & Fallot, 2001), areas of focus in this study included the school administration's commitment to change, training, and

education, along with a review of policies and procedures for the creation of a trauma-informed school. School leaders were invited to share perspectives regarding the implementation of practices, programs, and procedures used to mitigate the impact of ACEs in the school setting, which included SEL, resiliency building, and trauma-informed practices. Finally, I sought to uncover the professional development strategies employed by school leaders to support the transformational learning of school staff. In addition to the principles of trauma theory, as described by Harris and Fallot (2001), this study was also supported by Mezirow's (2009) transformative learning theory, which focuses on the adult learner.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study was built on Mezirow's (2009) transformative learning theory, a theory in adult education. Mezirow (1978a, 1978b, 1981) first framed his theory as perspective transformation and acknowledged reflection as one of the most important components of learning in adulthood. Reflection enables people to recognize, reassess, and modify structures of assumptions and expectations that scaffold their points of view and influence thinking, beliefs, attitudes, and actions. Mezirow (2009) continued to refine his theory and developed the current definition of transformative learning as "learning that transforms problematic frames of reference to make them more inclusive, discriminating, reflective, open, and emotionally able to change" (p. 22). As researchers have further refined transformative learning theory, the fundamental premise of individuals constantly making meaning of their experiences has remained steadfast (Hoggan & Hoggan-Kloubert, 2022).

To determine the use of transformative learning theory for this study, I examined its related strengths and weaknesses. A strength and long-term benefit of transformative learning theory is the provision of space for the adult learner to shift in perspective (Bass, 2012). Bass

(2012) shared a learner must have deep reflective practices to truly bring new learning into practice. In contrast, Boyd and Myers (1988) critiqued transformative learning theory as being overly rationalistic because it emphasizes deliberation and critical reasoning as the primary causes for development in learning. This critique has suggested a potential weakness of the theory; namely, when an adult learner is not ready, does not have the capacity for new learning, or is unable to reflect on learning, they will not experience transformational learning (Bass, 2012). Bass (2012) noted additional limitations of transformative learning theory, including the lack of context identification and its influence on the learning process, the importance of linking old and new information, and the social action in which learning may occur. Furthermore, Boyd and Myers (1988) argued transformative learning theory may not account for all forms of transformation and noted learners' self-experiences were missing from this framework. Another area of criticism is Mezirow's transformative learning theory has a narrow focus on the individual rather than the collective (Cunningham, 1992). In context of this narrative study, this individual-centric approach was a valuable asset because it allowed for concentrated exploration of an individual's learning journey.

Transformative learning theory states adults need to engage in new perspectives as information is presented or learned through a process of reflection and dialogue (Mezirow, 2009). Through the lens of this theory, then, school staff would not be able to apply old understandings of schooling while learning about ACEs and trauma-informed practices (Dube et al., 2023). The knowledge gained from the process of developing a trauma-informed school would change the staff's perspective, resulting in a staff more informed about trauma and better equipped to address trauma-related issues. Self-reflection is critical when learning new information; however, individuals cannot remain in the reflective phase indefinitely, as doing so

would inhibit moving forward with implementation (Leicht et al., 2018). The success of a trauma-informed school hinges upon the administration's unwavering dedication to change through continuous professional learning and policy review (Manhart, 2017). In creating a trauma-informed school, it is imperative to acknowledge the significant role ACEs play in shaping the context for these efforts.

Adverse Childhood Experiences

ACEs are traumatic events a child encounters before the age of 18 (CDC, 2021). According to the CDC (2021), a traumatic event could include violence, abuse, neglect, or something present in a child's surroundings that might affect their safety or stability at home, such as drug addiction of a caregiver. Traumatic events can happen anywhere, and a child's response to trauma may impact different aspects of the child's life (Rossen, 2020). Over half of children in the United States have experienced one or more ACEs (Sacks & Murphey, 2018).

Due to the prevalence of ACEs, school buildings in the United States are full of students who have experienced ACEs and other micro traumas (Carlson et al., 2020). A micro trauma is a small, inconspicuous psychological injury that, when accumulated, undermines a person's sense of self-worth, distorts their personality, and jeopardizes their relationships with others (Crastnopol, 2015). Sacks and Murphey (2018) administered a survey to children in the United States that measured eight specific adversities. Survey results showed economic hardship and parental divorce were the most common adversities reported by children in all 50 states. Adversities on the survey did not include homelessness or harassment, which also could be viewed as traumatic events and have an impact on children (Murphey & Sacks, 2019). As of 2023, poverty is not an isolated adversity risk factor or micro trauma; rather, it is embedded in an ACE score (Carlson et al., 2020; Lacey et al., 2020).

In comparison to other states, Pontius (2019) reported Maine ranked 30th, with 22.5% of children reporting two or more ACEs at the time of their study; however, additional research in Maine has shown 1 in 5 high school students, or 20%, has experienced four or more ACEs (MDHHS, 2019). This finding is significant because children with four or more ACEs have a 63% chance of being depressed and a 37% chance of considering suicide (MDHHS, 2019). Children with four or more ACEs are also more likely than their peers to be bullied, drink, and smoke (MDHHS, 2019).

Adverse Childhood Experiences and Long-Term Impacts

Prior research has indicated ACEs can have long-term consequences for children, and having more ACEs can increase the likelihood of adverse outcomes, including poor health and risky behaviors (Campbell et al., 2015; Felitti et al., 1998; Merrick et al., 2019; National Conference of State Legislatures, 2022). In the 1990s, the CDC sought to better understand the correlation between trauma experience in childhood and subsequent health outcomes as an adult (Felitti et al., 1998). The study focused on 10 specific factors: (a) physical, emotional, and sexual abuse; (b) physical and emotional neglect; and (c) household dysfunction, including caregiver mental illness, violence, divorce, incarcerated relatives, and substance abuse (Felitti et al., 1998). Findings indicated these specific traumas were associated with an increase in poor health outcomes in adulthood (Felitti et al., 1998).

Geneticists have also conducted research on the impact of ACEs and studies have shown a connection between ACEs and genetic markers, such as telomeres. According to the Jackson Laboratory (n.d.), a telomere is a region of repetitive DNA sequences at the end of each chromosome that copies and divides each time cellular regeneration occurs. As humans age, the telomeres' length naturally becomes shorter and eventually impacts the ability for a cell to

divide. Ridout et al. (2018) found telomeres are more likely to be shortened in children who exhibit behaviors associated with ACEs. Geneticists have also found telomere length can be associated with the impact of ACEs on adverse health in adults (Ridout et al., 2018). In the case of individuals who have experienced ACEs, their telomeres are shorter than those of individuals who have not experienced ACEs (Burgin et al., 2019; Ridout et al., 2018).

Impact of Adverse Childhood Experiences on Learning

Research has shown ACEs are more common than individuals realize (Carlson et al., 2020; Offerman et al., 2022), and a student with more ACEs has a higher likelihood of having behavioral and academic challenges (Murphey & Sacks, 2019; Souers & Hall, 2016). Students with higher numbers of ACEs were also more likely to perform poorly in school, leading to higher absenteeism, decreased student engagement, and a higher likelihood of grade retention (Crouch et al., 2019). ACEs often have negative effects on student learning by reducing necessary skills for academic development and hindering the development of social skills (Ziv et al., 2018). These challenges can manifest in various ways, such as bullying, outbursts, lack of self-regulation, attention-seeking behaviors, and withdrawal from classmates (Rossen, 2020; Souers & Hall, 2019).

Students with multiple ACEs were more likely to struggle academically, have emotional and behavioral challenges, and experience academic failure (Murphey & Sacks, 2019; Myat Zaw et al., 2022). Felitti et al. (1998) found children with three or more ACEs were 5 times more likely to have attendance issues, 6 times more likely to have behavior problems, and 3 times more likely to experience academic failure. Educators may not know who in the school has experienced trauma, and a universal response would be to treat all students similarly (i.e., precautions could be universally implemented to benefit the overall school environment;

Brummer & Thorsborne, 2021). The use of trauma-informed practices can help create an environment more suitable for building resiliency in all children. Teachers can implement trauma-informed practices to create environments infused with trauma awareness, responsiveness to the impact of trauma, and a focus on using resources that support healthy development (Margolius et al., 2020).

When students achieve success in school, they tend to develop a stronger bond with both the school community and other students in the classroom (Rossen, 2020); however, research has indicated a lack of early childhood school attendance is linked to ACEs and can result in student nonengagement (Crouch et al., 2019; Rossen, 2020; Scott et al., 2021). Direct correlations have been identified between the number of ACEs a child experiences, poor academic achievement, and behavioral challenges in schools (Crouch et al., 2019; Rossen, 2020; Scott et al., 2021). This evidence supports the importance of educators using integrated methods or approaches to respond to student needs more appropriately (Rossen, 2020; Souers & Hall, 2019). In a trauma-informed school, school staff can respond to children who have experienced ACEs by using strategies to build resilience (Brummer & Thorsborne, 2021).

Maine Integrated Youth Health Survey

The MIYHS (MDHHS, 2024) is a biennial survey of Maine children in Grades 5–12 that collects data to monitor health actions and beliefs on nicotine, alcohol consumption, chemical use, mental well-being, nutrition, and physical activity. These data are significant because they provide longitudinal information and allow for year-to-year comparisons of student responses (MDHHS, 2024). According to Felitti et al. (1998), over 50% of children experience ACEs before the age of 18. Data from MIYHS have supported the need for trauma-informed practices in Maine schools (MDHHS, 2019, 2021). Schools and community organizations can use these

data to develop and assess preventive initiatives that support children (MDHHS, 2024). The

MIYHS includes embedded questions that focus on the prevalence of ACEs experienced by

children (Pow, 2020). These statistics provide a deeper understanding of health-related actions

and beliefs in the student population and can be used to develop and assess student health

programs.

School districts in Maine can use screening data from the MIYHS to gather information

about ACEs in the school community, as specific questions are focused on children self-

reporting their exposure to ACEs (MDHHS, 2024). All questions are answered confidentially,

and information gathered from the survey can help determine the positive and negative attitudes

and behaviors of Maine youth that influence healthy development (MDHHS, 2024). At the time

of this study, data had shown the increased prevalence of children experiencing ACEs in Maine

(MDHHS, 2019, 2021). According to the MIYHS (MDHHS, 2019, 2021), the number of

children who self-reported experiencing an ACE increased from 20% in 2019 to 25% in 2021.

Comparison data from high school and middle school students are presented from 2019 and 2020

(see Table 1). In addition to high school students who participate in the MIYHS, students in

Grades 5 and 6 also participate in an age appropriate version of the survey every 2 years.

Comparative survey results can be found in Table 2.

Table 1

MIHYS Data for High School and Middle School Students

Data related to ACEs	High school students		Middle school students	
	2019 (%)	2021 (%)	2019 (%)	2021 (%)
Experienced more than four ACEs	20	25	-	-
Consistent sad feelings for 2 weeks	32	36	24.8	29.6
Seriously considered suicide	16	18.5	19.8	20.0
Bullying at school	23	16	46.3	41.1
Cyberbullying	21	20.5	-	-
Alcohol consumption in the last 30 days	22.9	19.0	4.0	3.2
Marijuana consumption	22.0	17.9	17.9	8.1

Note. Data were collected from high school students in 2019 ($n = 35,156$) and in 2021 ($n = 26,964$). Middle school student data were collected in 2019 ($n = 19,309$) and 2021 ($n = 14,360$).

Table 2

MIHYS Data for Children in Grades 5 and 6

Data related to ACEs	Grades 5 and 6	
	2019 (%)	2021 (%)
Bullied at school	43.5	35.9
Two or more hours at home without a trusted adult	23.8	22.5
Strong connection with at least one teacher at school	95.5	83.2
Feeling safe at school	90.7	91.7

Note. Data for Grades 5 and 6 were collected in 2019 ($n = 7,999$) and 2021 ($n = 5,861$).

Resilience

Resilience, defined as the ability to overcome adversity in life (Rossen, 2020), can play a pivotal role in understanding the impact of trauma on children; for example, not all children who undergo traumatic experiences exhibit negative long-term health outcomes, though they are likely to encounter stress (Rossen, 2020). Additionally, because children who have experienced trauma may not exhibit the same symptoms or behaviors, it is not always evident who has

experienced trauma and who has not. Such nuances in how the impact of ACEs manifests emphasizes the importance of using a comprehensive approach to teach resilience-building strategies to overcome adversity.

Community Partnerships

Community partnerships can support the cultivation of student resilience. To provide financial support for the development of these partnerships, the federal government extends Title I funding to high-poverty or underperforming school districts. These funds mandate the implementation of family engagement and community partnership programs under the Every Student Succeeds Act (Brown et al., 2019). The involvement of families with the school community can increase natural opportunities to strengthen the community support for schools and their students.

Researchers have examined the synergy between school systems and community collaborators to enhance school-based support for both students and staff (Bryan et al., 2020). In schools, wraparound services aim to furnish students with the academic, social, and behavior assistance they need to succeed during the school day (Evolve Treatment Centers, n.d.). Using a comprehensive and coordinated team approach, wraparound services provide support and resources to students who have complex needs, which can greatly benefit children as they develop resilience (Evolve Treatment Centers, n.d.). Strong community partnerships are vital for equipping schools with the resources and necessary training to nurture student resilience.

Collaboration between public school systems and external partners is essential. Elliot (2018) reported how one school system collaborated with external partners (e.g., United Way) to create a coalition with the goal of increasing graduation rates. As a result, the coalition developed before and after school programs to identify and support students who were at risk of

not graduating. Elliot noted afterschool programming offered by various community partners can reinforce what students learn during the day and make a connection to real life outside of the classroom. Community partnerships can also provide opportunities for professional development that otherwise may not have been accessible to staff, either as an in-kind donation or at a significantly reduced cost. For example, Elliot found school staff, along with community partners, participated in mindfulness training to ensure students learned how mindfulness practices could benefit them in real life. Thus, community partners offer a network of resources and volunteers to carry out these programs and have the financial capacity to help support the programs.

Resilience in the Classroom

In the school setting, opportunities exist for staff to integrate strategies that foster resilience throughout the school day (Henderson-Smith & Black, n.d.). Rossen (2020) proposed teachers can contribute to building resilience by maintaining consistent expectations while also showing empathy to a student's individual expectations. Regardless of the traumas they might be facing, students do not want to feel different from their peers (Rossen, 2020). Upholding high expectations in the school environment can convey a sense of continuity in the student's educational journey. This insight underscores the significance of seamlessly integrating resilience-promoting strategies in the education framework to provide vital support for students' development and well-being.

According to the Harvard University Center on the Developing Child (n.d.), the primary factor in fostering children's resilience is cultivating strong relationships with trusted adults. However, parents and guardians of children with multiple ACEs often share a history of ACEs themselves, which can hinder their ability to establish these vital relationships with their children

(Randell et al., 2015; Rossen, 2020; Woods-Jaeger et al., 2018). Emphasizing a similar point, Brummer and Thorsborne (2021) stated connections with students should transcend academics and focus on forging genuine human bonds. Brummer and Thorsborne further highlighted the necessity for students to connect with teachers' inherent humanity, which can be perceived as going above and beyond their contract as an educator. In essence, the foundation of a child's resilience hinges on strong relationships with trusted adults, which necessitates a deeper human connection than just academic interactions.

Fostering resilience involves recognizing and celebrating the incremental steps in a student's journey, a process that can seamlessly occur during classroom instruction (Rossen, 2020). By consistently acknowledging progress, student motivation can be effectively sustained (Rossen, 2020). This approach would enable every student to achieve success in learning, provided teachers cater to individual academic levels and acknowledge the limitations of a one-size-fits-all approach to teaching (Bondie et al., 2019). Creating innovative and engaging lessons that align with students' individual capacities is essential for student engagement (Rossen, 2020). Additionally, there are long-lasting benefits for students who engage in self-reflection to monitor progress toward a goal and intrinsically celebrate accomplishments (Rossen, 2020). Building resilience in students involves celebrating their progress, engaging in tailored teaching methods, and fostering a culture of self-reflection, which collectively contributes to their lasting growth and development.

The development of an individual's resilience is shaped by their environment, with specific focus on cultivating personal protective resources such as optimism, self-efficacy, empathy, and socioeconomic resources (Foster, 2020). Aligning with this perspective, McAllister and Brien (2020) emphasized schools play a significant role in the collective social obligation to

develop resilience in students. When school staff actively assume their role in a collaborative effort, they become instrumental in creating an environment in which a student's resilience can flourish. By facilitating students' access to personal protective resources, these educators empower students to develop the skills and mindset needed to confront and overcome life's adversities (Foster, 2020). This collaborative approach aligns with the broader objective of transforming school staff into a more trauma-informed and responsive team.

Resilience Cultivation to Cope With Adverse Childhood Experiences

The impact of ACEs on children and the resulting negative impact on their adult lives cannot be neglected; however, not all children who experience ACEs have a negative health impact as an adult (Rossen, 2020). In fact, researchers have found resilience is the conduit through which to mitigate the impact of childhood adversities (Lee, 2019; Liu et al., 2020). For instance, Liu et al. (2020) showed the impact of ACEs on mental health was significantly reduced through the cultivation of resilience. According to Lee (2019), resilience prevents potential negative effects of ACEs on children's well-being by fostering positive values such as self-efficacy and confidence. The findings demonstrated resilience can thwart potential adverse outcomes of childhood trauma and result in positive characteristics that lead children to thrive later in life (Lee, 2019; Liu et al., 2020).

Social–Emotional Learning

Schools can increase resilience through a variety of intentional practices. One such practice is SEL which is a "set of social, emotional, behavioral, and character skills that support success in school, the workplace, relationships and the community" (Frey et al., 2019, p. 2). According to CASEL (n.d.-b), SEL is a process through which people acquire and apply knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions, achieve personal

and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions. SEL lesson topics may include self-identity, emotional regulation, cognitive regulation, and social skills (Frey et al., 2019).

Social–Emotional Learning Competencies

CASEL (n.d.-b) determined five interrelated competencies of SEL: (a) self-awareness, (b) social awareness, (c) relationship skills, (d) self-management, and (e) responsible decision making. SEL competencies can be embedded into curricula at all grade levels and across content areas (CASEL, n.d.-b). Further research by the Wallace Foundation identified three domains specific to SEL including cognitive, emotional, and social (Jones et al., 2018). The implementation of SEL focuses on developing life skills that can be applied to any situation an individual may face (Frey et al., 2019). Instruction that highlights SEL can help students develop their social–emotional skills and have a positive impact on the school community.

Social–Emotional Learning Curriculum

Historically, teaching SEL skills has been embedded in what educators do, yet oftentimes SEL was not a specific part of the written curricula. Jones et al. (2021) reported there has been little research on which specific instructional practices lead to the positive outcomes experienced when implementing SEL programming in schools. Naturally, teachers make decisions on the values expressed, materials chosen for instruction, and individual behaviors that influence students with whom they interact (Frey et al., 2019). Many teachers have used SEL practices in their classroom for all children (Sprenger, 2020). SEL strategies can either be embedded in classroom instruction or provided as a separate class, which typically occurs for the youngest students (Frey et al., 2019). Implementing a SEL-focused curriculum can have a positive impact on academics, behavior, and school climate (Atwell & Bridgeland, 2019; Rosen et al., 2022).

SEL should be integrated into the school community by encouraging a team approach inclusive of all staff (Chu & DeArmond, 2021).

Integrating SEL curriculum into daily procedures is typically more robust and impactful during the elementary years; however, Rosen et al. (2022) emphasized the necessity of developing a stronger program specifically tailored for secondary students. Rosen et al. examined SEL school reform in high school by focusing on a systemic approach (i.e., personalization for academic and social–emotional learning [PASL]). Initially implemented in Florida, PASL is a holistic school reform method that emphasizes personalized social–emotional support for students and uses regular check-ins, goal setting, and progress tracking (Rosen et al., 2022). Rosen et al. found students who were disengaged in school before the ninth grade had a greater level of engagement following implementation of the program; however, overall benefits of PASL showed insignificant positive results, and further research needs to be conducted on the impact of PASL for students in Grades 10–12 (Rosen et al., 2022). The potential benefits and expanded implementation of the PASL program require more investigation for additional consideration as an approach to be used in high schools.

Consistent implementation of SEL practices can improve student and staff well-being (Atwell & Bridgeland, 2019). When SEL becomes a school focus, student–teacher relationships improve, classroom management challenges decrease, instruction thrives, and teacher burnout diminishes (Atwell & Bridgeland, 2019). According to a CASEL survey in 2019, principals believed SEL skills were teachable and should be an important component of the school day (Atwell & Bridgeland, 2019). In addition, research has demonstrated the importance of positive childhood experiences to negate or reverse the impact of ACEs (Crandall et al., 2019). According to Crandall et al. (2019), even if a person had four or more ACEs, a high number of

positive experiences may mitigate adverse health impacts later in life. Promoting SEL practices and fostering positive childhood experiences can profoundly impact the well-being of students in the school community and their long-term health outcomes.

Many schools have moved toward schoolwide adoption of an SEL curriculum, from which there are many to choose. The Maine Department of Education, for example, has made SEL a priority, creating an online portal in 2020 to support staff in the implementation of SEL lessons for prekindergarten through Grade 12 classrooms. SEL lessons were also available for adults who could benefit from the strategies. However, during the COVID-19 global pandemic, Zieher et al. (2021) found teachers had a difficult time with virtual instruction and faced challenges in implementing any SEL curriculum. Findings indicated schools that had a fully supported SEL curriculum prior to the pandemic had less difficulty transitioning to distance learning models in which SEL was also implemented (Zieher et al., 2021). Providing SEL classroom lessons is one way educators can support students to build resiliency, yet, as implied by implementation findings during the pandemic, educators still need effective professional development to support their understanding of SEL practices.

Trauma-Informed Practices

In addition to SEL, school initiatives to support students may also include implementing trauma-informed practices (Brummer & Thorsborne, 2021). These practices can create a safe environment, foster connection in the school community, and address students' needs (Rossen, 2020). According to SAMHSA (2014), trauma-informed practices include key principles of (a) safety; (b) trustworthiness and transparency; (c) peer support; (d) collaboration and mutuality; (e) empowerment, voice, and choice; and (f) cultural, historical, and gender inclusivity. These six

principles should be upheld in trauma-informed schools across all levels of school operations (Lang et al., 2015; SAMHSA, 2014).

Trauma-informed practices are strategies school staff can use to build classroom environments with trauma awareness that (a) are responsive to the impact of trauma and (b) consider and use essential resources to support students when trauma occurs (Margolius et al., 2020). Trauma-informed practices can include routines, consistency, and relationship building, which can help educators mitigate the impact of trauma (Howell et al., 2019). According to Somers and Wheeler (2022), some schools have implemented morning meetings, meditation, and mindfulness as a way for teachers to implement trauma-formed practices. The successful implementation of trauma-informed practices can lead to arming students with strategies needed to overcome adversities and achieve academic success (Phifer & Hull, 2016).

In a trauma-informed classroom, teachers partner with students to create an empowering and empathetic learning environment (Bashant, 2020). Collaboration in these classrooms empowers students and transforms the teacher's role from instructor to facilitator (Li et al., 2022). Although teachers learn about trauma-informed practices in their work with students, teachers also gain the skills necessary to cope with the secondary stress that comes from working with traumatized children (Maynard et al., 2019). Secondary stress is defined as "emotional duress that results when an individual hears about the first hand trauma experience of another" (National Child Traumatic Stress Network [NCTSN], n.d.-b, para. 1) and can impact professionals working with youth who disclose ongoing trauma. Staff members who engage in learning about trauma and trauma-informed practices can help prevent secondary trauma for themselves and the students with whom they work (Maynard et al., 2019; Rossen, 2020).

Proactive implementation of trauma-informed practices can facilitate an atmosphere that helps students cope with issues prior to manifesting in more damaging behaviors (Howell et al., 2019). Teachers can be trained to use trauma-informed practices to react to and deescalate students' problematic or challenging behaviors (Brummer & Thorsborne, 2021). As a result, these trauma-informed practices can prevent classroom disruption, promote learning, and improve the overall learning environment and student outcomes (Brummer & Thorsborne, 2021). By integrating trauma-informed practices and properly identifying students who need additional support, teachers can proactively handle unwarranted behaviors and ensure students have better access to learning (Minahan, 2019; Phifer & Hull, 2016). Phifer and Hull (2016) found a safe environment and proper identification of students who need additional support is essential to cultivating personal resilience. As such, trauma-informed practices can help create an environment that recognizes and responds to trauma and increases resiliency in youth (Brummer & Thorsborne, 2021). Still, despite the availability of research focusing on a variety of trauma-informed practices, a lack of agreement and empirical evidence about the practices, strategies, and core elements essential for a successful trauma-informed approach persists (Robey et al., 2021).

Trauma-Savvy Practices

Though commonly known as trauma-informed practices, some schools, districts, and even states use the phrases trauma sensitive and trauma ready interchangeably (Souers & Hall, 2019). To clearly articulate different levels of implementation for trauma-informed practices, Souers and Hall (2019) developed a spectrum of trauma-savvy practices that includes four categories: (a) trauma inducing, (b) trauma indifferent, (c) trauma informed, and (d) trauma invested. Trauma-inducing environments lack any degree of safety and contribute to unsafe

experiences for individuals. Trauma-indifferent environments do not consider the impact of trauma or ACEs in their practices of policies. In contrast, stakeholders in a trauma-informed environment are aware of trauma and have knowledge about strategies to mitigate the impact and build resilience. When these stakeholders collaborate and commit to actions that increase safety across all domains, the environment is considered trauma invested.

This spectrum of trauma-informed practices is not static and allows for movement toward the goal of becoming trauma invested, which has been described as a "philosophy or way of life" (Souers & Hall, 2019, p. 27). Souers and Hall (2019) claimed, in a trauma-invested school, staff are committed to the notion all students have the potential for trauma exposure and school may be the only safe place in which they can learn and flourish. All staff members should support each other in recognizing the strengths of their students and be ready to offer understanding and assistance when needed (Souers & Hall, 2019).

Need for Trauma-Informed Practices

Children attend school to learn, and traumatic events can create barriers to that goal. Some schools have taken strategic steps to become trauma informed such as offering professional development on ACEs, SEL strategies, mindfulness strategies, and restorative practices (Brummer & Thorsborne, 2021). The NCTSN (n.d.-a) indicated the importance for children to feel supported in school and ready to learn. Maynard et al. (2019) stated incorporating trauma-informed practices in a school system is a noble endeavor that requires valuable resources of time, money, and focus from all stakeholders. Maynard et al. reported many schools have moved toward trauma-informed practices, yet little research has been completed to measure the effectiveness of the work.

Schools are well situated to provide trauma-informed services for students because they can provide appropriate support for identified individuals to help meet student needs. Souers and Hall (2016) suggested teachers should try to determine a student's ACE exposure by getting to know the children they serve. By building student relationships, teachers can predict ACE exposure based on a student's family circumstances (Souers & Hall, 2016). Although identifying ACEs in children can be helpful, the American School Counselor Association (Hertz, 2020) critiqued this approach because it can cause negative impacts through misidentification. In addition, screening students based on anecdotal information can cause additional trauma for the student (Hertz, 2020). Given the potential challenges associated with identifying ACEs in students, it is essential for schools to offer professional development to equip educators with the skills and knowledge necessary to provide students with the essential resources and support they require.

Professional Development

All staff in school should have the opportunity to learn about trauma and its effect on learning. Staff education can strengthen the development of a safe, trauma-informed school that sustains all students (Korpics et al., 2021; Rossen, 2020). Staff knowledge of trauma-informed practices can impact a student's ability to thrive despite the adverse effects of trauma (Bashant, 2020). In addition, staff in the school community can build students' resilience, specifically their self-regulation skills (Brunzell et al., 2022). Koslouski and Chafouleas (2022) stated there is not one type of professional development that meets the needs of all educators in a building. A risk of this type of work is retraumatizing staff who may have experienced their own trauma, as more than 60% of U.S. adults have experienced traumatic events (Koslouski & Chafouleas, 2022; Merrick et al., 2019). The objective for professional development for school staff is to impart

information and alter attitudes regarding trauma, thereby gaining staff support for trauma-informed practices (Rossen, 2020).

Professional Development Implementation

Rossen (2020) noted professional development provided to staff must be designed with intentionality, as this is essential to the success of school-wide implementation. The National Implementation Research Network (n.d.) indicated four stages of implementation for a new initiative: exploration, installation, initial implementation, and full implementation. Rossen (2020) identified how the stages of implementation for a trauma-informed school begin with professional development in the exploration phase. Exploration refers to identifying the readiness of staff and school community for becoming a trauma-informed school. Next, installation is the stage in which the school team creates an action plan of the steps toward implementation. Initial implementation, in this case, may also be referred to as the trauma responsive stage, in which staff learn new trauma-informed practices through professional development opportunities and intentional reflections on implementation. Finally, the full implementation stage is an essential component in the analysis of current trauma-informed practices and their alignment with specific school and/or district goals (Rossen, 2020).

Role of School Leadership in Professional Development

Transforming a school to being trauma informed requires consistent and steadfast leadership. Research has shown school leaders who actively participate in professional learning alongside their staff are more likely to create valuable learning opportunities and effectively disseminate knowledge across the school community (Howard, 2019; Stokes & Brunzell, 2019). School staff can benefit from collective efficacy that fosters a professional learning culture or creates an environment conducive to culture change (Donohoo, 2018). The actions of building

leaders can influence student outcomes (Stokes & Brunzell, 2019). School leaders have an opportunity to work with all staff to increase awareness of the prevalence and effects of trauma and how trauma impacts students' development, behavior, and ability to learn.

Efficacy of Trauma-Informed Professional Development Interventions

Professional development for all staff is important to bring about change in the school community; however, professional development will not be effective if presented as sporadic events that lack connection to the overall needs of the school (Frey et al., 2019). Instead, Roseby and Gascoigne (2021) stated professional development should be multifaceted with initial training and subsequent follow-up training over time to benefit students. In addition, Brummer and Thorsborne (2021) noted, to maximize the benefits, professional development should be delivered as a well-structured series of events tailored to the specific challenges and context of each educational setting.

A gap exists in the available literature regarding the relationship between professional development, its impact on teaching practices, and the resulting influence on student outcomes. Although Purtle (2020) found professional development supported a change in staff knowledge and attitudes, there was little evidence professional development supported the application or modification of teaching practices. Stokes and Brunzell (2019) indicated leaders and teachers must acknowledge the need for alternative pedagogical approaches in response to the effect of unresolved trauma on students. Past methods of academic instruction may not meet the needs of current students who struggle with ACEs (Stokes & Brunzell, 2019). Further research is needed to determine the benefits of professional development and the implementation of trauma-informed teaching practices.

Barriers to Implementing Professional Development

There is an established need to implement trauma-informed approaches in schools, yet

notable barriers prevent a fully realized trauma-informed system (Brummer & Thorsborne, 2021;

Rossen, 2020). Even when staff express buy-in and believe in the significance of this work

(Leibel et al., 2021), it is still essential to address the barriers hindering successful

implementation. These barriers include a shortage of time for professional education, inadequate

support staff-specific professional education, and turnover among those leading these efforts

(Rossen, 2020). Additionally, staff who begin to implement practices may lack the resources

necessary to provide interventions for students (Maynard et al., 2019; Rossen, 2020), including

access to mental health services beyond the scope of what the school system can provide. These

obstacles highlight the importance of adopting a trauma-informed approach in schools.

<p align="center">Trauma-Informed Schools</p>

A trauma-informed approach cannot just identify a population of individuals for

intervention; rather, schools must create a comprehensive response system that includes

prevention, intervention, and targeted trauma treatments—a multileveled approach (Rossen,

2020). The development of a trauma-informed school includes all aspects of the school's

programming, culture, climate, and values (Covington & Bloom, 2018). All school personnel are

a part of the school's culture, climate, and values and subsequently play an integral role in

building a trauma-informed school—from teachers to bus drivers, administrators to

administrative assistants, and so on (Guarino & Chagnon, 2018). School systems can empower

adults who work in schools to change the culture and climate of the school and create a place

where all students feel a sense of belonging (Bashant, 2020). For example, Bashant (2020)

explained meaningful relationships with an adult at school can be used to counteract the impacts

of trauma in students. In transitioning to a trauma-informed school, Rossen (2020) indicated leadership, professional development, access to resources, collaboration with families, academic instruction, and nonacademic instruction must all be deeply considered and planned out.

Murphey and Sacks (2019) found schools should develop and foster a universal, schoolwide strategy to create a trauma-informed climate. Several studies described ways to do this, for example, school staff members can develop a tiered system of student services to make the educational experience as supportive and nourishing as possible (Rosenbalm, 2018). Brown-Chidsey and Bickford (2015) described a multitiered system of support (MTSS) that includes academic and behavioral tiered systems, such as response to intervention (RTI) and positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS), to help all students succeed in school. MTSS is heavily based on data-driven decision making and performed by a team of professionals who design targeted interventions for the students they serve (Brown-Chidsey & Bickford, 2015). As of 2023, no universal systematic approach exists to implement trauma-informed professional development, nor is there a consistent trauma-informed message (Thomas et al., 2019). However, this review presents two school systems in the United States that offer an example for how to systematically implement a trauma-informed school environment.

States on opposite sides of the country are credited with being pioneers in trauma-informed education (Stevens, 2012). Massachusetts and Washington have embarked on the journey to reshape their educational systems to be more empathetic and responsive to the needs of their students. By acknowledging the prevalence of trauma and ACEs, schools in Massachusetts and Washington took crucial steps toward fostering safer and more supportive learning environments.

Brockton School District

The George School in Brockton, Massachusetts began the transition to become a trauma-informed school in 2005 with a goal to focus on helping students regardless of their exposure to trauma (Stevens, 2012). Data available from the ACEs study (Felitti et al., 1998) the field of neuroscience, and child psychiatry indicated the need to take a different approach at the school (Stevens, 2012). The Brockton School District partnered with the Lesley Institute for Trauma Sensitivity (LIFTS) and the Trauma and Learning Policy Initiative (TLPI) to begin staff education regarding the impact of trauma. Schoolwide, trauma-informed improvement plans were created, and 300 teachers completed a course from TLPI about working with children who have experienced trauma (Stevens, 2012). One reason Brockton's model has been successful was the integration of community in these efforts. Local police, youth service organizations, and other agencies worked closely with the school district and allowed for opportunities to best support students in the school buildings.

In addition to the George School, Arnone Elementary School, also in Brockton, implemented a PBIS program (Stevens, 2012). The school focused on changing messaging to students from being punitive or negative to being positive. The implementation of a PBIS program focused on teaching students behavioral expectations and celebrating when those expectations were met (Stevens, 2012). These practices helped change the school climate and culture.

Spokane Public School District

The Spokane Public School District in Washington partnered with Washington State University's Area Health Education Center to transition to trauma-informed schooling with the goal of reducing children's exposure to violence (Stevens, 2012). Previous research indicated

students who had more ACEs had higher rates of academic failure, inconsistent attendance, behavior challenges, and poor health outcomes (Stevens, 2012). Spokane adopted a universal approach designed to address the needs of the majority of students because researchers believed such an approach had the potential to reach a broader spectrum of children compared to other types of interventions (Stevens, 2013). The transition necessitated staff members understood the significance of becoming trauma informed. Professional development was introduced, beginning with education on ACEs, brain development, and the impact of dysregulation on student learning. As teachers and staff gained a deeper understanding of trauma-informed practices, they initiated the implementation phase, which was supported by available and relevant data.

The Brockton and Spokane school districts both pursued the implementation of trauma-informed schools, each with their own unique motivations and strategies (Stevens, 2012). However, their experiences revealed shared elements of committed school staff engagement and strong community backing in facilitating this transformation. Additionally, the acknowledgment of distinct community requirements was pivotal in excluding the adoption of a standardized approach to the establishment of trauma-informed educational institutions.

Summary

ACEs are traumatic events a child encounters before age 18 that may lead to significant health challenges in adulthood (CDC, 2021). Almost half of children in the United States have experienced one or more ACEs (Sacks & Murphey, 2018), and children who have experienced multiple ACEs are more likely to struggle in school academically and have emotional and behavioral challenges (Murphey & Sacks, 2019; Myat Zaw et al., 2022). These findings supported using integrated methods or approaches to understand the impact of ACEs in young children and respond to them more effectively. When implemented as a universal practice, a

schoolwide trauma approach ensures all students receive the benefits of SEL and resilience building strategies (Halladay Goldman et al., 2020).

Educational leaders can work together to build a trauma-informed school. When traumatic events occur, trauma-informed schools provide an opportunity for students to be supported earlier (Brummer & Thorsborne, 2021). Professional development can provide school staff with fundamental knowledge of trauma, its effects on students and staff, and what it means to be a trauma-informed school (Guarino & Chagnon, 2018). However, barriers to the implementation of a trauma-informed school include availability of resources, changes in staff, and staff buy-in (Leibel et al., 2021; Rossen, 2020). Furthermore, professional development needs to be consistent and frequent to ensure understanding of the practices (Rossen, 2020).

Trauma-informed schools develop out of a need for change and to do more for the students served. Empirical evidence from the Brockton and Spokane school districts supports the idea of employees in different school districts learning from each other. The consistency of the public school system can be the perfect place for universal trauma-informed practices to help all students overcome adversity. The work must begin with teachers and staff developing awareness of ACEs, understanding how their impact may present in student behavior, and building a toolbox of practices for school staff to support students (Brummer & Thorsborne, 2021). Despite the availability of information regarding the development of trauma-informed schools, a gap in the literature exists about educational leaders' perspectives on the implementation of trauma-informed schools. Therefore, in this study, I shared the perspectives of school leaders in the development of a trauma-informed school. In Chapter 3, I provide a comprehensive overview of the methodology to be used to collect data and to sustain the ethics of the study regarding credibility, transferability, and dependability.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

ACEs increasingly and negatively impact students, and school staff have been unable to provide necessary targeted assistance to support students in building resilience against the effects of trauma (Murphey & Sacks, 2019; Rossen, 2020). The purpose of this qualitative narrative inquiry was to explore how educational leaders perceive the development of a trauma-informed school. In this study, the trauma-informed school was defined as a public school setting in which all staff have acquired some knowledge about ACEs and are versed in strategies to mitigate their impact (Souers & Hall, 2019). Using existing literature relevant to the impact of ACEs on children and the need for developing trauma-informed schools to mitigate their impact, the following questions guided the study:

Research Question 1: How do trauma-informed school leaders describe necessary practices, programs, and procedures in supporting the cultivation of children's resilience to mitigate the impact of ACEs?

Research Question 2: How do trauma-informed school leaders make informed decisions about trauma-informed professional development offered to expand staff understanding toward the implementation of a trauma-informed school?

The concept of TIC (Harris & Fallot, 2001) supports the theoretical framework for this study, which is Mezirow's transformative learning theory. Mezirow's (1991) transformative learning theory suggests adult learners must continue critical reflection while engaging in experiences to promote learning (Kurnia, 2021). Transformative learning theory focuses on how individuals can undergo profound cognitive and emotional shifts through critical reflection and examination of their assumptions, beliefs, and perspectives (Mezirow, 1991). Mezirow (1991) suggested transformative learning involves a process of becoming aware of and challenging

one's existing knowledge, beliefs, and assumptions, leading to a reevaluation and reconstruction of one's worldview. This transformative process can result in personal growth, increased self-awareness, and the development of new perspectives, which are all necessary for educators and school staff in the creation of a trauma-informed school.

Educational leaders can use the framework of Mezirow's (1991) transformative learning theory to develop their understanding of the impact of ACEs. By incorporating the principles of transformative learning theory, educators can engage in a reflective and critical examination of their experiences and beliefs (Mezirow, 1991). This process allows individuals to challenge and reconstruct their understanding of themselves and their ability to support students' growth and resilience (Mezirow, 1991).

A qualitative narrative inquiry approach was used to capture the unique stories of five participants. Creswell and Guetterman (2019) stated narrative inquiry allows participants to share their meaningful stories and to be heard. In narrative inquiry, participants share a part of their life and their experiences through storytelling (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). By centering on the exploration of personal and social experiences, each experience emerges from and builds upon another experience (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

This narrative inquiry gathered data using semistructured interviews. Stories of participants were uncovered as they shared their perceptions of developing a trauma-informed school in the state of Maine. Interview questions were designed with a focus on the TIC framework (Harris & Fallot, 2001), which includes aspects such as staff and administration commitment to change, professional development, and a review of policies and procedures.

Site Information and Demographics

The site for this study included various public schools in the state of Maine where participants were educational leaders working in a trauma-informed school. I gained access to participants through public school websites where e-mail contact information was available. In 2022, the Maine Department of Education reported the state had 603 public schools with 48,330 full-time teachers and educational leaders. Based on state reports, the predicted student enrollment was 165,257, of which 64,320 students lived in poverty, 1,457 students experienced housing insecurity, and 1,118 students were in foster care (MDHHS, n.d.). The CDC (2021) reported poverty, unstable housing, and lack of connection to other people are all risk factors for ACEs. Furthermore, the CDC (2021) noted there is not one single cause of ACEs, and the many factors that cause ACEs can increase the likelihood of long-lasting impacts. The state of Maine has many trauma-informed educational leaders in public schools who were invited to participate through my connections with established professional listservs. Interviews and data collection were conducted virtually over the Zoom platform to allow for participation across the state.

Participants and Sampling Method

Purposeful sampling, defined as "selecting information-rich cases, to yield insight and understanding of the phenomenon under investigation" (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018, p. 148), was used for this study. I selected five participants from whom to gather personal experiences around the design of a trauma-informed school. The number of participants was limited to allow for deep analysis and retelling of the participants' stories (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Participation criteria included being over the age of 18 and identifying as a trauma-informed educational leader in a Maine public school. For this study, a trauma-informed educational leader was a person who was involved in the development of a trauma-informed school. According to Stokes

and Brunzell (2019), the leadership qualities necessary for leading trauma-informed schools are centered on staff buy-in; leader commitment; and the ability to address the needs of children, teachers, and the school community as a whole. Educational leaders who participated in this study included building administrators, school counselors, social workers, and trauma-informed coaches.

Upon receiving approval from the University of New England (UNE) Institutional Review Board (IRB; see Appendix A), participant recruitment occurred through the distribution of a recruitment flyer (see Appendix B) via email to principals in the state of Maine. The recruitment flyer and associated participant information sheet (see Appendix C) were distributed directly to Maine principals' work emails via my password-protected UNE email. The recruitment flyer provided participants with information regarding the purpose of the research project, why they were being asked to participate, a description of the process, potential risks and benefits of participation, and assurances for privacy and confidentiality during the study. The recruitment email and participant information sheet asked participants to reply within a 2-week period if they wished to participate. Ten days after the initial email, I sent a reminder email inviting them to participate in the study.

The participant pool was reached during the 4-week recruitment period. After that time, I closed the recruitment process and sent out communication to individuals who were not selected to participate in this narrative inquiry study to explain the number of participants had been met. During the recruitment period, I began to schedule interviews with individuals who expressed interest in participating in the study. Interviews were scheduled at a mutually agreeable time, and a Zoom meeting link was sent to participants. The next section describes the interview process in more detail.

Instrumentation and Data Collection

I used a virtual, semistructured interview process to gather detailed stories from the five participants. Semistructured interviews were conducted using an interview guide or protocol (see Appendix D) to narrow the conversation while allowing for opportunities for participants to engage in further conversation (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018). Ravitch and Carl (2021) stated storytelling offers a path to understanding lived experiences. The five participants were contacted through email and scheduled for a 1-hour, semistructured interview to take place via the Zoom platform at a mutually agreeable date and time. Zoom is a video conferencing platform that can be used to conduct virtual interviews. Following confirmation of participant availability, a Zoom meeting link was sent to each participant with the date and time of the interview. On the day of the interview, I logged into Zoom 10 minutes before the interview start time to be present and available in the event the participant logged on early. The interview began with an introduction to the study, a review of the participant information sheet to secure verbal consent from the participant, and an opportunity for the participant to ask any questions. During the introduction, I gained consent from each participant to record the Zoom session, with the option of having their camera off. Recording directly through Zoom allowed for the creation of a digital transcript of the interview via the Zoom transcription feature. When the participant was ready, the interview commenced.

Zoom recordings were transcribed using the automatic transcription feature provided through Zoom, after which I reviewed the transcribed text and edited any errors. Finally, the transcripts were proofread purposefully to ensure accuracy and proper representation of the interview content. Restoried narratives were prepared from the transcripts of the semistructured

Zoom interviews and were shared with participants for member checking to ensure the information gathered was accurate.

Data Analysis

The narrative inquiry approach allows for fluidity in the analysis and presentation of the participants' lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Once the semistructured interviews were conducted and transcribed, I used the three-dimensional narrative process (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) to restory the interviews. This process included a focus on the interaction, continuity, and situation. The stories obtained were placed in chronological order, which allowed me to identify a beginning, middle, and end (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Restorying involves gathering information from participants, identifying key themes, and rewriting the stories while considering the context or setting of the participant (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The restoried narratives were deidentified using pseudonyms selected by participants during their interviews.

After restorying the interviews, the narratives were sent to each of the participants via email for member checking. Member checking allowed participants to ensure the information collected was valid and credible (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Participants were given 5 days to review the restoried narrative for accuracy and clarity. Restoried narratives were deemed accurate if no edits were received from participants within the 5-day period.

After member checking, the restoried narratives were reviewed to identify underlying themes. The narratives, along with the TIC framework and Mezirow's (2009) transformative learning theory, were used to create codes and themes that emphasized the connectivity of each participant's story. Narratives were manually coded and organized to group common sections together and present a collective story regarding the development of a trauma-informed school. The creation of the codes during the analysis of data was used to formulate broader thematic

categories. Creswell and Guetterman (2019) defined themes as being "similar codes aggregated together to form a major idea in the database" (p. 251). Themes, formed by several codes yielding one idea, were extrapolated after coding was completed (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I then used the ideas uncovered from the coding process to interpret the qualitative data obtained from participants' stories.

Limitations, Delimitations, and Ethical Issues

Scholarly research requires clear articulation of the limitations, delimitations, and ethical issues associated with a study. I identified the limitations of this study to be transparent about the weaknesses uncovered (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018). Identifying the delimitations of the study allows the researcher to share the scope of the study and why particular choices were made (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018). In addition, ethical considerations must also be addressed to protect participants from harm (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018).

Limitations

This research employed a qualitative approach using narrative inquiry research approach methodology. The use of a qualitative narrative research methodology created certain limitations for the study. The data collected in this study were confined to the stories shared by selected participants, as indicated by the nature of narrative inquiry (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). The scope of the data was dependent on participants' experiences, the specific questions posed during interviews, and my interviewing skills. It was essential to recognize the findings of this research may not be generalizable to a broader population. Additional limitations related to potential bias included the influence of my own experiences and beliefs on data collection, analysis, and interpretation of participants' narratives.

Delimitations

Delimitations allow the researcher to "define and clarify the conceptual boundaries" (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018, p. 165) of a study. Identifying delimitations allows the researcher to explain choices made regarding research components (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018). Delimitations of this study included the number of participants interviewed and the research setting—in this case, five public school leaders in the state of Maine who self-identified as educational leaders in a trauma-informed school. Bloomberg and Volpe (2018) noted a small number of participants may be appropriate in a qualitative study if descriptive stories are told and descriptions are detailed. Further, participant selection was also a delimitation in this study because participants were selected by the order in which they communicated interest to participate (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Finally, the last set of delimitations were the questions I asked participants and participants' lived experiences with trauma-informed schools and professional development.

Ethical Issues

To protect participants from harm, this qualitative narrative study necessitated an ethical perspective (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018). The UNE IRB reviewed the research proposal to ensure the research design protected participants from harm (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018). Qualitative research is fluid, such that ethical issues may arise at any point (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018). Bloomberg and Volpe (2018) described "issues of ethics focus on establishing safeguards that will protect the rights of participants and include informed consent, protecting participants from harm and ensuring confidentiality" (p. 161). All participation was voluntary, which allowed individual participants to determine if the risks were worth their participation (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018). *The Belmont Report* (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979) was signed into law to protect human subjects

from behavioral research and has three components: respect of person, beneficence, and justice. Participants received a participant information sheet (see Appendix C) that indicated how a participant's information would be deidentified. The IRB process plays a critical role in ensuring research involving human subjects adheres to ethical guidelines and safeguards the rights and well-being of participants.

Respect of Person

According to *The Belmont Report* (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979), all people should be treated as autonomous agents, and people with diminished autonomy should be protected. Participants in this research study engaged voluntarily and were provided a participant information sheet that described how their information would be protected. In addition, all information, inclusive of transcripts of the interview, recordings, and participant data, were kept on a password-protected personal computer accessible only to me. All information received were deidentified to protect participants' identities. Pseudonyms were used for participants, and a master list of participant names and pseudonyms were stored in a safe in my home office, which only I could access. The master list was destroyed after all restoried narratives were verified for accuracy. After data analysis of the interview recordings was complete, the recordings were deleted. Finally, the restoried transcripts will be destroyed 3 years following the publication of the dissertation.

Beneficence

In addition to respect of person, *The Belmont Report* (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979) also described beneficence as necessary for securing the well-being of participants. Participant risk was minimized by protecting their identity through the use of pseudonyms for their names.

Additional information such as school name, district name, and colleagues were also

deidentified, and data were stored on a password-protected personal computer. At any time

during the interview, participants could elect to skip a question and choose not to answer it. In

addition, participants could elect to have their camera turned off for the duration of the interview.

Justice

The final component noted in *The Belmont Report* (National Commission for the

Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979) focuses on justice

relating to who benefits or incurs burden from the research. Participants were protected because

their identities were protected. Each participant was treated equally during the research process.

All of the semistructured interviews followed the same interview protocol (see Appendix D).

Data obtained were restoried using the three-dimensional narrative process described by

Clandinin and Connelly (2000). Restoried narratives were sent to participants for member

checking to ensure accuracy. The narratives were then analyzed using the five steps to data

analysis by Creswell (2013). I adhered to IRB guidelines to protect participants and ensure their

confidentiality.

Trustworthiness

Standards for rigor in qualitative research include credibility, transferability,

dependability, and confirmability (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018). Credibility focuses on the ability

of a researcher to share participants' stories accurately (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018).

Transferability allows for other researchers to conduct a similar study in the future (Creswell &

Guetterman, 2019). Dependability in qualitative research "refers to whether one can track the

process and procedures used to collect and interpret the data" (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018, p.

163). Confirmability was accounted for by using member checking and sharing the restoried

narratives with participants to ensure the accuracy of participants' stories (Creswell &

Guetterman, 2019).

Credibility

Credibility is rooted in the researcher's ability to tell participants' stories in an accurate

way (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018). To obtain credibility, Creswell and Guetterman (2019)

suggested three strategies: triangulation, member checking, and external audit. Data collected

from the interviews were coded and resulted in emerging themes. Interpretation of these themes

allowed me to retell the participants' stories. To increase the credibility of the research, member

checking was used to ensure accuracy of the restorying. This process also limited my personal

bias by allowing participants to verify if the interpretation of their transcripts was what they

intended.

Transferability

Transferability allows for others to conduct a similar study in other contexts or

environments (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). In a qualitative study, transferability "refers to the

fit or match between the research context and other contexts as judged by the reader"

(Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018, p. 164). Creswell and Guetterman (2019) described transferability

as "establishing the context of a study, giving detailed descriptions of the procedures, and writing

findings in vivid detail supported with quotes" (p. 261). This qualitative study used narrative

inquiry and purposeful sampling to collect data from trauma-informed public school leaders in

the state of Maine. The study site was limited to the state of Maine, which potentially limited the

transferability of the findings; however, the methods used were relevant for transferability.

Dependability

Dependability in qualitative research "refers to whether one can track the process and procedures used to collect and interpret the data" (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018, p. 163), allowing other researchers to repeat the study (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). I needed to be transparent about data collection and analysis in this study (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018). The semistructured interviews were supported by the interview protocol and conducted through the Zoom platform to capture data and create a digital transcript. The processes used to obtain the qualitative data and present the analysis were clearly identified.

Confirmability

Confirmability refers to the concept of objectivity in which the "outcomes are the result of the research, rather than an outcome of the biases and subjectivity of the researcher" (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018, p. 177). In qualitative research, objectivity is more difficult to attain, yet researchers must show "how their data can be traced back to its origin" (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018, p. 177). In this study, I accounted for confirmability by using member checking and sharing restoried narratives with participants to ensure the accuracy of their stories (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019).

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Summary

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This qualitative narrative inquiry shared the stories of educational leaders and their perspectives on the development of trauma-informed schools in Maine. The study explored strategies, tools, and processes that could be shared with other educational leaders to help them create trauma-informed schools. Although current research has reflected agreement on how ACEs can impact adult health, there remains no clear definition of a trauma-informed school (CDC, 2021; Rossen, 2020). This study sought to fill the gap in the literature regarding

educational leaders' lived experience in the formation of a trauma-informed school. Due to the prevalence of ACEs and their impact, I sought to answer the following research questions: (a) how do trauma-informed school leaders describe necessary practices, programs, and procedures in supporting the cultivation of children' resilience to mitigate the impact of ACEs; and (b) how do trauma-informed school leaders make informed decisions about trauma-informed professional learning offered to expand staff understanding toward the implementation of a trauma-informed school?

This study relied on the TIC framework, which emphasizes the impact of traumatic experiences on individuals' well-being and the need for a comprehensive approach to healing (Harris & Fallot, 2001). In addition, Mezirow's (1991) transformative learning theory was incorporated for its focus on the critical reflection and examination of assumptions, beliefs, and perspectives necessary to facilitate personal growth and resilience. This qualitative research took place in the state of Maine, where participants were educational leaders working in a trauma-informed school. Purposeful sampling was used to select five participants who were trauma-informed educational leaders in Maine public schools. Semistructured interviews were conducted virtually using Zoom, which enabled me to record the audio and transcribe the interviews. Data were analyzed using coding and thematic analysis to identify patterns and themes.

Limitations of the study included the reliance on participants' stories and a lack of generalizability to a broader population. Delimitations included the small number of participants, the focus on trauma-informed educational leaders in Maine, and the questions I asked participants. Ethical considerations were addressed throughout the research process to ensure participant protection and trustworthiness. I upheld all aspects of ethics through the IRB process and followed the tenets of *The Belmont Report* (National Commission for the Protection of

Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). Data from this research may not

be generalizable. In Chapter 4, I outlined the data gathered and detailed the findings from the

data analysis, having upheld the ethics of the study and ensured its credibility, transferability,

and dependability.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

The purpose of this narrative inquiry was to explore how educational leaders perceive the development of a trauma-informed school. A trauma-informed school is an educational institution that acknowledges and comprehends the far-reaching effects of trauma on students, faculty, and the entire school community (NCTSN, 2018). Due to the prevalence of ACEs in the state of Maine, research has identified the need to develop trauma-informed schools (MDHHS, 2021; Offerman et al., 2022). Despite the availability of information regarding the development of trauma-informed schools, a gap in the literature has existed pertaining to educational leaders' perspectives on the implementation of trauma-informed schools. The research questions that guided this study were:

> **Research Question 1:** How do trauma-informed school leaders describe necessary practices, programs, and procedures to support the cultivation of students' resilience and mitigate the impact of ACEs?

> **Research Question 2:** How do trauma-informed school leaders make informed decisions about staff professional development to expand understanding toward the implementation of a trauma-informed school?

The research questions guided the development of semistructured interview questions to give voice to educational leaders who wanted to share their perspectives on the cultivation of a trauma-informed school. Researchers use narrative research to understand personal experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). In this study, a narrative inquiry allowed the five participants to share their experiences in the public education setting in Maine. Once interviews were completed, I used Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) three dimensions of narrative writing (i.e., time, place, and social interactions) to restory the interview transcript. Through the restorying

process, emergent themes among the participants were identified. In this study, the following three themes emerged from the participant narratives: (a) connections, (b) readiness for change, and (c) availability of time.

Analysis Method

Participant recruitment was open for 26 days, during which the recruitment flyer was sent a total of three times. Five participants responded by email indicating interest in being a part of the study. Response emails were sent to participants to schedule semistructured interviews, which were conducted over Zoom. Interviews were scheduled within a week of each participant responding. All interviews were recorded and transcribed using the Zoom transcription feature. The duration of each of the interviews was about 60 minutes, with the shortest interview lasting 52 minutes and the longest interview lasting 71 minutes.

Once interviews were transcribed, I organized interviews based on the following categories: (a) relationships, (b) professional development, (c) developing trauma-informed practices, (d) community partners, (e) barriers, (f) measuring success, and (g) future work. After the data were organized into these categories, I restoried into narratives using Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) three dimensions of narrative writing by including time, place, and social interactions. I wrote participants' information as a narrative that paraphrased the stories they told. I sent restoried narratives via email to participants and allowed them to review the narratives for accuracy and clarity. Each participant was given 5 days to member check their restoried narrative. One participant responded to the email but did not provide changes; four participants did not respond. As explained in the participant information sheet (see Appendix C), following 5 days without a response for changes, the five restoried narratives were considered

accurate. Data from the restoried narratives were then analyzed to identify themes and commonalities.

I carefully read the narratives with a focus on finding common ideas and themes. I color coded themes in the narrative as a way of organizing the information. Common ideas were color coded in each narrative, and patterns began to appear. Three themes emerged from the analysis of the data in the study: (a) connections, (b) readiness for change, and (c) availability of time.

Presentation of Findings

Interview data were organized based on relationships, professional development, developing trauma-informed practices, community partners, barriers, measuring success and future work. Once the data were organized, participants stories were written in narrative form using Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) three dimensions of writing. In each narrative, participants were able to describe their own experiences with the development of a trauma-informed school.

After the restoried narratives were completed, each narrative was coded to identify patterns. From these patterns, these themes emerged: (a) connections, (b) readiness to learn, and (c) availability of time. Each of the participants explained the need to build relationships with students and families, planning for continuous professional development, and the variation in trauma-informed practices. These themes were then explained in the context of the research questions and Mezirow's (1991) transformative learning theory. These themes showed there are commonalities in participants' experiences in the development of a trauma-informed school.

Narratives

Five participants who self-identified as being an educational leader in a trauma-informed school in Maine participated in semistructured interviews on Zoom to share their perspectives on

trauma-informed school development. After interviews were completed, transcribed and restoried, pseudonyms were assigned to further protect the participants identify. Participants had the opportunity to review the narratives for accuracy. Demographic information about these participants can be found in Table 3. Interviews were restoried using categories expressed by each participant: (a) the importance of relationships, (b) professional development, (c) developing trauma-informed practices, (d) community partners, (e) barriers, (f) measuring success, and (g) future work.

Table 3

Participant Demographic Information

Pseudonym	Age	Years in education	Maine Department of Education certification
Dan	41	18	Secondary English
Melanie	57	36	Superintendent
Karla	40	19	Principal
Autumn	49	27	Assistant Superintendent
Jillian	50	25	School Counselor, Assistant Principal, Licensed Clinical Professional Counselor

Participants expressed the need to develop strong connections with students and families. Further, participants indicated the need for formal and informal professional development to develop strong trauma-informed practices. In addition, participants expressed the need to identify community partners to support students. Participants also emphasized the importance of identifying barriers and finding ways to remove them. Participants shared the ways in which they are able to identify whether their trauma-informed work is meaningful for students. Finally, participants identified future work needed for the development of a trauma-informed school. The following section presents each of the study participants and their corresponding restoried narrative.

Dan

Dan was part of the leadership team from 2019–2023 at a public school in Maine where he had been hired by the school district to teach students necessary skills for overcoming adversity and building resilience. As a seasoned educator, he empathized with staff who were challenged with meeting the various needs of students sitting in front of them and of students who had yet to make it to class. His focus remained on the implementation of trauma-informed practices as school staff continued the journey toward being a trauma-informed school.

Each year, Dan and others who shared the same role in the district supported new staff through professional development on topics such as ACEs, brain science, mindfulness, anxiety, and various other trauma-informed topics that would be useful when interacting with students. Dan shared when staff members build connections with students, students, in turn, feel a sense of belonging and experience more success in school.

Dan stated, "5 years ago, this school building felt like a different place. Think about this, we were masked, 6 feet apart, after school sports and clubs were not running, we were all hurting." He also described a scenario in which a teacher stood in front of the classroom, spoke to 23 students with a raised voice and angry facial expressions, and lectured students on how they could or should have done better on their most recent assessment. The same teacher, for another 5 minutes, lectured students about how they did not prepare the night before and did not care about their own learning. By exhibiting anger toward the students, the teacher created a power struggle, which can result in two types of student responses: (a) students shut down and withdraw further from learning by doing something else (e.g., putting in ear buds, placing their hood on their head, or leaving the room for the bathroom); and (b) students become angry, dysregulated, and may even decide to leave the classroom. School staff needed to learn how to

best serve and connect with the students in front of them. Dan believed, "We can do better, we must do better." With this unwavering conviction of wanting to build resilience in all students, Dan recognized change cannot happen overnight and patience must prevail. His focus had been on relationships, professional development, and soliciting support from community partners who also shared the same mission: to support kids in overcoming adversity.

Relationships. Dan understood relationships between staff and students are instrumental in building a trauma-informed school. He described his school as a place where both students and staff were happy. Furthermore, the feeling of mutual respect between staff and students was evident in the way they talked with one another. When walking down the long hallway, lined with metal lockers, it was not uncommon to see staff greeting students by name and with a smile. Casual conversations occurring between school staff and students revolved around video games, a soccer game, a television program from last night, or any topic that could possibly interest students. Staff had worked to connect with students because a feeling of belonging can be cultivated through relationship building.

Dan mentioned there were numerous opportunities for building connections, such as the creation of an advisory program that allows staff to connect with their students for 4 years. He described, during the 4 years, being able to provide social–emotional learning (SEL) lessons to students. Opportunities to work directly with students aided Dan in creating an environment of inclusion and belonging for students and staff.

Professional Development. Dan shared trauma-informed professional development took place frequently in his school; however, he did not always use the language "trauma-informed." Dan indicated, "while we may not explicitly label these practices as 'trauma-informed,' they are essentially rooted in the same fundamental concept." Dan continued to share about the focus on

building relationships during the 2023–2024 school year. He described the need to present information on trauma in diverse formats and encouraged staff to reflect on how that information applies to their context. Dan also believed in empowering staff to make subtle adjustments in their interactions with students required learning about the impact of human connections.

Developing Trauma-Informed Practices. Though conducting professional development on trauma-informed practices might seem straightforward, it was not, according to Dan. Staff could gain knowledge on ACEs, trauma-informed practices, brain science, and anxiety, yet merely having the information was not the same as implementing what they had learned. Dan described how the transition to a trauma-informed school takes time and may be more of a journey rather than the destination. The journey begins when one staff member strives to implement various trauma-informed practices. When that staff member experiences success with students, colleagues take notice. Dan believed a powerful way to learn is by modeling, wherein one staff member is able to witness trauma-informed practices being implemented by another staff, which could potentially lead to an adjustment of practices for all staff.

Dan indicated professional development also needs to be consistent, relevant, and applicable. According to Dan, "teachers come from a lot of different angles;" therefore, it is necessary to offer a variety of professional development supported through various interactions in the school building. Dan described how topics such as anxiety, trauma, resilience, brain science, trauma-responsive teaching practices, and restorative justice have all helped to ensure "we are working toward being trauma-informed [responsive]." Dan mentioned a high level of staff support for each other, from curriculum coaching to supervisory roles. Dan shared, "We know that our students learn in different ways, we also need to provide learning opportunities for our staff that model those best practices for change to occur." He predicted, after a period of

time, staff and students would begin to embrace the changes that would later become the culture of the school. In Dan's view, as students began to treat each other differently in the hallway, they would become more comfortable and implement strategies that help mitigate life's challenges.

Dan believed change was a process requiring both time and patience. People learn at different rates and levels of comfort. Dan acknowledged educational trends (e.g., implementing trauma-informed practices), ebb and flow of educational initiatives, and more cynical teachers might perceive trauma-informed practices as a trend that would fade away in a couple of years. However, Dan did not believe that learning about trauma, brain science, and implementing trauma-informed practices was an educational trend. He described how to make lasting progress by remaining persistent, exhibiting kindness, serving as role models for desired behaviors, and offering diverse learning opportunities.

Community Partners. Dan expressed the need for a united community in supporting the success of students. He explained students who spend many hours each year within the physical walls of the school building could benefit from having similar support when they leave the safety of the school. As an example of support outside the confines of the school building, Dan identified how communities could bolster the success of students by actively engaging with a variety of stakeholders to explore ways of creating positive childhood experiences. Dan confirmed community events involving families could provide direct support and resources to parents.

Additionally, Dan acknowledged opportunities to collaborate with community organizations to deliver support to students with targeted challenges, such as housing insecurity, are of value for students' success. He shared how these community organizations have offered comprehensive case management services and valuable resources to families undergoing

challenging times. Dan added, school departments, often with the involvement of private agencies, have applied for grant funding to support these much-needed positions because the support of community partners is essential to helping students and their families.

Barriers. Regardless of the benefits of trauma-informed practices, Dan explained not all staff members are interested in learning about or implementing them. He elaborated further by articulating the variation of buy-in allows for various levels of support from coaches, counselors, or even the building administration to assist staff members with implementation. Dan confirmed individual, targeted support and omitting the nomenclature (e.g., trauma responsive, trauma informed, trauma-informed practices) can be beneficial to reach those staff members who are not fully dedicated to the implementation of trauma-informed practices.

Dan described lack of parent involvement as a barrier. For example, there had been evening events for families to share information on anxiety, how to be safe online, or how to raise a teenager, yet those events were not well attended. Dan suspected the lack of engagement could result from work obligations, lack of childcare, and a lack of understanding events were offered. In addition, Dan believed the school also struggled with proper outreach to families due to finances and/or project management. Historically, it seemed parents naturally disengaged from the schools as students got older.

In addition to the lack of parental involvement, some families experience adversity, and they do not accept assistance made available to them. Dan said, "Just because they [families] qualify for case management, it doesn't mean they will accept it or follow through with it." Dan continued, when families do not use the support available to them, it creates additional strain on the system. Dan described this barrier as one needing greater attention to ensure families understand how to access the support available to them.

Barriers were more visible particularly for students who were struggling. Dan described, "their struggle is tangible." Students either self-identify as needing support or are identified as needing additional support based on attendance, truancy rates, or other forms of data. Dan acknowledged students who seemed to be okay but were struggling are usually not the ones who self-identify as needing additional help. From Dan's experience, ACEs could impact everyone in unique ways.

Measuring Success. Dan observed, with the transition to a trauma-informed school, it was often unclear how to measure the success of practice implementation. He believed it was helpful to survey students and staff to learn more about general wellness and school culture. Dan acknowledged the data collected from the survey would naturally allow for conversations to begin. However, data by itself do not show the full picture. Using quantitative metrics could have provided additional information for consideration.

Dan discussed additional data points that could be used to measure success. For example, comparing the data between 2017 and 2022, there were fewer truant students and the graduation rate increased in 2022. Ultimately, Dan described a different measure of success as a feeling, not a quantitative data point. Dan stated, "School has become a place where people want to be." He confirmed students seemed happier to be in school than in years past; students appeared to be smiling more and so did the staff. He also observed there were more positive interactions between staff and students.

Future Work. Dan acknowledged the need for continued work as a school community in supporting students to cultivate resilience. He said, "This type of work does not end with a destination, rather, it continues to grow and become more robust." Dan suggested to his school about developing a strategic plan with actionable steps to guide the work and offer opportunities

for deep discussion on what matters. Dan asserted the school's commitment to trauma-informed practices should continue by introducing advanced training for specific lead teachers and department heads who would embed trauma-informed practices in their instruction. Dan believed these educators would model trauma-informed strategies and serve as invaluable resources for their colleagues who work closely with students on a daily basis. More importantly, Dan agreed embracing this ongoing journey toward trauma-informed practices would form an environment in which resilience could thrive and every student could succeed.

In summary, Dan as an educational leader, wanted to transition his school to being more trauma-informed, which would help students overcome adversities. Dan had focused on building relationships between staff and students, provided ongoing professional development for staff on topics related to trauma, and partnered with community organizations. There have been positive signs of success from his efforts, such as improved school climate and student attendance.

However, barriers still existed, such as lack of staff buy-in and limited parent involvement. Dan acknowledged becoming a trauma-informed school is an evolving, long-term process that required persistence. Further, he said his school aimed to further embed trauma-informed practices into instruction by training teacher leaders to support their colleagues through modeling. The ultimate goal is to create an environment in which all students could thrive.

Melanie

Melanie is a building principal at a school in Maine and had worked for the district for over 15 years. In her school, she was part of a strong leadership team committed to minimizing the disparities in opportunities for students. Her observations that her students struggled with poverty, were housing insecure, and faced academic challenges, strengthened her resolve to make a difference in their lives.

Melanie shared a trauma-informed school connects students on an emotional and academic level. At such trauma-informed schools, students feel a sense of belonging because families, staff, and communities are connected. Melanie described the entrance to the school and how students were immediately connected to the physical space by seeing walls adorned with pictures of themselves, friends, and their teachers. Halls were filled with the sounds of calming music, and each step into the building revealed a new quote or motivational saying etched into the walls. Melanie believed she had created a space where all who entered belonged.

Melanie explained the wisdom of an educational leader increases with years of experience in the field. Her career as an educator began as a third-grade teacher outside of Maine. As a third-grade teacher, she learned there were variations in opportunities given to kids simply by the books they were given to read. Students did not have the opportunity to collaborate in discussion about the books because students were reading different material, written for different reading levels. Having students read different stories made it difficult for her to establish a classroom culture of connectivity and relationships because students' materials were not aligned.

Melanie quickly transitioned out of the classroom into a formal leadership role. Her first principalship was in a Texas school of 850 prekindergarten through Grade 5 students. The majority of her students spoke a primary language other than English, and this environment helped Melanie learn to appreciate and navigate the challenges posed by cultural diversity. This unique experience equipped her to address the increasing cultural diversity in her community when she moved to Maine.

Melanie's next principalship was at an elementary school in Maine where she had to learn about the community, staff, and students. There were high levels of poverty, housing

insecure families, students struggling with achievement, and increasing diversity. Melanie knew she had the skills to make a difference. Her unique approach to leadership was profoundly influenced by her experiences as an educator. Melanie reflected on the transformations she had seen in the community and with parents and students. She recognized parents were always doing their best to support their children. It was evident there was a pressing need to address issues children were experiencing beyond the classroom.

What remained unchanged for Melanie was her unwavering commitment to making a difference in the lives of children. She believed every school leader's purpose should revolve around students' well-being, putting students' needs before anything else. However, Melanie was keenly aware the educational system had not changed much since her days as a student, even though the world had changed dramatically. She had an unshakable conviction schools would remain stagnant and provide the same results they always had if change did not occur. Melanie's journey was not just about her past experiences; it was a path illuminated by her commitment to fostering relationships, nurturing the community, and prioritizing the well-being of every child.

Relationships. Melanie was not just a principal; she could be considered a visionary. She believed in the power of unity and collaboration in the school building, and she had a vision of creating a trauma-informed school in which every person played an equal and essential role in meeting the needs of students. Melanie made her stance clear on the very first day of school. Standing before the entire staff, which included teachers, support staff, cafeteria workers, and custodians, she emphasized the importance of collective efforts. She made sure everyone knew staff appreciation included all who worked in the school.

Melanie led by example and worked alongside her staff. She scrubbed the floors with the custodians' scrubber, donned a hairnet to serve lunch alongside the cafeteria staff, and

enthusiastically took on every job considered trivial for an educational leader. She believed every job was important as all were equal members of the team. Melanie believed her school staff could work together, and the school would run smoothly, even if she was not there.

Though Melanie's message resonated with most staff, a few skeptics could not let go of their egos. Melanie pointed out there was a lack of unity among the staff. In a staff meeting, she commended the kitchen staff for their dedicated work in feeding students daily. Regrettably, some colleagues believed recognition should be reserved for those with degrees who are involved in teaching and support roles in the school. Melanie recognized the need for change and acknowledged it would not always be easy; there would be resistance from some along the way. Nevertheless, she was undeterred; she believed in moving forward despite the naysayers.

One day, Melanie led the school staff and students in celebrating Bus Driver Appreciation Day. Parents, students, and school staff lined up with signs and cheered for them as they dropped off each busload of children. Melanie smiled as she watched and knew she had played a part in creating this sense of community. Melanie was determined to continue her mission of building communities and nurturing relationships. In another example, Melanie instituted monthly assemblies to recognize the achievements and contributions of students and staff. It was her way of underlining the importance of hard work from all individuals in the school community.

Melanie enumerated examples of relationship building as she believed these relationships led to the success of her vision. Further, Melanie understood trust, communication, transparency, and support were building blocks for a trauma-informed school. Melanie admitted she worked hard to involve parents in the educational process and make them understand that, with their support, the school and parents could make a significant difference in the lives of the children.

Community events in which families were invited to participate became a regular occurrence in Melanie's school. During these events, Melanie and her staff provided clothing for those students in need and ensured no child lacked essential items for school. Every Friday, the school provided food for students who might otherwise go hungry over the weekend. Melanie's commitment was unwavering. When a child needed shoes, snow pants, or anything else, she made a trip to Wal-Mart to purchase the needed items. School supplies were also available and on hand for all students at any time. She had learned sometimes minor things made a difference in a child's life and positively impacted the family.

Melanie recounted her recent attendance at a school committee meeting during which one committee member questioned when the school would shift its focus from students' social–emotional well-being to academics. This dichotomy between social–emotional needs and academic success highlighted for her there was still work to be done. Melanie emphasized the importance of meeting students' basic needs first because effective learning could only occur when students were emotionally stable. If students were upset or lacked the tools to manage their emotions, they would struggle to absorb knowledge from their teachers. Melanie firmly believed this dichotomy should not be an "either–or" scenario. Instead, a school should be a place where students develop both resilience and academic skills simultaneously.

Professional Development. Melanie believed the transition to a trauma-informed school began with a book, *Help for Billy* by Heather Forbes. The book study allowed staff to learn the basics of trauma and trauma-informed practices, come together in a collaborative professional learning community, and have the opportunity to talk about the information they were reading. The book sparked interest, questions, and a staff desire to seek more professional development.

Melanie explained a pivotal movement in the development of a trauma-informed school. She brought a group of teachers to another school in rural Maine where trauma-informed practices were already established. The group of teachers observed how trauma-informed practices were implemented and understood how SEL was essential to help students learn. Following this experience, the team of teachers was ready to move forward with the implementation of these practices in their school.

Professional development continued for staff when Melanie's school introduced its first therapy dog to the school community. The impact of the dog as a gentle presence brought comfort and support to students to help them heal and thrive. School staff learned how to integrate the therapy dog into their day, and students could visit the dog as needed.

Melanie shared staff built a community of trust and understanding through the united work of creating a trauma-informed school. Staff members began asking to visit each other's classrooms to learn from one another. They were able to share best practices and further understand the various approaches taken to support students. As time went on, Melanie noticed the needs of staff continued to change, and professional development continued to be a dynamic and evolving process. She advocated professional development was not a one-time event; rather, it was an ongoing journey revisited throughout the school year in response to the needs of staff and students. Melanie stated ongoing professional development was a commitment to learning, growing, and adapting and ensured every staff member would continue to be a part of the change and driving force in creating a trauma-informed school.

Developing Trauma-Informed Practices. At Melanie's elementary school, staff had a powerful mission in mind: to foster resilience. They knew fostering resiliency in students was not a one-time task; it needed to be an ongoing journey, and trauma-informed practices must be

embedded in what staff do. Melanie described using books with students to share the message about kindness and empathy, a part of SEL. All school staff shared consistent messages about being kind and empathetic with their students. Melanie believed this message would help students as they continued to grow.

Melanie noted the importance of the school staff helping students to build resilience. Students have access to the internet, television, and video games, and many are exposed to content that may not be age appropriate at an early age. The school created a nurturing environment by establishing calming corners for students. A calming corner is a section of the classroom where students can self-select at any time to go to when they are feeling uneasy or escalated. Students return to the classroom experience when they are ready to participate with their classmates in the learning. In addition, the significance of morning meetings was not underestimated; these meetings were deemed an essential way to start the day on a positive note. Melanie would participate in a different morning meeting each day alongside teachers and students.

The respect and appreciation for teachers who contributed to the school's mission was evident in Melanie's reflection. She even shared her admiration for one particular teacher whose ability to connect with students and communicate with love and support went above and beyond expectations. This teacher was not just an educator; she was a mentor and role model who helped children navigate the challenges they faced.

Melanie shared ways to connect with families and bring them into the school. School staff introduced a unique initiative in which they fulfilled a student's wish. The size and significance of these wishes were inconsequential; however, staff recognized the importance of making dreams come true in the school environment. The desire to create positive memories and

demonstrate their dedication to building relationships with students was at the core of this initiative.

Community Partners. According to Melanie, the involvement of community partners was essential to providing for her students. One example of this involvement included generous donations from local businesses who rallied to supply essential materials students and teachers needed, such as school supplies and backpacks. Support from an insurance company, a car dealership, and a grocery store had given students the materials they need to succeed. In fact, the grocery store became a lifeline to fund various projects.

In addition, the school also had a store full of supplies from which students and families could shop. Store items ranged in price and offered a way to showcase school spirit. This store was available to the community, and all profits benefited the school and students. According to Melanie, it was not uncommon to deposit a check of $10,000 from store proceeds each year. She also mentioned additional opportunities existed to solicit financial support from the community; however, district personnel preferred school leadership not actively seek out these opportunities as they could not be relied on from year to year.

Barriers. The transition to build a trauma-informed school was a complex journey marked with many barriers. Melanie identified the first barrier to overcome was staff buy-in. She felt strongly the transition would only take place if the staff, as a collective group, believed they could do better to support the needs of students they see every day. Melanie shared staff were able to shift their perspectives and understand why a student was behaving a particular way. She confirmed staff learned developing trauma-informed practices was necessary through conversations and personal reflections. As a team, they developed an expectation of implementation, and, from there, staff decided to either stay or move on to other schools.

Melanie believed being consistent with expectations and support from others would equip staff to make better decisions.

Melanie explained creating a year-long plan was often futile as new initiatives constantly arose during the school year; thus, time emerged as one of the most significant barriers in the transition to building a trauma-informed school. Teachers at other schools may have 4 or 5 days before welcoming students into the building, a luxury that Melanie did not have at her school. Melanie stated:

> Instead of using the days before school to work on our goals, develop our why, and talk about how we can work to serve all students and offer professional development, my teachers are running from meeting to meeting trying to get their rooms ready for students.

Melanie felt additional time at the start of the school year could help to establish the tone for the year ahead, build trust among staff, and allow time to prepare for welcoming new students.

Melanie noted teachers' contracts were also a barrier to the work of building a trauma-informed school. A trauma-informed school needs to foster a strong family connection, which often takes place after school hours with events such as family bingo, speakers, or pumpkin painting. Teachers are bound by a contract that limits the time required to work after school. Melanie believed there needed to be additional flexibility added to the contract to allow for consistent family engagement opportunities. These events with families were critical in promoting a sense of belonging and unity in the school community, and Melanie believed they were crucial in creating a trauma-informed school. Opportunities to connect with families helped school staff understand each family's unique situation.

According to Melanie, school staff recognized building a trauma-informed school was challenging and barriers would continue to rise as time continued. However, as a staff, they were

committed to overcoming these challenges to provide a supportive and nurturing environment for their students. Through shared commitment, school staff hoped to create an atmosphere in which students could heal, grow, and succeed despite overwhelming adversity. Melanie said, "The barriers were natural, but the resolve to overcome them was stronger."

Measure Success. Melanie described the true success of a trauma-informed school extended beyond the traditional metrics of attendance and dysregulated children. She stated the focus should be on the well-being and happiness of students. She believed students' eagerness to come to school daily, enthusiasm for learning, and positive attitude were the fundamental indicators of success. Melanie shared the school's climate had changed dramatically over the years and noted differences regarding before and after the COVID-19 global pandemic. She mentioned the sense of belonging and trust among the school community could not be captured in any amount of qualitative data.

The youngest students also benefited from working in a trauma-informed school. Melanie shared their collective goal was to lay the foundation for a lifelong journey of personal growth and emotional resilience. Melanie believed this approach could make a significant impact in the school and community. She continued by sharing the ripple effect this impact would have on the broader community. She realized if school staff could instill resilience in their students, young learners would carry them forward and create a positive impact in their homes, among their friends, and, as they grew up, their workplaces and communities.

Future Work. Melanie found herself in a unique position in terms of the cultivation of a trauma-informed school. She stated, "We keep doing school the same way we did when I was in school and the world is not the same place, schools must change." Through unwavering support at the district level, coupled with her belief it was best for kids, Melanie created and sustained a

school that builds resilience in its students. However, Melanie also realized her school is the only one in the district that has made incredible gains in being a trauma-informed school. She contemplated the next school students transition to and wondered if the work in her school was enough for students to continue to access the trauma-informed practices they had learned. The process of establishing a trauma-informed school offered the opportunity to collaborate with colleagues and encourage them to understand the school's implementation of trauma-informed practices, which established the foundation for future educational leaders to build upon the progress at Melanie's school.

In addition to ensuring continued trauma-informed support throughout the district, Melanie also commented on the continued need to learn and grow as a staff. There was not one finish line or one goal the staff worked toward; instead, they were constantly learning about their current reality and believed in what they were building with their shared vision. Melanie shared, "The dedicated staff continued their willingness to adapt and grow." She emphasized future work would rely on staff mindset and unwavering commitment to supporting all students.

In summary, Melanie is a dedicated building principal with over 15 years of experience in Maine. She is on a mission to create a trauma-informed school that bridged emotional and academic needs of students. Her leadership centered on building relationships, involving the community, and prioritizing students' well-being. Despite barriers, Melanie and her team remained committed to creating a nurturing environment in which success was measured by student well-being and a positive school climate. Melanie's story was a testament to the power of an educational leader with a vision who was not content to stand still and, instead, actively works to create a brighter future for all.

Karla

Karla embarked on her teaching career in elementary education at a rural elementary school in Maine in 2003. Her excitement about being a teacher was palpable even though she never imagined herself teaching young students. After some time at the elementary school, she accepted a 1-year position at a high school, where she worked with students involved in a program focusing on career and college readiness. Even though her time at the high school was enjoyable, Karla realized her true passion resided with elementary students. Karla was able to return to elementary education, where she stayed and dedicated the next 11 years of her career as an educator.

Karla actively pursued excellence and had a drive to improve her practices and support her colleagues along the way. She actively sought leadership opportunities at the school. Throughout her journey, she pursued a master's degree in education with a focus on literacy. Her commitment to teaching students how to read motivated her to become the best teacher she could be. She became a team leader, participated in numerous committees, and strategically positioned herself to step into leadership roles in the future. As she progressed in her career, she started to question whether being a classroom teacher was her sole calling. Enrolling in more educational leadership classes, she continued to play an active role in various leadership initiatives.

Karla's path changed once again when she had the opportunity to step out of the classroom for part of the day and become an instructional coach. The role divided her time into part-time teacher and part-time instructional coach. Balancing these dual roles became a challenge and pushed her to contemplate her next move.

Karla realized maintaining two part-time jobs was not a sustainable, long-term solution, so she began exploring other opportunities in education administration. Her quest led her to a

position at an elementary school in an urban setting, where she assumed the position of assistant principal in a school where students from minority groups made up the majority of the student body. During her time there, she formed a dynamic partnership with the principal, and the two worked exceptionally well together. However, when her colleague decided to retire, she found herself at a crossroads and pondered her own career trajectory. With her colleague's retirement, she had to consider her future. She contemplated the possibility of becoming a principal and decided the opportune moment to make the transition was upon her. Consequently, she began applying for principal positions.

At the time of this study, Karla served as the principal of a rural elementary school where the demographics were not as culturally diverse as in her previous position. Though there were notable differences, there were many parallels in her journey. Her past work experiences continued to guide her as she navigated this new chapter in her career.

Relationships. Karla encouraged teachers in her building to do something that went beyond the usual realm of academics and grades. She asked teachers to make personal phone calls to the families of their students, not to discuss academic performance but simply to build connections. During these phone calls with families, Karla said teachers would express how they were looking forward to working with parents to support students as they embarked on the new school year. Initially, some families were taken aback by the personal connection, but many realized teachers exemplified genuine care for the students in their classrooms.

Professional Development. In pursuit of creating a trauma-informed school environment, professional development became a cornerstone of growth and understanding for Karla and her team. She described starting the journey of professional development toward trauma-informed practices with a book study group. During the book study group, Karla

explained to staff members about brain science and how to be culturally responsive in their teaching practices. They learned about the intricate relationship between teachers and students with diverse backgrounds. As the pages of the books turned during their book study groups, so did the gears of change in the school. Staff realized they needed to embark on a collective journey toward a trauma-informed approach to education.

Karla explained professional development included all staff, from teachers to educational technicians, nurses, and beyond. The framework for this transformation was inspired by the successful trauma-informed approach Karla had witnessed in another school district, where she had mastered the art of creating a supportive and understanding educational atmosphere. From the other school district, she learned how being trauma-informed was a fundamental part of the school's mission and reflected the school's commitment to providing a safe and nurturing environment for students.

Karla knew school leadership recognized the urgency of this task and had made it a primary goal on their agenda. She said school leadership wanted to equip every teacher and staff member with the tools to understand what students were bringing with them to school each day. This focus was an acknowledgment that students had experienced various forms of trauma in their young lives. These traumatic experiences manifested as challenging behaviors in school and created a unique set of hurdles that needed to be addressed.

Karla described the vehicle for this transformation was the gift of time. District officials designated Wednesdays as early release days for teams to gather and facilitate learning, growth, and connection among school staff. Each month, time was dedicated to exploring trauma and its impact on students. Smaller teams of school staff had the chance to convene, share their current challenges and achievements, and benefit from mutual learning opportunities.

According to Karla, professional development became a vital component of the school's culture. Professional development was no longer just another obligation but rather a shared commitment that ran deep in the hearts of all those involved. She confirmed staff understood the importance of the work involving trauma-informed practices. Staff had fully embraced the work and knew it would change the way they interacted with their students and, in turn, would change students' lives for the better.

Developing Trauma-Informed Practices. Karla believed she had a good understanding of what her staff needed in terms of continued learning. In their quest to develop trauma-informed practices, staff at the school recognized the pressing need for a comprehensive approach to understanding the social and emotional needs of their students. This journey was about more than just education; it was about nurturing the whole child, acknowledging the experiences they brought into the classroom, and providing necessary support.

While reflecting on the journey, Karla reminisced about how one staff member shared the shift toward trauma-informed practices had begun prior to her arrival to the school. This staff member could only piece together the past from the stories shared by their colleagues, which included tales of an educational system primarily focused on content and standards and often overlooking the emotional needs of students. There was a profound realization not all students were ready for the standard curriculum. Some students carried the weight of trauma, which manifested in their behavior. Recognizing these students' struggles, staff needed to adapt and provide scaffolding and specific strategies to help these students overcome their challenges. Karla described how the change in perspective marked a pivotal moment and highlighted the importance of understanding why some students were not immediately ready for learning.

According to Karla, professional development became the cornerstone of this transformation. Teachers engaged in book studies and personal research to better understand trauma-informed practices. They knew these practices were not just about managing classroom disruptions; they were about building relationships and trust with students. Students needed to know they were understood and supported, and this required time, effort, and learning from educators. The school implemented dedicated time for professional development, setting aside every Wednesday to delve into the world of trauma-informed practices. Through books, workshops, and discussions, staff deepened their understanding and commitment to this vital work.

Karla described how the physical transformation of the school was subtle but significant. Classrooms buzzed with activity as students engaged in small- and whole-group learning. Students who needed a moment to regulate their emotions had designated areas in the classroom to help them self-regulate. These "calming corners" became safe spaces where students could learn emotional regulation techniques. In these corners, students learned how to control their emotions under the guidance of an educational technician. The school did not differentiate these practices based on the severity of a student's trauma. Instead, strategies were universal and recognized all students, at one point or another, needed a safe space, a quiet moment, or tools for emotional regulation.

Karla conveyed these practices extended to all students, regardless of whether they appeared emotionally dysregulated or not. Understanding everyone brought something to school, staff ensured access to these resources was consistent and predictable. The emphasis for using these practices was on safety, predictability, and the commitment of adults to support students. One crucial aspect of these practices was not to demand compliance but to help students

understand the strategies available to them. Even students who seemed well-adjusted might carry their own traumas, which indicated offering support and understanding was paramount. Building trust and relationships with students was central to these practices. For students who struggled to trust adults due to past experiences, staff commitment to consistency and understanding played a pivotal role in helping them regain students' trust.

Karla shared implementing trauma-informed practices was a process requiring patience and devotion, in which staff had to adapt and embrace new ideas and practices to suit the ever-evolving needs of their students. Implementation of these practices required recognizing every student as unique, and trauma-informed practices needed to reflect this individuality. The journey was not without its challenges, but, ultimately, the school transformed into a place where students felt safe, understood, and ready to learn. The message was clear: every child mattered, and their emotional well-being was a priority. Resilience, patience, and unwavering dedication to students were hallmarks of the gradual but steady transformation.

Community Partners. Karla believed community partners played a role in shaping the school community. Collaborative relationships between organizations, businesses, and individuals were built on a shared commitment to improving the school experience for all students. They worked together to address a wide range of social, educational, economic, and health-related challenges.

Karla spoke about the wide community support she had experienced in her previous school from a variety of nonprofit organizations, local businesses, outside social workers, and parent volunteers. Her new role, however, had a variety of challenges and lacked strong community partnerships. The lack of community partnerships in her current school was further emphasized by the presence of new staff members, including the assistant principal, two social

workers, and the school counselor position which remained unfilled at the time of this study. Given the absence of key personnel in roles crucial for community outreach and collaboration, Karla was not able to share specific ways in which the school was engaging in the cultivation of strong community partnerships. The situation underscored the need for time and adjustment as new team members settled into their roles and worked to establish connections with the community.

Barriers. Karla identified several barriers stood in the way of achieving a trauma-informed school. One of the barriers was the deeply ingrained mindset among staff members about what they considered appropriate for teaching and expectations of a student's behavior. This mindset was a challenge characterized by the sentiment that, as staff, they held the authority to dictate actions and conduct of students in the classroom.

Karla shared a recent development that further compounded this challenge was the inclination of some adults to remove students from classrooms when they displayed behaviors that deviated from staff expectations. This approach created a significant problem because students perceived removal as a rejection. Karla described how students felt their presence was no longer wanted, which led to a profound erosion of trust in the staff and the school. This trust was critical for creating an environment in which students felt safe and supported.

Karla stated, "The dynamics of family structures and the needs of students have changed. The educational landscape had changed, and staff need to adapt their approach accordingly." Karla believed the behavior of dismissing students from the classroom was a personal belief of the staff. Some staff seemed to hold onto traditional teaching methods and discipline approaches that may have been more acceptable in the past.

Karla believed overcoming this barrier required not just professional development but a change in mindset and an openness to new approaches. This process required time, practice, and modeling to understand and appreciate alternative methods for supporting students. One critical aspect to overcoming this barrier was establishing a core group of individuals who believed in and championed the new trauma-informed practices, she referred to them as the pioneers.

She described these pioneers as "they truly believe in the new practices and how they can support students in a positive way." The pioneers are essential for demonstrating the success of trauma-informed approaches to their peers. When pioneers shared their experiences of working with challenging students and how they successfully used new strategies to support them, it served as a catalyst for change.

Karla described another barrier regarding the lack of family involvement and trying to increase their connection with the school community. Building connections with families was essential because it allowed parents to be part of the team and work together with the school to support students. Some staff members felt uncomfortable reaching out to families through a phone call. Karla believed offering a script for those staff members and offering to coach them through their initial phone calls may result in increased confidence when calling families. Apart from providing teachers with scripts and guidance on initiating conversations, the need to focus on establishing a positive connection with parents rather than addressing disciplinary issues is also impactful. Furthermore, the offer to participate in more conversations with families provide additional support to help teachers feel more at ease with the parents.

The final barrier Karla highlighted was the recruitment and retention of staff members. According to Karla, the demands and stress staff face often discourage potential candidates from

entering the profession. Alternative career paths offer similar compensation but with less stress. Therefore, attracting and retaining dedicated professionals proves to be an ongoing challenge.

The barriers identified by Karla reflected the complexities of transforming a school environment into a trauma-informed one. Karla acknowledged the work to overcome these barriers must remain a focus of the school staff. This transformation was a process requiring new practices and approaches, a fundamental shift in mindset, and a commitment to building trust and support for both students and educators.

Measuring Success. Karla believed measuring the success of transforming a conventional school into a trauma-informed school is a complex undertaking. Traditional metrics such as attendance records, incidents of dysregulated behavior, and test scores offered data points, but they only scratched the surface of the broader, transformative movement. The true measure of success in this endeavor was elusive because it extended far beyond mere statistics.

Karla recognized success goes beyond quantitative data. School staff needed to acknowledge their vital role in this ongoing mission. She said, to be an educator, one had to be a particular type of person who was intrinsically motivated to pursue a career in teaching. This internal drive was an essential prerequisite and something that could not be imposed externally.

She added genuine teachers are those individuals who possess an unwavering passion for the art of teaching and are willing to go above and beyond their duties because they understand their efforts directly benefit students. Karla said once these educators were welcomed into the school, discussions about innovative curricula, novel interventions, and transformative educational approaches became possible. These educators were inherently more open to experimentation and change and more aware of the potential impact of their endeavors on the students they served.

In her many years of education, Karla learned one crucial lesson: change could be exceptionally challenging for many individuals. Her realization became apparent when the school underwent a transition in leadership; her experience provided a firsthand glimpse into the difficulties people face when confronted with change. Although the change may have appeared promising and led to positive outcomes, it also elicited apprehension and resistance from the staff.

Karla shared the key to fostering success in a trauma-informed school was to cultivate a staff of dedicated individuals who recognized the potential for positive change. She further explained change require an environment where experimentation was encouraged, even if it occasionally resulted in setbacks. A common objective of assisting students and the larger community drove the collective effort to embrace change and venture into uncharted territory.

Karla believed in successful creation of a trauma-informed school that transcended metrics. Success revolved around dedication, transparency, and collective commitment of school staff to drive change, ultimately improving the well-being of students under their care. She noted the true measure of success is a journey of constant pursuit of improvement, and a belief in the potential for transformative change.

Future Work. Karla believed the focus on transitioning to a trauma-informed school occurred only at the school level, and it had not extended to other schools in her district at the time of the study. Her goal for the immediate future was to continue implementing these practices in the school environment and ensure more staff understood the science behind trauma-informed practices and the important role they play in the creation of a trauma-informed school. Karla shared a significant cohort of school staff recognized the necessity of SEL for students and had intentionally implemented SEL practices in their daily lessons. Sharing their experiences and

successes with district leadership could potentially pave the way for broader adoption in the future.

Karla stated the focus going forward must be on increasing family engagement and communication. The process of improving engagement and communication begins with supporting all staff in establishing connections with families through phone calls and postcards. Karla shared the importance of the extension into the community beginning with the families, "the school can only do so much and partnerships with the home are extremely important." She believed working with families would allow students to sustain their resilience, a concept they learned in school.

Karla shared the work towards trauma-informed practices is extremely challenging and complex for many reasons. The building leader must remain steadfast; progress may appear slow and messy, but results will manifest over time. Staff in the school building have the power to create a trauma-informed school and improve the well-being and happiness of students. She further added staff can control the support provided, tools offered, and unwavering consistency as stabilizing influences in the lives of students.

In summary, Karla, an elementary school principal, believed transforming a school into a trauma-informed environment is a complex, ongoing process requiring dedication from staff. The focus was on providing professional development to build staff capacity in trauma-informed practices. Implementing these practices involved subtle but impactful changes like the creation of calming corners in classrooms. Overcoming barriers, such as ingrained mindsets of staff and involving families, remain challenges that need to be continuously addressed.

Karla shared quantitative metrics do not fully capture success; rather, success is defined by the passion and commitment of staff in providing support to students. The work toward

trauma-informed practices continues by sharing successes with district leadership and increasing family engagement. Karla confirmed, with unwavering consistency of trauma-informed practices by the staff, the school could create an environment where students feel safe, understood, and ready to learn.

Autumn

Autumn, fresh from completing college, began her educational career as a Title I educational assistant at a small school in rural Maine. She secured this job a few days before the school year began. It was a time of uncertainty for her; she did not think she was ready to take on the role of a teacher. She followed a push-in model, as over half of the students were identified as being in Title I. It wasn't too long before a classroom teaching position opened up because the teacher she was supporting was moving to a different district. Suddenly, she found herself stepping into her very first teaching position in the first grade.

Over the next 9 years, Autumn dedicated herself to shaping young minds, and she felt she needed to further her own education to meet the needs of the students in front of her. She made the decision to return to school and earned a literacy specialist certificate. Armed with this new knowledge and professional accomplishment, Autumn felt better equipped to teach her students how to read.

During the first 9 years as a teacher, Autumn's primary focus remained on first and second grade students. However, after earning the literacy specialist certificate, she began yearning for more professional learning and began coursework for her administrative certificate. She wanted to deepen her understanding of curriculum, instruction, and assessment with a concentration on response to intervention.

Autumn found herself immersed in the coursework and discovered a true passion for educational leadership. She eventually transitioned from the classroom to being a literacy coach and supported teachers in creating appropriate response to intervention plans for students. Autumn often reflected on her role in education and assessed her own impact on the lives of the students she taught.

Noting that she was limited in her current role, Autumn devised a plan to study the effectiveness of coaching in the districts. After a year of data collection, Autumn shared her findings with the school community. As a direct result from Autumn's research, the school district hired additional coaches the following year.

For the next 6 years, Autumn continued as a literacy coach and thoroughly enjoyed her time with students until the opportunity presented itself for her to step into a building administrator role at a small elementary school in Maine. This transition began another sequence of events that led her to the position she held at the time of this study. As Autumn reflected on her journey from an educational technician to becoming a building principal, it was evident she was offered significant learning opportunities along the way.

Autumn was faced with the task of supporting various initiatives in her new position. However, the task of creating a trauma-informed school was never shared with explicit instructions. She was passionate about her role as an educational leader and doing what was necessary to support all students who entered her school. The power of her own journey opened Autumn's eyes to the possibilities of a more compassionate and resilient educational environment.

Relationships. Autumn stated, "They [staff] didn't just teach math and reading, their chosen profession is so much more than that." In the heart of a bustling elementary school, she

described the magic of relationships unfolding—a quiet, yet powerful, force that shaped the lives of students and teachers alike. The school was a place where educators understood the significance of connecting with students on a deeper level. Building those relationships was the foundation upon which everything else stood. Teachers on the front lines knew getting to know their students was the key to identifying when a child was going through a tough time.

Autumn reflected on the importance of the school's instructional coach who played a vital role in the process of building relationships. The instructional coach shared various activities with staff to be used as a morning greeting, a moment that set the tone for the day. According to Autumn, some staff adopted this practice right away whereas other staff members were more hesitant. However, Autumn believed during the 2023–2024 school year, something special happened as morning greetings were not an optional practice; they became a tradition for everyone.

On the opening day of the school year, the instructional coach made greeting cards available to all staff. These greeting cards, placed outside each teacher's door, became a colorful menu of connections. Students had the opportunity to choose how they wanted to greet their teachers each morning, and the effect was remarkable. Autumn excitedly described the experience:

> It was like a buffet of emotions: a fist bump for an enthusiastic start, a smile for a warm connection, a high-five for an energetic welcome, a hug for comfort, or even a silly dance for a touch of whimsy.

Over half of the school teachers embraced this practice, and it became a cherished part of their daily routine. Autumn admitted the overall impact on the school environment was profound and heartwarming for everyone.

Autumn also shared a story of a teacher who spent quite a bit of time on the morning meeting; the teacher's daily practice was to greet students outside of her classroom and individually engage her students in meaningful conversations. Sometimes these teacher–student interactions extended over 20 seconds. As an observer, Autumn marveled at this particular teacher's patience and dedication.

In addition, students waiting in line displayed an admirable level of patience to take their turn and be welcomed to class by their teacher. The teacher's attentiveness stood out through daily special acknowledgement, questions, or comments to each student. Although these teacher–student interactions were not perfunctory, they were deeply personal.

It became evident that Autumn's relationships with students were akin to those of a homeroom teacher. Autumn shared a daily ritual with students, a morning meeting where they talked about their weekends, shared stories, and connected on a personal level. In these moments, the genuine care for each student became abundantly clear.

In Autumn's school, morning meetings were not exclusive to younger grades; even fifth-grade students participated with their teachers, although in a shorter format. Students shared, engaged in activities, and greeted each other every day. These daily rituals, however brief, revealed much about the students and offered a glimpse into their lives as people. Autumn believed these interactions, even as students and staff passed each other in the hallways, continued to strengthen relationships. Relationships were the cornerstone of trauma-informed schools, and, through morning greetings, daily meetings, and genuine care, teachers understood the profound impact they had on their students' lives.

Professional Development. Autumn described the movement of staff toward the transformation to a trauma-informed school as a staff-led process. She said the staff created a

movement that began with a few teachers and grew to include more staff members. It was a journey that required dedication, collaboration, and a deep commitment to professional development.

The school's mission was clear: to create a trauma-informed environment where every student felt safe and supported. The journey began with monthly check-ins during professional learning communities (PLCs) and staff meetings. However, the journey was not always this structured.

At the outset, Autumn met regularly with staff who were ready for this work and revisited their vision and professional development plans. Together, Autumn and staff members who were ready to create a trauma-informed environment brainstormed strategies to best help school personnel understand why implementing trauma-informed practices was best for all students. The ever-present needs of students shaped the approach by staff as they advanced in the process, which included improvisation and adapting to unique challenges and opportunities.

Autumn described a pivotal year in the transition toward trauma-informed practices included greater intentionality and a well-defined purpose. She confirmed staff embraced a new chapter with an opportunity for growth and transformation. The school year commenced with a clear understanding of the expectations delivered by Autumn and the team of support staff who were working to bring the vision to life. The message shared by Autumn and support staff was a collaborative approach to ensure all students were supported could not be done in isolation. The team, led by Autumn, conveyed the importance of the first 4–6 weeks of school; this time period was devoted to building a positive culture and climate in the classrooms and setting the stage for the trauma-informed approach.

Autumn described the trauma-informed approach as being unique. She added, "It was a testament to the collective effort to make a positive impact in the lives of the students they cared for deeply." The staff buy-in to professional development offerings was optional at first and allowed some staff members to be pioneers of trauma-informed practices in their respective classrooms.

As time went on, the offerings for professional development continued, and more staff members became interested and wanted to learn how to integrate trauma-informed practices in their daily routines. She expressed professional learning about responsive classroom techniques, which include trauma-informed practices, was a choice willingly embraced by staff who were ready to receive the new learning. Autumn believed the school's dedication to creating a trauma-informed environment was not just a goal; it was a journey that unfolded through regular check-ins, collaboration, and a purposeful start to the school year.

Developing Trauma-Informed Practices. Autumn confirmed staff and district administration were deeply committed to cultivating trauma-informed practices and recognized the critical importance of those practices in shaping the lives of students they nurture. The passion for this endeavor was not confined to the school walls alone. Even the superintendents shared a dedication to this cause and engaged in numerous conversations that underscored the significance of the school's mission of becoming trauma-informed.

A pivotal moment occurred when Autumn was introduced to an expert in the field of trauma-informed practices. The insights and resources the expert shared had a profound impact on Autumn and her school staff. The Maine Department of Education also played a significant role in the development of a trauma-informed school by offering a wealth of resources, particularly as the world emerged from the COVID-19 global pandemic. Staff had access to tools

to help them address the unique challenges students faced during their time away from in-person education.

According to Autumn, the reentry to full-time, in-person learning was a turning point in the development of a trauma-informed school. It was a time when Autumn, along with the school staff, realized the necessity of prioritizing relationships with students. She confirmed the effects of the COVID-19 global pandemic had left many students lacking social skills due to remote or hybrid learning periods as students did not have the opportunity to practice and develop essential social interactions.

The journey into trauma-informed practices became a personal interest for Autumn, who took the initiative to delve further into the field. One summer after the COVID-19 global pandemic, Autumn and her team enrolled in a three-part online comprehensive course which introduced them to trauma-informed practices and provided practical skills and strategies. Autumn said it was not a typical online class; instead, it was a dynamic, engaging environment that challenged participants to think and grow.

She admitted the course was a different approach to teaching and learning. Autumn found the experience refreshing and invigorating and shared, "The course pushed the boundaries of traditional education, leading to fresh perspectives and deep reflection on the current reality of our students' needs." The transformative experience from the course inspired Autumn to bring the innovative teaching methods she learned to the school.

As the school year commenced, a remarkable activity unfolded on opening day. Autumn introduced teachers to a series of activities designed to build trust and strengthen relationships with students. The purpose of these activities was to understand how to communicate with different types of students.

Staff were asked to reflect on the language they used with their exemplary students (i.e., those who consistently met expectations) by sharing phrases, words, and tones they used to motivate and encourage these students. Staff were then asked to turn their attention to the students who posed more significant challenges and were encouraged to consider the words and phrases they used when addressing these students. Autumn shared this activity was about self-awareness, recognition of how language might affect students, and how staff could change their approach to provide better support.

Autumn offered a glimpse into the complex web of supporting students with behavioral or emotional needs and students who were quietly struggling. The challenge was finding methods to identify students with behavioral or emotional needs and create conditions that fostered their development. Furthermore, Autumn made the case for implementing trauma-informed practices for all students because it was not always evident which students are struggling.

Autumn shared her belief all students could benefit from such practices, not just those who presented obvious challenges. This belief drove her contemplation about how to create a system that ensured every student had a staff who knew something special about them. Autumn believed the creation of a trauma-informed school was an opportunity for teachers to make deeper connections with students who might not immediately exhibit signs of distress or challenges.

Further support was given to teachers with responsive classroom training, which reinforced the importance of relationships, community, and safe learning environments. "This work," Autumn stated, "was about recognizing the diversity of students' needs and nurturing their resilience and well-being." The school had already invested in responsive classroom

professional development and made various levels of training available. Many staff members had undergone extensive training in trauma-informed practices, and the aim was to integrate these practices into the trauma-informed approach.

Autumn characterized the journey toward the implementation of trauma-informed practices as a strong commitment to and a profound understanding of the need to prioritize relationships, resilience, and emotional well-being in education. She said this journey took time, and the results were not immediate. She noted the school was evolving, not just in its approach to teaching but in its dedication to creating a safe, nurturing space for all students, regardless of their individual challenges or strengths.

Community Partners. Autumn described a network of support led by a team of dedicated professionals and fueled by a common goal: to provide unwavering support for every student in their care. The team was comprised of the school's two counselors, a compassionate social worker who specialized in special education, an invaluable board-certified behavior analyst (BCBA), and the school nurse. Guided by the school's leaders, the team's mission was clear: to ensure every student received the comprehensive and personalized support they needed.

In weekly meetings, the team assessed students' emotional and academic well-being. However, it was the post-check-in agenda that continued their important work. Together, the team maintained a shared list of students in need of special attention and support. Students on the list often faced a variety of challenges, whether academic, emotional, or familial. The team was able to identify these students and collaborate on how to best support them. They were, in essence, a family of educators and specialists who recognized they were responsible for students' education and their overall well-being.

The collaboration did not end after identifying students in need. Autumn indicated the team actively searched for resources and partnerships in the community to provide wraparound support; in her own words, "it takes a village." Autumn and her team understood the well-being of students was deeply intertwined with the community and services available for them.

Autumn described a recent meeting, during which a team member shared an invaluable online website with an exhaustive list of resources available throughout the state of Maine. She said this website provided a comprehensive guide for families and students, and it listed an extensive range of available support and services. The resources provided from the website were not limited to the confines of the school but extended to the broader community to address the myriad challenges students might face outside of the classroom. Autumn believed this website was a lifeline for parents and caregivers who often found themselves not knowing what to do or how to respond to their unique situations.

The dedication of Autumn's staff was unwavering, and their efforts were a testament to the deep bonds they had formed in service of the students for whom they cared. Each week, they gathered to share their collective wisdom, find solutions, and forge partnerships with the community. For Autumn, this close-knit community was a reminder no student's needs would ever go unmet, and no challenge would go unanswered. In their hands, every student found hope and the promise of a brighter future.

Barriers. Autumn found herself at the center of a challenge that weighed heavily on her heart and her mission. The barrier she faced was a prevailing skepticism. There were staff who believed the work of implementing trauma-informed practices was just another addition to an already long list of responsibilities. The challenge presented was to change the perspective of

these individuals to see this type of work as an integral part of a comprehensive teaching approach.

Autumn knew this perspective was more than a single concept; it encompassed her entire philosophy of teaching. Implementing trauma-informed practices was about fostering a learning environment in which students felt valued, heard, and safe. As she looked back, Autumn wished she had known the school's culture better before taking on this initiative. If she had understood what was to come and the relationship she would forge with her superintendent, she might have chosen a more effective approach.

As time moved forward, she embraced the idea of implementing trauma-informed practices. Her enthusiasm and support had influenced the adoption of trauma-informed practices, which led to their implementation. She was still aware of the prevailing negative mindset of select individuals, some of whom were the most wonderful teachers. Their skepticism stemmed from the belief they were already doing similar things for their students. The real challenge, Autumn believed, was to alter the perception of trauma-informed practices as a supplementary activity to a fundamental shift in teaching. Autumn could not help but ponder the negativity she encountered from educators who questioned how much work they needed to do for their students. She believed education had evolved over the years, and the role of teachers had transformed. Autumn acknowledged teachers were not just instructors; they were caregivers, mentors, and champions of their students' overall well-being.

Though there were barriers to overcome, Autumn knew most educators understood the importance of their evolving roles. Time, patience, and unwavering commitment would eventually lead to a shift in mindset. Autumn's perspective was filled with hope and determination. She knew, despite the existing challenges, they were all working toward a shared

goal: creating a school environment where every student felt valued, heard, and nurtured, both academically and emotionally.

Measuring Success. Autumn often found herself reflecting on the concept of measuring success in her role as a school principal. She understood not every student responded to initiatives in the same way, which made it challenging to assess the impact of trauma-informed practices objectively. She contemplated the idea of collecting data to gauge the effectiveness of their efforts, including the use of informal surveys or online surveys like Google Forms to gain insights on how students perceived changes. Unfortunately, quantitative data gathering had not been initiated at the time of this study.

Nevertheless, Autumn could not deny the palpable feeling of safety, happiness, and contentment that seemed to envelop the school. From her observations, parents, students, and the community felt secure in the school's nurturing environment. Most students cherished their time at school, and their joy was evident. Though Autumn acknowledged not every student might share the same sentiment, the prevailing atmosphere was one of happiness and contentment at school. When she compared the school to her previous experiences in three different districts, Autumn felt her school was a unique and exceptionally cheerful place. She described her school as a haven of warmth and happiness, both for staff and students.

Autumn recognized the importance of anecdotal evidence and understood quantifying the impact of their work was not always possible due to the nature of becoming trauma-informed. During her time at the school, she witnessed significant changes, especially given the challenges they faced during the COVID-19 global pandemic. The school evolved following a year of hybrid learning, and the resilience of staff and their growing capacity to embrace trauma-informed practices were evident. Autumn was acutely aware of the transformation that had taken

place in the school's culture; it was a testament to staff dedication and the positive impact of their trauma-informed approach. Though hard, quantitative data remained elusive, the profound changes she witnessed in the school environment and the responses of students based on her observations were invaluable indicators of their success.

Future Work. Autumn found herself contemplating her approach to the important work that had unfolded over the years. The task at hand was no small feat, and she had started with a different perspective regarding how to share her inspiration and motivation with staff. Ultimately, Autumn chose to create her own path, one that was uniquely hers. She understood the development of a trauma-informed school as not just about a single concept or initiative; it was about transforming the approach to teaching and learning.

To achieve a trauma-informed school, Autumn had to be strategic in her planning. She recognized numerous responsibilities would vie for staff time and attention throughout the school year. Her passion-driven work could easily be overshadowed by state testing results, census bureau surveys, and other obligations.

A challenge she recognized for staff learning was the demand of their roles as educators. Staff were easily pulled in different directions with limited time to devote to professional development. It was critical to make space for this work and provide staff with opportunities to engage, even if it meant revisiting the topic of trauma-informed practices more frequently. Conversations with her staff also prompted her to consider the nomenclature of trauma-informed practices. She understood the education field often experienced trends that came and went. It was essential to overcome the skepticism that the concept might be just a passing phase.

Autumn shared her thoughts on how educators must focus on the actions and essence of the work rather than the specific terms used. The core goals were to create a nurturing

environment, prioritize the happiness of the students, develop their social skills, and foster meaningful relationships. Although the terminology might evolve, the essence of the work would remain unchanged.

Autumn acknowledged working in an elementary school had its advantages. She explained elementary school teachers naturally understand the importance of relationships, compassion, and creating welcoming classroom environments. Although skepticism might be more prevalent in middle or high schools, the essence of the work encompassing trauma-informed practices remained consistent. In the end, Autumn contemplated the message to her staff—the one word she wished to instill in them when interacting with all students. She ultimately settled on "resilient" because, in her view, it encapsulated the most important message she wanted to convey: every student should have the skills to be resilient.

In summary, Autumn described herself as an educator passionate about implementing trauma-informed practices in her school, and her focus is on relationships. Autumn explained how her staff embraced optional professional development on responsive classroom techniques that aligned with trauma-informed approaches. She detailed the collaborative efforts between administration, counselors, and specialists to support students facing challenges.

Despite acknowledging skepticism as a barrier, Autumn remained dedicated to creating a nurturing environment where all students felt valued. She reflected on how to sustain this work amid other obligations and conveyed her core message of helping students become more resilient to overcome adversity in life. Overall, Autumn was committed to transforming her school to prioritize student well-being through trauma-informed practices.

Jillian

Jillian, an educational leader with 9 years of experience in a public school in Maine, brought a unique perspective to her work. Her graduate education, which included a trauma-informed lens specific to the program she had been accepted into, prepared her for the hands-on and collaborative nature of her profession. By engaging in deep group discussions with classmates and her professors, she learned to uncover personal triggers of emotion, understand the impact of trauma, and apply trauma-informed practices when interacting with students, particularly those who may be dysregulated.

Before her career in public education, Jillian delved deeper into the clinical realm, after witnessing the profound effects of trauma on students. Her daily work involved not only helping students heal but also nurturing their resilience. This experience provided her with a historical perspective on working with students from diverse backgrounds and life experiences. Through home visits, she gained a unique perspective on the reality of the environment students lived in, often discovering unmet basic needs such as access to adequate food or the financial stability of the family. These insights underscored the crucial importance of fostering connections and support for these students.

Jillian's extensive background in trauma-informed education equipped her to work effectively with students and allowed her to share her knowledge with staff. She brought her perspective and expertise to her current school in Maine where trauma-informed conversations began. Jillian shared the importance of frequent conversations with colleagues to begin planting the seed of change.

Additionally, Jillian reflected on her use of every opportunity to share what she knew about trauma-informed education with her colleagues. She presented short videos on student

behavior with a structured discussion open to all staff at the very beginning of the work to become a trauma-informed school. Finding staff who were eager to learn about trauma-informed practices out of curiosity rather than obligation allowed for a slow but authentic approach to the transformation. Her holistic approach of using multiple modalities for professional development, coupled with in-depth conversations, reflected a deep understanding of the multifaceted challenges students face and the importance of addressing students who have been impacted by trauma through collaboration and support.

Relationships. Jillian believed relationships were the pillars of a trauma-informed school and stated, "when relationships are first, everything else falls together." If the foundation was strong with supportive relationships, the school would transform into a trauma-informed school. Thus, relationships became the foundation for all aspects of the work toward a trauma-informed school, from managing academic expectations for students and families in the school setting to fostering strong connections among staff and students.

Jillian recognized her students all had various perspectives and experiences requiring individualized approaches to meeting their needs. She affirmed the acceptability of learning who students are on a personal level and sharing challenges students faced outside of the classroom if they were willing to share. Jillian and her staff were able to listen, understand, and offer support without the presumption of fixing everything for the students; rather, the goal was to provide a framework to help students move forward in a way that allowed the cultivation of resilience. Over time, Jillian shared the staff became more adept at inquiring about the well-being of students by engaging in conversations with other classroom teachers, transportation staff, cafeteria staff, and even building administrative assistants. The collaborative efforts of staff allowed individual student needs to be met with a greater level of consistency.

Professional Development. Jillian described a needed focus on professional development to support school staff in learning about trauma. She believed the timing of professional development had to align with staff readiness to receive information and learn. Jillian described a series of structured, professional development opportunities available to all staff. Topics included SEL exploration, brain science, student experiences and how they impact students' days, and, finally, self-care for staff to better serve students.

She added school staff collaborated to participate in extensive training on trauma sensitivity and explored the distinctions between trauma-sensitive approaches and a deeper awareness of the impact of trauma. The focus of these trainings was to identify the essential elements needed to truly embody a trauma-informed perspective. Opportunities for professional development required constant scrutiny and adaptation to ensure staff followed through on their commitment to be a trauma-informed school.

Jillian explained learning progressed and the use of a common language happened organically among staff. During PLCs, teachers were encouraged to focus on students' strengths and challenges to develop a comprehensive understanding of each student, which allowed for the generation of possible solutions, sustained connections with students and families, and ensured students did not fall through the cracks. Jillian shared the collaborative spirit of the staff was the cornerstone of their efforts to provide a supportive and nurturing educational environments for all the students.

Jillian affirmed collaboration is essential in the journey toward becoming a trauma-informed school. Working closely with colleagues and drawing from various individuals' expertise, she planned and implemented additional professional development. Over time, Jillian and her staff continued to adapt and evolve with the ever-changing needs of staff.

Further, she commented on the support from administrators who continued to provide space for this work, and incorporated the practice during monthly professional development including daily practice throughout the building. She said "The daily routines established became part of the transformation into a trauma-informed school." She continued, "Opportunities for continued conversations and further discussion of new knowledge allowed for progress to be sustained." The school provided opportunities to share information with staff to continue engaging them in the work and transfer new learning to their interactions with students.

Developing Trauma-Informed Practices. Jillian knew trauma-informed practices could not be developed in afterschool professional development alone. She explained there were times when staff members attended meetings but were not quite ready to fully engage with the learning process. In these moments, the approach shifted to meeting staff where they were and modeling how to effectively interact with students.

Jillian shared her staff was a diverse group of unique individuals with their own distinctive ways of absorbing information, as each person had a preferred learning style. When staff encountered challenging students, the true impact of their collective efforts became apparent. These moments marked a year of ongoing conversations and often turned out to be the most significant part of their collaborative work.

Through casual conversations, staff members would candidly express their struggles with meeting the needs of their students. Jillian, too, would share openly about her emotional triggers and acknowledged her own vulnerabilities. Jillian shared some teachers admitted a particular situation was difficult for them and talked about their own perspectives. Teachers discussed what was needed and how they could adapt to ensure students were at the center of the conversation.

Jillian shared how every day in education was not easy. Some students, with an uncanny ability to read their educators like an open book, were more prone to power struggles with their teachers or other adults. In these moments, resource teachers were invaluable because they would step in and acknowledge familiar conversations they had previously had with students. The resource teacher and classroom teacher would have the opportunity to work together to brainstorm new strategies to navigate challenging situations. Jillian shared this collaboration often resulted in the classroom teacher feeling supported and able to implement new strategies to meet the needs of students.

Jillian stressed it was essential to communicate differently and focus on what students needed rather than simply repeating the same responses. The collective effort of brainstorming and creative problem solving made a difference. For example, the school staff used curriculum on SEL and mindfulness with students. The implementation of SEL and mindfulness curriculum also supported consistency in language and understanding for school staff. The goal, always at the forefront, was to ensure the best interests of students remained the central focus.

Jillian noted staff members were making a difference in students' educational journeys through their dedication, willingness to adapt and evolve despite challenges, optimism to celebrate each small victory, and commitment to do what is best for their students. The collaboration and mutual support among these educators made a world of difference for both the teachers and students. They celebrated each small victory and remained steadfast in their commitment to doing what was best for their students.

Community Partners. Jillian shared the community she works in is small and the connections run deep in terms of the commitment to support students in their educational journey. The belief was, in addition to the assistance provided in the educational institution, there

were also invaluable resources available in the broader community. These resources were like a safety net and helped to provide the necessary wrap-around services for students and families.

Although the support network was expansive, Jillian noted it was not without challenges. The network was seen as serving a spectrum of needs, and the level of support often depended on the comfort level of families involved. Over the years, Jillian believed there was a noticeable shift, particularly since the COVID-19 global pandemic. Families seemed increasingly willing to seek counseling, a positive development that contributed to the well-being of students and the extended school community. Despite this progress, the community continued to face significant limitations in the availability of support services. Jillian was baffled by why help was not more accessible, which warranted conversations and collaborative problem solving. Jillian recognized not all students required the same level of support, and the type of assistance needed was highly contingent on the individual needs of both the student and the family.

Jillian lamented the lack of counseling services, a crucial and typically accessible resource, which often had a waitlist even for online or Zoom counseling. Jillian stated, "I tell parents to get on every wait list you can, because people don't always show up." This advice may have led to some availability and support. Jillian described parent involvement as critical to finding the necessary support for students outside of the school day.

Jillian realized if access to outside resources was a challenge, finding a way to keep students engaged and connected while in school was essential. Collaboration among school staff created opportunities for programs to be altered to better meet the diverse needs of students. Jillian shared staff worked together across various schools in the same community to provide unique opportunities for students who were struggling with accessing a traditional educational program (e.g., elementary students working with middle school students on a drone project).

Jillian believed the connections or relationships staff had across school buildings allowed these opportunities to take place. Sometimes opportunities could arise at the last minute, which could result in staff pivoting to best meet the needs of students.

Barriers. Jillian described three barriers to the creation of a trauma-informed school, these were professional development, staff stress levels, and reluctance to change. Professional development and learning opportunities were open to all staff, yet various hurdles emerged, such as constraints imposed by working hours established through collective bargaining agreements for public education. Jillian explained context mattered, which was reflected by the complexity of her school system.

For school staff who were ready, their journey toward a trauma-informed school continued. They sought out transferable knowledge and practices that could be immediately applied in the classroom; however, the timing did not always align with an ideal scenario for introducing and implementing new practices. Opportunities needed to be created at different times to ensure support staff and teachers remained moving forward in their learning.

A second barrier Jillian mentioned was increased stress levels from external pressures such as yearly budget discussions and contract negotiations, both of which could impact the implementation of trauma-informed practices. In addition, some staff were at the later stages of their teaching career and may not have been interested in changing. The cyclical nature of education, much like history, meant some years might be more conducive to embracing change than others.

The third barrier Jillian described was reluctance from certain staff members to change their practice. Not everyone had pursued education with the same mindset or had the inclination to embrace a trauma-informed approach. It was a challenge faced in the broader educational

context and in the district. Resistance stemmed from discomfort in building relationships with all students and a lack of understanding the root causes of students' behavior.

Jillian believed barriers could be minimized to focus on the work toward becoming a trauma-informed school. Jillian understood staff members were at different stages of acceptance and understanding of trauma. Offering one-on-one support to staff who were more open to personal growth and desired to learn further nurtured the transition and confirmed a student-focused school and unwavering dedication from school leadership would continue to create an environment where students could thrive.

Measuring Success. Jillian noted success in a trauma-informed school could be identified with anecdotal evidence such as the stories shared by staff members describing their interactions with students. She stated the true measure of success was when teachers could see changes in students with whom they had been working for years, through the ups and downs of their educational journey. One of those stories included a student who, after being a source of challenge, began to show remarkable growth.

Jillian affirmed these stories highlighted struggles and conversations characterized by rigidity, misunderstanding, and even moments of tension that transpired between students and staff while building strong relationships. Jillian noted the resilience of students and the dedication of the staff prevailed. Efforts to build partnerships with families involved phone calls home, challenging discussions, and many pieces that needed to be put together like a complex puzzle. In the end, these efforts and partnerships benefited the students.

Jillian remembered a success story "when a student embraced a staff member with a heartfelt hug as the culmination of countless efforts, illustrating how a relationship that once faced significant hurdles had evolved into a beautiful connection." Jillian again mentioned

timing was important, and it was necessary to understand when both students and staff members were ready for the transformation, personally and professionally. She also noted success extending beyond heartwarming stories.

Success extends into the practical aspects of education as well. Attendance was a concrete indicator school staff paid close attention to; it reflected the quality of relationships in the school. Jillian stated, "when students did not show up, it was a sign there was work to be done, either in building relationships or addressing student needs." As a response to issues with attendance, Jillian hosted weekly attendance meetings to track this crucial metric. The focus on attendance was deeply intertwined with the broader mission of fostering relationships. Staff examined patterns of frequent absenteeism and looked beyond the surface to identify underlying issues.

Future Work. Jillian noted dedicated staff are aware that they are making significant strides in the transformation to a trauma-informed school but with the understanding that the work is far from over. The school had shifted its focus to students, their emotional well-being, and the importance of building relationships. However, they recognized the next phase of their mission would involve reaching out to the broader community.

As Jillian reflected on the progress made, she thought about the work ahead, particularly in engaging the community. Educating families and parents about the principles of trauma-informed care was paramount, but time constraints often posed a challenge. Part of the future work involved helping families navigate the complex web of services available to them. Jillian mentioned families' experiences from case management supervision provided a deeper understanding of hardships families faced, even when they did everything right. Jillian

mentioned frustrating waitlists for essential support services, despite best efforts by families, remained a significant hurdle and was an issue that needed to be addressed.

In the broader picture, Jillian observed positive changes, particularly regarding shortened wait times, which led to immediate assistance for students requiring in-home support. However, staff were aware more work needed to be done to ensure timely access to support all students who required it. Jillian shared lessons learned along the way were invaluable, and her mantra was "don't give up." The road to becoming a trauma-informed school was arduous and filled with obstacles. It demanded a deep understanding of the complexities of human interactions and the diverse stages of personal development.

Jillian said, "I think there must be layers [to the learning]; it can't be one and done." She continued by sharing how learning opportunities focused on SEL and parent/community education events to provide additional skills to staff while working with students. Jillian stated, "I'll continue to provide learning opportunities for all who will listen so we can nurture resilience and help every student thrive." Timing played a crucial role in knowing when to push forward and when to pause and reflect. Admittedly, school leadership acknowledged the challenges posed by external factors including the impact of the COVID-19 global pandemic. The journey towards a trauma-informed school is a continuous process requiring momentum to keep moving forward.

In summarizing Jillian's story, her background in trauma-informed education offered a deep understanding in relationships being paramount while working toward a trauma-informed school. She collaborated with staff on professional development topics such as brain science and mindfulness to build collective understanding. She noted trauma-informed practices develop over time through open conversations about challenges and collective problem solving. She also

believed community partnerships are crucial, but barriers such as waitlists for counseling services remain a source of concern. Jillian concluded the work of developing a trauma-informed school is never complete and requires persistence and commitment.

Themes

After the narratives were restoried and member checked, they were manually coded to identify emerging themes. The first theme was on connections, as participants shared their experiences of developing a trauma-informed school, they described the need to find ways to deeply connect with their students and families. The second theme was readiness for change among staff. Participants shared staff need to be ready to learn about trauma to implement trauma-informed practices. The last theme was the availability of time as a limited commodity and a needed resource to continue learning, building connections, and supporting the implementation of a trauma-informed school. Each of these themes were analyzed using the lens of Mezirow's (1991) transformative learning theory.

Connections

The first theme was connections. According to all participants, the foundation of a trauma-informed school was unequivocally reliant on the connections fostered. Each of the participants discussed connections necessary to support the students they served; their examples provided insight on various ways connections can be made such as the feeling of belonging, shared ownership through collaboration, daily practices, and family connections.

Feeling of Belonging. Dan shared the increased interaction between students and staff provided opportunities for deeper connections, which resulted in the school feeling like a happier place overall. In his mind, the feeling of belonging developed through an increased focus on building relationships with students. Furthermore, Melanie mentioned the importance of the

physical space in school to promote feelings of belonging. She described having the school building decorated as if students were a part of it by putting pictures of students on the walls. This was another example of how school staff and the establishment of relationships can make a difference in how the students feel.

Jillian spoke of connectedness when discussing the importance of relationships as the foundation of a trauma-informed school. She described working with staff in various roles (e.g., transportation, cafeteria, assistants, and teachers) to develop a full picture of each student and their needs. Jillian's collaborative efforts with the school team allowed for greater consistency in recognizing and meeting student needs.

Shared Ownership Through Collaboration. Melanie emphasized the importance of shared ownership among the staff through unity and collaboration. She made it a point to work with her staff and assume the roles they have on any given day. She led by example, which allowed staff to learn their importance to the operation of the school and the school district.

Each of the participants discussed the importance of working together, as a staff, to meet the various needs of the students they serve. Autumn stated, "This work cannot be done in isolation." Jillian and Autumn believed collaboration was essential to the journey, and it was necessary to provide opportunities for staff to learn and reflect together through professional learning communities, professional development, and staff meetings. Furthermore, Karla and Melanie both discussed the opportunities for building trust through small group learning and book studies as a way to build collaboration and new learning among the staff.

Daily Practices. Participants shared various ways connections were made through daily practices. Daily practices allowed for consistency for students. Both Dan and Autumn shared the importance of a daily greeting. For Dan's school, this greeting included talking with students

about topics that interest them such as a recent sports game or a new video game. The topic did not matter as long as it was something the student and staff member could use to connect in conversation.

Autumn's school did their daily practice of morning greeting differently. Autumn shared the development of daily practices promoted connectedness among her staff and their students. She went into great detail about morning greetings and the meetings established in each homeroom. Autumn stated:

> It all started with a few teachers who wanted to do something different. They stood outside of their door and greeted the students each morning with a fist bump, high five, hug or a dance. The students smiled and grew to expect that greeting every day. This became contagious and other teachers wanted to do the morning greeting as well.

The daily practice of the morning routine allowed students to feel connected to their teachers beyond their traditional academic role in the classroom.

Karla described the use of calming corners in the academic setting to support students who were dysregulated and how those corners could be found in each classroom. According to Jillian, the increase of consistent daily routines in the classroom setting allowed for additional staff conversation during PLCs or staff meetings. Likewise, Melanie shared daily practices were further realized when staff members increased collaboration organically and began to visit each other's classrooms. Staff began to learn from one another through observation and collaboration.

Family Connections. Family connections were not discussed in all interviews. Dan shared connecting with families can be a barrier, whereas Melanie believed the work they do with students may positively impact the family. Jillian's role was a bit different and required her

to speak to families often; however, such interaction did not always translate to receiving the supports necessary for students due to lack of professional services available.

Notably, Karla's experience focused on the connection with families, encouraging and supporting staff to make personal phone calls home. The intent of these phone calls was not to discuss the student's academic performance, rather it was to build a connection with the families. She shared the following:

> I would ask staff to call home and introduce themselves to the parent. I didn't expect some of my teachers to have a difficult time in doing this, but I know that this was really important. I worked with the staff and created a script for them to use on the phone. I offered to be with staff who needed it to make the initial phone calls. Eventually, my staff was doing this on their own. They would tell the families they are looking forward to work with their child during the school year. I really believe this personal connection with families makes a difference. The parents know their teacher cares about their child.

Karla's story offered a unique perspective of the persistence and support she needed to provide for her staff.

Readiness for Change

The second theme was the readiness for change. All five participants discussed how staff could not be told to change; rather, the change began when staff members were ready for the learning and implementation of knowledge on trauma-informed practices. The five participants agreed staff learn at different rates and through various modalities. Regardless of staff readiness, all study participants believed it was their job to be persistent in offering formal and informal learning opportunities to ensure their respective schools were moving toward the implementation of trauma-informed practices.

Implementation of Professional Learning. Dan further described the informal professional learning to promote change among staff by allowing time for the staff to reflect on the information presented and to think deeply about how it could be reflected in their own practice or context. Dan said, "professional development must be consistent, relevant, and applicable to the staff." In addition, Jillian advocated for the importance of modeling instructional practices, with the understanding that everyone learns in different ways. Some staff members could implement trauma-informed practices if they were shown how rather than only being told. Despite the need for change to improve the school experience for staff and students, Karla mentioned change could be exceptionally challenging for some individuals and needed to be done gradually.

Melanie, Autumn, and Karla shared the need to start the transition to a trauma-informed school with a few individuals who can lead the way. According to Autumn, staff buy-in allows some staff members to become pioneers of trauma-informed processes in the classroom. Furthermore, Jillian emphasized the significance of consistently providing professional learning opportunities to staff throughout the school at their currently level of knowledge or readiness. In addition, all of the participants discussed the importance of modeling trauma-informed practices to help the professional learning of their staff.

Although Jillian acknowledged the need to have a well-defined plan to promote professional learning and support staff change, Melanie shared a different perspective. Melanie states staff readiness levels and student needs could change during the school year. Therefore, it was better to consistently assess the needs of staff to promote continued, relevant learning. All of the participants agreed once staff saw the benefits of implementing trauma-informed practices, they were more enticed to delve further into the work.

Resistance to Change. Although change appeared promising and created positive outcomes, too often, change also elicited apprehension, skepticism, and resistance from the school staff. Dan, Melanie, and Autumn indicated staff readiness for change could be impacted by the skepticism that trauma-informed schools are just another educational trend. Autumn stated, "Staff need to understand the reason for the work rather than the terms we are using such as SEL, trauma-informed or ACEs." She further explained her role as a building leader was to help staff overcome skepticism.

Availability of Time

The third theme was availability of time. All participants described how their schools or districts dedicated time in their schedules to support the implementation of trauma-informed practices. Melanie referred to countless hours dedicated to book studies, professional learning designed to share trauma-informed practices, development of professional learning committees, and consistent opportunities to share new learning during monthly staff meetings. All participants stated dedication to the creation of a trauma-informed school requires time, and many referred to it as a continuous "journey" as the final destination to be reached was not definitive.

Social–Emotional Learning Lessons. Dan discussed the availability of time to provide professional learning to staff during staff meetings and during new staff training at the beginning of the school year. He further shared the importance of working directly with students during an advisory program to deliver lessons on SEL. Dan identified time factored in the school's schedule, but Melanie described the lack of time as a barrier to the trauma-informed learning. She referred to staff contracts that clearly outlined the hours and days the staff were required to work. Melanie used the available time as effectively as possible but strongly believed providing

additional time would significantly help propel her staff's development forward. In addition, Melanie shared SEL did not have to be separate lessons; they could be embedded into the daily classroom activities.

Staff Stress. Autumn's focus remained on staff facing added stress due to periodic additional responsibilities, which could diminish the time available for cultivating a trauma-informed school. The variability of staff readiness to learn may have added to inconsistent progress toward a trauma-informed school. Further, Jillian stated although professional development opportunities were provided, some staff members who attended were unable to fully engage in learning due to other pressing responsibilities that demanded their available time. Regardless, both Autumn and Jillian affirmed a steadfast commitment to time for trauma-informed practices that remained sacred and was best realized with a detailed, yearlong professional development plan.

Family Engagement. Connecting with families also required time from teachers. According to Karla, when staff members were being asked to make personal phone calls home to families, they were pulled away from other tasks they needed to manage and accomplish. Karla and Autumn both agreed the demands of the profession could lead teachers in various directions. Despite this, the leadership's dedication remained strong and ensured trauma-informed learning persisted.

Family engagement can also begin in other ways. Melanie shared the importance of helping students with the most basic needs such as food or clothing. Meeting the needs of students helped to create a strong relationship with the home environment. In addition, Jillian and Dan both mentioned the importance of visiting students' homes to meet with families or

caregivers. These visits were another way to obtain necessary information about the lives of students and begin to cultivate relationships with families.

Summary

The purpose of this narrative inquiry was to explore how educational leaders perceive the development of a trauma-informed school. The problem addressed by this qualitative narrative research is, with an increasing number of students impacted by ACEs, school support staff have been unable to provide necessary, targeted assistance to help students build resilience and learn coping strategies to combat the impact of ACEs (Murphey & Sacks, 2019; Rossen, 2020). The theoretical framework of this study was built on Mezirow's (2009) transformative learning theory, a theory in adult education. Reflection enables people to recognize, reassess, and modify structures of assumptions and expectations that scaffold their points of view and influence thinking, beliefs, attitudes, and actions. Mezirow (2009) further honed his theory and formulated transformative learning as the process that alters challenging perspectives to render them more encompassing, discerning, introspective, receptive, and adaptable emotionally.

Narrative research provided a vehicle for participants to share their lived experiences in this study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Semistructured interviews were conducted and recorded using the Zoom videoconferencing tool. Each interview lasted up to 60 minutes and were transcribed through Zoom. Data analysis for this narrative inquiry included restorying and coding of participants' stories. Each of the restoried narratives was sent to participants for member checking to ensure accuracy.

The lived experiences of the five participants in the development of a trauma-informed school aligned with Mezirow's (1991) transformative learning theory because staff need to be ready to receive the learning, learning opportunities must be presented in a variety of modalities,

and learning must be revisited over time to allow for reflection from the adult learner. Each of the participants also identified challenges with professional learning and the amount of time required for change to occur. Themes identified through the analysis of data included (a) connections, with the subthemes of feeling of belonging, shared ownership through collaboration, daily practices, and family connections; (b) readiness forcChange, including the subthemes of implementation of professional learning and resistance to change; and (c) availability of time with the subthemes of SEL lesson implementation, staff stress, and family engagement. Five participants in this study shared their lived experience with the development of a trauma-informed school.

Overall, participants shared their personal journeys of developing a trauma-informed school. Data analysis and subsequent themes focused on the problem that students are experiencing ACEs at a rate which school support staff are unable to address. Participants' perspectives on how they are cultivating trauma-informed schools varied in each location; however, connections, readiness for change, and availability of time were common throughout participant responses. In the succeeding chapter, Chapter 5, I consolidated the data from Chapter 4 and encompassed the conclusion, interpretation, and importance of findings. Further, I outlined the implications drawn from the research and offered recommendations for action and further study.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

In the state of Maine, the alarming prevalence of ACEs among high school students has raised significant concerns, with nearly 1 in 4 students experiencing three or more ACEs in 2021, according to the MIYHS. MDHHS (2021) noted a concerning increase in ACEs since 2019, which underscores the urgency of addressing this critical issue. ACEs encompass a spectrum of traumatic events children may endure, ranging from abuse and neglect to household dysfunction, all of which can profoundly impact their well-being and academic performance (Felitti et al., 1998). Research has consistently linked ACEs to a range of negative health outcomes in adulthood (Felitti et al., 1998; Webster, 2022) and limitations in academic growth during childhood (Frey et al., 2019).

In response to the increase in ACEs, there is a growing need for the development of trauma-informed schools. The journey to create trauma-informed schools in Maine represents a critical step toward nurturing a generation of resilient, empowered, and emotionally healthy youth and overcoming the impact of ACEs (Felitti et al., 1998; MDHHS, 2019, 2021; NCTSN, 2018; Webster, 2022). The following research questions were developed to explore the lived experiences of five participants in developing a trauma-informed school:

Research Question 1: How do trauma-informed school leaders describe necessary practices, programs, and procedures to support the cultivation of students' resilience and mitigate the impact of ACEs?

Research Question 2: How do trauma-informed school leaders make informed decisions about staff professional development to expand understanding toward the implementation of a trauma-informed school?

A trauma-informed framework, also known as TIC, fundamentally relies on knowledge and shared understanding as initial steps (Rossen, 2020). Participants were school leaders who pledged commitment to change, professional development, and education with the goal of establishing a trauma-informed school environment. Implementation of TIC, paired with Mezirow's (2009) transformative learning theory, which strongly emphasizes the power of reflection for adult learners, enabled school staff to alter their practices.

Five participants shared their personal stories during semistructured interviews conducted via the Zoom platform. These interviews were then restoried using Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) three-dimensional analysis. Restoried narratives were sent to participants and member checked for accuracy. Narratives were analyzed using manual coding and organized to group common sections together to present a collective story regarding the development of a trauma-informed school. Three themes emerged: (a) connections, which included feeling of belonging, shared ownership through collaboration, daily practices, and family connections; (b) readiness for change, which included implementation of professional learning and resistance to change; and (c) availability of time, which included the subthemes of SEL lessons, staff stress, and family engagement.

Interpretation and Importance of Findings

Narrative inquiry is a way to explore the personal experiences of a group of people in an institution to uncover shared experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Participants in this study collectively possessed over 50 years of educational experience, and all of them stated the need for cultivating resilience as they worked through the multifaceted needs of staff, students, and the community. Moreover, participants expressed the need for consistent and steadfast commitment to an overall goal of creating a trauma-informed school to build resilience in students. Narrative

inquiry was used as the research approach to allow the five study participants to share their individual narratives regarding the central phenomenon of developing a trauma-informed school. The interpretation and importance of the findings as they relate to the two research questions are provided.

Interpretations and Importance of Research Question 1

Research Question 1 "How do trauma-informed school leaders describe necessary practices, programs and procedures to support the cultivation of students' resilience and mitigate the impact of ACEs?" This question explored the lived experience of educational leaders developing a trauma-informed school with the focus on practices, programs, and procedures. The needs of students are changing, and school staff can mitigate the impact of ACEs students experience with the implementation of TIC (Harris & Fallot, 2001). The implementation of TIC can support students in a wholistic way by including administrative commitment, professional training, and review of policies and procedures (Harris & Fallot, 2001). In the trauma-informed framework, it is necessary for staff to understand the potential impact of ACEs on the lives of their students. All participants shared how creating a trauma-informed school was a journey that required a steadfast commitment to continual development over time. Dan, Jillian, and Melanie each described the importance of having unwavering support from the district to develop a trauma-informed school. Participants described building resilience, developing relationships, and implementing additional programs and practices to further support students.

Building Resilience

Participants shared the importance of cultivating resilience in their students. Dan described the purpose of building resilience in the students as allowing them to be successful in school despite the obstacles they face in life. Literature has supported engaging in consistent

expectations with students (Rossen, 2020) and empowering students to overcome life's

adversities (Foster, 2020). Autumn and Melanie agreed they would continue to lead staff to focus

on building resilience in their students even though formal evidence to support their efforts was

not available. Research has supported resilience can thwart potential adverse outcomes of

childhood trauma and lead children to thrive later in life (Lee, 2019; Liu et al., 2020).

The development of an individual's resilience is shaped by their environment (Foster,

2020). Both Melanie and Karla questioned if students had built enough skills to be resilient when

the students transitioned to the next school in the district. The creation of personal, protective

resources such as optimism, self-efficacy, empathy, and socioeconomic resources equip a student

with skills to overcome adversity (Foster, 2020). Participants corroborated findings from

McAllister and Brien (2020) who agreed a collaborative effort from all who serve students, both

in the school and outside of the school, would yield a more trauma-informed team approach.

Each of the participants reported commitment to the vision for continued work.

Developing Relationships

When students achieve success in school, they tend to develop a stronger bond with both

the school community and other students in the classroom (Rossen, 2020). Each of the five

participants shared the importance of developing strong relationships as the foundation of

creating of a trauma-informed school. Relationships fell into one of three categories: staff to

staff, staff to student, and school to community. Staff-to-staff relationships offered collaboration

to ensure students were being supported in a wholistic way. Both Melanie and Jillian shared

opportunities for staff to observe each other and learn how trauma-informed practices can be

implemented. Autumn described opportunities for staff to talk with each other through

professional learning communities (PLCs) to better understand how to support the students they

serve. In addition, Autumn stated this work could not be done in isolation; rather, the collaborative efforts of learning together would help to keep the staff focused on the mission of the school community.

In schools, the importance of human relationships transcends academics (Brummer & Thorsborne, 2021). Staff-to-student relationships were discussed across all five participants. Autumn and her school staff believed prioritizing relationships with students was necessary and allowed for the development of trust. Karla stated trust had to be developed and believed, when established, it provided a foundation for the relationship and feeling of safety. Dan shared building relationships with students can sometimes focus on things of personal interest to the student, such as sports or video games. Each of these examples offered ways for teachers to learn more about their students and develop a deeper understanding of the potential challenges the student's family may face (Souers & Hall, 2019). All participants believed finding unique ways to connect with students is essential as it provides a sense of belonging.

Finally, school-to-community relationships are essential. Karla shared some staff needed support in establishing connections with families through phone calls, emails, and mail. She also described working with families so they learn how to be a part of the team that supports their student. Jillian and Karla discussed using outside organizations to further support students who may need additional resources to build their resiliency. This finding supports research by Elliot (2018) who noted external partners are essential to meet the needs of all students by providing financial support, professional development, or additional before- or after-school programming. A barrier in developing external partners is the lack of resources in Maine, where students are sometimes on multiple waitlists to be seen by a social worker, counselor, or other supportive

medical professional. The focus for school staff going forward must be on increasing family engagement and communication, which, in turn, will benefit the students.

Supportive Programs and Practices

Participants did not agree on one, single program that could or should be used to create a trauma-informed school, which has been supported by current literature (Maynard et al., 2019; Robey et al., 2021). Dan and Jillian taught lessons to students, either in groups or with individuals on a particular topic. Dan believed the development of a strong advisory program with a focus on developing social emotional skills would benefit both the students and staff. Such a program would offer a pathway to building strong relationships as there is a need for the development of stronger SEL programs for secondary students (Rosen et al., 2022). Additionally, there has been little research on which SEL practices should be implemented in SEL programming in schools (Jones et al., 2021). Instead, teachers are able to select what they believe will work best for the students with whom they interact (Frey et al., 2019). Jillian and Karla stated they had used various, accessible social emotional curriculums, whereas Melanie shared how she used a book with students to focus on kindness and empathy as a school community, which worked better for her students.

Additional SEL resources were made available for educators as SEL was a priority. Autumn mentioned the support provided by the Maine Department of Education during and after the COVID-19 global pandemic to support students' social emotional development was helpful, as was the implementation of responsive classroom practices. However, Zieher et al. (2021) found teachers had a difficult time with virtual SEL instruction curriculum. Regardless of the methodology of SEL implementation (e.g., advisory, in person, online, curricular resources), it was a conduit in the creation of a safe school environment for students.

A safe environment is essential to cultivating personal resilience (Phifer & Hull, 2016) and using trauma-informed practices can help to create an environment that responds to trauma in students (Brummer & Thorsborne, 2021). Both Melanie and Karla described how they used physical spaces in their classrooms called calming corners for students to regroup if they felt dysregulated during the school day. Dan and Autumn shared the importance of welcoming students to school every day in a positive way through the use of morning greetings as a way to cultivate a safe environment. Melanie and Autumn used morning meetings as an essential way to begin each day on a positive note, and Dan shared the importance of a structured advisory program. Jillian noted how daily routines are important for students because they are something students can rely on and students know what to expect. Regardless of the trauma-informed practices participants chose to share with me, it was evident there was not one specific way of implementing trauma-informed practices to support all students, which is supported by the lack of evidence for specific practices essential for a trauma-informed school (Robey et al., 2021).

Consistent among the five participants was a focus on the mission established by the school or district as well as the strong leadership that supported this work. Educational leaders must allow staff to work in collaboration with one another to create an environment where professional learning is valued (Stokes & Brunzell, 2019) and to create a culture of change (Donohoo, 2018). Karla referred to creating a school where experimentation by staff happened to better serve the needs of the students even though it occasionally resulted in setbacks. Risks are taken as opportunities from which to learn and move forward with the focus remaining on how to support the students by cultivating resilience.

Interpretations and Importance of Research Question 2

Research Question 2 "How do trauma-informed school leaders make informed decisions about staff professional development to expand understanding toward the implementation of a trauma-informed school?" This question was developed to gather information on how educational leaders determine how to support staff with professional learning opportunities as they transition to a trauma-informed school. TIC (Harris & Fallot, 2001) along with Mezirow's (2009) transformative learning theory served as the guides for this work. Each of the five participants agreed learning offered to staff needs to occur over many different opportunities using multiple modalities, which was supported by the literature (Brummer & Thorsborne, 2021; Roseby & Gascoigne, 2021). Participants identified both formal and informal strategies for staff professional development.

Formal Professional Development

Developing a year-long professional development plan was helpful for a few participants, yet Melanie cautioned against it. She believed the needs of students and staff change quickly, which could result in an obsolete plan. This finding is supported by Brummer and Thorsborne (2021). Jillian agreed with Melanie in terms of the necessary adaptation of the plan and noted professional development plans should be under constant scrutiny. Regardless of the creation of the professional development plan, the focus for school leadership remained anchored in the established mission of the schools. All participants agreed sporadic professional development that lacks connectivity to the school would not meet the needs of staff or students and needs to be developed with intentionality as noted by Rossen (2020).

Professional development has been offered formally in each of the participants' schools in the areas of SEL and ACEs through the use of expert presentations and book studies. A

commonality across participants' experiences was each school began the transformation to a trauma-informed school by establishing their "why" prior to beginning this work. Dan shared, even though these professional development opportunities were offered, staff still needed to learn how to transition that knowledge into practice. This finding was supported by Mezirow's (2009) transformative learning theory, which involves self-reflection and requires adjustments in pedagogical approaches. Understanding the impact and prevalence of ACEs is important for staff to know because it allows them to build stronger relationships with their students.

Learning about implementing trauma-informed practices through a book study can be a productive way to engage in conversation with staff; however, this practice is not supported by current literature. Professional development can support a change in staff knowledge and attitudes, yet there is little evidence to support the application or modification of teaching practices (Purtle, 2020). Melanie believed a pivotal moment in the journey toward becoming a trauma-informed school occurred when a team of educators from her school visited a school where trauma-informed practices were being implemented with consistency. Melanie learned alongside her staff, which was more likely to create a culture of collaboration and support and an environment conducive to change (Donohoo, 2018). She shared the belief that this learning experience allowed the information staff members had been discussing from a book to come to life.

Staff had to believe the work was important and worthwhile for them to buy in. Each participant mentioned the barriers of time available to educate staff and staff readiness to learn, which have been supported by available literature (Rossen, 2020). Karla shared she allocated time each Wednesday to focus on trauma-informed learning, which could be the consistency staff need. All participants shared the transformation to a trauma-informed school began with a

small group of individuals who were interested in learning about implementing trauma-informed

practices and grew from there.

Informal Professional Development

Informal professional development was also noted during the semistructured interviews

with my participants. Throughout the interviews, participants noted the importance of

establishing consistent opportunities for collaborative learning and conversations among staff in

the creation of collective efficacy (Donohoo, 2018). The collaborative learning opportunities

may take place during PLCs, department time, or staff meetings. The result of these informal

conversations could be as powerful as formal professional development opportunities, if not

more so. Informal learning opportunities may allow staff to self-select when they are ready for

professional learning. As Jillian noted, trauma-informed practices develop over time through

open conversations about challenges and collective problem solving.

Regardless of formal or informal professional development, Autumn believed

professional learning could not be done in isolation. Melanie agreed, through the development of

collaboration, staff began to ask if they could observe and learn best practice implementation

from each other. Jillian, Melanie, and Autumn noted some staff reached out to each other

organically for support if they were challenged by a particular student interaction or situation.

Jillian also noted the importance of offering varying professional development opportunities on

different topics in a consistent manner. Dan shared staff who were implementing trauma-

informed practices made connections with their students, and other staff members took notice.

Informal collaboration among staff became a powerful way to support all students as they built

the skills to cultivate resilience.

Implications

This study contributed to the body of research by sharing the perspectives of educational leaders regarding the development of a trauma-informed school. ACEs contribute to health challenges in adulthood (CDC, 2021), and research has indicated 1 in 4 Maine students have experienced more than three ACEs (MDHHS, 2021). Furthermore, children with multiple ACEs are prone to academic struggles and increased dysregulation (Murphey & Sacks, 2019). Understanding and effectively responding to the impact of ACEs requires employing integrated approaches (Halladay Goldman et al., 2020). Considering these findings, adopting a universal, schoolwide, trauma-informed approach has emerged as a strategic practice to ensure all students benefit from SEL and resilience-building strategies (Halladay Goldman et al., 2020). By integrating trauma-informed practices universally, educational leaders can contribute to mitigating the adverse effects of ACEs on students.

Collaboration among educational leaders to establish trauma-informed schools is crucial as professional development has been identified as a key factor in building a trauma-informed school environment and equipping school staff with essential knowledge about trauma and its effects on both students and staff (Guarino & Chagnon, 2018). Rossen (2020) identified consistent and frequent professional development as a necessity to ensure a comprehensive understanding and application of trauma-informed practices. However, the implementation of trauma-informed schools faces obstacles such as resource availability, staff turnover, and the need for staff buy-in (Leibel et al., 2021; Rossen, 2020). The three implications from this study are awareness, relationships, and sharing how educational leaders are developing a trauma-informed school.

The first implication from the findings of this narrative inquiry is the awareness of the experiences of educational leaders who are responding to the impact of ACEs by working toward developing trauma-informed schools. There is a need for educational leaders to acknowledge the varying levels of staff readiness and abilities to learn and employ trauma-informed practices. Participants in this study each observed students unable to access their education as they do not have the necessary resilience skills. Students may present as being emotionally dysregulated, which can impact the learning environment. This study also accentuates how many educational leaders and school systems serve the most basic needs of students by providing food and clothing before academics can be addressed.

The second implication from this qualitative study is the concept that connections with a trusted adult are paramount in the cultivation of a trauma-informed school. Relations cultivated between staff and students develop over time and are intentional. Participants shared the need to develop safe spaces for students and find ways to connect with them on a personal level to make the school building or classroom a place where students want to be.

The third and last implication from the study is the benefit for educational leaders to see how other leaders have cultivated a trauma-informed school. Understanding the perspectives of educational leaders in building a trauma-informed school can begin conversations of how to begin this journey elsewhere. Discussion of ACEs, SEL, student behavior, and resilience building can be strengthened when professional educators learn from one another. School communities can continue to strengthen through the collaborative efforts of educational communities. Trauma-informed schools offer early support for students in the aftermath of traumatic events (Brummer & Thorsborne, 2021). These implications support the following recommendations for action.

Recommendations for Action

Upon examining participants' experiences with establishing a trauma-informed school, three recommendations for future action emerged. Participants highlighted how creating a trauma-informed school is an ongoing process requiring continuous evaluation. Nevertheless, implementing a comprehensive, schoolwide trauma-informed approach guarantees all students reap the advantages of SEL and resilience-building strategies (Halladay Goldman et al., 2020). The three recommendations for action derived from the findings of this research are identified in the following paragraphs.

The first recommendation is the delivery of consistent and well-planned professional development opportunities for educators. Professional development opportunities need to include information about ACEs and the impact of ACEs. All participants in this study shared they had exposure to working with students who had ACEs, and all of them perceived ACEs as a prevalent issue in the educational setting, which created a need to cultivate a trauma-informed school. Educators need professional development to create a sense of awareness and collective understanding toward the meaning behind the work. Rossen (2020) wrote a school with a trauma-informed model requires educators to realize ACEs are prevalent and a health crisis; staff need professional development to recognize the signs displayed by students and respond with trauma-informed practices.

The second recommendation for action is to create opportunities for staff professional development throughout the year and ensure educators are learning in a variety of ways and modalities. Effective professional development needs to be consistently employed for improvement and change in the school (Rossen, 2020). Schools can offer many different types of professional development to better meet the needs of adult learners in the building (Koslouski &

Chafouleas, 2022). Although participants shared informal opportunities for staff to discuss the implementation of trauma-informed practices were helpful, ensuring there is enough time for all staff to participate in professional development is crucial.

Finally, the third recommendation is to provide opportunities to observe how other school staff model trauma-informed practices in the classroom setting. Research has indicated professional development may support a change in staff knowledge but not necessarily the application or modification of teaching practices (Purtle, 2020). Participants shared the importance of all school staff having an awareness of trauma-informed practices, yet they were unsure of how that translated into action in the daily activities of the teacher. Furthermore, participants described the power of collaboration to better support the students they were serving.

Recommendations for Further Study

This study focused on the perceptions of educational leaders in the transition to a trauma-informed school. From the limitations, delimitations, and data gathered from this study, further research studies are recommended for a more in-depth understanding of educational leaders' perceptions of ACEs. There are two recommendations for future research: (a) applying a different research methodology, and (b) targeting research toward a coaching approach of implementing trauma-informed practices.

For the purpose of this research, a small number of participants was selected; however, expanding the sample size could yield further insights. This study delved into the perspectives of educational leaders, and increasing participant numbers could offer additional valuable findings. Diversifying participants across various school demographics may also enhance the understanding of how trauma-informed schools develop.

Another recommended area for further study should concentrate on the nature of professional development provided to staff, specifically exploring the accessibility of trauma-informed coaching. Participants in this study shared the importance offering professional development that was consistent and targeted throughout the school year; however, they also shared the availability of professional development did not ensure implementation of trauma-informed practices in the classroom. Focusing on the use of trauma-informed practices learned through professional development may increase the impact on students if the learning is revisited throughout the school year.

Conclusion

Five participants completed one-on-one semistructured interviews on Zoom for up to 60 minutes. Interview transcripts were then transcribed and restoried. Once restoried narratives were member checked for accuracy, they were manually coded to look for patterns and emergent themes. Three themes emerged from the narratives: (a) connections, (b) readiness for change, and (c) availability of time.

ACEs are increasingly prevalent in Maine (MDHHS, 2021) and have been shown to have an adverse effect students (Felitti et al., 1998; Frey et al., 2019; Murphey & Sacks, 2019). Findings from this study were consistent with research by Harris and Fallot (2001) showing the prevalence of ACEs indicates the need for TIC, which includes building strong connections and staff understanding the impact of ACEs. Insights shared from educational leaders' narratives can assist other schools as they transform into trauma-informed institutions and align with TIC (Harris & Fallot, 2001). Being open and prepared to embrace this learning aligns with transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991). Readiness to learn begins with acknowledging the issue and using personal reflection to comprehend new knowledge (Mezirow, 1991). Participants

identified professional development as a priority for all staff. However, professional development must extend beyond book studies and presentations. Participants all shared the need for development of strong trauma-informed teaching practices to serve all students regardless of their exposure to trauma. Building a student's resilience would assist them in overcoming adversity in the future. The development to a trauma-informed school requires continuous professional development and for the staff to be ready for the learning, which was supported by Mezirow's (1991) transformative learning theory.

This study offered perspectives on how school leaders can create trauma-informed schools. It revealed although educational leaders employ various strategies to address student needs, establishing strong connections with students remains crucial to lessen the impact of ACEs and foster resilience. Additionally, school leaders emphasized intentional, consistent and diverse professional development is essential for learning.

This study addressed a gap in research by using narrative inquiry to offer personal insights into the creation of a trauma-informed school with a focus on practices, programs, and procedures. In this study, the narratives of the five participants provided rich, detailed descriptions of their individual perceptions as educational leaders in the cultivation of a trauma-informed school. These narratives have the potential to assist other administrators striving to establish a trauma-informed school. Moreover, this research may offer guidance to student-centered services such as recreational departments, sports teams, and after-school programs. Each story has the power to heighten awareness about ACEs among administrators and policymakers, the necessity for trauma-informed schools, and the crucial professional development required for all staff to assist students in developing resilience.

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APPENDIX A

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL

UNE | UNIVERSITY OF NEW ENGLAND

INNOVATION FOR A HEALTHIER PLANET

Office of Research Integrity
Institutional Review Board

Biddeford Campus
11 Hills Beach Road
Biddeford, ME 04005
(207) 602-2244 T
(207) 602-5905 F

Portland Campus
716 Stevens Avenue
Portland, ME 04103

DATE OF LETTER: September 06, 2023

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Mandy Cyr
FACULTY ADVISOR: Rosette M. Obedoza, Ed.D.

PROJECT NUMBER: 0923-01
RECORD NUMBER: 0923-01-01

PROJECT TITLE: Sharing Stories of Development: How Trauma-Informed School Leaders Perceive Developing a Trauma-Informed School: A Qualitative Narrative Study

SUBMISSION TYPE: New Project
SUBMISSION DATE: August 31, 2023

ACTION: Determination of Exempt Status
DECISION DATE: September 06, 2023

REVIEW CATEGORY: Exemption Category # *2(ii)*

The Office of Research Integrity has reviewed the materials submitted in connection with the above-referenced project and has determined that the proposed work is exempt from IRB review and oversight as defined by 45 CFR 46.104.

You are responsible for conducting this project in accordance with the approved study documents, and all applicable UNE policies and procedures.

If any changes to the design of the study are contemplated (e.g., revision to the research proposal summary, data collection instruments, and/or other approved study documents), the Principal Investigator must submit an amendment for review to ensure the requested change(s) will not alter the exempt status of the project.

If you have any questions, please send an e-mail to irb@une.edu and reference the project number as specified above within the correspondence.

Best Regards,

Bob Kennedy, MS
Director of Research Integrity

Page **1** of **1**

APPENDIX B

RECRUITMENT FLYER

<Insert DATE>

Dear <Educational Leader>,

I am seeking participants for my dissertation entitled "Sharing Stories of Development: How School Leaders Perceive Developing a Trauma-Informed School" pursuant to earning my Doctor in Education degree from the University of New England in Biddeford, Maine

The purpose of this research study is to discover how educational leaders describe the strategies, tools, and processes used in the creation of a trauma-informed school.

I am looking for five educational leaders who self-identify as trauma-informed educational leaders (these positions may include principal, assistant principal, instructional coach, Social Emotional Learning Coordinator, and school counselor), in a Maine public school and have the ability to bring professional development opportunities to their trauma-informed school who are willing to participate in a recorded Zoom interview lasting approximately 45–60 minutes. Participation is completely voluntary. All interviews will be conducted using Zoom at a mutually agreeable time. The names of all participants, superintendents, districts, and schools collected for this study will be deidentified.

Please review the attached Participant Information Sheet which outlines the specific details of this study including confidentiality and privacy measures. If you are willing to participate in this study or if you have any questions, please send me an email at XXXX@XXX.XXX.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Regards,

Mandy Cyr

Doctoral Candidate

University of New England

APPENDIX C

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

UNIVERSITY OF NEW ENGLAND

INNOVATION FOR A HEALTHIER PLANET

Office of Research Integrity
Institutional Review Board

Participant Information Sheet

Version Date:	August 31, 2023
IRB Project #:	*[An IRB Study # will be assigned to you upon receipt of your submission]*
Title of Project:	Sharing Stories of Development: How Trauma-Informed School Leaders Perceive Developing a Trauma-Informed School
Principal Investigator (PI):	Mandy Cyr
PI Contact Information:	XXXXXXX@XXX.XXX; (XXX)XXX-XXXX

INTRODUCTION

- This is a project being conducted for research purposes. Your participation is completely voluntary.
- The intent of the Participant Information Sheet is to provide you with important details about this research project.
- You are encouraged to ask any questions about this research project, now, during or after the project is complete.
- The use of the word 'we' in the Information Sheet refers to the Principal Investigator and/or other research staff.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS PROJECT?

The general purpose of this narrative inquiry is to discover how educational leaders describe the strategies, tools, and processes used in the creation of a trauma-informed school.
Five participants will be invited to participate in this research as part of the principal investigator's dissertation research.

WHY ARE YOU BEING ASKED TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS PROJECT?

You are being asked to participate in this research project because you are over the age of 18, who self-identify as trauma-informed educational leaders these positions may include principal, assistant principal, instructional coach, Social Emotional Learning coordinator, and school counselor, in a Maine public school and have the ability to bring professional development opportunities to their school. This study seeks five participants.

WHAT IS INVOLVED IN THIS PROJECT?

- You will be asked to participate in one semistructured interview with the principal investigator that will last approximately 45 to 60 minutes over Zoom.
- You can choose a pseudonym to be used in place of your name for the study.
- You will be given the opportunity to leave your camera on or off during the interview, and your interview will be recorded using Zoom.
- You will be emailed a copy of your restoried narrative to review for accuracy. You will have five calendar days to respond, or the principal investigator will assume that you have no comments or revisions, and the restoried narrative will be assumed to be accurate.

WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE RISKS OR DISCOMFORTS INVOLVED FROM BEING IN THIS PROJECT?

The risks involved with participation in this research project are minimal and may include an invasion of privacy or breach of confidentiality. You have the right to stop, skip questions, or even take a break. You may decide not to answer certain questions and stop the interview at any time.

Please see the 'WHAT ABOUT PRIVACY & CONFIDENTIALITY?' section below for steps we will take to minimize an invasion of privacy or breach of confidentiality from occurring.

WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE BENEFITS FROM BEING IN THIS PROJECT?

There are no likely benefits to participants from being in this research project; however, the information we collect may help further strategies, tools, and processes used in the creation of a trauma-informed school.

WILL YOU BE COMPENSATED FOR BEING IN THIS PROJECT?

You will not be compensated for being in this research project.

WHAT ABOUT PRIVACY AND CONFIDENTIALITY?

We will do our best to keep your personal information private and confidential. However, we cannot guarantee absolute confidentiality. Your personal information may be disclosed if required by law. Additionally, your information in this research project could be reviewed by representatives of the University such as the Office of Research Integrity and/or the Institutional Review Board.

The results of this research project may be shown at meetings or published in journals to inform other professionals. If any papers or talks are given about this research, your name will not be used. We may use data from this research project that has been permanently stripped of personal identifiers in future research without obtaining your consent.

- Data will only be collected during one on one participant interviews using Zoom, no information will be taken without your consent, and transcribed interviews will be checked by you for accuracy before they are added to the study.

- Pseudonyms will be used for all participants and any personally identifying information will be stripped from the interview transcript.

- All names and e-mails gathered during recruitment will be recorded and linked to a uniquely assigned pseudonym in a master list.

- The master list will be kept securely and separately from the study data and accessible only to the principal investigator.

- The interview will be conducted in a private setting to ensure others cannot hear your conversation.

- You will be given the option to turn off your camera during Zoom interview.

- After you have verified the accuracy of your restoried narrative the recorded Zoom interview will be destroyed. Once all restoried narratives have been verified by the participants of this project, the master list of personal information will be destroyed.

- All other study data will be retained on record for 3 years after the completion of the project and then destroyed. The study data may be accessed upon request by representatives of the University (e.g., faculty advisors, Office of Research Integrity, etc.) when necessary.

- All data collected will be stored on a password protected personal laptop computer accessible only by the principal investigator.

WHAT IF YOU WANT TO WITHDRAW FROM THIS PROJECT?

You have the right to choose not to participate, or to withdraw your participation at any time until the Master List is destroyed without penalty or loss of benefits. You will not be treated differently if you decide to stop taking part in this project.

If you request to withdraw from this project, the data collected about you will be deleted when the master list is in existence, but the researcher may not be able to do so after the master list is destroyed.

WHAT IF YOU HAVE QUESTIONS ABOUT THIS PROJECT?

You have the right to ask, and have answered, any questions you may have about this research project. If you have questions about this project, complaints or concerns, you should contact the Principal Investigator listed on the first page of this document.

WHAT IF YOU HAVE QUESTIONS ABOUT YOUR RIGHTS AS A RESEARCH PARTICIPANT?

If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, or if you would like to obtain information or offer input, you may contact the Office of Research Integrity at (207) 602-2244 or via e-mail at irb@une.edu.

For IRB Office Use Only – Do Not Alter or Delete
RES-T-001; Rev 1; Effective Date: 11/14/2022

APPENDIX D

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

1. BACKGROUND INFORMATION
   a. What is your role in supporting the trauma-responsive practices in your school? How long have you been involved in creating a trauma-informed school? What was the motivation to pursue this approach?

2. UNDERSTANDING TRAUMA-INFORMED SCHOOLS
   a. In your experience, describe what a trauma-informed school looks like, feels like and sounds like?
   b. How does the trauma-informed approach differ from traditional approaches to education?
      i. Follow-up question if necessary: What key principles or values underpin your trauma-informed school?

3. STRATEGIES FOR BUILDING A TRAUMA-INFORMED SCHOOL
   a. Could you describe strategies or approaches you have found effective in creating a trauma-informed school?
   b. How do you ensure that all staff members are trained and knowledgeable about trauma and its impact on students?

4. TOOLS AND RESOURCES
   a. Describe specific tools or resources you use to support the implementation of a trauma-informed approach?
      i. Follow-up question if necessary: How do you select or develop these resources? What criteria do you consider?
   b. Describe the external organizations, partnerships, or collaborations that have been instrumental in supporting this work?

5. PROCESS AND IMPLEMENTATION
   a. Could you describe the process and timeline followed when implementing a trauma-informed approach in your school inclusive of barriers.
      i. Follow-up question if necessary: How were stakeholders engaged such as other leaderships, teachers, staff, and families? Were there any challenges or obstacles you encountered during the implementation phase? If so, how did you address them?

6. IMPACT AND OUTCOMES

a. Share stories of positive changes or outcomes resulting from the implementation of trauma-informed practices in your school? Describe your school or district initiative that led to the trauma-informed practices implemented in your school?

b. How do you measure the impact of these practices (i.e., student well-being, academic performance, and school climate)?

7. ADVICE

a. What are some valuable lessons you have learned through your experience in creating a trauma-informed school?

8. CLOSING

a. Thank you for your time today and again, your responses will not be identifiable as I will replace any identifying information with pseudonyms. Do you have any questions for me or any last thoughts to share?