EXPLORING THE PERSPECTIVES OF PRIVATE HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS WITH ADVERSE CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES ON TRAUMA-BASED APPROACHES

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ABSTRACT

Nearly 75% of high school students reported having at least one adverse childhood experience (ACE) (Anderson et al., 2022). The effects of trauma include hindrances to skill acquisition and task completion because of how one's executive functioning is inhibited (Cohen & Barron, 2021; Hubel et al., 2020; McClain, 2021). Students with trauma may experience "emotional, relational, behavioral and cognitive levels that will significantly impair their psychosocial functioning" (Milot et al., 2010, p. 232). This study used a qualitative phenomenological approach to capture the essence of the lived experiences of the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2017). The purpose of this study is to explore how private high school students, age 18 or older, who have at least one ACE, perceive trauma-based approaches used in the classroom. The specific problem that this study addresses is the lapse in research on trauma-based approaches used by private school teachers. This study used students with ACEs as participants to solicit their insights into the trauma-based approaches they believed positively impacted their academics and functioning in learning. The research's findings revealed that a trauma-based approach in this study is a three-pronged approach that includes a holistic teacher, a holistic learning environment, and responsive instructional methods used by the teacher. The findings of this research also revealed that a trauma-based approach can lead to pervasive academic achievement and cultivate self-reflection in students while also nurturing a student's identity and repairing their attachment.

Key terms: academic performance; adverse childhood experience (ACE); attachment; developmental trauma; functional performance; neurobiological changes; physiological response; teacher-student relationship; trauma-based approach; trauma-based intervention

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To God for the abilities, gifts, and experiences that I have ascertained in my lifetime which have led me to the culmination of this dissertation.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The United States of America's Center for Disease Control has identified "childhood victimization" as a significant health crisis in the country (Ford et al., 2013, p. 841). Ford et al. defined this victimization experienced by children as "symptoms of affective, somatic, cognitive, behavioral, interpersonal, and self-identity dysregulation that constitute a 'silent epidemic of neurodevelopment injuries' caused by victimization typically beginning early in childhood" (p. 841). An experience of childhood victimization is an "adverse childhood experience" (ACE) (Anda et al., 2006, p. 174).

Feletti et al. (1998) first coined the phrase adverse childhood experience (ACE). Feletti et al. led a groundbreaking study called *The Relationship of Childhood Abuse and Household Dysfunction to Many of the Leading Causes of Death in Adults.* In this study, Feletti et al. identified seven ACES, which included psychological abuse, physical abuse, contact sexual abuse, exposure to substance abuse, mental illness, violent treatment of mother/stepmother, and criminal behavior in the household, and their effects on health and behaviors outcomes for adults. The correlative findings between adverse childhood experiences and health and behavior outcomes hold implications for educators in the K-12 education system (Hobbs et al., 2019; Paredes, 2021).

In 2019, the United States Center for Disease Control expanded Felitti et al.'s (1998) definition of adverse childhood experiences to encapsulate any experience that challenges a child's attachment, safety, or security (Center for Disease Control, 2019). According to Stoppelbein et al., the "rates of ACEs have reached epidemic levels with nearly 35 million children experiencing at least one or more types of serious ACE-related traumas in the USA" (p.

130). In addition, one in two 3-year-old children in early childhood programs have experienced at least one adverse childhood experience (Hubel et al., 2020).

According to Milot et al. (2010), exposure to a single ACE, multiple ACEs, or chronic exposure to an ACE has significant effects on K-12 students. Milot et al. also shared that students exposed to these experiences could experience trauma symptoms. Many researchers on the topic have considered using the phrase "developmental trauma" to describe those who have had adverse childhood experiences and the impact ACEs have had on their daily functioning and progress in school (Milot et al., 2010, p. 231). Cohen and Barron (2021) shared, "While the single event and small cluster trauma can lead to post-traumatic stress disorder and the comorbidity of anxiety and depression, adolescents experiencing the complex trauma exposure of abuse and neglect can develop pervasive symptoms of developmental trauma disorder" (p. 225). Cohen and Barron (2021) also argued that trauma exposure can also negatively impact brain development from the years of early childhood to adolescence. The effects of trauma on the lives of students are catalysts for widening achievement gaps and perpetuating behavioral problems (Buxton, 2018; Hobbs et al., 2019; Ormiston et al., 2020; Twemlow et al., 2006).

Acknowledging the pervasive effects of adverse childhood experiences (Cohen & Barron, 2021; Milot et al., 2010), it is helpful to solicit the perspectives of students with ACEs. Students with ACEs would have firsthand experiences of teachers utilizing teaching practices and modeling teacher characteristics. Teacher practices and characteristics used to meet the needs of students with ACEs may be described as a holistic trauma-based approach (Hobbs et al., 2019). The insights of students with ACEs into trauma-based approaches clarify the effects of trauma-based approaches.

Definition of Key Terms

The following key terms and definitions, listed in alphabetical order, are designed to enhance the reader's understanding of the terminology to develop a comprehensive understanding of this research study.

Academic outcomes. A student's academic growth and skill attainment in achievement areas, such as literacy, language arts, mathematics, and other core subject areas, as measured by local standards compared to neurotypical peers (Brunzell et al., 2019; Ormistron et al., 2020).

Adverse childhood experience (ACE)/trauma. An adverse childhood experience is a traumatic experience, or any experience, incurred by or repeatedly lived by the child that undermines their safety, stability, and attachment (Stoppelbein et al., 2020). The experience also leads to negative neurobiological impacts on a child's behavioral, physiological, relational, functional, and academic outcomes (Anda et al., 2006).

Attachment. Attachment occurs when an individual and primary caregiver, or another adult that functions as a primary caregiver, develops a relationship that responds to the individual's wants and needs and provides them with stability and security (Neitzel, 2020; Opiola et al., 2020). Those with secure attachments are likely to have closer relationships with the primary caregiver and others, while individuals with insecure attachments to their primary caregiver experience more conflictual relationships (McClain, 2021; Stoppelbein et al., 2020).

Developmental trauma. The changes in a child's development may put a child at risk for developing posttraumatic stress disorder because of an experience of trauma or adverse childhood experience (Milot et al., 2010). Symptoms of developmental trauma that result from exposures to trauma or adverse childhood experiences include "dissociation, somatic symptoms, and physical illness, relationship difficulties in the home, school, and community, self-

harm…[and] challenges with attention, executive functioning, [and] learning" (Cohen & Barron, 2021, p. 225).

Functional outcomes. A student's growth in key behavioral areas, which include, but are not limited to, engagement, attention, relationship building, impulse control, and emotional regulation, affect their ability to be available to learning (Hubel et al., 2020; Milot et al., 2010; Neitzel, 2020; Ormiston et al., 2020).

Neurobiological changes. Changes in the individual's brain structure and nervous system due to experiencing or past exposure to trauma affect cognitive processes such as attention, memory, and executive functioning (Foreman & Bates, 2021; Hubel et al., 2020). The release of cortisol increases during intense, stressful experiences that result in neurotoxicity on various parts of the brain, which results in impaired functioning and learning (Chambers, 2017; Foreman & Bates, 2021; Neitzel, 2020).

Physiological response. A response in an individual who has experienced or is currently exposed to trauma to stimuli that results in a "fight, flight, or freeze" reaction prompted by the heightened sympathetic nervous system (Chambers, 2017; Hubel et al., 2020). Physiological responses include but are not limited to, physical ailments (e.g., stomach aches, obesity, increased heart rates) and challenging behaviors (e.g., excessive crying, distress, violence, hypervigilance, over sensitivity) (Hubel et al., 2020; Neitzel, 2020; Ormiston et al., 2020).

Private school. Schools that are managed by nongovernmental organizations despite funding sources (Gutiérrez et al., 2023).

Public school. Schools that are managed and funded by government organizations (Gutiérrez et al., 2023).

Teacher-student relationship. The quality of the relationship between teacher and student and the pair's ability to be responsive, understanding, and sensitive to the needs of the other to cultivate a safe, stable, and nurturing relationship (Neitzel, 2020; Opiola et al., 2020).

Trauma-based approach. A trauma-based approach is researched-based knowledge and practices utilized by professionals who serve students with trauma holistically through teacher practices and characteristics (Hobbs et al., 2019). Knowledge and awareness of trauma while also allowing them to tailor their practices, which are informed by their funds of knowledge of trauma, to be responsive to the self-regulatory and relational needs of struggling learners while also avoiding retraumatization (Brunzell et al., 2019; Hobbs et al., 2019; Maynard et al., 2019; Neitzel, 2020).

Trauma-based intervention. A trauma-based intervention is a research-based one implemented by a qualified professional trained in it (Hobbs et al., 2019). They are also specifically designed to treat trauma symptoms to enable healing (Cohen & Barron, 2021; Maynard et al., 2019).

Statement of the Problem

The number of students with ACEs in K-12 school systems is growing at astronomical rates (Anderson et al., 2022; Hubel et al., 2020). The attainment of adverse childhood experiences significantly impacts the academic and functional progress of the individual child (Neitzel, 2020; Stoppelbein et al., 2020). As of 2020, one study demonstrated that 50% of children in early childhood programs have at least one adverse childhood experience, while 12% of three-year-olds have had three or more adverse childhood experiences (Hubel et al., 2020). After the COVID-19 pandemic, the prevalence of adverse childhood experiences rose even to a higher rate (Anderson et al., 2022). Anderson et al. discovered that "nearly three quarters (73.1%) of high school students aged <18 years reported at least one ACE during the COVID-19

pandemic (53.2%, 12.0%, and 7.8% reported one to two, three, and four or more ACEs, respectively)" (p. 1302). Adversity experienced in childhood leads to an increased risk of experiencing adversity later (Wilson-Genderson et al., 2022). High school students are also students in a school system who have accumulated life experiences and adverse childhood experiences over the years (Anderson et al., 2022).

The consequences of ACE-related traumas include negative impacts on language, trusting relationships, and neurobiological changes that may impact an individual's daily functioning and ability to learn (Paredes, 2021). Intense, stressful experiences induced by trauma invoke high cortisol production levels by the adrenal glands from the hypothalamus working through the hypothalamic pituitary adrenal (HPA) axis (Chambers, 2017). Such high cortisol levels create neurotoxicity in various brain parts including the amygdala, which is essential to detecting threats and activating the body's "flight, flight, or freeze" system (Hubel, 2020, p. 7). The neurotoxic effects of the high production of cortisol change the trajectory of a brain's development unless it is addressed through interventions and therapies (Neitzel, 2020). The symptoms of such neurotoxic effects in the brain include impaired memory, attention, executive functioning skills, regulation of intense emotions, and being in a constant state of heightened awareness of stressful situations that perpetuate the release of cortisol (Foreman & Bates, 2021; Hubel et al., 2020; Milot et al., 2010; Paredes, 2021).

ACE related traumas also negatively affect an individual's physiology and behavioral outcomes (Feletti et al., 1998; Maynard et al., 2019; Ormistron et al., 2020; Pierce et al., 2022). ACE related traumas may result in headaches, stomach aches, heart disease, obesity, and mental health issues like anxiety and depression (Foreman & Bates, 2021; Neitzel, 2020; Ormiston et al., 2020). Due to changes in the individual's neurobiology, individuals with trauma may

demonstrate challenging behaviors, which include poor emotional regulation, aggression, excessive crying, withdrawal, engaging in violence, and extreme hypervigilance of the actions and expressions of those in the environment (Buxton, 2018; Hubel et al., 2020; Neitzel, 2020; Ormiston et al., 2020). Adverse childhood experiences negatively affect an individual's neurobiology and physiology, which may impact their ability to be available for learning and make academic and functional growth (Hubel et al., 2020; Ormistron et al., 2020; Stipp & Kilpatrick, 2021).

Current literature demonstrates the academic and functional outcomes of public high school students with ACEs and the effects they may experience after high school. Regarding academic outcomes, students in grades 9 through 11 who have had at least one or more adverse childhood experiences had associations with cutting class, truancy, literacy challenges, below-average academic achievement, dropping out of school, and making no plans to graduate high school (Duke, 2020; Ormistron, 2020). Regarding functional outcomes, students with "histories of ACEs can predict…undesirable behaviour among adolescents, and the strongest correlation is among students with low resilience" (Myat Zaw et al., 2022, p. 715).

The comorbid negative effects on academic and functional outcomes could lead to difficulties in socio-economic mobility for high school students after high school (Duke, 2020). Duke shared, "Consistent with cumulative inequality theory, findings show adverse social and economic experiences correlate with outcomes for academic disadvantage in adolescence that, if persistent and without remedy, portend future downward mobility and compounding of inequality into adulthood" (p. 625). Wilson-Genderson et al. (2022) also claimed, "People who experienced ACEs had trajectories of depressive symptoms in late life that were higher than people not having these experiences" (p. 2171). Traumatic experiences that occur in the lives of

K-12 students as soon as early childhood are felt while an individual is in school (Anderson et al., 2022). However, trauma can have lifelong effects well into adulthood, especially in socio-economic mobility (Duke, 2020; Neitzel, 2020).

Teachers and school personnel have a pertinent role in mitigating the effects of traumatic experiences in the lives of their students (Duke, 2020; Hobbs et al., 2019). Duke (2020) stated how strategies oriented to strengthen students' connections with the school "may be relevant for supporting youth resilience and tempering academic disadvantage in the context of ACEs" (p. 627). Exploring the perspectives of students with adverse childhood experiences on teachers' uses of trauma-based approaches may be beneficial to teachers to deepen their understanding of trauma-based approaches and their related outcomes according to the perspectives of students with trauma who experience them.

The current literature on this topic of trauma-based approaches and students with adverse childhood experiences demonstrates that most of the recent research has been primarily done in a public school setting. Based upon existing research, there is a lapse in research into students' experiences with adverse childhood experiences in private schools. However, studies have suggested that private schools with a religious affiliation may lead to better mental health outcomes and a student's character development (DeAngelis & Dill, 2018; DeAngelis & Wolf, 2020). DeAngelis and Dill (2018) remarked that "better school cultures may improve mental health. Private schools, especially religious schools, may focus more on character building than district-run public schools" (p. 327). DeAngelis and Dill (2018) also described how safer school environments benefit children's mental health. In addition, DeAngelis and Wolf (2020) claimed that "schools with religious affiliations tend to emphasize the importance of shaping student character traits and moral behavior" (p. 16). DeAngelis and Wolf (2020) continued to articulate

how improving character skills leads to reduced undesirable behaviors. Studies have acknowledged that private schools may benefit students affected by mental health issues (DeAngelis & Dill, 2018; DeAngelis & Wolf, 2020).

Private educational institutions, such as the Archdiocese of Philadelphia, acknowledged the benefit of a private school experience for students with mental health issues, specifically students with adverse childhood experiences (Gambino, 2018). Gambino (2018) reported that the Archdiocese of Philadelphia is discussing how to address the needs of students with adverse childhood experiences in their high schools (Gambino, 2018). More research into the relationship between private schools and students with adverse childhood experiences is needed to fill this lapse in the current literature on adverse childhood experiences.

The specific problem that this study addresses is the lapse in research on trauma-based approaches used by teachers in private schools for students with adverse childhood experiences to meet their academic and functional needs. There is also a lack of clear understanding of trauma-based approaches used by teachers in private schools, or even public schools, in the classroom and their related academic and functional outcomes for students with adverse childhood experiences (Maynard et al., 2019). According to Maynard et al. (2019), there were no studies at the time of their systematic literature review.

It may be valuable to solicit the perspectives of private high school seniors who have self-identified as having at least one adverse childhood experience to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the academic and functional outcomes of trauma-based approaches used in private schools. Private high school seniors may also be beneficial because they have accumulated experiences in going to school for most of their lives and in adverse experiences throughout life (Anderson et al., 2022). Anderson et al. (2022) shared that after the

COVID-19 pandemic, 73.1% of high school students reported having at least one adverse childhood experience. Wilson-Genderson (2022) also discussed how initial stressors from adverse childhood experiences may manifest in secondary stressors later in life and affect one's adaptive capacities to challenging situations such as difficult schoolwork or social situations.

High school seniors may be ideal candidates to discuss and share how earlier adverse childhood experiences may have affected their perceptions of stressful situations later in their academic careers. Exploring the perspectives of seniors in a private high school, 18 years of age or older, who have experiences with teachers attempting to meet their needs as students with histories of trauma may help in the identification of trauma-based approaches. Their perspectives give insight into what supports students with adverse childhood experiences in their academic and functional growth.

Foreman and Bates (2021) shared that training in trauma-based approaches for classroom teachers is necessary to "facilitate learning for students with a history of trauma" (p. 1). Teachers with a more profound knowledge of trauma-based approaches could benefit from the perspectives and insights of students with ACEs who experience the trauma-based approaches teachers use in their classrooms. As an additional hypothesis, teachers may use this deeper understanding to tailor their instruction to help students with a history of trauma experience positive academic and functional outcomes.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study is to explore how private high school seniors, age 18 or older, who have at least one adverse childhood experience perceive the trauma-based approaches used by their teachers in the classroom. An adverse childhood experience is a traumatic experience, or any experience, incurred by or repeatedly experienced as

a child that undermines their safety, stability, and attachment (Stoppelbein et al., 2020). Trauma-based approaches are teacher practices and characteristics informed by a holistic understanding of trauma that allows the professional to empathize and understand the experiences of students with trauma to tailor their practices and qualities to mitigate the effects of trauma on student learning (Brunzell et al., 2019; Hobbs et al., 2019; Maynard et al., 2019; Neitzel, 2020). Practitioners may use students' insights into teachers' trauma-based approaches to reflect upon what students with adverse childhood experiences perceive as helping them experience positive academic and functional outcomes.

Research Questions and Design

The following questions will guide this study to explore the perspectives of high school seniors, age 18 or older, who have at least one adverse childhood experience on trauma-based approaches in the classroom they have experienced.

Research Question 1: How do private high school seniors, age 18 or older who have experienced at least one adverse childhood experience, describe the trauma-based approaches in their classroom?

Research Question 2: How do private high school seniors, age 18 or older who have experienced at least one adverse childhood experience, describe the outcomes of trauma-based approaches on their academic progress?

Research Question 3: How do private high school seniors, age 18 or older who have experienced at least one adverse childhood experience, describe the outcomes of trauma-based approaches on their functional progress?

The design of this research is a qualitative phenomenological study. The purpose of a qualitative phenomenological study, according to Bloomberg (2022), is to "investigate the meaning of the

lived experience of people to identify the core essence of human experience or phenomena as described by research participants" (p. 88). Semi-structured interviews will be used to collect data in this qualitative phenomenological study.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

The conceptual framework considers "the main things to be studied-the key factors, variables, or constructs, and the presumed relationship among them" (Roberts & Hyatt, 2019, p. 104-105). Conceptual frameworks require the researcher to engage in higher-order thinking that provokes reflection on the purposes and operations of the research process (Kivunja, 2018). The components of a conceptual framework include researcher interest, topical research, and theoretical framework. The topical research component of the conceptual framework for this study will be adverse childhood experiences (Felitti et al., 1978). Adverse childhood experiences "hinder children's acquisition of academic skills" (Hubel et al., 2020, p. 3) and influence neurological processes "such as attention, memory, organizational skills, ability process information, and problem-solving skills" (Ormiston et al., 2020, p. 320). Children with adverse childhood experiences also may demonstrate behavioral challenges such as aggression, dissociation, self-esteem issues, peer-rejection, altercations in relationships, and increased anxiety and depression (Milot, 2010; Ormiston et al., 2020; Twemlow et al., 2006).

The theoretical framework "summarizes concepts and theories, which you develop from previously tested and published knowledge which you synthesize to help you have a theoretical background or basis for your data analysis and interpretation of the meaning contained in your research data" (Kivunja, 2019, p. 46). Attachment theory (Bowlby, 1958) will be the theoretical framework in this research study. Bowlby's attachment theory (1958) could play a crucial role in alleviating the impact of adverse childhood experiences on the learning process. Attachment

occurs when an individual and primary caregiver, or another adult that functions as a primary caregiver, develops a relationship that responds to the individual's wants and needs and provides the individual with stability and security (Neitzel, 2020; Opiola et al., 2020).

As educators consider and reflect upon how to meet the needs of students with traumatic histories, educators need to recognize the nuances between a trauma-based approach and a trauma-based intervention (Hobbs et al., 2019). A trauma-based approach would consist of a holistic approach that includes developing knowledge and awareness of trauma, prioritizing healthy relationships with students with ACEs, implementing practice with the knowledge of trauma's symptoms and effects, and being sensitive to retraumatizing a student (Hobbs et al., 2019; Neitzel, 2020). A trauma-based intervention is delivered by a qualified professional with training to implement the intervention to treat trauma symptoms. (Cohen & Barron, 2021; Maynard et al., 2019). A partnership between a trauma-based approach and trauma-based interventions allows the needs of students with ACEs to be met on the organizational level as well as the interpersonal level within the classroom.

Assumptions, Limitations, and Scope

This qualitative phenomenological study considers the researcher's position, what the researcher may not have control over in the study, and the conditions of the study that give it focus. According to Creswell and Poth (2017), assumptions are the beliefs and philosophical positions a researcher brings into a study, which the researcher needs to consider before including or setting them aside for the research study. Bloomberg (2022) shared that the limitations of a study are factors that the researcher does not have control over. Bloomberg also shared that the scope considers how external conditions give focus to the study.

Assumptions

Assumptions are the beliefs and philosophical perspectives that a researcher brings to the study (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Creswell and Poth (2017) suggested that assumptions are "ingrained views about the types of problems that we need to study, what research questions to ask, or how we go about gathering data" (p. 15). Creswell and Poth (2017) also emphasized that researchers need to be able to recognize and increase their awareness of the assumptions they hold and then consider if these assumptions need to be set aside or not for the research study.

The prior professional experiences of the researcher in the classroom guided the study's belief in the primal importance of the teacher-student relationship. This assumption should be considered as the research study goes forward, as the literature review indicated the importance of the teacher-student relationship in mitigating the effects of trauma. This research is also guided by the belief in the importance of academic and functional outcomes. This perspective needs to be set aside to allow the participants to describe the academic and functional outcomes of teachers' trauma-based approaches in the classroom. The research also assumes that participants will answer truthfully and honestly throughout the semi-structured interview.

Four philosophical perspectives are considered in phenomenological studies. Creswell and Poth (2017) shared that they are "a return to the traditional task of philosophy,....a philosophy without presuppositions,...the intentionality of consciousness,....the refusal of the subject-object dichotomy" (p. 75). Creswell and Poth (2017) added that the traditional task of philosophy is concerned with the Greek's perception of the search for wisdom, while philosophy without presuppositions is concerned with the researcher "suspending all judgments about what is real…until they are founded on a more certain basis" (p. 75). The intentionality of consciousness considers how an individual's "consciousness is always directed toward an object" (Creswell & Poth, 2017, p. 75), and refusal of the subject-object dichotomy considers

how “the reality of an object is only perceived within the meaning of the experience of an individual” (Creswell & Poth, 2017, p. 75).

This study seeks the wisdom, experiences, and perspectives of students with adverse childhood experiences. This study will also suspend all judgments about trauma-based practices and their effectiveness. This study will assume that students are consciously aware of the specific objects of teacher practices and characteristics they are responsive to in the classroom, which may impact their academic and functional outcomes.

Limitations

There are limitations to this phenomenological study. According to Bloomberg (2022), “Limitations of a study are some potential challenges and shortcomings that are inherent in the research and over which the researcher has little or no control and authority to manage or overcome” (p. 311). Bloomberg (2022) also said that the limitation of a qualitative approach is smaller sample sizes. Smaller sample sizes may not be representative of a larger target population; however, smaller sample sizes may lead to studies that are rich in detail. According to Bloomberg (2022), a limitation in phenomenological studies may be the difficulty of bracketing a researcher’s experiences and biases from the analysis of the data collected. Bloomberg argued, “Bracketing personal experiences is difficult, if not impossible” (p. 88). Therefore, Bloomberg (2022) shared that it is necessary to do one’s best to bracket personal experiences where appropriate and to consider how one’s personal experiences may be helpful in the analysis of the collected data.

A limitation of this qualitative phenomenological study is the lack of transparency from participants as they offer their responses because of the nature of the trauma they experienced

and how it has influenced their perspectives of teacher characteristics and practices. A lack of transparency may impact the authenticity of the data collected from a participant.

Another limitation is that the researcher has not worked in this high school setting before; therefore, the researcher has no previous relationship or rapport with students or teachers. This lack of relationship may be beneficial for preserving objectivity and mitigating other biases when collecting information. However, lacking trust and rapport with participants may affect the data received. Finally, participants being interviewed might give edited answers due to the sensitive nature of why they are being interviewed.

Scope

The scope of this study considers how external conditions give the study focus and constraints (Bloomberg, 2022). This study will be conducted with eight participants from a New Jersey Catholic high school in a central New Jersey suburb. The eight participants will need to self-identify and fulfill the criteria of being (a) a senior at the chosen research site, (b) being 18 years old or older, and (c) having at least one adverse childhood experience. After self-identifying eligibility for the study and offering consent to participate, each participant will engage in a semi-structured interview, which will then be transcribed and checked for accuracy by the respective participants before the data is analyzed for emerging patterns and themes.

Rationale and Significance

Adverse childhood experiences have been proven to create neurobiological changes and invoke physiological responses in students that negatively affect their ability to make academic and functional progress (Chambers, 2017; Foreman & Bates, 2021; Hubel et al., 2020; Neitzel, 2020; Ormiston et al., 2020). Without proper practices that these students with trauma are responsive to, these students will have outcomes that result in greater achievement gaps

(Brunzell et al., 2019; Foreman & Bates, 2021). The result of achievement gaps leads to special education referrals and, at times, misunderstanding of student needs and incorrectly choosing interventions (Ormiston et al., 2020).

The reasoning behind this study is to attempt to adequately listen to and understand the voices of students with traumatic experiences in the K-12 school system. Students with adverse childhood experiences who have been through a K-12 school system may be considered experts in describing the trauma-based approaches that teachers may have used in the classroom. These students are also experts due to their experiences with various educators over a thirteen-year career in education (Anderson et al., 2022). This study aims to describe students' experiences with adverse childhood experiences and their perceived academic and functional outcomes.

Summary

A substantial portion of the student population in the United States has been exposed to or experienced trauma in the form of one, multiple, or chronic adverse childhood experiences (Hubel et al., 2020; Ormiston et al., 2020). Such experiences may negatively affect children, affecting their development, neurobiology, and physiological responses to everyday stimuli. In the absence of practices and interventions that are informed by an understanding of trauma and traumatic experiences, K-12 students with trauma would be left unsupported, which may lead to greater gaps in achievement and functional performance. This qualitative phenomenological study must solicit the perspectives of seniors in high school (18 years or older) with histories of trauma who can speak to what they perceive as beneficial teacher practices and characteristics that helped them experience positive academic and functional outcomes. This study's conceptual framework includes researcher interest, topical research, and theoretical framework (Bloomberg, 2022). The topical research component of the conceptual framework will be adverse childhood

experiences (Cohen & Barron, 2021; Felitti et al., 1978; Milot et al., 2010). The theoretical framework for this study will be attachment theory (Ainsworth & Bell, 1970; Bowlby, 1958; Bowlby, 1982). Like other trauma studies, Felitti et al. (1978) acknowledged the correlative relationship between an individual having an adverse childhood experience and the role of attachment theory (Bowlby, 1958) in mitigating the effects of adverse childhood experiences.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Much literature has been published on the theoretical understanding of trauma and its effects on child development and classroom performance. This literature review captures a substantive and comprehensive understanding of the historical perspective of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and the evolving definition of ACEs (Anda et al., 2006; Felleti et al., 1998; Milot et al., 2010; Stoppelbein et al., 2020). This review commences by presenting the researcher's conceptual and theoretical framework, a history of adverse childhood experiences, and the effects of trauma. It will then uncover themes discovered by this researcher's exploration through the current literature on this topic, which include: (a) adverse childhood experiences, (b) outcomes of ACEs for high school students, (c) neurobiological changes, (d) physiological responses, (e) academic and functioning delays, (f) teacher awareness and practices, (g) teacher-student relationship, and (h) culture of the classroom and school. This review will also end with a summary.

Three primary gaps in the current literature on adverse childhood experiences and school-based approaches were identified. First, there is a lack of research into trauma-based approaches used to meet the needs of students with adverse childhood experiences in private school settings. Second, there is a lack of clarity and understanding of what teachers and schools know about trauma-based approaches and how staff members implement them. According to Maynard et al. (2019), the current understanding of trauma and trauma-based practices does not cover tangible and observable practices that teachers have utilized in the day-to-day to address the needs of students with adverse childhood experiences. Third, the current research also lacks stakeholder participation and input, primarily from students with histories of trauma, in the identification of perceived effective practices that meet their needs (Maynard et al., 2019).

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

According to Kivunja (2018), the conceptual framework is the master plan for a research study. Kivunja (2018) shared that it explains the core concepts being studied throughout this research process, how various variables and factors are related, and the concepts to be studied. The components of a conceptual framework include researcher interest, topical research, and theoretical framework (Bloomberg, 2022). In this study, the adverse childhood experience (ACE) framework (Feletti et al., 1978) will be the topical research in the conceptual framework, and attachment theory (Bowlby, 1958) will be this study's theoretical framework. The theoretical framework is the "basis for your data analysis and interpretation of the meaning contained in your research data" (Kivunja, 2019, p. 46). Felitti et al. (1978) acknowledged the correlative relationship between their ACE framework and the implication of attachment theory by Bowlby (1958) in mitigating the effects of adverse childhood experiences.

Researcher Interest

The researcher's interest is studying the effects of trauma on students and student outcomes in academics and functional performance. This area of interest is accompanied by an interest in examining the role of the teacher-student relationship in mitigating the effects of trauma in a student's life by functioning as a vehicle for a holistic trauma-based approach. From professional experience as an educator, the following aspects have been witnessed by the researcher:

- The effects of strong and secure relationships between teachers and students with histories of trauma.
- How the relationship between teachers and students plays a pivotal role in shaping the trajectories of students with adverse childhood experiences.

This research intends to contribute a refined articulation of how the teacher-student relationship facilitates effective teacher practices and characteristics utilized to meet the needs of students with adverse childhood experiences.

Topical Research

The topical research for this study focuses on adverse childhood experiences as a framework. An adverse childhood experience is understood as an experience that undermines a "child's sense of safety, stability or attachment" in their relationships (Stoppelbein et al., 2020, p. 130). Seventy-five percent of high school-aged students have reported having at least one ACE since the COVID-19 pandemic (Anderson et al., 2022). Wilson-Genderson (2022) discussed how an individual's initial stressors from ACEs manifest themselves in later life stressors, which affect their adaptive capacities as their lives progress. Neurobiological changes and physiological responses experienced by a student with a history of trauma can be mitigated by attachment moves, such as proximity and using a calm voice, which leads to a co-regulation between a caregiver and an individual (Brunzell et al., 2019).

Foreman and Bates (2021) added that teachers need to understand how establishing relationships with students is essential in mitigating the effects of trauma. Hobbs et al. (2019) also contributed that "central to all trauma-informed approaches is the importance of strong, trusting, consistent and predictable relationships between an adult and a trauma-affected child. It is within this space that opportunities to repair dysregulated stress responses and disruptive attachment styles…take place" (p. 1). Attachment theory and adverse childhood experience framework connect most of the themes identified in the literature review.

A strength of the adverse childhood experience framework is that it is a simple tool that presents the correlation between experiencing more adverse experiences and higher rates of

poorer outcomes (Goodall et al., 2020; Lacey & Minnis, 2020). Lacey and Minnis (2020) stated, "The use of ACE scores acknowledges the high level of co-occurrence of different childhood adversities, and that, on average, experiencing more adversities is associated with poorer outcomes" (p. 118). Another strength of the ACE framework is that it has been used in the development of "primary prevention or secondary interventions" (Goodall et al., 2020, p. 497). Goodall et al. (2020) shared that schools are adopting these trauma-informed practices in their approach to education.

A weakness of the adverse childhood experience framework is that it treats all adverse experiences the same and that it does not make a distinction between the factors of severity or duration (Goodall et al., 2020). Goodall et al. (2020) shared, "Nuance is lost when all types of ACEs are given equal weighting. Studies comparing types of adversity indicate that some may be more relevant than others to educational outcomes" (p. 495). Lacey and Minnis (2020) explained that "the ACE score approach assumes that each adversity is equally important for outcomes" (p. 118). Another weakness is that the ACE framework "assumes that everyone with the same ACE score will receive the same benefit from an intervention regardless of what those adversities were" (Lacey & Minnis, 2020, p. 119). Although the ACE framework has strength in providing insight into the development of trauma-based approaches, it also has weaknesses in substantiating the benefit of trauma-based practices experienced by individuals with varying types and degrees of adverse experiences.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study is attachment theory (Ainsworth & Bell, 1970; Bowlby, 1958; Bowlby, 1982). Attachment theory has been used as a theoretical framework to study students (Bumbacco & Scharfe, 2023). For example, Bumbacco and Scharfe (2023) used

attachment theory as their theoretical lens to understand how attachments may lead to burnout or increased dropout rates for post-secondary students. Ramsdal and Wynn's (2022) study is another example that used attachment theory to understand why high school students drop out of school and what factors functioned as catalysts for them to re-enroll in school.

Bowlby's (1958) attachment theory was also a lens for researchers in studying preschool competencies and the role of the mother and father in developing social-inner working models. (Lu, 2023; Suess et al., 1992). Suess et al. (1992) described how the mother and father dynamic and social-inner working models in a child's attachment affect preschool readiness and class functioning when the primary caregiver, the child's parents, is no longer present. Similarly, Lu (2023) also considered attachment theory and the role of the mother and father in developing a child's social-inner working models. Lu (2023) discovered that parental emotional warmth towards a child was influential in developing the social-inner working models for students in school as they form relationships with teachers and peers; however, Lu suggested that teacher-student relationships may also play a mediating role in the quality of attachment found between a primary-giver and a child.

Bowlby (1958) emphasized the fundamental importance of the relationship between a child and their mother in his founding of attachment theory. Ainsworth, a student of Bowlby, continued his research into the theory and added that infants use attachment with the mother as a "secure base from which to explore the strange situation" (Ainsworth & Bell, 1970, p. 61). Ainsworth and Bell defined strange situations as "conditions of novelty and alarm" (p. 53), and they reported that the goal of their study was to discover the extent to which infants were willing to leave their secure base to explore a strange situation. The attachment between mother and child may have implications for future relationships with peers and adults, including a child's

relationship with their teachers as they go through school (Chambers, 2017). The quality of the teacher-student relationship is essential for educational availability and positive academic and functional for students with ACEs (Hobbs et al., 2019). Outcomes for individuals with histories of ACEs include "marital difficulties, difficulties relating to one's children, neuroses, and personality disorders" (Chambers, 2017, p. 543).

According to Bretherton (1992), Bowlby and Ainsworth, both inspired by Freud, drew on "ethology, cybernetics, information processing, developmental psychology, and psychoanalysis" to define attachment theory (p. 759). Bretherton (1992) emphasized that drawing upon the expertise of these various disciplines allowed Bowlby and Ainsworth to flesh out their development of attachment theory and its effects on a child's development. Bretherton shared that Bowlby embarked on this journey of defining attachment theory after working in a school with maladjusted children. In this school, Bretherton (1992) acknowledged that Bowlby took notice of two students who had difficulties with emotional regulation and had a broken relationship with their primary caregiver. Bretherton (1992) continued to describe how the first student who influenced Bowlby was a "very isolated, remote, affectionless teenager who had been expelled from his previous school for theft and had no stable mother figure" (p. 759). The second student who influenced Bowlby was "an anxious boy of 7 or 8 who trailed Bowlby around and who was known as his shadow" (Bretherton, 1992, p. 759). These two students catalyzed Bowlby's embankment of developing attachment theory.

In one of Bowlby's (1958) earliest works, "*The Nature of the Child's Tie to His Mother*," Bowlby attempted to explain an infant's tendency to cling to their primary caregiver and how the primary caregiver's response affects development. In this study, Bowlby (1958) explained, "In my experience a mother's acceptance of clinging and following is consistent with favourable

development..., whilst rejection of clinging and following is apt to lead to emotional disturbance even in the presence of breastfeeding." (p. 352). Bowlby (1982) continued his study into the attachment between mother and child in his book, "*Attachment and Loss*." He described the nature and functioning of attachment and shared the importance of physical contact in the development of attachment. Bowlby (1982) argued, "These data make it obvious that contact comfort is a variable of critical importance in the development of affectional responsiveness to the surrogate mother" (p. 214).

Ainsworth, a student of Bowlby, continued the development of attachment theory. Ainsworth (1964), in "*Patterns of Attachment Behavior Shown by the Infant in Interaction with his Mother,*" validated the importance of physical contact between a mother and child. Ainsworth added that attachment can be developed through "vocalization, visual-motor orientation, following, exploring from a secure base, and so on" (p. 58). Ainsworth (1964) demonstrated that attachment is not limited to physical contact; other means of interaction are formidable to the relationship between mother and child. Ainsworth also contributed to attachment theory by describing the experience of separation between a mother and child with a developed attachment. Ainsworth and Bell (1970), in "*Attachment, Exploration, and Separation: Illustrated by the Behavior of One-Year-Olds in a Strange Situation*," discovered how infants were willing to engage in exploratory behavior with objects, other infants, and people when their mothers were in proximity. Ainsworth and Bell (1970) found that infants go as far away from their mothers as possible, but they then return to their mothers when they experience separation and need to re-attach. As Ainsworth and Bell demonstrated, attachment between mother and child affects a child's ability to explore their environment and relationships with others. The strengths and weaknesses of this same theory are of noted interest.

A strength of attachment theory is that the research into the theory reveals a range of studies that consider families with depression, maltreatment, low social support, and children with behavior problems (Bretherton, 1992; Rajkumar, 2022). Longitudinal studies on infants with secure attachments also demonstrate that these individuals are more adept at forming relationships in life (Sroufe, 2005). Attachment theory has been studied in other cultures in countries like Japan, Germany, and Israel, according to Bretherton (1992). Granqvist (2021) also argued how attachment theory can be used to understand the transmission of human cultures to the next generation. Suess et al. (1992) found in their study that gender did not play a significant factor in a child's ability to develop safe and secure attachments. However, Emran et al. (2023) added that gender may influence how insecure attachments present differently in men and women. Regardless of family circumstances, culture, or gender, the theory of attachment is applicable when there is a primary caregiver and child relationship (Bretherton, 1992; Emran et al., 2023; Granqvist, 2021; Rajkumar, 2022; Sroufe, 2005; Suess et al., 1992).

According to Bretherton (1992), some researchers may question the rigor of attachment theory because "Bowlby's strategy was, wherever possible, to meticulously test intuitive hunches against available empirical findings and concepts from related domains, thus keeping the theory open to change" (p. 771). This lack of rigor in the theory may lead to others questioning its credibility. Another weakness of attachment theory is that an individual's ability to make relationships later may be more affected by a child's inner organization and framework of relationships than an earlier attachment with a primary caregiver, which is a foundational understanding of attachment theory (Suess et al., 1992).

This present study explores the perspectives of private high school students with ACEs. Attachment theory offers insight into how teacher characteristics or practices may help create a

safe and secure relationship between participants and their teachers. Current research into private schools and mental health suggests that private schools may have better school cultures to improve mental health outcomes (DeAngelis & Dill, 2018) while also sharing that private schools pay more attention to character formation and morality (DeAngelis & Wolf, 2020). These studies suggest that private high schools may present an environment amicable to developing safe and secure attachments between participants with adverse childhood experience and their teachers. The quality of the relationship between a student and teacher may impact a student's availability for learning (Brunzell et al., 2019; Foreman & Bates, 2021; Hobbs et al., 2019; Maynard et al., 2019; McLain, 2021).

History of Adverse Childhood Experiences

The genesis study of ACEs was a study done in collaboration between Kaiser Permanente's Health Appraisal Center (HAC) in San Diego, California, and the U. S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, which began in the 1990s (Anda et al., 2006). Feletti et al. (1998) led this historic study, which was titled *The Relationship of Childhood Abuse and Household Dysfunction to Many of the Leading Causes of Death in Adults.* The original seven ACES studied by Felitti et al. included psychological abuse, physical abuse, contact sexual abuse, exposure to substance abuse, mental illness, violent treatment of mother/stepmother, and criminal behavior in the household. According to Anda et al. (2006), the goal of Felitti's study was to "assess the impact of numerous, interrelated, ACEs on a wide variety of health and behavioral outcomes" (p. 176), which also holds implications for educators and students in the classroom. The impact of ACEs on K-12 aged students included effects on student engagement, availability for learning, and ability to build healthy relationships with teachers and students,

which are foundational to the process of learning (Brunzell et al., 2019; Foreman & Bates, 2021; Hobbs et al., 2019; Maynard et al., 2019; McLain, 2021).

In 2019, the United States Center for Disease Control expanded the definition of ACEs. Stoppelbein et al. (2020) shared this definition:

> ACEs are defined as stressful and potentially traumatic experiences that occur during early development and include experiences such as abuse, neglect, exposure to violence, having a primary caregiver who is incarcerated and/or has mental illness/substance abuse problems. In general, *any experience* [emphasis added] that might undermine a child's sense of safety, stability, or attachment can be considered an adverse childhood experience. (p. 130)

Adverse childhood experiences can be any experience that hinders a child's "safety, stability, or attachment" (Stoppelbein et al., 2020, p. 130). Stoppelbein et al. (2020) also noted that an ACE is synonymous with the term trauma in the sense that it is a trauma that occurs specifically during childhood development.

In the growing understanding of ACEs, experiences of trauma during childhood development may be considered child maltreatment from the position of a developmental trauma disorder (Cohen & Barron, 2021; Milot et al., 2010). Trauma experienced by school-aged children can be "viewed as a major life stressor and a potentially traumatic situation that may strongly impair child *development* [emphasis added] and functioning" (Milot et al., 2010, p. 231). Milot et al. added that trauma could impair a child's cognitive and physical development while also putting them at increased risk for posttraumatic stress disorder (Milot et al., 2010). Symptoms of developmental trauma include "dissociation, somatic symptoms and physical

illness, relationship difficulties,...self harm…[and] challenges with attention, executive functioning, [and] learning" (Cohen & Barron, 2021, p. 225).

In 2000, the United States Congress founded the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN). Maynard et al. (2019) stated that the organization offers training, services, and resources to various stakeholders impacted by trauma. In 2015, the United States federal government passed the Every Student Succeeds Act (Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015). In this legislation, government leaders included provisions that address trauma-informed practices and the needs of students with traumatic experiences. According to Maynard et al. (2019), the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 included provisions for "training of school personnel in understanding when and how to refer students affected by trauma, and grant programs that provide funding to support services that are based on trauma-informed practices that are evidence-based (section 4108)" (p. 4). They also shared that local, state, and federal levels of government engage in initiatives to respond to the needs of American students with adverse childhood experiences in K-12 school systems. As of 2016, "17 states have been identified in which trauma-informed approaches have been implemented at the school, district, and even state-wide levels" (Maynard et al., 2019, p. 2). In January 2022, the New Jersey State Assembly (NJ. 2022) introduced NJ A1710, which requires public schools to have annual training in trauma-informed educational practices. As of January 2022, NJ A1710 did not pass the Assembly Education Committee and is no longer considering this bill.

The Effects of Trauma

Trauma's effects on a school-aged child encompass several variables and factors that lead to undesirable academic and functional outcomes (Cohen & Barron, 2021; Hubel et al., 2020; McClain, 2021; Milot et al., 2010; Ormiston et al., 2020; Paredes, 2021). The effects of trauma

include hindrances to skill acquisition and task completion because of how one's executive functioning is inhibited (Cohen & Barron, 2021; Hubel et al., 2020; McClain, 2021). Trauma inhibits cognitive processes, including "attention, memory, organizational skills, ability to process information, and problem-solving skills" (Ormiston et al., 2020, p. 320). Trauma also inhibits concentration, organizational, and language development abilities needed to grow in student achievement (Paredes, 2021).

Students with trauma may also experience "emotional, relational, behavioral and cognitive levels that will significantly impair their psychosocial functioning" (Milot et al., 2010, p. 232). These experiences affect students' ability to self-regulate their emotions and engage and build peer relationships (Milot et al., 2010; Ormiston et al., 2020; Tweedie et al., 2017; Twemlow et al., 2006). Not only does trauma affect lifelong health outcomes (Felitti et al., 1998), but the conglomeration of traumatic effects leads to significant implications for student outcomes and consequences for one's peers and teachers in the classroom (Hobbs et al., 2019; McClain, 2021; Stoppelbein et al., 2020). One of the present study's goals is to identify practices that may mitigate the effects of trauma to optimize the learning experiences of students with trauma.

The second underpinning of this literature review is identifying practices that reduce the impact of trauma. Practices can be understood in two conceptual categories: a trauma-based approach and a trauma-based intervention (Hobbs et al., 2019; Maynard et al., 2019). Regarding a trauma-based approach, Hobbs et al. (2019) explained that a trauma-based approach "practice is not an intervention, and it does not have an endpoint. It is a process and a holistic way of working that involves understanding and attending to the specific needs of individuals with trauma-affected childhoods" (p. 1). A trauma-based approach would require practitioners to

acquire and maintain a fund of knowledge of trauma and its effects on students (Hobbs et al., 2019; Maynard et al., 2019). This fund of knowledge that teachers may possess also helps teachers realize trauma's impacts, conceptualize how to mitigate its effects, identify signs of traumatic responses from students, and integrate their understanding of trauma in their practice, interactions, and relationship-building with students with adverse childhood experiences (Maynard et al., 2019).

Regarding trauma-based intervention, the literature discusses how it is distinguished from a holistic, trauma-based approach. Interventions are implemented by qualified personnel trained in the intervention (Cohen & Barron, 2021). They are also specifically designed to treat trauma symptoms to enable an individual's healing (Maynard et al., 2019). A trauma-based intervention can be a part of a teacher or school system's trauma-based approach to addressing the needs of these students (Ormiston et al., 2020).

Adverse Childhood Experiences

Adverse childhood experiences are any traumas that occur during childhood development that negatively impact a child's sense of safety, stability, and attachment (Stoppelbein et al., 2020). ACE related traumas take on a variety of forms. They can be an act of commission, an act of omission, single, chronic, historical, and a result of a natural disaster (Hobbs et al., 2019; Milot et al., 2010; Ormiston et al., 2020). The impact of trauma, regardless of frequency and type, may affect student engagement, learning, and academic and functional performance (Buxton, 2018; Hobbs et al., 2019; Hubel et al., 2020; Maynard et al., 2019; Neitzel, 2020; Ormiston et al., 2020; Taylor, 2021; Twemlow, 2006).

Ormiston (2020) explained that traumas that are in the form of acts of commission are described as intentional words or actions that threaten or cause harm to another (e.g., physical

abuse, sexual abuse, and psychological abuse). Ormiston (2020) specified that traumas that are in the form of omission are described as “the failure to provide for the basic physical, emotional, or educational needs of a child” (p. 319). Traumas, as acts of commission or omission, may impact an individual’s ability to have secure relationships with their primary caregiver, other adults, and peers (Ormiston et al., 2020; Stoppelbein et al., 2020).

Trauma can also vary in frequency, amount, and cause (Hobbs et al., 2019; Milot et al., 2010; Ormiston et al., 2020). Adverse childhood experiences, or traumas that are single “events can lead to a conditioning of physiological and behavioral responses linked to the event” (Milot et al., 2010, p. 226). These single-event experiences are acute traumas (Ormiston et al., 2020). Students who are re-traumatized are exposed to stimuli that are related to the initial traumatic event (Wilson-Genderson et al., 2022). Students might have multiple traumatic experiences that are unrelated to each other (Ormiston et al., 2020). Ormiston et al. (2020) described these traumas as chronic. Traumas can also be described as complex or historical. First, complex traumas are chronic exposures to experiences induced by interpersonal relationships, primarily the relationship between a child and their primary caregiver (Milot et al., 2010; Ormiston et al., 2020). Second, historical traumas are “a personal or historical event or prolonged experience that continues to have an impact over several generations" (Ormiston et al., 2020, p. 320). Individuals can experience disaster traumas as well. These traumas are induced by large-scale events such as hurricanes, tsunamis, oil spills, terrorist attacks, war, or a national or international health crisis (Taylor, 2021; Tweedie et al., 2017).

Trauma may impact academics, self-regulation, relationships, and physical well-being (Buxton, 2018). Adverse childhood experiences have links to “challenges in self-regulatory and academic skills” (Hubel et al., 2020, p. 3). ACEs can also impact relationships because of poor

self-regulation and language skills developed through academic work (Buxton, 2018; Paredes, 2021). Depending on intensity and severity, ACEs can impact a student's physical well-being (e.g., experiencing stomach aches) (Foreman & Bates, 2021; Ormiston et al., 2020).

The consequences of childhood trauma may be detrimental to the individual's academics, functioning, and development in their present time, but it may also have lifelong impacts unless addressed and treated early on (Cohen & Barron, 2021; Milot et al., 2010; Opiola, 2020). Traumas that are experienced by 3-year-olds in early childhood programs can lead to lasting effects into adulthood (Hubel et al., 2020; Milot et al., 2010). Regarding academic impacts, Brunzell et al. (2019) believed that "trauma can be defined as an overwhelming experience that undermines one's belief that the world is good or safe and can dramatically and negatively affect a student's educational trajectory" (p. 601). Adverse childhood experiences, which may impair cognitive processes for learning, can exacerbate achievement gaps unless mitigated early on (Buxton, 2018; Milot et al., 2010; Ormiston et al., 2020). Social skill development and emotional regulation development have also been shown to be impacted by trauma, and its effects can last into adulthood (Neitzel, 2020). A child's development, behavioral, cognitive, and emotional domains "can result in negative physical and mental health problems throughout the lifespan" because of ACEs (Post et al., 2020, p. 9).

Studies have shown that early adverse childhood experiences before age 5 may correlate to higher rates of suspension and expulsion in high school (Pierce et al., 2022). Adverse childhood experiences and their effects are not isolated to when they occurred or soon after. The weight and effects of ACEs in the lives of school-age children may be carried with them through the rest of their educational careers and well into adulthood (Hobbs et al., 2019; Neitzel, 2020). However, equipped with self-regulation, coping strategies, and teacher-student relationships

guided by unconditional positive regard, students with ACEs can have agency over the experiences that daunt them (Hobbs et al., 2019; Neitzel, 2020; Ormiston et al., 2020).

Outcomes of ACEs for High School Students

According to Anderson et al. (2022), approximately 75% of high school-aged students reported having at least one adverse childhood experience since the COVID-19 pandemic. Of the 75%, approximately 53% reported having one to two ACEs, 12% having three ACEs, and 8% having four or more ACEs. Anderson et al. (2022) added that high school students hold a unique position in being the most experienced in attending a K-12 school system while accumulating the most life experiences compared to school-age peers, some of which may be adverse experiences.

Wilson-Genderson (2022) discussed how the stress experienced from an initial adverse childhood experience affects how individuals experience stress later in life. They also described the potential trajectories of students who have experienced ACEs later in life. Wilson-Genderson shared that those individuals "who experienced ACEs had trajectories of depressive symptoms in late life that were higher than people not having these experiences" (p. 2,171). Individuals with two or more ACEs were more likely to experience significant distress during natural disasters in comparison to those who did not have ACEs (Wilson-Genderson et al., 2022). Wilson-Genderson et al. (2022) found that individuals with multiple ACEs carried higher risks of experiencing depressive symptoms.

Chambers (2017) reported that individuals with ACEs may experience "marital difficulties, difficulties relating to one's children, neuroses, and personality disorders" (p. 543). Chambers (2017) continued to describe that the primordial relationship between mother and child becomes a frame of reference for future relationships and attachments with other adults, such as teachers and peers. The quality of the initial attachment may highly impact one's ability

to form relationships with others, including teachers, which is required for one to be available for learning (Chambers, 2017; Hobbs et al., 2019).

Duke (2020) added that high school students' "experiences of adversity were significantly associated with scholastic outcomes that portend limited prospects for health and status attainment in adulthood" (p. 618). Duke (2020) shared how ACEs in high school students may affect their ability to achieve academic success, which may translate to economic status and health outcomes after graduating high school. Duke (2020) discussed how ACEs in high school students are connected to outcomes such as dropping out of school, higher rates of unemployment, and low-income earnings.

The impacts of ACEs among high school students may lead to negative outcomes during and after high school unless they are mitigated before leaving the school environment. Duke (2020) claimed, "Strategies for strengthening student school connection may be relevant for supporting youth resilience, and the potential for better stability in adulthood" (p. 618). Duke (2020) also shared that the student-teacher relationship paired with a holistic trauma-based approach may be beneficial in changing the trajectories of the outcomes experienced by high school-aged students during and after high school.

Neurobiological Changes

Current research has comprehensively captured the neurobiological changes in K-12 grade students with adverse childhood experiences (Buxton, 2018; Hobbs et al., 2019; Hubel et al., 2020; Neitzel, 2020). Neitzel (2020) stated, "Research suggests that prolonged exposure to traumatic events can be toxic to the developing brain" (p. 158). The neurobiological changes in students with ACEs have impacts on various brain regions that work in concert to engage in the

learning process for academic progress (Buxton, 2019; Foreman & Bates, 2021; Hubel et al., 2020; Tweedie et al., 2017).

Various regions of the brain work in concert to facilitate cognitive processes necessary for learning (Buxton, 2019; Foreman & Bates, 2021; Hubel et al., 2020; Tweedie et al., 2017). The hippocampus is the region of the brain that controls the function of memory, which is needed to recall information to participate in academic activities (Chambers, 2017). The frontal lobes, and more precisely the prefrontal cortex regions of the brain, are also responsible for attention and executive functioning (Hobbs et al., 2019; Schneider et al., 2013), which are needed to sustain attention to an academic task and complete the activities.

Three main cognitive processes for learning that are impaired by neurobiological changes include (a) memory, (b) attention, and (c) executive functioning (Buxton, 2019; Foreman & Bates, 2021; Hubel et al., 2020; Tweedie et al., 2017). Chambers (2017) claimed that increased cortisol levels in response to stressful situations may develop neurotoxicity in the hippocampus and frontal lobes. These affected areas contribute to the cognitive processes of memory, attention, and executive functioning, which are needed for learning. Foreman and Bates (2021) supported Chambers's claim and stated that:

> such a decrease in recall and processing may stem from cortisol buildup in specific regions of the brain including the amygdala, hippocampus, and corpus callosum. This makes the repetition of instructions and classroom guidelines essential for academic success, especially for students who have experienced trauma (p. 3).

Foreman and Bates (2021) also acknowledged that increased cortisol in different brain regions may affect learning processes; however, they could be overcome with instructional strategies and practices.

Physiological Responses

Research has also considered how students may experience a physiological response to experiences of trauma or retraumatization in K-12 grade students (Buxton, 2018; Hobbs et al., 2019; Hubel et al., 2020; Neitzel, 2020). The physiological responses in students with ACEs result in physical ailments, challenging behaviors, and the body's full traumatic response to an environmental stimulus that is linked to the child's traumatic history (Hubel et al., 2020; McClain, 2021; Ormiston et al., 2020; Wilson-Genderson et al., 2022). These behaviors may impact a student's academics and classroom functioning (Brunzell, 2019; Hobbs et al., 2019).

Other regions of the brain, such as the amygdala, are responsible for detecting harms and threats that invoke a physiological that results in physical ailments, challenging behaviors, and the body's full traumatic response (Chambers, 2017; Foreman & Bates, 2021; McClain, 2021; Neitzel, 2020). Students with adverse childhood experiences often experience stomachaches and headaches because of the increase in cortisol in their bodies during a stress response to environmental stimuli (Foreman & Bates, 2021). They also often experience increased heart rates and higher baseline cortisol levels (Neitzel, 2020). These physical ailments that are caused by trauma could also be linked to future cases of heart disease, obesity, and depression (Ormiston et al., 2020). Not only may students with trauma histories exhibit physical ailments, but they also may demonstrate challenging behaviors (Neitzel, 2020; Opiola et al., 2020). Challenging behaviors that are commonly found in students with ACEs include aggression, poor emotional regulation, excessive crying, distress, withdrawal, engaging in unsafe acts, and experiencing hypervigilance (Buxton, 2018; Hubel et al., 2020; Neitzel, 2020; Ormiston et al., 2020).

The body's physiological response to stressful situations copes by activating the body's full traumatic response system (Neitzel, 2020). McClain (2021) asserts that "the amygdala

detects threat and activates the 'fight or flight' system within the human body, innately ordering a person to do what it takes to survive the threat at hand" (p. 6). Neitzel (2020) added that "children exposed to chronic trauma experience a constant state of fight, flight, or freeze" (pp. 158-159). When the amygdala activation repeatedly occurs, and the brain is in a constant mode of fight, flight, or freeze, the "brain begins to have an exaggerated response to small threats and minor stressors" (McClain, 2021, p. 6). The experiences of trauma could hijack regions of the brain that are responsible for regulating emotions, stressors, and assessing threats or harm. Cultivating safe, secure, and trusting relationships with others is challenging for students with histories of trauma (Hobbs et al., 2019; Stoppelbein et al., 2020). These relationships are needed to facilitate learning in the classroom environment between the individual and their peers and between the individual and their teachers (Hobbs et al., 2019; Opiola et al., 2020; Stoppelbein et al., 2020).

Academic and Functioning Delays

The current literature has also heavily considered the role of adverse childhood experiences in causing school-aged children to have academic and functioning delays (Brunzell et al., 2019; Buxton, 2018; Hubel et al., 2020; Milot et al., 2010; Neitzel, 2020; Ormiston et al., 2020). Buxton (2018) argued, "In school, traumatized children experience significant academic problems" (p. 31). The literature also described that there might be a correlation between poor higher educational outcomes and adverse childhood experiences (Duke, 2020; Hobbs et al., 2019).

In discussing academic performance, students with histories of trauma have demonstrated deficits in literacy and language, which pervasively affects all the other content areas (Ormiston et al., 2020). Students with ACEs also have a pattern of inconsistent school attendance (Duke,

2020; Ormiston et al., 2020). The causal relationship between trauma and poor literacy, language, and school attendance outcomes becomes a three-pronged catalyst for academic delays (Duke, 2020; Neitzel, 2020; Ormiston et al., 2020). Due to neurobiological changes because of trauma, cognitive processes such as executive functioning make task completion difficult (Hobbs et al., 2019; Taylor, 2021).

Students with histories of trauma also have demonstrated deficits in functional performance, which include engagement, poor attention, lack of attachment to teachers and peers in the classroom, and impeding behaviors to learning (Hubel et al., 2020; Milot et al., 2010; Neitzel, 2020; Ormiston et al., 2020). These key behavioral areas make individual students available for learning and allow them to engage in the learning process. Inconsistent engagement in learning activities may hinder the student's ability to acquire academic skills, work collaboratively with peers, and process information from the teacher's instruction (Hubel et al., 2020). Attention is needed to focus and complete learning activities by discriminating if the information that is being processed is necessary for the learning activity (Schneider & McGrew, 2013). Schneider and McGrew (year) stated, "This function of attention is often called inhibition, as the purpose is to inhibit responding to task irrelevant information that may capture or hijack our attention" (p. 769). Adverse childhood experiences that result in neurological changes may hinder the brain's ability to attend to necessary information. As a result, students with adverse childhood experiences often get mislabeled with ~~A~~ttention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) (Ormiston et al., 2020).

Functional deficits for students with ACEs can be a lack of social attachments to peers and teachers in the classroom or impeding behaviors to learning. The literature has shown that if students in early childhood cannot attain a secure attachment with their primary caregiver, the

child is left “with little possibility of attaining affective security” with others in the classroom (Milot et al., 2010, p. 226). Lack of relationship skill building and trusting relationships could hinder varying means of learning in the classroom, which include small group and whole group instruction, where their effectiveness relies on the interdependent relationships of the students (Hobbs et al., 2019; McClain, 2021; Twemlow, 2006). Impeding behaviors caused by the body’s response to trauma and “retraumatization” may result in a student’s inconsistent availability for learning and inconsistent access to the classroom’s instruction and curriculum (Hobbs et al., 2019; Taylor, 2021). Consistent and uncontrolled behaviors of aggression, anxiety, withdrawal, excessive crying, and emotional dysregulation remove the student with trauma from the continuity of learning in a school day (Neitzel, 2020; Twemlow et al., 2006).

Teacher Awareness and Practices

Teachers’ awareness of trauma, its symptoms, its effects on the individual, and its implications for learning need to be integrated into trauma-informed practices (Brunzell et al., 2019; Cohen & Barron, 2021; Hobbs et al., 2019). The practices teachers use in the classroom to improve academic and functional outcomes must take a holistic approach with a sensitivity to trauma and its implications (Maynard et al., 2019). A teacher’s awareness of trauma and its effects paired with a holistic trauma-based approach may result in positive academic and functional outcomes for students with ACEs (Brunzell et al., 2019; Hobbs et al., 2019; Maynard et al., 2019; Ormistron et al., 2020)

A review of the literature shows that early childhood practitioners have limited awareness of trauma. Cohen and Barron (2021) defined trauma awareness as those who can “recognize and respond to the impact of traumatic stress on those who have contact with the system, including children, caregivers, and service providers.” (p. 226). The literature also shared that practitioners

have limited knowledge of addressing the needs of students with adverse childhood experiences in the classroom (Neitzel, 2020). Developing teachers' awareness of trauma and how to meet the needs of students with trauma is imperative for a teacher's holistic trauma-based approach. (Cohen & Barron, 2021; Neitzel, 2020). The consequence of heightened teacher awareness of trauma gives teachers a more empathetic perspective of challenging classroom behaviors and academic challenges these students may face (McClain, 2021). Another consequence of teachers being aware of trauma is that they would be more adept in recognizing symptoms of trauma in their students and identifying them to provide them with a trauma-based approach or trauma-based intervention by a qualified professional in the school system (Ormiston et al., 2020). Increased trauma awareness may also contribute to a trauma-sensitive and emotionally healthy school and classroom culture (Stipp & Kilpatrick, 2021).

The literature review also revealed how various teacher practices may positively impact students with adverse childhood experiences (Hobbs et al., 2019; Opiola et al., 2020; Stoppelbein et al., 2020). Some of the teacher practices detailed in the literature include (a) repairing attachment: relationships and unconditional positive regard; (b) classroom management strategies and predictability; (c) direct instruction into mental health areas; and (d) identifying and using outside resources that appropriately service students' needs (Hobbs et al., 2019; Opiola et al., 2020; Stoppelbein et al., 2020). Teachers may use these practices to assist students in experiencing positive academic and functional outcomes (Hobbs et al., 2019; Opiola et al., 2020; Stoppelbein et al., 2020).

Repairing Attachment: Relationships and Unconditional Positive Regard

The first teacher practice covered in the current literature is prioritizing positive relationships through unconditional positive regard to repair the disrupted attachments of

students with histories of trauma (Brunzell et al., 2019; Foreman & Bates, 2021; Hobbs et al., 2019; McClain, 2021; Scott et al., 2021). Focusing on positive relationships with students with adverse childhood experiences and all students in the classroom should be the priority for a trauma-informed instructor (Foreman & Bates, 2021). Unconditional positive regard is when "an adult who treats them with simple sustained kindness, an adult who can empathize with the challenges they face" (Hobbs et al., 2019, p. 13). Sustained kindness and empathy allow students with ACEs to create formidable attachments rooted in "safety, stability, and nurturance" (Neitzel, 2020, p. 163).

Classroom Management Strategies and Predictability

Another teacher practice discussed in the literature is using classroom management strategies flexible to the needs of students with trauma and fostering predictability and consistency in the classroom environment (Hobbs et al., 2019; Neitzel, 2020). Traditional methods of behavior management are often ineffective for students with adverse childhood experiences because behaviors that students with trauma exhibit often are not designed to please the teacher; instead, it is their bodies' response to intensely stressful situations (Hobbs et al., 2019). Instead, classroom management strategies should include co-constructing strategies for inevitable future episodes of a student's physiological response to trauma or retraumatization, using natural consequences related to the behavior, talking to students about the inappropriate behavior in a calm and approachable tone of voice, using I-messages, and making connections to other experiences (Hobbs et al., 2019). Classroom management should also prioritize avoiding abrupt changes and provide predictability and consistency because a classroom that achieves these ends results in a "safe classroom climate, minimizes stress for students, [and] enhances students' sense of belonging" (Hobbs et al., 2019, p. 11).

Direct Instruction into Mental Health Areas

Other teacher practices believed to be effective in meeting the needs of students with trauma are direct instruction in mental health areas and classroom-based emotional, coping, and self-regulation strategies (Brunzell et al., 2019). Brunzell et al. (2019) shared that direct instruction into mindfulness, character strengths, positive emotions, resilience, hope, and growth mindset are effective in helping students self-regulate, cope, and process their intense emotions. The literature demonstrates that it is necessary to equip students with emotional coping and self-regulating strategies in early childhood to deal with adverse childhood experiences (Neitzel, 2020). Neitzel (2020) stated, "The first 3 years of life are particularly critical in helping young children develop key social–emotional and coping skills that are essential for recovery and healing from trauma" (p. 164). Neitzel (2020) also shared that equipping students with trauma with the strategies they need will help them have agency over the effects of trauma in their daily lives and the classroom.

Identifying and Using Outside Resources that Appropriately Service Students' Needs

The literature considers teacher knowledge and recommendations for school-based accommodations, such as special education and related services or a Section 504 plan, are sometimes a necessary trauma-informed practice for students with adverse childhood experiences (Buxton, 2018; Paredes, 2021). Depending on the intensity and severity of a student's traumatic experiences and their effects on learning, they can be eligible for a Section 504 plan or special education and related services under the classification of emotional disturbance (Buxton, 2018; Paredes, 2021). School officials should utilize these federally mandated services, such as a Section 504 Plan or special education and related services for

students with ACEs if it assists them in closing present achievement gaps (Buxton, 2018; Paredes, 2021).

Teacher-Student Relationship

The current literature demonstrates that the teacher-student relationship plays a fundamental role in mitigating the effects of trauma in the lives of students with adverse childhood experiences (Hobbs et al., 2019; Neitzel, 2020; Post et al., 2020; Stoppelbein et al., 2020). Twemlow (2006) explained that poor relationships with students who have histories of ACEs will result in ineffective efforts to mitigate the effects of trauma and even exacerbate these effects. However, a safe, secure, and nurturing relationship between the teacher and student will optimize opportunities for these students to make academic and functional progress at school (Stoppelbein et al., 2020).

The underpinning theory of the teacher-student relationship is attachment theory, which considers the role of the primary caregiver in ensuring a sense of stability and security for the child (Neitzel, 2020; Opiola et al., 2020). When children achieve a secure attachment with their primary caregiver, they can maintain homeostasis in stressful situations (Milot et al., 2010). Increased cortisol levels induced by stressful situations could be reduced by an increase in oxytocin for individuals with secure attachments (Chambers, 2017). Chambers (2017) claimed that secure attachments with a primary caregiver allow for greater agency over and regulation of the body's stress response.

However, children with adverse childhood experiences tend to have failed to develop secure attachments with their primary caregivers, which results in them lacking a working model of relationships (Chambers, 2017; McClain, 2021). These failed attachment attempts after birth and early childhood "provide a precedent for how to act and respond when presented with new

relationships" (McClain, 2021, p. 8). While failed attachments with primary caregivers for students with ACEs present challenges, they are not insurmountable. The literature states that children who fail to make secure attachments with their primary caregivers in their families can develop attachment bonds with adults outside of the family (Brunzell et al., 2019). In many cases, teachers have been identified as adults in the lives of children with ACEs, giving the child a second chance to form a bond of attachment that ensures safety and security (Brunzell et al., 2019; Stoppelbein et al., 2020). Scott et al. (2021) stated, "Building healthy relationships requires building trust and connection. Trauma-informed educators recognize how foundational secure educator–child interactions and relationships are to student development and healing" (p. 7). A teacher's efforts to build a strong teacher-student relationship with those who have histories of trauma are engaging to repair disrupted attachment (Brunzell et al., 2019).

To support repairing disrupted attachment for students with ACEs, Brunzell et al. (2019) argued that teachers must prioritize learning about attachment theory and unconditional positive regard to inform their practices. An educator's holistic trauma-based approach to developing a relationship with students who have histories of ACEs must be guided by the principle of unconditional positive regard and forming the critical qualities of safety, stability, and nurturance (Hobbs et al., 2019; Neitzel, 2020). Insight, understanding, and consistent reflection on the experiences of students with trauma allow teachers to inform their perspectives that change how they interact with students with adverse childhood experiences (Brunzell et al., 2019). These trauma-informed teachers will use a strengths approach to understanding students' abilities (Foreman & Bates, 2021; Hobbs et al., 2019). They will not see these students as a problem when they engage in undesirable behaviors but rather as individuals with needs that ought to be met (Foreman & Bates, 2021; Hobbs et al., 2019).

Culture of the Classroom and School

Not only do students with adverse childhood experiences benefit from a trauma-based approach in building classroom relationships, but *all* students receive an educational benefit from this trauma-based approach to education (Foreman & Bates, 2021; Hobbs et al., 2019). According to the literature, the benefit of a trauma-based education approach received by students with trauma histories and all others creates positive implications for the culture of the classroom and the school (Hobbs et al., 2019). A trauma-based approach in a classroom and school may yield benefits for the cultures of both settings.

Inside the classroom, a trauma-based approach to classroom design, managing and understanding behaviors, and prioritizing building safe and secure classroom relationships result in a safe and secure classroom culture (Brunzell et al., 2018; Hobbs et al., 2019; Neitzel, 2020). Classrooms designed to provide predictability and consistency promote safety, trust, and a feeling of control for students with adverse childhood experiences (Neitzel, 2020). Classrooms that are student-centered and prioritize building authentic and trusting relationships with all students have fewer behavior problems (Opiola et al., 2020). Opiola et al. (2020) explained that having fewer behavior problems is achieved by these classrooms engaging in positive ways to rehabilitate challenging behaviors, especially for those with histories of trauma. Opiola et al. (2020) also shared that trauma-based teachers create a positive classroom culture and learning environment.

In the context of a whole school, a trauma-based approach that is systematically and strategically developed can lead to a positive school culture (Stipp & Kilpatrick, 2021). A trauma-informed school can recognize the impact of trauma on the student population, recognize the symptoms of trauma, and co-create strategies to help these students mitigate their inhibiting

symptoms (Maynard et al., 2019). Maynard et al. shared (2019) that a trauma-informed school can also integrate their funds of knowledge of trauma into their practices and policies while also having an increased awareness of antecedents for students that would cause "retraumatization." The true foundation of a trauma-informed school is the teachers who adopt the philosophy and practice of a trauma-based approach to education. Twemlow (2006) argued, "Teachers are critical in determining the school climate. Thus, their attitudes to power dynamics are extremely relevant" (p. 189). Teachers who adopt a trauma-based approach and practices in a school can "model healthy socioemotional skills and consider the impacts of trauma on a student" (Ormiston et al., 2020, p. 324). Stakeholder and leadership philosophies, dialogue, policy development, and actions that are informed by increased awareness of trauma will yield an educational benefit for students with histories of trauma and all students in the school (Cohen & Barron et al., 2021; Hobbs et al., 2019; Ormiston et al., 2020).

Summary

The study of ACEs began in the 1990s, and its definition was expanded by the Center for Disease Control and other researchers to include any experience that "undermines a child's sense of safety, stability, or attachment" (Stoppelbein et al., 2020, p. 130). The current literature describes that these experiences negatively impact academic and functional performance in schools (Buxton, 2018; Hobbs et al., 2019; Milot et al., 2010; Neitzel, 2020; Ormiston et al., 2020; Twemlow et al., 2006). Educators must respond to these students' needs effectively to facilitate recovery, healing, and progress in school.

Patterns emerging from the literature include adverse childhood experiences, outcomes of ACES for high school students, neurobiological changes, physiological responses, academic and functioning delays, teacher awareness and practice, teacher-student relationship, and culture of

the classroom and school (Anderson et al., 2022; Brunzell et al., 2019; Feletti et al., 1998; Foreman & Bates, 2021; Hubel et al., 2020; Opiola et al., 2020; Ormiston et al., 2020). These themes comprehensively discuss the current understanding of the effects of adverse childhood experiences on school-aged children and what teachers and schools have done to mitigate these effects through trauma-based practices that can be categorized as either trauma-based approaches or trauma-based interventions. However, the current literature lacks evidence that it has identified specific practices that positively impact students with adverse childhood experiences (Maynard et al., 2019). Maynard et al. also shared that the current literature lacks evidence that it has solicited input from the most affected stakeholders, students with ACEs, to give their perspective on why they perceived certain teacher practices to be effective in meeting their academic and functional needs.

The main purpose of this research is to explore how private high school seniors, age 18 or older, who have experienced at least one adverse childhood experience describe the trauma-based approaches used by their teachers in their classrooms. While using attachment theory as a conceptual framework and theoretical lens, this research intends to provide insight into how the teacher-student relationship facilitates teacher practices and characteristics that yield positive academic and functional outcomes for high school students with ACEs. The collective teacher practices and characteristics that this study's participants perceive as yielding positive outcomes may be used by practitioners to reflect upon what high school students with ACEs share as being meaningful and effective in meeting their needs according to their perspectives.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study is to explore how private high school seniors, age 18 or older, who have at least one adverse childhood experience, perceive the trauma-based approaches used by their teachers in the classroom. The researcher believes that this study may be significant because of the growing rates of students with adverse childhood experiences in K-12 school systems (Hubel et al., 2020; Stoppelbein et al., 2020). According to Hubel et al. (2020), 50% of children in early childhood education programs have at least one adverse childhood experience. Approximately 35 million children (about twice the population of New York state) in the United States have one or more adverse childhood experiences (Stoppelbein et al., 2020).

Foreman and Bates (2021) shared that without "training or instruction on how to best facilitate learning for students with a history of trauma, the epidemic is likely to continue impeding academic success and disrupt learning in all classrooms" (p.1). Foreman and Bates (2021) also stated that students with histories of trauma are at greater risk for incurring academic and functional achievement gaps, which may result in challenges for their academic careers in the K-12 school system and beyond unless remediated. The following research questions were developed to guide this study:

Research Question 1: How do private high school seniors, age 18 or older who have experienced at least one adverse childhood experience, describe the trauma-based approaches in their classroom?

Research Question 2: How do private high school seniors, age 18 or older who have experienced at least one adverse childhood experience, describe the outcomes of trauma-based approaches on their academic progress?

Research Question 3: How do private high school seniors, age 18 or older who have experienced at least one adverse childhood experience, describe the outcomes of trauma-based approaches on their functional progress?

A phenomenological research approach was chosen for this study. According to Bloomberg (2022), “The purpose of phenomenological research is to investigate the meaning of the lived experience of people to identify the core essence of human experience or phenomena as described by research participants” (p. 88). Phenomenology grew out of the writings of Edmund Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Creswell and Poth (2017) discovered that all these contributors to phenomenology believed that the purpose of phenomenological research is to capture the essence of lived experiences and not the analysis of them. A phenomenological research approach primarily uses interviews as a data collection tool. Polkinghorne (1989, as cited in Creswell & Poth, 2017) recommended that 5 to 15 participants who have experienced the specified phenomenon be interviewed. Creswell and Poth (2017) stated that transcribed interviews then go through a coding process and theme development process to capture the phenomenon's essence.

A phenomenological research approach has strengths and challenges to be considered. A strength of the phenomenological research approach is that the knowledge of common experiences for specific groups may be helpful to those who work with them, including “therapists, teachers, health personnel, and policy makers” (Creswell & Poth, 2017, p. 80). Creswell and Poth (2017) noted that the phenomenological research approach uses a “streamlined form of data collection by including only single or multiple interviews with participants” (p. 80), also stating that conducting a phenomenological study includes ensuring that all participants have experienced the phenomenon of the research topic. Creswell and Poth

(2017) claimed that if not all participants have experienced the phenomenon, it will be difficult to find common patterns representative of the phenomenon to discover the essence of the experience being studied. Another challenge of phenomenological research is the researcher's ability to bracket their firsthand experiences. Creswell and Poth (2017) articulated that bracketing is the practice of setting aside the assumptions a researcher brings to the research study that may impact the understanding of the central phenomenon.

For this qualitative phenomenological study, the participants will be private high school seniors who are 18 years or older and have self-identified as being students who have had at least one adverse childhood experience. These participants will participate in individual 60-minute semi-structured interviews, which will be recorded via Zoom-Education edition. Zoom (2022) "is a communications platform that allows users to connect with video, audio, phone, and chat" (para. 1). The recorded interviews will then be transcribed. After transcription, a coding analysis process will be used to discover emerging themes (or patterns) found among the data collected from all the participants.

The qualitative phenomenological research approach can have several benefits to consider that would allow this research to achieve its desired ends. A benefit of the phenomenological approach is that it is structured toward creating a comprehensive understanding of the research study's central phenomenon as experienced by the participants (Bloomberg, 2022). In the context of this qualitative research study, participants will offer firsthand experience and knowledge about what they have experienced and perceived from their teachers as being effective in helping them have positive academic and functional outcomes in the classroom. Academic outcomes include growth and skill attainment in areas such as literacy, mathematics, and other core subjects (Brunzell et al., 2019; Ormistron et al., 2020), while

functional outcomes include a student's demonstration of engagement, attention, relationship building, impulse control, and emotional regulation that affect their ability to be available to learning (Hubel et al., 2020; Milot et al., 2010; Neitzel, 2020; Ormiston et al., 2020).

The qualitative phenomenological approach aligns with this study's conceptual and theoretical frameworks. In this study, Adverse childhood experience (ACE) (Feletti et al., 1978) will be the conceptual framework, and attachment theory (Bowlby, 1958) will be the theoretical framework. As trauma theorists, Felitti et al. (1978) connected ACE as a conceptual framework to attachment theory (Bowlby, 1958) in their study on childhood trauma. The theoretical framework of attachment theory may be key to understanding the trauma-based approaches used by teachers to meet the academic and functional needs of students with adverse childhood experiences.

Site Information and Demographics

The eight participants of this study came from a private high school in a township in central New Jersey. The data gathered about this research site was obtained from Private School Review in December 2023. Private School Review (2023) stated that the private high school has grades 9 through 12 and has approximately 500 enrolled students. Private School Review (2023) also shared that the student population is approximately half male and half female. At this private high school, about one-third of the students are of color. As it relates to the private high school's teaching staff, Private School Review shared that the ratio between teachers and students is 11:1. The demographics of the student population and teaching offer context to the data extracted from this research site's participants.

This research site was chosen for three reasons. First, the research site is a private high school with private school students. Second, the high school has a large student population size

which allows for a larger pool of participants to be solicited to volunteer for this study. Third, the researcher has never worked with any student or staff member at this private high school.

Participants and Sampling Method

The sampling method used for this study was criterion sampling. Bloomberg (2022) shared that criterion sampling is when "participants are chosen because they meet a certain set of criteria as predetermined by the researcher" (p. 268). Bloomberg (2022) also stated that the most prominent criterion will be the participants' lived experience with the phenomenon being studied. Thus, while the research sought to identify participants who have shared a lived experience, their individual experiences and characteristics differed.

Due to the sensitive nature of studying the effects of trauma, compliance, willingness, and availability to participate were necessary for participants when soliciting the most accurate and representative responses of their perspectives. Criteria for students to participate in this study were:

1. They must self-identify as being enrolled as a high school senior at the study site.
2. They must self-identify as being 18 years of age or older.
3. They must self-identify as having had at least one adverse childhood experience.

In prior phenomenological studies, Creswell and Poth (2017) stated, "We have seen the number of participants range from 1 (Padilla, 2003) up to 325 (Polkinghorne, 1989). Dukes (1984) recommends studying 3 to 10 participants, and one phenomenology, Edwards (2006), studied 33 individuals" (p. 159). Based on these recommendations, a sample size of eight participants from the target population was appropriate for this qualitative study to describe the context of the central phenomenon while being in line with the sample size norms of prior phenomenological studies.

Several steps were taken to secure the approval of the study site and the University of New England's Institutional Review Board. First, this researcher sought consent to conduct the study at the chosen research site. Then, approval from the University of New England's Institutional Review Board was needed to conduct this study. The study's recruitment period commenced after approval was received from the appropriate private high school authorities and the University of New England's Institutional Review Board.

Recruitment of participants was accomplished through email. The research site's assistant principal was solicited for an email list of seniors at the study site above 18 years old. The recruitment email (Appendix D) included the Center for Youth Wellness (CYW) Adverse Childhood Experiences Questionnaire (ACE-Q) Teen Self-Report (Appendix E), which helped participants determine whether they self-identify as having at least one adverse childhood experience as part of this study's criteria for participation. The questionnaire did not require completion or submission by the participant. The participants did not disclose their specific ACE in the data collection process of this study. A participant information sheet was attached to the recruitment email (Appendix F). The participant information sheet discussed what this study is about, confidentiality, risks, and benefits to the participant, the confidentiality of participant information and data collected, how the results of the study was used, and how to contact the researcher for additional information. The recruitment email stated that each participant who completed their participation in this study after member checking their transcript will receive a compensation of a $40 Amazon online gift card, which was sent to their email address.

After a participant self-identified as meeting the criteria, the participant was asked to reply to the recruitment email stating their interest in participating in the study. Those who expressed interest were added to the master list. A created master list kept a record of the names of

participants, assigned pseudonyms of each participant, and email addresses. After receiving a participant's expressed interest, the participants were scheduled for individual interviews via Zoom. At the beginning of the Zoom call, participants were asked to give verbal consent again for the interview before it begins.

The recruitment period was open until eight participants who have self-identified as meeting this study's criteria completed their interviews. The recruitment period ended after receiving eight interviews, and no other participants were accepted. As responses for voluntary participation were received, a mutually agreed upon time with the consenting participant, who has met the criteria, was scheduled for a 60-minute interview via Zoom. Students who responded after eight completed interviews were thanked for their interest in participating in the study and notified that the recruitment period has ended.

Instrumentation and Data Collection

This qualitative phenomenological study utilized semi-structured interviews to collect data which was recorded and then auto transcribed using Zoom. According to Bloomberg (2022), the semi-structured interview balances "interview questions with interview dynamics,…[which] reconcile[s] a frequent need to incorporate a set of questions tied to their study's research questions…with some spontaneity, and often results in unexpected participant responses to follow up with probing questions" (p. 279). The questions developed for the semi-structured interview protocol are focused on the central phenomenon of this study while also ensuring the focus of this study's research questions is addressed.

During the interview process, this research also utilized memoing. Bloomberg (2022) shared that memoing allows researchers to take notes for themselves. Bloomberg also stated that "these memos can include notes about anything, including thoughts on emerging concepts,

themes, and patterns found in the data…and the ways in which researcher bias may be problematic" (p. 328). Memoing enables notation of participants' facial responses, physical shifts during the interview, and voice tones as data is collected during the interview, which assisted in the data analysis.

The virtual semi-structured interview applied to all involved parties. All involved parties chose, or were provided with the choice to choose a quiet and private location where the interview could be conducted. Ensuring a quiet and private location allowed all parties to experience confidentiality during the research away from public view.

Once the recorded interview was completed for a participant, the interview was transcribed using Zoom's auto transcription feature (2022). After transcription, the participant's transcript was sent to the participant via email to be reviewed for accuracy for member checking. A participant was given five calendar days to review their transcript. If five calendar days passed without correspondence from the participant, the researcher considered the transcript accurate. Upon receiving correspondence from the participant or when 5 calendar days have passed, the $40 Amazon gift card was emailed to the participant. The master list and recordings were destroyed after all participants completed the member-checking process.

Data Analysis

Creswell and Guetterman (2019) discussed how data analysis is a process of "'taking the data apart' to determine individual responses and then 'putting it together' to summarize it" (p. 10). Data analysis procedures were used to evaluate and consider the data collected from this study's participants' semi-structured interviews. The research utilized the six steps of qualitative data analysis as recommended by Creswell and Gutterman. The six steps, according to Creswell and Gutterman (2019), are:

> (1) Preparing and organizing the data for analysis, (2) engaging in an initial exploration of the data through the process of coding it, (3) using the codes to develop a more general picture of the data (descriptions and themes), (4) representing the findings through narratives and visuals, (5) interpreting the meaning of the results by reflecting personally on the impact of the findings and on the literature that might inform the findings, and, finally, (6) conducting strategies to validate the accuracy of the findings. In practice, researchers do not always follow these steps in sequence but iteratively proceed back and forth through the steps of qualitative analysis. (p. 237)

After the interview transcripts were verified for accuracy by participants and deidentified, the data analysis steps prescribed by Creswell and Gutterman (2019) were utilized. NVivo 14 (2020) is a qualitative data analysis software used for the coding process. NVivo 14 (2020) allows researchers to "analyze data from interviews, surveys, field notes, web pages and journal articles and…allows them to organize, analyze and visualize their data, finding the patterns it contains" (para. 2). The NVivo 14 software was used to code for words and phrases in the transcripts that "symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute" from the data (Saldana, 2008, p.3). After the coding process, the NVivo 14 software collapsed codes as needed.

After coding, the research transitioned to the theme development stage of my qualitative data analysis. Bloomberg (2022) stated, "Thematic analysis involves noting relationships, similarities, and differences in the data, and is a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data. Thematic analysis, at the same time, organizes and describes your dataset in rich detail" (p. 370). Bloomberg (2022) shared that themes can be categorized as elementary themes, unexpected or unintended themes, major and minor themes, or miscellaneous

themes. Bloomberg (2022) stated that elementary themes are expected themes to be found, and unexpected or unintended themes are not expected to be found. Bloomberg (2022) also shared that major and minor themes are primary and secondary concepts and ideas, while miscellaneous themes are difficult to relate to other themes. NVivo 14's (2020) thematic analysis features was also used to organize codes and uncover underlying themes. The themes uncovered by NVivo 14 were used to interpret the results.

Limitations, Delimitations, and Ethical Issues

This researcher reflected upon limitations, delimitations, and ethical issues relevant to this study. According to Bloomberg (2022), "Limitations are external conditions that restrict or constrain the study's scope or may affect its outcome" (p. 261). Bloomberg (2022) also articulated that delimitations are actions taken by the researcher to limit the scope of the study to refine its parameters further, while ethical issues help the researcher consider how to minimize harm to participants in the study.

Limitations

Every research study has its limitations, and it is important to acknowledge them to better refine the research's findings (Bloomberg, 2022). In this qualitative phenomenological study, one limitation was the responses given by participants because of the sensitive nature of the topic of trauma. Due to the sensitive nature of the experiences of trauma in a participant's life, participants may or may not have been fully transparent and honest in their responses to the interview (Neitzel, 2020). It was essential to build trust and rapport with every participant to solicit the participants' most authentic perspectives to mitigate the limitation's effects.

Another limitation of this qualitative phenomenological study was the small sample size. The results and interpretation of the data collected from the participants were limited to the

perspectives of a small group of individuals in a private grades 9 through 12 high school in a suburban New Jersey township. The perspectives of this small group of participants also led to overgeneralization, which was another limitation of this study.

Delimitations

Delimitations reflect a researcher's inclusionary and exclusionary decisions in the investigation of a research topic (Bloomberg, 2022). In this qualitative phenomenological study, which explores practices used to meet the needs of students with adverse childhood experiences according to the perspectives of students, several inclusionary and exclusionary decisions were made to refine the scope and participants of the study.

A delimitation of this study was the decision to conduct the study in one private New Jersey high school in a suburban township. The student sample came from high school seniors who were at least 18 years of age and who self-identified as having at least one adverse childhood experience at one private high school. Another delimitation of this study was that teachers were not interviewed for their knowledge of trauma-based practices and effective teacher characteristics. The sole perspective of this study was students with ACEs. The perspectives of these students with histories of trauma helped identify what may be effective teacher practices or teacher characteristics in meeting the needs of students with trauma for positive academic and functional outcomes.

Ethical Issues

The Belmont Report was authored by the National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral, 1979). The report discussed the

various ethical principles and protection guidelines for conducting research on human subjects. The three basic ethical principles included respect for persons, beneficence, and justice.

The first ethical principle considered by the Belmont Report was respect for persons (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral, 1979). The National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral (1979) stated, "The principle of respect for persons thus divides into two separate moral requirements: the requirement to acknowledge autonomy and the requirement to protect those with diminished autonomy" (p. 4).The National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral (1979) also shared that it is important to refrain from influencing or obstructing the behaviors and opinions of human participants to acknowledge a participant's autonomy. The National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral (1979) acknowledged that not everyone has a level of autonomy that gives them agency over their opinion and choices. Factors such as mental health, sicknesses, or other restricting circumstances could be impactful for a human participant. Therefore, The National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral (1979) claimed, "The extent of protection afforded should depend upon the risk of harm and the likelihood of benefit" (p. 4). Participants of this study were informed of their protected rights to consent to participate in the study and to withdraw their consent at any time through the consent form and participant information sheet prior to the interview. Participants were also notified in writing and throughout their interviews that they could skip questions and offer no responses to any questions they desired.

The second ethical principle considered by the Belmont Report was beneficence (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral,

1979). The National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral (1979) stated beneficence is when a researcher puts forth effort to ensure the security of the well-being of a human participant. The National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral achieved the security of the well-being of a human participant by ensuring the minimization of harm to the participant while maximizing benefits. For this study, confidentiality was agreed upon in the consent form to ensure that participants were protected from any harm this study could cause them based on the responses they offered in an interview. Student participants may not have received the maximum benefit of offering their responses to this study because they would be leaving the school system in less than a year. However, other students with adverse childhood experiences in a school population and teachers who teach them may benefit from this research's findings.

The National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral (1979) considered justice as the third ethical principle, and the organization asks the question, "Who ought to receive the benefits of research and bear its burdens?" (p. 5). The National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral (1979) considered at least five ways to formulate how benefits and burdens are distributed: "(1) to each person an equal share, (2) to each person according to individual need, (3) to each person according to individual effort, (4) to each person according to societal contribution, and (5) to each person according to merit (p. 5). Student-participants bore the burden of time and commitment in offering their responses in the semi-structured interview of the study. However, they also yielded the benefits of this study, which may help students with adverse childhood experiences and teachers who teach them by identifying effective practices and characteristics that may lead to positive academic and functional outcomes. The acknowledgment and

identification of teacher practices and characteristics that support a student with a history of trauma may then be disseminated for the benefit of other students and teachers in similar contexts with comparable population demographics.

Trustworthiness

The process of establishing research as trustworthy ensures that the research developed is credible and accurate, leading to the validation of the study results (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Lincoln and Guba (1985) shared how four concepts typically substantiate trustworthiness in qualitative research design. It is essential to consider four key concepts, credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, to ensure the accuracy of research and its findings (Bloomberg, 2022).

Credibility

According to Bloomberg (2022), credibility is considered "whether the research participants' perceptions match up with the researcher's portrayal of them" (p. 302). The researcher is responsible for articulating the perspectives and words of participants in such a way that best represents the intentions and ideas of the participants. Methods to ensure credibility include member checking. Member checking allows the participants to verify interview transcripts for accuracy (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Verifying the accuracy of transcripts is necessary for coding and developing emerging themes to explore the patterns among several participants.

Transferability

Transferability concerns itself with readers of the research study drawing and inferring conclusions from this study and making the judgment that the findings could be replicated in another similar context (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Transferability is different from the

other trustworthiness criteria, as it is the only criterion the researcher cannot guarantee (Bloomberg, 2022). The explicit use of detail is necessary for transferability, allowing readers to make a fully informed decision on how the research study may or may not be beneficial to themselves or other similar situations in their consideration.

Several steps were taken to demonstrate transferability in this study. First, this study detailed the sampling methods used, the participants' experiences brought into the study, and the data collection process (Bloomberg, 2022). The researcher collected the study data from high school seniors, age 18 or older, in one New Jersey private high school. The participants interviewed were selected based on criterion sampling. They were selected in order of response and consent received to participate. This study developed a "thick description," which is when the researcher "thoroughly describ[es] the study's setting, research participants, and related experiences so as to produce findings and interpretations that will allow readers to make contextualized meaning" (Bloomberg, 2022, p. 304). This meticulous approach to detailing the setting, participants, and experience of participants allows readers to have a profound and comprehensive understanding of this study's context. Bloomberg (2022) stated that this approach provides a scrupulous level of detail to be considered by researchers, allowing them to understand similarities and differences between this research study's context and other similar settings.

Dependability

Bloomberg (2022) believed that "to achieve dependability, the researcher must ensure that the research process is clearly documented, logical, and traceable. Dependability refers to the stability and consistency of data over time" (p. 303). The stability and consistency of the data was ensured through this qualitative phenomenological research study by demonstrating that its

procedures, data collection, and data analysis were methodical and sensible in such a way that led to its ultimate findings.

In this study, a semi-structured interview was used to capture the experiences and perspectives of students with histories of trauma and what they said were effective in meeting their needs. The interviews were then transcribed. The transcribed interviews then went through a coding process to search for patterns or emerging themes. After recording the interview, transcribing it, and searching for emerging themes and findings, member checking was used to ensure that the transcripts were accurate and that the findings reflected the perspectives of those interviewed.

Confirmability

Confirmability, in this study, ensured that "the study's analysis and findings are not based on misinterpretation or researcher bias" (Bloomberg, 2022, p. 305). Bloomberg (2022) stated that confirmability requires this researcher to engage in honest and ongoing self-reflection and critique that allows one to understand the biases and prejudices they may bring into the research process. This study demonstrated how data will always be connected to the participants who were the originators of the data collected while also articulating the methodical choices and decisions made throughout this research study. This research was the product of ongoing self-reflection and acknowledgment of positionality to mitigate the effects of biases and prejudice that this researcher brings into this research study. This research also used "epoche, or bracketing, in which investigators set aside their experiences, as much as possible, to take a fresh perspective toward the phenomenon under examination" (Creswell & Poth, 2017, p. 78). Bracketing helped ensure that the researcher can put aside experiences that may relate to the central phenomenon only to represent the essence of the participants' lived experiences.

Summary

This qualitative phenomenological study explored the perspectives of high school seniors who are 18 years or older with at least one adverse childhood experience. It specifically considered what teacher practices and characteristics these participants perceive as impacting their academic and functional outcomes. This study also utilized a semi-structured interview to answer the research questions proposed by this study. This study comprehensively detailed the site information, participants, and sampling methods used while protecting and concealing the confidentiality of the research site and participants. It was also important to identify and acknowledge the limitations, delimitations, and ethical issues that this study may present. The most significant limitation of this study was the sensitive nature of trauma and its effects on the responses given by participants; however, it may have been mitigated by building rapport, trust, and respect with each willing and consenting participant. As a result of methodically and poignantly considering all these factors, this study's trustworthiness through its credibility, transferability to similar scenarios and contexts, dependability, and confirmability were ensured.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore how private high school seniors, age 18 or older, who have at least one adverse childhood experience, perceive the trauma-based approaches used by their teachers in the classroom. Bloomberg (2022) stated, "The purpose of phenomenological research is to investigate the meaning of the lived experience of people to identify the core essence of human experience or phenomena as described by research participants" (p. 88). Creswell and Poth (2017) discovered that phenomenological research is to capture the essence of lived experiences. Semi-structured interviews with memoing were the data collection tools used in this study. Semi-structured interviews balance preset interview questions with follow-up questions (Bloomberg, 2022), while memoing allows the researcher to take notes for themselves (Bloomberg, 2022).

The following research questions were answered in this phenomenological study on the perspectives of 18-year-old high school seniors with at least one adverse childhood experience and their experiences with trauma-based approaches.

Research Question 1: How do private high school seniors, age 18 or older who have experienced at least one adverse childhood experience, describe the trauma-based approaches in their classroom?

Research Question 2: How do private high school seniors, age 18 or older who have experienced at least one adverse childhood experience, describe the outcomes of trauma-based approaches on their academic progress?

Research Question 3: How do private high school seniors, age 18 or older who have experienced at least one adverse childhood experience, describe the outcomes of trauma-based approaches on their functional progress?

This chapter commences with an overview of this study's method of analysis. This chapter will then transition to presenting this study's results and findings in the framework of emerging themes and subthemes. Emerging themes from this study include (a) theme 1: a holistic teacher, (b) theme 2: a holistic learning environment, (c) theme 3: responsive instructional methods, (d) theme 4: pervasive academic achievement and cultivating reflective students, and (e) theme 5: nurturing a student's identity and repairing attachments. This chapter will conclude with a summary.

Analysis Method

The eight participants of this phenomenological study identified themselves as (a) a senior at the chosen research site, (b) being 18 years old or older, and (c) having at least one adverse childhood experience in the recruitment process. The eight participants were all 18 years old. The participants also consisted of four males and four females. The participants identified themselves as attending private school for 2-13 years by June 2024.

Table 1

Demographic Information

Participant	Gender	Age in Years	Years in Private School by 2024
Participant #1: Emma	Female	18	4
Participant #2: Valerie	Female	18	3
Participant #3: Brady	Male	18	2
Participant #4: Santino	Male	18	4
Participant #5: Peter	Male	18	4
Participant #6: Abby	Female	18	13
Participant #7: Jade	Female	18	4

Participant #8: Bob	Male	18	13

Note. This table displays the gender, age in years, and years in private school of each participant.

After receiving their consent to participate in the study, the eight participants participated in individual interviews recorded using Zoom (2022). This study used a semi-structured interview and memoing to collect data from participants. An interview protocol with fifteen questions was also used. The interview protocol questions were developed to answer the guiding research questions of this study. The interview protocol was also balanced with follow-up questions and memoing notes during data collection. After a recorded interview, it was transcribed using the audio transcription function on Zoom (2022).

After the transcription of an interview, the transcript was emailed to the individual participant for member checking. Participants were requested to acknowledge a transcript's accuracy within 5 days to receive this study's compensation. All participants responded acknowledging the accuracy of their individual transcripts within the 5 days.

Once the eight interview transcripts were completed, checked for accuracy by participants, and the researcher engaged in the coding process. Creswell and Poth (2017) shared that the purpose of the coding and theme development process is to capture the phenomenon's essence. Creswell and Poth (2019) stated that the coding process entailed six steps, which are:

> (1) Preparing and organizing the data for analysis, (2) engaging in an initial exploration of the data through the process of coding it, (3) using the codes to develop a more general picture of the data (descriptions and themes), (4) representing the findings through narratives and visuals, (5) interpreting the meaning of the results by reflecting personally on the impact of the findings and on the literature that might inform the findings, and, finally, (6) conducting strategies to validate the accuracy of the findings. In practice, researchers do not always follow these steps in sequence but iteratively proceed

back and forth through the steps of qualitative analysis. (p. 237)

NVivo 14 (2020), a qualitative data analysis software, was used for the coding process in this phenomenological study. All eight interview transcriptions were uploaded to NVivo 14 (2020), with participants' assigned numbers and pseudonyms. Numbers were assigned in order of completion of the interviews. Participant demographic information, including (a) gender, (b) age in years, and (c) years in private school by 2024, was also uploaded to NVivo 14 (2020).

Before coding each participant's transcript, the researcher did an initial review of each transcript. Bloomberg (2022) believed that "the underlying purpose of this initial read is to really immerse yourself in your data and gain a sense of their possibilities" (p. 337). After the initial read, the researcher engaged the transcripts in a second read and manually coded all eight transcripts for words and phrases that "symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute" from the data (Saldana, 2008, p.3). Seventy-five codes were accumulated after the second review of the transcripts. The transcripts were analyzed again using NVivo 14's autocode function, which generated additional references from the transcripts for each of the seventy-five codes from the eight transcripts.

After coding, the researcher transitioned to the theme development stage. Bloomberg (2022) stated, "Thematic analysis involves noting relationships, similarities, and differences in the data, and is a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (p. 370). The theme analysis for this study was done manually. The codes from NVivo 14 were exported to a spreadsheet and aggregated into clusters in Microsoft 365 Word by the researcher. The initial aggregation of codes resulted in nine clusters collapsing into five emerging themes. Codes that had similarities, patterns, or a relationship with one another were grouped. Similarities, patterns, or relationships among the codes were related to (a) the teacher, (b) the

learning environment, (c) instructional methods, (d) academic growth and reflective practice, and (e) a student's self-esteem and relationships.

Presentation of Results and Findings

The results and findings answered the guiding research questions of this qualitative phenomenological study. These patterns, similarities, and relationships among the codes from the eight transcripts translated into the emerging themes of this study: (a) a holistic teacher, (b) a holistic learning environment, (c) responsive instructional methods, (d) pervasive academic achievement and cultivating reflective students, and (e) nurturing a student's identity and repairing attachments. Under each emerging theme, subthemes were created in recognition of the relationship among the codes under a major theme. The emerging themes of a holistic teacher, a holistic learning environment, and responsive instructional methods have four subthemes. Another emerging theme was pervasive academic achievement and cultivating reflective students, which has two subthemes. The last emerging theme was nurturing a student's identity and repairing attachments, which also has two subthemes. The themes and subthemes uncovered using NVivo 14 were used to interpret the results of this phenomenological study.

The following table displays the emerging themes and corresponding subthemes for this study.

Table 2

Emerging Themes and Subthemes from this Research Study

Theme	*Subtheme*
A Holistic Teacher	Teacher Qualities
	Student Visibility
	Seeking Student Needs

	Tough Love
A Holistic Learning Environment	Classroom Permissions
	The Teacher's Role
	Evolving Student Perspectives
	Evolving Student Behaviors
Responsive Instructional Methods	Dynamic Instruction
	Scaffolded Instruction
Pervasive Academic Achievement and Cultivating Reflective Students	Positive Growth in Academic Achievement
	Increased Metacognition
Nurturing a Student's Identity and Repairing attachments	Growth in Self Esteem
	Repairing and building Connections

Note: These emerging themes and subthemes were the result of the aggregation of codes from the participant interviews based on their relationship and patterns found in the data (Bloomberg, 2022).

Theme 1: A Holistic Teacher

Each of the participants were asked about their favorite teacher. Participants were also asked questions about what their favorite teachers said or did for them that they perceived as affecting their academics and their comfortability in the classroom. The theme of "a holistic teacher" can be best described by the aggregation of codes into the subthemes of (a) teacher

qualities, (b), student visibility, (c) seeking student needs, and (d) tough love. All the eight participants referenced their favorite teachers as having unique qualities about their character, being seen by their teacher, and receiving 'tough love' from their teacher. Seven of eight participants referenced their teacher proactively seeking out their needs as students. A holistic teacher is an individual who can be described by qualities and characteristics that flow from their being, outlook on the world, and personal philosophy about the role of education in the lives of their children, which translates into the embodied practices, behaviors, and communications they have in the classroom and with their students.

Subtheme: Teacher Qualities

The participants described experiences that revealed various qualities about the teachers they felt responded to their needs. The aggregation of codes revealed at least five teacher qualities that could be used to describe a holistic teacher. The five qualities that participants described their teachers included being approachable, flexible, stoic, accessible, and humorous.

Brady, Santino, and Jade all described their teachers as people who felt confident they could go to and be comfortable around. Brady shared how he used to not go for extra help when he was in public school because he did not feel like he could talk to his teachers. With his teacher at his private high school, Brady shared, "If I needed any extra problems that were not homework or any like review, I would just go to her." Santino, in describing his teacher, believed that "he was not really intimidating." Jade also described her favorite teacher, who was the same as Santino's as "very welcoming. He's a very comforting person to be around. He is very calm and collected." Brady, Santino, and Jade described a holistic teacher as someone they could approach in need of extra help, someone they could connect with, and who embodied a calmness about themselves.

Santino and Peter also expressed how their teachers would demonstrate flexibility in response to how they learn and when they need extra help. Santino said, “He would give us the freedom to listen to music. So, I would put my air pods in, and I work best with that.” Peter described his experience with his teacher when he needed extra help. Peter discussed how even if he were wrong, his teacher would answer any questions he had and that she would break it down, take her time, and even restart the entire problem if you asked her to.

Jade recalled how she had difficulty with a geography assignment and asked her teacher to teach her the concept again repeatedly. She remembered thinking that despite asking her teacher the same questions multiple times, she said that her teacher “never made her feel like she was stupid.” Brady shared a similar experience and contrasted it with teachers he had before his current private high school. He shared how his teacher never got angry or showed emotion when she was asked for help. He recalled teachers in his other schools often getting angry or emotional when students needed help.

Accessibility is another teacher quality described by participants. Brady and Emma described the same teacher who they believed they could always go to. Brady described the teacher as “a resource when you need her.” Emma shared about a poster the same teacher had on her desk that said, “Right here, right now.” Emma reflected on the meaning of the teacher’s poster and said, “She wants us to know the second we feel a little bit of doubt; she wants us to go to her right now, like don’t even doubt. Oh, is she busy? Just go!” Valerie also expressed how she felt like she could go to his classroom during lunch whenever she wanted. She was never turned away.

Peter and Jade also reflected on how their teachers have used humor to keep them engaged and comfortable in class. Peter expressed, “It’s easier to focus more when someone’s

really funny." Jade described how her teacher using humor made him seem "more real" and made her comfortable. She said, "He's also just very funny, which I appreciate. Cracking little jokes here and there, and that really helps me feel comfortable in his classroom."

Subtheme: Student Visibility

Students with adverse childhood experiences have had experiences that undermine their safety, stability, and attachment (Stoppelbein et al., 2020). Students being seen and visible to their teachers mitigates the effects of ACEs. Emma, Abby, Brady, Valerie, and Peter described how they have experienced visibility from their teachers. Emma stated, "She'll have you come up to her desk, and she'll just really make you feel like you have that attention on you for that time, and she'll help you and sit there until you get it." Emma described confidence in her teacher's commitment to spend time with her until she understood the content. Abby recalled how she had experiences with her teacher who would ask her about her interests and talk to her about not only school work, but books that she likes to read or what her opinion was on something that is on the news. Brady often heard from his teacher "I'm proud of you," which he expressed was "nice to hear." Valerie and Peter also shared examples of how their teachers made time for them, whenever they requested it, before school, after school, or during lunch. Memoing during Valerie and Peter's interviews revealed how they had a sense of calmness when discussing their ability to ask their teachers for their time.

Subtheme: Seeking Student Needs

The subtheme of seeking student needs was best represented by an anecdote shared by Brady and his teacher. Brady told the story about how he was at a basketball game after school that his teacher happened to be at. Randomly, he said, the teacher pulled him aside during the game to a private area and said, "I see that you are struggling in class. Is there anything I can do

for you?" Brady shared how he initially did not know how to react, thought about the offer, and went back to her later and asked for help. He reflected on that experience and shared that in that moment he knew that she cared, and he wanted to work hard for her. Emma has witnessed the same teacher get into the habit of walking around the class, asking students, "Did you understand that? Did you get that? Did you need help?" This teacher, whom Brady and Emma described, consistently and proactively notices student needs and seeks ways to help them.

Jade described how she has needs outside of the classroom that add to her daily responsibilities. She expressed how she has sports and extracurricular activities but also has a job and needs to help take care of her siblings. Every now and then, because of her circumstances, she has asked her teacher for an extra day for an assignment, and she described her teacher as always understanding of things that go on outside of school for her. Bob described his teacher as someone who could "put himself in someone else's shoes." Participants experienced their needs being sought after when they had been proactively offered help and sensitive to their needs outside of the classroom.

Subtheme: Tough Love

In describing her teacher in one phrase, Valerie said, "Tough love." When asked to elaborate on what she meant, she said about her teacher:

> She loves every one of her students and she just wants the best for all of us. So, I think it's better to know that she's going to be mean to you so you could be good. Then rather, she's going to be nice to you and not really care what happens to you as a student.

Valerie was describing the duality of high expectations and depth of care for a student's well-being. Brady expressed how he knows that his teacher wants him to succeed. He said that awareness pushes him to do well in her class. He also said that others complain about her

strictness in the class, but for him, he did not really mind it at all because he knew he was cared for by her.

Theme 2: A Holistic Learning Environment

The participants discussed and reflected on their experiences in the classroom environment created by their teachers. The aggregation of codes revealed that teachers set 'permissions' in their classrooms that supported a sense of safety and stability in the environment. The codes also suggested that teachers have functional roles in the class that contribute to the development of a holistic learning environment. A holistic learning environment, led by the teacher, creates a space that ensures a student's safety and stability and nurtures healthy relationships in the class. The participants also described the effects of a holistic learning environment on their perspectives on coming to class and how they behave in the classroom.

Subtheme: Classroom Permissions

The participants described classroom experiences that suggested permissions allowed by their teacher. Six of the eight participants offered examples of classroom permissions, given by their teacher, giving them a sense of comfort and inclusiveness in the classroom. The classroom permissions include (a) permission to ask questions, (b) permission to give the wrong answer, and (c) permission to offer all perspectives on a topic.

Peter shared that his teacher created an environment where "if you want to go and ask him about something, he'll definitely help you with it, and not say, 'hey, you got to figure this out by yourself'." Peter expressed assurance and confidence in his belief that he can always ask his teacher questions. Brady, in a different class, spoke similarly about his teacher and class. Brady recalled his teacher saying to his class, "Don't be afraid to ever ask a question here,

because you'll never be judged for asking any type of question, because every question is a valuable one, and I was like, damn, like that was deep." He went on to express how she repeated this mantra that every question is a valuable one. He also offered an example of how someone once asked an "obvious" question and how others responded with groaning. He shared how the teacher immediately paused the class and reminded his peers that all questions are valuable.

Valerie shared that when she offered the wrong answer, her teacher would not be too harsh on her. As a result, she felt comfortable sharing and asking questions. Peter echoed the same confidence as his teacher in feeling comfortable in giving the wrong answer. Peter stated, "If you're not afraid to mess up, you're going to have all the confidence in your answer, whether it's right or wrong. Because you're not afraid about being something that happens." Peter's reflections suggested that a student's confidence increases when permitted to be correct or incorrect when answering questions in class.

Finally, Santino discussed how his teacher invited various and all perspectives regarding the discussion of potentially highly contested topics during class. Santino shared about his class, "You can have outside views other than just that; you know this is 'wrong.'" This assurance that he could speak, despite having a perspective in the minority of the conversation, gave him calmness during discussion and a willingness to offer his thoughts to the conversation.

Subtheme: The Teacher's Role

A holistic teacher plays an important role in the creation and development of a holistic learning environment. A holistic teacher demonstrates various practices that nurture an environment that is safe, secure, and supports relationships. Bob said that he "always still felt cared for" by his teacher. He goes on to say that the care extended to him "was incredibly impactful." Jade discussed how her teacher "built a great connection with her." She said she's

also “sure a bunch of other students,” too. In the daily interactions between teachers and students, a holistic teacher could take advantage of opportunities to express a sense of caring and support to build rapport and connections with all their students. The connection between teacher and student is foundational for student buy-in and success.

Other participants offered examples of how teachers nurtured the connections they had with their students. Emma shared how her teacher admitting when she makes mistakes positively impacted her perspective of her teacher. Emma said, “She always lets us know that she's done things wrong, too, especially on tests.” The admission of one’s mistakes as the teacher offered students a space to be incorrect and to not fall into embarrassment in the learning environment. Emma also shared that her teacher, if she notices that she is not doing well, she’ll “drop everything, and she’ll just say, ‘breathe, breathe, calm down.’” A holistic teacher pauses and engages in the coregulation of a student’s emotions when they are in distress.

Brady offered another example of how his teacher nurtured a connection she had with him. He shared how he once discussed why he did well on a test with his teacher. He discussed his strategies and discovered that she then shared his ideas and successes with others. Brady stated, “She uses some of my study tactics in class to see if it would help other people. And I was like, Wow, she’s actually sitting here listening to me. I felt so good about it.”

Subtheme: Evolving Student Perspectives

A holistic learning environment that provides safety, security, and nurtures classroom relationships positively impacts the perspectives students with adverse childhood experiences have of the classroom environment they enter. Coding suggested that participants experience increased comfort in the classroom environment, which allows them to be more comfortable

speaking, enjoy learning, and change the preconceived notions they may have about their teachers.

Emma recalled how she used to mumble her answers in class under her breath, and she said that her teacher would say to her, “Come on, Emma, just say it out loud!” She said that “he’ll force it. He always made sure that I was comfortable speaking up. He made me comfortable in that class.” Emma also stated that she used to be very shy and that she now “became more willing to learn and like to participate in the classroom setting.”

Valerie shared how, at the beginning of the school year, she really disliked a particular subject. After spending several months with the teacher she had, Valerie’s perspective changed. Valerie said, “At the beginning, I was like, Oh, my God! This is annoying! But now, I’m like really appreciative, like I really am grateful that I had her, because now I do enjoy it.”

Subtheme: Evolving Student Behaviors

A holistic learning environment may lead to increased attention and class participation among students with adverse childhood experiences. Peter stated, “We’re doing it together as a class because we’re all trying to work through these same things, and learning from other people’s mistakes always makes you kind of like, pay attention more.” Valerie also expressed how her teacher kept elevated expectations and would not let her get distracted. Valerie shared, “I could probably stare at the wall for like 20 minutes and not even notice. But with him, he won’t let me do that.” A holistic learning environment may lead to increased attention in the classroom.

Participant Brady also reported how the learning environment increased his desire to participate in the class. Brady shared that he used to be very shy to ask questions, “but now, this

year especially, I don't care. I have a question. I want the answer. And she doesn't make me feel dumb when I ask a question. I don't have to be shy about asking questions anymore."

Theme 3: Responsive Instructional Methods

Another emerging theme from the aggregated codes was responsive instructional methods. Participants in the study referred to various instructional strategies used by teachers in the classroom that they perceived as helpful in attaining and retaining information in class while also participating in class. The list of instructional strategies mentioned through examples by participants can be under the umbrella of responsive instructional methods. Responsive instructional methods are responsive to the individual needs of students to make them available for learning. The instructional methods can also be broken down into two categories: dynamic instruction and scaffolded instruction.

Subtheme: Dynamic Instruction

In the subtheme of dynamic instruction, the aggregated codes suggested that participants perceived that they responded well to teachers who demonstrate excitement in teaching, create meaningful connections to learning, and vary their teaching styles from time to time. Valerie said that her teacher "just loves what she does." Bob echoed the sentiment of teachers who care about what they do. Bob said, "They care about the scholarship, and they love to learn as much as their students do, and they'll inspire their students to learn." Jade also recalled how she experienced enjoyment watching her teacher and how he interacted with people. She said, "I wanted to listen because of just how he went around. You know, he walks around the room, and he'll just be presenting. And I really like it, it helps me a lot."

Santino claimed that if what is being taught is made "applicable to real life scenarios, then a lot of people will probably pay attention." Santino recalled how what is discussed in class

sometimes reminds him of things that happened in the previous school year or other parts of his life. These meaningful connections, facilitated by a teacher's question, encourage students to engage according to Santino.

Emma, Abby, and Jade also offered examples of how teachers were dynamic in their instruction in their classes, which increased their engagement and participation. Emma claimed that her teacher's class is "never truly boring…he always switches it up. We'll do notes. And then the other day, there's a random project, just to get us back into that learning energy." Abby discussed how she does not respond well to teachers just "telling you the information." She said she appreciates when her teachers "ask questions, asking if they knew, showing pictures, slides, and videos." Jade also shared that she prefers interactive lessons and believes her teacher makes them interactive very often.

Subtheme: Scaffolded Instruction

The subtheme of scaffolded instruction emerged from practices that participants experienced as supporting them in the learning process. Valerie captured an aspect of scaffolded instruction when she said that her teacher "explains things very simply and thoroughly. She explains things step by step and makes sure that we know exactly what she's talking about." The breaking down of instruction "step by step by step" allowed content to be manageable and simplified into parts that may support understanding. Emma and Abby shared a sentiment similar to Valerie's. Emma expressed how she liked it when teachers are "straightforward," which may be related to the simplicity of instruction that Valerie discussed. Abby also shared how her teacher would "explain further, go into more detail," which was related to Valerie saying that her teacher was thorough in her instruction.

Participants also offered examples of what they have been given to scaffold learning. Abby shared how she would receive notes with fill in the blanks for a lesson. Emma also discussed how her class uses Canvas, which offers her reminders of when assignments are due and shows her progress in class. Emma and Valerie also reported that their teachers do not allow electronics, such as personal cell phones, to be used or accessible in the classroom. The removal of electronic devices supported student engagement and may lead to increased participation.

Theme 4: Pervasive Academic Achievement and Cultivating Reflective Students

Participants described experiences that they have had, which may be categorized in the first three themes as a holistic teacher, a holistic learning environment, and responsive instructional methods. The theme of pervasive academic achievement and cultivating reflective students emerged from the perceptions students have about the effects of teachers, their instructional strategies, and the classroom environment they develop on their academic achievement. The two subthemes for this emerging theme include positive growth in academic achievement and increased metacognition.

Subtheme: Positive Growth in Academic Achievement

Valerie and Brady both reported a positive trajectory in their grades after working with their teacher. Valerie shared, “My grade from her class last year I think I had a C. And now I had an ‘A+.’ Brady stated:

> For example, the first semester last year I had a ‘D’ in math. The first marking period I had A. And the second part marking period, which is like in the middle of when she told me that I had a B.

He credited his academic growth to his teacher and her care for him. Brady continued to say, "When no one was in my corner she came in my corner, and kind of lifted up my sphere to be a better student all around, and not even just in math. All my grades ticked up this year."

Santino and Jade described a similar phenomenon with perceived improvement across subject areas because of one teacher. Santino shared, "He helped me to put in the effort, and then it kind of just carried on through the rest of the school day." Jade also stated, "It was just him being as good of a teacher as he is, it made me motivated to do good in school and specifically in his class." Santino and Jade both expressed how a single teacher positively impacted their desire to do well in other subject areas throughout their school day. A single teacher's impact on a student may have pervasive effects on a child's desire to do well in school and their academic achievement in multiple subject areas.

Subtheme: Increased Metacognition

A student's awareness and understanding of one's own thought process gives insight into why a student does well, understanding why they need to do well, and reflecting on their work. A teacher has an important role to play in the cultivation of these reflective thoughts in students' thinking. Emma shared two impactful conversations she had with her teacher. The first conversation was with her teacher who asked, "Why does this happen?" Her teacher was asking why she was getting bad grades on her test. In the second conversation, Emma recalled her teacher asking her why she thought she did well on her midterm. Emma stated, "She wanted to see why I got it." Emma then said that her teacher reminded her, "You need decent grades to get what you want to do, like if you want money for financial aid and stuff. She always holds that over our heads. She reminds us we need the grades." Emma described how her teacher solicited

her to engage in a reflective practice of understanding why she was not doing well, why she did well, and why she needed to do well.

Valerie also shared how she changed her approach to test-taking with her teacher, who encouraged reflective thinking about her learning. In previous tests with other teachers, she would just hand in her test. With her teacher, Valerie shared, "I go over everything. After each problem, I check it, and it helps me be more patient instead of rushing and being frustrated." Reflective practices may encourage students to consider what makes them successful or not successful in school and to review their work intentionally before submitting it for a grade.

Theme 5: Nurturing a Student's Identity and Repairing Attachments

The last theme, nurturing a student's identity and repairing attachment, emerged from an aggregation of codes that suggested participants experienced a growth in their self-esteem, a growing desire to please their teacher and better social relationships. Similarly to theme 4: pervasive academic achievement and cultivating reflective students, this theme can be categorized as the perceived effects of having a holistic teacher, being immersed in a holistic learning environment, and being afforded instructional methods that are responsive to their needs. This emerging theme's subthemes include growth in self-esteem and repairing and building connections.

Subtheme: Growth in Self-Esteem

Emma and Brady both expressed an increase in their self-confidence after working with their respective teachers. Emma discussed how she had not really talked to people before because she was shy. Now, she describes herself as an "extrovert" because of her relationship with her teacher and how he encouraged her to come out of her shell. Brady also offered his

insights after acknowledging that he believes that his teacher will always be in his corner as long as he's at his high school. Brady believed:

> I can do this life thing. I can live my life as someone who's not a failure. I can do good in life. I can take a progressive step forward in life, and I can come up from being down and come up and rise to the top.

Self-confidence increased for Emma and Brady because of their relationships with their teachers.

Coding of Brady's transcript also suggested that he had an improved emotional state after working with his teacher. After he talked about his relationship with his teacher, Brady shared, "I don't know. I just felt at ease. I guess you could say something was lifted off of my shoulders. But it was just like, Okay, wow, like, someone actually cares about how I'm doing in the classroom." Previously, Brady described himself as a "tense" person. Memoing of Brady's interview suggested that Brady spoke in an increasingly confident and upbeat tone of voice as he described the effects his teacher had on him being less tense and more at ease.

Jade and Valerie also expressed how their motivations to do well increased. Jade stated, "Him just being how he is made me want to do good in school." Valerie also described a newfound satisfaction in completing her work and "getting it right." She went on to say, "I'm very thankful she forced me to pay attention and be a good student." Valerie concluded her interview, after reflecting on the impact of her teacher, by stating, "All my grades are really good. So I feel like I definitely could be a better student, and that I am a good student." Valerie expressed self-confidence and an improved self-image that she *is* a good student.

Subtheme: Repairing and Building Connections

Emma and Brady both expressed in their interviews how they did not have strong social connections and relationships. Both described themselves as "shy" before connecting with their

teachers who have impacted them. Emma now describes herself as an “extrovert” after connecting with her teacher. She said, “He forced me out of my shell to just talk to new people this year. I’ve made a lot more friends, especially in his class, the people I never thought I’d be friends with.” Brady also shared how his peer relationships improved due to his grades. Brady expressed how he could not spend time with friends as much because he did not do well in school before. After improving his grades, he reported having more opportunities to be with his friends.

Valerie, Brady, and Jade also expressed a desire to please the teachers who have cared for and supported them in school. Valerie said she wanted to do well for her teacher because she didn’t want her to be upset with her. Valerie demonstrated a desire to please her teacher. Brady shared, “it's just motivating when someone wants you to succeed and they think that you can succeed even when you’re at your lost point. It brings you up and makes you want to succeed.” Brady expressed, even in moments of struggle, a desire to succeed and please the teacher he knew cared for him and has said that she’s proud of him. Jade also stated:

> Of course I want to do good for them, and I care about what they think because I care about them. You know I care about that class. I care about what they think of me. So I do with certain teachers, the ones that do try to have a connection with students, but the ones that are just up there teaching to teach. I don’t care, because it doesn’t feel like you care about me at all.

Valerie, Brady, and Jade, because of their relationships with their teachers, wanted to please the teachers who have supported them by doing well in school and doing what is expected of them as students in their classes.

Summary

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore how private high school seniors, age 18 or older, who have at least one adverse childhood experience, perceive the trauma-based approaches used by their teachers in the classroom. Semi-structured interviews and memoing were used as data collection tools for this study. After the completion of the semi-structured interviews, the coding process began. The initial stages of coding were guided by the research questions that fulfill the purpose of this qualitative study. In the initial stages of the coding process, 75 codes were gathered from the eight transcribed interviews. The codes were then aggregated into emerging themes based on similarities, patterns, and relationships to one another.

Five Emerging themes from this study include (a) theme 1: a holistic teacher, (b) theme 2: a holistic learning environment, (c) theme 3: responsive instructional methods, (d) theme 4: pervasive academic achievement and cultivating reflective students, and (e) theme 5: nurturing a student's identity and repairing attachments. Themes 1 and 2 had four subthemes that emerged for each theme. Themes 3, 4, and 5 had two subthemes emerged, respectively. These emergent themes and subthemes found in the results of this study were used to inform this researcher's findings, which will be found in chapter five.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

The number of students with adverse childhood experiences (ACE) in K-12 schools has significantly grown (Anderson et al., 2022; Hubel et al., 2020). The attainment of adverse childhood experiences negatively impacts a student's academic and functional progress in the classroom (Neitzel, 2020; Stoppelbein et al., 2020). Some of the negative effects of adverse childhood experiences include delays in language development, lacking trusting relationships with peers and teachers, low rates of resiliency, impaired memory, inconsistent executive functioning, dysregulation of intense emotions, and impaired attention (Foreman & Bates, 2021; Hubel et al., 2020; Milot et al., 2010; Myat Zaw et al., 2022; Paredes, 2021).

The literature also acknowledged the negative effects of adverse childhood experiences on high school students. Students in grades 9 through 11 who have had at least one or more adverse childhood experiences had associations with cutting class, truancy, literacy challenges, below-average academic achievement, dropping out of school, and making no plans to graduate high school (Duke, 2020; Ormistron, 2020). The negative effects of adverse childhood experiences in high school students may also lead to challenges long after high school. Duke (2020) claimed that the negative effects of poor academic and functional outcomes could lead to difficulties in socioeconomic mobility. Wilson-Genderson et al. (2022) also claimed that individuals with ACEs had trajectories of prolonged symptoms of depression later in life.

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore how private high school seniors, age 18 or older, who have at least one adverse childhood experience, perceive the trauma-based approaches used by their teachers in the classroom. A trauma-based approach is researched-based knowledge and practices utilized by professionals who serve students with trauma holistically through teacher practices and characteristics (Hobbs et al., 2019). A

professional who has knowledge and awareness of trauma can tailor and inform their practices to be responsive to the needs of struggling learners with adverse childhood experiences (Brunzell et al., 2019; Hobbs et al., 2019; Maynard et al., 2019; Neitzel, 2020).

To fulfill the purpose of this study, the researcher conducted eight semi-structured interviews. The eight participants self-identified as being (a) a senior at the chosen research site, (b) being 18 years old or older, and (c) having at least one adverse childhood experience. The research questions of this study that guided the semi-structured interviews included:

> **Research Question 1:** How do private high school seniors, age 18 or older who have experienced at least one adverse childhood experience, describe the trauma-based approaches in their classroom?
>
> **Research Question 2:** How do private high school seniors, age 18 or older who have experienced at least one adverse childhood experience, describe the outcomes of trauma-based approaches on their academic progress?
>
> **Research Question 3:** How do private high school seniors, age 18 or older who have experienced at least one adverse childhood experience, describe the outcomes of trauma-based approaches on their functional progress?

The data collected from the interviews were transcribed, member-checked, and coded for emerging themes. The five emerging themes of this study are (a) theme 1: a holistic teacher, (b) theme 2: a holistic learning environment, (c) theme 3: responsive instructional methods, (d) theme 4: pervasive academic achievement and cultivating reflective students, and (e) theme 5: nurturing a student's identity and repairing attachments. Themes 1, 2, and 3 could be categorized as perceived trauma-based approaches used in participants' classrooms, while themes 4 and 5 are the participants' perceived academic and functional outcomes of trauma-based approaches.

A holistic teacher has four subthemes which include (a) teacher qualities, (b) student visibility, (c) seeking student needs, and (d) tough love. A holistic learning environment has four subthemes: (a) classroom permissions, (b) the teacher's role, (c) evolving student perspectives, and (d) evolving student behaviors. Responsive instructional methods have two subthemes: dynamic instruction and scaffolded instruction. The subthemes for pervasive academic achievement and cultivating reflective students are growth in student achievement and increased metacognition. The last theme, nurturing a student's identity and repairing attachments, has two subthemes, which are growth in self-esteem and repairing and building connections.

The emerging themes and respective subthemes should be considered in the context of this study's limitations. In this qualitative phenomenological study, the collected data was limited to a small sample size at a single private high school in a suburban New Jersey township. Another limitation of this study was the responses given by the participants. Due to the sensitivity of the topic of adverse childhood experiences, participants may not have been fully transparent and honest in their responses to the interview.

This chapter will discuss the interpretation and importance of the findings of these emergent themes and subthemes. This chapter will also cover the implications of these findings and make recommendations for action and further research based on this research and its limitations and delimitations. This chapter will end with a conclusion.

Interpretation and Importance of Findings

The researcher of this qualitative phenomenological study explored the perspective of eight high school seniors who were at least 18 years of age and self-identified as having at least one adverse childhood experience. The data analysis of these interviews unveiled five emerging

themes and respective subthemes that addressed this study's research questions and complimented or added to the findings of the current literature.

Research Question 1

The first research question of this study explored the perceptions of private high school seniors, age 18 or older, who have experienced at least one adverse childhood experience, and how they described the trauma-based approaches used in their classrooms. The current literature explained that a trauma-based approach is researched-based knowledge and practices utilized by professionals who serve students with trauma holistically through teacher practices and characteristics (Hobbs et al., 2019). The emerging themes in this research including: a holistic teacher, a holistic learning environment, and responsive instructional methods are categories that add to the literature's understanding of trauma-based approaches. In summary, the aggregation of data from participant interviews revealed that a trauma-based approach is a three-pronged approach that includes the teacher, the learning environment, and instructional methods used by the teacher.

Finding #1: A trauma-based approach is a three-pronged approach that includes a holistic teacher, a holistic learning environment, and responsive instructional methods.

A Holistic Teacher.

According to the aggregated input from participants of this study, a holistic teacher is someone who sustains teacher qualities, engages in actions and words that promote student visibility, proactively seeks the school based and external needs of students, and balances high expectations and compassion for their students through 'tough love.' In alignment with the current literature, a teacher who uses and embodies a trauma-based approach has knowledge and awareness of trauma and uses their knowledge base to inform their practices in the classroom to

be responsive to their students (Brunzell et al., 2019; Hobbs et al., 2019; Maynard et al., 2019; Neitzel, 2020). Since this study's primary focus was the perspectives of students on trauma-based approaches, there is no way to substantiate if their teachers had knowledge of trauma-based approaches; however, this study, through the perspectives of private high school seniors, is able to suggest teacher practices and characteristics that they perceived in meeting their needs and providing them with stability and security (Neitzel, 2020; Opiola et al., 2020).

This study's theoretical framework, Bowlby's attachment theory (1958), stresses the role of a primary caregiver and their ability to be responsive to the needs of a child and nurturing a relationship that offers that stability and security (Neitzel, 2020; Opiola et al., 2020). Participants of this study expressed how their teachers proactively sought their needs. Brady offered the example of how his teacher unexpectedly pulled him aside during a basketball game and said, "I see that you are struggling in class. Is there anything I can do for you?" Brady was in shock and, after reflection, appreciated her offer and took her up on it later. He later credits his teacher with his pervasive success in school. The participants also expressed how their teachers, functioning in the role of a primary caregiver, showered them with affirmations, consistently made time for students, connected with students, and held them to high expectations. These actions and words that come from a holistic teacher embody a professional who participants may describe as being approachable, accessible, flexible, stoic, and humorous. A holistic teacher, put simply in Emma's words, is someone who the participants can say, "We know she cares."

A Holistic Learning Environment.

A review of the current literature spoke to how a trauma-based approach may lead to a positive classroom culture led by a teacher who subscribes to a trauma-based approach in the classroom. However, it is limited in describing the decisions made by holistic teachers in the

design of a trauma-based classroom that offers stability and security to an individual with adverse childhood experiences as described by Bowlby's (1958) attachment theory. This research unveiled at least three permissions that mark a holistic learning environment: permission to ask questions, permission to offer all perspectives, and permission to give the wrong answer.

Brady described an experience when a student asked an "obvious" question in class and other students responded with groans. Brady's teacher responded to the moment by saying, "Don't be afraid to ever ask a question here, because you'll never be judged for asking any type of question, because every question is a valuable one." In this moment, the teacher protected all students from embarrassment and undid the fear of asking any type of question that may be faced with retribution by one's peers or teacher. Peter echoed a similar confidence in the learning environment created by his teacher and in his ability to give answers in class. Peter shared, "If you're not afraid to mess up, you're going to have all the confidence in your answer, whether it's right or wrong. Because you're not afraid about something that happens."

A holistic teacher has an integral role in creating and developing a holistic learning environment in what they say and what they do. In the story, recalled Brady, his teacher's intervention demonstrated her expectation of a learning environment that promotes conversations, inquiry, and student input in all matters. In Peter, these types of moments and his comfortability in the learning environment instilled in him the confidence to participate and share without fear of repercussions to his participation. A holistic learning environment, led by a holistic teacher, nurtures, and solicits desired classroom behaviors such as increased attention and participation and molds the perspectives of students with adverse childhood experiences to be open to engagement with their teachers and peers.

Responsive Instructional Methods.

The participants described examples of teacher actions they found helpful to meeting their needs in the classroom. The teacher's actions in their instruction could be categorized as dynamic instruction and scaffolded instruction. Bowlby's (1958) attachment theory emphasizes the importance of a primary caregiver and the relationship they have with an individual that is responsive to the individual's wants and needs. Participants like Emma described how their teachers would always "switch it up." Emma expressed that her teacher is "never truly boring…he always switches it up. We'll do notes. And then the other day there is a random project, just to get us back into that learning energy." Jade echoed a similar sentiment and expressed her appreciation of lessons from her teacher that are more interactive and engaging. Emma also expressed how her teacher used tools like Canvas in the classroom, which kept her organized and helped her meet deadlines for assignments, while Abby received scaffolded Cornell notes to fill in the blanks.

Responsive instructional methods meet the needs of students with adverse childhood experiences. Students with adverse childhood experiences may have needs in language development, work completion, impaired attention, etcetera (Foreman & Bates, 2021; Hubel et al., 2020; Milot et al., 2010; Myat Zaw et al., 2022; Paredes, 2021). However, the needs of students with adverse childhood experiences can be met by teachers and lessons that dynamically engage them through different pedagogical practices and offer tools that break down content, presented in detail, and eliminate distractions that impede work completion and attention.

Research Question 2

The second research question of this study explored the perceptions of private high school seniors, age 18 or older, who have experienced at least one adverse childhood experience

and how they described the outcomes of trauma-based approaches on their academic progress. The current literature comprehensively acknowledged the negative effects of adverse childhood experiences on a student's academic performance and the impairment of their cognitive processes needed for learning (Brunzell et al., 2019; Buxton, 2018; Milot et al., 2010; Ormiston et al., 2020). Participants of this study suggested that a trauma-based approach that includes a holistic teacher, a holistic learning environment, and responsive instructional methods leads to pervasive academic achievement across subject areas and cultivates self-reflection in students.

Finding #2: A trauma-based approach may yield pervasive academic achievement across subject areas and cultivate self-reflection in students.

Pervasive Academic Achievement and Cultivating Reflective Students.

The theme of pervasive academic achievement and cultivating reflective students emerged from the participants' perceptions of how a trauma-based approach positively impacted their academics in school. Valerie and Brady both reported a positive trajectory in their grades with the teachers they identified as being responsive to their wants and needs as students with adverse childhood experiences. Unexpectedly, Brady shared, "All my grades ticked up this year" because of the one teacher he described as "always being in his corner. " Santino and Jade expressed a pervasive desire to do well in school because of the teachers they identified in their respective interviews. Santino shared how his teacher helped him to put in the effort to do well in school, and "then it kind of just carried on through the rest of the school day." Jade also reported that her relationship with her teacher motivated her to "do good in school and specifically in his class." The significance of this finding sheds light on that the secure and stable attachment developed between a holistic teacher and student with adverse childhood experiences may not

only positively impact their academics in one class, but also it may impact their academics, or at least desire to do well, for other classes as well.

A trauma-based approach may also cultivate student reflections according to the aggregation of data from participants. Trauma inhibits cognitive processes, including “attention, memory, organizational skills, ability to process information, and problem-solving skills" (Ormiston et al., 2020, p. 320). Participants shared how their teachers solicited them to reflect on why they did not do well on an assignment, why they did do well on an assignment, and why they must do well in school. Teachers engaging students in this metacognition allows them to mitigate the effects of trauma on their cognitive processes needed for learning. Emma described an impactful conversation with her teacher when she asked her, “Why does this happen?” after not doing well on an assignment. In another conversation, Emma described how her teacher wanted her to explain why she “got it” and did well on a particular assignment. Emma continued to describe how her teacher “reminds us we need the grades.”

The ongoing practice of self-reflection in students gives meaning to the work being done for teachers and in their classes. Bob spoke about his desire to conceptualize a purpose for the work he does for his teachers. Bob explained that he would often say, “What am I doing? That's a question I ask myself all the time: what am I doing? Why am I doing this? If the assignment is meaningless, it’s a waste of time.” Cultivating reflective students gives meaning to work, helps students understand their strengths and areas of need in doing well in school, and gives what they do for their holistic teachers and others purpose.

Research Question 3

The third research question of this study explored the perceptions of private high school seniors, age 18 or older who have experienced at least one adverse childhood experience and

how they described the outcomes of trauma-based approaches on their functional progress. A student's functional progress is a student's growth in key behavioral areas, which include, but are not limited to, engagement, attention, relationship building, impulse control, and emotional regulation that affect their ability to be available to learning (Hubel et al., 2020; Milot et al., 2010; Neitzel, 2020; Ormiston et al., 2020). The current literature claimed that students with adverse childhood experiences have delays in these areas of functioning. Students with adverse childhood experiences have trouble securing attachment with a primary caregiver, lack relationship-building skills, and have difficulty with their emotions, which may manifest in anxiety or anger (Hobbs et al., 2019; Neitzel, 2020; Twemlow et al., 2006). The aggregation of data from participant interviews revealed that trauma-based approaches nurtured students' identity and repaired attachments.

Finding #3: A trauma-based approach nurture's a student's identity and repairs attachments

Nurturing a Student Identity and Repairing attachments.

Aggregated participant data unveiled how a trauma-based approach positively impacted participants' perception of their identity as learners and being learners in their environment. Brady, Valerie, and Jade spoke about how their teachers increased their self-confidence, increased their intrinsic motivation to do well in school, improved their overall emotional state and improved their self-image. Brady once described himself as a "tense" person, but after developing a relationship with his teacher over time, he described how he's "loosened up more" and is more "enlightened" because of his relationship with his teacher. Valerie expressed gratitude to her teacher and their relationship. Valerie now has a newfound satisfaction in completing her work and "getting it right." Reflecting upon her relationship with the teacher,

Valerie shared her new belief that she is "a good student." Jade also shared how, because of her teacher, she desires to do even more well in school.

All three participants described different ways that they have grown as students and in their perceptions of themselves and their abilities because of their relationships with their teachers. The teacher-student relationship for these participants was the main catalyst in growing their self-esteem and nurturing their perceived identity as students and as students in their school environment. The role of the teacher-student relationship and its effects on these participants is consistent with the literature's claim that the teacher-student relationship plays a fundamental role in mitigating the effects of trauma in the lives of students with adverse childhood experiences (Hobbs et al., 2019; Neitzel, 2020; Post et al., 2020; Stoppelbein et al., 2020).

The data also revealed how their changed perspective led to repairing attachments and building social connections. Bowlby's (1958) attachment theory placed a high importance on the relationship between the primary caregiver and the individual in providing the individual security and stability. Attachment theory by Bowlby (1958) has also been used as a framework that informed other studies. Lu (2023) discovered in his research that an individual's mother and father informed the individual's social-inner working models. An individual's relationship with their mother or father becomes a frame of reference for building relationships with teachers and peers in school (Lu, 2023). However, Lu (2023) suggested that the teacher-student relationship may mediate the effects of a weaker attachment between an individual and their mother or father in building relationships with other teachers and students. In this qualitative phenomenological study, participants described how their relationships with their teachers led them to want to please their teachers more and strengthened their social relationships. Jade expressed that her teacher instilled in her a desire to do well for him. Jade shared:

> Of course I want to do good for them, and I care about what they think because I care about them. You know I care about that class. I care about what they think of me. So I do with certain teachers, the ones that do try to have a connection with students, but the ones that are just up there teaching to teach. I don't care, because it doesn't feel like you care about me at all.

Jade's desire to do well in her teacher's class reflects her desire to contribute to the teacher-student relationship initiated and nurtured by her teacher. Jade's intrinsic motivation to please her teacher supported the mutually giving relationship between her and her teacher.

Emma also expressed how her relationship with her teacher helped her build new connections with other students. Emma described herself as shy before her relationship with her teacher. She now describes herself as an "extrovert" and has made friends with students she never thought she would be friends with. Emma stated, "I've made like a lot more friends, especially in his class and his history class, the people I never thought I'd be friends with." The relationship that Emma had with her teacher, over time, became a frame of reference for her as she built new relationships with other students.

Implications

This qualitative phenomenological study attempted to address three primary gaps in the literature, which included a lapse in research on trauma-based approaches used in private schools, a lack of clarity of tangible examples of a trauma-based approach, and absent stakeholder input, primarily from students with histories of trauma. This study attempted to adequately listen to and understand the perspectives of private high school seniors with histories of adverse childhood experiences and their identification of what teachers said or did for them that supported their academics and classroom functioning. The aggregation of interview data in

this study was able to describe a renewed trauma-based approach, building on the current literature, as a three-pronged approach that entails a holistic teacher, a holistic learning environment, and responsive instructional methods. This study also described how participants perceived a trauma-based approach's impact on their academic and functional outcomes.

Stakeholder groups that would be impacted by this research would be teachers, school leaders, and district administrators. A review of the literature showed that early childhood practitioners have limited awareness of trauma (Cohen & Barron, 2021). Another study also demonstrated that practitioners in their school setting also had limited knowledge of how to address the needs of students with adverse childhood experiences in the classroom (Neitzel, 2020). This study offers a renewed framework of a trauma-based approach with identified holistic teacher qualities, practices of what holistic teachers say and do for students with adverse childhood experiences, parameters of a holistic learning environment, and instructional methods that are responsive to the learning needs of students with adverse childhood experiences. This study also solicits reflection and input from private high school seniors, who could be understood as experts in attending a K-12 school system, on their perceptions of how this study's trauma-based approach framework positively impacted their academic and functional outcomes.

This study's trauma-based approach framework, building off the current literature and input from student stakeholders, contributes to the awareness of trauma in teachers and helps teachers, school leaders, and district administrators address the needs of students with histories of trauma in their classrooms and schools. The implication of a heightened awareness of a trauma-based approach among these stakeholders could lead teachers to have an increased awareness of the needs of students with trauma and be more empathetic to this student group (Cohen & Barron, 2021; Neitzel, 2020). Another implication would be that teachers and

administrators would have a stronger ability to identify students with adverse childhood experiences in their classrooms and schools (Ormiston et al., 2020). Other implications of this study include offering teachers strategies and practices that could be utilized in their classroom and offering school leaders and district administrators a framework with strategies to develop professional development opportunities. This study may also provide an implication for a teacher, school leader, or district administrator who is attempting to strategically impact classroom and school culture (Stipp & Kilpatrick, 2021).

Recommendations for Action

The findings of this study adequately answer the guiding research questions and complement and expand the current body of literature on the topic. Reflection on the findings of this study offers new insights and perspectives on the experiences of students with adverse childhood experiences with trauma-based approaches used in the classroom and their effects on academic and functional outcomes. These reflections also lead to recommended actions that could be taken by stakeholder groups to strategically use the findings of this study to influence the academic and functional outcomes of students with adverse childhood experiences and the culture of a school or classroom.

Recommended Action #1: Pre- and Post-Survey staff members' knowledge, awareness, and utilization of trauma-based approaches using the framework developed in this study

The creation of a pre and post survey using this study's trauma-based approach framework would help school and staff members assess their knowledge, awareness, and utilization (knowingly or unknowingly) of trauma-based approaches in the classroom. The pre-survey could be used before giving staff members professional development on the findings of this study. The purpose of the pre-survey is to assess the school's current usage of a trauma-

based approach. The post-survey measures how a school staff has developed and implemented the findings of this study after professional development.

Recommended Action #2: Dissemination of this study's trauma-based approach framework and discovered outcomes through professional development opportunities

Professional development could be developed from the findings of this study. Professional development could be tailored to teachers, school leaders, and district administrators. However, all three sessions would be rooted in the trauma-based approach framework of this study, strategies, and practices that participants offered as meeting their needs in the classroom. Professional development would also offer stakeholders an opportunity to reflect on current practices that may be meeting the needs of students with adverse childhood experiences and to discover ways they could enhance their practices using the findings of this research to promote positive academic and functional outcomes in students.

Recommended Action #3: Survey student perceptions of academic outcomes, functional outcomes, and class and school culture based on this study's trauma-based approach framework

Another recommendation would be to survey student perceptions of their academic outcomes, functional outcomes, and the culture of their class and school based on this study's trauma-based approach framework and the identified practices in it. Student surveys can be done on an annual basis and allow for teachers, school leaders, and district administrators to assess their progress in developing a trauma-sensitive staff and school culture that is responsive to the needs of students with adverse childhood experiences. Student feedback is necessary in assessing how teachers and school leaders holistically approach their students in the classroom.

Recommended Action #4: Use this study's trauma-based approach framework as a basis of conversation for staff member reflection

Finally, the findings of this study and the developed trauma-based approach framework could be used as a tool to facilitate conversations with staff members and encourage staff member reflections on their practices in the classroom. Using this framework with associated practices allows teachers to consider ways they can grow in becoming trauma-informed educators. It also offers administrators a framework for leading discussions with their staff members on trauma-based approaches and the desired outcomes for students from it.

Recommendations for Further Study

This qualitative phenomenological study offers valuable insights into the perspectives of private high school seniors with adverse childhood experiences from one private high school in New Jersey. The findings of this study are substantive and could be useful for stakeholder usage. However, the findings of this study could be further developed and expanded on in future research studies.

Recommendation for Further Study #1: Increase participant sample size and use multiple research sites

This study only used eight participants from one private high school in New Jersey, which may lead to overgeneralization of its findings. To mitigate overgeneralization, further research should be conducted with a larger participant sample size and multiple research sites. A larger sample size of student participants across multiple research sites would refine the findings of this study and increase its trustworthiness, which would further validate the study results (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019).

Recommendation for Further Study #2: Conduct the same study on the elementary school and middle school levels

This study used private high school seniors because they may be considered experts in describing trauma-based approaches that teachers may have used in the classroom during their 13 years in a K-12 school system (Anderson et al., 2022). The same study could be conducted by interviewing middle school students (Grades 6-8) and elementary students (Grades K-5). The same study being replicated at a private elementary and private middle school could offer insight into the similarities and differences among the perspectives of students of various ages with adverse childhood experiences.

Recommendation for Further Study #3: Use teachers and students as participants from the same research site to assess their perceptions of trauma-based approaches used in the classroom and their perception of student outcomes in academic and functional progress.

This study focused on the perspectives of students with adverse childhood experiences, their perceptions of trauma-based approaches used in the classroom, and their effects on academic and functional outcomes. A future study ought to consider the perspectives of teachers and students from the same research site. This type of study would allow for an analysis that compares similarities and differences between these two stakeholder groups' perceptions. This information may be insightful in understanding how two different stakeholder groups perceive and respond to trauma in the lives of students.

Conclusion

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore how private high school students, age 18 or older, who have at least one adverse childhood experience, perceive trauma-based approaches used in the classroom. The specific problem that this study addresses

was the lapse in research on trauma-based approaches used by teachers in private schools for students with adverse childhood experiences and their related outcomes. This study specifically focused on giving students with adverse childhood experiences as a stakeholder group the opportunity to offer their insights into the trauma-based approaches they found to positively impact their academics and functioning in the learning environment. This study was also guided by three research questions that had participants describe trauma-based approaches used by their teachers in the classroom. The research questions of this study that guided the semi-structured interviews included:

> **Research Question 1:** How do private high school seniors, age 18 or older who have experienced at least one adverse childhood experience, describe the trauma-based approaches in their classroom?
>
> **Research Question 2:** How do private high school seniors, age 18 or older who have experienced at least one adverse childhood experience, describe the outcomes of trauma-based approaches on their academic progress?
>
> **Research Question 3:** How do private high school seniors, age 18 or older who have experienced at least one adverse childhood experience, describe the outcomes of trauma-based approaches on their functional progress?

The researcher's review of the current literature on the topic uncovered themes, which include: (a) adverse childhood experiences, (b) outcomes of ACEs for high school students, (c) neurobiological changes, (d) physiological responses, (e) academic and functioning delays, (f) teacher awareness and practices, (g) teacher-student relationship, and (h) culture of the classroom and school. The findings of this study complement the current literature and build upon it. The emergent themes from this study include (a) a holistic teacher, (b) a holistic learning

environment, (c) responsive instructional methods, (d) pervasive academic achievement and cultivating reflective students, and (e) nurturing a student's identity and repairing attachments.

The research's findings revealed that a trauma-based approach in this study is a three-pronged approach that includes a holistic teacher, a holistic learning environment, and responsive instructional methods used by the teacher. The findings of this research also revealed that a trauma-based approach can lead to pervasive academic achievement and cultivate self-reflection in students while also nurturing a student's identity and repairing their attachments. Recommendations for future actions include creating pre and post surveys into staff members' knowledge, awareness, and utilization of trauma-based approaches using the framework developed in this study, the creation of professional development, and the creation of surveys that solicit student feedback into the usage and effectiveness of the trauma-based approach framework. Finally, further research that builds upon the findings of this study may include the increased participant sample size, using multiple research sites, conducting this study on the elementary and middle school levels, and using teachers and students from the same research site to assess their perceptions of trauma-based approaches.

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APPENDIX A

IRB Approval Letter

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: December 20, 2023

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Jay Aldrin Locquiao
FACULTY ADVISOR: Alaina Desjardin, DBA

PROJECT NUMBER: 1223-09
RECORD NUMBER: 1223-09-01

PROJECT TITLE: EXPLORING THE PERSPECTIVES OF PRIVATE HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS WITH ADVERSE CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES ON TRAUMA-BASED APPROACHES

SUBMISSION TYPE: New Project
SUBMISSION DATE: December 13, 2023

ACTION: Determination of Exempt Status
DECISION DATE: December 20, 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

APPENDIX B

Letter of Introduction to Research Participants

Subject: Research Participation study Opportunity and Introduction

Hello,

My name is Jay Locquiao. I am currently a doctoral student at the University of New England. I am conducting a study titled EXPLORING THE PERSPECTIVES OF PRIVATE HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS WITH ADVERSE CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES ON TRAUMA-BASED APPROACHES for my dissertation.

The purpose of this research study is to explore the perspectives of students with adverse childhood experience on the use of trauma-based approaches used by their teachers in the classroom. This study is being conducted to fulfill the completion of my dissertation study.

This is a legitimate research study that you can participate in. This project was reviewed and exempted by the Office of Research Integrity at the University of New England. XXXXX High School has also given me permission to conduct this study.

Participation of high school students above the age of 18 in this research is voluntary. Participation will consist of one recorded interview of approximately 45 minutes to 1 hour. All data will be kept confidential and pseudonyms will be used to protect the identities of respondents. All identifying information, including your school's name and location will be unidentified.

Regarding compensation, your high school senior will be receiving a digital **$40 Amazon gift card** for taking part in this research project

I, Jay Locquiao, will be reaching out to your high school senior via email in the near future if he or she is interested in sharing their experience with me, and with additional information. Your high school senior will be receiving the email from jlocquiao@une.edu.

I am grateful for your support in helping me complete my dissertation study.

Sincerely,
Jay Locquiao
Doctoral Student
University of New England
(e) jlocquiao@une.edu

APPENDIX C

Letter of Introduction to the parents of Research Participants

Subject: Research Participation study and Introduction

Hello,

My name is Jay Locquiao. I am currently a doctoral student at the University of New England. I am conducting a study titled EXPLORING THE PERSPECTIVES OF PRIVATE HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS WITH ADVERSE CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES ON TRAUMA-BASED APPROACHES for my dissertation.

The purpose of this research study is to explore the perspectives of students with adverse childhood experience on the use of trauma-based approaches used by their teachers in the classroom. This study is being conducted to fulfill the completion of my dissertation study.

This is a legitimate research study that you can participate in. This project was reviewed and exempted by the Office of Research Integrity at the University of New England. XXXXX High School has also given me permission to conduct this study.

Your participation in this research is voluntary. Participation will consist of one recorded interview of approximately 45 minutes to 1 hour. All data will be kept confidential and pseudonyms will be used to protect the identities of respondents. All identifying information, including your school's name and location will be unidentified.

Regarding compensation, you will be receiving a digital **$40 Amazon gift card** for taking part in this research project

I, Jay Locquiao, will be reaching out via email in the near future if you are interested in sharing your experience with me, and with additional information. You will be receiving the email from jlocquiao@une.edu.

I am grateful for your support in helping me complete my dissertation study.

Sincerely,
Jay Locquiao
Doctoral Student
University of New England
(e) jlocquiao@une.edu

APPENDIX D

Recruitment Email for Research Participants

Dear XX,

I am currently a doctoral student at the University of New England. I am conducting a study titled EXPLORING THE PERSPECTIVES OF PRIVATE HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS WITH ADVERSE CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES ON TRAUMA-BASED APPROACHES for my dissertation.

The purpose of this research study is to explore the perspectives of students with adverse childhood experience on the use of trauma-based approaches used by their teachers in the classroom. An adverse childhood experience may be any experience you have where you felt unsafe or had an unhealthy relationship with a parent/guardian, or another person. A trauma-based approach is anything that a teacher says or does to be helpful to students who have at least one adverse childhood experience. This study is being conducted to fulfill the completion of my dissertation study.

I am seeking 8 participants to participate in my doctoral research study.

You are eligible to participate in this study if you:

- Are enrolled as a high school senior at the study site.
- Are 18 years of age or older.
- *Self-identify as having had at least one adverse childhood experience. *(You will not be asked or required to disclose your specific adverse childhood experience(s).*

**Please see the attachment to this email titled "Center for Youth Wellness (CYW) Adverse Childhood Experiences Questionnaire (ACE-Q) Teen Self-Report." This document will help you determine if you have at least one adverse childhood experience as part of this study's criteria for participation. This study does not require you to complete or submit the questionnaire.*

Participation in this research is voluntary. Participation will consist of one recorded interview of approximately 60 minutes. The interview will be conducted on Zoom at a time of your convenience. If there are more than 8 people who express interest, only the first 8 will be selected to interview. All data will be kept confidential, and pseudonyms will be used to protect the identities of respondents. All identifying information, including your school's name and location 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 interested in sharing your experience with me, please contact me via email at **jlocquiao@une.edu** and we can set up a time for an interview over Zoom.

Regarding compensation, you will be receiving a digital **$40 Amazon gift card** for taking part in this research project which will be sent to your email after completion of your interview and verification of the accuracy of your interview transcript.

If you would like additional information or have any questions, please reach out to me at the above listed email.

Thank you for your consideration of participation in this study.

Sincerely,

Jay Locquiao
Doctoral Student
University of New England
(e) jlocquiao@une.edu

APPENDIX E

CYW Adverse Childhood Experiences Questionnaire (ACE-Q) Teen Self-Report

To be completed by Patient

Today's Date: _____

Your Name: _____ Date of birth: _____

Many children experience stressful life events that can affect their health and development. The results from this questionnaire will assist your doctor in assessing your health and determining guidance. Please read the statements below. Count the number of statements that apply to you and write the total number in the box provided.

Please DO NOT mark or indicate which specific statements apply to you.

1) Of the statements in section 1, HOW MANY apply to you? Write the total number in the box. ☐

Section 1. *At any point since you were born...*

- Your parents or guardians were separated or divorced
- You lived with a household member who served time in jail or prison
- You lived with a household member who was depressed, mentally ill or attempted suicide
- You saw or heard household members hurt or threaten to hurt each other
- A household member swore at, insulted, humiliated, or put you down in a way that scared you OR a household member acted in a way that made you afraid that you might be physically hurt
- Someone touched your private parts or asked you to touch their private parts in a sexual way that was unwanted, against your will, or made you feel uncomfortable
- More than once, you went without food, clothing, a place to live, or had no one to protect you
- Someone pushed, grabbed, slapped or threw something at you OR you were hit so hard that you were injured or had marks
- You lived with someone who had a problem with drinking or using drugs
- You often felt unsupported, unloved and/or unprotected

2) Of the statements in section 2, HOW MANY apply to you? Write the total number in the box. ☐

Section 2. *At any point since you were born...*

- You have been in foster care
- You have experienced harassment or bullying at school
- You have lived with a parent or guardian who died
- You have been separated from your primary caregiver through deportation or immigration
- You have had a serious medical procedure or life threatening illness
- You have often seen or heard violence in the neighborhood or in your school neighborhood
- You have been detained, arrested or incarcerated
- You have often been treated badly because of race, sexual orientation, place of birth, disability or religion
- You have experienced verbal or physical abuse or threats from a romantic partner (i.e. boyfriend or girlfriend)

CYW ACE-Q Teen SR (13-19 yo) © Center for Youth Wellness 2015

APPENDIX F

Participant Information Sheet

Version Date:	*December 20, 2023*
IRB Project #:	#1223-09
Title of Project:	EXPLORING THE PERSPECTIVES OF PRIVATE HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS WITH ADVERSE CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES ON TRAUMA-BASED APPROACHES
Principal Investigator (PI):	*Jay Locquiao*
PI Contact Information:	*jlocquiao@une.edu* | *201-359-7136*

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 purpose of this research study is exploring the perspectives of students with adverse childhood experience on the use of trauma-based approaches used by their teachers in the classroom. An adverse childhood experience may be any experience you have where you felt unsafe or had an unhealthy relationship with a parent/guardian, or another person. A trauma-based approach is anything that a teacher says or does to be helpful to students who have at least one adverse childhood experience. Eight 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 study because you are 1) a senior in high school, 2) 18 years old or older, and 3) Self-identify as having had at least one adverse childhood experience.

WHAT IS INVOLVED IN THIS PROJECT?

- You will be asked to participate in one semi structured interview with the principal investigator that will last approximately 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 interview transcript to review for accuracy. You will have five calendar days to respond or the PI will assume that you have no comments and the transcript 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 skip or not answer any questions, for any reason.

- Although you are required to self-identify as having at least one adverse childhood experience, you are not being asked or required to disclose what adverse childhood experience(s) you have in this project.

- 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 by being in this research project; however, the information we collect may help us further understand the experiences of high students above the age 18 who have at least one adverse childhood experience and the trauma-based approaches used by their teachers in the classroom.

WILL YOU BE COMPENSATED FOR BEING IN THIS PROJECT?

You will be receiving a digital $40 Amazon gift card for taking part in this research project which will be sent to your email after completion of your interview and verification of the accuracy of the transcription.

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.

The following additional measures will be taken to protect your privacy and confidentiality:

- 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 emails gathered during recruitment will be recorded and linked to a uniquely assigned pseudonym within 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 the Zoom interview.
- After you have verified the accuracy of your transcribed interviews and given your Amazon gift card via email, your recorded Zoom interview and master list with your 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.
- Results of this study will be shared with site leadership. All participant data will be de-identified and presented as aggregated.

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 could be deleted when the master list is in existence, but 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.

APPENDIX G

Interview Questions

Interview Question 1: How would you describe your overall experience in going to school?

Interview Question 2: How would you describe your favorite teacher? Why?

Interview Question 3: Why do you think those teachers (insert teacher name used here) positively impacted you in school?

Interview Question 4: What did he/she say or do for you that you appreciated as a student in his/her classroom?

Interview Question 5: Do you have any examples how your teacher _____ while you were in his/her class?

Interview Question 6: How do you think those teachers helped you get good grades in school?

Interview Question 7: What did he/she say or do for you that helped you **believe** you could get good grades in school?

Interview Question 8: What did he/she say or do for you that helped you **get** good grades in class?

Interview Question 9: Why do you think those things they said or did were helpful to you getting good grade?

Interview Question 10: How do you think those teachers helped you to be comfortable and confident in the classroom to learn?

Interview Question 11: What did he/she say or do for you that helped you pay **attention** in class?

Interview Question 12: What did he/she say or do for you that helped you **complete your work** in class?

Interview Question 13: What did he/she say or do for you that helped you **when you got frustrated** about something in class, work or other students?

Interview Question 14: Why do you think those things they said or did were helpful to you being comfortable and confident to do well?

Interview Question 15: Using one word or phrase, how would you describe your favorite teacher. Why?