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Early Childhood Teachers' Perspectives of Teaching Children Who Are Experiencing Toxic Stress

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Walden University
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Abstract

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EdS, Troy University, 2006

MA, Troy University, 2003

BS, Florida A&M University, 1998

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

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Abstract

A growing number of children entering early childhood classrooms are experiencing toxic stress. Early childhood teachers are responsible for meeting the educational needs as well as fostering their social and emotional development. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore early childhood teachers' perspectives of being challenged to support the emotional and academic needs of young children who are experiencing toxic stress in the early childhood classroom, which the research questions focused on. The theory of social constructivism was the conceptual framework for this study. Purposeful sampling was used to select 10 early childhood teachers to share their perspectives through semistructered interviews. Participants included K-3 teachers with experience teaching children experiencing toxic stress. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Three themes emerged from the data analysis: (a) teachers lack strategies to help children with toxic stress manage emotions, (b) children with toxic stress struggle to maintain relationships with teachers and peers, and (c) teachers are challenged and need training and resources to support children experiencing toxic stress. The implications for positive social change include a better understanding of the challenges of early childhood teachers to meet the emotional and academic needs of children experiencing toxic stress. The findings may be used to develop strategies or professional development to improve the educational experiences of children experiencing toxic stress in the general education classroom.

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my mother, Rosetta Palmer and to the loving memory of my father, Willie Palmer. Thank you for always encouraging me to pursue my dreams. Your unconditional love has always been the pillar of my strength. I am forever grateful! I would also like to dedicate this dissertation to my children CJ and Palmer. I love you both more than words can ever express. Remember to always shoot for the moon!

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Jeremiah 29:11 For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. I would first like to give all praises and honor to God. Through him, I know this dissertation journey was possible. I would also like to thank my wonderful family and friends for believing in me and supporting me every step of the way. To my sisters: you ladies have always been my role models. Bridget, thank you for teaching me what it means to show compassion to others and being the epitome of unconditional love. Tina, thank you for showing me what faithfulness, hard work, and dedication looks like. Angie, thank you for being the spirit of determination and showing me how to overcome any obstacles that come my way. It is only because of you all I am the woman I am today. Shemekia thank you for having my back in the midst of many storms and for your unwavering love and support. Ret thank you for cheering me on to the finish line. Your encouragement meant a lot. Marcheria thanks for celebrating with me when I wanted to celebrate and letting me vent when needed. I also have to thank my children, CJ and Palmer, for being patient and loving during my journey. To the greatest parents in the world, Rosetta and Willie, I hope I continue to make you proud. I love you all with my whole heart.

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To God be the Glory!

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

The early childhood classroom consists of children from various backgrounds and diverse experiences, each bringing their own uniqueness to the learning environment. Because early childhood teachers strive to fulfill the needs of each individual learner and help them achieve at their optimal levels of performance, classroom teachers must be equipped with the knowledge of supporting students who pose a challenge (Plumb et al., 2016). For instance, within the early childhood classroom many children are experiencing toxic stress (Sciaraffa et al., 2018). Toxic stress occurs when children experience frequent and/or prolonged adversity (Shonkoff, 2017), which can lead to impairments to their biological and psychological development (Branco & Linhares, 2018). Toxic stress can be defined as chronic activation of the stress-response system in response to continued environmental stressors (Condon et al., 2019). Physical abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse, incarcerated parents, neglect, and household dysfunction such as divorce are all contributors to toxic stress (Bucci et al., 2016).Toxic stress in young children interrupts normal development and causes damage to the overall function and development of the brain (Bucci et al., 2016). Consequences of toxic stress range from issues with appropriate cognitive function to emotional dysregulation (López, 2018). It is estimated that between 9.5% and 14.2% of young children experience social-emotional problems (Williams et al., 2018). These children often face challenges with learning in the early childhood classroom (Kelly & Li, 2019).

As the number of students dealing with toxic stress is increasing, so are the demands of early childhood professionals to meet the educational and social emotional

needs of these children. Educational institutions serve as a needed resource to decrease the impact of toxic stress exposure in young children; therefore, it is imperative to understand what difficulties teachers encounter when working with children who are experiencing toxic stress in the classroom environment (Twum-Antwi et al., 2020). This study explored early childhood education teachers' challenges to support young children who are experiencing toxic stress. There is minimal literature that focuses on teachers' perspectives and the challenges they endure in the classroom pertaining to toxic stress (Branco & Linhares, 2018). The results of this research may lead to social change by providing information to teachers and administrators on teachers' challenges to support the emotional and academic needs of children experiencing toxic stress. The results of this research may also help with the creation of professional development to assist teachers with these challenges.

Background

Toxic stress is becoming a problem in the United States (Purewal Boparai et al., 2018; Sofer, 2019). There is a growing number of children who are being exposed to adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) that lead to toxic stress (Blodgett & Lanigan, 2018; Lipscomb et al., 2021). In the United States, 1 in 5 children live in poverty, and 5.1 million children have had a parent incarcerated (Cox et al., 2018). The largest subgroup of maltreated children in the United States range from birth to 4 years old and account for 271,000 identified cases of victimized maltreatment (Ryan et al., 2017). The Research State Center for Child Advocacy treated 629 children for abuse related toxic stressors in 2016 with an increase of 757 children in 2017 (2020). The data from the

center also indicated that 71% of these children experienced some form of sexual abuse, 15% physical abuse, and 6% witnessed violence or homicide, which are all contributors to toxic stress.

Children experiencing toxic stress may pose a challenge in the early childhood classroom. Young children dealing with ACEs and experiencing toxic stress often have below-average academic skills, attention problems, and demonstrated aggression (Jimenez et al., 2016). Data from a statewide root cause analysis showed that 57% of preschool age children struggling with literacy and literacy interventions had three or more ACEs (The Research State House of Representatives Committees, 2019). But providing the needed support in the general education classroom to children combatting the effects of toxic stress has been a challenge for several teachers in the research state (academic instructional lead teacher, personal communication, February 24, 2021).

Although there is an abundance of research related to toxic stress, there is minimal literature that incorporates the perspectives of teachers working with students experiencing toxic stress. In this study, I explored the challenges early childhood teachers face meeting the social emotional and academic needs of children dealing with toxic stress. Teachers serve supportive roles in caring for children experiencing ACEs and toxic stress and serve as a protective system (McGruder, 2019). By understanding the early childhood teachers' perspectives, advances may be made in the development of supports teachers receive when addressing toxic stress in the early childhood classroom.

Problem Statement

The problem this study addressed is that early childhood education teachers are challenged to support young children who are experiencing toxic stress (McGruder, 2019). There is a growing number of students entering into early childhood classrooms who are experiencing toxic stress (Allee-Herndon & Roberts, 2018). Young children are more susceptible to the dangers of toxic stress, as their brains are still developing (Branco & Linhares, 2018). Prolonged exposure to toxic stress can change the hardwiring of a developing child's brain (Sciaraffa et al., 2018), affecting their ability to think creatively and solve problems (Woods-Jaeger et al., 2018). The immediate effects of toxic stress are thus becoming apparent in the inability of children to learn in the general education classroom (Kelly & Li, 2019). Children who experience toxic stress associated with adverse experiences have poorer academic outcomes in kindergarten when compared to their peers (Jimenez et al., 2016).

In addition to learning academic skills, a school is a place where social-emotional competence is acquired and further developed (Panayiotou et al., 2019); however, toxic stress exposure has been linked to delays or difficulties in the social-emotional behaviors of young children (Branco & Linhares, 2018). Fourteen to 30% of children entering preschool programs do not have age-appropriate social and emotional skills, which puts these students in jeopardy of behavioral problems (McLeod et al., 2017). Data from the research state student health survey provided evidence of increasing amounts of stress, anxiety, suicidal ideation, substance abuse, and mental health issues among student populations in local counties (Smith, 2017). Teachers in a suburban school district in the

southeastern United States have expressed concern about the challenges of teaching children experiencing toxic stress. Working to meet the needs of children experiencing toxic stress has posed a problem with early childhood educators, as these students are in general educational classrooms with noticeable educational deficits and exhibiting behavioral difficulties (assistant principal, personal communication February 25, 2021). Given the evidence of the challenges teachers in the research district face in supporting children experiencing toxic stress, there is a need to understand early childhood teachers' perspectives of assisting students emotionally and academically.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore early childhood teachers' perspectives of being challenged to support the emotional and academic needs of young children who are experiencing toxic stress in the early childhood classroom. There is little research that addresses teaching students exposed to toxic stress (Branco & Linhares, 2018). Current research on toxic stress has also indicated a need for future studies to focus on school environments as a pathway to combating the effects of toxic stress on children (Blitz et al., 2016). This study will help address the gap in practice of teachers being able to support the emotional and academic needs of young children who are experiencing toxic stress in the early childhood classroom. Gaining the early childhood teachers' perspectives may help provide the information on needed resources for teachers who are challenged with meeting the social emotional and academic needs of children experiencing toxic stress.

Research Questions

The following research questions were used to guide this qualitative research study:

Research Question 1: What are early childhood teachers' perspectives of being challenged to support the emotional needs of young children who are experiencing toxic stress in the classroom?

Research Question 2: What are early childhood teachers' perspectives of being challenged to support the academic needs of young children who are experiencing toxic stress in the classroom?

Conceptual Framework

In this basic qualitative study, I explored early childhood teachers' perspectives of being challenged to support the emotional and academic needs of young children who are experiencing toxic stress in the early childhood classroom through Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivism theory. Vygotsky's social constructivist theory indicates how teachers view development through instruction using the student's background, culture, and worldview to encourage the learner to arrive at their own version of the truth. Vygotsky's theory places the environment as a major influence on learning outcomes. Acquiring new concepts begins through social relationships then further develops with the individual learner internalizing that concept on an intrapersonal level (Mayo, 2013). The early childhood teacher serves a guide of the educational classroom environment. Vygotsky's theory of social constructivism views learning as a social exchange, upon which the learning environment must account for the student's past experiences for

learning to take place (Vygotsky, 1978). In relation to the theory of social constructivism, teachers must be able to facilitate a learning environment that accounts for the past experiences of children experiencing toxic stress. Vygotsky's theory focuses on the social components that occur in the early childhood classroom that can impede students who are experiencing toxic stress from learning and having successful educational experiences.

Vygotsky's social constructivist theory was used to help to establish the way children engage in learning environments and the role teachers play in providing environments that are conducive for learning to take place. The theory of social constructivism also provided insight on the role teachers play as buffers to the negative impact of toxic stress on young children by providing a nurturing environment. The goal was to construct knowledge of how early childhood teachers are challenged to support children experiencing toxic stress in the classroom environment. In Chapter 2, I will provide a more detailed explanation of Vygotsky's social constructivist theory as it relates to teachers' perspectives of supporting children who are experiencing toxic stress.

Nature of the Study

I used a basic qualitative research design for my study. The use of qualitative approaches in research allows the researcher to gain data in the form of a narrative about personal experiences (Burkholder et al., 2016). The qualitative approach was most appropriate for this study as I was seeking to explore the personal experiences of early childhood teachers who have taught children who were experiencing toxic stress. Investigating teachers' perspectives within the educational setting can best be described from a qualitative approach because qualitative research examines people in their natural

settings and seeks understanding from their lived experiences and other phenomenon (Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

Data came from semistructured interviews with open-ended questions. In-depth interviews allow the researcher to gather rich and detailed information in the form of experiences, narratives, or stories (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Face-to-face interviewing was not feasible at the time due to COVID-19 restrictions, so interviews were conducted via Google Meets or telephone. The use of semistructured interviews enabled me to acquire extensive details regarding the study's purpose of exploring early childhood teachers' perspectives of being challenged to support the emotional and academic needs of young children who are experiencing toxic stress in the early childhood classroom. An interview protocol was developed to guide the research process (see Appendix).

Early childhood teachers were research participants from local schools in the research district. I only elicited early childhood teachers who have experienced challenges working with students experiencing toxic stress. Participants included 10 early childhood teachers (K-3) who have experienced challenges while supporting the emotional and academic needs of children experiencing toxic stress in the classroom. Their responses were recorded for later transcription and coding. The coding process allows the research to assign meaning to the data collected (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). I continued with the coding process until no new themes emerged from the data regarding teachers' experience working with children experiencing toxic stress.

Definitions

The following terms are presented to assist the reader's understanding of terms used throughout the study.

Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs): Negative events experienced by an individual during childhood that cause harm and threat to psychological and physical health. Negative events could include but are not limited to parental substance misuse and mental disorder, sexual abuse, physical abuse, emotional abuse, physical neglect, emotional neglect, familial death, parental separation, residential instability, and witnessing violence in the home (Jia et al., 2020).

Early childhood: The first period in child development beginning at birth. Early childhood is generally defined as including all children from birth through age 8 (National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC], 2020).

Early childhood education: A term defined using the developmental definition of birth through approximately age 8, regardless of programmatic, regulatory, funding, or delivery sectors or mechanisms (NAEYC, 2020)

Early childhood teacher/Educator: An individual who cares for and promotes the learning, development, and well-being of children birth through age 8 in all early childhood education settings while meeting the qualifications of the profession and having mastery of its specialized knowledge, skills, and competencies (NAEYC, 2020).

Toxic stress: Occurs when a child experiences strong, frequent, and/or prolonged adversity—such as physical or emotional abuse, chronic neglect, caregiver substance abuse or mental illness, exposure to violence, and/or the accumulated burdens of family

economic hardship—without adequate adult support. This kind of prolonged activation of the stress response systems can disrupt the development of brain architecture and other organ systems and increase the risk for stress-related disease and cognitive impairment well into the adult years (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University [CDCHU], 2020).

Assumptions

It is imperative for researchers to examine assumptions that influence or shape the research (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). While exploring the perspectives of early childhood teachers, there are several assumptions that can be made about this study. The first assumption was that early childhood teachers provided honest detailed responses to all questions regarding teaching challenges and experiences related to working with students experiencing toxic stress. Another assumption was that teachers are aware of the students that are experiencing toxic stressors. I also assumed that teachers had knowledge of ACEs and what leads to toxic stress. Finally, I assumed that the teachers selected to participate in this study are representative of the early childhood teachers, generally.

Scope and Delimitations

The scope of this research was the perspectives of early childhood teachers within a suburban school district in the southeastern United States. I explored teachers' perspectives by asking them to share their thoughts, feelings, and beliefs about the challenges teaching children experiencing toxic stress. Participants included 10 early childhood classroom teachers who have experience working with children experiencing toxic stress. I excluded special education teachers as those teachers typically receive

additional training in providing support to children and have greater knowledge of teaching children with challenging social emotional needs. This study also did not include the expertise of school administrators, counselors, social workers, or teachers who work with students beyond the early childhood years. During this study, I used semistructured interviews to collect data regarding the challenges early childhood teachers encounter meeting the social emotional and educational needs of children experiencing toxic stress in the general education classroom environment.

The selected research sites were chosen due to the high poverty rate as compared to other potential sites. The selected research sites also have a high number of minority students and students identified as English language learners. All charter and private schools in the research district were excluded from the research study. Findings for this study may be useful to other early childhood professionals who are working with children experiencing toxic stress and experience challenges meeting the needs of those students. This study may help support the development of appropriate professional learning for early childhood professionals on toxic stress and supporting learners in the general education classroom.

Limitations

This study was conducted with limitations. The first limitation was the number of teacher participants. Participation in the study was strictly voluntary but limited to teachers with early childhood teaching experience. Teachers must have had experience teaching children experiencing toxic stress within a general education classroom setting. These limitations created a small sample population of teachers willing to share their

personal perspectives. Another limitation was the location of the study. The location for the study was limited to a school district in the southeastern United States. The location limited the number of accessible participants but was sufficient for gathering in-depth data about teachers' perspectives. Due to these limitations, the data may be difficult to transfer to other settings outside of the current.

Researcher bias could have posed another limitation to this study. As the sole researcher, my own experiences working with children who were experiencing toxic stress could have affected the results of this study. This bias may further extend to being an employee of the district in which the research took place. To address these potential biases, I kept reflective journals to monitor my thoughts as they pertain to teaching children experiencing toxic stress. I also only selected teachers with whom I did not have a personal relationship and did supervise to participate in the research study.

Significance

There is research that suggests toxic stress causes adverse reactions to the brain development of children, but limited research addresses the teachers' experiences educating these children (Branco & Linhares, 2018). Teachers' perspectives were studied to better understand teachers' challenges when supporting the emotional and academic needs of children who are experiencing toxic stress in the classroom. Examining teachers' perspectives of challenges when teaching students who experience toxic stress may provide teachers, administrators, and professional development administrators with information on working with this group of students. This study may contribute to positive social change by providing knowledge that might be used to create strategies, adapt

policies, create interventions, or practices to assist teachers who are challenged with supporting the social emotional and academic needs of children experiencing toxic stress. The field of education needs current research on early childhood classroom teachers' perspectives and experiences (Ryan et al., 2017).

Summary

Toxic stress is a growing concern in the field of education. In this chapter I discussed the problem and purpose of exploring early childhood teachers' perspectives of teaching children experiencing toxic stress. Within Chapter 1, I also discussed the background of the study, the research questions, the conceptual framework, and the nature of the study. I provided the assumptions, the scope and delimitations, and limitations that may affect the study. In Chapter 2, I provide a review of the literature. Chapter 2 also contains the research strategies used to collect literature and provides a detailed discussion of the conceptual framework. This chapter also details the current literature as it pertains to toxics stress and exploring the early childhood teachers' perspective.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

In this chapter, I describe research relevant to my study, which addressed how early childhood teachers are challenged to support young children who are experiencing toxic stress. Toxic stress is a growing epidemic in the United States with 90% of all children experiencing at least one traumatic event in childhood (Perkins, 2019). Children who experience toxic stress have difficulty reaching their full academic potential and are at an increased risk for life long complications (Plumb et al., 2016). Early childhood teachers should approach children experiencing toxic stress differently than the children's peers (Sigler, 2016). The purpose of this basic qualitative research was to explore early childhood teachers' perspectives of being challenged to support the emotional and academic needs of young children who are experiencing toxic stress. There is an abundance of research on early childhood adversity, trauma-informed schools and care, and ACEs. Research addressing toxic stress is also available, but minimal research has explored teachers' perspectives of supporting young children who are experiencing toxic stress. This study fills this current gap in practice.

This chapter contains the literature search strategies I used to find literature relevant to toxic stress. I also explain the conceptual framework of the study, Vygotsky's theory of social constructivism, and describe various topics related to the study including toxic stress, ACEs, resilience, brain development, and teachers' perspectives. I end the chapter with a summary based on the literature review.

Literature Search Strategy

For the literature review, I used a variety of internet-based resources to discover literature on teachers' perspectives of teaching children who are experiencing toxic stress. I used the Walden University Library and Google Scholar to locate books, articles, and other scholarly resources. Several educational databases were searched including EBSCO, ERIC, Proquest Central, SAGE Journals, and PsycINFO. I searched mainly for peer-reviewed articles that were published within the last 5 years. The initial search was conducted using the key terms associated with toxic stress and children in the early childhood classroom. The following key terms were used while searching for relevant literature: *toxic stress, trauma, adverse childhood experiences, early life adversity, toxic stress in schools, toxic stress and brain development, poverty, trauma informed care, resilience, resilience in early childhood, early childhood development, teachers' perspectives on trauma,* and *teachers' perspectives of toxic stress*. I also used Walden's Proquest to search dissertations for additional references. Boolean phase searches were conducted to help obtain literature for the review. I also completed a search for the seminal works of Vygotsky for the social constructivism conceptual framework. This collection of literature surpassed the 5-year time frame period but provides relevant material for supporting the conceptual framework. This information was found in the Walden resources listed above.

Conceptual Framework

For the conceptual framework for this study, I used the work of Vygotsky, which helped as I examined early childhood teachers' perspectives of challenges supporting

young children who are experiencing toxic stress. Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivist theory suggests how teachers encourage learners based on the students' backgrounds and worldviews, because the unique experiences students have prior to learning are impactful to their overall learning experience. Vygotsky emphasized the way development occurs based on social experiences and interactions (Marginson & Dang, 2017). Vygotsky's theory thus places the environment as a major influence on learning outcomes. Social constructivism allows children to construct their own knowledge through encounters with the environment around them (Jacobs, 2001). Constructivism supports active learning and learners acquiring learning by doing (Vaishali & Misra, 2020).

According to Vygotsky (1978), children require the guidance of adults during exploration. The early childhood teacher serves as a guide of the educational classroom environment, which must account for the student's past experiences for learning to take place (Vygotsky, 1978). Through a child–adult collaboration development occurs through instruction (Clarà, 2017). Research has shown that children are capable of learning skills for communicating, expressing ideas, and accepting differences through a collaborative learning environment (Kim & Darling, 2009). Further, children are givers of knowledge and consumers within the classroom environment. In the early childhood classroom, the teacher is the adult responsible for guiding students through the journey of exploration and providing the necessary support.

In addition to explaining how children develop in the classroom environment, the work of Vygotsky (1978) provides a foundation into understanding the challenges teachers face to support children academically and social emotionally due to past

experiences. The early childhood classroom is comprised of children from multiple backgrounds who may have faced early life adversity leading to toxic stress(Allee-Herndon & Roberts, 2018). The social constructivism theory supports the distinction each learner may have and their challenges due to toxic stress. Children experiencing toxic stress are unable to achieve their academic potential, but public schools can help provide interventions (Plumb et al., 2016). Vygotsky's social constructivism theory requires the teacher to fluidly adapt to the needs of the learner and understand each pupil will acquire knowledge differently (Adams, 2006). Teachers and students work together to create a classroom emotional tone that constrains or encourages individual actions from the students (Zembylas, 2004). Teachers must also understand that learning is responsive to social conditions that are constantly changing within each learner (Marginson & Dang, 2017). The role of the classroom teacher should be more of a manager or facilitator of learning that focuses on helping students access and process knowledge (Surtees, 2003). Educators are responsible for providing high quality education that promotes social interactions and opportunities for cognitive development (Immordino-Yang et al., 2019).

Literature Review Related to Key Concepts and Variable

Toxic Stress

Stress is a regular occurrence for children. Stress can be tolerable and sometimes beneficial to young developing children (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2014). How the child can respond to the stressful occurrence in daily life plays a role in the way a young child grows and develops (Perkins, 2019). Children experience three levels of stress responses: positive, tolerable, and toxic (Shonkoff et al., 2017).

Positive stress is considered normal and does not cause harm to developing children. Examples of positive stress include the first day of school, a visit to the doctor, or meeting someone new. With positive stress, the body responds with a mild increase in heart rate and blood pressure. Tolerable stress in contrast causes the body's responses to heighten and last for a longer duration. A critical injury or death of a loved one can create a tolerable stress response. Children who have the support of caring adults can have their stress response system restored to a normal level; the sense of safety through the intervention of supportive adult relationships is a buffer for children experiencing tolerable stress.

All children will experience stress at some point during childhood; however, caregivers should prevent stressful events from developing into toxic stress (Branco & Linhares, 2018; Rollins, 2018). When children experience prolonged frequent trauma or adversity such as abuse, extreme poverty, or neglect, toxic stress responses occur (CDCHU, 2020). The body's response to toxic stress includes an increased heart rate, elevated blood pressure, and greater amounts of the stress hormone cortisol (Perkins, 2019). Children who remain in the toxic stress state remain at risk of bodily harm as they develop.

Prolonged exposure to toxic stress has detrimental effects on young children. The effects of toxic stress are not visible scars or bruises. Toxic stress leads to changes in the child's social/behavioral functions, the neuroendocrine system, and in molecular function (e.g., genetics, epigenetics, and immune function; De Jong, 2016). Toxic stress disrupts the way young children develop and impacts their emotional regulation, interpersonal

relationships, and their physiological process (Choi et al., 2020). Extreme exposure to toxic stress also alters the child's stress response system and the way the child perceives threats (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2014). Further, children exposed to toxic stress experience changes in their bodily functions, eating, and toileting and often suffer from anxiety, detachment, and aggression (Rollins, 2018). Victims of toxic stress can also experience great difficulty with their emotions, have a poor working memory, display overall issues with cognition, and act impulsively (De Jong, 2016). The younger the child experiencing toxic stress, the greater the susceptibility to the long term negative impact of toxic stress (Dowd, 2017).

The lasting impact of toxic stress has become a growing concern for individuals in various fields that serve young children. To address the issue of toxic stress, advances are being made to identify children with potential toxic stress exposure. Screening for toxic stress exposure is a developing component of primary care pediatrics (Selvaraj et al., 2019). The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends pediatricians expand examinations of young children to include routine screeners that identify those children currently experiencing toxic stress or children at risk of toxic stress exposure (Oh et al., 2018). Pediatricians have an established relationship with patients and play a vital role in the identification of toxic stressors (Burke Harris et al., 2017). A universal screener has been successful with identifying children at potential risk for toxic stress (Selvaraj et al., 2019). Potential risks factors for toxic stress include but are not limited to unmet social needs, parental education, childcare, food, housing, and legal aid. Children exposed to

these potential risks factors who do not receive proper interventions eventually develop toxic stress, which further affects their educational experience.

Out of the potential risk factors for toxic stress, the environment in which young children grow influences the level and type of stress they experience. Research has suggested that 90% of all children will experience at least one traumatic experience with the potential for toxic stress (Perkins, 2019). Traumatic experiences include a car accident, verbal abuse, sexual abuse, parental neglect, or divorce (Blodgett & Lanigan, 2018). The family unit can often be the primary source of the toxic stress children experience (Gershoff, 2016). Children have a 30–60% chance to have child abuse or domestic violence occurrences in their home (De Jong, 2016). Children who are placed in the foster care system often have experienced family induced toxic stress, have issues with attachment, the potential to develop chronic illness, aggression, and experience school failure (Rafeedie et al., 2019). Young children who enter into the child welfare program have had life altering traumatic experiences that influence development (Chinitz et al., 2017). Foster care children have been exposed to toxic stress that leaves neurobiological, neuroendocrine, and structural changes to the brain, leading to increased behavioral problems (Barbel, 2020). These children are likely to have difficulty with conduct and diagnosis of attention disorders, attachment difficulties, depression, delinquency, bipolar disorder, externalizing behaviors, sexualized behavior, aggressive behaviors, and suffer with low self-esteem. Studies have also found children placed in foster care often have elevated levels of the stress hormone cortisol (Barbel, 2020; Purewal Boparai et al., 2018).

In addition to being exposed to toxic stress through their family, one of the most traumatic events a child could endure is the separation from a parent or caregiver (Martin, 2018). For example, refugee children represent a population of children at risk of experiencing toxic stress and experiencing early adversity. The environment of refugee children imposes a threat on their development. It is not uncommon for child refugees to be forcibly removed or displaced from their parents. Refugee children also often witness acts of violence and themselves are victims of abuse (Zeanah et al., 2018). Social isolation, separation from family, economic hardship, residential instability, and language barriers create toxic environments for refugee children that lack protective buffers (Murray, 2018). Without intervention, refugee children are at greater threat of developmental delays due to toxic stress.

Children who have experienced or are experiencing toxic stress can buffer the lasting impacts by establishing and maintaining supportive environments. Effective interventions can improve the outcomes for children that have experienced toxic stress (Burke Harris et al., 2017). Several studies addressed trauma informed care such as trauma sensitive schools as a source for combating the long-lasting impacts of trauma. School-based interventions are ideal for reaching children and mitigating the impact of ACEs by providing support to students (Plumb et al., 2016). Despite the evidence of supportive environments to combat toxic stress, there is little empirical research that has examined the early childhood teachers' perspectives of the challenges faced meeting the academic and social emotional needs of children experiencing toxic stress.

Adverse Childhood Experiences

Children have different early life experiences. Many children have childhood experiences that leave negative impacts on their development. Traumatic events that happen in a child's life prior to them turning 18 are considered ACEs (Whiteside-Mansell et al., 2019). ACEs like parental separation or divorce, physical and emotional child abuse and neglect, sexual violence, domestic violence, household substance abuse, and incarceration of a family member are detrimental to young children and their development (Post et al., 2020; Vink et al., 2019). Children with exposure to ACEs are at greater risk of developing toxic stress and experience classroom difficulties.

There are a growing number of children that are impacted by challenges in childhood. ACEs are a silent epidemic that extends into adulthood, impairing overall health (Plumb et al., 2016). Sixty percent of children and adolescents in national population-based studies have experienced at least one category of ACEs (Purewal Boparai et al., 2018). Worldwide, between 500 million and 1.5 billion children a year experience acts of violence (Zeanah et al., 2018). A study of adults indicated that 25% had experienced at least three ACEs, and 9% reported having experienced at least five ACEs (Whiteside-Mansell et al., 2019). A study of 349 early childhood educators showed that 73% reported the struggles of experiencing at least one ACEs, and 22% reported experiencing four or more ACEs during childhood (Hubel et al., 2020).

As the number of ACEs children experience increases, they are more likely to develop toxic stress. The time and duration of the ACEs plays a contributing factor to the damage. Research shows a positive correlation between ACEs and challenges

experienced across a lifetime (Plumb et al., 2016). Those who experienced early life adversity had a positive association with decreased cognitive flexibility as adults (Kalia & Knauft, 2020). Additionally, research indicated that children who had experienced 6 or more ACEs had a decreased life expectancy of 20 years compared to those who had not experienced any ACEs (Kimple & Kansagra, 2018).

The damaging outcomes, like poor physical and behavioral health, for children who experience ACEs is important for everyone working with young children to understand. It is imperative for physicians, social workers, psychologists, and educators to have knowledge of ACEs and the impacts on young children (Petruccelli et al., 2019). In a study conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2020) in conjunction with Kaiser Permanente, researchers highlighted the common ACEs children experience. This study, also known as the ACE Study, linked the most common ACEs to chronic diseases and later-life quality of health. The detailed study conducted between 1995 to 1997 listed abuse (physical, sexual, emotional), neglect (physical, emotional), and household dysfunction (substance abuse, mental illness, domestic violence, incarceration, parental separation) as the ACEs studied. The results of the ACE Study indicated the more ACEs a person was exposed to, the greater the risks for detrimental health conditions later in life.

The number of ACEs experienced by young children has also been linked to negative outcomes in the classroom with academics and behavior. Children who have experienced more ACEs by the time they were 3–5 years old had more negative engagements with peers and teachers in the classroom (Lipscomb et al., 2021). These

children were less engaged in completing tasks, had trouble focusing, lacked the ability to work in group dynamics, and demonstrated difficulty with early math skills. Research has also shown the likelihood of repeating a grade is greater for children that have higher incidences of ACEs (Blodgett & Lanigan, 2018).

Some children are more likely than others to be impacted by ACEs. ACEs are associated with all socioeconomic groups with a greater interconnection with children living in poverty (Selvaraj et al., 2019). Research shows that children raised in the southern part of the United States are at greater risk of experiencing ACEs (Whiteside-Mansell et al., 2019). Whiteside-Mansell et al. (2019) reported children in urban areas are at a greater risk of experiencing ACEs than children living in rural areas. There are also studies that show the disparities of ACEs by race and gender. In a recent study by Vink et al. (2019) of 644 children, girls reported more ACEs than boys, with more girls reporting emotional and sexual abuse than boys. This study also indicated divorce and parental separation as the most common ACE reported by children between the ages of 9-13 years old. Zeanah et al. (2018) stated females were disproportionately victimized with acts of physical and sexual abuse. Diversity plays a role in the likelihood of experiencing ACEs. Patterson et al. (2018) reported that African American children are at an increased risk of living in poverty and being victims of other ACEs. This study stated 42% of African American children experienced higher poverty levels as compared to 15% of white children. Due to an increasing rate of deportations in the United States, children that are immigrants or have parents that are immigrants often experience ACEs (Perkins, 2019). Immigrant children are also more likely to experience unstable housing, live in unsafe

environments, lack proper schooling, and become separated from their parents (Perkins,

2019). Violence is often experienced by refugee, immigrant, and migrant children in

addition to poverty and poor living conditions (Zeanah et al., 2018). The ACEs children

experience are more prone to one age group or race, but the impact is the same despite

the victim.

The long term effects of young children experiencing ACEs can vary. Children

that experience ACEs and have the support of caregivers have different outcomes as

compared to those children that do not (Post et al., 2020). Post further stated resilience is

dependent upon stable relationships between the child and the caregiver. Caregivers

responsible for providing support to children with experienced ACEs are not limited to

the parents but also includes teachers who work with children in the educational setting.

Choi et al. (2020) stated that many of the children that experience ACEs lack the needed

caregiver to promote resilience. Choi further explained that when ACEs originate with a

child's parent or caregiver, they are extremely harmful and diminish the buffering effects

caregivers provided to impede the development of toxic stress. Young children

experiencing ACEs often have increased feelings of insecurity that affects their

perceptions of and experiences in school (Sanders et al., 2020). This feeling of insecurity

can diminish relationships with teachers and peers, further limiting protective support.

The life of a child dealing with ACEs is not the same as the average child.

Children dealing with ACEs are more prone to poor school attendance, behavioral issues,

and failure to meet grade-level standards (Blodgett & Lanigan, 2018). The highest

reported ACE is parent separation and divorce, which has been correlated to poor

academics and interpersonal skills for these children (Whiteside-Mansell et al., 2019).

Sanders et al. (2020) stated ACEs have been associated with an array of negative

implications for children, including poor health, social disorders, emotional distress, and

school difficulties. Children experiencing ACEs often have difficulty regulating their

behaviors and emotions and are likely to experience developmental delays (Post et al.,

2020). Lambert et al. (2019) conducted a study on ACEs and how it influences

neurodevelopmental processes. The findings in the study indicated violence exposed

children had issues with associative memory that increased with age. The ACEs young

children experience have many negative influences on their lives and lead to toxic stress.

Brain Development

The early years of a child's life are important to healthy brain development.

Critical development begins before birth. Brain growth occurs at its highest rate during

the first few months of life than any other period (Weber & Harrison, 2019). As babies

begin to develop and grow, the types of experiences, whether positive or negative, greatly

impacts their ability to manage stress (Hansel, 2017). The developing brain goes through

a sensitive period during which experiences help structure the body's response to threats

and stress (Martin, 2018). Early life stressors can alter proper brain development of

circuits that help filtrate later life experiences (Levitt & Eagleson, 2018). Experiences

like neglect and abuse lead to toxic stress and create disruptions in the developing brain

(Chinitz et al., 2017). The overworked stress response system, due to toxic stress, does

not return to a normal level but enters a state of allostatic load (Gershoff, 2016). The

allostatic load can be referred to as the excessive wear and tear of the body as a result of

toxic stress (Dich et al., 2017). Damage to the brain, organ systems, and other functions that influence behavior are impacted by the allostatic load (Cicchetti & Handley, 2019). Allostatic load alters how the brain regions that are designed to handle stress management are structured (Gershoff, 2016). The amount and duration of toxic stress, the greater the impact on altering young children's developing brains.

Research findings indicate that toxic stress is not healthy for young children and plays a negative role in their brain development even before they are born (Nelson et al., 2019; Sege & Harpe Brown, 2018; Zeanah et al., 2018. Prior to birth, the brain is susceptible to the damages of toxic stress and toxic stress exposure (Zeanah et al., 2018). Prolonged exposure to toxic stress of a mother produces damaging effects on the brain development of their unborn child, which later impairs their cognitive, behavioral, and motor development (Sege & Harpe Brown, 2018). Expectant mothers exposed to high levels of stress have been found to have babies with elevated cortisol levels that persist throughout the early childhood year (Zeanah et al., 2018).

Toxic stress in young children causes deficits in the functions of the brain. In young children, toxic stress has been found to cause immediate and long-term detrimental damage to neurodevelopment (Dowd, 2017). Gilmore et al. (2018) stated that early stress exposure can be detrimental to the structure and functionality of children's brains. When young children experience toxic stress, it creates a series of events within the body. The brain architecture, along with the millions of neural connections created within the brain, are altered when children are exposed to toxic stress (CDCHU, 2020; Perkins, 2019). Even though the brain is an organ that continues to develop throughout life, the first two

years are known as the critical period for brain development. The critical period

represents a time when the neural circuit of the brain formation is heavily influenced by

experiences (Nelson et al., 2019). During this time, the brain is busy creating synaptic

connections based on the child's positive and negative experiences (Zeanah et al., 2018).

The brain has the most plasticity during the critical period and already has most of the

neurons it will ever contain (Levitt & Eagelson, 2018). Perkins (2019) stated that as the

brain develops, it also undergoes a pruning process that holds on to the connections used

more frequently and relishes the ones that are not. Toxic stress exposure that does not

include protective buffers makes it difficult for the brain to keep the plasticity needed for

healthy brain development (Zeanah et al., 2018). Not all toxic stress affects the brain the

same. Cameron et al. (2017) studied the varying factors of toxic stress that influence

brain development. They found that neglect or deprivation affects the brain's prefrontal

areas that are used for complex problem solving. Repeated exposure to violence is

associated with alterations in the hippocampus and circuits related in fear learning. In all

toxic stress, exposure brings changes to the brain that alters other boldly functions

(Dowd, 2017; Nelson et al., 2019).

The negative impacts of toxic stress on the developing brain leads the body to

experience physiological changes. Allostatic overload is detrimental physiologically

(Quinones et al., 2018). The physiological responses of a child experiencing toxic stress

is activated by the autonomic nervous system leading the body into a fight or flight

response (Purewal Boparai et al., 2018). Toxic stress causes the hypothalamic-pituitary-

adrenal, which is known for regulating stress, to remain in an active state (Purewal

Boparai et al., 2018). Remaining in an active state of stress causes the body to release an increase of the stress hormones such as cortisol. The dysregulation of the stress response system can have negative impacts on the brain leading to a trajectory of brain development issues such as decreased brain weight, decreased DNA content, problems with myelination, decreased dendritic spines, and increased risk of infection due to elevated cortisol levels suppressing the immune system (Perkins, 2019). Toxic stress has lingering impacts on the brain that extend beyond the critical period and further extends into early childhood.

The damage caused to the brain due to toxic stress has many negative implications on young children's development. Cognitive development has been found to be impaired by toxic stress. Children experiencing high levels of toxic stress are unable to achieve their full academic potential (Plumb et al., 2016). Toxic stress has been linked to the brain's inability to perform executive functions (Levitt & Eagelson, 2018). The important skills that help us plan, focus attention, switch gears, and complete multiple tasks are considered executive functions (CDCHU, 2020). Levitt and Eagelson (2018) stated that toxic stress can cause a disruption of executive function development and predicts a poor life outcome as a long term consequence. Studies also show children exposed to toxic stress have impaired brain development, which impacts the way these children learn (Kelly & Li, 2019; Lambert et al., 2020; Vink, 2019; Woods-Jaeger et al., 2018). As young children are continuously exposed to ACEs, which leads to toxic stress, the child becomes more focused on survival rather than learning content material (Craig, 2016). Whitaker et al. (2019) noted preschool-aged children who face early life

adversities experience learning issues due to negative emotions and disruptive behaviors. These children are often at greater risk of repeating grades and overall lower school engagement (Blodgett & Lanigan, 2018).

Resilience

Toxic stress can be problematic in the lives of young children. The negative implications can be felt past early childhood (De Jong, 2016; Kalia & Knauft, 2020; Plumb et al., 2016). Children who experience toxic stress suffer from poor quality of life as adults. The frequent exposure to toxic stress leads to problems that persist through adulthood and lead to issues with chronic diseases (Branco & Linhares, 2018). Resilience is important in combating toxic stress and the long-term effects that can linger into adolescence and adulthood. Perkins (2019) defined resilience as the process of adapting effectively to stressful situations. Twum-Antwi et al. (2020) stated resilience refers to the ability of one or more systems to withstand, overcome, and adapt to adversity. Sattler and Font (2018) further described resilience as the positive adaptation to adverse circumstances. At some point in early childhood, all children will experience stress, however, caregivers should prevent stressful events from developing into toxic stress (Branco & Linhares, 2018). Resilience is important to young children who are dealing with ACEs that lead to toxic stress or currently experiencing toxic stress. Children dealing with toxic stress need the support of caring adults to become resilient. Cusinato et al. (2020) stated for children to become resilient, the quality of the interactions with the environment upon which the child exists is important. Environments that support typical development promote resilience in young children (Cutuli & Willard, 2019).

School is a place where children go to learn, but subsequently, it becomes the place where children who have been exposed to toxic stress develop resilience. No longer are educational institutions required to focus on just academics but also provide children with an opportunity to become resilient (Wu et al., 2020). Being resilient is not a trait but rather behaviors, thoughts and actions that can be fostered and developed in the early childhood classroom (Collet, 2017). Murray (2018) stated that for refugee children with known toxic stress, the school environment is where refugee children learn to trust again, reestablish bonds with peers and teachers. Teachers can promote resilience within the classroom by building self efficacy and self-regulation as well as creating a secure relationship with the child (Sciaraffa et al., 2018). Twum-Antwi et al. (2020) stated having positive experiences in supportive environments like school promotes health and well being. Twum-Antwi et al. also noted young children in the early childhood classroom who experience toxic stress need the support of teachers that promote resilience, being that school is a place where children spend the majority of their time.

In an effort to promote resilience and combat the negative implications associated with toxic stress, many schools are leaning towards trauma informed schools and trauma informed practices as interventions (Plumb et al., 2016). Implementing trauma-informed schools and using trauma-informed approaches are methods to aid in assisting children dealing with ACEs or experiencing toxic stressors in the school setting that are research-based (Rishel et al., 2019). Trauma-informed practices are models of care and support for children that have been victims or exposed to trauma (Record-Lemon & Buchanan, 2017). Trauma-informed schools are aware that trauma is a catalyst that can affect a

child's overall well-being and development (Record-Lemon & Buchanan, 2017). Trauma-Informed Elementary Schools is an intervention program used in the elementary setting for children that exhibit symptoms of chronic stress (Rishel et al., 2019). The intervention usage has been successful in assisting in the domains of emotional support, classroom organization, and instructional support as measured by the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (Rischel et al., 2019). The Logic Model is another school based trauma informed intervention program being used. The Logic Model accounts for the inability to accurately identify children that are experiencing trauma or stressors (Plumb et al., 2016). The Logic Model's focus is helping every child reach academic potential despite past trauma exposure (Plumb et al., 2016).

Schools also are implementing social emotional learning (SEL) to promote resilience in the early childhood classroom. SEL has been defined in a variety of ways but by multiple authors. Moreno et al. (2019) defined SEL as the explicit and intentional promotion of social and emotional skills and well-being within a non-family context (usually school) and appreciation of the equal importance of and symbiosis between social and emotional concerns and academic concerns. Blewitt et al. (2020) stated the definition of SEL as the process through which children recognize, understand, and regulate their emotions, empathize with the feelings and experiences of others, build and maintain prosocial relationships, establish and achieve positive goals, and make responsible decisions. SEL is focused on promoting skills that children experiencing toxic stress are often lacking, including self-regulation and problem-solving, self-awareness, coping and resilience, and self-worth (Moreno et al., 2019). Immordino-Yang

et al. (2019) stated the most important SEL periods are when the brain is actively changing during the prenatal period through childhood, adolescence, the transition to parenthood, and old age. Immordino-Yang et al. also noted the brain is malleable and can be changed by social relationships at any time during life. McLeod et al. (2017) noted there are a growing number of children entering preschool programs that lack the SEL competence needed to be successful from the early childhood experience.

SEL interventions are important to a child that has experienced toxic stress as they help to with the emotional regulation they often lack to perform well in an academic setting (Immordino-Yang et al., 2019). COPE-Resilience is a preschool SEL intervention that focuses on children's empathy, prosocial behaviors, positive and negative coping, inhibitory control, problem behaviors, and emotional knowledge (Wu et al., 2020). Wu found COPE-Resilience to improve the overall social emotional competence of preschool aged children when implemented by an experienced teacher who has undergone the necessary training. Other SEL interventions have been examined for effectiveness in the early childhood classroom. In a recent study, by Blewitt et al. (2020), 10 SEL programs were used to explore usefulness as a universal curriculum-based intervention program. The results indicated SEL programs might strengthen teaching quality, particularly the provision of responsive and nurturing teacher-child interactions and effective classroom management. For children experiencing toxic stress, there is a need for the utilization of SEL interventions to promote resilience during the early childhood years in a nurturing environment. Fostering resilience by creating improved teacher-child relationships and

developing the lacking SEL competence needed for school success is one of several roles of the early childhood teacher.

Role of the Classroom Teacher

Teachers play many roles in the classroom environment. Preparing children to operate and perform in the 21st century requires teachers to foster young children's cognitive and non-cognitive development (Boylan et al., 2018). Teachers are intricate parts of the learning process and set the tone for the classroom climate and their students' learning experience. Wu et al. (2020) stated that teachers are a primary important source to the development of children's socio-emotional and psychological well-being. Rentner et al. (2016) noted that 68% of teachers stated they wanted to make a difference in the lives of children when they were asked why they entered the teaching profession. With the desire to make a significant change in a child's life, teachers are faced with many challenges. With these challenges in mind, teachers must come prepared to meet the learning needs of children with various cultures, religions, socioeconomic statuses, and life experiences (Clark, 2020). The role of a teacher transforms the experiences of students. Despite the significant role the educator plays in maintaining classroom climate and culture, there have been limited studies that address teachers' perspectives and their needs to meet the educational demands of teaching children experiencing toxic stress.

A glimpse into the early childhood classroom provides insight into the role of the classroom teacher. Teaching and facilitating learning are primary duties; however, that is not the extent of the required tasks. Early childhood teachers are challenged with the growing demands of the classroom. Rentner et al. (2016) found that managing students'

behaviors, addressing the needs of economically disadvantaged students, large class sizes, lack of sufficient time for teachers to collaborate, lack of sufficient instructional time for students, lack of supportive leadership in my school, lack of supplemental academic support for struggling students, need for more parent-teacher collaboration, and unsafe working conditions as the greatest challenge teachers face. Boylan et al. (2018) noted early childhood teachers believe feeling safe at school, SEL, children's engagement and motivation, teaching quality, parental support and engagement, developing a growth mindset, school climate, family background, and school discipline policies as factors that are important to the success of children in school. Children who experience toxic stress pose a challenge for early childhood educators for many reasons, including their complex experiences, behavioral challenges, and lack of parental support.

The success of young children in the early childhood classroom is the goal of the educational experience. Children that experience high levels of toxic stress often have trouble reaching their full academic potential and lack successful educational experiences (Plumb et al., 2016). Having teachers that are knowledgeable in the field and capable of providing the appropriate support is important to the process. Teachers require support to remain knowledgeable of appropriate skills that support all learners. Blodgett and Lanigan (2018) stated that children who experience ACEs often have poor attendance, learning issues, and lower reading achievement. Carvalho et al. (2020) noted children that who experience early adversity may not adjust well to new situations, be easily frightened, have behavior difficulties, and face challenges regulating emotions. Professional development provides teachers an opportunity for developing curriculum,

instructional strategies, and assessment tools (Spencer, 2016). Quinones et al. (2018) shared professional development is an opportunity for educators to enhance their pedagogy through a shared dialogue of each other's shared experiences. Teachers being able to collaborate has shown to be an effective way for teachers to extend their knowledge on helping students improve their learning (Renter et al., 2016). Whitaker et al. (2019) stated that professional development on trauma could improve the quality of relationships between teachers and students experiencing ACEs. The collaboration between early childhood teachers may help acquire the knowledge teachers need to address the issues of toxic stress within the classroom.

Early childhood teachers spend numerous hours with young children daily. During this time, relationships are built, and attachments are formed. In the lives of many young children, early care and education teachers are important adults (Hubel et al., 2020). Fostering social emotional development is an important aspect of early childhood development. SEL is also critical to the early childhood years as the brain is in a critical period of developmental influence from social relationships (Immordino-Yang et al., 2019). Early childhood teachers are responsible for providing an environment that teaches young children how to embrace their emotions properly. Students learn how to emotionally engage through experiences and adult demonstration and develop emotional self-regulation through environmental demands (Kelley, 2018). Li (2017) stated teachers help children construct their knowledge individually and socially by creating authentic social contexts for students to engage with their peers and others. Children that experience early childhood adversity leading to toxic stress often have impaired social

emotional development (Loomis, 2018). Haslip et al. (2020) stated that children who have not acquired the necessary social emotional skills often endure negative behavioral consequences in the early childhood classroom. The role of the early childhood teacher includes modeling appropriate behaviors that provide support for social emotional development.

Post et al. (2020) stated that positive relationships are important for the development of young children, and often teachers are the ones that provide the most stable relationship for children. The relationships that early childhood teachers provide have been deemed important in assisting in children's emotional dysregulation. Thurston et al. (2018) noted research findings that indicate by improving child-caregiver relationships, this in turn, helps children learn to self-regulate emotions. Whitaker et al. (2019) suggested that in an effort to help preschool-aged children develop the self-regulation skills needed for learning, there must be stable, safe, and nurturing environments provided by an educator that understands the learner's needs. The early childhood teacher's role is encompassing, but little research has been conducted that focuses on supporting the emotional and academic needs of children experiencing toxic stress (Allee-Herndon & Roberts, 2018; Wu, 2020).

Teachers' Perspectives

Early childhood teachers enter the classroom setting with their personal ideas and perspectives. Boylan et al. (2018) indicate teacher perspectives determine what teachers do and think and first-person account of their views. McKenney and Bradley (2016) stated beliefs are what teachers assume, think, and know and how they perceive

instructional practices should be implemented within the classroom. The ideas and beliefs of teachers are impactful in the classroom (Warren & Hale, 2016). Plans and approaches to learning are significantly associated with teaching and learning beliefs (Li, 2017). Supportive environments which include the care of teachers has been associated with successful efforts to combat toxic stress and early childhood adversity (Plumb et al. 2016; Zeanah et al., 2018). Stokes and Brunzell (2020) stated that teachers often feel helpless in their daily pedagogies to help children exposed to childhood trauma and drained to the point they leave the profession. Limited studies address the issues of teachers working with children dealing with toxic stress. Understanding early childhood teachers' perspectives are important as they provide the firsthand knowledge of the challenges experienced teaching children experiencing toxic stress.

Summary and Conclusions

I reviewed relevant literature related to toxic stress and young children. There was an abundance of literature pertaining to various aspects of the topic of toxic stress. The results of the literature review provided information on the meaning of stress and how stress occurs in the lives of children at different levels. Literature as it relates to toxic stress, demonstrated a connection between early life experiences and toxic stress occurrence. In the literature review, multiple studies concluded ACEs are the primary cause of toxic stress in young children. The literature stated most children are likely to experience at least one ACEs during their lifetime. The literature indicated that children in foster care, African Americans, and refugee children are at greater risk of experiencing ACEs. The review of literature showed toxic stress can be experienced at a very young

age and poses a threat to the way the brain develops, leading to a manifestation of complications throughout early childhood and life. The literature review also demonstrated toxic stress experienced early in life has detrimental impacts on the child later in life. Current literature states young children that experience toxic stress often face extreme difficulties in school. These children have poor attendance, lower achievement scores in reading and math, behavior issues, and suffer from emotional dysregulation. After reviewing current literature, it was noted that resilience is an important aspect of combating the lingering effects of toxic stress. Caregivers, including early childhood teachers, play a critical role in promoting resilience in children that may be dealing with toxic stress. The studies reviewed on toxic stress and schools emphasized the important role of the caregivers and environments as effort to combat toxic stress.

The literature was lacking in the area pertaining to the classroom teachers' perspectives on toxic stress. The identified gap is the nonexistence of literature that focuses on teachers' perspectives regarding their challenges teaching children who are experiencing toxic stress in the early childhood classroom setting. The purpose of my study was to examine early childhood teachers' perspectives of being challenged to support the emotional and academic needs of young children who are experiencing toxic stress in the early childhood classroom. The new knowledge gained may help provide the adequate support to classroom teachers to better enhance the educational experience of all children.

This chapter included an overview of the literature search strategy, the conceptual framework, and a review of current literature. Chapter 3 includes a complete description

of the research design, methodology, data collection, and data analysis plan used for investigating teacher's perspectives of toxic stress. It also includes an explanation of how I will create an ethical and trustworthy study.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore early childhood teachers' perspectives of being challenged to support the emotional and academic needs of young children who are experiencing toxic stress in the early childhood classroom. The participants were recruited from a school district in the southeastern United States, and their perspectives were gathered in interviews. In Chapter 3, I provide details of the methodology for this study, including a description of the research design, rationale, and the role of the researcher. The participant selection, data collection, and data analysis processes are also discussed. Chapter 3 concludes with a discussion of trustworthiness and a chapter summary.

Research Design and Rationale

The following research questions were used to guide this qualitative research study:

Research Question 1: What are early childhood teachers' perspectives of being challenged to support the emotional needs of young children who are experiencing toxic stress in the classroom?

Research Question 2: What are early childhood teachers' perspectives of being challenged to support the academic needs of young children who are experiencing toxic stress in the classroom?

I chose a basic qualitative research design to explore the early childhood educators' perspective of the challenges they face meeting the educational and social emotional needs of children experiencing toxic stress in a general education classroom. I

used semistructured, in-depth interviews with open-ended questions to capture the early childhood teachers' perspectives. In-depth interviews allow the researcher to gather rich and detailed information in the form of experiences, narratives, or stories (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Interviews took place using Google Meets or telephone conferencing.

I chose a basic qualitative research design for this study because this approach was the most appropriate method to answer the research questions. Qualitative research methods allow for collection of first-hand accounts of knowledge. My goal was to gather an understanding of the challenges early childhood teachers face teaching children experiencing toxic stress as the primary source of data. By using a qualitative method, I had direct interactions with study participants to gather their first-hand accounts of working within the general education classroom and the struggles they face meeting the social, emotional, and academic needs of children experiencing toxic stress. The qualitative approach was thus used to investigate the lived experiences of early childhood educators within the educational setting and explain phenomenon that quantitative measures cannot (see Burkholder et al., 2016).

Other research designs, such as ethnography and phenomenology, were considered but were not deemed feasible for the nature of my research study. Ethnography emphasizes being in person and completely immersed in the field of study to develop the meaning of the culture being studied (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Ethnography was not appropriate for this study because I was not seeking to understand a culture. In a phenomenological study, interviews are used to understand the lived experiences of individuals upon which meaning is constructed about the phenomenon being studied

(Ravitch & Carl, 2016). A phenomenological approach was not suitable for this study because I was not seeking to create new meaning but rather explore the perspectives of early childhood teachers in regard to being challenged to support the emotional and academic needs of young children who are experiencing toxic stress. No quantitative methods were considered because the challenges of early childhood teachers working with children experiencing toxic stress cannot be properly expressed in a quantitative form. Qualitative methods provided rich details about the problem that are necessary to address the research questions.

Role of the Researcher

I was the sole researcher for this study. As the researcher, my role included interviewing study participants, recording interviews, collecting data, transcribing the participants' interview responses, and analyzing the data gathered. I am currently an early childhood educator in the research district. Prior to my current teaching assignment, I was an early childhood classroom teacher in a high poverty school located in the district. With my experience as a classroom teacher, I was often challenged with meeting the needs of all learners, especially those experiencing toxic stress. My current role removes me from the general education classroom setting as a homeroom teacher where I support students in general education classrooms when the homeroom teachers state they need additional support. I did not have a professional or personal relationship with the teachers at the chosen research sites. I had no prior work experience at the research sites chosen for this study. My classroom teaching experience and my current experiences serving as a

support in a general education classroom have created a need to better understand the challenges of toxic stress as it pertains to young learners.

The methodological stance of inquiry is the premise of qualitative research (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). The researcher is as vital to the research process as the research being conducted itself. The role of the researcher in the qualitative study is to make connections and discover the "whys" within the natural setting of what is being studied. Researcher bias is possible in qualitative research. To limit researcher bias, I used reflective journals to monitor my thoughts as they arose pertaining to the teachers' perspectives about toxic stress. I also remained attuned to my feelings as participants shared their perspectives during all interviews.

Methodology

Participant Selection

I purposefully selected the participants for this study. In purposeful sampling, participants are selected based on certain experiences or having knowledge of a specific phenomenon (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). The participants for this study included 10 early childhood teachers (i.e., K–3) from three elementary schools in a school district in the southeastern United States. A small sample size was needed to understand the challenges early childhood teachers encounter teaching children that are experiencing toxic stress. In qualitative research, small sample sizes help produce the in-depth responses necessary to answer the research questions. The focus in qualitative research is not the population size but obtaining the necessary data to support the research purpose and answer the research

questions (Burkholder et al., 2016). All participation was voluntary with no promise of compensation.

I first emailed the superintendent of the research district to gain permission to conduct my study in three elementary schools. After obtaining approval from the local superintendent, I began the participant selection process. Interested participants needed to meet the study criteria. The first criterion was participants had to be an early childhood teacher at one of the three selected research sites in the research district. The second criterion was having at least 3 years of teaching experience in the general education classroom. Participants also had to have experience teaching children experiencing toxic stress.

After receiving district approval to conduct my study in three selected elementary schools, I began emailing potential research participants. I retrieved teacher email addresses from the school websites. I distributed emails to the teachers at each school stating the purpose of the study, the criteria to participate, and my contact information. Interested participants were asked to refer other early childhood teachers that fit the study criteria. This process continued until the number of desired participants were met. I emailed a consent form to each participant to ensure they were aware of the audio recording that would take place during interviews and that I would be removing any identifiable information from their responses. Teachers who agreed to participate were asked to reply, "I consent" via email.

Instrumentation

I used semistructured interviews to collect data for this study. In qualitative

studies, the research instruments are the necessary tools needed to collect the research

data (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). In qualitative research, the role of the researcher includes

that of a data collection instrument (Burkholder et al., 2016). I created an interview

protocol (see Appendix) to guide the interviews and gather data pertaining to early

childhood teachers' perspectives of the challenges they face meeting the emotional and

academic needs of children experiencing toxic stress. The interview protocol included a

welcome message followed with details about the purpose of the study that was provided

to the participants before asking them any questions. The interview questions were open-

ended to gather as much data from the participants as possible. Clarifying probes were

included in the interview protocol and were used as needed. The interview protocol also

included a conclusion statement letting the participant know they will receive a summary

of the study findings. All interviews took place via Google Meets or telephone

conferencing services. I audio recorded each interview and took accurate notes during the

interview process for later reference. Recording each interview session allowed me to

remain focused on the interview itself and not writing down participant responses. Once

all the interviews were completed, I transcribed each interview for data analysis. During

the interview process, I kept a reflexive journal to remain aware of any personal feelings

as they arose.

I created all interview questions to gain an understanding of the early childhood

teachers' challenges teaching children experiencing toxic stress. Qualitative interviews

focus on specific research questions, trying to get in-depth and detailed answers from participants (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Each question was written to create an open dialogue with the study participants to share their personal experiences. The research questions for this study were based on the conceptual framework. Interview questions 1-9 were aligned to answering the main research questions of this study. An expert in the field education research reviewed my interview questions. The expert provided assurance that the interview questions were in-depth and framed to elicit rich information from participants. The expert has a doctorate in education and serves as a university methodologist. Participants' responses provided information on challenges teacher experience working with children dealing with toxic stress in the general education classroom. The results of the study may help to provide the missing components needed to create a conducive learning environment that supports the emotional and academic needs of young children experiencing toxic stress. The information from this research may also help other teachers create resources to address the challenges early childhood teachers face.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

I started by gaining permission from the Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB) to conduct my research study. I then emailed the superintendent of the research district to gain permission to conduct the study in three elementary schools. The email included the details of the study and all correspondence that was shared with study participants.

To recruit teachers for the study, I used the school websites to gain access to teacher email addresses. I then sent a school-wide email to teachers asking for volunteers for the study. The email was an invitation to participate in the study that included details about the study purpose, study criteria, and my contact information for potential volunteers to respond with their interest. I used purposeful sampling to select the study participants. Teachers who expressed interest and met the inclusion criteria were emailed an informed consent form including a description of how I would remove all identifiable information related to the teacher and the selected school from the study. The consent form also outlined the fact that I would be recording the interview sessions and provided an explanation of my use of the participants' responses in the study. Teachers were asked to reply, "I consent", via email to participate in the research study. I continued to recruit other participants by asking research volunteers for the names and email addresses of other possible study participants.

I used semistructured interviews to collect data for this study. Once participants replied they consented via email, I contacted them to schedule interviews. Interviews took place at an agreeable time and were scheduled for approximately 1 hour. The scheduled interviews took place via Google Meets or telephone conferencing. If the interviews were held via Google Meets, the participants were provided with a link for access to the online meeting. Prior to each interview, I reminded participants that their identity will be kept confidential and of their ability to withdraw from the interview process at any time. Participants were also reminded that the entire session would be audio recorded, using Google Meets or telephone conferencing, for later review and

transcription purposes. All interview questions were open ended and focused on capturing the early childhood teachers' perspectives of the challenges of teaching children experiencing toxic stress. Probing questions were asked to gather more details and for clarity. Responses were audio recorded via Google Meets. Telephone interviews were audio recorded using the audio-recording device on my cell phone. I concluded the interviews by giving the participants an opportunity to ask questions and thanking them for their willingness to participate. I also sent a summary of the findings to study participants as a form of member checking.

Data Analysis Plan

Data analysis is an important step in the qualitative research process. To begin the data analysis process, I first transcribed all the semistructured interviews verbatim. Next, I read the transcripts and listened to the audio recordings several times for accuracy. After the collected data was in the form of transcripts, I started analyzing the data using open coding. Interview transcriptions were used for the hand-coding process. Coding is the broadest scope of data analysis, and a code is a word or phrase given to represent meaning from transcribed data (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The initial coding that takes place is considered first cycle coding, which is followed by a more analytical and specific second cycle of coding (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). In the first cycle, I highlighted words and sentences that were helpful in understanding and generating meaning from the data. During the second cycle, I attempted to connect the meanings of some of the previously assigned codes.

Once codes had been determined, I began to develop categories by using axil coding to determine what connections existed within the data. Categories connect related codes that share similar meanings or attributes (Saldaña, 2016). The process of creating categories provided a more precise group of related codes. I then conducted a data analysis of the categories for emerging themes by looking for patterns and relationships. Themes emerge as an outcome of coding, categorization, and analytic reflection (Saldaña, 2016). I reviewed the themes that emerged to ensure that the data supports the themes. Then, I verified that the themes were coherent and checked for overlapping themes, subthemes, and other possible themes in the data. The themes were refined to identify relevance to the research question and further examined for relationships, similarities, differences. I provided a detailed write up of my findings in relation to the research question from my thematic analysis.

Trustworthiness

As a qualitative researcher, it is important to maintain the quality, trustworthiness, and credibility of the research produced. Qualitative researchers depend on credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability to determine the trustworthiness of a study (Chowdhury, 2015). Credibility in qualitative research ensures the study is accurately measuring what the research states it will measure. Transferability is also used to measure the trustworthiness of research by ensuring the study is applicable to other contexts (Burkholder et al., 2016). Dependability in qualitative research deals with consistency and the ability for the study to be replicated (Burkholder et al., 2016). Confirmability is the last criterion to determine the trustworthiness of qualitative

research, and this step ensures the findings are derived from the data and not the researcher themselves (Chowdhury, 2015).

I addressed issues of credibility in this study by using multiple data collection strategies, including interview recordings, transcriptions, reflective journals, and member checking. After the semistructured interviews were complete, participants received a summary of study findings. I asked the participants to report any questions, errors, or concerns about inaccurate data and make adjustments to the findings accordingly. A reflective journal was maintained during each interview session to capture my personal thoughts and feelings.

To address the issue of transferability, I provided an in-depth methodological description of the study. Details about the data collection methods used and the participants selected for the study was provided. Additional information about the setting was provided to allow the reader to determine if this study may be transferable to another study.

I addressed issues of dependability by describing the research design in detail as well as the data collection process. Maintaining consistency during the research process and noting any changes that occurred along the way in detail also ensured the dependability of the research. Member checks also helped with issues of dependability; participants were provided with the opportunity to review their interview summary for accuracy. These steps helped achieve the appropriate data necessary to answer the research questions.

To ensure confirmability, I made efforts to put aside my own beliefs about the challenges of teaching children experiencing toxic stress. Participants' interview recordings and transcripts were used during the research process. I used member checking to ensure the validity of data collected. I also provided detailed, reflexive notes on any biases or assumptions that occurred to me about the challenges of teaching children experiencing toxic stress in a reflective journal to maintain confirmability throughout the study.

Ethical Procedures

Consideration of ethical issues is imperative in the field of qualitative research. Researchers should remain aware of the potential harm to participants and respect of their privacy (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Prior to any data collection, I obtained approval from the Walden University IRB. Once IRB approval was obtained, I sought approval from the research district to conduct my study within the three local elementary schools. Permission was gained to solicit early childhood teachers in the selected schools.

Once participants were selected, I provided them with the informed consent form. The informed consent form included the purpose of the study, selection criteria used, and the data collection and analysis procedures that were used in the study. The consent form also notified participants that I would be recording the interview sessions and described how their responses and data would be used. In the form, I also informed the participants that their participation is strictly voluntary, and they had the right to withdraw from the study at any time as well as that; there would be no compensation for participating. Participants were asked to review the informed consent form in detail prior to replying, "I

consent" to me via email. Once consent was gained, individual interviews were scheduled. The informed consent was reviewed and discussed with each participant prior to all interview sessions commencing.

I maintained participants' confidentiality throughout the research process by removing all identifiable information and assigning research participants and schools with alphanumeric codes to protect their identities. All data collected during the process was only accessible by me. Electronic data was stored on a personal, password-protected computer. Any paper information gathered was kept in a lockbox in my home. All information obtained throughout the duration of the study will be stored for 5 years in accordance with Walden University's policy. At the end of the 5-year mark, all electronic files will be deleted, and paper files will be shredded.

Summary

In Chapter 3, I provided information about the design and methodology of this study on early childhood teachers' perspectives of the challenges of teaching children experiencing toxic stress. I included the purpose of and rationale for conducting a basic qualitative research study. I discussed my role as the researcher and the selection of 10 early childhood teacher participants for the study. Next, details about the use of semistructured interviews as the data collection method and how this information was collected and stored were provided. I explained how the data from the interview transcriptions was analyzed. This chapter included a discussion of the trustworthiness of the study and ethical procedures. Chapter 4 will include in-depth details about the study findings.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore early childhood teachers' perspectives of being challenged to support the emotional and academic needs of young children who are experiencing toxic stress in the early childhood classroom. I emailed potential research participants an invitation detailing the purpose of the study, the criteria to participate, and my contact information. Teachers who expressed interest and met the inclusion criteria were emailed an informed consent form; those who replied "I consent" were interviewed via Google Meets or telephone. The entire interview session was audio recorded only. Each semistructured interview was transcribed verbatim and analyzed using open coding. The data were further analyzed for categories and emerging themes. Chapter 4 includes the analysis of data, which entails a description of the participant selection process, participants' demographics, and the procedures for data collection and analysis.

Setting

I conducted all 10 semistructured interviews from my home office using Google Meets or telephone. The participants for this study included 10 early childhood teachers (K–3). Participants were recruited using purposeful sampling and had prior experience teaching children experiencing toxic stress. Participants were from three elementary schools in a school district in the southeastern United States. The participants had teaching experience ranging from 3 years to 21 years of teaching.

There were no unplanned situations that affected the analysis of the results of this study. Data were collected from 10 K–3 early childhood teachers using one-to-one

semistructured interviews conducted by Google Meets or telephone. There were nine

interviews conducted using Google Meets and one telephone interview. All interviews

were audio recorded. I transcribed all interviews verbatim and then began the coding and

analysis process.

Demographics

In a suburban school district in the southeastern United States, 10 early childhood

teachers shared their perspectives of being challenged to support the emotional and

academic needs of young children who are experiencing toxic stress in the early

childhood classroom. Each teacher shared their personal perspectives for this research

study. To ensure confidentiality I assigned each participant an alphanumeric code. All

participants were early childhood teachers from three elementary schools in the district.

Experience ranged between 3–21 years. All participants had experience teaching children

experiencing toxic stress. Table 1 provides a summary of the participants' alphanumeric

code, highest degree obtained, years of teaching experience, and grades taught.

Table 1

Research Participants

Participant	Degree	Years of Teaching Experience	Grades taught
A1	Master's	3	1st
A3	Master's	20	1st
A20	Master's	7	3rd
A30	Doctorate	21	2nd
A45	Specialist	21	1st
A50	Bachelor's	4	1st
C2	Bachelor's	6	Kindergarten
D4	Doctorate	17	2nd
D6	Specialist	11	3rd
D15	Master's	11	2nd

Data Collection

The data collection process commenced once approval was obtained from Walden University's (IRB; 05-25-21-0984670). I used purposeful sampling and the websites of three elementary schools to recruit participants. Participants were emailed an electronic invitation to participate in the study. Participants who emailed me expressing interest to participate were provided with a consent form. The consent form provided the participant with information about the study background, purpose, procedures, sample questions, participants' rights, benefits of the study, and participants' privacy. Interested participants emailed "I consent" if they agreed to participate in the study. Data from 10 early childhood teachers were collected using one-to-one Google Meets or telephone interviews. All interviews were audio recorded.

The data collection process took approximately 4 weeks. Nine participants preferred interviews through Google Meets, and one participant preferred a telephone interview. Participants provided a day and time that was most suitable for their schedule. I interviewed each participant one time. The length of each interview varied based on the amount of information shared by the participant and lasted between 30 and 45 minutes. I asked each of the participants the same questions to guarantee the same general information from each interviewee. I used semistructured interviews to explore participants' thoughts and concerns regarding teaching children experiencing toxic stress. Each interview was audio recorded using the recording feature in Google Meets or the audio-recording device on my cell phone. Before each interview, participants were reminded they could stop the interview or withdraw from the study at any time. A

reflective journal was maintained during each interview session to capture my personal thoughts and feelings. I used the audio recordings to create a written transcript of each interview.

I did not deviate from the planned data collection process shared in Chapter 3, and there were no unusual circumstances encountered in the data collection process. All data collected for the study will be secured in a lockbox in my home for 5 years. All electronic data will be password protected on a personal computer. I am the only person with access to the lockbox and password.

Data Analysis

In this basic qualitative study using semistructured interviews, I explored teachers' perspectives of being challenged to support the emotional and academic needs of young children who are experiencing toxic stress in the early childhood classroom. Every participant was asked the same nine open-ended questions in the same order. I transcribed each recorded Google Meets or telephone interview before analyzing the data and compared the written interview to the audio interview to ensure accuracy. I started the analysis process by reading and rereading each transcribed interview line by line twice. During the transcription phase, I became more familiar with the research data. The data were first analyzed based on the study's conceptual framework and the literature, which included the key concepts from the literature review. Next, I applied open coding to the raw data to search for repeated words, phrases, and concepts that could answer the research question. Then, I applied axial coding by arranging the open codes into categories according to their similarities.

Interview Analysis

I used Saldana's (2016) approach for qualitative data analysis. The steps that I followed included (a) organizing and preparing the data, (b) reviewing and becoming familiar with the data, (c) beginning to code the data, (d) generating themes, (e) discussing the findings, and (f) validating the findings. No unusual situations occurred that affected the data analysis process.

Step 1: Organize and Prepare Data

For the first step of the analysis process, I prepared and organized the data. I compared the written transcripts with the audio recordings to ensure accuracy. I printed all the interview transcripts and organized them in the order the interviews took place. I matched the interview protocol (see Appendix) and the transcript to the participant's alphabetical identifier and then paired the participant with the numerical identifier.

Step 2: Review and Become Familiar With Data

I listened to the recordings several times without making notes. I read the transcribed data twice to become familiar with the data again without taking notes. I did not reread the transcripts for 24 hours to allow myself to gain a renewed perspective.

Step 3: Begin to Code the Data

I used two phases to code the data: (a) open coding and (b) axial coding. For the first phase, open coding, I read each transcript and made notes in the margins. I reread the transcripts line by line and used highlighters to identify words, phrases, and concepts relevant to the conceptual framework (yellow highlighter) and research questions (green for Research Question 1 and pink for Research Question 2). I compiled a list of all

highlighted words, phrases, and concepts. I was able to regroup the word, phrases, and

concepts into codes by similarities and other common characteristics. From the data, 45

open codes emerged from the data. Table 2 includes a sample of eight of the open codes,

participant identifiers, and examples of excerpts from the data that fit each code.

Table 2

Examples of Open Codes

Code	Participant	Excerpt
Students aggressive and angry	A50	"This student would become very angry and throw things. The aggression was normally directed towards the authority figure."
	A30	"He had a hard time with behavior issues. Some of the issues were escalated to the point he would lash out at teachers."
Teaching coping mechanisms	D6	"I was trying to teach him strategies to help deal with stress…I was trying to teach him coping mechanisms."
	A1	"I would try to have them practice deep breathing."
Students have problems processing and focusing	A20	"Especially when trying to teach academics some of the students can't process or focus on the academic part."
	C2	"He could not process information. I thought he had a processing disorder initially."
Disruptive behavior issues	D4	"Their behaviors definitely interrupt the learning environment."
	A30	"I was challenged with making sure they did not disrupt the learning of others."
Isolates from others/Loner	A3	"These kids shy away and not want to play with. The start to isolate and not want to be involved."
	A45	"This child was a loner…very little to no interactions with anyone."
Withdrawn from the rest of class	A1	"Sometimes they barely talk in class and are more withdrawn from their peers."
	D15	"My student was very withdrawn. It was hard to bring them in."
Need Strategies / Need for mandatory training	C2	"Training should be mandatory. Schools should have committees in place to help teachers help children."
	A20	"A mandatory training on toxic stress or a yearly professional development should be offered. Equip us with something to help our students.
Students do not retain information	D4	"Some of the academic challenges. I have seen is they are not able to retain information."
	A50	"I think the most challenging thing was finding ways to help them retain information."

For the second phase of coding, I used axial coding to organize the codes into categories according to their similarities. I created charts to assess the codes in a visual format using Microsoft Word. I grouped codes together that were similar. If codes had the same meaning, I combined or condensed them. I did this until all the codes were in groups based on similarities. Once codes were grouped, which groups became my categories. I named each category based on the types of codes that the category contained. When I finished the axial coding phase, I had a total of 12 categories. Table 3 shows an example of some of the categories, open codes, participant identifiers, and excerpts from the interview transcripts.

Table 3

Examples of Open Codes and Categories

Category	Code	Participant	Excerpt
Non-conducive learning environment	Disruptive behavior	A3	"Their behaviors are disruptive to the learning environment."
	Disrupts learning	A30	"I was challenged with making sure they did not disrupt the learning of others and making sure everyone had an opportunity to learn."
Challenging relationship with peers	Difficulty making friends	A50	"Finding friends, creating friends, was challenging for this student."
	Isolates from others/Loner	D15	"She just could not connect with other students, always played alone, and appeared older than her years."
Low academics/achievement	Students do not retain information	D4	"The moving around or homelessness may play a role in their inability to retain information. It interrupts the learning foundation."
	Low cognitive function	A20	"Cognitively they tend to function at a lower level but placed in a regular classroom making it difficult to teach grade level content."
Lack of training related to toxic stress	Needs classroom support	A50	"I would appreciate more support in my classroom and modeling rather being told what to do."
	Need strategies/ Need for mandatory training	D6	"If we are going to work with these students then we need to equip teachers with strategies and knowledge to better handle these students."
General education classroom challenging	Following directions	A3	"She couldn't really follow directions and I had to repeat, redirect, repeat, redirect."
	Small group setting	A30	"I feel the general education classroom was just too much. I did notice that he did work better when he was in a small group setting."
Classroom social emotional/ Emotional regulation	Self-regulate emotions	D6	"They didn't know how to self-regulate their emotions."
	Students aggressive and angry	C2	"I was needing to understand why these kids are so angry and what are their triggers."

Step 4: Generate Themes

After completing axial coding, I reviewed the categories for emerging themes. I had a total of 12 categories that emerged from the axial coding phase. I began to group the categories with similar meanings or characteristics. I then began to discover the themes that emerged for each group of categories based on the characteristics of the groups. I reorganized the information by matching the themes to the corresponding research question they answered. I confirmed alignment between the themes and the conceptual framework, related literature, and the research questions. Three themes emerged: (a) teachers lack strategies to help children with toxic stress manage emotions, (b) children with toxic stress struggle to maintain relationships with teachers and peers, and (c) teachers are challenged, need training, and resources to support children experiencing toxic stress. Table 4 shows the themes related to each research question along with the number of excerpts included in each category.

Table 4

Categories and Themes

RQ1: What are early childhood teachers' perspectives of being challenged to support the emotional needs of young children experiencing toxic stress?	
Category	Theme
Classroom social emotional /Emotional regulation Concerning behaviors in the classroom Classroom triggers Lack of social emotional training	Theme 1: Teachers lack strategies to help children with toxic stress manage emotions.
Challenging relationship with teacher Challenging relationship with peers Issues with trust Learning communities	Theme 2: Children with toxic stress struggle to maintain relationships with teachers and peers.
RQ1: What are early childhood teachers' perspectives of being challenged to support the academic needs of young children experiencing toxic stress?	
Category	Theme
General education classroom challenging	Theme 3: Teachers are challenged, need training and

Student requires high levels of support in the classroom Low academics/achievement Non-conducive learning environment Limited current areas of support in place Lack of training pertaining to toxic stress	resources to support children experiencing toxic stress.

Step 5: Discuss the Findings

The results of the data revealed three themes related to the research questions. Two themes emerged for Research Question 1, and one theme emerged for Research Question 2 (see Table 4). I compiled the information into results based on the themes that emerged from the data.

Step 6: Validate the Findings

I compared emerging themes to the current literature to validate the findings. I utilized a veteran educator. The veteran educator is a professor at a university in a northern state. He also serves as a university methodologist. The feedback from the outside veteran educator validated the findings. I compiled and shared a summary of the results in Chapter 4 with the participants and gave them time to review the findings. No one disputed the findings or contributed any additional information.

Results

I examined teachers' perspectives on perspectives being challenged to support the emotional and academic needs of young children who are experiencing toxic stress through a basic qualitative study using semi-structured interviews. In this section, I described the results of the responses that I collected during the interviews with 10 participants. I used nine open-ended interview questions to help answer the research questions (see Appendix). The interview method to develop an understanding of the early

childhood teachers' perspectives. Teachers were able to provide in-depth and thorough responses through interviews.

The following is a summary of findings based on the research questions that guided this study. Research Question 1: What are early childhood teachers' perspectives of being challenged to support the emotional needs of young children who are experiencing toxic stress in the classroom? Interview Questions four, six, seven, eight, and nine addressed this research question (see Appendix). Through the interviews, two major themes emerged regarding Research Question 1. They included: (a) teachers lack strategies to help children with toxic stress manage emotions, (b) children with toxic stress struggle to maintain relationships with teachers and peers. I discussed each of the themes in this section.

Research Question 2: What are early childhood teachers' perspectives of being challenged to support the academic needs of young children who are experiencing toxic stress in the classroom? Interview Questions five, six, seven, eight, and nine addressed this research question (see Appendix). Through the interviews, one major theme emerged regarding Research Question 2. The one theme that emerged was: (a) teachers are challenged, need training and resources to support children experiencing toxic stress.

Theme 1: Teachers Lack Strategies to Help Children with Toxic Stress Manage Emotions

All participants expressed concern about the social emotional issues of children experiencing toxic stress. They explained the challenges of helping these children manage their emotions and triggers. Participants stated anger as the most challenging

behavior displayed by children experiencing toxic stress. C2 expressed the challenges of working with children experiencing toxic stress that displayed constant anger. C2 stated, "The most common emotion is that of anger. This student would never smile, and everything made him angry. No matter what I tried it would always resort back to negativity and anger." D15 shared, "I am just not used to dealing with these behaviors. He just becomes so angry. It is hard to watch, for the other students to witness such aggression from a small child, is very difficult." A1 also shared, "I would try to have them practice deep breathing when they got worked up. That was all I knew to do to help them find some self control." A45 elaborated:

> I consider myself to be a veteran teacher and find working with this type of student to be a challenge. They are highly emotional. Some cry all day for no apparent reason even though we know there is a reason. Others are hostile to the world. They throw fits, run, hit teachers or students and are just angry. Then I have had the ones that are just quiet and won't speak to anyone. With my experience, I still don't think I have the right strategies to help them work through what they are feeling.

Several participants shared that children experiencing toxic stress had triggers that led to them displaying certain behaviors. Participants A20, D4, A30, A3 and D6 shared that once children dealing with toxic stress have been triggered they had difficulty helping the child manage their emotions. They expressed that children experiencing toxic stress were not able to self-regulate their feelings or emotions. According to A20, "I felt if I said the wrong thing that would be a trigger and the tears would start or just random

screaming. Then, I was not sure how to bring him down from what triggered the reaction." D4, shared "I learned it was important to try and learn her triggers and what would set her off because once she started acting out, we had no way of bringing her back." A30 stated, "We have to be cognizant of emotional triggers. It could remind them of the trauma they endure or have endured. That's something I had to learn." A3 expressed how not understanding the child's triggers made it difficult for the child to remain in the classroom.

> I never knew what I was going to walk into each day. Having a routine in place I thought would help control emotional outbursts. However, we could do the exact same thing each day but somewhere something would trigger him to have fits of rage. It was nothing I could control and would have to call for him to be removed from the classroom. The next day he would be fine and have a normal day. I could never figure out what would trigger such an outburst.

Participant D6 shared:

> One thing I observed working with children dealing with stress is any situation can trigger unpredictable behaviors. It took me years to understand this, but these students can instantly shut down and want to be left alone for the rest of the day. I have also had students that became aggressive. Then others were up and down all day every day. I found it difficult to help these students self-regulate their emotions. They don't know how to self-regulate their emotions.

Participant D15 described her approach to helping children dealing with social emotional issues as unsuccessful despite using a strategy learned in college. D15 shared,

I find it very challenging to meet social emotional needs of all my students,
especially those dealing with toxic stressors. I attempted things like implementing
the Zones of Regulation I learned about in college. I believe my students were
beyond that type of self-regulation tool and needed more severe interventions.

Most of the participants described the emotional behaviors of children
experiencing toxic stress as being too challenging for the general education classroom
and felt their social emotional needs could not be met in the general education classroom.
Teachers with various years of experience expressed their inability to support the
emotional needs of children experiencing toxic stress. Participants A50 and A1 were
early childhood teachers with less than five years teaching experience. A50 and A1
expressed their lack of teaching experience attributed to their challenges meeting the
social emotional needs of her students. A50 shared, "I have only been a classroom
teacher for 4 years and I just find helping these students with social emotional problems
concerning." A1 stated, "If I had more experience or training as a classroom teacher then
maybe I would have been able to help these children more, but I just like he would do
better in special education than with me." Participants D4, A30 and A20 were early
childhood teachers with 20 plus years of classroom teaching experience. These
participants despite their history in the early childhood classroom expressed challenges
supporting the social emotional needs of children experiencing toxic stress in the general
education classroom. D4 expressed,

We are seeing more and more children exhibiting signs of toxic stress with severe
emotional behaviors. This epidemic is beyond the regular classroom. I'm always

asking for help because what I have to provide in my classroom is not sufficient to meet their emotional needs.

In all, despite the teaching experience of the classroom teacher, meeting the social emotional needs and helping children experiencing toxic stress manage their emotions and triggers was deemed challenging.

Theme 2: Children with Toxic Stress Struggle to Maintain Relationships with Teachers and Peers

The majority of the participants stated maintaining healthy classroom relationships with children experiencing toxic stress was challenging. Participants expressed relationships are essential to classroom success especially when working with children experiencing toxic stress, but they are not always successful with maintaining connections. Four of the participants spoke on the issue of trust being a factor that deterred meaningful relationships. Participant A50 stated, "I always felt as if he didn't trust me. Maybe he had been hurt by too many adults." Participant A45 shared,

Children dealing with toxic stress are not very trusting of individuals. You have to work hard to earn their trust. You have to think...they may have been abused, neglected, mistreated by someone that looks like you. So, they shut everyone out and refuse to make those bonds. They don't want a relationship with any adult. They are hurting. We as teachers have to understand their perspective.

Participant A1 stated, "I would greet them with a smile and try to give them hugs. They didn't want my hugs. They probably felt like they couldn't trust me or my actions." D4 shared, "Building a relationship is based on trust. If the student feels they cannot trust

you it will be challenging to have that important bond. And a lot of these children do want to trust you, but it takes time."

Seven out of 10 participants felt establishing relationships with students experiencing toxic stress was frustrating. Many shared they understood it was vital to try to connect with students experiencing toxic stress but would develop a sense of frustration. C2 shared, "It was so hard to try to build a relationship with someone who doesn't talk to you. It can be frustrating." A3 stated, "I have to admit I wanted to give up on trying to connect with this kid. I felt like we would never connect." D15 also shared, "It is easy to become frustrated with the student, the situation when you are dealing with this on your own. Each day I would just work hard to find some way to bring us together." Participant A30 shared a similar thought,

> As teachers we know how important it is to connect with our students. You won't be able to teach them if you cannot reach them. It is work...but is our job to make them feel safe and secure in the classroom. It is our job to make life long relationships. I am not saying it easy and yes, it can be frustrating, but it is what is best for the child going through toxic stress. All students.

Participants also expressed concern about the relationships children experiencing toxic stress have with their peers. All 10 participants made mention of children experiencing toxic stress and challenges with peer relationships. D6 expressed challenges of getting students experiencing toxic stress to socialize in the classroom. D6 stated, "On one end of the spectrum these children do not want to be around anyone and will not socialize at all. Socialization is a part of the learning process and is necessary for learning

to take place." Participant D15 also expressed isolation was a concern as she shared her

experience working with a student experiencing toxic stress. D15 shared, "She just could

not connect with other students, always played alone and appeared older than her years."

A20 stated, "This particular student didn't really have friends. The other kids were

intimidated by him." C2 said,

> I believe this child had no friends because the other students were terrified of him.
>
> When I would try to pair other students with him no one wanted to be his partner.
>
> It was obvious. He also did not care to work with other students. A lot of times he
>
> would just get up and move to another part of the room by himself. So, it was
>
> hard trying to find the right fit for him in my classroom.

D15 shared,

> I found it difficult to help children experiencing stress to socialize with their
>
> peers. A lot of them can be timid, shy, and reserved. Just not interested in playing
>
> or making friends. I felt my role was to help facilitate the social part of learning.
>
> However, I was not very successful. I feel the stress is so great they just shut
>
> down on the happy emotions.

> Participants A1 and A45 both had similar views on the challenges of supporting

the emotional well-being children experiencing toxic stress. A1 stated,

> I used to think all children would come to school with the necessary skills for
>
> learning. I learned that I have to teach children how to share, how to get along,
>
> how to make friends, and how to be kind. These skills are often not there for
>
> children that may be going through high stress.

A45 further explained, "The main challenge is supporting the whole child as many do not have the tools to form friendships. That might have to be taught and not easy for children of trauma or toxic stress."

Theme 3: Teachers are Challenged, Need Training and Resources to Support Children Experiencing Toxic Stress

All participants indicated a concern with supporting the learning demands of children experiencing toxic stress. Participants reported the challenges endured with supporting their academic achievement. A1commented, "Academics is secondary. From my experience they are never engaged in the learning." Participant A45 shared, "I wish I could say that they were able to achieve academically. I think you have to meet other needs first. A30 further elaborated, "I was challenged to meet their academic needs, yes. When a child is worrying about the night before or what will happen later, learning academics is not their focus. They struggle." D15 stated,

> Children dealing with toxic home lives do not come to school to learn. They often come to escape. Their educational experience is going to look different. As a teacher, you are going to have to work harder because they are not in learning mode. Their minds may not be able to focus on let's say sight words [or] math facts. They are still processing trauma.

Seven participants stated an inability to follow directions as a concern. A1 stated, "For these students I often have to repeat simple directions." Participant A3 shared, "She could not follow directions. I had to repeat, redirect, repeat, redirect." A20 also shared a

similar concern by sharing, "I find that I spent more time repeating directions to just them. Like maybe, they had a processing disorder. Frustrating."

Participants also mentioned retaining information, processing, and cognitive function difficulties as challenges when teaching children experiencing toxic stress. Participant A50 shared, "I think the most challenging thing was finding ways to help them retain information. It's like you can show them several ways and nothing helps. I understood they were dealing with those levels of stress." D15 stated, "Finding creative ways for them to retain the information was not working. Their brain was off from processing information." Participant A20 stated, "Cognitively they tend to function at a lower level but placed in a general education classroom." C2 stated, "He could not process information. I thought he had a processing disorder initially. Like why can't he retain anything I'm teaching." A45 elaborated,

> When you work with children experiencing toxic stress you see the processing difficulties, attention problems. They normally are not able to grasp new concepts. They are your lower level learners. In 21 years, I have never taught a child experiencing toxic stress that was able to excel academically.

Eight participants identified lack of focus on academics in the classroom as a common trait of children experiencing toxic in the general education classroom. A20 said, "They are often not attuned to what is going on and unmotivated. They are not focused on me or what I am teaching." Participant A30 shared, "I just remember he couldn't focus. He always seemed in a zone. Showed no motivation to learn. Like he had ADD." C2 expressed, "It is challenging to get these students to focus. I know they must

have a lot going on in their brains. Attention and focusing on me as the teacher was a true challenge." D4 shared,

> Focus comes into play as a reason I can see why a lot of children experiencing toxic stress fall behind. You have to try to keep them engaged in learning, but I think their minds are not there. Despite what you are doing to keep them engaged or focused on you, mentally they have checked out."

The participants expressed that the dynamics (overall learning environment) found in general education classrooms are challenging for children experiencing toxic stress. Participants shared the placement of children dealing with toxic stress in general education as a challenge. D6 stated, "I think the regular classroom is too rigorous or demoing for a lack of better words. A smaller setting and a few extra teachers are what they need." Participant A30 also expressed similar thoughts by stating, "I feel the general education classroom is too much. I did notice he worked better in a small group setting." D15 shared,

> This particular student was new, and they integrated him into my general education classroom. As time passed, we learned of his past….as [I] thought he was experiencing toxic stress. He really needed more help and support. Honestly, I think we try to make them fit in a place that serves them no good. These children should not be taught in a regular classroom. Most of us are not trained to help them.

Participants also expressed disruptive behaviors create a non-conducive learning environment. A50 stated, "The frequent outburst made it hard to keep him in the

classroom. I could not teach him or anyone else. They learned nothing." Participant D4

expressed, "Their behaviors definitely interrupt the learning environment. The teaching

task shifts to calming [the] student so the rest of the class can learn." Participant A30

expressed similar thoughts, "I was challenged with making sure they did not disrupt the

learning of others and making sure everyone had an opportunity to learn." A1 shared,

> I am not sure if they or he needed to be in the general education classroom
>
> because I spent most of my time just focusing on this student. Trying not to
>
> trigger him or calm him down. I felt like I neglected a lot of other students and
>
> what they could have learned. His academics suffered and so did the others, but I
>
> was new and didn't know how to deal.

Several participants mentioned students experiencing toxic stress require high

levels of support. A45 stated, "Students dealing with this type of stress have needs and

require the support I don't think is fair to place on the classroom teacher." C2 shared,

"The support for this type of student is not available in the general education classroom.

You have to think about the other students." Participant D6 further explained,

> Once you understand that [a] student is dealing with toxic stress there should be
>
> some additional support added. The classroom teacher will not be able to fully
>
> support them academically and emotionally. Their needs are not like a general ed
>
> students. From my past experience, they need more help with everything and that
>
> can be demanding on one person."

All 10 participants mentioned the need for additional training or resources for

teaching children experiencing toxic stress. Several expressed they have never received

any training on the topic of toxic stress. C2 shared, "I have never received training on working with children experiencing toxic stress. It is a growing concern and an educational buzzword." Participant A3 shared, "I have not been offered training on toxic stress. It should be mandatory because these students are present in our classrooms." D4 stated,

> I think most teachers do not fully understand toxic stress and the implications on young children. It is something I had to learn on my own. I graduated from college years ago and the term was unheard of. I have many years in education and have never had any formal training that made mention of what toxic stress is and how it impacts children. However, it is something all educators need to be made aware of so the misdiagnosing will stop.

Participants mentioned they lack resources to support children in their classrooms experiencing toxic stress. The one resource all participants mentioned having was the school counselor. Participant A1 shared, "I relied on the school counselor, and she would sometimes get the school social worker involved. I'm not aware of other resources. I didn't know of any strategies to help." A30 stated, "Our school counselor always gets involved. What she can do however is not enough. The strategies I had in place were not effective. These students often need outside resources or wrap around services." Participant D15 further elaborated,

> The first resource is normally the school counselor when working with your students experiencing toxic stress. I have been in places where this was my only resource. In my professional opinion, I think we do not utilize the school

psychologist to our benefit. They should do more than test students for special education. They should be working with the students experiencing toxic stress, like an in school treatment plan.

Several participants stated training on toxic stress should be mandatory. A50 stated, "Training should be mandatory if we want to support the whole child. Teachers just need more tools in their toolkit to assist students dealing with high levels of stress." A20 shared, "A mandatory training on toxic stress or a yearly professional development should be offered. Equip us with something to help our students." Participant D6 further elaborated,

> If we are going to work with these students, then we need to equip teachers with strategies and knowledge to better handle these students. Most of them are not willing to ask for help and don't want to be ridiculed for having poor classroom management. As a teacher who has been there, I know this is more than classroom management but others looking in view it as such. There should be trainings, professional developments, trained staff, and wrap-around services readily available.

Participant A45 shared similar thoughts by stating, "Yearly we have mandatory training for everything else. Why not offer us training on toxic stress. We need it to be better teachers to all our students."

Discrepant Cases

Throughout the data analysis stage of my research, I did not find any evidence that would oppose the findings. Therefore, further analysis was not necessary.

If inconsistent data would have been found, I would have reviewed the data and addressed any variances between the findings.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Qualitative researchers rely on trustworthiness criteria to ensure the rigor of qualitative findings (Burkholder et al., 2016). I employed credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability strategies for evidence of trustworthiness. To address content validity, an expert in the field of education research reviewed my interview questions for clarity and framed to answer the research questions. I also conducted a mock interview with one nonparticipant to become familiar with the interview protocol. The use of semistructured interviews allowed the participants to share their perspectives of the challenges supporting the emotional and academic needs of young children who are experiencing toxic stress.

Credibility

Credibility in qualitative research ensures the study is accurately measuring what the research states it will measure. To assure creditability I used multiple data collection strategies, including interview recordings, transcriptions, reflective journals, and member checking. After the semistructured interviews were complete, participants received a summary of study findings. Participants had no objections or comments regarding the summary findings. A reflective journal was maintained during each interview session to capture my personal thoughts and feelings.

Transferability

Transferability is also used to measure the trustworthiness of research by ensuring the study is applicable to other contexts (Burkholder et al., 2016). I provided an in-depth methodological description of the study. Details about the data collection methods used and the participants selected for the study were provided. Additional information about the setting was provided to allow the reader to determine if this study may be transferable to another setting with challenges of working with students experiencing toxic stress.

Dependability

The stability of findings over time determines dependability (Burkholder et al., 2016). I gained dependability by describing the research design in detail as well as the data collection process. I also audio recorded and transcribed all interviews word for word to ensure the data was collected accurately. There was not a need to conduct follow-up interviews. I also maintained a reflective journal to record my thoughts during the study and to limit personal biases with data collection and analysis. I utilized the interview protocol to ask the participants the same questions. All questions were asked in the same order. Prior to starting the interview, I reminded participants of their rights to withdraw from the study at any time. The emerging themes were compared to the current literature to validate the findings.

Confirmability

Confirmability ensures that research findings are generated from the participants data, and not the biases of the actual researcher. To ensure confirmability, I made efforts to put aside my own beliefs about the challenges of teaching children experiencing toxic

stress. Maintaining the reflective journal allowed me to document my thoughts and feelings as they arose, and my personal biases as they were recognized. During the development of the codes, themes, and findings, I utilized an external auditor to review the development of codes, themes, and findings. The external auditor is a veteran in the field of education that is familiar with the phenomena.

Summary

In Chapter 4, I addressed the data analysis and the findings of my study. This study was formed from two research questions and explored early childhood teachers' perspectives of being challenged to meet the emotional and academic needs of children experiencing toxic stress. A total of 10 teachers from a school district located in the southeastern United States shared their perspectives for this basic qualitative study using semistructured interviews. During data analysis, I used Saldana's (2016) approach to analyze the findings. Three themes emerged (see Table 4) that reflected the perspectives of the ten participants. From completing the data analysis two themes emerged, that reflected the participants' perspectives of Research Question 1: What are early childhood teachers' perspectives of being challenged to support the emotional needs of young children who are experiencing toxic stress in the classroom? All participants expressed concern about the social emotional issues of children experiencing toxic stress. Participants shared they are challenged helping children experiencing toxic stress manage their emotions. The participants reported anger being the most challenging emotion displayed by the children dealing with toxic stress. In addition, participants were concerned with identifying the triggers that lead to the disruptive behaviors displayed by

the children in their classrooms. Participants shared that students experiencing toxics stress where not able self-regulate their feelings and emotions and as teachers, they lacked the strategies to assist their students with emotional regulation.

The second theme related to Research Question 1 was children with toxic stress struggle to maintain relationships with teachers and peers. The majority of the participants stated maintaining healthy classroom relationships with students experiencing toxic stress was challenging. Participants shared the students experiencing toxic stress often have issues with trusting teachers and their peers. Participates also expressed feelings of frustration when trying to build relationships with children in their classroom experiencing toxic stress. The participants felt establishing relationships with students was an important aspect of the learning environment but children dealing with toxic stress showed little to no interest in connecting with others in the classroom, including other students. Participants shared students experiencing toxic stress did not socialize with their peers and remained isolated from others during social times, like recess.

Based on the responses to Research Question 2 about teachers' perspectives of being challenged to support the academic needs of children who are experiencing toxic stress, majority of the participants felt they were challenged to meet the basic academic needs of children experiencing toxic stress and need additional training and resources to utilize. Participants believed children experiencing toxic stress were not able to focus in the classroom. Participants were concerned that children experiencing toxic stress were more focused on their toxic home lives rather than the teacher and their lessons.

Participants stated following directions as a challenge that hindered the achievement of children experiencing toxic stress. Majority of the participants stated children experiencing toxic stress were not able to follow classroom directions or keep up with the basic demands of the general education classroom. Participants also mentioned retaining information, processing, and cognitive function difficulties as challenges when teaching children experiencing toxic stress.

The participants commented children experiencing toxic stress display disruptive behaviors, making the classroom environment non-conducive for learning. The majority of the participants expressed their only resource to assist them with children experiencing toxic stress was the school counselor. All study participants stated they lacked the appropriate training and resources for teaching children experiencing toxic stress in the general education classroom.

Chapter 5 includes an interpretation of the results, limitations of the study, recommendations, and implications. Interpretations of the findings for each theme are discussed in detail and connected to the literature. Limitations of the study are discussed in detail. Recommendations for addressing the limitations and topics for further research are provided. Implications for the study are discussed and possible opportunities for social change are included. I provide a conclusion and final thoughts on the study.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

I conducted a basic qualitative study with semistructured interviews to examine early childhood teachers' perspectives of being challenged to support the emotional and academic needs of young children who are experiencing toxic stress in the early childhood classroom. A total of 10 early childhood teachers from a school district in the southeastern United States participated in the study. Participants shared their perspectives of the challenges working with children experiencing toxic stress. Through the analysis of data, three themes emerged: (a) teachers lack strategies to help children with toxic stress manage emotions, (b) children with toxic stress struggle to maintain relationships with teachers and peers, (c) teachers are challenged, need training, and resources to support children experiencing toxic stress. Understanding the participants' perspectives will help lead to a better understanding of supporting children experiencing toxic stress. Chapter 5 includes the findings with a connection to the current literature and conceptual framework. I also provide implications, limitations, and recommendations for future research.

Interpretation of the Findings

I obtained approval from the Walden University IRB before data collection began. I used the following research questions to gather qualitative data for this study:

Research Question 1: What are early childhood teachers' perspectives of being challenged to support the emotional needs of young children who are experiencing toxic stress in the classroom?

Research Question 2: What are early childhood teachers' perspectives of being challenged to support the academic needs of young children who are experiencing toxic stress in the classroom?

The participants were asked nine questions about their perspectives of being challenged to support the emotional and academic needs of young children who are experiencing toxic stress in the early childhood classroom. Two themes aligned with early childhood teachers' perspectives of being challenged to meet the emotional needs of children experiencing toxic stress and one aligned with teachers' perspectives of being challenged to meet the academic needs of children experiencing toxic stress. The findings of this study indicated that the participants lacked strategies to help children with toxic stress manage emotions, children with toxic stress struggle to maintain relationships with teachers and peers, and teachers are challenged and need training and resources to support children experiencing toxic stress.

I evaluated the interpretations of the findings through current literature and the constructs of my conceptual framework, Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivist theory. Vygotsky's theory places the environment as a major influence on learning outcomes. Vygotsky's theory of social constructivism views learning as a social exchange, upon which the learning environment must account for the student's past experiences for learning to take place.

Theme 1

Theme 1 indicated that early childhood teachers lack strategies to help children with toxic stress manage emotions. The early childhood teachers expressed concerns with

the social emotional issues of children experiencing toxic stress. Children who experience early childhood adversity leading to toxic stress often have impaired social emotional development (Loomis, 2018). Victims of toxic stress experience great difficulty with their emotions and act impulsively (De Jong, 2016). Children exposed to toxic stress often suffer from anxiety, detachment, and aggression (Rollins, 2018). C2 stated, "The most common emotion is that of anger. This student would never smile, and everything made him angry." D15 shared, "I am just not used to dealing with these behaviors. He just becomes so angry. It is hard to watch, for the other students to witness such aggression from a small child, is very difficult."

Several teachers also expressed that children experiencing toxic stress were often triggered by unknown events and in general were not able to self-regulate their emotions. Caregivers are influential in a child's ability to self- regulate their emotions (Thurston et al., 2018), but participants stated once the children had been triggered, they were not successful in helping them manage their emotions. Participant A20 shared, "I felt if I said the wrong thing that would be a trigger and the tears would start or just random screaming. Then I was not sure how to bring him down from what triggered the reaction." D4 also shared, "I learned it was important to try and learn her triggers and what would set her off because once she started acting out, we had no way of bringing her back." Participants A30 and A45 had similar statements that aligned with previous research and the role of the classroom teacher helping students regulate emotions. A30 stated, "We have to be cognizant of emotional triggers." A45 shared,

You have to understand what triggers a student. My student was often triggered by being redirected by other students. I would try to keep the other students from speaking to him directly. If he felt the other students were telling him what to do he would explode.

Teachers expressed challenges helping students learn how to self-regulate their emotions and their social emotional development. To help preschool-aged children develop the self-regulation skills needed for learning, there must be stable, safe, and nurturing environments provided by an educator that understands the learner's needs (Whitaker et al., 2019). Students learn how to emotionally engage through experiences and adult demonstration and develop emotional self-regulation through environmental demands (Kelly, 2018). Participants D6 and D15 shared that as the classroom teachers they were not able to help the children in their classrooms experiencing toxic stress to self-regulate their emotions. Participant D6 stated, "I have also had students that became aggressive. Then others were up and down all day every day. I found it difficult to help these students self-regulate their emotions." D15 shared, "I attempted things like implementing the zones of regulation I learned about in college. I believe my students were beyond that type of self-regulation tool and needed more severe interventions."

SEL is also critical to the early childhood years as the brain is in a critical period of developmental influence from social relationships (Immordino-Yang et al., 2019). No longer are educational institutions required to focus on just academics but also provide children with an opportunity to become resilient, which includes fostering SEL (Wu et al., 2020). However, most of the teachers felt they could not meet the social emotional

needs of the children in their general education classroom despite their various years of teaching experience. Participants D4, A30, and A20 were veteran educators with over 20 years of teaching experience that expressed challenges with helping their students with their social emotional needs. A30 expressed,

> I have learned how to deal with some children experiencing toxic stress, but I do not consider myself an expert. Even for me, at times I feel as if I have exhausted all my resources to help these children manage their emotions. A lot of children dealing with toxic stress could benefit from medical interventions that are not available in the school.

The results of this study indicated teachers are in need of strategies to help children with toxic stress manage their emotions. The findings supported the research found in Chapter 2 and the conceptual framework.

Theme 2

Under Theme 2, children with toxic stress struggle to maintain relationships with teachers and peers. Most of the participants stated that maintaining healthy classroom relationships with children experiencing toxic stress was challenging. Supportive environments, which include the care of teachers, has been associated with successful efforts to combat toxic stress and early childhood adversity (Plumb et al. 2016; Zeanah et al., 2018). Teachers understood how important healthy relationships are with students but expressed challenges about being able to connect with students experiencing toxic stress. School is an environment where victims of toxic stress learn to trust again and reestablish relationships with teachers and peers (Murray, 2018). But most participants expressed

issues with trust that deterred meaningful relationships. Participant A50 stated, "I always felt as if he didn't trust me. Maybe he had been hurt by too many adults." Young children experiencing ACEs often have increased feelings of insecurity that affects their perceptions of and experiences in school (Sanders et al., 2020). Participant A1 shared, "My student dealing with stress just did not want to open up enough to accept me. He probably did not trust me … but we could never connect or form a bond."

The early childhood teacher serves as a guide of the educational classroom environment, which must account for the student's past experiences for learning to take place (Vygotsky, 1978). But teachers reported feelings of frustration about relationship building with children experiencing toxic stress. Participants deemed relationships with students as an imperative part of the classroom environment but often became frustrated in their attempts to connect with students experiencing toxic stress. Teachers often feel helpless in their daily pedagogies to help children exposed to childhood trauma (Stokes & Brunzell, 2020). C2 shared, "It was so hard to try to build a relationship with someone who doesn't talk to you. It can be frustrating." D15 also shared, "It is easy to become frustrated with the student, the situation when you are dealing with this on your own. Each day I would just work hard to find some way to bring us together." Participant D6 shared a similar thought: "You feel like you are breaking down a wall when trying to build a relationship with a child experiencing toxic stress. It can be frustrating at times, and you want to stop your efforts."

Teachers help children construct their knowledge individually and socially by creating authentic social contexts for students to engage with their peers and others (Li,

2017). Similarly, Vygotsky's social constructivism theory emphasizes the role of social experiences and interactions in development (Marginson & Dang, 2017). Children construct their own knowledge through encounters with the environment around them (Jacobs, 2001). All 10 of the early childhood teachers mentioned concerns about the relationships children experiencing toxic stress have with their peers. Participants expressed issues with socialization and the necessity of socialization for learning. D6 stated, "On one end of the spectrum these children do not want to be around anyone and will not socialize at all. Socialization is a part of the learning process and is necessary for learning to take place." Educators are responsible for providing high quality education that promotes social interactions and opportunities for cognitive development (Immordino-Yang et al., 2019). But the participants shared that children experiencing toxic stress did not engage with their peers in the learning environment even when the teacher facilitated the encounters. A50 shared,

> Making sure all students are involved in the learning process is important to the learning environment. For my students experiencing toxic stress it was hard to get them to socialize with others in the classroom. Partner activities, games, and cooperative learning opportunities were not possible for my students experiencing toxic stress. They even experienced issues socializing in special areas like Art and PE.

ACEs have been associated with an array of negative implications for children, including social disorders, emotional distress, and feelings of insecurity that can diminish relationships with teachers and peers (Sanders et al., 2020). Teachers mentioned the

important social emotional skills that help children build and develop relationships are not exhibited by children experiencing toxic stress and must be taught. A45 explained, "The main challenge is supporting the whole child as many do not have the tools to form friendships. That might have to be taught and not easy for children of trauma or toxic stress." Therefore, the results of the study showed that children experiencing toxic stress struggle to maintain relationships with teachers and peers. The current study findings supported the research reviewed in Chapter 2 and the conceptual framework.

Theme 3

Theme 3 showed that all participants expressed challenges meeting the learning demands of children dealing with toxic stress and needed training and resources to support children experiencing toxic stress in the general education classroom. Teachers explained that children experiencing toxic stress were not successful in the classroom and were not receptive to the learning taking place. Children who experience toxic stress associated with adverse experiences have poorer academic outcomes in kindergarten when compared to their peers (Jimenez et al., 2016). Participant A45 shared, "I wish I could say that they were able to achieve academically. I think you have to meet other needs first." As young children are continuously exposed to ACEs, which leads to toxic stress, they become more focused on survival rather than learning content material (Craig, 2016). The immediate effects of toxic stress are becoming apparent in the inability of children to learn in the general education classroom (Kelly & Li, 2019). A30 said, "I was challenged to meet their academic needs, yes. When a child is worrying about the night before or what will happen later, learning academics is not their focus.

They struggle." Teachers also shared that children experiencing toxic stress use school as an escape or place of safety.

Children that experience high levels of toxic stress often have trouble reaching their full academic potential and lack successful educational experiences (Plumb et al., 2016). These children are often at greater risk of repeating grades and overall lower school engagement (Blodgett & Lanigan, 2018). Participants shared children experiencing toxic stress had trouble following directions, retaining information, processing, and cognitive function difficulties. Participant A3 shared, "She could not follow directions. I had to repeat, redirect, repeat, redirect." A20 also shared a similar concern by sharing, "I find that I spent more time repeating directions to just them. Like maybe, they had a processing disorder. Frustrating." Participant A50 shared, "I think the most challenging thing was finding ways to help them retain information. It's like you can show them several ways and nothing helps. I understood they were dealing with those levels of stress." Studies also show children exposed to toxic stress have impaired brain development, which impacts the way these children learn (Kelly & Li, 2019; Lambert et al., 2020; Vink, 2019; Woods-Jaeger et al., 2018). D15 stated, "Finding creative ways for them to retain the information was not working. Their brain was off from processing information." Participant A20 stated, "Cognitively they tend to function at a lower level but placed in a general education classroom." Participant D6 shared their personal experience on the academic achievement of children experiencing toxic stress. D6 shared,

The students I have taught that were experiencing toxic stress were behind the other students in the class. They were placed in the RTI process because of their lack of academic achievement. My student this year appeared to have ADD or problems paying attention. They were also failing every subject. I knew this student was experiencing toxic stress. They are currently in the SST process."

Participants in the current study expressed concerns about the lack of focus exhibited by children experiencing toxic stress. Children dealing with a high number of ACEs leading to toxic stress are less engaged in completing tasks, had trouble focusing, lacked the ability to work in group dynamics, and demonstrated difficulty with early math skills (Lipscomb et al., 2021). Participant A30 stated, "I just remember he couldn't focus. He always seemed in a zone. Showed no motivation to learn. Like he had ADD." A3 shared, "You have to work hard to keep students dealing with toxic stress engaged because these students have a hard time focusing. They appear withdrawn most of the time."

The dynamics (overall learning environment) found in general education classrooms are challenging for children experiencing toxic stress. All research participants suggested that the general education classroom was not the appropriate setting to address the needs of children experiencing toxic stress, which supports previous research (Kelly & Li, 2019). D6 stated, "I think the regular classroom is too rigorous or demoing for a lack of better words. A smaller setting and a few extra teachers are what they need." A1 shared, "I feel my students experiencing toxic stress will perform better in

another environment or in another class. The general education classroom does not have the supports these students need. I don't have the experience or skills to help them."

Participants expressed concern about the behaviors displayed by children experiencing toxic stress as another reason why the general education classroom was not an appropriate setting. A50 stated, "The frequent outburst made it hard to keep him in the classroom. I could not teach him or anyone else. They learned nothing." A20 shared,

> When I reflect on my past experience with a child experiencing toxic stress, I spent my time focusing on keeping this particular student calm. I did not want to her to disturb the peacefulness in the classroom. If she got started, the entire day of learning was over for everyone. Her behaviors were that severe.

Participants stated children experiencing toxic stress needed high levels of support which they found challenging to provide to one student. A45 stated, "Students dealing with this type of stress have needs and require the support I don't think is fair to place on the classroom teacher." D4 explained, "Children experiencing toxic stress do not get the support they need in the general education classroom. These students need additional supports that extend beyond the classroom teacher."

All the study participants mentioned they needed additional training or resources for teaching children experiencing toxic stress in the general education classroom. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2015), public schools are the ideal environment for interventions for children that experience childhood adversity as 90% of children attend public schools (Plumb et al., 2016). Majority of the participants stated they have never received training in the area of toxic stress, lack resources to use

with children experiencing toxic stress, and felt training about toxic stress should be mandatory. Rentner et al. (2016) found that managing students' behaviors, addressing the needs of economically disadvantaged students, large class sizes, lack of sufficient time for teachers to collaborate, lack of sufficient instructional time for students, lack of supportive leadership in my school, and lack of supplemental academic support for struggling students as some of the greatest challenge teachers identified. Participant A3 shared, "I have not been offered training on toxic stress. It should be mandatory because these students are present in our classrooms." D4 stated,

> I think most teachers do not fully understand toxic stress and the implications on young children. It is something I had to learn on my own. I graduated from college years ago and the term was unheard of. I have many years in education and have never had any formal training that made mention of what toxic stress is and how it impacts children. However, it is something all educators need to be made aware of so the misdiagnosing will stop.

Effective interventions can improve the outcomes for children that have experienced toxic stress (Burke Harris et al., 2017). All participants stated they lacked resources to support children experiencing toxic stress. However, the one resource all participants mentioned having to support them and students was the school counselor. Participant A1 shared, "I relied on the school counselor, and she would sometimes get the school social worker involved. I'm not aware of other resources. I didn't know of any strategies to help." These students often need outside resources or wrap around services." Participant A50 stated,

The school counselor is normally my first contact when I find out a student is experiencing toxic stress. I ask her to provided strategies, any help, for dealing with the social emotional aspect. I have also asked the counselor to help me advocate for out of school resources for some students.

Whitaker et al. (2019) stated that professional development on trauma could improve the quality of relationships between teachers and students experiencing ACEs. Participants felt that training on working with children is necessary and should be mandatory. A50 stated, "Training should be mandatory if we want to support the whole child. Teachers just need more tools in their toolkit to assist students dealing with high levels of stress." Professional development provides teachers an opportunity for developing curriculum, instructional strategies, and assessment tools (Spencer, 2016). A30 shared,

> As teachers, we need strategies to serve the students in our classrooms that are experiencing toxic stress. This can come in the form of school trainings, professional development, or continuous learning hours. Most new teachers I mentor have never heard of the word toxic stress. In my opinion, they could benefit the most from learning opportunities about toxic stress.

The study results indicate teachers are challenged with meeting the learning demands of children dealing with toxic stress and needed training and resources to support children experiencing toxic stress in the general education classroom. The current findings supported the research found in Chapter 2.

Limitations of the Study

Possible limitations in this study included sample size, the COVID-19 pandemic, participants' willingness to participate, and researcher bias. This study was limited to early childhood teachers (K-3) who had at least 3 years teaching experience and had experience teaching children experiencing toxic stress. I excluded special education teachers, school administrators, counselors, social workers, or teachers who work with students beyond the early childhood years. Another limitation was the sample size. I limited the number of participants and used three elementary schools in the research district. I used school websites to recruit participants. I interviewed 10 participants. The low number of participants and schools might limit the overall perspectives of teachers' challenges working with children experiencing toxic stress. More teachers might have participated if the interviews had occurred prior to the school year ending. Seven potential participants replied to my invitation to participate in my study after the deadline. During the summer months, teachers do not check their emails frequently; therefore, several potential participants did not open the email prior to the deadline.

COVID-19 health and safety mandates prohibited me from conducting interviews face-to-face. Therefore, for health and safety reasons, I interviewed participants by Google Meets and telephone. I conducted nine semistructured interviews through Google Meets and one by telephone.

Researcher bias was also a limitation. As a former classroom teacher, I had my own personal views regarding working with children who were experiencing toxic. This bias further extended to being an employee of the district upon which the research took

place. To address these potential biases, I kept reflective journals to monitor my thoughts as they pertain to teaching children experiencing toxic stress. The researcher is a significant part of qualitative research and must be able to describe relevant biases, assumptions, expectations, and experiences that qualify him or her to conduct the study (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). I only selected teachers with whom I had no personal relationship and did not supervise to participate in the research study. I also explained data collection and analysis in detail. This study confirmed some of the research findings and major tenets from the conceptual framework regarding teachers' perspectives of being challenged to meet the social and academic needs of children experiencing toxic stress.

Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to examine teachers' perspectives of being challenged to support the emotional and academic needs of young children who are experiencing toxic stress in the early childhood classroom. Participants in the current study identified that teachers lack strategies to help children with toxic stress manage emotions; children with toxic stress struggle to maintain relationships with teachers and peers and teachers are challenged; need training and resources to support children experiencing toxic stress. Participants believed they did not have effective strategies to help children experiencing toxic stress manage their emotions and learn to self-regulate when they experienced triggers. Participants believed that healthy relationships were important but had difficulty maintaining relationships with children experiencing toxic stress in their classroom. Teachers also expressed having a hard time helping children

experiencing toxic stress build and establish relationships with their peers that are necessary for learning communities. Participants believed that children experiencing toxic stress in the general education classroom were also challenging academically. Participants believed they needed additional training and resources to help children experiencing toxic work through their academic challenges and be successful in general education. The study findings support the gaps in research on practices concerning teaching children experiencing toxic stress. The following are recommendations for future research.

The first recommendation is to replicate this study and focus on the perspectives of teachers who teach grades beyond the early childhood years. Toxic stress greatly impacts the educational experience of a child overtime. Frequent exposure to toxic stress leads to problems that persist through adulthood (Branco & Linhares, 2018). A study that extends to upper grade teachers may demonstrate if the challenges of working with children experiencing toxic stress are the same as the children get older or if the challenges worsen over time.

The second recommendation is to conduct a study to gain the perspectives of teachers who have received training in the area of toxic stress and incorporate SEL as part of their curriculum. SEL is focused on promoting skills that children experiencing toxic stress are often lacking, including self-regulation and problem-solving, self-awareness, coping and resilience, and self-worth (Moreno et al., 2019). The majority of the teachers expressed the challenges they faced were due to lack of training and not having sufficient resources to support children experiencing toxic stress in the general

education classroom. The results from a study of this magnitude may show the importance of training general education teachers in the area of toxic stress and utilizing SEL curriculums.

The last recommendation would be to replicate this study and include a larger more diverse population. This study was limited to the perspectives of female participants from three elementary schools located in the southeastern United States. The perspectives of male teachers and participants from other regions of the United States may provide additional insight on the challenges early childhood teachers face meeting the emotional and academic needs of children experiencing toxic stress.

Implications

A goal of the study was to understand early childhood teachers' perspectives of being challenged to support the emotional and academic needs of young children who are experiencing toxic stress in the early childhood classroom. Participants in the study expressed concerns with lacking strategies to help children with toxic stress manage emotions. Participants shared concern with helping children with toxic stress to maintain relationships with teachers and peers. Participants also expressed being challenged to meet the academic needs of children experiencing toxic stress, as well as needing additional training and support for supporting students experiencing toxic stress.

The results of the current study have implications for early childhood educational leaders. This study may lead to early childhood leaders developing professional learning centered on toxic stress. Positive social change may occur if early childhood leaders create opportunities for professional learning, based on the needs of their school, to

inform teachers about toxic stress and its effects children. Effective interventions can improve the outcomes for children that have experienced toxic stress (Burke Harris et al., 2017). Early childhood leaders could also devise a school wide plan to support teachers as they work to meet the needs of the learners experiencing toxic stress in their classroom. This plan might include research-based strategies for working with children experiencing toxic stress, opportunities for SEL, or a school wide SEL program.

Early childhood leaders could develop educational models that require yearly training on the topic of toxic stress. This mandatory training could also inform teachers of the resources that are available to them as well as students and their families. Positive social change could be a result of the study if early childhood leaders create policies and mandates for districts to follow pertaining to toxic stress. The established policies could include a district wide action plan for combating toxic stress, which includes system level support staff. Other implications for social change include a partnership between educators, school counselors, social workers, medical professionals inclusive of pediatricians, behavioral therapists, psychologists, psychiatrists, and other stakeholders in the community working together to provide the necessary services to children experiencing toxic stress.

Conclusion

The purpose of this basic qualitative study is to explore early childhood teachers' perspectives of being challenged to support the emotional and academic needs of young children who are experiencing toxic stress in the early childhood classroom. The results of my study filled a gap in practice. Research exists on toxic stress, but little research

exists regarding early childhood teachers' perspectives on the challenges of meeting emotional and academic needs of children experiencing toxic stress. The results of this study demonstrated the challenges early childhood teachers face supporting children experiencing toxic stress. Teachers indicated they lacked strategies to help children with toxic stress manage emotions. The results of this study also demonstrated children experiencing toxic stress struggle to maintain the relationships needed for learning with teachers and peers. Teachers also indicated they are challenged to meet the academic demands of children experiencing toxic stress in the general education classroom. The results of this study provide evidence that teachers need additional training and resources to serve children experiencing toxic stress in the general education classroom. The findings of this study fill the gap in practice by contributing to an increased understanding of teachers' perspectives of being challenged to support the emotional and academic needs of young children who are experiencing toxic stress in the general education classroom.

I hope that results from my study will lead to deeper knowledge of the challenges of teaching children experiencing toxic stress. The information from my study may inform school administrators, early childhood leaders, and policy makers on the importance of training, professional development, and adequate resources to support classroom teachers to meet the needs of teachers working with children experiencing toxic stress. The study may also continue to support positive social change by helping early childhood teachers develop best practices for educating children experiencing toxic stress in the general education classroom.

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Appendix: Protocol and Interview Questions

Date:

Time:

Location of Interview:

Interviewee:

Interview Protocol:

Thank you for agreeing to talk with me today. I am interested in understanding your perspective of the challenges teaching children who are experiencing toxic stress. I am going to ask a few questions to get us started. If you feel uncomfortable answering the questions, please let me know. I am going to record our conversation for data analysis. I will send you a summary of research findings later.

Study Purpose: The purpose of this study is to explore early childhood teachers' perspectives of being challenged to support the emotional and academic needs of young children who are experiencing toxic stress in the early childhood classroom.

RQ1: What are early childhood teachers' perspectives of being challenged to support the emotional needs of young children who are experiencing toxic stress in the classroom?
RQ2: What are early childhood teachers' perspectives of being challenged to support the academic needs of young children who are experiencing toxic stress in the classroom?

_____

Interview Questions:

1. How long have you been an early childhood teacher and what is your current level of education?

2. When you hear the words toxic stress what are the first things that come to mind?

3. What are your thoughts about the effects of toxic stress on young children?

4. Tell me about your experiences teaching children experiencing toxic stress.

5. Describe some of the challenges you face when teaching children experiencing toxic stress from an academic perspective.

6. Describe some of the challenges you face when teaching children experiencing toxic stress from a social emotional perspective?

7. What services are in place within your school or within the county that addresses teaching children experiencing toxic stress?

8. What training or professional development on supporting children experiencing toxic stress have you received?

9. What specific training, materials, or policies would you like to see presented for teachers who feel challenged to support children experiencing toxic stress?

Potential Probes, used as needed

1. Can you explain,

2. Can you give me some examples

3. What other things do you consider when ___.

I want to thank you for taking the time to meet with me today. You have provided me with some important information. I will be transcribing this interview and will email you a summary. You will check to ensure your thoughts were adequately recorded. I may also need to contact you via email for clarity of your responses if any confusion should arise during transcription. Thank you again and please contact me for any questions or concerns.