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Walden University

College of Social and Behavioral Sciences

This is to certify that the doctoral study by

Tracey Faye Whetstone

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,
and that any and all revisions required by
the review committee have been made.

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Walden University
2020

Abstract

Rural Teacher Perceptions of Trauma on Youth

by

Tracey Faye Whetstone

Capstone Project Submitted in Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Social Work

Walden University

November 2020

Abstract

This study was an exploration of teacher experiences and perceptions in working with trauma-exposed students in a rural school district and what is needed to best support student academic and psychosocial success. The substantial long-term effects of trauma exposure cause many children to face behavioral and academic challenges in school, yet teachers are often unaware or untrained concerning trauma-informed care. There is little research regarding how teacher experiences with trauma-exposed students are perceived. This study explored teacher insight with rural trauma-exposed youth in terms of awareness and how they narrate these experiences in response to trauma-related issues. Grounded in trauma and ecological theory, the research questions explored how teachers perceive their experiences and what is needed to support the academic and psychosocial success of trauma-exposed students. A basic qualitative design using semistructured interviews was employed with a purposeful sample of 9 teachers of high school age students in rural South Carolina. The interviews were analyzed using a narrative analysis framework where descriptive and conceptual coding yielded 3 emergent themes of teacher self-efficacy, professional self-efficacy, and school culture. The findings derived key concepts suggesting that teacher-student relationships, team approach, trauma training, and classroom resources were essential for improving teacher efficacy and responding to the needs of trauma-exposed students. The outcomes support social change through enhanced trauma knowledge and awareness of rural culture that can be used to inform school social work practice and district implementation of professional development and trauma resources.

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Dedication

This study is dedicated to all children. I will continue my work to ensure your voice is heard and your life is enriched regardless of your experiences.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Dr. So’Nia Gilkey and Dr. Debora Rice for their unwavering guidance and support. Special thanks to the participants for trusting me and sharing their stories and experiences. I appreciate all you do for the children.

Thanks to my husband for his patience and ongoing support through this process, my mother for her prayers, encouragement, and belief in me, my mother-in-law whose cakes helped me get through writing on Sundays, and to my son who has inspired me to be better since the day he was born. I love you all!

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Section 1: Foundation of the Study and Literature Review

According to Crosby, Somers, Day, and Barony (2015), over 25% of children in the United States will experience some form of trauma. The National Comorbidity Study-Adolescent Supplement revealed that one in five adolescents between the ages of 13 and 18 endures an adverse event (Merikangas, Avenevoli, Costello, Koretz, & Kessler, 2009). The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMSHA, 2016) indicated that adverse events can include abuse, neglect, violence, and caregiver incarceration.

These events can impact mental, physical, social, and emotional well-being and ultimately yield lasting functioning effects (SAMSHA, 2012). Trauma exposure and adverse experiences in childhood can also potentially influence cognitive abilities, academic performance, and classroom behaviors (Alisic, 2012; Reker, 2016). Research suggested that children who endure early experiences of maltreatment and other adverse experiences face a higher risk of emotional and behavioral problems, which can become progressively complex during adolescence and impair academic performance in middle and high school (Reker, 2016).

A report conducted by the Health Resources and Services Administration indicated that children in rural settings experience higher rates of adverse childhood experiences (ACE) than their urban peers (Health Resources and Services Administration, 2016). Correspondingly, children who live in lower socioeconomic communities are often at higher risk of witnessing and being victimized by trauma-causing events (Goodman, Miller, &West-Olatunji, 2012; National Child Traumatic

Stress Network [NCTSN], 2017). Rural communities where poverty is prevalent create a context of stressors that build upon each other (Santiago, Wadsworth, & Stump, 2011). Likewise, poverty and low socioeconomic status are associated with poor psychological health and stress due to the financial limitations, lack of stability, and attainment of needs such as food and housing (NCTSN, 2017; Santiago, et al., 2011). Similar studies have shown that children living in disadvantaged communities are more likely to be placed in foster care, exposed to familial and community violence, and experience homelessness (Goodman et al., 2012; NCTSN, 2017; Santiago et al., 2011). This signifies a connection between youth who live in rural communities and higher risks of environmental trauma (Martin, 2015).

School social workers have been key in providing intervention support regarding trauma-affected children, and they often serve in the role of educating and training teachers (Alisic, 2012). To inform school social work practice in the provision of trauma-informed care, it is essential to be aware of the perceptions and experiences of teachers in working with trauma-exposed students, as their responses to challenging behaviors can affect academic and psychosocial outcomes (Alisic, 2012; Brunzell, Water, & Stokes, 2015). A better understanding of teacher perceptions can enable school social workers to provide them with the appropriate resources that support an optimal learning environment (Alisic, 2012). The gathering of teacher experiences in this study facilitate awareness and expounds upon school social work practice in promoting collaboration, prevention, and treatment of child emotional and behavioral challenges associated with trauma exposure (see Lynn, McKay, & Atkins, 2003).

The next sections include a discussion of the problem with information regarding the prevalence of trauma, potential challenges in addressing classroom behavior, and how school social workers can support the overall well-being of trauma-exposed students. The theoretical framework for this study is presented with emphasis on the Ecological Perspective and Trauma Theory. This section also includes a brief discussion of the study's purpose and research questions, definition of key terms, nature of the doctoral project, significance of the study, theoretical framework, and values and ethics.

Problem Statement

Research suggested that a third of youth in the United States between the ages of 12-17 have experienced at least two or more types of adverse childhood events (SAMSHA, 2012; Stevens, 2013). Such events are indicative of trauma and can impact mental, physical, social, and emotional well-being and ultimately produce long-term adverse effects on a child's academic and psychosocial well-being (Maynard & Farina, 2019; SAMSHA, 2012; Somers & Day, 2016).

In a cross-sectional study conducted on adverse events among high school students, outcomes indicated that increased frequency of traumatic stress led to a decrease in problem-solving skills, indicating challenges in the ability to learn (Coker, Ikpe, Brooks, Page, & Sobell, 2014). In addition, the more trauma and stress endured, the more challenges in cognitive processing and learning exist (Alisic, 2012; Coker et al., 2014). Children who have experienced acute stress and trauma are also more likely to have language delays and problems with language expression, which is an essential component of the learning environment (Alisic, 2012; Maynard & Farina, 2019).

Research showed that between 10% and 30% of trauma-exposed children develop chronic psychological problems that affect their development and well-being in academic, social, emotional, and physical domains (Alisic, 2012; American Psychiatric Association, 2000; SAMSHA, 2012), highlighting a correlation between trauma exposure and various long term academic and psychosocial problems (Ippen, Harris, Van Horn, & Lieberman, 2011).

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2014) supports health promotion, prevention, and preparedness in the United States. The CDC-Kaiser Permanente Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study is one of the largest investigations of childhood abuse, neglect, and well-being. The ACE seminal study surveyed more than 17,000 adult participants, with approximately two-thirds of who reported a minimum of one adverse experience in childhood and 20% who reported three or more ACEs (CDC, 2014). In addition to highlighting the prevalence of childhood trauma and adverse experiences, this study also signified the relationship between trauma and the development of risk factors for disease and psychosocial well-being throughout the life course (CDC, 2014).

The conditions of poverty and violence are often interrelated (Buitrago, Rynell, & Tuttle, 2017). As such, children living in lower socioeconomic communities where poverty is widespread are more likely to witness crime or become victims of violence and other adverse experiences (Buitrago et al., 2017; Stolbach et al., 2013). In an analysis comparing rural youth exposed to gun violence to those with no exposure, 25% of rural youth reported exposure to gun violence at least once (Slovak & Singer, 2001). Youth

exposed to gun violence reported significantly more problems with anger, dissociation, posttraumatic stress, and overall trauma (Slovak & Singer, 2001). Subsequent ACE studies have incorporated physical and emotional neglect, discrimination, economic hardship, and parental separation or divorce as chronic adverse experiences relevant to impoverished youth (Slovack & Singer, 2001; Wade, Shea, Rubin, & Wood, 2014).

The symptoms and behaviors associated with trauma are most often observed at school, as for some students, attending school can be the most consistent and predictable aspect of their lives (Alisic, 2012; Brunzell et al., 2015). There is considerable literature that highlighted the link between trauma in childhood, problematic classroom behaviors, poor academic performance, and emotional regulation. These factors may impose a substantially negative impact on a child's psychosocial and cognitive development (Berg, 2017; NCTSN, 2017; SAMSHA, 2012). However, many students respond effectively to the school environment due to stress at home (Alisic, 2012; Openshaw, 2008). The classroom can be a significant and effective setting for posttraumatic healing (Alisic, 2012; Brunzell et al., 2015). Hence, teachers can be a source of frontline support for a child or a source of further traumatic exchanges if the teacher does not understand how trauma affects behavior and academic success. In some instances, teachers are not properly trained in working effectively with youth exposed to trauma (Alisic, 2012; Crosby et al., 2015). This can lead to inadequate responses to challenging classroom behaviors and the child may experience further traumatization (Crosby et al., 2015). It is not the intention of the teacher to cause such distress; however, without fully understanding how classroom and teacher-student dynamics can affect a previously

traumatized child, the classroom can be, yet another source of the child's trauma experiences. As such, the lack of awareness and skills regarding trauma can result in the misinterpretation of behaviors (Crosby et al., 2015).

Franklin, Kim, Ryan, Kelly, and Montgomery (2012) conducted a systemic review that investigated the degree to which teachers primarily provide school-based mental health services and how the efficacy of teachers and school mental health professionals impact educational outcomes. The findings indicated that out of 49 school mental health studies, 40.8% of teachers were actively involved in mental health interventions and were the only providers of interventions in 18.4% of the studies (Franklin et al., 2012). Additionally, data also signified that many school mental health interventions were universal and occurred within the classroom setting (Franklin et al., 2012). There is limited understanding of the perceptions and experiences that influence teachers' efficacy in supporting students exposed to traumatic events (Alisic, 2012; Reker, 2016). This study addressed the gap in the literature by improving understanding of how school social workers can support the trauma-informed response of teachers in working with trauma-exposed students.

Purpose Statement and Research Questions

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to inform social work practice through the exploration of teacher perceptions and experiences in working with trauma-exposed high school-age students in a rural South Carolina setting. Additionally, findings support the need for more holistic and trauma-informed approaches within the learning environment.

Qualitative exploration seeks to understand how individuals and groups perceive and bestow meaning to their experiences (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). In this study I employed a basic qualitative inquiry as the main framework for exploring teachers' perceptions of and experiences with trauma-exposed youth. According to DeLong (2014), qualitative inquiry allows for exploration of life events and experiences. The use of a basic qualitative inquiry design contributed to the generation of data from teacher experiences within their context, thinking, values, and actions (see De Long, 2014). Through this study, I obtained firsthand descriptions of teachers' classroom experiences and perceptions of classroom challenges. The research addressed the following questions.

RQ1: What are the perceptions of teachers in rural schools of South Carolina regarding the academic and psychosocial needs of high school-age youth who have been trauma-exposed?

RQ2: What are the experiences of teachers in rural schools of South Carolina in dealing with the academic and psychosocial needs of high school-age youth who have been trauma-exposed?

RQ3: What do teachers in rural schools of South Carolina think school social workers can do to partner with them to build improved self-efficacy in teachers as it relates to working with high school-age youth who have been trauma-exposed in order to promote academic and psychosocial success in the classroom?

Definitions

The key concepts identified for this study include trauma, trauma exposed, trauma informed, traumatic events, psychosocial well-being, high school-age youth, rural, and self-efficacy. The following provides operational definitions of the key concepts.

Trauma: An event, series of events/experiences, and/or circumstances that are experienced by an individual and considered physically or emotionally harmful or life-threatening that may have lasting adverse effects on the individual's mental, physical, social, emotional, behavioral, and/or spiritual well-being (SAMSHA, 2011, p. 1).

Trauma-exposed: An individual who has had some exposure to some type of event or circumstance that makes the individual feel there is potential threat of injury, death, or physical harm to self or others that also causes extreme fear and feelings of helplessness in the person. Effects may or may not be long-lasting (Fratto, 2016).

Traumatic events: Sexual abuse, physical abuse, domestic violence, community and school violence, medical trauma, death of a loved one, suicide, acts of terrorism, war experiences, natural and human-made disasters, and other traumatic losses (Fratto, 2016).

Trauma-informed: Services within a system in which everyone recognizes and responds to the impact of traumatic stress (SAMSHA, 2011).

Psychosocial well-being: A child's ability to exhibit adaptive and coping mechanisms, basic abilities for regulating impulses, and the ability to adequately relate to teachers and peers despite the enduring effects of trauma exposure (Shaw, 2003).

High school-age youth: Students in grades 9-12.

Rural: According to the United States Department of Agriculture (2019), an area that is geographically isolated comprising open land with a population of 2,500 or fewer than 50,000.

Self-efficacy: For this study, a teacher's ability to identify symptoms and behaviors associated with trauma and possessing the skills and knowledge to employ trauma sensitive responses in the classroom to promote psychosocial and academic success (Reker, 2016; Smyth, 2017).

Nature of the Doctoral Project

In this basic qualitative exploration, I sought to inform school social work practice through the perceptions and experiences of teachers in working with trauma-exposed students. Purposive sampling was used and included general education teachers of high school-age students in a rural South Carolina school district. The sample included nine teachers from various cultural and ethnic backgrounds to maximize diversity in perceptions and experiences. Due to the valuable knowledge that qualitative research can yield from teachers regarding students with behavioral and academic challenges, semistructured interviews captured teacher experiences with trauma-exposed students. Rubin and Rubin (2011) posit that qualitative interviewing represents more than just the collection of data; it is a way of seeking to learn from the perspectives of others. Likewise, use of qualitative interviewing seeks to explore and describe the manner in which people behave and give meaning to their experiences (Alshenqeeti, 2014). Because qualitative interviewing facilitates the attainment of knowledge regarding a specific area of study (Rubin & Rubin, 2011), this method of exploration supported the inquiry of

teacher perceptions regarding the challenges they encounter with trauma-exposed students. The teachers' experiences served as professional observations relating to the impact of trauma exposure on academic success and psychosocial well-being and afforded participants the opportunity to express their perceptions about these experiences as they perceive them (Perez, 2017, Robinson, 2012).

Qualitative analysis requires attention to variations, differences in emphasis, and meaning (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). To facilitate thorough data analysis, I recorded interviews and later transcribed them using N-Vivo software, as this helped me to identify relevant concepts and themes (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). I initially coded the data with MAXQDA and later manually to identify constructs that were used in pattern detection (Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Saldana, 2016).

Significance of the Study

According to the National Association of Social Workers (NASW, 2017), school social workers provide leadership in developing a positive school climate and work collaboratively with school personnel to increase accessibility and effectiveness of educational services for all children. Additionally, school social workers facilitate understanding of factors in the home, school, and community that affect students' educational experiences (NASW, 2017). Teachers guide the success of students; as such, they can provide valuable insight into their classroom experiences of working with trauma-exposed youth (Perez, 2017). To eliminate barriers to learning, promote student well-being, and achieve positive academic outcomes, social workers should support the preparedness of teachers and school staff. As such, for social workers to understand how

to enhance teacher preparedness in working with trauma-exposed students, insight into their perceptions and experiences should be examined. The outcomes of this study informed school social work and support the inclusion of multicultural and therapeutic strategies to ensure resiliency, healthy development, and learning for trauma-exposed youth.

The goal of this study was to enable school social workers to identify the needs of teachers regarding trauma and its impact on youth, as well as provide trauma-informed strategies to support teachers in understanding the effects of childhood trauma and their role as teachers ensuring resiliency, healthy development, learning, and the academic success of trauma-exposed youth. This exploration enhanced school social workers' knowledge of teachers' perceptions regarding trauma-affected youth, as well as their understanding regarding trauma and the influence on classroom functioning. Also, the current study expounded upon the school social worker's role in the identification of specific training needs, resources, and professional development as it relates to preparedness in the implementation of trauma informed school-based activities and programs for teachers and school staff.

Theoretical Framework

Ecological Theory

This study was grounded in Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory, which posits that development and change are influenced by environmental systems (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). Similar research has applied ecological theory to highlight the integral role of the school, the multifaceted interactions and influence of teachers, and how the

classroom can be an optimal setting for trauma-informed interventions (Guarino & Decandia, 2015). Ecological theory proposes that the environment plays a key role in how trauma is perceived and experienced, and that improved understanding of trauma, particularly in the school environment, can enable a broader understanding of how environmental factors such as classroom expectations, teacher-student relationships, and teacher responses to academic and/or behavioral challenges can impact functioning and recovery of trauma-affected youth (Alisic, 2012; Crosby, 2015).

Ecological theory also suggests that human development and behavior are the results of interactions among various environmental systems (Crosby, 2015). As such, throughout the developmental process, a child is not only affected by biological and psychological characteristics, but also by family, the community, and school (Crosby, 2015). Hence, variations in the response and recovery of trauma are influenced by environmental contributors (Harvey, 1999). Research suggested the establishment of positive teacher-student relationships can facilitate trust and resiliency for trauma-exposed students (Crosby et al., 2015).

In addressing the needs of traumatized children, it is essential to be informed of the perceptions that may influence responses to challenging behaviors. As such, this information can be used to provide resources that are ecologically fit or suitable for a child's particular challenges (Guarino & Decandia, 2015; Harvey, 1999). Thus, ecology represents a broader conceptualization of how environmental factors impact functioning and recovery (Bloom, 1999; Guarino & Decandia, 2015). So, from an ecological perspective, the school and other learning institutions are seen as critical targets for

trauma-informed interventions (Guarino & Decandia, 2015; Harvey, 1999). The use of an ecological framework highlights the interactions among systems affecting a child's response and recovery and how positive school experiences can facilitate adaptive coping skills and enable students to be successful in other life domains (Crosby, 2015; Harvey, 1999). Additionally, the inclusion of ecological theory for this study provided a better understanding of how a positive learning environment can support healing.

Trauma and the Ecological Perspective

The literature suggested that school can be an ideal environment to address trauma-related challenges and provide therapeutic interventions that support resiliency, healthy development, and learning (Rolfsnes & Idsoe, 2011). Prior research also suggested that teachers can be a valuable alliance for school social workers and mental health professionals in the delivery of therapeutic interventions within the school environment (Feinstein, Fielding, Udvari-Solner, & Joshi, 2009). Moreover, it is proposed that collaboration with teachers and inclusion in school mental health teams is useful, as teachers can be advantageous in sustaining long-term outcomes because interventions can be reinforced in the classroom (Adi, Killoran, Janmohamed, & Stewart-Brown, 2007).

Trauma Theory

The inclusion of trauma theory in this study helped to provide a better understanding of trauma and the effect on development, behavior, and academic success. Charcot's trauma theory suggests that trauma alone does not cause impairment; impairment is determined by the response of the mind and body to an event (Bloom,

1999; Harvey, 1999). Although traumatic events may be externally experienced, they can become internalized (Bloom, 1999). Traumatization occurs when both internal and external resources are inadequate to cope with an external threat (Bloom, 1999). Correspondingly, children are traumatized when there their safety and well-being are threatened (Bloom, 1999). In conceptualizing the dynamics of trauma exposure in children, it is essential to acknowledge the foundation of trauma theory and the neurobiological and psychological impact of trauma (Bloom, 1999; Downey, 2007; VanderWegen, 2013). Individuals are biologically equipped to protect themselves from danger as best they can (Bloom, 1999; Harvey, 1999). When children are exposed to danger, they become sensitized to where even a perceived or minor threat can trigger a sequence of physical, emotional, and cognitive responses (Bloom, 1999; Ippen et al., 2011). The capacity to regulate our emotions and reactions is established during the early years of life (Bloom, 1999; Downey, 2007). However, when a child experiences an event that is so frightening that it causes a prolonged alarm reaction, the body emits chemicals and enzymes such as adrenalin and remains in a state of fight or flight (Bloom, 1999; Downey, 2007; VanderWegen, 2013). Subsequently, due to a reduced capacity to regulate emotions, children who have been traumatized are often impulsive and have problems controlling anger and other strong emotions, as well as difficulty sustaining attention (Downey, 2007).

The effect of trauma exposure creates an altered neurological state; however, for infants and children, trauma has a detrimental impact on the developing brain (van der Kolk, McFarlane, & Weisaeth, 1996). In childhood, chronic exposure to trauma interferes

with the capacity to integrate sensory, emotional, and cognitive information, therefore causing flawed responses to subsequent stress (Downey, 2007). Children who have suffered chronic abuse or neglect often experience a broad spectrum of challenges, developmental delays, and socialization deficits (Downey, 2007; van der Kolk et al., 1996). Prior research focused on trauma theory has shown that trauma affects the whole person: mind, body, spirit, and relationships with others (Downey, 2007; van der Kolk, et al., 1996). The inclusion of trauma theory in this study signified that to help traumatized students, safe and supportive environments must be created to lessen the long-term effects of trauma (Bloom, 1999; Ippen et al., 2011).

Values and Ethics

The NASW code of ethics outlines professional standards and values, which are the core of social work practice (NASW, 2017). NASW principles and values correlate with research aimed at improving the well-being of others. Service is an ethical principle which states that a social worker's primary objective is to help those in need and address social problems and promote social change (NASW, 2017). Correspondingly, trauma plays a significant role in health, mental health, and social problems (Smyth, 2013).

The value of human relationships guides the principle of social workers in recognizing the importance of human relationships (Brunzell et al., 2015; NASW, 2017). A key role of school social workers is to educate teachers and staff and promote positive behavior support (Wolpow, Johnson, Hertel, & Kincaid, 2009). Additionally, school social workers can be instrumental in furthering the mission of the school to provide an optimal learning environment for all students. This study explored the perceptions and

experiences of teachers in working with trauma-exposed students. Through these experiences, this study informed school social work practice in the provision of resources that support the improvement of teacher-student relationships and facilitate academic success, confidence, and stability of all students.

The mission of the educational environment is to support the academic achievement of students (Council on Social Work Education [CWSE], 2012). To attain this goal, children must feel safe and supported (CWSE, 2012). In consideration of student needs, it is essential to recognize that personal experiences of trauma-exposed students greatly influence learning and achievement (CSWE, 2012). It is assumed that most school districts operate from a perspective where there is a culture of competence, collaboration, trust, and respect for students, teachers, and staff. In correlation with the social work values of competence, service, and the importance of human relationships, this study focused on teachers and their experiences and perceptions regarding trauma and their responses to students with trauma experiences. The outcomes of this study not only inform school social work practice but influence the development of training and resources to enhance trauma awareness in the learning environment, therefore reinforcing the guiding values of the school setting. Establishing a culture of competence, trust, respect, and collaboration are key ethical principles in social work and paramount when it comes to the teacher-student relationship. This study aligns with relevant social work knowledge, skills, and practice through which social work values and ethical principles can be leveraged to improve a teacher efficacy and support the social, emotional, and academic success of trauma-exposed children.

Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

The literature review included the use of the Walden University academic databases and Google Scholar to conduct key word searches with keywords *childhood trauma, trauma theory, ecological perspective, educational wellbeing, teachers; trauma-informed schools,* and *school social workers*. This process helped to inform the development of this study**.**

Definitions of Trauma

Trauma is an event that subjects an individual to overwhelming demands affecting the psychological systems and can result in profound sense of helplessness (Altmaier, 2016**).** According to SAMSHA (2012), trauma is the result of one or more events or circumstances having the potential to substantially impair a person's physical and emotional health and cause chronic negative effects on functioning. Moreover, trauma involves a disruption of the sense of safety and support that is generally associated with caregiver relationships (VanderWegen, 2013). Simple trauma is distinguished as a one-time event or brief occurrence; however, complex trauma suggests exposure to more than a single event occurring for an extended time (Brunzell et al., 2015). Research suggests that the chronicity and frequency of trauma are strongly associated with more distinct and complex symptoms, including posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD; Stolbach et al., 2013).

The research further suggested a significant association between trauma-induced experiences and PTSD (Brunzell et al., 2015). However, children who endure chronic trauma and adversity are less often diagnosed with PTSD, as criteria has been

insufficiently informed developmentally (De Jongh et al., 2016; Rahim, 2014). Multiple exposures to more than one form of interpersonal trauma strongly correlate with a diagnosis of developmental trauma disorder (DTD), which focuses on the multidimensional impact of adverse experiences on a child's functioning (Reker, 2016). DTD suggest that multiple exposures to interpersonal trauma, such as abandonment, physical or sexual assaults, or witnessing domestic violence have consistent and predictable consequences that affect many areas of functioning (De Jongh et al., 2016). DTD focuses on the emotional, physical, behavioral, cognitive, and relational symptoms of trauma exposure (Reker, 2016). However, the classification of DTD in *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 4th ed., was noted to be limited in focus and therefore excluded from addressing diagnostic gaps (Reker, 2016). The fifth edition of *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* updated PTSD criteria to more precisely capture the experiences and symptoms of children and highlights how they continue to manifest at different stages of life and may be impacted by the developmental continuum which influences many disorders (Jones & Cureton, 2014). According to *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders,* 5th ed., triggers for a diagnosis of PTSD currently include death or the potential risk of death, serious injury, or sexual violence. Additionally, other factors include direct exposure to a traumatic event, witnessing a traumatic event, being aware of a traumatic event occurring with friend or family member, or reoccurring exposure to the details of a traumatic event (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). This change is based on recent research detailing of what PTSD looks like in young children and is more beneficial for age-

appropriate diagnosis and treatment (Jones & Cureton, 2014). The revised developmentally appropriate criteria facilitated better recognition of how trauma responses manifest in children and informs effective treatment (APA, 2013; Jones & Cureton, 2014).

Significance of Trauma in Childhood

According to the National Traumatic Stress Network, at least 40% of children in the United States have experienced or witnessed traumatic events including destabilization, violence, death, sexual abuse, substance abuse, physical abuse, and other adverse experiences (Brunzell et al., 2015). The Childhood Trust Survey indicated that at least 74% of caregivers reported a child's exposure to one traumatic event, 60% reported exposure to at least two traumatic events, and 45% reported exposure to three or more traumatic events (Holmes, Levy, Smith, Pinne, & Neese, 2014). The ACE Study was conducted in 1998 by Kaiser Permanente in association with the CDC. The data was collected through surveys from approximately 17,000 adult health insurance members between 1995-1997 and indicated 11% reported experiencing emotional abuse, 30% reported physical abuse, and 19% reported sexual abuse (CDC, 2014). Additionally, 23% of participants reported exposure to substance abuse, 18% mental illness, and 12 % domestic violence (CDC, 2014). The study outcomes revealed that over 46% of children were assaulted and one out of 10 children endured some form of maltreatment (CDC, 2014). The ACE Study significantly highlighted the prevalence of direct and indirect exposure to adverse experiences in childhood and the substantial long-term effects.

Children living in low socioeconomic and disadvantaged communities face a higher risk of experiencing neighborhood and family trauma such as poverty, violence, incarceration, and chronic illness (Martin, 2015). These types of socioeconomic disadvantages also place families at heightened risk for experiencing behavioral health problems and engaging in child maltreatment (Talbot, Szlosek, & Ziller, 2016). Talbot et al. (2016) conducted an analysis to assess the prevalence of adverse experiences and the overall exposure to ACEs in rural settings. The analysis was based on data from the Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System, a telephone survey designed by the CDC. A total of 11 states selected random survey samples from adults living in rural and urban populations within households that had a landline telephone. The data demonstrated that ACEs were common among rural residents, with over half (56.5%) of participants reporting they had been exposed to at least one traumatic event (Talbot et al., 2016). Approximately 21.8% reported only one ACE, 12.0% reported two ACEs, 8.1% reported three ACEs, and 14.6% stated that they had experienced at least four or more ACEs.

One out of 10 children living in urban and rural neighborhoods reported witnessing a shooting or stabbing (Martin, 2015). In a baseline survey design study conducted by Springer and Padgett (2000), the relationship between gender, exposure to violence, and PTSD among adolescents was examined. Participants included teachers and students ages 11-15 living and working within impoverished communities with high crime and unemployment rates (Springer & Padgett, 2000). Data revealed high levels of direct victimization and exposure to violence, while indirect exposure included witnessing a shooting, stabbing, or assault (Springer & Padgett, 2000). Moreover, males

were found to have higher rates of direct victimization from school and community violence and a greater presence of PTSD symptoms than females (Springer & Padgett, 2000). Yet, female participants experienced more PTSD-related symptoms from witnessing violence within their environment and community (Springer & Padgett, 2000). The findings from this study not only highlighted the variances in PTSD symptomology among males and females but also signified how poverty, diminished resources, and violence intersect within low socioeconomic communities.

Impact of Trauma on Learning

Infancy and early childhood denote a time when brain development is occurring rapidly (VanderWegen, 2013). During this period of development, sensory processing and input are forming to advance skills in the identification and response to environmental situations and external stimuli (VanderWegen, 2013). Exposure to adverse experiences such as abuse and neglect during infancy and early childhood not only disrupt brain development but also impede functioning causing deficits in cognitive and language skills, socioemotional development, and mental health problems (Anda, Brenner, Felitti, Walker, Whitfield, Perry, & Giles, 2006; VanderWegen, 2013). Early exposure to traumatic experiences can interfere with the functionality of the left and right hemispheres of the brain and pose lifelong adverse effects on emotional and physical well-being (Maynard & Farina, 2016; Teicher, Andersen, Polcari, Anderson, & Navalta, 2002; VanderWegen, 2013). Stress related to chronic abuse can result in anxiety, depression, and facilitate vulnerability for problematic classroom behaviors such as conduct disorder, attention, and memory difficulties (O'Neill, Guenette, & Kitchenham,

2010; VanderWegen, 2013). Moreover, early adverse experiences produce difficulties with emotional regulation in the absence of danger and uncertainty (Bendtro, 2015; VanderWegen, 2013).

In a case-control study conducted by researchers at Stanford University, an experimental procedure of functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI), was used to evaluate the brain activation patterns in 16 children exhibiting symptoms of PTSD, as compared to patterns observed in 14 non-traumatized children in performing decision-making tasks (Stanford University Medical Center (SUMC), 2007). The fMRI procedure discovered changes in blood flow and oxygenation, which were associated with an increase in neuron activity for specific regions of the brain (SUMC, 2007). Correspondingly, children with PTSD symptoms displayed less brain activity than non-traumatized children in the left middle frontal cortex, which is responsible for response regulation, as well as the insula which regulates emotional awareness (SUMC, 2007). As a result, children with PTSD can often have difficulty with emotional regulation and maintaining attention, creating further challenges in the learning environment (SUMC, 2007). Therefore, signifying a substantial correlation between deficits in this area of the brain and the severity of PTSD symptoms (SUMC, 2007).

Trauma and the Classroom

Teachers have the potential to make a significant impact on the social and emotional functioning of students, as they are involved with students in various contexts and for extended periods (Diekstra & Gravesteijn, 2008). Franklin et al. (2012) conducted a systematic review which revealed teachers were actively involved with 41% of mental

health interventions provided at school and were responsible for at least 18% of those interventions. While the prevalence of trauma-related issues among students exist, and the need for therapeutic interventions and response is warranted, disparities remain in the delivery of trauma-informed interventions in the classroom (Alisic, 2012; Berg, 2017).

Reinke, Stormont, Herman, Puri, and Goel (2011) conducted a qualitative study to better understand the perceptions, roles, and needs of teachers in supporting children's mental health needs. In a sample of teacher participants, only 28% expressed the knowledge and preparedness in meeting the needs of children with mental health issues, while approximately one-third of teachers felt they were adequately skilled to address mental health needs. According to Reinke et al. (2011), mental health awareness and strategies for working with externalizing classroom behaviors, were identified as vital areas of need for teachers. Although outcomes from the Reinke et al. (2011) study highlighted the general perceptions of classroom mental health issues, there is limited research which specifically addresses the experiences of teachers in supporting the academic and psychosocial needs of trauma-exposed students.

Teachers and school staff often encounter difficulty in working with trauma-exposed students (Alisic, 2012; Berg, 2017). Following trauma many children develop behavioral coping mechanisms in an effort to feel safe and in control, yet these behaviors can frustrate educators and evoke responses that are unproductive (Gil, 2006). Crosby et al. (2015) suggested there is ambiguity to the needs of students with acute stress and the role of teachers in addressing psychosocial issues and problematic classroom behaviors. Further research implied that teacher perceptions, lack of knowledge and awareness can

significantly impact responses to problematic behaviors, subsequently affecting student outcomes (Alisic, 2012; Crosby et al., 2015). In general, the literature proposed that teachers can be a valuable ally for school social workers and mental health professionals in the delivery of therapeutic interventions within the school environment (Feinstein et al., 2009). Therefore suggesting the need for teacher support in attaining skills and education to effectively manage problematic classroom behaviors (Alisic et al., 2012; Crosby et al., 2015). The outcomes of this qualitative study contributed to the gaps in knowledge regarding trauma awareness and inform school social work practice through a better understanding of the support and training needed in addressing the academic and psychosocial challenges of trauma-exposed students.

Summary

Trauma and adverse experiences affect over 25% of children in the United States (Crosby et al., 2015). Children living in economically disadvantaged communities are at greater risk for family and neighborhood violence, as well as victimization (Crosby et al., 2015). Such experiences can have acute, negative influences on development and functioning, including affect regulation, attachment, behavioral control, and mental health (Somers & Day, 2017). Subsequently, childhood exposure to chronic and complex experiences can translate into significant academic and psychosocial challenges within the learning environment and therefore impede success (Crosby et al., 2015).

According to the Social Work Policy Institute (2010), trauma can impact a child's worldview, as well as how the child is perceived by others. Teachers who are ambiguous about how to meet the needs of trauma-exposed students can possess inaccurate

assumptions about how to effectively address and respond to problematic classroom behaviors (Somers & Day, 2017). This uncertainty can cause further distress and produce unproductive outcomes (Crosby et al., 2015). Research indicated that teachers could play a significant role in establishing trust and resiliency in trauma-exposed children (Brunzell et al., 2015). Furthermore, the significant time that is spent with students in the classroom facilitates the opportunity to establish relationships that promote feelings of safety and support positive academic outcomes (Brunzell et al., 2015). There is limited research on the perceptions and experiences of teachers in working with trauma-exposed students. As such, this study expounds upon the gap in the understanding of how school social workers can support teachers through the exploration of in-depth descriptions of perceptions and experiences in working with trauma-exposed students.

The following sections present the research design consistent with qualitative methods and offers relevant methodological steps that supported the exploration of teachers' perceptions and experiences with trauma-exposed students. Additionally, this section provides a discussion of the study highlighting the prevalence of trauma-exposed students and the lasting effects on psychosocial well-being and academic success. The development of interview questions and sample participants are further explained to show alignment with the current study and how the proposed research questions were addressed. Next, data analysis and transcription are discussed to include methods of rigor for this study. Lastly, ethical procedures are outlined to ensure the protection of participants in the current study.

Section 2: Research Design and Data Collection

A substantial number of children are exposed to traumatic events and violence either directly or indirectly (VanderWegen, 2013). These children can endure lasting effects that compromise their psychosocial well-being and academic success (Alisic 2012; VanderWegen 2013). Research showed that teachers can play a significant role in providing posttraumatic healing due to the significant amount of time spent in the classroom with students (Alisic, 2012). The literature also suggested that many teachers lack knowledge regarding trauma and the effects on psychosocial well-being, academic success, and behavior (Alisic, 2012). School social workers are responsible for ensuring all students are provided with an optimal learning environment. As such, the experiences, and perceptions of teachers regarding trauma-exposed students can inform school social work pertaining to professional development and training needs.

Research Design

Traumatic exposure is significant in children's lives; therefore, it is essential to better understand the perceptions and experiences that influence teachers' responses to behavioral challenges to support the implementation of a trauma-informed practice. Teachers can be instrumental in supporting children's recovery after trauma (Alisic, 2012). However, prior research has suggested ambiguity about a teacher's role in effectively assisting children following trauma exposure (Crosby, 2015). For school social workers to support the provision of trauma-informed classroom interventions, it is essential to gain a better understanding of the teacher experiences and perceptions in

working with trauma-exposed students. The current study addressed the following questions:

RQ1: What are the perceptions of teachers in rural schools of South Carolina regarding the academic and psychosocial needs of high school-age youth who have been trauma exposed?

RQ2: What are the experiences of teachers in rural schools of South Carolina in dealing with the academic and psychosocial needs of high school-age youth who have been trauma exposed?

RQ3: What do teachers in rural schools of South Carolina think school social workers can do to partner with them to build improved self-efficacy in teachers as it relates to working with high school-age youth who have been trauma exposed in order to promote academic and psychosocial success in the classroom?

This qualitative study informed school social work practice through the perceptions and experiences of teachers working with trauma-exposed students. Qualitative research attempts to understand individuals, groups, and phenomena in their natural settings in a manner that reflects the meaning given to experiences (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Qualitative inquiry for this study was centralized in the pursuit of attaining a better conceptualizing of the perspectives and approach resulting from the meaning of unique experiences (Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

Using a qualitative design provided the opportunity to obtain enhanced awareness of teachers' outlook towards their experiences in working with students who are trauma exposed. A qualitative framework is perspectival and is an attempt to avoid preconceived

assumptions about human experiences, feelings, and responses to a particular situation of interest (Larsson & Sjöblom, 2010). As such, through the personal accounts I collected the experiences of teachers, which led to a better understanding of how school social workers can support teachers in working with trauma-exposed students to promote successful academic and psychosocial outcomes.

Methodology

According to Seidman (2006), qualitative interviewing supports access to individual meaning given to experiences. Furthermore, interviewing allows behavior to be understood in personal contexts (Rubin & Rubin, 2011; Seidman, 2006). In the current study I used semistructured interviews, which are an important data collection strategy in qualitative exploration. Semistructured interviews offer focused insight into the lived experiences of others and can be attained through social, dialogic exchange as part of the research process (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). I conducted semistructured interviews with teachers in a rural South Carolina school district, transcribed the interviews and then analyzed the data using MAXQDA and NVivo software.

Teachers were key informants in this study given their roles in the school; they attested expertly to their perceptions regarding children with trauma experiences. Key informant interviews are qualitative in-depth interviews with individuals who are knowledgeable regarding a particular subject (Boyce & Neale, 2006). The purpose of using key informants is to collect information that provides insight into the nature of an issue and lead to recommendations for solutions (Boyce & Neale, 2006). Following Institutional Review Board approval 12-12-19-0720833, I provided a presentation

regarding key elements of the research to teachers and the school district superintendent. Subsequently, school district approval was granted, and teachers followed up through via Walden e-mail indicating their desire to participate in the study.

Participants

I used purposive sampling, and participants consisted of nine teachers of high school-age students within a rural South Carolina school district. According to Crouch and McKenzie (2006), a qualitative researcher who uses interviews often seeks to understand experiences and manifest meanings. This requires the researcher to facilitate effective relationships and dialogue that will address the research questions in-depth (Crouch & McKenzie, 2006). Using a small sample allowed me to be sufficiently engaged and supported the establishment of valuable dialogue (Crouch & McKenzie, 2006). The participants were purposively chosen to provide a substantial contribution to the phenomenon under exploration, representing a homogenous perspective rather than a population (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

Development of Interview Questions

In alignment with the exploration of teacher insight and awareness in working with trauma-exposed adolescents, the Teacher Perceptions of Student Behaviors Scale, the Teaching Traumatized Students Scale, and the Teacher Response to Student Behavior Scale were used as a point of reference to support the development of the interview questions for the current study. According to Somers and Day (2016), there are numerous existing instruments that assess the school climate in association with trauma, yet there is a lack of instruments to gather the perceptions, views, and attitudes of nonmental health

school staff such as teachers in addressing the academic and psychosocial needs of trauma-exposed students. To examine staff sensitivity and preparedness associated with trauma, it is crucial to evaluate the perceptions, awareness, and knowledge of trauma (Somers & Day, 2016). The teacher assessment tools facilitated the identification of school staff assumptions about student behavior, overall knowledge of trauma and efficacy with traumatized youth, instructional and teaching responses to challenging behaviors, and perception of further resources and training needed.

The measurement tools described were only used to inform the development of the qualitative interview questions. These tools were not part of the participant interview protocol. However, they aided in my thinking about what interview questions would be aligned with the study's research questions and would be consistent with what the literature has determined to be valid assessments when attending to teachers' trauma knowledge.

Data Analysis

Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim using the transcription software N-Vivo. This process allows central themes to be derived from verbal data (Creswell, 2013). To discover emergent themes, I coded, documented, and analyzed data for patterns (see Bengtsson, 2016). The aim was exploration and description, resulting in data that addressed the research questions of the study (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). I reviewed the data for a general understanding and then noted the words or phrases that appeared to summarize significant messages (see Bengtsson, 2016). Also, I organized these key terms words and phrases into categories and subsequently coded for

pattern detection. Next, I conducted a review of responses and assigned codes, as this process helped to align data and facilitated a better understanding of emerging themes that evolved from the interviews (see Maher, Hadfield, Hutchings, & de Eyto, 2018). The process of analysis involved the development of analytic memos, which facilitated better interpretation of the data.

According to Ryan (2005), rigorous research applies the appropriate tools to address the objectives of a study. Qualitative research involves the exploration of subjective meaning and perceptions of the subjects of interest (Ryan, 2005). The use of semistructured interviews allows for the discovery of human experiences as they are lived and perceived by key informants and ensures credibility of the data (Rubin & Rubin, 2011). In addition, to increase the dependability of the findings of the study, it is recommended to conduct a code and recode process during the analysis phase of the study interviews (Ryan, 2005). Following the initial coding of data, I reviewed the preliminary analysis of the transcribed interviews and then recoded the information for comparison to ensure accuracy.

Ethical Procedures

This study was presented and discussed with relevant school district personnel to obtain permission to proceed. Additionally, Institutional Review Board protocol and procedures were followed to ensure the protection of all study participants. The data was utilized to solely inform school social work practice, professional development, and remained the primary focus of the study. I ensured open, verbal, and written communication concerning the parameters of the study; the rights and responsibilities of

participants; access to outcomes following the study; who the information will be shared with; and how the data will be used. I also ensured that precautions were taken throughout the process to protect the participants' identities. As such, participants were identified only with alphanumeric codes. The informed consent included the data being collected, provisions of confidentiality, and risks for participation in the study, including no identifying information, recognition of communities, schools, or districts. Additionally, participants were assured that interviews could be canceled or terminated at any time, and only myself or assigned chair committee would have access to the data, which was stored in a password protected file. The secure destruction of all research data involves methods that are irreversible and ensures no further usage (Privacy Technical Assistance Center (PTAC), 2014). It is particularly critical that confidential or sensitive data remains unreadable (PTAC, 2014). Per Walden University requirements, all data will be maintained for a minimum of five years and then subsequently destroyed utilizing a software application designed for storage device removal of sensitive information.

Summary

This study sought to inform social work practice by obtaining an in-depth description of teacher experiences and perspectives in working with trauma-exposed students. Using a qualitative study design, I explored the experiences of teachers through semi-structured, qualitative interviews. According to Astalin (2013), this method of inquiry seeks to build holistic descriptions to inform the researcher's understanding of phenomena.

It was anticipated that through qualitative in-depth exploration of teacher experiences and perceptions in working with trauma-exposed students, there would be improved understanding of the teacher experience and knowledge regarding child/youth trauma, and this understanding would be used to better inform practice strategies in this regard for school social work practice. Additionally, It was expected that findings from this study would aid the school social worker in identifying teachers' needs in relation to working with students with adverse experiences, and support teachers in recognizing the negative impact these experiences have on a child's ability to achieve social, emotional, and academic competence successfully. In this instance, fostering a higher degree of trauma knowledge and skills among teachers that can be used in the classroom promotes social change; whereby the school social worker is at the forefront in leading the way for improved trauma-informed methods that might be used by teachers in order to better support children in need.

The upcoming sections will discuss data collection procedures, as well analysis of data retrieved from qualitative, in-depth interviews, which is essential in addressing the research questions of the current study, findings from the analysis, a discussion of the findings, and implications for practice.

Section 3: Presentation of the Findings

Serving as a school social worker for the last 6 years, I have had numerous experiences with trauma-exposed children. Furthermore, as I have worked in various settings, I noted that rural environments present with higher incidences of adverse experiences. I wanted to conduct a study that explored how teachers perceive trauma, particularly in a rural school setting, as I encountered teachers who faced challenges in working with trauma-exposed students. In some instances, teachers reported being uncertain of how best to respond, indicating minimal understanding regarding the relationship between trauma experiences and behavior. As such, I chose to explore how best to support teachers in creating an optimal learning environment by further understanding how they view trauma and what can be done to promote a more trauma-informed response.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to inform social work practice through the exploration of teacher perceptions and experiences in working with trauma-exposed high school-age students in rural South Carolina and the role of the school social worker in supporting the needs of teachers in this regard. The school social worker is key in helping teachers identify strategies to meet the needs of trauma-affected students and promote success in the school environment. For this study I aimed to explore teachers' perceptions regarding the impact of trauma on students and what is needed to support improved trauma-informed approaches in the learning environment, specifically when addressing the psychosocial and academic needs of trauma-exposed youth in rural communities. I selected a narrative inquiry framework to obtain firsthand descriptions of

teachers' classroom experiences and perceptions of challenges in working with trauma-exposed students, how they narrate these experiences, and what they understand these experiences to mean in terms of their responses, interactions, and expectations related to psychosocial and academic outcomes. A study of this kind lends itself to further exploration of teachers' experiences so that more holistic and trauma-informed approaches in the learning environment are considered. Subsequently, the research sought to address the following questions:

RQ1: What are the perceptions of teachers in rural schools of South Carolina regarding the academic and psychosocial needs of high school-age youth who have been trauma exposed?

RQ2: What are the experiences of teachers in rural South Carolina schools in dealing with the academic and psychosocial needs of high school-age youth who have been trauma exposed?

RQ3: What do teachers in rural South Carolina schools think school social workers can do to partner with them to build improved self-efficacy in teachers as it relates to working with high school-age youth who have been trauma exposed in order to promote academic and psychosocial success in the classroom?

In the following sections I discuss the participant selection, instrumentation, and the methodology of the study. Next, I present the data analysis procedures to include how manual coding was conducted, the emergence of themes and validation procedures, as well as limitations and challenges presented when conducting the current study. I also

describe the data collection and analysis process and techniques that I used for this study as well as the findings of the research, along with themes that emerged from the data.

Data Analysis Techniques

I employed a purposeful sampling strategy as the research questions specifically focused on experiences related to working with trauma-exposed students. The participants for this study were chosen to maximize the diversity in perspectives concentrating on the phenomena of interest (see Maxwell, 2005). Participant sample characteristics included general education teachers of high school students in grades 9-12 in a rural South Carolina school district. In qualitative research, samples should be large enough to obtain in-depth information, yet small enough that data does not become repetitive (Mason, 2010). Moreover, using a small sample allows the researcher to be sufficiently engaged and supports the establishment of valuable dialogue (Crouch & McKenzie, 2006). A sample size of 10 was proposed as a starting point to gather sufficient data for analysis of themes and to prevent elongation of the study (see Rudestam & Newton, 2015).

Following school district approval to proceed with the study, I presented a brief detailed PowerPoint presentation on the nature and major elements of the study to potential participants. I then provided my Walden University e-mail contact information along with further instructions if participation was desired. Additionally, I provided the research PowerPoint via my Walden University e-mail at the request of potential participants for further review. Once I received an e-mail from prospective participants, I replied within one day to address relevant study inquiries and schedule a tentative date

and time that was most convenient. I then sent a confirmation email to participants before the scheduled interview. Initially, there were 13 responses of interest to participate; however, the final data set included a total of nine teachers.

The duration of the interviews ranged from 40 minutes to 50 minutes and were conducted over a 4-week period. Additionally, to ensure the privacy and confidentiality of participants, the location of the interviews consisted of a remote setting. According to the literature, open-ended questions allow participants to respond freely and supports the researcher in discovering as much information as possible regarding participant experiences and perceptions (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012). As such, I was able to engage in open conversation with participants and be attentive to their responses so that I could reflect and summarize content to ensure my understanding of what they were trying to convey. The interview protocol entailed open-ended questions presented in a semistructured format.

This study was guided by narrative inquiry, and I therefore applied narrative analysis of the data to discover patterns and themes associated with the experiences and perceptions of teachers. According to Saldana (2016), narrative analysis is beneficial to the interpersonal exploration of experiences and behavior to obtain a better understanding through story. Moreover, narrative analysis explores the distinctive ways in which qualitative data can be understood (Earthy & Cronin, 2008). Gilbert (2008) suggested the accounts that are told about life experiences contribute to the fundamental aspect of social inquiry. So, I elected to use narrative analysis as it facilitates a better understanding of the meaning people bestow on their experiences (Kim, 2015). The process of narrative

analysis involves the examination of data and subsequently condensing the information into emergent themes and patterns through coding (Kim, 2015). The literature suggested obtaining meaning can be difficult, hence the cyclical process of coding supports the researcher in identifying nuances that contribute to a larger context of understanding through participant experiences (Kim, 2015).

To initiate the analysis process, I transcribed the data using NVivo professional transcription software as the use of transcription in qualitative analysis can be particularly useful to help discover patterns and themes from the interviews (Kuckartz & Kuckartz, 2002). Next, to immerse myself in the data, I reviewed each interview transcript several times and then compared with the audio recording for clarity. According to the literature, qualitative researchers serve as interpreters of the narratives of others (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). As such, I wanted to ensure that participant narratives were adequately reflected in the transcripts. The final step in the immersion process involved review of my analytic memos to remain in tune with my thoughts and reactions, which enhanced my insights about the data set.

Next, the initial coding process entailed use of MAXQDA analysis software in the development of a solid coding structure and to become more familiar with the data content. Conducting qualitative data analysis with MAXQDA supports the researcher in constructing patterns and subsequently identifying emerging themes (Kuckartz & Kuckartz, 2002). Conversely, the research suggested that qualitative data analysis software can be complicated to the novice researcher and ultimately produce challenges in the analysis process (Saldana, 2016). Therefore, novice researchers should use pen and

paper to code research and obtain important data and themes that may be significant to the research (Saldana, 2016). In navigating the software to discover patterns and themes from the data, I became focused on the various coding options while overlooking important initial observations and patterns. Subsequently, MAXQDA was not continued as I elected to manually code and employed a more natural approach to analyzing the data. This process allowed me to become more attuned with my observations during the analysis process and organize the data in a way that was conducive to the research goals. As part of this manual process, I used narrative analysis to identify initial codes, secondary codes, and eventual emerging themes. This manual analytic process consisted of first organizing the data and gaining a general sense of the information, examining the data to discover patterns and categories, then coding the data to highlight emerging themes and interpretation (see Creswell, 2009). In qualitative research, comparison can facilitate on-going reflection between coded data to ensure accuracy (Gibbs & Taylor, 2005). I employed a continual method of comparison of the data to ensure consistency throughout the analytic process. I also extracted portions of the data that were significantly meaningful and subsequently assigned that information among categories that further supported theme development. To capture and monitor notations that arose during the research process, I incorporated research journaling, which served as a useful tool in reflection of my thoughts and assumptions during the research process (see Janesick, 2011).

The process of coding data is an iterative feat (Hedlund-de Witt, 2013). Coding cycles facilitate further managing, filtering, and highlight significant features in the data

that support the generation of themes, concepts, and meaning (Saldana, 2016). I chose to use inductive coding as this supported the development of codes based on the qualitative data. The first cycle of coding involved reviewing the transcripts to familiarize myself with the data. During this time, the development of initial observations was noted for later reference. Additionally, thematic coding was conducted to identify emerging categories and codes to contribute to the final theme development. Saldana (2016) recommends that you keep a record of your emergent codes, their content descriptions, and a brief data example as it can be quite useful in the analysis process to observe codes uniformly without having to sort through data (Saldana, 2016). Subsequently, I created a code chart that was helpful in reviewing the data taken directly from the transcript and engaged in the process of analyzing and reorganizing codes to confirm emerging themes (Hedland-de Witt, 2013).

In later coding cycles, initial codes can be refined, relabeled, and incorporated with other codes or eliminated (Hedlund-de Witt, 2013). Abbott (2004) compares the cycles of coding to the process of decorating a room: "You try it, step back, move a few things, step back again" (p. 215). Thus, engagement in the analysis process involved further review and reassignment of codes after evaluating the data and comparing initial observations. The next cycle of analysis involved narrative coding which contributed to the identification of nuances among participant accounts (Saldana, 2016). During this cycle of coding, I constructed analytic memos which can be viewed as insightful connections regarding the data (Saldana, 2016). This analytic process supported emergent patterns and facilitated a better understanding of the reciprocal relationship between

initial coding development and the evolution of understanding a phenomenon (Weston et al., 2001).

My final step of analysis involved review of potential themes and evaluating their reliability (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009). Additionally, to ensure consistency with the study questions and the data, I conducted numerous reviews of the themes in relation to the codes and categories. Corbin and Strauss (2015) described the coding process in qualitative research as sorting through information derived from the data towards the development of concrete impressions that capture the meaning and experiences of the participants. Likewise, the process I used for identifying and constructing themes was informed by the data, research questions, theoretical framework, and my understanding of participant experiences and perceptions in working trauma-exposed youth (Braun & Clarke, 2012).

Validation Procedures and Evidence of Trustworthiness

Credibility

The first aspect that should be addressed in qualitative research is credibility, as it establishes trustworthiness (Janesick, 2011). The basic notion of credibility assumes the research design is logical and adequately supports the goals of the study (Kim, 2015). Moreover, credibility of the research process should produce parallels between data, codes, and emerging themes (Given, 2008). The credibility of the current study was enhanced by using a purposely sampled group of teachers and semistructured interviews in the exploration of perceptions and experiences in working with trauma-exposed students. Additionally, using a semistructured interview process allowed each participant

to responded to the same set of questions; therefore, increasing the integrity of data collection. Carlson, (2010) confirmed that using the same research procedures during qualitative interviewing improves the trustworthiness of the interpretations and conclusions drawn from the data. Hence, the questions in the interview protocol focused on the experiences of the participants and included prompts as needed to elicit further description and meaning (Ravitch & Carl, 2016; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). This method supports prolonged engagement, which is a process that facilitates trust and rapport through the exploration of experiences and participant narratives in order to gain a better understanding of behavior and context (Janesick, 2011).

Triangulation is used to support both credibility and dependability of research (Statistical Solutions, 2017). According to Noble & Healea (2019), triangulation supports the exploration of human behavior through various methods, offering a more balanced explanation of the findings. Hence, triangulation is considered a qualitative research strategy to test validity through the convergence of information from different sources (Patton, 1999). To ensure dependability of the data in the current study, multiple procedures were used (Rudestam & Newton, 2015). For instance, during data collection, questions were rephrased as needed to ensure clarity of the information being sought from participants. Additionally, reviewing audio recordings for the correction of errors and discrepancies in the transcript enhanced the credibility of the study by ensuring an accurate depiction of participant responses was noted. In this narrative study, the use of triangulation among interviews was used as a way to verify the meaning of the participants' responses (Loh, 2013). As such, I reviewed field notes composed during

data collection and then referenced to notations made during the transcription process to discover contrasting data and emerging trends. This process allowed me to compare thoughts and assumptions that were developing and ensured consistency and continuity of theme development (Boritz, Bryntwick, Angus, Greenberg, & Constantino, 2014).

Finally, according to the research, reviewing and coding of data can be completed by more than one individual as this procedure supports validity and quality of meaningful data (Boritz, Bryntwick, Angus, Greenberg, & Constantino, 2014). Therefore, I consulted with my research dissertation committee, discussed key interviewee points and emerging themes, and engaged in critical discussion with my research committee to ensure I was objectively evaluating the data and arriving at reasonable interpretations that supported eventual themes of the study.

Transferability

According to Padgett (2017), transferability occurs when there are parallels between the reader's own experiences and outcomes of the study. I incorporated rich description of contexts, highlighting experiences that could be familiarized by the reader and thus enhance transferability. Although this study was conducted in a rural setting that is often representative of unique contexts, the descriptive details of participant characteristics, the classroom environment, as well as experiences could be transferable among teachers from various cultures, settings, and those who work with at-risk populations. A deeper depiction of study contexts aids social workers in similar environments such as elementary and middles schools in recognizing related experiences and supporting teachers in achieving successful outcomes in working with trauma-

exposed students. This then supports transferability of this study in similar settings and has further implications for transferability with administrative personnel in school settings as it relates to their understanding of how trauma experiences impact students (Cope, 2014).

Dependability

Dependability is important to trustworthiness as it establishes the research study's findings are reliable and easily replicated. To ensure dependability, it is essential that the findings are consistent with data collection, analysis, and subsequent research would produce similar findings, interpretations, and conclusions about the data (Earthy & Cronin, 2008). The consistency of the data through similar contexts represents the dependability of the research process (Tobin & Begley, 2004). In the current study, dependability was achieved through the use of a reliable data collection process from recruitment to interview completion. The literature suggested that analysis should not seek representation of truth yet, render transparent processes by which trustworthy interpretations can be achieved (Lapadat, 2000). Moreover, narrative analysis is indicative of representation and often used for research surrounding group experiences (Earthy & Cronin, 2008). As such, this study used narrative analysis in the social inquiry of peoples' experiences and subsequently produced understanding of the meaning bestowed upon these experiences. The application of narrative analysis was consistent with the current basic qualitative study and reinforced the dependability of data. Creswell (2009) suggested that narrative analysis supports classification and interpretation. Hence, for the current study, the process of narrative analysis involved the examination of raw

data, identifying emerging themes through multiple coding processes to ensure consistency and meaning of data (Kim, 2015).

Confirmability

Korstjens & Moser (2018) suggested that confirmability is associated with the notion that research findings are solely derived from the data and not researcher interpretations. Furthermore, a study's confirmability is enhanced by the ability of similar outcomes to be produced through a review of the literature (Williams, 2018). Reflexivity is an integral part of ensuring the transparency and quality of qualitative research (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Rudestam and Newton (2015) recommend using a reflexive approach to strengthen the validity of the study. According to Janesick (2011), research journaling can be incorporated as a reflexive process that facilitates a deeper sense of self-awareness, as well as foster a better understanding of participants' behavior, feelings, and thoughts. I incorporated reflexive journaling to aid in my assessment of interviews and identification of relevant categories and eventual themes consistent with those not otherwise identified during analysis of the data. Additionally, this reflexive process facilitated the identification of potential bias and served as a useful tool in reflection of my thoughts and assumptions during the research process (Janesick, 2011). To enhance the dependability of the study, I employed a continual method of comparing and contrasting of initial observations with my impressions during data analysis to ensure the identified codes and themes were consistent throughout the analytic process and authentically represented the data.

Limitations of the Study

Due to the environmental contexts of this study, the culture of the work environment could temper participant responses. As so, the participants could be reluctant to disclose gaps in knowledge or highlight perceived responsibility of the school to provide further training and resources. A participant's response regarding awareness indicated "no teacher wants to admit they don't know something." When probed for clarification, the participant asserted that from their perspective, teachers may be reluctant to disclose any gaps in knowledge regarding student learning due to shame. Similarly, the literature shows that research surrounding job expertise and performance in the work environment can create feelings of shame (Blitz, Anderson, & Saastamoinen, 2016). As such, perceived gaps in efficacy could potentially affect participant responses. In this study, it is possible that the participants may not respond genuinely if there were underlying feelings of shame or inadequacy regarding trauma. To minimize this limitation, prior to conducting interviews I conveyed that all experiences and perceptions were valuable to the study and the information would not solely be used to highlight gaps in knowledge, rather for school social workers to support teacher efficacy in working with trauma-exposed students to increase their psychosocial and academic success.

Findings

Descriptive Data

The final data set consisted of nine participants from one high school setting. To protect the confidentiality of the participants, I elected to shield their identity by using alphanumeric assignment codes for identification. The minimum educational

requirements for teachers in the state of South Carolina include a bachelor’s degree with individualized subject areas. The ages of participants ranged from 29 to 59 years, teaching experience ranged from seven months to 29 years, gender consisted of two males and seven females, and countries of origin varied among those within and outside of the United States. The subject areas taught by study participants included, physics and astronomy, chemistry, English, speech, history, journalism, general math, and social studies.

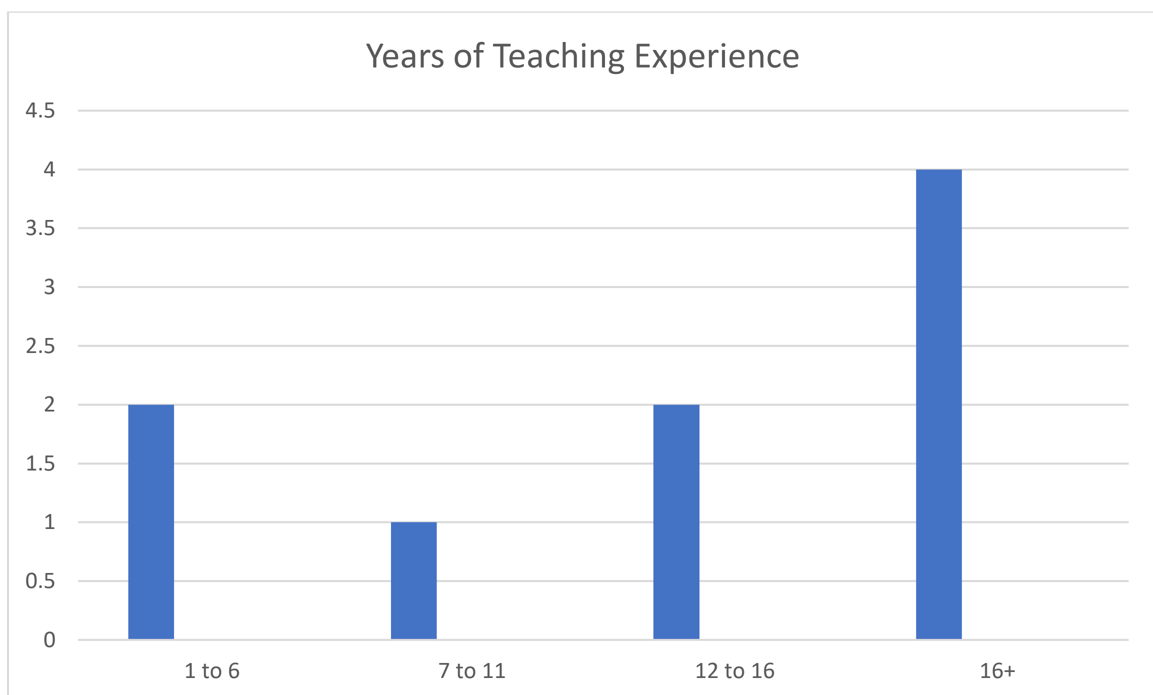

Figure 1. Participants’ years of teaching experience.

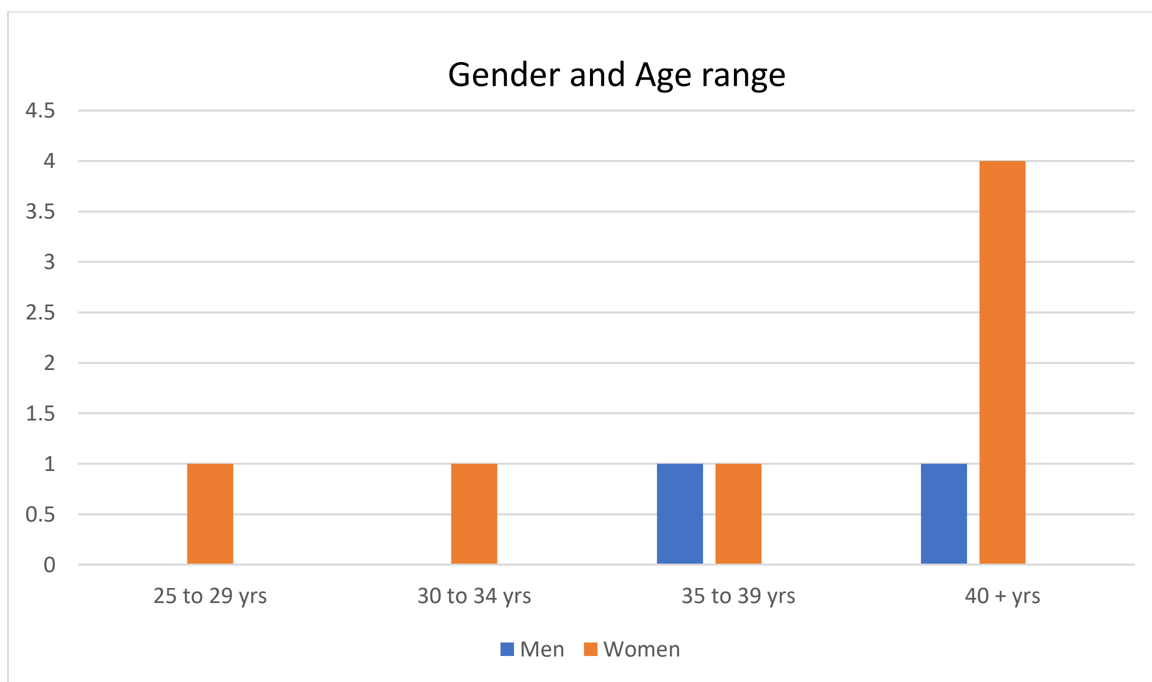

Figure 2. Participants' age and gender.

Discrepant Cases

Goetz and Lecompte (1984) note that in qualitative research, discrepant cases can aid in refining an emerging theory or finding from the data. They argue that such cases can be used to refine and expand the researcher's proposed themes, or refute them and thus, add an additional spin to the understanding of the phenomenon under inquiry (Goetz & Lecompte, 1984). In the case of this study, discrepant cases did not emerge because participants were particularly aligned in their experiences. Their description of their experiences with trauma and youth offered similar classroom experiences and provided consistent portrayals of how they viewed trauma in relationship to its impact on the students they taught and their individual and professional needs.

Discussion of Themes

This study sought to answer three research questions. Data collection and analysis

from the individual semistructured interviews generated three main themes and five subthemes. The theme that emerged relating to the first research question included teacher self-efficacy. For Research Question 2, the theme of teacher self-efficacy and professional self-efficacy emerged along with subthemes of (a) trauma awareness; (b) classroom balance; and (c) training and resources. Last, for Research Question 3, a main theme of school culture emerged with subthemes of (a) team approach and (b) social worker support. The following main theme definitions follow:

- Teacher Self-Efficacy refers to a teacher's belief in their ability to employ strategies and skills which support optimal learning and influence successful outcomes. (Protheroe, 2008).
- Professional Self-Efficacy refers to a professional's perception of job-related challenges, skills, and competence in achieving resolution (Ventura, Salanova, & Llorens, 2015).
- School Culture encompasses the beliefs, behaviors, and practices that influence the functionality of the school (Fisher, 2012).

The data collected resulted in a richer understanding of the experiences and perceptions of teachers in working with trauma-exposed students. The identified themes for all three research questions are described in further detail below. The participant responses and quotes are used to support each theme. Some responses were minimally edited to enhance clarity and readability while maintaining the participant's words and intent. The following main theme emerged from RQ1: What are the perceptions of

teachers in rural schools of South Carolina regarding the academic and psychosocial needs of high school-age youth who have been trauma-exposed?

Theme: Teacher Self-Efficacy

The NCTSN (2017) posits there is a significant interconnection of trauma with culture, history, race, gender, location, and language. Cultural differences can exist in the perception and interpretation of trauma, the meaning given to the traumatic event and beliefs of resiliency (NCTSN, 2017). The literature indicated that various perceptions of trauma can also affect the response and support that is provided (Alisic et al., 2012). The subtheme of trauma awareness highlighted participants' understanding of trauma, and the challenges that come with trying to maintain a sense of teacher self-efficacy when academic and psychosocial needs are influenced by many students' lifetime trauma experiences. Trauma awareness entails the ability to understand the impact of trauma, recognize signs and symptoms and respond by integrating knowledge and strategies to mitigate the effects of trauma (SAMSHA, 2014). When exploring trauma awareness in this study, the inclusion of specific terms such as "life-changing, long-term, psychological and emotional impact, physical harm and threat to well-being" were used to describe teacher perceptions of trauma. Participants expressed that traumatic events were associated with student experiences such as death, poverty, homelessness, substance abuse issues, divorce, violence, prostitution, bullying, rape, economic issues, and abuse. Most participants appeared to feel competent in their understanding of the basic concept of trauma and its impact, but less confident in how to respond when problem behaviors or emotional reactions were present in the classroom. Similar sentiments were expressed

regarding the effects of trauma on a child's well-being, as well, how adverse experiences of students can have a significant impact on academic and psychosocial performance. To highlight this, the following examples of teacher's perceptions of trauma awareness are presented.

Participant CP001 stated, "Trauma takes a child off their regular course of thinking and doing where the child can be experiencing emotional distress and not be able to focus or engage in classroom activities." Participant CPOO2 expressed, "Something negative happened in that child's life, and it might be a death or illness but something out of the ordinary happened and the negative experience most likely will have a long-term effect on them." Participant CP004 indicated, "Trauma could have positive and negative effects but usually the negative effects are exhibited in school." Participant CP007 provided this account:

> In my mind, I think that it has to do with some kind of response to something that happened previously and for whatever reason, based on what's happening in the person's life it seems to have an impact on how they process and the reaction comes out in different ways and different behaviors associated with the trauma.

Participants seemed to understand trauma to be the result of some type of event or circumstance and acknowledged that these experiences can have varied lasting effects. This concept is important as it relates to teacher self-efficacy since a lack of understanding about the symptoms of trauma can influence the lens in which behavior is viewed causing ineffective responses and possible further traumatization (Phifer & Hull, 2016). It's also important as it relates to trauma awareness because if educators are

expected to rise to the challenge of closing the gap in academic achievement, they must be educated themselves regarding the prevalence and impact of trauma and be fluent in strategies to counteract it (Ko et al., 2008).

Participant accounts emphasized teacher self-efficacy with respect to awareness of the needs of trauma-exposed students. When exploring the participants' perceptions of their experiences with students who may be trauma exposed, I found elements such as trust and the importance of teacher-student relationships. Overall, participants acknowledged teacher-student relationships as one of the most essential components of identifying and adequately responding to the needs of trauma-exposed students. For example, participant CPOO1 stated, "You have to get to know your kids, you can't help them if you don't have a relationships with them," and Participant CP004 expressed, "A teacher must have relationships with their students because building relationships with students will give them confidence that they can trust you." Participant CP008 discussed her perception of student needs as first having a trusting relationship and next a willingness to listen regardless of your own understanding of what a child may be going through adding, "Many students feel embarrassed by their circumstances or experiences and will only communicate with someone they can trust, and you should listen even if you do not understand." In addition, Participant CP006 referenced students without supportive relationships at home and how teacher-student relationships have benefitted those students stating, "Having relationships and being there for students when they need you builds their trust because in some cases there is no one to support them and they will feel they can come to you when they need to." Participant CP007 further suggested,

"Students spend a lot of time with teachers and that is a fact, so we do have a great role that we could play as far as relationships and being there regardless of our own understanding."

Participant CP009 emphasized the importance of trust. In order to build better relationships with the students, they need to have the confidence that you are not going reveal certain information that is shared within limits of mandated reporting stating, "Students require a secure teacher-student relationship, compassion, and encouragement and that I am not here to judge their situation and to be told their experiences do not define them."

It was noted by some participants that many teachers do not realize the importance of relationships in helping students feel connected and that a disciplinarian approach is not effective and can create resistance. It was also noted that many teachers do not know how to develop relationships with students. This spoke to teachers' sense of self-efficacy in the classroom and how challenging it can be to identify and provide the kind of support that is responsive to the needs of their students, particularly as it relates to trauma. In general, participant responses reflect that student support within the classroom was the responsibility of all teachers and crucial to the child's overall success. Additionally, participant accounts suggested that in order for teachers to establish good relationships with their students, trust is key in establishing rapport. McNeely (2005) suggested teacher-student relationships are representative of school connectedness and have a significant effect on behavior and academic success. Hence, teacher-student

relationships which involve feelings of trust and support facilitate connectedness (Dods, 2015).

Trauma awareness entails understanding of the role in which culture and environment play in the outlook of children in rural communities (Shoulders & Krei, 2015). In terms of teacher self-efficacy, the responsiveness to student needs should consider the unique characteristics of rural communities that influence student outcomes. Furthermore, the knowledge required to adequately serve trauma-exposed students improves teacher self-efficacy and allows teachers to feel more empowered to support and connect with students not just in response to their academic needs, but also in terms of their cultural needs. Most participants acknowledged the unique characteristics of rural communities as small and close knit, which they felt contributed to trustworthiness playing a major role in establishing relationships with trauma-exposed students. One participant referred to her own traumatic experience as a child and how discussion amongst the rural community where she was raised caused her to shut down and become resistant to relationships at school. Emphasizing the need for trust in small communities, Participant CP001 expressed, “The community is small, and information can move around more quickly than in larger communities, so they have to be able to trust you if you are going to make progress.” Participant CP004 stated, “The community is small, so if anything happens, it moves around a small town like this, if it is a big city who cares, but in rural city it moves about the community and they need trust.” Correspondingly, Participant CP005 discussed the importance of students feeling like teachers can be trusted not to talk among staff. The following example highlights this:

> Being in a rural area, everyone knows each other and the first thing they think about is they know, and my neighbor knows, and this is something which really bothers them so it's important to not talk among others in the school about private student issues.

Participant CP006 spoke of the lack of resources and how trust was essential to the helping process stating, "There are not a lot of resources here, so the school is important, and teachers need to be connected with students to help them."

The ability to trust others can be difficult for students following trauma. In a qualitative case study exploring the perspectives of youths and their experiences and perceptions of the school role in supporting trauma-exposed students, outcomes revealed the need for trust as a key factor in establishing relationships with teachers (Dods, 2018). According to Gunn (2018), children who experience damaged family attachments often view the world through a lens of distrust. Thus, a student with a history of trauma may have difficulty trusting teachers, authority figures, or even peers (Brunzell et al., 2015). The literature indicated that when children do not feel safe and cared about at school, they are less likely to develop the supportive relationships which help them thrive (Saewyc et al., 2006). Correspondingly, rural environments present with unique contexts of close-knit communities where information is widespread (Iniguez, & Stankowski, 2016). Compacted by the effects of trauma where trust is often compromised due to broken relationships, the need for trust would seem to be an essential component of teacher-student relationships and can yield a sense of safety (Brunzell et al., 2015; Dods, 2017). The literature supports the notion that relationships are significant to the overall

academic and psychosocial success of trauma-exposed students. Yet, even more noteworthy, in terms of teacher self-efficacy, the cultural characteristics of rural communities suggest the need for teachers to be more trauma aware specifically in regard to how the context of rural environments influence the outlook and learning of trauma-exposed children.

The literature has shown that for many abused children, having at least one supportive person in their life can foster healing, even if the child's traumatic experience is never discussed (Brunzell et al., 2015). Furthermore, trauma-exposed children long for their distress to be noticed and validated by teachers (Dods, 2018). Small acts such as inquiring about a student's well-being or offering to talk about a problem or concern can exhibit caring behavior (Dods, 2018). In the end, it is this demonstration of compassionate behavior exemplifying validation, understanding, and empathy which meet the needs of trauma-exposed youth (Dods, 2018). In a study conducted by Saewyc et al. (2006), the outlook and behavior throughout the lifespan of youth in grades 7-12 was explored. The outcomes of this study concluded that two primary protective factors for youth who experienced abuse and other adverse events were a sense of connectedness with school and family (Saewyc et al., 2006). The teachers in this study talked a great deal about how school connectedness serves as a foundation for the helping process, and further that connectedness cannot be achieved successfully when the teacher-student relationship is not grounded in trust, the student doesn't feel supported when in the classroom, and the teacher doesn't have the confidence that they can help the student with presenting needs.

As teachers grapple with how the importance of building a trusting, supportive, and connected relationship with students while trying to have a solid sense of self-efficacy, the idea of school connectedness for participants is a central element to supporting their feelings of teacher self-efficacy. An account by Participant CPOO8 stood out, which indicated, "As an educator, the worst thing that can happen is for students to feel that you don't care because then you are faced with many challenges." Blum (2005) suggested that school connectedness refers to an academic environment where students feel that people care about them and their success. Participant accounts entailed perceptions of how engaging with students can promote trust, concern, and connectedness. For example, Participant CP002 expressed that consistently greeting students or talking to them about their day can help promote a sense of belonging and trust. In another example, she made a reference to teachers who do not acknowledge students as they enter the classroom, suggesting this creates barriers to "good relationships." Participant CP002 also provided the contrast of the classroom being your home. This participant indicated that in order for people to feel accepted and welcome you must acknowledge them. Additional accounts suggest that acceptance and positive regard are needed to ensure connectedness among teacher-student relationships.

Participant CP006 stated, "As a teacher, you have to listen to your students even if you don't understand because it shows you care and sometimes, they just want someone to talk with." While Participant CP008 stated, "Just listening to children and letting them talk about it, is most important to them because it shows you care about them and what they have to say."

The essence of participant responses suggested that trauma-exposed students endure diverse circumstances, and the school can provide the opportunity to engage in safe, trusting relationships that support overall well-being. At least four of the participants acknowledged that many students are resistant to relationships outside of their home environment due to fear of others being aware of personal situations causing embarrassment and shame. Dods, (2015) suggested that trust in teacher-student relationships is an important component in supporting students who have trauma experiences, particularly as those experiences show up in some way in the classroom. McNeely (2005) suggested that teacher-student relationships were found to be one of the greatest preventive factors for vulnerable youth. Due to the positive benefits of school connectedness on the physical, emotional, and academic well-being of students, it appears though relationships and connectedness are constructs that would significantly benefit the learning environment. As such, the development of school connectedness and relationships among teachers and social workers would facilitate a stronger support system for all students and encourage positive teacher-student relationships that promote academic success and psychosocial well-being (Wilson & Elliott, 2003)**.**

The noted observations of participants seemed to convey the importance of having trusting relationships with students and this can often be an ongoing challenge when it comes to securely establishing a sense of teacher self-efficacy. The following main theme emerged from RQ2: What are the experiences of teachers in rural schools of South Carolina in dealing with the academic and psychosocial needs of high school-age youth who have been trauma-exposed?

Theme: Teacher Self-Efficacy and Professional Self-Efficacy

When considering teacher self-efficacy in the context of trauma and the academic and psychosocial needs of students, most of the teachers reported not being confident in their knowledge of trauma when responding to the unique needs of trauma-exposed students. Further, most of the teachers indicated that they felt less confident in their ability to provide instruction in a way that attends to the psychosocial needs of students in situations where there was some evidence to suggest that a student's past trauma experiences impacted how they engaged with the learning environment. Providing the type of instruction needed for these students were at times difficult to determine and challenging to manage when students were not responsive to general instruction. To highlight this issue of teacher self-efficacy and challenges when dealing with trauma-exposed students, the following offers a summarized depiction of teacher statements in this regard. Participant CPOO1 stated:

> Kids could be dealing with something so traumatic that they can't focus and you really have to know how to engage them so you don't create more stress for them but that can be difficult when you don't really know how.

Participant CP002 indicated that students have difficulty adjusting to situations and concentrating, and behavior can manifest into depression or withdrawal. She provided the example, "Students are upset and dealing with something so they put their heads on the desk, will not talk or participate, and it's hard to engage them and you don't want to cause more distress." Participant CP005 further added:

> At times I feel like I am successful with responding to a child who may be dealing with a problem and at times I know this is something I need to figure out and do better with for the entire class.

Participant CP006 stated, “Sometimes a student will be upset and need attention in the middle of class which can be difficult if you don’t know exactly how to help.”

Generally, participants spoke of the intent to support a child who may be experiencing some type of stressor, yet often did not know how to effectively do so without causing further harm. When you consider the experiences noted here by participants, this issue is further demonstrated by the following, but with particular emphasis on feelings of not being able to balance teaching expectations with student’s psychosocial needs. For example, Participant CP005 expressed, “I try observing their expressions and behavior and know I need to help but do not want to distract the class or draw attention to the child.” Participant CP006 stated, “You have to figure out what all your students need and sometimes when a child is going through something, it is a challenge to figure out what those needs are and not draw attention to them.” Participant CP008 explained that most trauma-exposed students do not want attention focused on them and she tries to treat those students as she would the rest of the class. She indicated, “I do not want to do anything that really draws attention to the fact that they have an extra need or are hurting but as their teacher I have to help them.”

Generally, participants reported feeling less empowered to engage these students because of their lack of trauma knowledge and how it impacts academic and psychosocial well-being for students. Also, being able to leverage any sense of self-efficacy as it

relates to obligations in the classroom was often questionable; this as some teachers reported struggling to meet classroom-related learning tasks and activities with students who clearly were having a “bad day” or “triggered” by some event in the classroom that brought about behavioral and emotional reactions. As a result, participants felt helpless in addressing the situation effectively. Some of the participants expressed that they just did not have the knowledge or classroom support to be able to adequately identify and address the academic and psychosocial needs of trauma-exposed students when that trauma presented in the classroom. It is as if teachers have to routinely weigh their personal skills with any personal weaknesses or personality liabilities in order to gauge how to respond effectively psychosocially and academically. Friedman and Kass (2002) talked about this in their study on teacher self-efficacy and classroom organization where they describe how teachers are often charged to balance classroom tasks and learning responsibilities with their knowledge of environmental factors impacting the classroom experience, as well as things like their own sense of self-awareness in response to such. It is truly a balancing act for sure. When you add the additional responsibility of being trauma informed and knowing how to appropriately respond in the classroom, a teacher’s sense of self-efficacy can be muddled and leave teachers feeling disempowered to leverage teacher self-efficacy.

Professional self-efficacy also emerged from the data and involves personal beliefs in capabilities to address and resolve professional demands (Ventura, 2015). Unlike teacher self-efficacy, professional self-efficacy is focused on the skills and knowledge that are utilized to not only impact the academic and psychosocial success of

students yet influences the trauma-informed school culture. Teacher self-efficacy in this study entails belief in personal abilities in terms of presentation of materials, teaching techniques, and other strategies needed to facilitate learning. However, professional self-efficacy signifies a firm knowledge base and competency in executing interventions and strategies in response to trauma. In other words, professional self-efficacy for the current study involves how effective participants perceive their ability as educators in contributing to the overall purpose and culture of a learning institution. The following participant narratives reflect examples of uncertainty in responding to trauma-related situations and optimal classroom support.

Participant CP001 provided an account of a student who experienced an event and she felt frustrated because she did not how to respond so she conducted her own "research" to help the child. While Participant CP002 stated, "I kind of notice behavior and try to pick up on little things a child might say and do, but I may not realize how much of a traumatic experience something is for them and how to help." Participant CP003 disclosed their inability to consistently recognize when a student is experiencing trauma-related problems unless the student actually discloses the information or gives indications about a traumatic experience. Additional participant accounts highlighted experiences with students who exhibited emotional distress and the uncertainty of how best to respond resulted in feelings of powerlessness. Furthermore, although most participants had some awareness of trauma and toxic stress, they felt at a loss in regard to helping a child and were reluctant in addressing particular situations. As a result, according to participants, this causes personal stress and feelings of professional

inadequacy due to the inability to respond effectively. For instance, Participant CP004 shared an experience where a student displayed emotional distress associated with sexual abuse and she did not know how to respond, so she “prayed for her” while Participant CP005 shared this perception:

> Sometimes I do not know what to do, and I do introspection of why a child may act so violently towards me to see how I can help this child, and think about if it’s me, my voice or my facial expressions.

Participant CP006 stated, “I get to know my students, but I do not always know how to help them with some of the things they deal with at home.” Participant CP007 provided this perspective, “I think about if behavior issues could really be trauma related, because they overlap to a certain degree and if I knew, I think it would have made a difference in how I interacted and responded.”

Due to trauma exposure, most students are typically those that exhibit behavioral problems within the classroom setting (Phifer & Hull, 2016). The inclusion of Jean Charcot’s trauma theory in this study provides an understanding of trauma and the effect on development, academic success, and behavior. When children are exposed to danger, they become sensitized and a perceived threat can trigger a sequence of physical, emotional, and cognitive responses (Bloom, 1999; Ippen et al., 2011). The research has shown that trauma exposure causes significant changes in brain functioning and is therefore linked to problematic classroom behaviors and poor academic performance (Berg, 2017; NCTSN, 2017; SAMSHA, 2016). The classroom environment is composed of dynamics that can be representative of a child’s environment and therefore trigger

intrusive thoughts and stress responses within the school setting (Dods, 2017). Thus, behavior could instinctively be driven by their stress arousal level and displayed to minimize perceived threat or gain a sense of control (Beers & De Bellis, 2002).

A subtheme of classroom balance emerged from the data in relation to teacher self-efficacy. According to Anderson (2015), classroom balance entails strategies and approaches that can be used to mitigate the impact of trauma within the classroom and support educational outcomes. Correspondingly, a teacher's sense of efficacy can play a major role in how they approach teaching strategies, goals, and challenges (Caldarci, 1992). According to Bandura (1997), in order for teachers to believe they can maintain the classroom environment, they must be confident in their ability to respond effectively and implement strategies that facilitate change and balance. Overall, participant accounts suggested ambiguity in how to effectively address the needs of trauma-exposed students while attaining to the needs of other students. For example, Participant CP003 stated:

> A child with trauma exposure behavioral issues may take more time on my part, I try to help each student but at the same time also determine what each student need to be successful and that sometimes creates a challenge.

Participant CP004 stated, "Trying to establish classroom balance is a big job and it is not always clear how to balance relationships and the needs of the class with academic expectations."

The general accounts of teacher experiences regarding problematic classroom behaviors were commonly noted as attention seeking, disruption, anger, and withdrawal. Hence, all representative of emotions and behaviors often associated with trauma (Rossen

& Hull, 2013). Participants proposed that these behaviors were indicative of an emotional response to something yet expressed uncertainty in how to intervene without highlighting a student needs amongst the class. Participant CP005 stated, “Classroom management can be a challenge because teachers have to focus on instruction while trying to best respond to a student and figure out what they need.” Participant CP008 further added:

> It is hard to balance the needs of certain students because you do not want to draw attention to them, but you need to figure out how to help them and that can be difficult when there are other student needs.

Participant CP009 expressed, “I would like to be more aware of the differences between response to behaviors associated with trauma versus discipline and how to balance that.” Further teacher accounts included children who experienced negative emotions or were overwhelmed and required immediate extra attention while other students were expected to work independently. Another example included students who exhibited attention-seeking behaviors, which required extra time to get them settled, as to not distract the rest of the class.

Interestingly, most teachers reported that withdrawal was most difficult due to the effort that is required in trying to engage a student who has put their head down on the desk or refuses to communicate. For example, Participant CPOO6 indicated, “When a child is experiencing some type of distress and they shut down, it can be hard to help them,” and Participant CP005 stated, “If a child shuts down in class and you don’t know what to do then they don’t learn.” According to the literature, the behavioral coping mechanisms of trauma-exposed students can lead to uncertainty in the response to some

behaviors (Crosby et al., 2015). Consequently, several participants disclosed that when classroom balance was unable to be attained, disciplinary decisions were made in order to achieve daily academic goals. So, in certain instances, students would be left to sleep, removed from class, or referred for administrative intervention. Limited knowledge and awareness can significantly impact responses to problematic behaviors, subsequently affecting student outcomes (Alisic, 2012; Crosby et al., 2015). This notion corresponds with lack of teacher self-efficacy and can influence the trauma-informed response that is warranted in addressing classroom balance. Most participants identified intersecting classroom demands; however, having a clear plan of how to effectively execute strategies to maintain balance were the highlighted gaps in teacher self- efficacy in working with trauma-exposed students.

The subthemes of trauma training and classroom resources emerged from professional self-efficacy. Some participants conveyed they had little to no previous trauma training or only received coursework associated with psychology, sociology, and information surrounding children with disabilities during their prospective undergraduate programs. For example, Participant CP001 expressed:

> I think training is important because when you have only taken two to three courses of Childhood Psychology you don't receive any practical experience with kids who are experiencing trauma as opposed to special education and that broad spectrum because all of my psychology classes incorporated so much special education into them in terms of learning disabilities that they didn't discuss the real psychological issues that a lot of my kids face.

Participant CP002 stated that she received no trauma training other than human growth and development and sociology courses in college stating, "My knowledge and information have mostly been from observations or experience over the years." Participant CP003 indicated:

> I have taken several behavioral management classes, so I think behavioral management training for the classroom is probably the greatest strength that I have, but mostly communicating with other professionals to gather information is where my knowledge has come from.

In another example, Participant CP007 expressed:

> I think my only a concept related to trauma would be, what I have learned in psychology, and that was many years ago and I think the awareness could be greater by social workers providing some type of training, but also having a classroom resource or trauma manual similar to what we have for fire drills and other health related information that teachers can refer to if needed and although there are school resources available, I could personally benefit from trauma training.

The data also signified gaps in professional self-efficacy through participant accounts of challenges they face in responding to the emotional needs of trauma-exposed students. Although there were various levels of teacher experience, education, and cultural characteristics, the need for trauma training was expressed among all participants. In some instances, it appeared that the need for more training is not easily

proposed and often disregarded by teachers due to potential feelings of inadequacy. For instance, Participant CP001 shared an insightful perspective:

> Many first-year teachers and those with less experience or not formal trauma training feel as though it is their fault and often refrain from asking for help, as they do not want to be viewed as inadequate among other professionals.

Participant CP002 stated, “I try to do what I can to help my students, but teachers do not always know how to really help students that are dealing with some situations.” Participant CPOO6 expressed that in some cases teachers do not know how to respond to certain situations and do not really want to ask for help so they “do the best they can.”

The experiences and perceptions that influence teacher self-efficacy can inform school social workers as to the professional development and resources needed to support the psychosocial and academic success of trauma-exposed students. Participant responses embodied perceptions of how professional development could enhance their awareness of trauma as well as other staff in contributing to a more trauma-informed school culture. Participant CP001 shared this perception, “Training is going to help because it forms a foundation and you have something in place to know what to do when these things happen and then you can respond with a professional structure in place.” Interestingly, Participant CP001 expressed that she felt the inclusion of simulations in professional development or trauma-specific training would be helpful stating:

> I think simulations would be very effective as a part of training because when you experience that type of event a lot of times there's nothing like it, so, if you have a

> simulated event or experience at least you have some idea of what it may look like.

Participant CP002 expressed, “Trauma training would be extremely helpful in helping teachers to identify trauma related symptoms and enhance awareness in how to respond.”

Participant CP003 also shared this perception, “I think trauma training should be mandatory because we are here to help the students with not only being successful academically but also socially.” He added that because teachers are on the “frontlines” they should have the knowledge to be able to deal with trauma-related situations and anyone who works with students on a daily basis, should receive trauma training. Additionally, Participant CP005 expressed:

> It is not just about teaching but goes beyond that because this a second home for the child and teachers need to be able to identify and support students who may have experienced trauma. She suggested trainings should occur at the beginning and end of the school year to monitor and address trauma-related challenges.

Participant CP006 expressed that she felt the academic culture should not be the only focus in regard to training and shared this perception:

> I think trauma training is definitely needed because it helps in the classroom, helps teachers identify trauma related behaviors and what to do because when a student yells it does not always mean they are being rude, but they could be saying they need help indirectly.

Generally, participants expressed a need for trauma training and felt trauma-specific resources could be helpful in supporting their awareness and responses to

trauma-exposed students. For instance, Participant CP003 suggested, “I think it could be beneficial to have an additional classroom resource to serve as a reference for teachers in addressing trauma related student issues.” Participant CP008 stated:

> Every student that walks through your door will not deal with trauma the exact same way, so I think trauma training is imperative. I think there needs to be some type of trauma plan that address the needs of a particular student, that way teachers are informed about how to respond.

Participant CP008 also expressed that Individual Education Plans are effective in the provision of classroom accommodations related to a child’s disability and felt a “trauma plan” could provide similar advantages. While Participant CP009 stated that she feels all teachers are not “naturally compassionate” and therefore may not be open to accept that a child has something to say or share about a traumatic experience and training could support that process and further stated, “I think the training is important because the training confirms that immediate discipline is not always the answer and helps you be more informed, so you know how to navigate the classroom space more effectively.”

The participant responses suggested that although teachers are aware of trauma and adverse events, there is still some degree of uncertainty in regard to the behaviors associated with trauma and how best to respond to the emotional needs of trauma-exposed students. Furthermore, although teachers desire to support trauma-exposed students, many are uncertain in how best to do so**.** Subsequently, because teachers are often faced with these classroom challenges and are not adequately equipped with the

knowledge needed to effectively respond and maintain classroom balance, they experience frustration and gaps in teacher and professional efficacy. Hence, school social workers can support teachers in enhancing their trauma awareness and therefore improve overall efficacy in working with trauma-exposed students and enhance academic and psychosocial outcomes. The following main theme emerged from RQ3: What do teachers in rural schools of South Carolina think school social workers can do to partner with them to build improved self-efficacy in teachers as it relates to working with high school-age youth who have been trauma-exposed in order to promote academic and psychosocial success in the classroom?

Theme: School Culture

The final research question sought to explore how school social workers can support teachers in working with trauma-exposed students. A theme of school culture emerged as well as two subthemes of team approach and social work support. Generally, participants expressed that the school culture could be enhanced through the establishment of a team which would support teachers in identifying the needs of trauma-exposed students and also incorporate the knowledge and skills of other school professionals in addressing relevant interventions and services needed to ensure the academic and psychosocial success of trauma-exposed students. Moreover, it was conveyed that the inclusion of a team approach would support overall efficacy and promote feelings of competency in addressing classroom challenges. For example, Participant CP001 stated:

> I think having a team is what really helps with trauma-exposed students because although I may not be proficient in a certain area, as long as I know how to get to someone who is proficient and collaborate the child will get the help they need.

Participant CP002 expressed, “Teachers are important, but the response could be more effective when other professionals come together as a team to help a student.”

The overall perception of participants suggested that addressing the needs of trauma-exposed students requires a multi-tiered approach and should be done through collaboration. The research suggested that although teacher response to trauma is essential, the environment in which teachers and students’ function is critical, as the setting influences behaviors and services (Williams, Horvath, Wei, Van Dorn, & Jonson-Reid, 2007). As such, teamwork brings together diverse knowledge and skills and can result in effective planning and services whereby a more trauma-informed response can support the academic and psychosocial success of students. Participant accounts suggested the employment of a team approach in responding to the needs of trauma-exposed students would also enhance the communication process and support a broader continuum of services. For instance, Participant CP003 stated, “Having a team in place is more beneficial to students because it allows everyone to play an essential role in the student’s wellbeing.” Participant CP007 shared this perception:

> I think if we had a system in place where, we could collectively as a team identify and respond to those students who may have issues that we don't necessarily pay attention to on a regular basis, it would very beneficial in the helping process.

Additionally, Participant CP009 provided this account:

> Team would be beneficial because it would help distribute the load, because as a classroom teacher you cannot be fully responsible for a student needs and so having a whole network of people to pull from should be a part of teacher resources.

According to Rossen & Cowan (2015), schools play a crucial role in mitigating the effects of adversity, stress, and trauma on students. The literature suggested an effective approach to addressing trauma involves the integration of a multi-tiered framework that supports wellness, prevention, preparedness, and intervention (Rossen & Cowen, 2015). Multi-tiered systems of support enhance the effectiveness of interprofessional collaboration by emphasizing the contributions of all support team members (D'Agostino, 2013). This collaborative intervention approach can improve school culture and reduce barriers to learning (D'Agostino, 2013). Thus, developing school culture involves collaborative strategies that support understanding, communication, and problem solving in regard to the needs of the environment (Deal & Peterson, 2009). Since children in rural and low socio-economic communities are at higher risks for adversity it is particularly important, as it may be the only opportunity for intervention and support (Anderson, Blitz, & Saastamoinen, 2015). As such, the educational environment should collectively function from a trauma-informed approach to enhance understanding and support related needs of trauma-exposed students (Anderson et al., 2015). In an effort to support teachers, school social workers can be influential in the development of multi-tiered support framework that facilitates prevention, preparedness, and interventions in regard to the academic and psychosocial

success of trauma-exposed students. The school social workers can play a critical role in ensuring that students feel connected to school through educating teachers to provide trauma-informed classroom interactions, and emphasizing the important role teachers play when they engage in caring relationships with students (Kelly, 2020). Additionally, school social workers provide in-service trainings to teachers on the importance of their connections with families of students and how those connections contribute to schoolwide efforts to improve school climate and academic achievement (Kelly, 2020). The essence of participant accounts suggested a team approach would facilitate a more trauma-informed response among teachers and therefore improve efficacy in the provision of services for trauma-exposed students.

The school culture-derived participant accounts seemed to suggest that better relationships between teachers and social workers could improve the level of comfort among teachers in seeking support as related to trauma-exposed students and the overall school culture. Similarly, these relationships would also provide an ally to advocate and support students in reaching out for help or services who may not otherwise do so (Dods, 2017). A participant account proposed when there are supportive relationships between teachers and social workers, students are more inclined to trust social workers enough to seek out help if they need it. Moreover, a common outlook among participants signified that improved communication regarding student circumstances, can help teachers obtain a better understanding of factors which may be affecting behavior and academic success. Although most participants expressed the need to be more aware of underlying student trauma-related issues, all acknowledged aspects of confidentiality that must be

maintained. The data suggested having more accessibility to the school social worker through classroom engagement would promote familiarity and relationships among teachers and students. This then could support overall teacher self-efficacy through more trauma-informed teaching strategies that have been shown to connect and engage students in the classroom (Brunzell et al., 2015).

The school social worker is often among few staff members with appropriate trauma knowledge and understanding regarding behaviors that may be influenced by a child's past trauma experiences. The research shows school social workers have been key in providing intervention support regarding trauma-affected children, and further often serve in the role of educating and training teachers (Alisic, 2012). For example, the school social worker could serve as an additional resource for activities which build upon character strengths to support attainment of goals, while improving a sense of well-being and personal achievement for all students (Brunzell et al., 2015). Correspondingly, this notion embodies the NASW principle relating to the importance of human relationships and could facilitate the establishment of rapport with teachers, thus playing a key role in promoting collaboration and positive behavior (NASW, 2017; Wolpow, Johnson, Hertel, & Kincaid, 2009). The following are examples of participant accounts reflect the of school social worker support. Participant CPOO1 expressed:

> It would be beneficial to spend time with the social worker at the start of the school year because I think a lot of times teachers are overwhelmed and a nice reprieve from that would be to be able to work with the social worker who sits down and gets to know the teachers with a small group talk to open up the line of

> communication so if they do experience trauma related problems, they feel comfortable enough to ask for help.

Participant CPOO2 stated, “The social workers can help teachers understand the underlying issues with a child because we are not specialist and then we know how to help the child.”

It is proposed that participants feel school social workers can support teachers to improve efficacy through regular communication to discuss and review student needs and progress. Many participants felt that collaboration with the school social workers facilitated awareness regarding trauma-related circumstance and allows them to be better equipped to respond to the needs of students. For instance, Participant CP004 expressed:

> Teachers often are not aware of what may be going on with a child, regular check in meetings would be beneficial for teachers as they could work together to help a child instead of the teacher trying to figure it out.

Participant CP005 further added:

> There should be trainings at least in the beginning and end of the year with the social worker so they can identify any issues and teachers can share their experiences and this way teachers can talk about how they feel, what worked and how they can improve working with trauma exposed students going forward.

Lastly, Participant CPOO8 shared this perspective:

> I think having the social worker come into the classroom and be more visible so that if students see that teachers trust and respect social workers then they will be

less afraid and more willing to go to them if they need to because I think the mindset regarding social workers needs to be changed by staff and students.

Additionally, Participant CP009 expressed that she feels an open line of communication with school social workers support the establishment of rapport and therefore helps teachers to feel more comfortable about seeking help and navigating through challenges together stating, “I would like to have one on one time with the social worker to become more aware of how to draw the line between understanding why a child is acting out as a result of their past experiences.”

Summary

McNeely (2005) suggested that teacher-student relationships were found to be one of the greatest preventive factors for vulnerable youth. Thus, due to the positive benefits of school connectedness on the physical, emotional, and academic well-being of students, it seems that relationships and connectedness are constructs that would significantly benefit the learning environment. As such, the development of school connectedness and relationships among teachers and social workers would facilitate a stronger support system for all students and encourage positive teacher-student relationships that promote academic success and psychosocial well-being (Wilson & Elliott, 2003).

While participants acknowledged the support received from school counselors, administrators, and other school staff, suggestions were provided in terms of how to establish a more collaborative school culture through the inclusion of teams in addressing the needs of traumatized students. Correspondingly, the literature supports the notion of teamwork in response to trauma. According to SAMSHA (2016), to effectively address

trauma, programs and organizations should understand the effects of trauma exposure and employ a collective response which supports knowledge, integrates policies, procedures, and practices to prevent further traumatization. Hence, effectively functioning teams are essential in the provision of services for trauma exposed. Morrow (1987) developed, “The Compassionate School: A Practical Guide to Educating Abused and Traumatized Children,” which provided a framework for how schools can mitigate potential long-term effects of childhood trauma. This framework maintained a focus on awareness and proposed a team model approach to support teachers in establishing goals which promote a sense of safety, support, and belonging into classroom environments. This framework could facilitate and sustain the inclusion of social work support and trauma awareness within the school culture through a collaborative approach in addressing the psychosocial and academic needs of traumatized children (Spinazzola et al., 2017).

The following sections will present the Application to professional social work practice including a discussion of professional ethics, recommendations for social work practice, limitations of the study, future research and dissemination of research and will conclude with Implications for social change.

Section 4: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Social Change

The goal of this study was to explore the experiences of teachers in working with trauma-exposed students. Findings from this study will support school social workers to ensure teachers have adequate knowledge in understanding the effects of childhood trauma and equip them with the knowledge and skills needed for a more trauma-informed approach that enables the academic success of trauma-exposed youth. Teachers have the potential to make a significant impact on the social and emotional functioning of students, as they are involved with students throughout the day (Diekstra & Gravesteijn, 2008). I hope that outcomes of this study will support the need for more holistic and trauma-informed approaches in the learning environment. Furthermore, findings may be used to enhance teacher efficacy in demonstrating knowledge and preparedness in promoting the academic psychosocial success of trauma-exposed students.

The role of school social workers involves the provision of training, intervention support, and resources that promote the academic and psychosocial success of students (Alisic, 2012). A general perception of relationships and open communication underpinned participant responses. Many expressed that scheduled meetings to address concerns or follow up regarding student needs could ensure awareness and support student success. It was suggested that first-time teachers or those new to a setting would greatly benefit from social worker collaboration, as it would support relationships and thus promote a sense of comfort in seeking help.

Also, professional efficacy emerged as an overarching theme of how participants felt social workers could enhance self-efficacy as it relates to working with high school-

age youth who are trauma exposed. It was suggested that trauma training on how best to respond to the needs of trauma-exposed students was essential. Moreover, the need for classroom resources such as a trauma plan would be an essential source of support. Although participants held varying degrees of experience with trauma, most identified gaps in how best to effectively meet the needs of trauma-exposed students while balancing the needs of the entire class. It was astounding that all participants were highly skilled educators, yet general trauma knowledge was not included in respective undergraduate programs. Nevertheless, overall participants expressed a true passion to educate children and possessed the innate quality of empathy. Collectively, participants held the perception of a significant role they play in students' lives and were committed to gaining knowledge and skills to best serve the needs of all students.

Youth are primed to learn when they feel safe, connected, and supported at school, and that is best achieved through a whole-school approach (Rossen & Cowen, 2013). School social workers can be instrumental in providing professional development focused on trauma-informed classroom interactions which support the important role teachers play when they engage in caring relationships with students (Agresta, 2004). Additionally, school social workers can assist teachers in gaining a better understanding of how their connections with students and their families contribute to schoolwide positive outcomes (D'Agostino, 2013).

The outcomes of this qualitative study support enhanced understanding of the experiences and perceptions of challenges that teachers face in working with traumatized students. While school social workers are also responsible in helping staff to attain the

skills and knowledge to effectively work with students, the outcomes of this study provide a framework for how professional development and resources can be structured to best support the needs of teachers, as well as all school staff in working with traumatized youth. The research suggested that classroom and academic outcomes were most productive when teachers are provided with professional development and resources that address challenges within the classroom (Blandford, 2012). To eliminate barriers to learning, promote student well-being, and achieve positive academic outcomes, social workers should support the preparedness of teachers and school staff. Additionally, this study may validate the role of school social workers in expanding professional development preparedness programs for teachers and school staff. Findings also may inform social work programs to improve curriculum with the inclusion of trauma awareness that can help future educators to be informed regarding the implications of trauma and what is needed to support trauma-exposed students.

I next describe the application of this research to professional ethics in social work practice, make recommendations for social work practice, and discuss implications for social change based on the findings. I conclude with a summary of the research.

Application for Professional Ethics in Social Work Practice

The NASW code of ethics outlines professional values, ethical principles, and standards that are the core of social work practice (NASW, 2017). The NASW core value of service implies a social worker's primary objective is to help vulnerable populations and those in need and to promote social change (NASW, 2017). Social workers understand that trauma has significant effect on social issues and the physical and mental

health of individuals (Smyth, 2013). Trauma-exposed children are considered a vulnerable population due to the potential lifelong effects (SAMSHA, 2016). This study, in exploring the teachers' knowledge about children and trauma, explained how social workers might better support the needs of teachers and improve the well-being of trauma-exposed students, which is aligned with the core value of service. The NASW core value of service directs school social workers to use their expertise to provide resources and training. Through the current study, the experiences and perceptions of teachers in working with trauma-exposed students will inform school social work practice by offering a scaffolding for professional development in regard to trauma and promote trauma-informed care in the learning environment.

Competence is an NASW core value that suggests social workers should continually strive to expand their knowledge and ensure that others are knowledgeable in the provision of services to children. The CSWE (2008) emphasizes that social workers hold a strong commitment to working competently with at-risk populations. Rural populations are considered vulnerable due to the characteristics that make up and define rural culture (Daley, 2015). The attainment of competence in rural environments is essential as knowledge and awareness of the unique historical and cultural backgrounds of rural populations supports the provision of effective interventions and services in meeting the academic and psychosocial needs of students (National Advisory Committee on Rural Health and Human Services, 2018). Trauma-informed care incorporates understanding of the effects of adverse experiences on psychosocial functioning and what is needed to promote healthy outcomes (Levenson, 2017). The findings of this study

enhance the competency of school social workers through knowledge of the experiences of teachers in working with trauma-exposed students and subsequently contribute to the understanding of what is needed to promote academic and psychosocial success. Additionally, to successfully support trauma-exposed students in rural communities, a standard level of aptitude among teachers is needed to prevent retraumatization. In upholding a commitment to ensuring an optimal learning environment for trauma-exposed children, social workers provide the knowledge and skills to school staff and promote competency in working with rural populations.

The NASW value of human relationships informs the ethical principle of social workers recognizing the importance of collaboration (NASW, 2017). The establishment of collaborative relationships between school social workers and teachers contribute to the identification of classroom challenges as well as facilitate a better understanding of trauma-informed strategies to support the academic and socioemotional needs of trauma-exposed students (Wiest-Stevenson, 2016). Collaborative relationships between school social workers and teachers can facilitate trauma-informed strategies that prevent further traumatization in the learning environment (Wolpow et al., 2009).

When responding to the needs of teachers and school staff, it is important to note that school social workers have a primary ethical responsibility to students and teachers (Alisic, 2012). Daily, students attend school with diverse life experiences that contribute to who they are, their behavior, and learning outcomes (Dods, 2015). While for some students, feelings of safety and the ability to stay focused requires little effort, the

experiences of trauma can be an ongoing struggle of functioning and learning for others (Dods, 2015).

The NASW core values of service, competence, and the value of human relationships support research that contributes to the expansion of knowledge regarding the effects of trauma. The mission of the educational environment is to support the academic achievement of students (CWSE, 2012). In consideration of student needs, it is essential that school social workers recognize that teacher experiences greatly influence learning and achievement (CSWE, 2012). As a school social worker, I am charged to continuously explore effective therapeutic interventions to support successful outcomes of trauma-exposed students and promote awareness among those who work with them.

Recommendations for Social Work Practice

Being a school social worker and advanced practitioner, I am committed to the provision of services and dissemination of information to ensure resiliency, healthy development, and learning for all youth. The action steps for school social work practitioners could include advocacy for modified professional development policies mandated by the school district and state. Advocacy could be initiated by presenting research outcomes to local stake holders such as school board members, district personnel, and community leaders. According to the National Advisory Committee on Rural Health and Human Services, public education and awareness plays substantial role in not only the response to the needs of trauma-exposed children but in prevention (Bellenger et al., 2018).

The research indicated that children in rural settings experience higher rates of ACEs than their urban peers (Health Resources and Services Administration, 2016). In rural settings, the environmental systems, and characteristics specific to rural communities greatly impact the education and overall well-being of children in these communities. As a result of the distinct population size, limited resources, and the unique culture which exist in rural areas, students are subject to a variety of risk factors that increase the likelihood of negative outcomes in school (Friesen & Purc-Stephenson, 2016). Though children in rural communities face challenges that may be somewhat similar to students in other settings, these children also experience many barriers specific to rural communities such as lack of resources and higher incidence of poverty which significantly influence academic achievement and other school outcomes (Byun, Meece, & Irvin, 2012). The cultural context in which a student may have experienced trauma is essential in understanding potential effects associated with an event and can therefore, inform the response and interventions that are employed to support the child (Rossen & Cowan, 2013). This would seem to suggest the need for the inclusion of training programs on ACEs for school leaders, stakeholders, teachers, and all associated groups who work with children and would be essential in mitigating the effects of trauma on youth (Bellenger, 2018). A greater awareness of trauma may emphasize the correlation between traumatic stress and academic deficiencies among economically disadvantaged communities (Mikolajczyk, 2018). Since children who live in rural communities often face unique barriers that impact their academic and psychosocial success in school, school workers must utilize their knowledge and skills in the provision of professional

development, as well as trauma-informed practices and interventions that are specific to youth in rural communities.

Finally, the outcomes revealed the need for supplemental classroom resources such as a trauma plans or a manual pertaining to trauma interventions and strategies to support improved outcomes. Hence, a proposal to individual school leaders for the implementation of district-wide trauma teams who lead the development of classroom resources could be essential in further supporting the enhanced trauma awareness of teachers, as well as school staff. The need for continuous training, professional development, and collaboration are crucial in generating knowledge and skills regarding trauma awareness and informed strategies (Phifer & Hull, 2016). A holistic approach to trauma may create a collective outlook and therefore support enhanced understanding of underlying factors, influences, and ultimately effective response strategies which yield successful outcomes (Souers & Hall, 2016).

Research surrounding ecological theory emphasizes the integral role of school, teacher interaction, and how the classroom serves as an optimal setting for trauma-informed interventions (Guarino & Decandia, 2015). Correspondingly, ecological theory highlights the essential role of the environment and how improved understanding of trauma, particularly in the school environment, can enable a broader understanding of factors such as classroom expectations, relationships and teacher responses, can impact functioning and recovery of trauma-affected youth (Alisic et al., 2012; Crosby et al., 2015). The inclusion of trauma theory in the prospective study provides an understanding of trauma, the effect on development, behavior, and academic success. As a result,

findings from this study provide a framework for how social work practice can support trauma awareness within other academic settings, therefore implications for social work practice could undoubtedly be transferable among other contexts and promote academic and psychosocial wellbeing among all children.

Limitations of the Study

Participation in this study was limited to high school teachers in one rural school location. Geographical limitations may hinder transferability of findings to schools that are located beyond the geography of the study's participants due to rural culture. Daley (2015) suggested that rural geographic locations are considered a distinct cultural group and factors such as lack of resources, informal and formal support systems, as well as the beliefs and values that encompass this unique region contribute to a unique set of contexts and barriers. The National Association of Social Workers (2003) suggests that rural culture is comprised of certain characteristics such as unique beliefs and ways of life. Hence, the values and perceptions of the distinct participant group may not be transferable to groups beyond that of the participants in the target rural community for this study. Conducting research in a rural setting with teachers who are more likely to have fewer resources to address trauma issues of students than teachers in urban and suburban environments, could impact how they view trauma and its impact on students.

The sample group for the current study consisted of teachers who taught grades 9-12. The findings may not be applicable to elementary and middle school level teachers, as there may be variances in the perceptions and expectations of behavior of younger children as it relates to trauma exposure. According to the literature, younger children

react differently to trauma exposure than older children (SAMSHA, 2012). Exposure to violence and other traumatic events are found to have a substantial effect on all children and adolescents (Flannery, Wester, & Singer, 2004). Yet, in a study which examined the relationship between exposure to violence, with symptoms of psychological trauma and violent behavior in public school students in grades three through 12, outcomes indicated that younger children displayed more incidence of externalizing and aggressive behaviors than adolescents in grades nine through twelve (Flannery et al., 2004). Thus, for teachers of preadolescents the outcomes from this study may not be relevant to their experiences of working with trauma-exposed students.

Future Research

The review of the literature produced a wealth of information regarding the effects of trauma and the challenges that exist among teacher responses to working with trauma-exposed students. The justification for prominent attention to trauma in social work education and practice is found in the many studies that document the widespread prevalence of trauma exposure and its lasting impact across the life course (CSWE, 2012). In general, the literature suggested that teachers can be a valuable alliance for school social workers and mental health professionals in the delivery of therapeutic interventions within the school environment (Feinstein et al., 2009). This signifies the need for teacher support in attaining skills and knowledge to effectively manage problematic classroom behaviors (Alisic et al., 2012; Crosby et al., 2015). There is limited understanding of the perceptions and experiences which influence teachers' efficacy, specifically when considering school social work support (Alisic et al., 2012;

Reker, 2016). Teacher attitudes towards their responsibilities in the provision of services for traumatized students is guided by feelings of competency (Kos, Richdale, & Hay, 2006). Future research is recommended surrounding teachers' outlook on how school social workers can support the trauma-informed response in working with trauma-exposed students. As such, further research which builds upon gaps in the understanding of how school social workers can enhance teacher awareness of trauma could be essential.

Dissemination of Research

The dissemination of research should consider the goal of the current research, which includes raising awareness and understanding of the needs of teacher in working with traumatized students (McGrath, 2016). The dissemination of the outcomes would be best represented in an executive summary that is provided to stakeholders such as board members and community leaders or the study could be viewed through formal publication. Lastly, all participants expressed interest in the study outcomes, as such a participant post-research correspondence could be provided also presenting the information in review of the full context of the study.

Implications for Social Change

The study outcomes inform social work practice, by identifying multicultural and therapeutic strategies to ensure resiliency, healthy development, and learning for trauma-exposed youth. The findings substantially justify the role of school social workers in furthering knowledge around the needs of teachers in working with traumatized students, expanding professional development, and building awareness for teachers and school

staff as well as setting a framework for advocacy in regards to school and state educational policies.

Micro Level

The research showed that a considerable number of children are exposed to trauma and approximately 10 to 30 percent will develop chronic psychological problems (Alisic, 2012). Research also suggested that children who endure early experiences of trauma face a higher risk of emotional and behavioral problems, which can become progressively more complex during adolescence and impair academic performance in middle and high school (Reker, 2016). High school could be the last accessible means for some children to receive daily support, connectedness, and specialized services before they enter the world after graduation. The opportunity to build upon personal strengths and provide a student with the resilience they need to be successful can promote successful outcomes in life domains. Trauma awareness is vital in all educational settings; however, it is most essential for high school children as the opportunity to effectively respond and potentially mitigate the long-term effects of trauma can occur before adulthood. So, addressing the needs of trauma exposed students on a micro level may facilitate individual behavior changes and alter faulty cognitive processes that are influenced by trauma exposure therefore changing a child's outlook towards others and life.

Mezzo Level

Ecological theory proposes that functioning and recovery are influenced by environmental systems such as the school and community (Alisic et al., 2012; Crosby et

al., 2015). An environment which represents a sense of support and safety is most beneficial for any child (Talbot et al., 2016). According to the NCTSN (2017), trauma intersects in many ways with culture and can influence the perception and the meaning bestowed upon trauma as well as beliefs of resiliency (NCTSN, 2017). Hence, all cultures encompass customs, beliefs, and values that define cultural practices associated with trauma. For rural communities where trauma exposure is more prevalent, promoting social change suggests a greater awareness of trauma among teachers, school personnel, spiritual leaders, and community partners to establish preparedness in addressing the needs of traumatized children (Talbot et al., 2016). As such, recognizing and understanding the cultural nuances of rural communities as it relates to trauma, including the school environment is particularly important for social workers who work in rural school environments. According to NCTSN (2008), social change is defined as changes in human relationships and interactions to facilitate transformation among cultural and social institutions producing beneficial long-term outcomes. In consideration of the mezzo level of social change, outcomes could provide the framework for supporting the school and community in becoming more trauma informed and producing better outcomes.

Macro Level

While trauma-related issues among students exists, there are disproportions in the delivery of trauma-informed classroom interventions (Alisic et al., 2012; Berg, 2017). A trauma-informed approach highlights the significance of social work values and establishes a just framework for social change (Zgoda, Shelly, & Hitzel, 2016). The

potential for social change can be guided by study outcomes in the development of polices, which allocate more resources for students and the community as a whole; this includes mandatory training, district-wide trauma response teams, and other resources. The outcomes from this study revealed a lack of preparedness regarding trauma during undergraduate programs. Most teachers in this study expressed having insufficient knowledge of trauma. Preparing educators for what to look for, how to react, and when to get additional support is crucial. Unfortunately, according to the participants in this study, trauma-related education was not provided during formal education or teacher training. The capacity for change could be represented in policies among higher education standards and requirements. As such, new policies could influence modifications in curriculum standards for education majors and other related specializations. Future teachers could gain knowledge and skills related to supporting traumatized children. Thus, educators are better trained and prepared to deal with trauma exposed students.

Summary

"Jenna" came to school each day and was a model student. Then her grades began to drop, and she appeared distracted, often putting her head on the desk, and sometimes sleeping during class. One of her teachers became frustrated with the behavior and proceeded with disciplinary action. Conversely, another teacher who had developed a strong teacher-student relationship observed the same behaviors and had a conversation with her to explore the change in behavior and academic decline. "Jenna" provided subtle cues that something was going on at home. The teacher referred her to the school social worker, and it was then revealed that "Jenna" was afraid of being "touched" by her

mother's boyfriend, so she stayed awake at night with a knife under her pillow to protect herself and younger sister.

A quarter of all students will experience a traumatic event before they graduate from high school (Costello, Erkanli, Fairbank, & Angold, 2002). Trauma and adverse experiences can impact students' well-being and jeopardize their academic achievement and social-emotional health (Dods, 2015). Teachers are often unaware of the traumatic experiences a child has endured or even the effects that follow, yet everyday they deal with the challenges that come with those experiences (Dwyer, Nicholson, Battistutta, & Oldenburg, 2005). Understanding the personal impact of traumatic experiences can lead to a greater awareness regarding how student behavior is perceived and supported in the classroom (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005).

Trauma-exposed children develop behavioral coping mechanisms in an effort to feel safe and in control (Gil, 2006). Problematic classroom behaviors can frustrate educators resulting in unproductive responses (Gil, 2006). Crosby et al. (2015) suggested there is an uncertainty regarding the needs of students with acute stress, as well as the role of teachers in addressing psychosocial issues and problematic classroom behaviors. Further, research suggested that teacher perceptions and lack of awareness can significantly impact responses to problematic behaviors (Alisic, 2012; Crosby et al., 2015). In lieu of the literature that suggested long-term implications of trauma and the challenges of learning, it is crucial that teachers are able to understand, support, and respond to the needs of trauma-affected students (Hobbs, Paulsen, & Thomas, 2019). The research supports the notion that teachers are in the ideal position to help students

exposed to trauma, as they work with them every day (Alisic, 2012). It is not expected that teachers assume roles of mental health providers, yet a firm knowledge base can evoke therapeutic responses that provide support, feelings of safety, and connectedness (Dods, 2017).

A key role of school social workers is to educate teachers and staff and promote positive behavior support (Wolpow, Johnson, Hertel, & Kincaid, 2009). Additionally, school social workers can be instrumental in furthering the mission of the school to provide an optimal learning environment for all students. Collaborative relationships between school social workers and teachers can facilitate trauma-informed strategies that prevent further traumatization in the learning environment (Wolpow et al., 2009). As such, to help teachers provide children with optimal support after trauma, it is essential to be aware of their perceptions and experiences. The outcomes of this study highlight key components that are significant to school social work practice. First, there is power in addressing challenges through collaboration and relationships. In order for social workers to effectively support teachers and school staff, a culture of collaboration and unity is recommended. Also, for teachers to support traumatized students an environment where empathetic relationships and connectedness are fostered between the teacher and student is encouraged. It is safe to assume teachers want to support all students as they chose to be educators because they care about the wellbeing of children. Finally, for teachers to address educational gaps and promote successful academic and psychosocial outcomes, they must be aware of the individual and cultural factors which influence the effects of trauma.

Considerable research by psychologist Bandura revolves around the conceptual framework of how self-efficacy and belief in in one's capabilities has an effect on their actions, determination, and feelings (Bandura, 1989). Moreover, Bandura, (1989) suggests that when people lack confidence in their capabilities, efforts are minimized or avoided completely and those who possess a sense of self efficacy exhibit greater determination in mastering challenges. Hence, for teachers to effectively respond to the needs of traumatized students, they should strongly believe in their skills and competencies. Maya Angelo stated, "when you know better, you do better" (Angelo n.d.). It is proposed that through collaboration and support of school social workers the outcomes of this study will substantially contribute to the efficacy of teachers in supporting the academic and psychosocial wellbeing being of all students. Through the outcomes of this study, trauma awareness can produce healing and resiliency for trauma-exposed children.

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Appendix: Interview Protocol

Demographic Data

What is your age or year of birth?

How do you identify in terms or gender or pronoun?

What grade(s) do you teach?

How long have you been teaching in years and months (i.e. 6 years 3 months)?

What is your country of origin?

If the United States is not your country of origin, how long have you been a teacher in the United States?

Participant Interview Questions

1. What is your understanding of trauma? How would you define trauma in your own words?
2. Now consider the following definition of trauma/traumatic events (see the above noted definition and read to participants). Based on this definition, what percentage of the students you have taught thus far do you feel have had some type of traumatic experience/trauma exposure?
3. Regarding those students, what affect do you think their trauma experience/trauma exposure has had on them?
4. How confident do you feel you are you in recognizing behaviors associated with trauma experiences/trauma exposure of youth?

5. What skills do you feel are required to address problem behaviors of students who have trauma experiences/trauma-exposed?
6. Do you feel students who suffer from trauma exposure require additional emotional/behavioral/academic support in and/or outside of the classroom from the teacher? If yes to either of these, please discuss what kind of support you feel is needed regarding emotional/behavioral/academic support in and/or outside of the classroom. Now consider others. Do you feel students who suffer from trauma experience/trauma exposure require additional emotional/behavioral/academic support in and/or outside of the classroom from others? Others can be anyone else including other teachers, parents, mental health professionals, school guidance counselor, etc. If yes, discuss what type of support you feel the others can provide either in and/or outside of the classroom.
7. Do you feel as the teacher; you are able to balance the individual needs of your students who have trauma experiences/are trauma-exposed with the needs of your whole class (includes those students who have no significant traumatic event as far as you know)?
8. Discuss/describe the traumatic events you are aware of that your students have endured? (reference that percentage of students you indicated earlier that have trauma experiences/trauma exposure). Share a few examples that you feel are important to note.

9. Using the previous question as a reference (traumatic events your students have experienced) identify and describe the types of behaviors you have observed that are problematic in the classroom? Along these same lines, are there any behaviors that you feel support the student in being resilient, that is, being able to bounce back in a positive way despite their traumatic experience?
10. What factors do you feel impact a youth's emotional, behavioral, social, and/or academic response when they have had a traumatic experience/trauma exposure? (factors could range from anything like a youth's temperament, culture, age of the event/exposure, family functioning, economic status, school environment, etc.) – Give examples only if the teacher is unsure what is meant by factors or gives a response that does not speak to the bio/psycho/social elements.
11. What have you found to be the most helpful to you in working with students with a trauma experience/trauma exposure who present with a problem behavior or with poor academic performance? Please discuss/describe. What has been the least helpful? Please discuss/describe. Please note, this can be something you have done and/or something that others have done or offered/provided.
12. Do you feel students in rural school districts have more trauma experiences/trauma exposure than students in other environments like urban/suburban? Do you think being in a rural environment makes the trauma

experience/trauma exposure more difficult to manage/bounce back from? If yes, why do you think this is the case?

13. What trauma related training have you had either as a teacher or in some other role? Describe/discuss.
14. Do you feel trainings on childhood trauma and its impact on children would be helpful to you and/or other teachers? If yes, in what way? Please discuss/describe.
15. What about others who have some responsibility for the youth you work with. Would trainings on childhood trauma be helpful to them? If yes, in what way? Please describe/discuss.
16. Is there something other than trainings that the school social worker might do that you feel would benefit teachers as it relates to helping teachers better work with students with trauma exposure?
17. How can the school social worker support the teacher in providing support to students with trauma experiences/who are trauma-exposed?