LEADING WITH HOPE: EXPLORING A GROUNDED THEORY OF TRAUMA
INFORMED LEADERSHIP FOR SCHOOL PRINCIPALS

A Dissertation
by
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Abstract

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INFORMED LEADERSHIP FOR SCHOOL PRINCIPALS

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Leading with Hope: Exploring a Grounded Theory of Trauma Informed Leadership for School Principals is a grounded theory research study designed to help school principals understand ways to support students that have experienced traumatic circumstances, Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), and stress. This study involved 15 school principals that were recruited from social media groups and self-identified as trauma informed. The interviews that were conducted were analyzed using grounded theory methods to generate a theory about how school principals enact trauma informed strategies within their leadership. Key concepts of this theory are *leading with hope* and *being trauma informed.* Hope theory and leadership theories were also examined to help make meaning from the interviews of the participants. The impact of this theory of trauma informed leadership may help in the revision of how school principals are evaluated, professional development for school principals, and the academic preparation for school administration candidates.

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Dedication

This work is dedicated to my family: Shannon, Ethan, and Lillian. Without your love and support this work would not have been possible. I am extremely lucky to have such a wonderful support system. Between the creation of this dissertation and my schedule as a high school principal, I have sacrificed too much time with you. I have missed you and look forward to spending my weekends with my family again!

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

"The antidote for loss and grief is hope. Use the word often—it needs to be explicitly taught. Encourage teachers to point out the hope for the future. Help students identify things about which they are thankful or happy. (Sadin, 2021, p. 20).

How does a principal lead with hope? It is the hope that I have for my students that begs the question "How can I help you and support you through your educational journey?" This is a heartfelt sentiment that I truly have, but hope should go beyond optimism. To lead with hope, a principal must understand what hope is. Hellman (2021) describes the simplicity of hope as the idea that your future will be better than it is today, and that you have the power to make it so. This study examined how principals should lead with hope by going beyond optimism and taking action to make their schools a better learning environment for students.

Understanding how principals can help students be successful is an important pillar of educational leadership. Principals are given the responsibility of creating and maintaining the learning environment of the school so that students can learn the academic curriculum. One of the most confounding challenges that face school leaders today is how to support students that have experienced traumatic circumstances. In the research presented in Chapter 2 of this dissertation, I examined how behaviors driven by exposure to trauma can be seen as challenges to teachers and school staff. These behaviors are often a result of adaptive behaviors to bolster against trauma and/or an attempt to regain control in their lives. Research is also presented that examines school leadership and the power of hope. School principals that utilize and foster the principles of hope in their leadership role may help more students understand that their future can be better than the situations they are currently in.

This study is needed to help school leaders understand the impact of traumatic circumstances on student academics and behavior and how this knowledge should inform their leadership practices.

What is Trauma?

It is important to have a clear understanding of what events and/or circumstances are traumatic and potentially could have a larger impact on a person's life. As Weathers and Keane (2007) noted, it is difficult to create a general definition for trauma. Stressors and traumatic events or circumstances may range in magnitude and frequency. Traumatic events occur more often than previously thought and although may have less magnitude, they may occur in greater frequency. This range of magnitude leads some researchers to categorize trauma as large "T" trauma and small "t" trauma (Barbash, 2017). Large or big "T" trauma describes extraordinary circumstances and events with significant impact, such as natural disasters, terrorist attacks, or sexual assault. Small "t" trauma can be more personalized and may not be life threatening events, but still exceed our ability to cope and cause people distress. These events can be conflict with another person, financial worry, or infidelity of a spouse (Barbash, 2017).

Big T and little t can also be applied to discrimination experienced by people that have been marginalized. Race-based trauma refers to the events of danger related to real or perceived experience of racial discrimination (Comas-Díaz et al., 2019). A traumatizing event in a person's life, such as the death of a loved one due to a hate crime, would be a big T trauma, requiring ways to cope from the loss of a loved one, but also by the nature of that loss. A student could also experience little t racial trauma as well. An example of this would be if a marginalized student felt the constant pressure of being a person in an organization of

that ethnicity. This person would still need to find ways of coping with the stress and trauma that the pressure would have on them. Walker, Goings and Henderson (2022) make this point in how school administrators and School Resource Officers (SROs) inflict race-based trauma on students of color due to adherence to policies driven by institutional racism.

Discrimination based on gender identity, sexual orientation, and gender nonconformity would also be impacted by big T and little t trauma. Gorski (2020) explains how school policies can have a traumatizing effect on students when not allowed to use the name they identify with, or the bathroom of their gender identity. Traumatization can also occur when the belief systems of LGBT students are erased from sex education curricula, as well as bullying that may be allowed to continue by school officials. This bullying also applies to students that break stereotypes with gender nonconformity.

Students with disabilities can also find themselves coping with the stress of traumatic circumstances. Offerman et al. (2022) makes note of the prevalence of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) of students with disabilities. ACEs can present themselves in various forms and fall under big T and Little t categories. Disabilities that impact emotional and sensory control may have an impact on social interactions of students at school. Some interactions may create a hostile environment with the child's peers due to their disability.

The situations people find themselves in can lead to trauma impacting their lives. Traumatic circumstances include maltreatment, witnessing parental violence, as well as sudden, untimely, and unforeseen deaths. Other experiences include neglect, emotional abuse, and stigmatizing events such as peer aggression. Far reaching events or circumstances which are a threat to life or are violent, include fires, floods, car accidents, terrorism, or war. These circumstances can affect whole communities, while others are more specific to a

family or to a child. Whether the trauma exposure is personal, family related or community-based can have particular significance for the impact it has on family and peers. The impact will also be felt in the different strategies and techniques for preventative action (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

These examples are not to be viewed as a comprehensive list, but instead offer an idea of the types of circumstances that are understood to be traumatic. May and Wisco (2016) explain that direct and indirect exposure to trauma as well as proximity to trauma, are important pieces of information when trying to understand what trauma is. Trauma can be specific to an individual.

For the purposes of this research study, trauma is understood to be a person's emotional response to a stressful experience (Weathers & Keane, 2007). The idea of big "T" and small "t" apply to understand the magnitude of a distressing event, and how the frequency of smaller events build up to create stressful experiences (Barbash, 2017). Students are exposed to both types of traumas and they both have an impact on a student's success in the learning community. Big "T" trauma describes extraordinary events and/or circumstances with significant impact, that also need support to overcome. Small "t" trauma can be more individualized and may not be immediately life threatening, but still exceed a student's ability to psychologically cope.

Statement of the Problem

Supporting students that have been exposed to trauma has been a part of many schools' cultures since before the COVID-19 global pandemic (Sadin, 2020). The pandemic highlighted how some schools have struggled with this goal. Schools have been centers of learning, but also food centers, communities for social engagement, childcare, as well as

areas for student support (Shah & Shaker, 2020). Students who suffered from trauma before and during the pandemic were at risk of losing one of their most important safety nets in life, the safety of school. After the pandemic, social and emotional support for students was further emphasized. Schools struggled to provide the necessary support for students that had experienced traumatic events and/or circumstances during the pandemic. School principals lacked the capacity to provide the necessary student support due to the novel nature of the pandemic. School principals needed time to understand and disseminate how to support our students. There is a need to have a better idea of how schools can support students that have suffered from trauma. School systems also need to be able to build capacity with school principals, so they can lead their learning communities to ensure all students are successful. As school systems have returned to in-person learning, the issues highlighted by school closures and remote learning remain. Students impacted by trauma needed support before and during the pandemic. The need for Social Emotional Learning (SEL) was highlighted during the pandemic, but the need has been there before. School systems need to provide support to the teachers and school principals in understanding how to support students impacted by trauma.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explore a grounded theory of trauma informed leadership that may help principals lead their schools. To gain a better understanding of this, a dialogue regarding how schools have supported students suffering from traumatic events needs to take place. The school support provided was viewed from the perspective of the school principal. School principals may be able to help individuals by providing the appropriate leadership practices within their schools and create an environment that lessens

the chances of traumatization. This study may help principals improve student outcomes and better support these students using the concept of hope, and the power that it can have on an any individual, especially those that have experienced trauma.

Research Questions

This study examined the school support provided to students impacted by trauma from the perspective of the principal in the hope of explaining a grounded theory of trauma informed leadership. This research study aims to go beyond description of the phenomenon and explains why trauma informed leadership is important in education. To guide this study, I focused on the following research questions:

Question 1

How do public school principals come to understand themselves as trauma informed leaders?

Question 2

How do public school principals utilize trauma-informed strategies in their leadership?

Methodological Approach

This was a qualitative study and relied heavily on the constructed knowledge of school principals. Constructivism flows from the epistemological perspective that reality exists and is dependent upon the person and that person's lived experiences and interactions (Lincoln, et al., 2018). Through experiences each person constructs knowledge and adds information into what they believe they already know. Each new experience adds information to the knowledge base. The new information refines prior knowledge, or the new information changes what is known by that person. Our interaction with knowledge makes it

our reality. This means there are multiple realities and not a single, objective reality. This type of approach was chosen because it requires the examination of how traumatic events and/or circumstances affect student academics and behavior over a period through the lens of a school principal. This approach allowed the researcher the ability to gain understanding from the meaning created by the school principal of how students have been affected, and what leadership action was taken based on this meaning. Following this idea means that studying trauma-informed leadership should situate itself in the collective experiences of the population for the research study.

This study used grounded theory methodology to go beyond a description or explanation of the phenomenon of trauma informed leadership. It seeks to explain how leaders, specifically school principals, become trauma informed. The methods employed have generated a theory that explains trauma informed leadership for school principals. This explanation is in the context experienced by the participants of the study. This theory has been directly pulled from the data collected in the study, and analyzed using the qualitative methods associated with grounded theory generation (Birks & Mills, 2015)

One way to construct the data necessary to make comparisons between these leadership actions is through qualitative methods (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The qualitative methods used include semi-structured and unstructured interviews, memos, and field notes. These methods are an appropriate way to collect the thoughts and ideas from the school leaders in this study. The interviews construct knowledge based on the person's perceptions about a topic and the discussions with the researcher (Glesne, 2016).

Significance of the Study

The importance of supporting students that have experienced trauma has been a vital function of schools since before the COVID-19 pandemic. The closure of schools and movement to online and remote instruction has had a profound impact on educational practice. School administrators were tasked with developing plans for instruction on an equitable footing in a world full of inequities. Students that have been exposed to ACEs and mental health issues saw the safety net of school being taken away. It is important to understand the dangers school systems faced with the unknown factors surrounding the pandemic. The transformation to online public school was a remarkable feat, and the efforts of the federal, state, and local governments in providing the necessary devices and connectivity should not go unnoticed. However, now is the time to examine how we can learn from mistakes that were made. This is the most opportune time to begin the dialogue concerning the role of school leadership in trauma informed practices in the learning environment. This study presents recommendations for how principals can be trained and evaluated by adding components of trauma informed leadership to college academic programming and school executive standards. Staff morale can also be positively impacted by having school principals that are trauma informed leaders. Teachers can benefit from the improved success of all their students. Trauma informed leadership engages principals with helping teachers and staff members that have been exposed to trauma themselves.

Delimitations

This study involved principals of K-12 public schools that operate in the United States. The study included principals that are beginning the principalship as well as experienced principals. The possibility of seeing differences in academic preparation of

newer principals to veteran principals since trauma informed leadership is a relatively new term is possible. The study is also limited to public school principals because the nature of public school means the principals of public schools have a larger group of stakeholders to manage, as well as a larger and more diverse student population. A host of decisions are made daily by school principals, and the boundaries of this study aim to understand how trauma informed leaders make decisions and act in response to the hardships placed on students.

Chapter Summary

Students have been impacted by traumatic events and/or circumstances before the COVID 19 pandemic, but a new emphasis has been placed on schools to provide social and emotional support for students. This chapter introduced the idea of what trauma is and why it has had such an impact on our students. A problem facing the education of students impacted by trauma involves the leadership capacity of principals. This study examines the meanings of trauma informed leadership and how trauma informed practices can help students be more successful. The significance of this study may impact how school leaders are trained at the academic level as well as evaluated. The boundaries of this study also limit the scope to principals in the United States.

In the chapters that follow, I expand on the dialogue started in this chapter. In Chapter 2 I provide the background in understanding trauma as it is experienced by children and how schools have tried to support these students. I also examine gaps in understanding as it relates to trauma informed leadership and leadership theory in education. In Chapter 3 I diagramed how the research questions presented in this chapter were answered using qualitative methods to develop a grounded theory of Trauma Informed Leadership. In

Chapter 4 I discussed the findings of the research study and in Chapter 5 I examined the

significance of those findings. I make the connections to Hope Theory and Trauma Informed

Leadership. I also explain the importance of the findings to future research and practice.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

"We know that ACEs have a negative impact on educational outcomes. But we also know that it doesn't have to be that way. Resilience-focused interventions can help students deal with past trauma and prepare them going forward" (Conn et al., 2020, p. 63).

In this chapter I examined the literature surrounding the psychological and biological impact of trauma. Trauma informed teaching strategies and trauma informed schools are also examined through the context of education and implications for school leadership. Trauma informed leadership is also examined to gain a better understanding of the context in which school leaders make decisions related to supporting students impacted by trauma and adverse childhood events (ACEs). I also examined leadership theory and the implications for school leaders.

Psychological Trauma

Psychological trauma can be traced back to the 1980's when researchers began to look at the impact war violence had on veterans of the Vietnam Conflict, as well as the open discussion of the impact of sexual abuse and rape on women during the women's liberation movement (Van der Kolk, 2000). The creation of the diagnostic term post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) into the third edition of the DSM-3 enabled psychologists the ability to capture the psychopathology of traumatization in adults. PTSD can be seen as the beginning of modern concepts of trauma, and it builds on the previous works of Sigmund Freud, Josef Breuer, and Pierre Janet of the 19th and 20th centuries. The research on trauma evolved as the twentieth century continued with two world wars, and the work of Abram Kardiner on shell

shock and trauma (Van der Kolk, 2000). Since 1980 research has led to a better understanding of what trauma is, and it has developed to include more than PTSD.

Classifying Trauma

People experience traumatic events and/or circumstances in their lives and develop ways of coping with the effects. The effective use of internal and external assets leads to the development of resiliency in the person being exposed to trauma (Conn et al., 2020). The term acute trauma refers to a single incident that has caused a person distress. An example of an acute traumatic event is the death of a loved one. The feelings of sadness are great, especially for a person that is a close loved one. People can cope using support systems to share their grief and eventually carry on with their lives. In some cases, people are exposed to traumatic events more often, being characterized as chronic trauma. Examples of chronic trauma could be living in a home that deals with domestic abuse as a regular occurrence or experiencing emotional or sexual abuse for a prolonged period (Shanks & Robinson, 2013). A third type of trauma, complex trauma, is characterized by exposure to varied and multiple traumatic events, repeatedly and cumulatively, within specific relationships and context (Firestone, 2012).

There are other types of traumas that have been researched to show the stress and emotional impact events and/or circumstances have on specific portions of the population. One example is racial trauma, or race-based stress. This refers to the events of danger related to real or perceived experience of racial discrimination (Comas-Díaz et al., 2019). Another example is historical trauma. This is when multiple generations experience trauma by a specific cultural, racial, or ethnic group. It is related to major events in history that oppressed

a particular group of people, such as slavery, the Holocaust, forced migration, and the violent

colonization of Native Americans (Sotero, 2006)

Biological Impact

ACEs may impact children by changing how their body responds to different events.

The body systems work together instinctively to make sure the brain and body are prepared

to react to a situation effectively, making responses become less thoughtful and more reactive

(Perry, 2004, as cited in Rosenbaum-Nordoft, 2018). These physiological changes are what

lead to the fight, flight, or freeze responses mentioned earlier. These reactions are often what

lead to school personnel becoming aware that a student has experienced trauma and ACEs in

their life. Persistently elevated levels of stress hormones, such as when a child is in a

chronically stressful environment, can disrupt the brain development of the child. When

exposed to a threat, the limbic system takes over decreasing activity in the prefrontal cortex.

This shift allows the child to focus entirely on the perceived threat so they can survive. This

explains the necessity of why early detection and intervention are so necessary for the child's

healthy development (Rosenbaum-Nordoft, 2018).

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)

Research has shown childhood traumatic events may be linked to the health and

wellbeing of the child when they reached adulthood (Felitti et al., 1998). It also led to the

term *adverse childhood experiences* (ACE) being used in great length in the subsequent

literature that deals with the impact these events and/or circumstances have on a child's

education. Romano et al. (2015) took this research further and applied it to elementary age

students. Their results showed that ACEs had a negative impact on the child's school

success. Furthermore, the more stressors a child experienced, the more likely the child was to

show a gap in academic performance and emotional well-being in the classroom. ACEs are traumatic events to which children are exposed. These events and/or circumstances can be physical/emotional abuse or other forms of neglect such as prolonged hunger and witnessing domestic violence. The number of ACEs a child is exposed to can have an impact on the child's physiology and behavior. Children experiencing chronic abuse and/or neglect are at a higher risk for trauma-related challenges. This is due to a constant fear of harmful events. Children in these conditions are likely to develop totally different views of the world and may adapt dysfunctional behavior patterns for relating to the world (Swick et al., 2013). An example of this may be when a teacher redirects a student off task, the tone of voice they use may trigger a defiant behavior (talking back or running from the classroom). For students that have not been exposed to these same ACEs, their responses to the teacher's tone may be to get back on task. The student exposed to chronic ACEs may have developed the behavior that when presented with a raised voice they may fight (yell back) or flee (run from the classroom). Rosenbaum-Nordoft (2018) explains that "as a result of trauma, children can end up living in a heightened state of arousal that triggers a response of fight, flight or freeze even when no threat is present" (p. 3). These responses to trauma can be manifested in different ways, such as hypervigilance, guilt, fear, anger, perfectionism, intrusive thoughts, irritability, or avoidance.

ACEs appear to have an impact on a student's success in the educational environment. Differences in exposure to ACEs may contribute to academic inequities, leading to an achievement gap (McConnico et al., 2016). ACEs are related to achievement gaps because the populations of students that show achievement gaps also show exposure to ACEs. This achievement gap compels school and district leaders to provide support to

students experiencing chronic trauma to make the classroom and school more inclusive. Early intervention is also important to student wellbeing. "As a result of the significant neuro-biological, social, emotional, and cognitive effects of chronic trauma exposure, it is particularly important to intervene early to promote optimal development and success" (McConnico et al., 2016, p. 37). Exposure to chronic ACEs can have a negative impact on a student's academic development.

Chronic exposure to ACEs can also have a negative impact on a child's social development. The child's responses in the classroom setting may lead to their becoming stigmatized and excluded by peers due to the dramatic nature of their behavioral challenges (McConnico et al. 2016). This is due to the different responses these students may have to different stimuli. The other students may not understand why the child reacts the way they do, leading to the student becoming isolated by their peers. These actions leave the child feeling more alone, and the classroom environment has become less as a haven from the trauma the child experiences at home.

There is also literature that suggests the initial ACEs study may not have gone far enough in understanding the experiences faced by different socioeconomic and ethnic groups. By expanding the criteria used from the initial ACEs study, researchers have been able to include racial discrimination, danger of unsafe neighborhoods, living in foster care, bullying, and witnessing violence (Cronholm, 2015). The expansion of this research is the logical process to determine how other life circumstances surrounding trauma impacts the lives of children. The expanded criteria for ACEs should be included in future research to expand on these ideas.

The effects of childhood trauma have the potential to follow the child through their development into adulthood. Children who experience trauma have a heightened risk of developing a range of physical, mental health, and behavioral difficulties (Cooper, 2010; Gershoff, et al., 2007 as cited in Anderson & Blitz, 2015). The effect of these developed conditions can lead to years of rehabilitation through the mental health system, or if the behaviors escalate to criminal, the legal system. Larson et al. (2017) explains that students exposed to trauma are more likely to perform poorly in school, have diminished opportunities in education and employment, and are at a higher risk for medical and mental health conditions, and early death. The question we must ask ourselves is are our schools supporting students struggling with trauma? The events of this period of a student's growth will most likely have a lasting effect on the lives of our children.

Another effect of trauma is the toxic stress that is experienced by the student. According to Shanks and Robinson (2013), toxic stress is "caused by extreme, prolonged adversity in the absence of a supportive network of adults to help the child adapt. The stressful experience itself is not the problem, but how the child's body responds" (p. 162). The chronic stress of ACEs on a child can lead to a negative impact on the child's mental health and wellbeing. Experiencing toxic stress has the potential to have a significant impact on the development of healthy attachment and the ability to feel safe, trust others, and feel a sense of control over the student's life (McConnico et al., 2016). One could argue that the events of the COVID-19 pandemic filled many children with this sense that they had lost control of their lives. Students that had been successfully maintaining their sense of well-being may have needed the support system the school community provides during the lockdowns and school closures of the spring of 2020. It would be especially important for

school systems to provide this support when schools started back in the fall of 2020 through remote learning. It is equally important that students receive this support before and after the global pandemic.

An alternate view of this idea of toxic stress is that toxic stress is trauma by another name. It fits within the understanding of what chronic trauma is and does not seem to offer anything more to the understanding of the emotional distress experienced by people subjected to chronic trauma.

Trauma Informed Schools

After understanding what trauma is and how it impacts students, the next step is understanding how schools can support students. Trauma informed schools are schools that have taken the time to understand and reconceptualize the barriers presented to the learning environment by chronic trauma in the lives of students and how it impacts student behavior (Anderson & Blitz, 2015). School and district leaders have taken the time to build teacher capacity in understanding the impact trauma has on student lives, and the strategies schools can use to support students as they cope with the results of trauma. Sadin (2020) explains that trauma informed schools begin and end with the staff. Teachers must be trained in what trauma informed strategies are and the staff needs to be supported to ensure teachers are not at risk of experiencing trauma themselves. By looking at ways schools can implement professional development and build institutional capacity with a tiered system of support, one can see how leaders in education can have a positive impact on the academic success of these students. The tiered system of support offers different layers of support, minimal amount for students that do not need it, to added support as students' progress through tiers. The implementation of a Social Emotional Learning (SEL) plan or curriculum is also particularly

important as a trauma informed approach in schools. The importance stems from what may appear to teachers and other students as disruptive behavior, is a social emotional response to stress and stimuli from their surroundings (Anderson & Blitz, 2015).

Trauma informed schools have become more popular in recent years. Schools have worked to provide training and build teacher capacity in developing and maintaining trauma informed approaches, but as Gorski (2020) points out, some schools are more interested in the label of trauma informed and not interested in making the difficult systemic changes necessary to truly be a trauma informed school. A school's attempts at trauma informed approaches could backfire and retraumatize some students. To this point, some schools are also not willing to take on the heavy burden associated with implementing equitable trauma informed approaches. An example of this can be found in the approaches by some schools to resist trauma informed gender diversity policies, such as being addressed by the pronoun or names they choose (Gorski, 2020). This makes the implementation of trauma informed approaches even more important so students who have faced trauma at home should not experience traumatization at school.

Schools may need to take on a tiered level of support when it comes to students that have suffered with chronic trauma and ACEs. Tiered levels of support refer to different levels of interventions that school personnel use to help students be more successful. Tier 1 would be instruction for the whole group, where most of the students would be able to understand. An example could be the teaching of a Social Emotional curriculum to all the students of a kindergarten class. Some students may continue to have difficulty controlling their emotions, so a tier 2 intervention could be the students talking with the school counselor with a small group of students to discuss how to identify emotions. A comprehensive

approach can be impactful to address the multiple levels of intervention that are required to adequately result in sustainable and effective practice change (McConnico et al., 2016). Teachers and school counselors can partner together to understand classroom instruction that can help students with healthy mental, social, and emotional development. Teachers can work with counselors on best practices to implement and develop effective curriculum, and counselors can work with teachers on practices that can be added to instructional pedagogy. Trauma-informed practices include social–emotional development and problem-solving skills that classroom staff are in an optimal position to facilitate (Anderson & Blitz, 2015). Researchers often see trauma informed practices with social-emotional development due to the behavior of students that have suffered trauma. What may be regarded as disruptive behavior by the teacher may be a social emotional response to anxiety or stress. It is important for teachers and school staff to differentiate between the child and the behavior. With a trauma-informed mindset, teachers and staff can move away from thinking of the problem being with the student, to the function of the student's behavior. When a student is in a hyper-vigilant state, a functional behavior analysis can be conducted to determine what the function behind the behavior is. Once enough data has been collected, a behavior support plan can be created to help the child when they are in this state (Rosenbaum-Nordoft, 2018). Once student behavior has risen to the need of extra support beyond what the classroom provides, an added layer of support can be provided to help the student. An in classroom intervention could be an area that any student can use as a cool down spot for when they have become frustrated with someone or something. An additional support could be a check in, check out system where the student meets with another person, not the teacher, and plans goals and discusses how their week is progressing. It is important for classrooms to

implement strategies that are trust building, relationship building, and nurturing environments (Swick et al., 2013).

In some cases, parents and students have shown a reluctance to participate in the support the school is willing to provide. This can be due to a feeling that the parent or child is being judged by the ones seeking to help. It is important to try to lessen this feeling by moving from a lens of "what is wrong with you" to one of "what has happened to you", and finally to "what helps you" (Taylor & Barrett, 2018). In some cases, children may not have the language skills or self-knowledge to explain what can help them. Schools should be prepared to work with students and stakeholders on partnering together on understanding what has happened to a child. It is important that this is refined into how the school communicates with parents, and the relationships they build with parents and students. The reluctance shown by parents and students could be amplified by the COVID-19 pandemic, because students may not participate in online lessons, or be as willing to reach out for help. School principals utilize their leadership skills in helping students recognize school supports.

Leadership in Schools

Trauma informed leadership begins with the school principal making connections between trauma informed practice and the leadership of the school. School leadership is an important component when looking at the effectiveness of schools. Leadership in the school can be found beyond the principal's office. Teachers, secretaries, teacher assistants, other staff members, parents, and students have leadership roles in the modern school. The structure of modern school leadership has been influenced by different leadership theories and styles. To gain a better understanding of trauma informed leadership, an examination of traditional leadership models is necessary.

Transactional Leadership

Transactional leadership can be viewed as when the leader ensures compliance of their followers by rewarding or punishing them. This form of leadership compels followers to perform their best and to achieve their objective. The rewards and penalties are what create an effective transactional leader (Avolio & Bass, 2002). If transactional leaders improve their leadership skills, they will be more effective, innovative, risk-taking, and satisfied with the results of their leadership. The leader and follower relationship are transactional in nature, hence the name. Good results will be rewarded, uncompleted objectives will receive punishment.

When understanding transactional leadership, it is important to examine the goals of the leader. One of the leader's main goals is to help establish responsibilities and roles for each follower (Raptist et al., 2021). By establishing the responsibilities and roles clearly, the leader is making sure that there is no ambiguity on job responsibilities. This clarity also enables the leader to clearly reward the most effective team members and punish those team members that are not effective. School principals use this type of leadership when dealing with instructional accountability of teachers. Teachers that can effectively teach curriculum objectives are rewarded, whereas those that do not are given support for improvement. If the teacher does not improve, the punishment may come in the form of a lack of praise, or possibly dismissal.

Transactional leadership is based on the concept that leaders manage the organization through rewards and penalties based on the performance of their followers. Transactional leaders can control the processes through either rewards that are based on positive

performance or management by exception, or only acting when a result occurs that is unexpected (Bass & Riggio, 2006).

Transactional leadership would appear not to fully appreciate the impact of subjective factors when it comes to educating students. Students that have less support at home, learning disabilities, or socioeconomic factors will have an impact on a teacher's accountability measures. Should a teacher be punished if these factors prevent the teacher's students from performing on benchmark or standardized tests? Should a teacher be rewarded when their students that may come from affluent homes or engaging parents show higher proficiency or growth. The subjectivity of what impacts student learning has a tremendous impact on how a teacher may be rewarded or penalized using this form of leadership.

Transformational Leadership

Transformational leadership can be viewed as a leadership style that seeks for all members of the team to aspire to be better. Transformational leaders help their followers grow and become leaders themselves. This happens by responding to the needs of their followers, by empowering their followers, and facilitating a common set of objectives and goals for the team and the whole organization. Literature suggests that transformational leadership can lead followers to exceed performance expectation and to attain follower satisfaction with the organization (Goktas, 2021).

Transformational leaders set themselves apart from other types of leaders by having more interactions with their colleagues and followers. Through agreements and common exchanges, they transform the behaviors of their followers into developed, task-oriented actions. Some of the components of transformational leadership are inspirational motivation, idealized influence, individualized consideration, and intellectual stimulation (Bass &

Riggio, 2006). Leaders look to help followers aspire to be better, and by working as a whole team, aspire to see the organization be better. This is achieved by motivating followers by raising their awareness of organizational goals and by inspiring them to move beyond their own interests for the good of the organization. This requires transformational leaders to be more dependent on charisma in motivating teachers rather than a position of authority within the hierarchy (Tan et al., 2022).

Transformational leaders take on many roles to reach their goals. Although followers may sometimes misunderstand them, the transformational leadership style is able to resolve problems. Transformational leaders are often active participants in the goal achieving process but give explicit direction when needed. Where some followers may see them as democratic, some followers may mistake them for being undemocratic or elitist (Avolio & Bass, 2002).

Distributed Leadership

The term distributed leadership has been used to describe shared leadership, delegated leadership, and democratic leadership, but it is the idea that distributed leadership has great potential to bring about school improvement that has led to it becoming one of the most recognizable leadership styles in education (Hairon & Goh, 2015). Distributed leadership recognizes that schools are complex environments, and all school groups must be empowered in the decision making process to improve the school. By empowering the stakeholders of school, it leads to common ownership of the school, teachers buy in, and relieves the pressure on the school principal to be the sole voice of authority (Tan et al., 2002).

What does distributed leadership look like within a school? Harris (2008) has identified several characteristics of distributed leadership. These include broad-based leadership, multiple levels of involvement in decision making, including formal and informal

leaders, and links vertical and lateral leadership structures. One of the key components includes the development of leadership among teachers and other staff members within the school. With leadership comes ownership of what is being decided, and when decisions lead to improvement it can lead to validation of the thoughts and ideas of the stakeholders involved in the leadership decisions.

Trauma Informed Leadership

School principals are tasked with the responsibility of creating and maintaining the learning environment of the school so that students can learn the academic program. Despite a school's mission to engage students in learning, successful interventions will require fostering both mental well-being and academic achievement (Romano et al., 2015). This understanding is important when viewed through the lens of a global pandemic. School systems would need to address the mental well-being of students upon their return to schools, virtually or in person in the 2020-2021 school year. The United States has high rates of child poverty, with a limited social net, meaning that economic security for families can have a tremendous positive effect, where economic distress will have a tragic one (Shanks & Robinson, 2013). These students are exposed to toxic stress and ACEs and may be present in the same classrooms as more affluent peers. Students that have been exposed to stress present challenges to the established system of how schools have operated for years.

The use of zero tolerance policies concerning students that have suffered trauma can often do more harm than good. These students have already internalized their responses to traumatic events, and disciplinary actions by a principal can retrigger these events (Anderson, & Blitz, 2015). A student that has suffered from trauma that is defiant to a teacher and yells at them may not be able to understand or appreciate a punishment of in school suspension for

being disrespectful. A trauma informed approach will look to have a conversation with the student and look at methods to prevent outbursts like this from happening again. A response such as this requires student discipline to be treated in a more individualized manner, something that if the school administration can get teachers to understand, will help in building teacher capacity. If the point can be made how the long term effects of chronic trauma can lead children to experience lifelong difficulties, teachers can buy in to the approach (Rosenbaum-Nordoft, 2018).

School and district leadership should relay the importance of building teachers and institutional capacity in understanding the effects of ACEs. Building the capacity of teachers to support students by gaining an understanding of trauma and its impact on learning and behavior is critical. If teachers can understand how important it is to establish and maintain positive, caring, and supportive relationships with their students, they will be able to prevent some problem behavior. Understanding will also help to develop a sense of trust, security, and hope among their students that have been exposed to trauma (McConnico et al., 2016). A student-teacher relationship characterized by conflict will result with the teacher attempting to control their behavior and will hinder efforts to help them succeed. A relationship that can help the student feel safe and promote healthy decisions will be more effective at helping redirect problem behavior (Rosenbaum-Nordoft, 2018). The support of the school principal must also include time for teachers to debrief when teachers have had to endure stressful events with students. Support also includes proper professional development to help teachers understand how to cope with the stress of difficult student behavior. School principals should also pair more trauma informed/experienced teachers with teachers less knowledgeable (Howell et al., 2019). The insight of the trauma informed teachers is especially important

during the pandemic. The use of daily check-ins with staff at virtual faculty meetings, or teachers asking students how their previous day was can be seen as an extension of trying to help each other cope with the daily stress everyone was under.

School principals can also seek opportunities to partner with mental health professionals and community organizations. Larson et al. (2017) suggest that high quality, accessible, and culturally responsive mental health screening, and treatment services are needed for children and adolescents, specifically within school settings. School based therapy being provided by mental health professionals is an important intervention. While school counselors are not mental health professionals, it is important to incorporate them in the leadership decisions on how to provide tiered support for students that have suffered through trauma (Howell et al., 2019). Partnering with community organizations can also provide additional support to students that have been exposed to ACEs. Mendelson (2015) has discussed the success urban schools have had with partnering in communities using existing ties to workforce development programs. Community partnerships have proven successful in rural areas as well. The close ties felt in rural communities should be leveraged by school leaders to have a positive effect on students that have suffered from chronic trauma (Hartman, 2017). Partnerships with the local Rotary Club or area churches that can help with providing mentors or buddies for students. With the loss of many of these community partnerships due to COVID-19 lock downs and reopening procedures with schools, it fell upon the school system to be the center for these wrap-around services that supported mental health.

School principals may also adopt a tiered system of support to help with the success of students exposed to chronic trauma. Successfully adopting a trauma informed environment

would mean that the entire school community is committed to the process and is knowledgeable of the levels of support available (Alberta Education, 2008). Teachers need to be able to collect data, understand how to interpret it, and use it to determine if a student needs more intensive support for social and emotional learning. The school principal must head this change, but for it to be effective the leader must get teacher understanding so they may contribute to the implementation and the ultimate success or failure of its adoption. In North Carolina, the adoption of a multi-tiered system of support is a requirement, but each individual district is responsible for the development and implementation of how the tiers of support will work.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter I examined the literature and policies surrounding psychological trauma. I examined the different categories of trauma and examined trauma informed schools. The research behind the biological results of trauma was also examined to provide some context to the behaviors of students impacted by ACEs in the school environment. Leadership styles were explored to gain a better idea of what leadership looks like in schools. Trauma informed leadership was also examined to gain a better understanding of the context in which school leaders make decisions related to supporting students impacted by trauma, adverse childhood events (ACEs), and chronic trauma. In Chapter 3 I examined how the research questions were addressed using qualitative methods to develop a grounded theory of trauma informed leadership.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

I have explored the need to understand how trauma informed leadership can be used to help principals better understand students that have experienced trauma and provide a more supportive school environment. To gain a basic understanding of trauma and trauma informed leadership, I laid out the research in the previous chapter as a foundation of what the academic community has come to know, as well as gaps of understanding related to the topic of trauma informed leadership. The literature also relays the destabilizing impact the global pandemic has had on these researched ideas. In this chapter I discuss the methodology used to address the research questions. I also discussed the research paradigm and design used to carry out the procedures and data analysis. I also discussed trustworthiness, ethical considerations and my own positionality as the researcher.

As stated by Birks and Mills (2015) the use of literature in the beginning stages of a grounded theory study has sparked much debate. The nature of a grounded theory study dictates that it be free and open to discovery, and this freedom of thought could be restricted if presented with previous research and theory directly related to the research topic. However, it is important to have a basic idea of what the different terms and theories are, and how they are used to help describe a phenomenon. The use of literature can enhance theoretical sensitivity and can be used as a source for theoretical codes (Birks & Mills, 2015).

Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to examine the school support provided to students impacted by trauma from the perspective of the school leader in the hope of explaining a grounded theory of trauma informed leadership that may help students, teachers, school

leaders, and parents in the future. To guide this study, I focused on the following research questions:

Question 1

How do public school principals come to understand themselves as trauma informed leaders?

Question 2

How do public school principals utilize trauma-informed strategies in their leadership?

Research Paradigm

This study was conducted from a constructivist perspective. Constructivism is a term that encompasses many different thoughts and ideas when discussed with researchers. As Matthews (2000) explains that constructivism is not only a theory for the origin of ideas, but a theory of learning. It is also viewed as theories for teaching, education, and educational administration. Mathews goes on to propose that constructivism has become education's version of a "grand unified theory" (p. 491). With a constructivist framework, a researcher can gain knowledge by examining the ways in which people construct knowledge through lived experiences and reflection. The researcher within this paradigm tries to understand a subject through individual experiences because we are not able separate ourselves from what we know (Lincoln et al., 2018). The knowledge that an individual construct over their lifetime grows as they learn new knowledge from the many experiences they have. From a constructivist viewpoint, research can be disputed if it runs contrary with our lived experiences for this reason. Our understanding speaks to how we utilize research and observation to explain behavior. Lincoln et al. (2018) maintains that constructivists value

knowledge that is transactional. An exchange of knowledge between individuals is part of the transaction of knowledge creation.

Research Design

The study's design utilized qualitative methods to capture the knowledge created through the interactions of the researcher and the participants of the study. Through qualitative methods it is the hope to develop a theory to understand the phenomenon experienced by school principals and trauma informed leadership. Theory generation should be grounded in research, which is exactly what grounded theory does. Birks and Mills (2015) explain the evolving nature of grounded theory research due to the fluid, dynamic nature of the research methods used. The emergence of theory and explanation of a phenomenon comes after a process of deduction and reasoning involving the methods described in this chapter.

Grounded Theory

Contemporary understandings of grounded theory are informed by the seminal work of Anselm Strauss and Barney Glasser in 1967 with the publication of *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*. Charmaz (2012) describes grounded theory primarily as a method of analysis. Each phase of inquiry in a grounded theory study raises the level of analysis and comparison, with the hope of achieving theoretical emergence. The methods used in grounded theory are used by qualitative researchers as ways of analysis and understanding. The generation of a comprehensive and integrated theory helps conceptualize the answers to "why" questions. These answers offer explanations as opposed to simple descriptions of what and how a phenomenon occurs.

Grounded theory is more than a way to analyze data, but also a means of collecting and framing data. Initial coding and categorization of data is the first step of a grounded theory research study. Once the coding and categories have been started, concurrent data collection and analysis occurs through purposive sampling, or sampling when the researcher chooses a specific population for their research. Through writing memos and analysis of the data, theoretical sampling occurs to focus the comparative analysis of data. Intermediate coding is the second major stage of data analysis after the initial coding. This level of coding helps the researcher to fully develop categories, and to develop a core category. The final steps include advanced coding as this is a valuable part of theoretical integration. The final product of a grounded theory study is an integrated and comprehensive grounded theory that explains the phenomenon being studied (Birks & Mills, 2015).

Procedures and Data Sources

The procedures used in this research study included common qualitative methods used in grounded theory such as purposive sampling, semi-structured interviews, unstructured interviews, and various types of coding were used. The participants are pulled from principals of public schools across the nation and the various types of coding and use of memos produced rich data for analysis.

Sampling and Recruitment

The research study focused on principals of schools within the United States. To reach saturation of the grounded theory, fifteen principals were selected. According to Creswell (2007), 15-20 interviews are the minimum recommended for grounded-theory research. The population selected is a purposive sample, made up of school principals that demonstrate a knowledge of trauma informed strategies. This type of sample is important

because the research study is looking at how trauma informed leadership is developed and implemented through the lens of an administrator. A questionnaire was sent to thousands of potential research participants through social media posts. These posts were made on school principal Facebook groups. The administrators selected in the sample pull from all levels of schools, elementary, middle, high, and non-traditional schools, such as early colleges. Given that trauma occurs in many forms and most individuals will experience a traumatic event in their life, the level of school the principal supervises will have the experiences necessary to warrant a leadership style conducive to trauma informed strategies. The commonality between the participants is their knowledge and use of trauma informed practices within their rural and urban schools. Most principals are also from schools in North Carolina. One principal was an outlier in geographic location and resided in New Jersey.

The identity of each participant is private, and confidentiality was maintained. This was achieved by assigning the administrators selected pseudonyms that identify them throughout the research study. My dissertation chair and myself are the only people with access to the identity of each participant. I have taken steps to remove identifiable information from data collection and replace it with generalized information. For example, if a principal refers to their school by name, I replaced the name of the school with a pseudonym during the transcription and coding process.

Data Collection and Procedures

The sampling and recruitment process led to finding participants that could best help with identifying a grounded theory of trauma informed leadership. Participants were recruited by email and approached through school principal social media groups. Each participant completed a questionnaire (Appendix A) that provided contextual information

about the participant. This information was used to describe which level of school (elementary, middle, high, or early college) the principal is an administrator. The questionnaire also requested the amount of academic preparation, experience, and knowledge base the principal has for trauma informed practices. The participant was provided with definitions of some of the key vocabulary. Once the questionnaire was completed, I reviewed the responses and determined which principals understood what trauma informed practices are and have used them in their school. Appendix C shows the rubric I created to determine the level of understanding each participant had of trauma informed practices and leadership. Twenty principals completed the questionnaire. Of the twenty, seventeen fit the research study guidelines of being public school principals in the United States. I scheduled a place and time for an interview with these administrators by email. Fifteen of the seventeen administrators agreed to participate in the research study. The interviews took place over Google Meet and were transcribed using transcription software.

Each participant was interviewed using a semi-structured format. The semi-structured interview allows for the researcher to provide some guidance to the data being generated but still allows the participant to be open and rich with their responses. It also allows for probing questions that can take the experience to unexplored areas (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The interviews were approximately 60 minutes in length, conducted over video conference, such as Google Meet or Zoom. The interview protocol (Appendix B) is broken down into two topics: leadership and trauma informed practices. According to Taylor et al. (2015), to see the broader range of sites and people to understand the phenomenon being researched, it would make more sense to conduct interviews due to time constraints. Many of the events described by principals have happened in the past. Interviewing allows for the participant to

recall the events that have happened to them, giving the research rich data to better understand the phenomenon of trauma informed leadership. During the research study, I used memos to analyze data taken from the interviews and questionnaires and provide a written record of decisions made during the study.

During the research study a literature review of Hope Theory was conducted concurrent with the running of the study. This review informed my analysis during the critical moments of the emergence of the theory. This allowed for a foundational knowledge of Hope Theory but prevented it from overly influencing the findings of the research study. The review of literature and the connections made between Hope Theory, Leadership Theory, and Trauma Informed practices were examined in Chapter 5.

Data Analysis

The data was collected and analyzed with the use of research memos. Memos provided a written record of decisions made during the study. The memos served as a part of the constant comparative analysis needed for grounded theory research (Birks & Mills, 2015). The interviews were recorded using video conferencing software (Google Meet) with the participants. The interviews were also transcribed using a transcription add on to Google Meet and coding software (Nvivo) was used to help with analysis. The analysis of data followed the steps outlined in Figure 1.

Figure 1.

Flowchart of Constant Comparative Analysis

Initial Coding		Theoretical Sensitivity
Purposive Sampling		Intermediate Coding
Theoretical Sampling	Memos	Selecting a Core Category
Constant Comparative Analysis		Theoretical Saturation
Category Identification		

Memos

Advanced Coding

Theoretical Integration
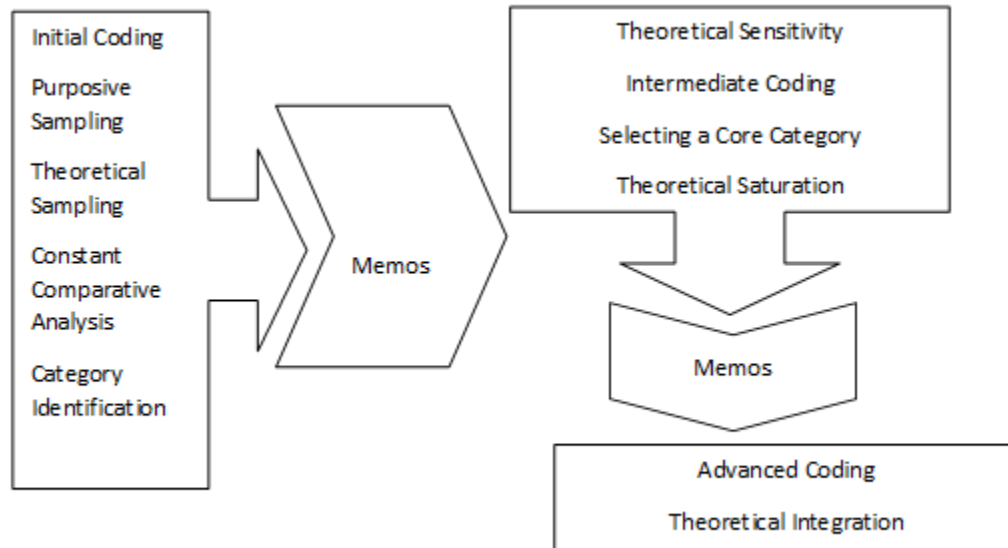
Charmaz (2012) explains how grounded theory is a systematic way of collecting and analyzing data in the hope to provide a middle level theory to explain a phenomenon. This research study used what are considered by Birks and Mills (2015) to be salient characteristics when designing a grounded theory research study. These essential grounded theory steps are laid out below.

Initial Coding and Data Categorization

The initial coding process began with the initial coding of data. The initial data collected in this research study was the questionnaires each participant completed and the first semi-structured interviews. The initial data was then coded using descriptive coding and categorized based on related groups of codes.

Research Memos

Memo writing is an ongoing activity in grounded theory research. The memos early in the research process were concerned with the design of the research project, the properties and dimensions of codes and categories, and my thoughts during the undertaking of a grounded theory research study. As Birks and Mills (2015) explain, memos are generated from the early stages of planning a research study until its completion. The memos have the potential to transform into the grounded theory this research study aims to produce. Memos were also written after each interview and collected as field notes. These field notes captured my thoughts, ideas, and interpretations of non-verbal communication from the participant. I continued to memo through each step of the process. These memos proved beneficial as I moved deeper into the building of a grounded theory as the research study continued.

Theoretical Sampling

Theoretical sampling of the principals selected for the study is used to supply and direct the constant comparative analysis of data. Theoretical sampling is necessary to help develop categories that are lacking. Sampling helped with the development of specific properties that are used in categories of codes and helped with identifying and understanding the relationships between different codes. The fluidity of grounded theory research does not allow for a limit to be placed on where the data will lead. At this stage, more interviews were used to help with the comparative analysis of the data, and to develop the categories that are lacking in data (Birks & Mills, 2015). Follow up interviews were used in an unstructured format to develop key categories related to hope, resilience, and trauma informed leadership.

Constant Comparative Analysis

Grounded theory is referred to as being an inductive method of research (Birks & Mills, 2015; Chamaz, 2012). The theory is derived from the data itself through analysis. The different experiences of interviews were compared, and codes emerged. These codes were compared to discover categories, and then categories were compared through analysis via the use of memos. Theoretical sampling helped provide definition and development to categories key categories related to hope, resilience, and trauma informed leadership.

Intermediate Coding

Following the initial coding and comparative analysis, intermediate coding represented the next major stage of analysis. This intermediate coding connected the initial categories in a more conceptual way than the thematic coding used in the previous stage. The concepts developed were able to connect data that had previously been isolated in themes. Birks and Mills (2015) describe how initial coding fractures data, and intermediate coding aims to reconnect them. Subcategories as new categories are created, where what previously was a category, now is a subcategory of a more conceptual category. Intermediate coding raises the level of analysis to the concepts apparent from the data. As these concepts were looked at in more depth, a core category emerged that could offer explanation to the grounded theory being researched. Theoretical sampling helped to bring this core category to a fully developed stage. Development was achieved through what is described by Birks and Mills (2015) as continuing to develop the core category until full theoretical saturation, where further data and analysis failed to add new properties or dimensions to an established category.

Advanced Coding and Theoretical Integration

Advanced coding was a vital part of the final stage of grounded theory, theoretical integration. Advanced coding helped provide a comprehensive explanation by allowing for variation in the research question. The storyline technique was used to also accomplish this explanation, as described by Strauss and Corbin (1990). The storyline provided a narrative that explained the theory while at the same time allowing for variations, limiting gaps, and proving the evidence is grounded in the research. By using theoretical codes, existing theories were pulled from to facilitate integration into the understood academic body of knowledge related to trauma informed leadership.

When creating the storyline, the guiding principles help explain the concepts that make up the theory being developed. Memos from the analysis process were used to create an advanced level of analysis. The advanced level of analysis is a conceptual narrative, designed to bring better understanding of the data through narrative. The storyline does not require every piece of data to be described, but instead ties the concepts used in the different levels of coding (Birks & Mills, 2015).

Trustworthiness

This research study has been designed to apply standards accepted by the research community. The qualitative methods chosen, unstructured and semi-structured interviews, were used to understand this phenomenon of trauma informed leadership from the perspective of the school leaders that interact with students, impacted by trauma, on a regular basis.

Potential threats to the trustworthiness of this research included that I currently work as a high school principal. A bias may exist on my part since this is the level of education I

currently work in and identify with. I also entered the research study with the assumption that each participant of the study understands the need of social emotional learning and trauma informed practices to help students. This point has been stressed across the nation as the mental health of students during the pandemic has become a focal point in the national dialogue on education (Shah & Shaker, 2020). Many of the principals in the research study currently work as principals within my school district, or I have met previously through professional development or academic classes. These relationships had an impact on the creation of data by reference to district policies, events, and common experiences. To make this research study credible, I used strategies such as triangulation, reflexivity, and transferability (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Triangulation involves using multiple methods of collecting data. In this research study I collected data through interviews, questionnaires, and memos. I also conducted follow-up interviews for theoretical sampling purposes. Multiple sources of data were cross checked with each other during the generation of codes and categories through constant comparative analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

I included reflexivity in reference to the researcher's position in the study. As a grounded research study, I wrote memos frequently concerning the design of the research study, the steps along the way as well as the conclusion of the project. Using memos, I laid out my biases, relationships to the participant, dispositions, assumptions, and perspective through the research process. These memos also served as an audit trail of the detailed account of methods, procedures, and decision points concerning the research study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The data provided through interviews and questionnaires also provided sufficient descriptive data to make transferability possible. One of the advanced coding methods employed in this research study is the method of story lining. Narrative description provided rich, thick descriptions of the phenomenon of trauma informed leadership, streamlining theoretical integration. The narrative allowed for data that would otherwise be dry and mundane, more palatable and more easily relatable to other situations and theories (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Ethical Considerations

This research study asked the participants to discuss their thoughts and experiences concerning trauma informed leadership. The experiences may have the unintended consequence of the participants remembering experiences of secondary stress or trauma. School personnel that have been exposed to the traumatic events of their students or the stress created in a classroom environment may remember those events during the interviews (Howell et al., 2019). To mitigate this threat, participants were told about the nature of this study concerning traumatic events.

During this study, I worked with colleagues and fellow principals. It was important for the data collected that the identity of the principals and their responses remain confidential. Stories, thoughts, and feelings were shared, and it was important to maintain the privacy of the participants. Only myself and my dissertation chair had access to the names and identities of the participants.

Statement of Positionality

Understanding my own positionality is important in qualitative research since I am an instrument in interpreting the data collected in this study. I am a white male that is a father,

husband, son, and brother. I grew up in a lower income home and endured some adverse childhood experiences. My parents divorced when I was twelve years old. When my father left home, we did not see him for several years and he did not provide financial support for our family. This led to food scarcity in our home. My mother remarried an alcoholic when I was fourteen. I have a good relationship with my stepfather but the problems with his alcoholism led to several verbal arguments in my home between him and my mother. Throughout this time in my home, I felt loved and had the resources made available to me through school, athletics, and outreach programs so that I could develop coping skills and resiliency. Several years after abandoning our family, my father reached out to restart our relationship. I was able to make peace with him when I was in my early twenties, but the issues surrounding him leaving our family had a tremendous impact on my life.

I became the first member of my family to attend and graduate college. Going through school I was always a rule follower and wanted to prove myself academically. I knew from my junior year in high school that I wanted to go to college to be a history teacher. I have always felt a need to give back to the community that had helped me during my troubling times during young adolescence. I have been an educator since 2005. Initially I started my career as a substitute high school history teacher, but due to a lack of job opportunities in my area I moved to the middle school level. I was very successful teaching at the middle school level and my success stemmed from my ability to build positive and meaningful relationships with young adolescents. I was a football and wrestling coach and worked hard to help my student athletes grow into respectful young men.

During this time in my life, I married a wonderful woman and had two terrific children. Teaching and coaching were very time consuming, and it was difficult to find a

good balance with my family. Unfortunately, my family seemed to always lose due to my dedication to my job and coaching. My last two years as a teacher I gave up coaching and went back to graduate school. This was less time consuming than coaching in two seasons, and I enjoyed the time with my family.

In the final years of my teaching career, I decided to make the change to administration. Finances had always been a concern. My wife has either been a stay at home mom or worked in secretarial work, so I was the main source of income for my family. What really pushed me into education was experiencing a good principal and then a bad principal. My first principal in middle school was awesome. I felt inspired by the great work he did, and his belief in me to be a teacher leader made me into a devoted follower to his philosophy. He left three years into my career and asked me to consider the principalship before he left. At that point in my career, I enjoyed teaching and coaching too much to move into administration. A couple of years later I had a principal that made me realize that my school needed a better leader. I am a professional and being a teacher leader meant that I worked with the principal to make the school a success. However, this principal was often absent from school, a delegator, and depended on rewards and punishments to get her goals accomplished. It was motivation for me to become a principal myself and try to not do what she did. My first principal was the perfect role model on what to do as an administrator, the administrator later in my career also helped me understand what not to do.

In 2015 I became an administrator, an assistant principal at the middle school I had worked at for the previous 10 years. I found myself in a supervisor position where my fellow teachers that I had worked with for many years still worked. I came to understand the importance of leveraging relationships and maintaining boundaries. I also became the

primary disciplinarian of the school of around 700 students. I became aware that students I was dealing with on a regular basis shared common characteristics of what I would later learn to be expressions of their response to trauma. Sometimes students would shout at me when I was disciplining them for violating school rules, and I did not understand why. My training as an administrator had not prepared me on how to respond to a student that would run from the classroom to avoid a situation, or to refuse to leave a classroom when the teacher had asked me to come remove a student. After my educational specialist program and my coursework in the educational leadership doctoral program, I now look back at some of the ways I handled situations and realize that my strict adherence to our code of conduct punishments were not always what was best for students. Sometimes my actions may have caused students to experience trauma, as they struggled through the education system.

In 2018 I began my first principalship of an elementary school. This school opened my eyes to the impact traumatic experiences can have on children. As I began to receive professional development on ACEs, and continue my own education journey through graduate school, I was able to make the connections about my experiences at the middle school listed above. While at this elementary school I employed trauma informed strategies with students that needed more support. I also provided trauma informed leadership in the ways I supported students, framed school procedures, and led staff professional development.

When I became the principal of a high school in 2021, I worked with my counselors and staff to provide students with Social Emotional Learning. I have seen firsthand instances where students have difficulty coping with day to day events and/or circumstances that although small in intensity, add to the overall burden students face in today's world. I am conducting this research because when I was an elementary school principal I came to see

and understand the impact traumatic events and/or circumstances can have on students and their families. I have continued to see the impact on students in high school. This school year I have known several of our students have attempted suicide. I am determined to devote my time and effort to discovering ways I can help all my students.

Limitations

This research study had some methodological limitations. This research study pulled from many school's principals but focused on fifteen principals that are trauma informed. The generalizations that were made from the analysis of the data may not necessarily be the same results taken from another group of school principals. The nature of qualitative methods limits the generalization of the phenomenon of trauma informed leadership, but this research has provided a much better understanding of what trauma informed leadership is and how it is implemented in the school environment.

Chapter Summary

This chapter focused on the methods that were used in this qualitative research study. The research paradigm used to view this data through a constructivist lens. The research design also called for the use of grounded theory methods to produce a theory to explain trauma informed leadership and how it is implemented in schools. The data collection and analysis process of grounded theory was discussed in detail. The initial coding of data helped with building the different categories necessary to develop the constant comparative analysis generated in grounded theory. Theoretical sampling was explained and was shown to be necessary to develop categories to engage in further analysis with intermediate coding. The development of a core category and advanced coding was also discussed as the highest levels of analysis and necessary for theory generation. The research design was also examined for

trustworthiness, ethical considerations, and methodological limitations. The positionality of

the researcher was also discussed to illustrate the natural bias I may have and the impact this

could have on the study. I will present the findings of the research study in the next chapter

by sharing a summary of the data analysis and a rich narrative using the storyline technique.

CHAPTER 4: PRESENTATION OF RESULTS

"We are in on the origin story of a child's hero's journey. I believe that and therefore we have to convey a sense of hope for what we're doing is possible, and that what they will do, and what they will overcome, will be possible." (Principal Steve, participant)

In the previous chapters of this dissertation, I have examined what trauma is, the impact it has on students, and how trauma informed practices help support students to be successful in schools. The role of the principal has been explored in this dissertation through the lens of different leadership theories to gain a foundational understanding of the phenomenon of trauma informed leadership. The methodology and design of this research study was explained, and a look at the grounded theory methods used in the research study were examined.

In this chapter, I present the results of the research study and the grounded theory of trauma informed leadership that emerged. The semi-structured and unstructured interviews were used to generate data that was analyzed using memos. The constant comparative analysis led to the creation of several categories and subcategories. Further analysis led to the creation of two key categories, *leading with hope* and *being trauma informed*. These two core categories proved to be the major components of the grounded theory generated in the research study. The story line technique was also used to provide a rich narrative to bring the research together in a way that is more accesible to the reader and integrates the theory into the current body of literature surrounding trauma informed practices, leadership theory, and

hope theory. The data constructed through the grounded theory methods employed has been applied to the following research questions:

1. How do public school principals come to understand themselves as trauma informed leaders?

2. How do public school principals utilize trauma-informed principles in their leadership?

Summary Data Analysis

In Chapter 3, I provided a detailed description of the grounded theory methods used in this research study. The results of data collection created a rich set of data used to describe trauma informed leadership through the lens of the school principal. A questionnaire was sent to thousands of potential research subjects through social media posts. These posts were made on school principal Facebook groups. The groups used were (a) The Principal's Desk; (b) Principal Principles Leadership Group; (c) School Leadership Reimagined; (d) Principals in Action; (e) The Resilient Principal; (f) I AM A Proud Principal; and (g) Principals and Leadership. Principals were also recruited using email lists of Appalachian State University doctoral students and school principals within my professional network. My professional network includes principals that I have worked with in my current district as well as met through the professional organization North Carolina Principals and Assistant Principals Association.

Participants

The fifteen participants in this research study completed the questionnaire in Appendix A. The initial pool of data presented a wide variety of participants that worked as principals in public schools. Table 1 lists the pseudonym given to each participant, the

current public school level of their principalship, their gender, and questionnaire score. The pseudonym chosen for each principal only reflected their gender. The use of a name as opposed to alpha-numeric title (principal A or principal 1) was to help maintain the humanity of the participant during the research study.

Of the fifteen principals that participated in the study, seven lead elementary schools, three lead middle schools, and five lead high schools. Of the five leading high schools, three lead a traditional high school and two lead early college high schools. This difference is important because due to the much smaller sizes of early college high schools, principals may be able to form closer relationships with a larger portion of the student body.

The group of participants is made up of a slight majority (53%) of participants that identify as female. The questionnaire score was determined using the rubric found in Appendix C. This score indicates that these participants identify as trauma informed, but to varying degrees. Participants that had received professional development or academic preparation in trauma informed practices may have rated themselves higher on the questionnaire. Principals that were more detailed in their responses to the questionnaire may show they have a larger knowledge base when it comes to the topic of trauma informed practices. This tool was used to screen participants, not to gauge their knowledge of trauma informed practices. For the purposes of this study, the questionnaire was designed to determine that the principal knows and has used trauma informed practices, and to serve as a part of the initial data for coding. The scores ranged from 11 to 22, with a median of 18, and a mode of 19. The mean was 17.5, which is very close to the mode of 18. This means participants were familiar with trauma informed practices and had experience with them in their schools as the principal.

Table 1
Summary of Participant Data

Principal Pseudonym	School Level	Gender	Question Score	School Category
Principal Sonja	Elementary	Female	17	Rural
Principal Karen	Elementary	Female	20	Rural
Principal Ramone	Middle	Male	11	Rural
Principal Kerri	Elementary	Female	15	Rural
Principal John	Elementary	Male	16	Rural
Principal Nick	High	Male	18	Rural
Principal Laura	Elementary	Female	19	Rural
Principal Derek	Early C.	Male	16	Rural
Principal Serena	High	Female	13	Urban
Principal Jackie	Middle	Female	19	Urban
Principal Kimberley	Early C.	Female	18	Urban
Principal Alan	Middle	Male	22	Rural
Principal Emily	Elementary	Female	22	Urban
Principal Barry	High	Male	17	Urban
Principal Steve	Elementary	Male	19	Urban

The participants came from a diverse set of backgrounds. During the semi-structured interviews, participants discussed their journey into education. Appendix D has summaries of the different backgrounds of the participants. Several of the participants discussed how they had been impacted by trauma and adverse childhood experiences. These events shaped the participants and impacted their career paths, as described by Principal Karen, "I've had two massive, trauma events. My children and I are survivors of domestic violence and I watched the effects through them." She goes on to describe how these events have shaped her desire to work in Title 1 schools.

> … I've always worked at schools that are Title 1. I've always believed in them and that's why I choose a Title 1 school, and predominantly those schools are high poverty, have a higher population of trauma and I want to show that it doesn't matter what school you come from, that you can get a good education, but you just need the

tools. And so, it's important to me that people who can't afford those tools, like private schools or charter schools. It's important, public school provides that for those students that we're all entitled to that.

Principal Sonja describes the impact of the trauma experienced by her family concerning the struggles and bullying of her handicapped brother. Personal experiences impact our daily lives.

> I think for me, trauma was personal, I have a handicapped brother. And so I remember my brother, he's older than I am, but I remember the struggles my parents went through his whole life and in public schools, and my parents fighting for his rights as a student and their rights as a parent. In my mind, when I see struggles of families that I deal with, I can always kind of hear my mom talking to my dad at home about just the struggle. My brother had a lot of health issues and then had some bullying issues, people made fun of him. And it was hard growing up, hearing those things, and seeing those things. So I try to keep that in the forefront of being a principal and a leader in just trying to be understanding of parent concerns. And especially through Covid.

Participants also describe the connection they feel from their personal trauma in their background and the students in their schools. This research study is framed from a constructivist lens. Experiences shared by principals help create knowledge from which the principal becomes more aware of trauma in their schools. This is described below by Principal Emily.

> What I'm finding, what I think is just very interesting, is that I've experienced some of these same things that my children, that my students have experienced, and I can

relate to some of the things that they're going through, which Is interesting to me. I
almost did not realize that I've experienced some trauma as a kid like that. I didn't
really realize that was considered trauma, but definitely some ACEs in my past that I
didn't realize, which helps me relate to students and families.

The fifteen participants selected for this research study met the criteria for selection by being
trauma informed and principals of a public school in the United States. Some participants had
a larger knowledge of trauma informed practices, and others were able to draw from previous
trauma in their lives to provide connections to the students in their schools. The participants
were interviewed for approximately one hour in the initial structured interviews. Five
participants agreed to follow-up interviews that on average lasted 25 minutes for theoretical
sampling.

Coding

The initial coding of data used questionnaire responses and semi-structured
interviews. Descriptive codes were created that broke down the data thematically and 48
codes were generated in this initial coding process. Through the constant comparative
analysis, these codes came together during the intermediate coding phase, where categories
and subcategories were generated. Six categories and ten subcategories were identified and
further developed through theoretical sampling that involved unstructured interviews. These
categories and subcategories can be found in Table 2. Two key categories began to emerge as
the data was analyzed, *Leading with Hope* and *Being trauma informed*.

Table 2

Categories and Subcategories

Category	Subcategory	Subcategory	Subcategory
Instilling Hope	Goals	Pathways	Willpower
Leading	Definition of Leadership	Leading from the Heart	What leadership looks like
Instilling Resilience			
Impacting School Culture	Sense of Belonging		
Experiencing Trauma	Personal	Professional	
Being Trauma Informed	Trauma Informed Practices		

Grounded Theory

The grounded theory model for trauma informed leadership for school principals that emerged from data analysis is provided in Figure 2. For the remainder of the chapter, I go into detail regarding each component of the theory using the storyline method. The end of the chapter makes the connection between the theory of trauma informed leadership and the research questions.

Figure 2.

Model of Trauma Informed Leadership in School Principals

| Leading systems that help students develop goals, find pathways to success, and reinforce student willpower. | → | Trauma Informed Leadership | → | Outcomes of Trauma Informed Leadership

Support Systems for All Students

Interconnectedness of Staff and Students

Safe Environment

Trauma Sensitive School |
| Having the capacity to understand trauma through experiences and professional development. | ↗ | | | |
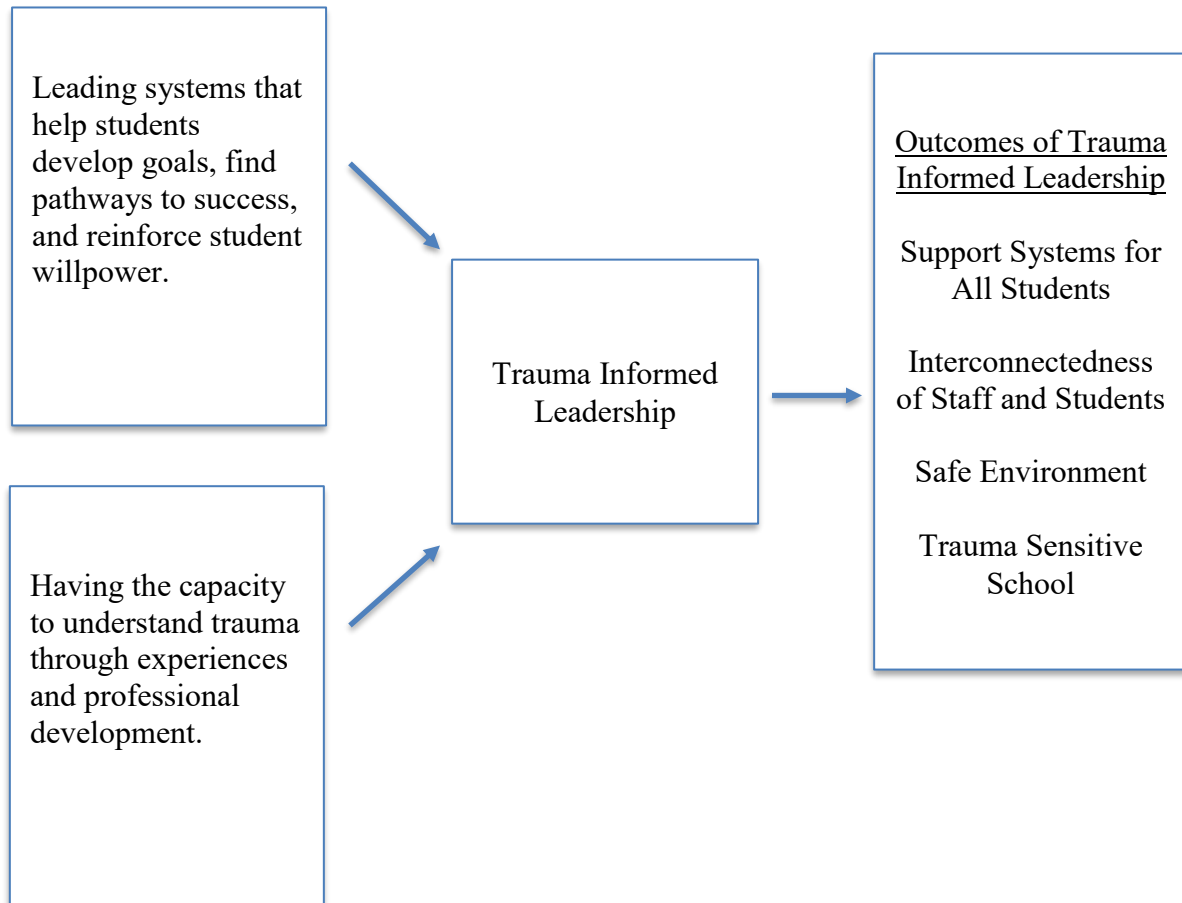
The theory of trauma informed leadership that emerged contends that this phenomenon can be seen when the inputs or concepts of *leading with hope* and *being trauma informed* come together by the actions of a school principal. *Leading with hope* is defined as leading systems that help students develop goals, find pathways to success, and reinforce student willpower. *Being trauma informed* is defined as having the capacity to understand trauma through experiences and professional development. The outcomes of trauma informed leadership come to be support systems for all students, the creation of a trauma

sensitive school and safe school. An interconnectedness between the students and staff of the school can also be found because of trauma informed leadership employed by the principal.

The theory of trauma informed leadership generated by this research study applies the ideas of a principal leading systems that help students develop goals, find pathways to success, and reinforce student willpower. Also found within this concept are elements of distributed leadership and transformational leadership. When combined with the school principal having the capacity to understand trauma through experiences and professional development, trauma informed leadership emerges. The emergent theory of trauma informed leadership finds its place within the current literature in close connection with hope theory and the leadership theories of distributed leadership and transformational leadership.

Theory of Trauma Informed Leadership Storyline

The origins of this research study go back to before I ever thought of applying to the doctoral program at Appalachian State University. They go back to when I was an elementary school principal and found myself leading a school where I felt powerless to help the children be successful students. I had seen the outward signs of children reacting to the trauma they had experienced in their young lives and it invoked an emotional response within me. I had not experienced what many of the staff at my school referred to as "runners," children that would run from their classrooms to avoid conflict. Student behavior existed that I did not understand and did not possess the capacity to help. Through professional development opportunities, I began to become aware of these signs of trauma and adverse childhood experiences. Upon reflection, I realized these signs had been present through my entire career as a teacher and assistant principal. I made the decision to return to graduate school the fall of my second year as a principal, to join the doctoral program to not only

research these ideas I had just become aware of, but to find a way to help my students and fellow principals be more successful.

This research study has been designed to develop a theory of trauma informed leadership that pulls from the experiences of the 15 participants and myself. This research study used grounded theory methods to produce a theory that is grounded in the data and may shed light on how school principals can use their leadership to help make all the students in their schools successful in providing a safe, nurturing, academic environment for students and staff. The model of the resulting theory combines two key concepts that were revealed through the constant comparative analysis employed in this research study. *Leading with hope* and *being trauma informed* are two concepts that are pivotal to a school principal if they are or wish to aspire to be a trauma informed leader. When used in isolation, these two concepts are important for helping a school principal create systems necessary to support every student in their school. The use of only one of these concepts would likely fail in producing a trauma informed leader in the principal. If the school leader does not take the time or make the effort to understand the concept of *being trauma informed,* they lack the capacity to understand the trauma in their student population. I would associate this with the perception by teachers that the principal is making the staff do a professional development session on trauma informed strategies with no follow up and no systemic implementation. The inverse would also be just as detrimental when a school principal understands the concepts of *being trauma informed* but lacks the capacity for leading change. *Leading with hope* goes beyond the principal being the central authority of the school, but occurs when the characteristics of compassion and leadership come together to transform the role of the

school leader. To understand this theory, I further explain these two key concepts and make meaning of how they may produce trauma informed leadership.

Leading with Hope

Leading with hope is an abstract idea that is a central concept to the trauma informed leadership theory generated from this research study. I believe this concept examines how the school principal is one of the central leaders of the school and how the school principal instills hope and resilience in the students and staff. Hope theory (Snyder, 2000) reveals connections to several leadership theories used by school principals. Transformational leadership aims to encourage followers to aspire to improve through the accomplishment of organizational goals (Goktas, 2021). One of the central tenets of Hope theory is the development of goals to improve one's situation in life. Distributed leadership, one of the most prevalent leadership theories used in schools today due to the significance it holds for school improvement, also has goal creation as an important feature (Hairon & Goh, 2015).

I have analyzed the data generated from this research study and the ideas behind Hope Theory (goal creation, discovering pathways, and will power) seemed to permeate through the different categories that I and the participants constructed. During the research study, I completed a review of literature on Hope Theory that has helped with making connections between leadership and trauma informed strategies. Principals see the power of hope every day in their schools. Principal Derek shared his thoughts on the importance of hope:

> Hope. Well. We as educators hope that students will do what they know they need to do, to perform well. I would think students who have goals in life, have a hope. That they have something to strive for so that hope is kind of a goal. I would say, you

know if they have goals, they have a hope of accomplishing something. I hope maybe

that will give them something to strive for so, in a sense hope is a goal.

Principal Kerri equates her hope to the optimism she feels for her students and staff to

improve their situation and the situation of their school. Principal Kerri's school was newly

designated as a low performing school and her understanding of leading with hope is

described below:

> I immediately think about leading with hope as a belief that things are going to
>
> continue to improve and continue to grow. And our kids are content and are going to
>
> continue to be inspired and believe in themselves and achieve their dreams. I always
>
> believe in my students and I am attached to the idea of never giving up hope and
>
> that's kind of my take on it. It goes back to never giving up on your students, always
>
> believing in them, always believing in your staff. And I think having hope is having
>
> your glass always half full.
>
> Principal Steve believes in the power of leading with hope. In his comments below,

he expands on how hope is a strategy that can be used to help all students, including students

that experience trauma every day.

> Hope gets downplayed a lot. I think there's an old statement someplace that says hope
>
> is not a strategy. I don't buy that hope isn't a strategy and you know, there are
>
> students who are suffering and dealing with things that some adults could not last 60
>
> seconds in their skin. And so, I believe, somebody saw something in me that I didn't
>
> see in myself that got me to this point. My fifth grade teacher besides my parents,
>
> right? And it's the same thing here in our gig as educators.

I believe Principal Steve raises a good point in the difference between hoping and wishing. Hope involves goal creation, finding pathways, applying willpower, and when these pieces are absent, the person's hope is just a wish.

Principal Alan understands the concept of *leading with hope*. As the school principal, he is a central figure, looked up to for leadership, help and for support, not just from students, but teachers as well. Principal Alan explains this below:

> I think that everything starts from the top. So, if I talk about hope and what we're doing with my staff that trickles down. I must instill a sense of hope in everybody, that is not something that is unique to anyone. I need to instill in my staff that there is hope for us. There's hope for these kids. It all starts at the top and hope is one of those things that once it starts, it'll trickle down. If I instill that in my staff, they will instill it in the kids.

Principal Kerri echoes these same thoughts about how it is important for the principal to model hope for the staff, so they can model it for the students. Modeling hope is different than projecting hope. A principal can hope their student will overcome the trauma they have experienced, but it is the student that must make the goals, find the pathways, and exert the willpower to make it happen. Principal Kerri describes this modeling of hope as follows.

> I immediately thought about a lot of the things that we went through back in the fall and the pathway we took in the fall to get through our super observations. And digging into student data because I feel like if I don't instill hope in my staff, they can never instill it in our kids. And that's immediately what I thought about too. When you said leading with hope, if I don't believe in it, then my staff won't believe in it and then my kids won't believe in it.

When I examined what Principal Alan and Principal Kerri were saying, their comments pointed to an important convergence of ideas, using hope in conjunction with distributed leadership theory. The recruitment of staff is an important idea when it comes to the concept of leading with hope. If the staff buys in to this idea, it means that they can work to help students realize the hope they can have in improving their own lives. I also saw that this idea was shared by Principal Laura. In her comments below, she calls for the principal to do more than pay lip service to these ideals, but put these words into action.

> We need to make sure that we are instilling that hope and giving them encouraging words, and not only giving them the words, but we're living them ourselves. And we're showing them and giving them the strategies.

Instilling Hope. I believe that this core category *Leading with Hope* picks up on the subtle difference of instilling hope and projecting hope. Hellman (2021) makes the point to explain how hope without pathways or willpower, or agency, is just a wish. He goes further to explain that projecting hope is not the same as instilling hope. By projecting our hopes onto others, they may be working towards goals that are not by their own design, but the wishes of others.

I believe that instilling hope is an integral piece of leading with hope. Working with students to understand that the future can be better than the present is an important part of being in education today. Principal Emily feels this every day in her newly formed elementary school.

> I think if we don't instill that hope, we don't show kids that they can be successful and that there's positive outcomes and there's positive people in their lives. They care

about and support you. Then they're not going to be a place where they feel like they

can be successful or try or want. I mean to work on these things with my students.

Principal Serena shares these sentiments on hope, "Hope plays the number one role. If they

don't hope that school is going to be better than home, then they're not going to come." Her

thoughts show how important it is that school is a place where hope can thrive.

Principal Nick is a veteran principal, and in our discussions, I came to find that his

ideas for instilling hope were an important way of utilizing the relationships principals build

every day. Below, Principal Nick discusses the importance of using these relationships with

instilling hope:

> I think as a general rule, the more we can be with the kids, involved with the kids we
>
> can preach that message of hope when we know the kids a little better, when we've
>
> eaten lunch with them, you know, when we've clowned around with them a little bit
>
> in the hallway. Now don't get me wrong. I don't want to be their buddies. They have
>
> plenty of buddies. They need adults that they can respect, and yet appreciate hearing
>
> teacher stories about where they came from. I don't know how we could incorporate it
>
> even more, but if you've got staff members, who grew up in a rough situation, rough
>
> times, I think the kids learning those stories helps to give hope. But I think it's vital,
>
> when we lose hope, it's over.

As a school principal myself, I believe relationships are a key component of leading a school

as a principal. Positive relationships with students, staff, and parents are important in getting

members of the school community to work towards a common goal. Principal John explains

the importance of helping students realize that life can get better than what they are currently

going through as follows.

…you always got to look for the bright spot in things and especially if you're talking about a student 10 to 18 years old, they got their whole life ahead of them. You paint a bright picture for them and let them know that there's more to life than what they're experiencing and there's hope that things are going to get better. They can turn their life around; they get off of this bad path and onto this good path. You help lead them that way. But also painting the picture that this isn't all there is.

Principal Alan takes this sentiment further by explaining how it is our job to help students better themselves, and make sure they continue to have hope. His thoughts shed light on the idea that students need to be told that tomorrow can be better than today, and the students have the power to make it so.

Hope is important for all of us. If you and I don't have hope, we're in big trouble. In lots of cases for kids that have experienced trauma and are in a rough situation, that may be all they have. If you take hope away, then they have nothing, it's hard to get out and to better yourself. That's what we are here for, to help these kids better themselves, and to take care of them and look after them. For a student that has lost hope it's almost impossible to get those kids where they need to be.

Principal Kerri looks for ways to make sure her students maintain hope even through the dark times in their lives. At her elementary school, she uses different ways to keep that hope alive. One way is the partnering of teachers with students that have gone through trauma during lunch (lunch bunch). This lunch program is a way to build supporting relationships between students and adults at the school. This program is also used to maintain and build hope, as she explains below.

I think hope has a place in students regardless of their experience. Not to sound.

corny for lack of a better word, but if you don't have hope, then, what's the purpose? I

think hope is as simple as providing them support, giving them that lunch bunch.

Hope is giving them a hug telling them that you love that they are at your elementary

school. You tell them you love them. Probably in high school too. Honestly, if a kid

doesn't have hope that things are going to get better, then how are they going to put in

the work themselves to improve, whatever situation they feel like they're drowning in.

I think it plays a very important role because why do you try to find the sun in the

middle of the storm if there's no hope?

Educators also need to be realistic in the difficulty students will face in creating goals,

finding a path, and maintaining that willpower to achieve their goal. School principals are the

cheerleaders for all of their students, but must also be realistic with students, staff and

families. There will be roadblocks, and defeats and failures along the way. Principal Jackie

mentions below the importance of being realistic when having these conversations with

students and parents.

I am kind and politely realistic with them. And say there is time for you to

accomplish that, but here's what you're going to have to do to get there. And here are

the resources. It's not just about telling a child or a parent, here's what you're going to

need to do now. Go do it. It's also about sharing with them the resources that they're

going to have to access help. They're going to need to get to make that happen. I can't

just tell them half the story and walk away. I'm going to give the complete picture of

how that can happen. And then It's up to them, but the resources have a lot to do with

it.

Goals. The creation of goals is an important feature of the concept of *leading with hope.* Not only is it important for the principal and staff to develop goals for the school, but instilling the goal building of hope in students. Principal Kimberley discusses how this happens at the early college high school that she is principal of:

> I think hope is everything. I think hope is what motivates not only us, but them (students) to keep going. I think it's that long-term goal, that long-term impact that we want to see that instills hope. That the things that we're putting in place for them is going to have a positive impact and be able to get them the resiliency strategies that they need to overcome their obstacles.

Principal Ramone also believes in the importance of goal building in instilling hope in all students. In his remarks below, he also explains how the hook of education leads to students making important connections and building interconnectedness is an outcome of the grounded theory of trauma informed leadership that this research study has generated.

> I think they have to have a goal. I think they have to have it, it's just like everything we do. There has to be some sense of purpose and in terms of the school I think it's helping. Again, we only have these kids seven and a half eight hours a day but I think it's giving them things to look forward to. That's creating the positives, it's making the hook of education and I think really taking it beyond, just you're taking this history class or this math class and the science class. It's really just about giving them purpose, giving them connection. Because again if there's nothing to strive for that's kind of back to the, why are we doing any of this?

Pathways. Principal Derek brings up pathways, one of the key parts to hope. Helping students find the path that will help them achieve the goals that will improve their current

situation. He explains how instilling hope is an important part in helping our students that have suffered trauma or ACEs in breaking the cycle that has repeated itself for generations in a student's family.

> Some students feel hopeless, but some see our place and we try to make it better. We try to share with them, hey, you can break that cycle. You can get out of the life that you are not liking at home. Possibly, take advantage of what we have here. Whether that's completing a degree and going on, or if you have a trade interest that you can get a diploma or certificate or even a degree in a trade area, be ready to work outside.

This same idea of using pathways as a way of breaking the cycle of trauma in the family was shared by Principal Karen. She makes connections to modeling hope, and having conversations with students:

> For me, seeing the family members who have lost hope here, young people, on drugs, whatever reason it is. The children come out innocent. And it's the adults that screw kids up. And it is our job to show them there's always hope, there's always a way. Don't give up and so I have to model it and talk to them and have those conversations and build that trust.

Principal Barry makes the connection of hope to opportunity in the high school that he is principal of. These opportunities act as pathways for students to be successful and find the support system at school that can help the students achieve a better tomorrow. In his comments below, he explains how he preaches about opportunity to his students every day.

> Everything is an opportunity. Hope and opportunity are one in the same. You come into class, you have an opportunity to learn because you have the hope of a teacher that, yeah, you might have just cussed them two days ago, or you might have not been

in class for 20 days but that's okay, you're back now. We are here today. Let's get it

going on. What do you need from me? What support do you need for me? We talk

about that as a school. We are not in the business to hold grudges against kids. We are

in the business to help kids.

Principal Steve believes that by instilling hope, it can serve as a vehicle to help

students achieve their goals. Hope can help students find their pathway to a better tomorrow.

He explains his message in the comments below.

Hope is essential to what we do because we are connecting that child to a future that

they are going to help shape, hope, is that vehicle to help that child get there. And

whether it's instilling that sense of hope in them, or whether it's instilling that sense of

that in teachers, we need to nurture that.

Willpower. An important part of hope that cannot be underestimated is willpower.

Hellman (2021) explains how as humans, we can only take so much defeat when it comes to

working towards our goals. Principal Nick discusses the importance of students maintaining

willpower through resilience:

Some kids kind of seem to be born with that (resilience). For others, it needs to be

instilled in them by a lot of different people. Some kids never get that but I think, for

kids who are impacted by trauma, without resilience, there's only a couple options

that are going to happen and none of them are good. It's what you can't see today. I

think resilience gets you to tomorrow and tomorrow's got to have hope so those two

things are tied in together.

How can school staff assist students impacted by trauma maintain the willpower it takes to

accomplish goals? One way several principals agreed on was by constant encouragement

65

while they are on the path the student has chosen. Principal Derek is a veteran principal that has been a principal at an elementary school, middle school, and high school. He explains below.

>Encouragement is the best thing we can do here. Encourage them, encourage them and get them to see there is light at the end, and there have been people to overcome similar circumstances and that they can too, that they're not alone. But hope. maybe that gives them the hope that to keep going and once they leave here, then they're that much closer to getting away from whatever situation that they're dealing with.

>I found Principal Steve's passion for his student's potential to be inspiring. This passion has given him a remarkable vision for his students. His description below of a child's hero journey is an incredible message that aims to not only instill hope but help students with overcoming the challenges they will face.

>We are in on the origin story of a child's hero's journey. I believe that and therefore we have to convey a sense of hope for what we're doing is possible, and that what they will do, and what they will overcome, will be possible. I'm sure at some point, in his academic career, Martin Luther King wasn't the best of students, and dealt with the trauma of segregation and racism. Malcolm X dealt with all kinds of traumatic issues, and wasn't the best of students and he probably would have been in our office for all kinds of reasons along the way.

Instilling Resilience. The concept of *leading with hope* involves that the principal be able to instill resilience in the students and staff of their school. Jorgensen and Wester (2021) explain how resilience can be unique to everyone but relates to how a person is able to bounce back from adversity. The participants in this research study agreed that schools can

foster this with strategies, but there is an internal component to each person that can be magnified to help them not lose hope in their journey through life. Principal Nick describes this idea below:

> Being resilient, that's a good word, rather than stubborn One of my daughters was one of those that would argue with a stop sign. but that stubbornness when it's resilience can be a wonderful blessing. That's the kid that doesn't quit, that doesn't give up. That's the kid that no matter how hard it gets they are just going to keep taking one day at a time. Some kids kind of seem to be born with that. Others, it needs to be instilled in them by a lot of different people, and some never get that.

The idea of resilience is a lifelong trait. We all experience adversity in our lives. Principal Laura describes this as, "We all experience hard times, we all have traumatic experiences. And resilience is what gets us through. It plays a major role in all of our lives, not just little children, but adults, as well." Below, Principal Derek agrees with this idea of how everyone has their own levels of resilience.

> The resiliency in each individual is different, some are more resilient than others, some can let it kind of roll off their back and say, You know, my day is coming, I'm going to overcome this. I'm going to get out of this. But some unfortunately, don't have that resiliency, and, you know, it's just that continuous cycle from generation to generation to generation and they can't break it, and to be honest, in my opinion, it's probably rare that they do break that cycle. It's our hope that we can help them break that cycle.

For people that are impacted by trauma of a large magnitude, it may require the support of outside systems. Schools have been places to help support and nurture this

characteristic. Principal Laura explains how the resilience instilled earlier in life has an impact as we grow.

> They're using resilience in different ways to get them through their part of the traumatic experience. But if they didn't, I almost wonder if they didn't go through all the horrible things they did in their younger years, if their resilience wouldn't have been as strong as it is right now. If they would be able to handle the traumatic experience that they were handling today.

This belief is shared by Principal Kimberley. In her comments below, she describes how some students that experience similar trauma cope differently. This relates to the idea of how resilience is an extremely personal trait.

> I think that's the big difference between two students who may have gone through the same trauma, but you've got one that's able to succeed and one that has a harder time. Not that their trauma is, any less. It's just that they've been given, or they have, a way to overcome what has happened to them and to move forward. Not that they forget it, that it doesn't impact them, but they are able to channel their feelings, in a way that propels them to meet the goals that they set for themselves.

Principal Kimberley that the school is able to help instill that resilience in students, and this is an important piece of the *leading with hope* concept. At the early college high school, where she is principal, staff are able to take time to work with all students in group lessons on resiliency. In her remarks below, one can see the impact the school principal has in facilitating the instilling of resilience.

> I think not only are we trying to support them, but I think the main goal is we're giving them those tools and those ways that they can overcome it and not let it be a

permanent obstacle or obstacle that keeps them from their goals. I think even though

some of our students naturally get those resiliency strategies, or their family has

helped them develop those resiliency strategies. I think you have to understand that

social muscle learning. The main thing is that every student is given those

opportunities to learn what those strategies are, and how to use them and when to use

them.

Principal Alan brings up a key point that school principals understand about instilling

resiliency in students that have experienced trauma. He explains, "So they [students] have to

have that built sense of resilience and we need to instill that in them, because we are not

going to be able to change that trauma in them." The trauma our students carry with them is a

part of who they are. As school principals, we need to problem solve ways to support

students as they develop resiliency. Students will need support and resources to cope with

trauma. The need for resources is expressed by Principal Jackie below:

The other phenomenon around trauma that gets on my last nerve is the discussion

about grit. So, [Angela] Duckworth can take grit and run in the other direction as far

as I'm concerned. Grit is really easy to pull out when you have resources. You can't

make something from nothing.

Principal Kerri describes how these strategies can be difficult to teach but need to be

modeled for the younger students in her elementary school. The modeling of this behavior

can help mitigate the communication barrier presented by very young children coping with

trauma.

It is a hard concept to teach the K5 littles (students). I think it could start with our

resilience and how hope and resilience go hand in hand. You've got to be able to pull

yourself up by the bootstraps and keep pushing and keep fighting every day. How do

you teach that to a five or six year old who's experienced trauma bigger than you've

ever experienced. And that's what we've got coming in our buildings, are these kids

that have faced things that we as grown adults have never experienced. I think we just

model that resilience for our kids. We have to let our kids see us fighting through the

hard things and coming out on the other side and we have to model. I'm looking at

calm down strategies and thinking I could probably use some of those calm down

strategies. Do I really want to do that? No. But would it be beneficial for me?

Probably, so I think it goes back to us modeling what resilience looks like to us and

then how we can bring it down to a level of a six year old. I always go back down to

my five or six year olds because those are the kiddos that can't always verbalize what

they're going through and what they need. I think we have to show them versus tell

them.

Principal Selena had a different experience to share when it came to instilling

resilience. She felt that resilience was innate, and that the focus of instilling resilience should

be with the staff working with students that have experienced adversity and trauma, because

the students have not learned resilience through the experience yet. In her comments below,

her thoughts are more of an outlier to the theory generated through this research study, but

offer a different perspective.

I think the resiliency needs to be from the staff that are helping the students. Because

it's (resilience) an innate trait, but I think you build resiliency when you've come

through trauma and some of our students haven't come through it yet, they're still in

the middle of it. So, I don't think resiliency should be highly weighted when it comes to trauma except for those giving the support to the students.

A profound thought that Principal Selena expressed is that resilience is innate. We all have it. For some, it is more pronounced and for others it needs to be brought out from within. I believe Principal Selena's experience speaks to the idea that trauma is a part of the student, and that the teacher needs to adapt the way they are trying to understand what has happened to the student. I agree that we do construct knowledge through experience, but we can also be guided by the strategies modeled by our teachers and principals. Principal Emily describes below the level of frustration that can be felt by teachers and principals as she has experienced in her elementary school.

> I'm thinking about one kid that, I mean, you name it and this has probably happened to this kid and she brings it every day and it's hard and I just keep telling myself, this is a nine year old and she's coming in with things that that most people have never experienced before, so yes, it's going to be a struggle. Yes, she's going to be a disruption in class. Yes, she will think I'm going to get out of the situation, I'm going to run but day in and day out. That's really hard when you're dealing with that but I think what she is realizing is I can push, push, push, and you're not going anywhere, right? I can push, push, push and run. Run. And you're going to get me and we're going to get back, and you're not going to miss. And we do call Mom, but as in a totally different way than she expects, we call Mom because we are all on the same team.

Principal Steve works to develop strategies with his staff on how resilience can be used to help his students be able to improve academically. In his comments below, he

discusses this thoughts about how resiliency has not received enough attention in recent years due to the word having a negative connotation.

> I serve Title One students and we don't celebrate resiliency enough, we don't. We don't put that out there. We call it grit. I know Angela Duckworth wrote that book Grit a few years ago, and I think in some cases, it's belittled but resilience to me resounds more, and resonates more. There's a lot of things out there that haven't been tapped into them. We're starting to tap into, like, problem-based learning, project-based learning, STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Math) and STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Art, Math) and really activating that student voice. If you can, and if you can connect that to the EOG or the EOC and look at it from the standpoint of growth that would be evident. That would be a victory for the student and for the teacher who struggles.

Principal Laura describes a similar approach to helping students with resiliency, specifically from her experiences as an assistant principal at the high school level. Students work with many different school members to develop resiliency.

> And in a way of trauma, I think, when you get to the high school level, where you are an administrator, kids are resilient. They have overcome a lot in their lives, they're working jobs, they're playing sports, they're trying to keep their grades up. They want to stay focused and go to college and that sort of thing. It starts really, with guidance counselors, but I think there's a lot of hidden motivation and goal setting. Among your coaches, your band directors. Those smaller groups of students find that leader, that's within that group and the students, and it helps them to overcome and build resiliency to say, okay, we didn't do well here, but we're going to practice harder and

we're going to move forward. I think those students that can participate in a smaller group where they're competing have a little bit of a head start, but they have a little bit more to help them become resilient.

Principal Alan also sees the importance of getting the entire school staff on board with helping students develop the resiliency needed to cope with trauma. In his comments below, he makes an emotional connection with students that have experienced trauma, which informs his practice of everyone being knowledgeable of the individual story of his students.

I can't put myself in the kids' shoes. I don't walk in their shoes. I know it's tough but being able to build that capacity to give them tools. Given those tools to get through it to help them build capacity, not just saying, you got to be able to do this. You can't just have them come into your office, or in your classroom and talk to you, and just say, we just got to understand what resiliency is and how we get there. We got to give them the tools to be resilient. We just can't say, hey, this has happened and you've got to find a way to get over it now. They need to be connected with people, support, they need help, they need to be connected with services, to help them build that resiliency to help them show them that they can overcome that.

Leading. Another essential component of *leading with hope* is the role of the principal as leader. There are many leaders within a school, but the central authority lies with the school principal. Through distributed leadership, the trauma informed leader empowers other school leaders, but there is a point as the school leader where the principal must be knowledgeable in what is happening in the school.

Principal Karen uses the tools of distributed leadership within her school, specifically the School Improvement Team (SIT), to help implement trauma informed practices within

her school. In her remarks below, she explains how as the school principal she is ultimately responsible for ensuring the practices are followed.

I do all decision-making through SIT. I want people to be on there because that seems, and I want teachers to say, SIT is powerful. Yes, that's the way it should be. I went to SIT and said, this is unacceptable. I gave you two non-negotiables already. The peace corner, calm down area and sensory bins. You need to have those, and they need to be in place tomorrow. That's all I talked about; I didn't give them an explanation so that was that, [and teachers] follow through with it. And then I had teachers saying, What about a desk? I said, no, you were taught. A desk is inappropriate. It's an area. It's a space. So, I have a vision board in my office and I have it chunked down like a timeline. How I think is to begin with the end in mind, here's where I want them to be. By the end of the year, I want them to utilize these spaces, and I want them to have morning meetings. And right now, those are the only things I want them to really do.

Principal Kimberley takes seriously her role as leader of the school. The principal has priorities that must come first. By making one of those priorities the physical and emotional safety of her students, she is leading with hope. In her comments below, she explains her reasoning for these priorities and the impact on the school.

I think, first and foremost a school leader keeps safety in mind at all times. And safety is not just the physical safety of your students but the mental well-being and them feeling safe while they're at your school. I think a good school leader knows that that's their number one priority. And their second priority is making sure that you're creating an environment in which students can learn. And that everybody has access

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to that learning and to be able to learn. And I think keeping those two things in mind and never forgetting that it is about students and what's best for them and not what's easiest or best for an adult I think a good leader, always keeps that in mind and they make sure their staff knows that that's their first thing when it comes to decisions and stuff for the school.

Principal John sees his role as leader as getting everyone in the school community working together to achieve the same goals. As the principal, he has a unique position in setting that direction. In his comments below he explains the importance of the whole team coming together to achieve those goals.

Leadership is setting a direction and guiding staff and students toward that direction. Whatever it could be; school improvement goals, could be everyday life goals, and there's a whole gambit there. So you just try to move people in the right direction, all the clocks working at the same time to put the puzzle together to achieve goals.

Principal Alan believes leadership also requires the building of relationships, and to bring people and ideas together. The comments below reflect his building of interconnectedness between people within his middle school's community and how sometimes those people can be difficult to get along with.

I think leadership is someone who can bring people and ideas together. I think that their relationship builders, they're able to realize that they don't have all the answers and they know that they can go to people. I think it's important for the school leader to be able to build relationships with different types of people because no one's the same. But you have got to find a way to connect with everyone and I think being an effective leader, even those that are difficult to get along with, you find a way to

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understand and recognize that they're important, too. They're sometimes people who are the toughest to get along with. Have good ideas and make you think of things outside the box. I think it's important for a school leader to be someone who brings everyone in the building together and makes sure that everyone is heard.

Leading is one of the essential components to the concept of *leading with hope.* The school principal is the central authority of the school and while the principal is not the only leader within the school, the principal does carry the authority of the state through public education. Using that leadership effectively can make a principal a trauma informed leader.

Leading from the Heart. When examining the leadership of the school principal during this research study, several principals described moments in time where the compassion and humanity of the school principal were shown through their actions. Sometimes this is a stark contrast to the data managing school executive role of school principals. In her remarks below, Principal Sonja describes how what is best for students comes first and that determination is sometimes not the same as what the child's parents or teachers want.

> The teacher wants you to be on their side, but the parent wants you on their side, and it's just trying to reach that common ground and doing what's best for the child in the end. I think that's what a school leader does, no matter what decisions you make it has to be what's the best interest of the child? Sometimes that goes against what the parent wants. And sometimes sadly, it goes against what the teacher wants. But it's whatever is best for that child.

Leading from the heart aims to help the students at a principal's school know they are safe and builds a sense of trust with the students. In the comments below, Principal Nick

shows his compassion as he retells his experience of visiting a student that had attempted suicide in the hospital. His connection to this student enters a new level beyond principal and student and creates a bond that lasts beyond the student's high school career.

>...I went to visit this young lady. She had attempted suicide. I went to the psychiatric hospital. I went in and sat with her and as I was leaving, she took a hold of my arm. And she asked me not to leave and she said, You're the only person that's come to see me. So, I sat back down. Fortunately, she made it through that. But it's an example of every possible trauma you could think of has happened to that young lady and she's been out of school 10 or 11 years now. And yet she is still one of my kids. It's the way I see her. And that's not the only example of that kind of thing, but it's one that definitely applies. I just think it's a matter of some kids really just win your heart.

Principal Nick goes on to discuss how leading with heart finds application in the hiring process of teachers. He makes a point to describe how good teachers have heart. I interpret this as teachers are understanding of situations that students find themselves in and are not always looking to use accountability as a weapon against a kid. In his comments below, he expresses how a principal leading with heart can fill a school with teachers that lead with heart. "As we hire (teachers) we've got to hire people who are her qualified, who are good teachers, who know their content, but the very next thing after that, you got to hire people who have big hearts Then I think you're on a good path to be successful."

Many of the principals in this research study described how they take time to know their student's stories. Principal Kimberley is at an Early College High School and is able to take the time to meet with many of her students often. In her remarks below, she describes

how she is a part of a student's intervention to help build resiliency with a check-in. A check in is when an adult in the building talks with a student to see how they are feeling.

> They start meeting with me on a weekly basis. I actually have a student that has to do a check in with me every day because of his trauma and mental health concerns. Like I said, those are the biggest supports and also just a lot of family. I have a lot of parents on speed dial on my phone and not necessarily if anything bad, but just so I can reach them if something comes up and so they can reach me if they've had a bad morning.

Principal Kerri works at a small elementary school and she also believes in the importance of getting to know the students stories. In her description below, her use of an iceberg as a metaphor helps paint a vivid picture of how students hide trauma.

> The first thing I think of is knowing all my kids inside and out. I think about the iceberg effect, you don't know what is going on beneath the surface because a lot of times the trauma is underneath the surface. Those are things we can't see. We see maybe the outburst or the negative behavior or the paper being crumpled up and thrown on the floor.

Other participants shared similar examples of taking time to learn the stories of their students. Principal Jackie has a different experience, one that serves as an outlier in this research study but offers a different perspective in making sure that we are not asking too much of ourselves and our staff.

> Sometimes I think that not getting enmeshed in knowing, kind of superficially, people's stories as much as they want to or feel they need to disclose those things. As

a leader, I would always receive that information. But sometimes I feel there is a saturation point. Expecting that to be the norm. I don't think that's healthy.

Principal Steve works at an elementary school and realizes that his leadership is always on display. He also feels that is the way it should be, so his students, teachers and parents see that he is working in the school for the students, every day. In one interview session, Principal Steve said "You don't lead from the desk, you know, you don't lead from the sidelines, you lead in the moment and you leave you lead in a very visible visceral present way." He says this was taught to him by one of his principal mentors, and in his description below, he explains the importance of that learning moment in his career.

> And if there's one thing that I learned from her, in every sense of the word, is the essence of servant leadership. I'll never forget this. One day during cafeteria duty, when I first started there, she handed me a broom. I was in my new assistant principal suit or whatever, and I thought, wait a minute and she said, Steve, we sweep during cafeteria duty. I said, Okay, why? Is something wrong with the janitor? She said, No, three things. She said dirt doesn't talk back. Dirt doesn't want to know about a bus assignment or talk about a discipline referral. She said it's the only part of her day where she gets a sense of accomplishment because sometimes as an administrator, we don't always see the finish line, or we don't always see the end result. Then, two other things. She said you know teachers and students need to see us get our hands dirty. It's important that we show that we're not above doing what we expect and doing what is asked.

Leading from the heart is a key component of the concept of *leading with hope.* It is the compassion from the school principal that proves to be a key characteristic of being a

trauma informed leader. School principals find themselves in the role of leader through the authority invested in them by the public school district. The impact of the principal's own humanity and compassion can be felt by the whole school community.

Impacting School Culture. The final component of *leading with hope* is the principal's impact on the school culture. School culture can be described as the historical patterns of meaning that include the norms, values, beliefs, ceremonies, rituals, traditions, and myths understood by members of the school community (Stolp, 1994). The concept of *leading with hope* aligns with norms, beliefs, and values that are trauma informed. The school principal, as a central leader within the school, has a unique position in maintaining these traditions, or initiating change. This is a reason why change leadership is often an important part in graduate school programs for school leadership.

Sense of Belonging. Creating an inviting atmosphere in a school is important in a way of giving students a sense of belonging. It begins with first impressions. In her remarks below, Principal Laura describes how her elementary school strives to do that.

> When a student enters our school, I give them a T-shirt, a sweatshirt and a hat that has (our school) logo on it. It is to let them know now they're family. A lot of it is probably done more in the classroom. The teacher introduces the child to the students and we do a lot of Kagan cooperative learning. The child is automatically placed into a group and has to talk throughout the day with that group, so they already begin to get to know each other. And the nice thing is because my kids are younger here. They just kind of want them to sit with them at lunch. And I think that it's just the nature of our school.

The norms, beliefs, and values of Principal Laura's school are reflected in the open way new students are welcomed into the school community. This open and inviting atmosphere that leads to a sense of belonging is not a feature of just elementary schools. Principal Derek describes below how his Early College High School utilizes what they call a "sherpa" program, where upper classmen guide students in the norms, beliefs, and values.

> When new students come to our school, we have a sherpa program that pairs them with mentors, upperclassmen who are mentors, and they are assigned to our new students at the beginning of their first year here at school, and they follow up with them. A couple of teachers, who, kind of, oversee that program. Our mentors touch base with our students periodically. I actually went to a school to watch one of our students play sports, and I saw one of our mentors, sherpas there watching her mentee. That was good to see.

> Creating a sense of belonging in the school culture also requires building time into the academic program to reinforce the ideas of interconnectedness that are reflected in a positive culture. Principal Kimberley describes regular school assemblies at her school in her comments below:

> We get together in grade level groups, every two weeks and each grade level does something that specifically instills a resilient, growth mindset. We also teach different types of skills there to help students overcome some of their obstacles.

Principal Steve also has built time into the schedule to foster that sense of interconnectedness and belonging in his elementary school. In his comments below, he discusses the different morning meetings and schoolwide assemblies that help build this sense of belonging into the school culture.

Emphasizing to our teachers that we lead, and we teach, with love. That's important.

We have a morning meeting which is established in our schedule every day. It's non-negotiable and we provide resources and support for our teachers. There's a K2 curriculum that we provide and a three five curriculum that we provided. You can kind of follow that bouncing ball. We also have partnered with (community organization), where we do restorative circles for our school and that's again, non-negotiable. We also have two school-wide morning meetings, on Mondays and Thursdays, again to create that sense of community and belonging. One of the things about our school that I'll say is that love is not an abstract here. Love is very concrete and because we're a smaller school, we're able to nurture and harness this sense of love and belonging.

Principal Alan has used his position as a leader to implement a change to the culture of his middle school. He is introducing clubs at his school to increase the sense of belonging at his school. In his description below, he describes how these clubs offer a sense of belonging for students not already experiencing this through sports.

We want to make sure that everybody takes pride in our school. We've tried to turn it into a, we're [school mascot], we're here for each other. We want to start having clubs this year. That's something that we didn't have before. It's easy for kids who play sports to connect with the team because they're going to go out but we want to do more things to meet the needs of different types of kids, whether it's chess club, art club, we do could battle the books, we want those kids to find each other and know that there are kids that have your similar interests and sometimes if you don't have

things like that, it's hard for kids to feel like they belong. We're going to go and try that route and see if that'll help this year.

Many schools will help build positive characteristics into their school culture by teaching students these traits through a word or phrase. This was seen in several of the schools of which participants of this research study were principals. In the comments below, Principal Kerri describes how her elementary school does this.

One of the things we did here [to build a sense of belonging] is we took the characteristics of the word pride: be prepared, be respectful, show integrity, be dependable and show excellence. And we recognize students every week who are showing those characteristics of pride and how they are being a good example. They're pulling their classmates in, they're being kind to others. They are showing respect and responsibility for our school. And really, it's just about how you treat others. And we do that with staff too.

Another example of this can be seen at Principal Emily's school. In her comment below, she describes how they use these positive characteristics to model their beliefs, but also as a way to teach students that are having difficulty following these cultural norms.

It's not that we don't call it PBIS but we do have an acronym that we use, HIKE, which is Honesty, Integrity, Kindness and Excellence. We drill that in since the first day of school and explain what that means and what we can say but what does that truly look like? We model that and then they get (school mascot) tokens for when they show HIKE and then they get to go to the (school mascot) store one day at the end of the month. They go to the store and get to buy all these things that they've gotten. They cash in tokens, and they can buy things. I think it really helps students

understand what we're all about here, they're mini-[school mascot]s, and we say that all the time. What does that mean? When we have these restorative sessions with kids, it's all about "Did you HIKE?" What was that? Let's talk through what that really means. As far as that sense of belonging is concerned, I think, has helped a lot as well.

Leading with hope has proven to be an essential component in the theory of trauma informed leadership generated by this research study. The key concepts of instilling hope, instilling resilience, leading, and impacting school culture have been found to be defining characteristics of this major concept. When *leading with hope* is combined with the component of *being trauma informed,* trauma informed leadership is the result.

Being Trauma Informed

The theory of trauma informed leadership generated by this research study has two primary inputs, displayed in the model in figure 2. The first of these two inputs are *leading with hope*, a concept that has been previously examined as leading systems that help students develop goals, find pathways to success, and reinforce student willpower. The second input is a concept called *being trauma informed*. This concept is vital to the grounded theory generated from this research study. Having the knowledge of trauma informed practices and strategies impacts a school principal's capacity to be a trauma informed leader. Another essential characteristic in this concept of *being trauma informed* is experiencing trauma. The principals of this research study provided details of how they have personally experienced trauma of varying degrees in their personal and professional lives. Everyone will experience a traumatic event in some fashion. The school principal uses personal experiences and

professional experiences to make meaning of what trauma informed leadership is and how a school principal uses it to support all students at their school.

Trauma Informed Practices. The trauma informed leadership theory that emerged from this research study outlines that a knowledge of trauma informed practices is an important part of the concept of *being trauma informed*. The principals that participated in the research study self -identified as trauma informed and had varying degrees of knowledge of trauma informed practices. Many of the principals had received formal training on mental health, SEL, ACEs, and had a knowledge of the strategies some schools have found to be successful in making school trauma informed. Principal Alan describes why he believes it is important for his school to be trauma informed.

> I think being trauma-informed and knowing the importance of being trauma informed, as a school leader, is more important now than ever. In our current state we have cases of trauma that are becoming more and more apparent and abundant in schools, and I think it's more important for me to be trauma informed. I was ACEs trained. When I was going through my principal internship, I planned to get my staff ACEs trained. They need to know the difference between an inappropriate behavior and one that is caused by trauma or could have been something that you know that they can't help because of that. We need to understand what the characteristics of those are and be able to recognize them and act appropriately.

The role of principal has evolved into a more versatile role. While principals still continue in the manager role as it relates to finances, discipline, and school policy new roles have developed making the school principal a more dynamic leader. Principal John describes how the role of principal requires you to act in many roles, one of which is counselor.

I mean as an administrator your every day is different. You're speaking with kids or

educating parents, or students who may have experienced some type of trauma, it

could have been bullying, it could have been a death in the family. You kind of got to

be a counselor and talk to those people at work. For those situations the ultimate goal

of ours is to get them back on the right path for life.

Trauma informed practices have a major aim of helping to support a student as they

develop a way to cope with the trauma they have experienced. Principal Sonja describes how

this has changed the way students are redirected at her elementary school. In her comments

below she describes how some behaviors are expressions of the student's response to trauma.

Students need the opportunity to find a way to learn that the behavior they are exhibiting is

inappropriate. The changing of the punishment of silent lunch to lunch buddies is an example

of this in the description below:

Instead of having silent lunch, we use something called lunch buddies. In the cafeteria

they have a lunch box and sit with the child that has a discipline problem and some

friends, so they can learn to be social. It's a lot of little things like that, that they're not

going to change overnight and it's a mindset for teachers. It's a mindset, not just for

classroom teachers, but staff that we've got to try to kind of shift from a consequence

to learning opportunities. If we ever want the behaviors to change.

Like Principal Sonja, Principal Karen educates the staff at her elementary school about how

some behaviors that teachers see are responses from the trauma a student in their classroom

has experienced.

Well, they need to be educated about what trauma is. They have to understand it

completely, they need to think of examples, and they have to ask because when you're

dealing with discipline, that's when they'll see it. First they need to ask "Why is the student acting this way?" There's a reason for every action and it is not necessarily challenging their authority. Here is an example, his behavior is this, it's refusal. I'm going to sleep. I'm going to call names, you know, I'm angry at the world. I'll give a strategy to the teacher and say "Hey, let's talk about this. What do you think's going on? When is this happening? What part of the day?" Kind of jot it down, a couple days' worth of writing down what you're noticing any patterns or behavior, and there's inconsistency. And so, then from that, we problem solve. I set up what's called the check-in, check out, and I take the teacher schedule or the students schedule, and I break it up hourly. And so, we're going to track and see, and set three goals for a student. Then in this student, as we want to stop with the refusal, the refusal is the "no I won't" or I'll put my hood on and go to sleep. I do know this child is staying up way past midnight. I can't control what happens at home. I can only control between seven o'clock and three o'clock. So, the child's truly asleep, I'm going to allow them to sleep because if you don't start with Maslow you're never going to get to Bloom. We must meet those basic needs first.

Principal Karen uses these trauma informed strategies to help the student in the example find success in his classroom. This method requires teacher capacity building and understanding for the need. To convey this training and get teachers to agree to the trauma informed strategies that may conflict with the teacher's experience as an educator, the principal needs to be a trauma informed leader.

Schools set up systems to support all students, academically, emotionally, and behaviorally. Since the COVID pandemic, more resources have been devoted to these areas.

The issues facing students coping with trauma existed before the COVID pandemic.

Principal Derek describes below how his early college high school has these systems in

place, helping students every day.

> We have discussions during our PLC's (professional learning communities) every
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> month. We all participated in the state mental health training last year. We discuss
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> ways that we can incorporate social emotional learning throughout the day. Without it
>
> appearing to be forced or canned. A lot of the things that we received through the
>
> training and through the district level we're already doing we just don't necessarily
>
> define it that way. Something as simple as positive quotes that we incorporate in our
>
> daily announcements. It can be something as simple as staff being available to listen
>
> to students who are having issues. Something as simple as a student acting differently
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> and a staff member outside of class, privately, checking in with them to see what's
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> going on as if there's something that can help them with that kind of thing. Again, I
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> think the biggest thing is we talk about it every month and it's something that we don't
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> force.

This type of monthly meeting to problem solve and discuss student social and emotional

wellness is a common occurrence with the participants of this research study. Principal

Kimberley describes how her early high school used the Multi-Tiered Systems of Support

(MTSS) committee at her school to serve this same purpose.

> We have an MTSS meeting once a month and before that there's a Google form that
>
> teachers have to complete to refer students to counselors that we are going to
>
> specifically talk about in the MTSS meetings. After we do our initial FAM-S (needs
>
> assessment) we look at what our needs are and where we want to grow. A form is

submitted for students that you feel like are academically not doing well, but you do

one for students that behaviorally maybe struggling as well as socially and

emotionally, maybe struggling. And their academics may be impacted by both of

those things, but those are all that triangulations of data that we look at whenever

we're looking at a student. Nine times out of ten, it starts with them not doing well

academically and that conversation that happens amongst teachers, amongst me,

amongst the counselor once we start diving into why this student is not doing well.

What's happening? What's going on? Has anybody had a conversation with their

parents? Did they give you any ideas? Does anybody know anything about this

student that may have happened in the past? You know, just things like that. It's all

about that conversation piece and then the counselor making notes of what support is

needed for that student, either through her, or through an agency, or through setting

up a child/family meeting to find out too. We can really get to the root of what might

be happening.

The approach used by Principal Kimberley is very similar to the approach used by Principal

Steve at his elementary school, where the MTSS team is replaced by a Care Team. Both

teams have similar roles in helping students overcome challenges to being successful at

school.

We have what's called the Care Team and it is made up of myself, our director of

student safety, our guidance counselor, school social worker and we meet weekly and

teachers make referrals of students where they fill out a Google form and they put in

some information and data or in some cases, they come to the meeting and then we

determine, you know, reviewing that referral how we can best help that child. Do we

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need to refer that child to a therapist? Do we need to review? Do we need to put that

child in one of our small counseling groups? Do we need to reach out to the family,

do we need to provide additional food, for a food disparity. It might be intensive, in-

home treatment. So, we must reach out to mental health agencies. Those ways are

both kinds of pieces or how we tune into our families and our kids, to provide as

much immediate support as we can:

The commonality in these different schools is the staff coming together to problem solve

ways to support the student academically, as well as emotionally.

School principals are given the power to administer policy within their schools. One

common trauma informed practice between the participants was how these participants view

zero tolerance policies. These are policies that dictate exact punishments for student behavior

deemed to be severe and inappropriate. With the one caveat of maintaining a safe school, the

participants of this research study were all in agreement that these types of policies are not

the most effective way to support students that have been impacted by trauma. In the

description below, Principal Steve gives his explanation.

I don't think they (zero tolerance policies) are effective at all. In extreme cases, like if

a child brings a gun to your school, we're not going to mitigate that, right? Or, if a

child decides to do something to that extreme, yes, you have to respond and you have

to take very extreme measures but you got to get to the root of things too. I've heard

the zero tolerance for bullying thing that people throw that around a lot. Now, no one

tolerates that. If you think about it, no one tolerates that or accepts that. If someone

were to come to you and to say, hey Mr. Bottoms somebody's being bullied, you don't

ignore it. You know, you respond. And I think people think that they make this leap

that zero tolerance means that we must put a kid out of school. Or we must do some

sort of draconian measure. No, we have to respond and we have to get to the root of

the behavior to try to either prevent it from happening again or understand why it's

happening. I think that the zero tolerance flag gets thrown around a lot, but people

think that it should be akin to some sort of banishment or expulsion or extreme

suspension.

Principal Barry agrees that zero tolerance policies are not an effective measure for all

students, but he differs with many of the participants of the study in the regard that he does

believe they can be effective for the majority of the students at his high school. His views are

an outlier, but the 10-20 percent he references could be student behaviors that are outward

expressions of that trauma.

There are some things we have to do zero tolerance for and these are the extremes.

Someone brings a gun or a weapon to school. We have to, that's school safety. Not

only is my job as a principal to look out for that kid. But to look out for all kids in this

building. Their education matters just as much as that one kid does. So there are some

things that are like we have to have a zero tolerance policy on and that's for safety.

Other things: throwing the book bag, cussing the teacher. I go off the chart (discipline

chart) 80% of the time but in the bottom of the chart, it says administration can alter

any of the above consequences and that is for those. 15%, 20% of kids that it's not

going to work for them to have three days OSS (out of school suspension), or two

days ISS (in school suspension). We have to think broader. We do have to hold that

kid accountable. We cannot get rid of the accountability aspect for actions, but

accountability for one child in that 15 to 20% will look different for another child

that's in the 80% because it is important they learn not to do it.

The school principals in this research study manage and utilize a wide range of

trauma informed practices within their schools. Their knowledge of these practices is an

important component to the concept of *being trauma informed*. Without their own capacity of

understanding the meaning of what trauma informed practices are, they could not effectively

implement them in their respective schools. They would also have difficulty in creating the

needed understanding and capacity for the teachers and staff in their schools to carry out

these strategies in an effective manner.

Experiencing Trauma. A characteristic of the concept of *being trauma informed* is

the principal's knowledge created from the experience of trauma. Everyone experiences

trauma over the course of their lives and utilizing support systems in coping with trauma is

important for a person's wellness. The magnitude and frequency of traumatic events and/or

circumstances differs vastly among people, but the knowledge constructed from the

experience helps a principal when understanding and supporting others in their own highly

personalized situation. The school principals in this research study described how the

experience of trauma on personal and professional capacities impacted their views on *being*

trauma informed.

Personal Experiences. This dissertation uses a constructivist paradigm in how

knowledge is created from the experiences we endure. The participants of this research study

shared some of their own personal experiences in coping with traumatic events. As

previously described, Principal Sonja was deeply impacted by the events and/or

circumstances surrounding her handicapped brother being bullied and struggling for services

in his school. Principal Karen previously described how she was impacted by being a survivor of domestic abuse and seeing her children also experiencing the same. Principal Nick describes below how he and his wife foster two young children who have experienced trauma in their lives and he shares how this impacted his view of expectations of young children put on them by schools with homework.

> My wife and I fostered two little boys. We knew their home situation was rough. We did not know how bad it was until we got the little guys. It gave me an entirely different perspective. For instance, the older one was in kindergarten, the younger one was only two years old when we got him. With everything that we were dealing with. I ask myself many nights why does this little kindergartner have so much homework? The high school principal and my wife, who is an elementary teacher, and I are saying why, why is he doing all this homework? It gave me a little bit different perspective even though my kids are grown up and were little a long time ago. Having these two young fellows changed my views on a lot of things. I think again, it makes it more personal, more humanized when we're experiencing it. I think I would really revisit when the kids do the work. They're in school a lot of time and I realize that classroom teachers, especially on elementary levels, ask a lot of them outside school.

Our worldview is greatly impacted by our experiences in the world around us. Principal Jackie reflects on her own childhood, and how her experiences with ACEs and trauma impacted her work as a school principal.

> I think it has given me the opportunity to go back and review my own life. And remember I came from very humble beginnings in rural Kentucky, that's where I was

born and raised and also where I quickly left as soon as I could. You don't really -

when you're in your own fish bowl, you don't realize a lot of things and I think my

work as an administrator has really put a spotlight on the way I grew up, not even

realizing at the time what I had or didn't have in material items but you know, also

just realizing I was pretty poor. I was in a pretty rough situation. But I never knew it.

I never knew it until I started to get a little older and even then it didn't quite click.

But working directly with students both in the classroom and as an administrator

when I see students who kind of fit the profile I had as a K-12 student. That's been.

enlightening for me. And I think it has really built my level of compassion and

empathy. It also has, I think, given me an opportunity, an edge on knowing how to

talk to kids and parents and guardians. in terms of offering solutions and navigating

school.

Professional Experiences. The participants of this research study have all seen

trauma and the impact it has played in their professional experience as educators. Some

principals describe events of students they have worked with and events within their school

communities. Principal Sonja describes her experience in building support at her school for

one student that was struggling with his own trauma and suicidal thoughts.

I had a student last year, a fifth grade student that had some suicidal thoughts, said

some things and while some others thought it was attention seeking behavior, and it

may have been, we took everything he said very seriously and tried to put a lot of

support in place for him at school and things (support) from (an outside mental health

agency). He ended up getting intensive in home therapies and we put some supports

in place. We put him on a modified school day because the stress. He had been

remote learning for like a year and a half and came back and he just didn't transition

back to the school very well because when he transitioned back full time, he was in

with fifth grade kids. He had been friends with kids in third grade, and they weren't

friends anymore. Relationships had changed, things have changed and it was hard for

him. and so his behaviors kind of escalated, but instead of suspending, instead of

doing those types of things, we really tried to do more restorative type things. We did

some small group, friendship groups, with him with the counselor and just put some

supports in place to help him reacclimate to being back in school.

Principal Alan learned through an experience he had as an assistant principal at a previous

middle school the importance of knowing your students and the traumatic events and/or

circumstances in their lives. He recounts an experience where a name triggered a response

from the student that was uncharacteristic for the student and revealed some traumatic

experiences the student had not shared previously.

I had a teacher once when I was at [a middle school], just call the kid a common

name, like, hey tiger or son, and just innocently called the student that and that was a

trigger that he had. The child's stepfather, who treated him poorly and called him

that, and it was just a trigger for him, and he just burst and the kid went to the office

but after realizing, what had happened the teacher was just so sorry and would have

handled that differently and we brought him and the kid in and everything was good,

but that was just another example of a trauma, and behavior that really was

inappropriate.

The personal experiences that school principals shared during the research study also

resonated with how making a personal connection with students helps the student in realizing

they have support structures in place. Principal Nick shares how he worked with a troubled student at his high school and built a personal connection that has lasted long after she left high school

> I had a student here at [school name] years ago, who I didn't know at the time, but she had been abused in every possible way. And as a result by the time she was a junior in high school, she was just mad at the world. She would fight at the drop of a hat. She wasn't one that would go around, running her mouth at somebody she would just go and hit him. She was very angry. I had suspended her multiple times. She has gone through some horrific things. And yet, she will keep popping up here at school or at different places, or I will see her. And over the years, we have become very close. She's involved in everything under the sun that she should not be involved in but yet, I think she knows that I care about her and would do anything to help her.

Principal Derek recalls his time as a counselor at a previous high school and how sometimes it is necessary to find unorthodox ways to help a student be successful. He worked with a student to help her find a pathway to success.

> I will go back to my counseling days. I was at a high school in [a neighboring] County. There was a student who was a senior. Home life was not very good, she had a lot of things happen in her life. She was trying to break that cycle. Get out of that situation. It was fall of her senior year. And she had already completed the requirements for graduation. So it must have been spring of her senior year because she had already completed senior English. She was having a hard time getting to school, you know things going on at home, some abuse situations in the home and she didn't know what to do. Fortunately, she had completed her graduation requirements,

so I said, if you just need to work, school isn't a thing that you need to be doing right now. We could graduate you with the credits that you have. Since you're 18, we can get you in a safe place, safe environment. So, we reached out to Social Services, got her involved with Social Services, got her some support through that got her into a shelter for adult women, she was 18 years old, she's considered an adult and they provide her job training and those kinds of things to help her get a job. And a few years later, I heard back from that student, she had done well, she had gotten married and moved to Tennessee. So that was a situation where it worked.

The principals of this research study related how the experiences of their children at school would often weigh on their thoughts outside of work. This is the human connection that we make to our fellow human beings that are suffering, and we want to help. In the comments below, Principal Kimberley sums up these thoughts with her description of how she carries these thoughts with her and how it impacts her leadership.

I think my leadership has been impacted by trauma. Mainly, because your job never stops and not that it's necessarily our job, but that you always take your children and your staff home with you who are struggling or are going through some things. I think that's a big part of it, but I also think that my everyday leadership is impacted because I have to know my individual kids' stories to know how to handle them.

The personal and professional experiences that principals have impact the nature of who they are. The participants of this study have shown how the experiences have amplified their awareness of trauma and their need to understand it. Through their compassion and humanity, they have shown the importance of having knowledge of traumatic experiences, so they can have the capacity to support all of the students in their schools.

Connection to Research Questions

I examined the school support provided to students impacted by trauma from the perspective of the principal in the hope of explaining a grounded theory of trauma informed leadership. The aim of the research study went beyond description of the phenomenon and explained why trauma informed leadership is important in education. To guide this study, I focused on two research questions. I lay out my findings in relation to the research questions below. In Chapter 5, I examined the significance of the research study results and how the findings of this research study will help principals in public education, as well as specific implications for educators, policy makers, and scholars.

Question 1

How do school public school principals come to understand themselves as trauma informed leaders?

My data collected from the participants led to the realization that these principals were trauma informed leaders. Principals come to this understanding through reflection on how they lead their schools, support their students, and create systems with the aim that all students at their respective schools will be successful.

Principals have had experiences within their careers that have led them to this moment of understanding, revealed within this research study. The school principals have experienced trauma in personal and professional capacities that have impacted how they react and administer school policies. These experiences have impacted how these principals have trained to learn trauma informed practices and these practices have informed how the participants in this research study lead their school communities.

One of the most important concepts to emerge from this research study is the concept of *leading with hope*. This concept describes the efforts that these school principals have made to find ways for every student in their school to be successful. None of the principals in this research study were familiar with the parts of hope theory that have been applied in the generation of the theory of trauma informed leadership generated from this research study. The analysis of data tells how these principals utilize these concepts of goal making, finding pathways, and willpower in the ways they lead their schools. A characteristic of this concept of *leading with hope* is the compassion these principals show for all of their students, but especially for students that have faced adversity.

Question 2

How do public school principals utilize trauma-informed strategies in their leadership?

Principals that have participated in this research study have utilized trauma informed principles in their leadership by the ways they have created systems of support within their schools. Each of the principals have worked within their school community to build an understanding for teachers, students, and parents of key characteristics of this research study. These principals have worked to instill hope and resiliency within their students through different strategies discussed in the narrative above.

The participant's personal and professional experiences of trauma have informed how they lead their schools. Each participant has developed systems of interventions to support students impacted by trauma emotionally, socially, and behaviorally. These systems took the shape of intervention teams, SEL lessons, student mentor (sherpa) programs, and school discipline strategies that focus more on the student learning from inappropriate behavior as

opposed to punishment. The resounding rejection of zero tolerance policies, except for when it applies to the safety of the school environment, is an example of how student behavior has become more restorative than punitive in the schools of these participants.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I presented the results of this research study. The participants were examined for trauma informed qualities and the theory of trauma informed leadership was introduced. A storyline was used to reveal the findings through a rich narrative and connection to data generated by this research study. The theory generated was displayed in the storyline as major and supporting categories were examined. Variations of the theory were seen throughout the storyline. Each category and characteristic of the theory was detailed, while also examining the outliers presented by participants. The evidence used throughout the storyline was found to be grounded with data. The key concepts of *leading with hope* and *being trauma informed* were shown to have a major impact on the understanding of the data generated in this research study.

After the storyline was completed, connections were made back to the research questions I first identified in Chapter 1. The findings related to the research questions were detailed. The implications for principals in public education and specific implications for educators, policy makers, and scholars are examined in Chapter 5. I also examine in Chapter 5 hope theory, and use it to make connections between the trauma informed leadership practices of the emergent theory and the ideas behind hope.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Preparing aspiring school leaders to understand and recognize the unique needs of students impacted by trauma is no small feat. However, we contend that with the significant rise – nationally and moreover, in North Carolina – in the number students and families exposed to trauma, now is the time for North Carolina to take a proactive lead in preparing trauma-sensitive leaders at the helm of all of the state's schools. The work ahead, while complex, is critically necessary if there is a serious desire to level the playing field for all students (Allen et al., 2020, p 16)

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed how in some areas school systems were not prepared to support students that have been exposed to trauma. Understanding how principals can help students be successful is an important pillar of educational leadership. School principals may not have possessed the capacity to provide the leadership necessary to make sure this support was given due to the novel nature of the pandemic. School principals would most likely need time to understand and disseminate how to best support students. Students impacted by trauma needed support before the pandemic, but the world of public education has learned from the mistakes made during the pandemic to better support all our students moving forward.

In this chapter, I examine the significance of the findings of this research study. This study employed grounded theory research methods with the aim of developing a grounded theory of trauma informed leadership. The theory that emerged has been grounded in the data and provided a model of how public school principals may better support the staff and students at their school. This theory informs school districts on how to better train school

principals on how to be trauma informed leaders. The theory created also has applications for educational policy makers, university school administrator programs, and further research. In this chapter, I also discussed the importance of Hope Theory and the close position of the theory of trauma informed leadership that emerged from this research theory.

Significance of Results

The role of school principal has changed dramatically over the course of the past few years. Before the adoption of the current school executive standards in North Carolina, the school principal was more of a facility manager or administrator. The change of school administrator to school executive was reflected as well in the change of professional development and academic preparation for school principals. This research study is a call to action for school leaders to demand change to the standards, training, and academic preparation of school principals. Allen et al. (2020) underline this sentiment that the state needs to redesign the school executive standards to include trauma sensitive strategies.

The study is significant as I vividly portray the work of trauma informed leaders in our public schools. Through comparative analysis these experiences of school principals reveal the process involved in helping to make a school trauma sensitive from the school leader's perspective. School principals must be trauma informed leaders and help provide the support needed to all students. I found myself connected to the participants in this study through common practices, challenges, and desires for student success. I believe that every principal should be a trauma informed leader but needs support to build the capacity to do so. A change should take place that helps school districts better evaluate school principals on the success of their school's ability to provide essential support for students as they experience ACEs and traumatic events in their young lives. As I stated in Chapter 2 of this dissertation,

students that have exposure to chronic ACEs can have a negative impact on a student's academic development, widening the achievement gap for these students (McConnico et al., 2016). The achievement gap compels school and district leaders to provide support to students experiencing chronic trauma to make the classroom and school more inclusive. Principals in this research study are working to lead their schools with this goal in mind. I found that almost all principals in this research study understood that for the student to close the achievement gap, a whole child approach was necessary.

Contextualization within Current Research

In Chapter Two of this dissertation, I reviewed the current research on trauma, trauma informed practices and leadership theory. In this chapter, I also examine hope theory since the ideas found within Hope theory have become so prevalent in the coding of data in the research study. Grounded theory research allows for an in-depth look at the research later in the research study to prevent the results being too heavily influenced by previous theory. Trauma informed leadership is still a relatively new topic of discussion in literature, but finds itself tied to research related to trauma informed practices, trauma sensitive schools, and school leadership theory. In this research study, I also make the connection to Hope theory.

The research I presented in Chapter 2 served as a foundation from which a theory of trauma informed leadership could be constructed. The classification of trauma, and how schools utilize trauma informed strategies was essential in the design and understanding of the questions in the qualitative methods used in the collection of data. The research concerning leadership theory was also important in the foundational knowledge for developing a new theory on leadership for school principals.

Students exposed to trauma are more likely to perform poorly in school, have diminished opportunities in education and employment, and are at a higher risk for medical and mental health conditions, and early death (Larson et al., 2017). Schools must support the students exposed to trauma with the same vigor and resource allocation as we see used to support other student populations in the school. The principals in this research study have described how they are doing this. The events of this period of a student's growth will most likely have a lasting effect on the lives of children. School teachers and principals can have a tremendous impact on the life of a student.

Trauma informed leaders work to change their schools. Trauma informed schools take the time to understand and conceptualize the barriers presented to the learning environment by the trauma in the lives of students (Anderson & Blitz, 2015). According to this research study several of the principal participants lead their schools in this fashion. Each of the school principals discuss how their schools have created systems within the school to understand the barriers presented to a student's learning environment. The various ways the participants did this ranged from CARE team meetings, where school members worked to problem solve barriers to learning, to ways the principals impact the school's culture. Examples of this include morning meetings, whole school assemblies to recognize success, and school wide activities with lessons geared toward helping students be resilient and hopeful for their futures.

Hope Theory

As the research study was conducted, I reviewed research on hope theory concurrent to the research project. The concept of hope was examined in the introduction to this paper and defined as the idea that your future will be better than it is today and that you have the

power to make it so (Hellman, 2021). Hope Theory was a concept first developed by Snyder (2000) and defined as being positively motivated by a sense of successful agency and pathways, the plan to meet goals. Snyder's model is built from the ongoing mindset and determination of the individual. This model suggests that as a person faces adversity, the higher hope individual would learn from the negative results to achieve their future goals. Later researchers refined the concept of hope as the convergence of three central tenets; goals, pathways, and agency (Baxter et al., 2017; Hellman, 2021).

Short term and long term goals are important when imagining what a better future can be for a person. Pathways are just as important as the goal since this is how the goals will be achieved. Agency, also described as willpower, is the energy and motivation that keeps a person along the path to achieving their goals. People that have been exposed to trauma and adversity have challenges when it comes to these tenets. Goals can become goals of avoidance instead of goals of achievement. Pathway thinking, or problem solving, can become more difficult when adversity or trauma is present in a child's life. Agency, or willpower, can become a limited resource. When met with failure, it becomes harder to find the motivation to stay on the right path to achieve a goal (Hellman, 2021). A commonality shared by all of the principal participants was goal creation. Many of the principals also discussed the importance of sharing ways students can be more successful (pathways) and for supporting students as they try and sometimes fail in these attempts (willpower).

Leading with hope can be a challenge for a principal. Often, a principal can tend to project their own hope for a student's future, but that student must be the one to have hope. The student could find themselves down a pathway that they do not want and experience failure. Success builds hope. As a person reaches success along their pathway, it improves

with the willpower needed to continue. A principal can facilitate and guide a student to building hope by helping remove barriers and obstacles to help students to develop their goals, finding their paths, and using their own agency to make the future the student imagined, a reality.

Implications for Research

I believe this study has implications for the way we understand the role of the school principal within our society. The school principal is a leader, but also has an important role within our community. This position of authority can be seen through a trauma informed lens as also the primary leader of a support system for the youngest members of our society as they cope with stress and trauma. I speak as a high school principal. Our students face social pressures through social media that magnify what previous generations had to endure. With the added social pressures our students face, it is the right time to examine different aspects of the role of the school principal within our society.

A field of research is now opened concerning the role of the school principal as a trauma informed leader. Future scholars may look at the role of trauma informed leadership for school principals within their supervisory practice of staff and faculty. Further research needs to take place that will examine how the school principal's ideas and views as a trauma informed leader are influenced by being in a rural school or urban school. The environment in which the principal is a school leader may have a profound impact on the way they view themselves as a trauma informed leader. The role that race has in the application of trauma informed leadership should also be examined in future research. Research could look at the effect institutional racism may have on how trauma informed leadership is used, as well as how capacity for school principals of marginalized races can be increased.

Further research can also explore the role of teacher leaders that utilize trauma informed leadership as leaders within their own classrooms. The application of the principles of Hope theory in this research study also makes one wonder what research could be uncovered by examining hope from the perspective of a student or other members of the school community, such as teachers or counselors. The major ideas behind Hope Theory have far reaching applications and avenues for research.

Implications for Practice

I recommend an effort to reform the North Carolina School Executive Standards. These standards are the basis for evaluation in North Carolina for school principals. The standards should be updated to reflect the trauma that students have experienced. COVID-19 shined a light on an area concerning trauma sensitive schools and SEL that could help schools be more successful in supporting all students.

Another practical application of the results of this study is the professional development of school principals to be trauma informed leaders. The trauma informed leadership theory generated from this study can help school principals in understanding the difficult behavior sometimes exhibited by students impacted by trauma. This professional development will help principals understand how to develop support systems within the school that can offer interventions for students that need support with coping with trauma and stress. As the emerging theory contends, a trauma informed leader must have the capacity to understand what trauma is and recognize it within the school environment. The other input of the theory maintains that the school principal must also provide the leadership necessary to foster and create systems in the school that will help students create goals, provide pathways for success, and support the willpower of students as they try to follow the pathways to

accomplish their goals. Principals must recognize the necessity of leading with a hope mindset for students. That practical application would also transmit to staff and students through feedback loops within the school, distributed leadership for teachers and students, and the application of transformational leadership practices to the school culture and environment.

The academic preparation in university school administration programs must give principal candidates a clear picture of the everyday world of a principal. Being a trauma informed leader requires building a framework of understanding on how a principal supports students socially, emotionally, and behaviorally. School Administration graduate programs should begin the process of building the principal candidates' capacity of understanding what trauma is, how they can recognize trauma in the school setting, and how to recognize the trauma they have already experienced from their personal journey. Making these connections with principal candidates within an administration graduate program would have a great impact on the development of school administrators. Speaking from my personal experience I recall instances from my early years in administration where I was dealing with the outward signs and behaviors of students that had experiences of trauma. I reflect back on those early experiences and realize that I did not handle the situations with those students in the most appropriate way. I did not have the understanding of the student's history and circumstances, and the best way to support the student on their journey.

Limitations

In this study, I employed qualitative methods as a grounded theory research project. Using these methods has created a much greater understanding of the phenomenon of trauma informed leadership but reduced the ability of generalization due to the subjective nature of

the methods. This subjectivity means that a different group of school principals may have differing ideas related to trauma informed leadership.

Another limitation of this research study was the difficulty I experienced in finding suitable candidates for the research study. Recruiting through social media afforded me the ability to send out invitations to tens of thousands of school principals across the country, but I was only able to recruit a handful of principals. I relied on previous connections with colleagues I have worked with in the past or presently, colleagues that are also in the doctoral program at Appalachian State University, and a few principals I have met through professional organizations for school principals.

Conclusion

School principals are tasked with creating and managing a school environment that enables students within their learning community to be successful. I have shown in this dissertation the need for principals to be trauma informed leaders. A theory of trauma informed leadership emerged that reflects how the school leader should provide the support needed by all students to be successful. The applications of this theory demand that important revisions to school executive standards and principal evaluations need to better reflect the world we live in after the COVID-19 pandemic. The opportunity to better prepare school principals through academic training and professional development is also made possible through the understanding of the emergent theory of trauma informed leadership from this research study.

The time to have these discussions about trauma informed leadership is now. Action is necessary to support our students on what one of the participants of this study, Principal Steve, referred to as their Hero's Journey. The institutions of our society must understand

that we have seen dramatic changes to our public education system and adaptations to those changes are necessary. We cannot support our students academically if we do not understand the trauma they have experienced in their lives. Several of the participants of this research study made the point to mention how we cannot take the trauma away from our students, it is a part of who they are. What we can do as educators is change the way we work with them so that we can offer better support. That support must come from the top of the school. The school principal should lead with the idea of making the school environment the best for all the students. The school principal should look for ways to build capacity for trauma informed strategies in the teachers and staff of the school. The school principal should lead with hope.

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Questionnaire for Research Study Participants
Thank you for participating in this research study focused on school leadership and the impact it has on school support for students that have been exposed to trauma and adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). Please answer the following questions honestly.

Common Vocabulary:
Trauma - The person was exposed to death, threatened death, actual or threatened serious injury, or actual or threatened sexual violence, in the following way(s): direct exposure; witnessing the trauma; learning that a relative or close friend was exposed to a trauma or indirect exposure to aversive details of the trauma, usually in the course of professional duties (e.g. first responders, medics). (American Psychiatric Association, 2013)

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) - ACEs are traumatic events to which children are exposed. These events can be physical/emotional abuse or other forms of neglect such as prolonged hunger and witnessing domestic violence (Felitti et al., 1998).

1. What level of school are you a principal? (Elementary, Middle, High, Non-traditional)

Do you have experience as a principal at rural or urban schools, or both?

Have you had any academic experiences (ex. college courses) involving the impact of trauma on students? If yes, please explain.

Have you had any training or professional development on the impact of trauma on students? If yes, please explain.

Do you know of school strategies that can help students that have been exposed to trauma and ACEs be successful in school? If so, please list some.

Have you ever made decisions as a school leader that were impacted by the existence of students exposed to trauma or ACEs, in your school?

What is the role of the principal in supporting students academically, emotionally, and socially?

In your opinion, what impact does trauma and ACEs have on a student's success in school?

Why should schools help students that have been impacted by trauma and ACEs?

In your own words what is resilience, as it relates to students exposed to trauma?

In your own words, what importance does hope have for a student that has experienced trauma?

How can the school community be more inviting and supportive for students that have been exposed to trauma and ACEs?

Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

Before I begin each interview, I will take information from the questionnaire found in Appendix A to add context to the subject being interviewed. I will look to provide the following contextual information about the participant:

1. Background of the Subject (short biography)

2. Relationship with the subject (identify positioning & relevant subjectivities)

3. Topics of the interview (what areas would the interviewee be able to provide more insight on beyond the topics listed in the Interview Guide)

4. Personal Reflection (What strengths and weaknesses will I have as a researcher interviewing this subject?)

Interview Guide

Topic: Trauma Informed Leadership

1. Tell me why did you choose to participate in this study?

2. What was your path into the education profession and your current role?

   Probe: How has your leadership been impacted by people that have experienced trauma?

3. I would like to better understand your thoughts on school leadership. How do you define leadership?

4. As we have come to better understand the impact of childhood trauma on student learning and the education environment, how do you think school leaders should further refine their leadership styles to account for the ways trauma shows up in schools?

Probe: Give me an example of how you have been motivated to help a student that has suffered from trauma.

5. What makes a good school leader? Tell me about a time when you saw a good school leader in action.

   Probe: What qualities make that person a good school leader.

Topic: Trauma Informed Practices

6. Tell me about how your school helps students that have experienced trauma?

   Probe: How have you been impacted by working with students exposed to trauma and ACEs.

   Probe: How do you prevent re-traumatization of your students that have experienced trauma?

7. Tell me about how you cultivate belonging in your school.

8. Tell me about a time when your leadership empowered school community members?

9. Tell me how does your school use Multi-Tiered Systems of Support to help students that have been exposed to trauma or ACEs?

   Probe: Can you think of ways your school can better support these students?

10. Tell me about your thoughts on the effectiveness of zero tolerance policies.

    Probe: Can you share a time when you administered a zero tolerance policy. How did it make you feel?

11. How is building capacity for teachers an important step in implementing any changes to the school environment?

    Probe: How have you built teacher capacity regarding SEL and/or mental wellness training with your staff?

12. What part does resilience play in helping a student that has experienced trauma?

13. What part does hope play in helping a student that has experienced trauma?

Appendix C

Trauma Informed Leadership Participant Rubric

This rubric will help determine whether the self-identified participants have a background knowledge of and experience with trauma informed leadership and practices. Question 1 (Q1) asks for the participant's name, and question 2 (Q2) asks for the level of school they are principal of. The questions that deal with academic experiences (Q3) and professional development (Q4) should have a basic point value of 1. Questions dealing with knowledge of strategies (Q5), why should schools help students impacted by trauma (Q9), the school community (Q12) and leadership decisions (Q6) will have a point value of 1 or 2. Some of the questions used are subjective and would best be weighted with a rubric of 1-3 points. These questions are the principal's role in supporting students (Q7), the impact of ACEs on a student's success in school (Q8), the resilience question (Q10) and hope question (Q11). The rubric is listed below:

	1	2	3
What is the role of the principal in supporting students academically, emotionally, and socially?	The response covers 1 area of academic, emotional, and social support. The response provides some detail	The response covers 2 areas of academic, emotional, and social support. The response provides good detail	The response covers 3 areas of academic, emotional, and social support. The response provides rich detail
In your opinion, what impact does trauma and ACEs have on a student's success in school?	The response makes the connection between trauma/ACEs and the negative impact on student success with details	The response makes the connection between trauma/ACEs and the negative impact on student success with good details	The response makes the connection between trauma/ACEs and the negative impact on student success with rich details
In your own words what is resilience, as it relates to students exposed to trauma?	The response doesn't define resilience but shows a connection to trauma with some detail	The response defines resilience and shows a connection to trauma with good detail	The response defines resilience and shows a connection to trauma with rich detail
In your own words, what importance does hope have for a student that has experienced trauma?	The response shows a positive connection between hope to trauma with some detail	The response shows a positive connection between hope to trauma with good detail	The response shows a positive connection between hope to trauma with rich detail

Appendix D

Participant Background Summaries

Principal Sonja - Principal Sonja began as a school counselor, and after substitute teaching, moved into elementary education. She was a teacher for twenty years, and then became an assistant principal at a high school. She then became the principal of an elementary school, which she has done for the past four years. She has also earned an Ed.S in education and is currently attending law school.

Principal Karen - Principal Karen was a lateral entry teacher, beginning in middle school, then moving to elementary school. She moved into an administration program where she spent a year as an intern, then an assistant principal. She became a principal of an elementary school and loved it. She tried a central office position but realized she needed to be with kids in a building. She is also a survivor of domestic violence, and this experience has impacted her tremendously.

Principal Ramone - Principal Ramone started out as a teacher assistant, an ISS coordinator at a K-12 alternative school. He taught at high school for seven years and transitioned into administration as an assistant principal at a middle school.

Principal Kerri - Principal Kerri was an EC teacher at an elementary school working with students in the self-contained classroom before becoming the assistant principal at a high school. She then became the principal of an elementary school.

Principal John - Principal John wanted to be highway patrolman, but things didn't work out like he thought it would so he became a PE teacher at a high school. He was there for 8 years and got approached by central office staff about administration. He chose to pursue that and was an assistant principal for three years in the middle school and currently an elementary principal, in his 8th year.

Principal Nick - Principal Nick was an athlete and wanted to coach, so he became a teacher. He started as a junior high school teacher, then went back to coach at the college level to be a basketball coach and AD. He then became an administrator, 2 years as an assistant principal and then 12 more as principal at the same school.

Principal Laura - Principal Laura was an elementary school teacher and then became an assistant principal at a middle school. She was the assistant principal at a small high school before becoming the principal of a small elementary school.

Principal Derek - After college, Principal Derek joined the army. After active duty, he received his school counseling degree and worked as a school counselor for 14 years. He was a counselor at all age levels, but mostly high school. He has been an administrator 14 years of and currently principal at an early college high school, but has been the principal of an elementary school, and a middle school as well.

Principal Serena - Principal Serena started out as a teacher where she taught for eight years as a Spanish teacher, at elementary, middle and high school. She then transitioned to administration at a small public school. Her family was relocated to (a northern state), 17 years ago. She has been the principal at a High School for 17 years at the same high school.

Principal Jackie - Principal Jackie works currently at a k-8 dual immersion. School, primarily with middle school. This is her fourth year at the school. Her teaching career began teaching abroad as a classroom teacher and then working with ESL students.

Principal Kimberley - Principal Kimberley originally wanted to be a lawyer, but due to pregnancy she had to find another career choice. She became a NC Teaching Fellow and became an elementary teacher. She then became an AP at the school she was teaching at. She them was an assistant principal at a high school and middle school. She became a principal at her old elementary school where she was a teacher, then she moved to her current job for the past four years as the principal of an Early College high school. She has been a principal for a total of nine years.

Principal Alan - Principal Alan was a physical education teacher for 14 years, where he received a principal fellow scholarship, got to do an internship for a year and then was an AP at a middle school. He recently became the principal of another middle school in March of 2021.

Principal Emily - Principal Emily was a teaching fellow at a southern university. She comes from a large family, and her dad said, If you want to go to college, you're going to figure out a way to do that. So she got the teaching fellow scholarship and that led her into teaching special education and was a classroom teacher for four years. She then became a curriculum coach and is currently the principal of a new elementary school.

Principal Barry - Principal Barry began his career as a high school Latin teacher. He lived in Italy for a year as a foreign exchange student in high school and went to college to get his undergraduate and master's degree in Latin. I did a Master of Science in educational administration, online. He became an assistant principal at the high school level and assistant principal for two years at a middle school, then principal at a middle school for three years and now principal at a High School.

Principal Steve - This is year 30 for Principal Steve. He started right out of college and started off as a volunteer teacher in an inner city public school for two years in exchange for a master's degree. After getting married and having children he began to contemplate administration. He joined a large school system that paid for his masters in administration. He is currently the principal of an elementary school in the same district.

Recruitment Email

Hello,

My name is Chris Bottoms, a doctoral candidate in the Educational Leadership program at Appalachian State University in Boone, North Carolina. Like you, I am also a school principal. I am writing you today in the hope that you may assist me in my dissertation research study by participating in a brief (10 minutes) survey, and possibly a follow up interview via Google Meet or Zoom.

This research project will help the world of educational leadership by examining school leadership through a trauma informed lens. School principals work to provide an environment for all students in their school to be successful members of the learning community. Some students are confronted with trauma, of varying magnitudes. School principals may be able to help individuals develop resiliency by providing the appropriate leadership practices within their schools.

The experiences from the global pandemic have brought to light some of the supports that have helped our students be successful in the learning community, but it has also shown where schools have come up short in this regard. Please consider being a part of this research study so that together we can help students find the support they need.

If you are interested in participating, below is a link to the Google Form questionnaire. Based on the results provided from the questionnaire, you may be contacted for a follow-up interview.

Respectfully,

Chris Bottoms

Doctoral Candidate, ASU

Principal, South Stokes High School

Appendix F

Social Media Post

Hello Fellow Principals,

My name is Chris Bottoms, a doctoral candidate in the Educational Leadership program at Appalachian State University in Boone, North Carolina. Like you, I am also a school principal. I am writing to you today in the hope that you may assist me in my dissertation research study by participating in a brief (10 minutes) survey, and possibly a follow up interview via Google Meet or Zoom. This research project will help the world of educational leadership by examining school leadership through a trauma informed lens. School principals work to provide an environment for all students in their school to be successful members of the learning community. Some students are confronted with trauma, of varying magnitudes. School principals may be able to help individuals develop resiliency by providing the appropriate leadership practices within their schools. If you are interested in participating, below is a link to the Google Form questionnaire. Based on the results provided from the questionnaire, you may be contacted for a follow-up interview.

Vita

Christopher Alton Bottoms was born in Pilot Mountain, North Carolina, to Terry and Sandra Bottoms. He graduated from Appalachian State University in Boone, North Carolina in December 2004. The next year he became a teacher with Stokes County Schools. In the fall of 2009, he began working toward a Master of Arts degree in Middle Grades education. The M.A. was awarded in August 2011. In fall of 2014, Mr. Bottoms commenced work toward his Master of School Administration degree at Appalachian State University. In 2015 he began his career in school administration as an Assistant Principal in November of 2015. The M.S.A. was awarded in May of 2016. He began work towards an Education Specialist degree in the fall of that year at Appalachian State University. The Ed.S degree was awarded in May of 2018. In July of 2018, Mr. Bottoms accepted his first principalship as principal of Walnut Cove Elementary School. In August of 2019 he began his work toward a doctorate in Educational Leadership at Appalachian State University. In July of 2021, Mr. Bottoms became principal at South Stokes High School.

Mr. Bottoms is a member of the North Carolina Principals and Assistant Principals Association and the North Carolina Association of School Administrators. He is a volunteer with the local YMCA of Stokes County. He resides in King, N.C. with his wife and two children.