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The landmark Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE) study of 1997 brought attention to the negative long-term impacts of trauma, but only in the past five years has momentum built around infusing trauma-sensitive (TS) policies and practices into public schools to buffer the effects of ACEs.  In this basic qualitative study, I review the Public School Forum of North Carolina's trauma-informed NC Resilience and Learning Project (NC R&LP) which began in 2017 with the goal of bringing trauma-sensitive (TS) strategies to schools in underserved communities where students are at greatest risk of toxic stress from trauma.  In my review of the literature, three key topics emerged: trauma screening, TS school characteristics, and vicarious trauma (VT).  Schools must consider if they screen to target TS approaches for students with trauma or institute universal TS practices.  Next, schools determine which TS practices to use to transform leadership, improve family and community involvement, and enhance classrooms.  Since staff are exposed to VT when working with students suffering toxic stress, proactive strategies are needed to mitigate secondary traumatic stress which can lead to burnout and disrupt school culture.  This research was conducted amidst the global COVID-19 pandemic; thus, it provides additional insights into the flexibility of the NC R&LP framework and the necessity of its work. Data collection methods included document analysis, semi-structured interviews, and online participation.  Data was coded into four categories: program logistics, screening, TS characteristics, and staff wellness.  From these four categories, seven thematic topics of what is needed for a TS school

transformation emerged: do no harm, whole-school collaboration, mindset and culture shift, flexibility and adjustment, staff wellness, whole-child approach, and family and community engagement. COVID-19 was an important topic within each theme as well. Principles of positive psychology served as a theoretical guide and demonstrated a strengths-based model of TS school implementation. Positive psychology stresses meeting students' basic needs, so they may attend to higher cognitive tasks, maximize their potential, and have optimism for a positive future. Staff may cultivate these by keeping an asset-based mindset with the potential of a positive self-fulfilling prophecy for students by treating them as thrivers capable of success. Students and staff in a TS school may develop resilience to overcome future adversities and see the silver lining of challenges to experience personal growth discussed in this paper as posttraumatic growth and vicarious posttraumatic growth.

*Keywords:* adverse childhood experience (ACE), trauma-informed, trauma-sensitive, toxic stress, vicarious trauma, compassion fatigue, secondary traumatic stress, trauma screening, resilience, positive psychology, posttraumatic growth, vicarious posttraumatic growth, COVID-19, social-emotional learning (SEL), restorative practices, relationships, NC Resilience and Learning Project, Public School Forum of NC

TRAUMA-SENSITIVE SCHOOLS: A LOOK AT THE PUBLIC SCHOOL FORUM OF

NORTH CAROLINA'S RESILIENCE AND LEARNING PROJECT

by

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This dissertation is dedicated to all the supportive people in my life...

My *mom* who is a never-ending source of inspiration, fountain of knowledge, and force to be reckoned with as she persists through life's adversities without comprising herself.

My *sister* who is a guardian angel having weathered many storms while looking out for those around her; in our journey of life, she cleared the way for my path to be easier.

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My *teachers* who took the time to reach out to the shy girl in the classroom and help her blossom.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

PREFACE

My personal life has been shaped by the lingering effects of my own adversities. My professional life has been impacted by vicarious trauma from hearing heartbreaking stories of students and carrying guilt from being unable to heal their suffering. Unable to escape past and present traumas, I have felt the strain of compassion fatigue.

This dissertation was born of the desire to push through my compassion fatigue and learn how to help avert the effects of trauma on students. Had trauma-sensitive knowledge and practices existed when I was young, it may have improved school life for myself and my peers. At times, school was a haven with adults who would not harm me since I did my best to be invisible and avoid trouble; however, at other times, it perpetuated feelings of insecurity as I heard peers verbally abused by adults, and teachers blatantly looked the other way as young men sexually harassed me. School was where some adults spoke with kindness and did their best, like the custodian who saved me from being attacked by a peer after school in seventh grade. However, it also had apathetic and burnt-out adults, who made it clear we were not worth their time. Despite little personal knowledge of me, my ninth-grade teacher said, I was "a loser" who "statistically speaking" would "wind up as a hooker on the street corner hooked on drugs" just based on the school I went to, neighborhood I lived in, and her bad day, not realizing the impact of her words on a young impressionable mind. School was where I envisioned education opening doors of opportunity while also realizing aspects of my life and other's thoughts of me, like that teacher, may slam those doors shut. Luckily, I did not fall victim to a

negative self-fulfilling prophecy perpetuated by the low-quality teachers at my one high school, which was most likely due to moving to a new city and school with better educators.  Unfortunately, many of my peers who never left that school did become statistics.  Trauma research states "…a caring relationship with even one adult in school can foster a sense of safety, improve student engagement and social success, and increase student attention and achievement" (Ristuccia, 2013, p. 259).  Mine was my senior English teacher who was the first nonfamily member I felt comfortable sharing personal aspects of myself with.  Her emotional support and acceptance made me realize every teen needs a Mrs. Peppers in their life, and I could be one of them by becoming an educator.  Throughout college as I strove to balance work, school, and becoming a mom, the brutality of statistics hung invisibly over me making me doubt I could preserve.  I looked to my mother as a role model since she went back to school later in life and managed to keep things together as she balanced work, school, and family to rise above adversities and achieve her dreams, so I too decided to defy statistics and be successful. Unfortunately, statistics continue to haunt me.  While attending a professional development (PD) on trauma a few years ago, the speaker had us do a personal inventory with Feletti's original ACE checklist.  According to my score, I should be cognitively impaired, have substantial health risks, poor social skills, and begin preparing for an early grave as described on the handout and reiterated by the speaker since ACE scores of four or more cause a host of learning, social, emotional, and health issues as demonstrated by the figure found in the groundbreaking 1995 to 1997 ACE Study conducted at Kaiser Permanente:
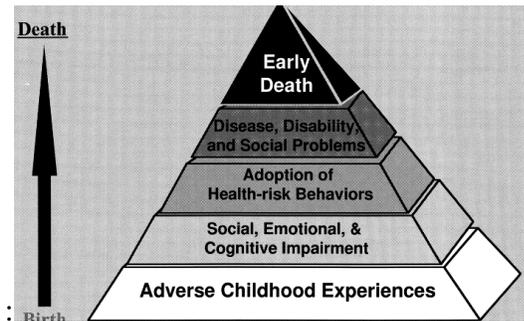
Figure 1. Pyramid of the increased risks a person faces in life by having ACEs in childhood. Reprinted from "Relationship of Childhood Abuse and Household Dysfunction to Many of the Leading Causes of Death in Adults," by Felitti et al., 1998, *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, *14*(4), p. 256. Copyright 1998 by Elsevier Science Inc. Reprinted with permission.

This PD reinforced negative stereotypes made years ago by some of my teachers. I was hoping colleagues lacking adverse backgrounds would hear a message of resilience and hope to become more sensitive and understanding of students' needs in a way that does not perpetuate possible adverse outcomes where kids are simply resigned to the fate of their high ACEs and fall victim to a negative self-fulfilling prophecy with educators who feel hopeless to help, but instead, they began articulating the gloom and doom which often leads to low expectations, hopelessness, or sympathy points, all of which fail to prepare students for academic success. It was particularly disappointing since I had been eager to attend a presentation on trauma since I want children who are often labeled at-risk and discounted to get needed supports to reach their potential; however, this PD showed me it is possible to do more harm than good. It was the deficit-based way ACEs statistics were presented which gave me the epiphany to focus my dissertation on trauma-sensitive schools in hope of finding an asset-based model that provides educators with tools to help all children, especially those with ACEs, succeed.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

I have dedicated my professional life to helping marginalized students see they can beat the odds and not perpetuate society's beliefs about them.  At times, it is a losing battle and very self-deflating as you watch teens with so much potential be waylaid by life's stressors.  Having worked primarily in high schools, it is apparent more needs to be done at younger grade levels since by high school it is often difficult to change the habits and mindsets so engrained in teens who have suffered from trauma due to trauma's impact on the brain structure making it harder to change as you age:

> Scientists use the term "plasticity" to refer to the capacity of the brain to learn from experience... Although windows of opportunity remain open for many years, trying to change behavior or build new skills on a foundation of brain circuits that were not wired properly from the beginning requires more effort. (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University [CDCHU], 2016, p. 2)

Thus, I wished to learn more about the trauma-informed NC Resilience and Learning Project (NC R&LP).  They are working alongside staff, primarily in elementary schools, to assist them in building students' resilience and combatting the impact of trauma while students' brains still have the most plasticity, so they may maximize students' potential.

For this qualitative study, I reviewed pertinent documents about NC R&LP, attended two NC R&LP webinars, explored their online learning platform, attended an online event with their parent organization (The Public School Forum of NC), and

conducted semi-structured interviews with three NC R&LP staff members to learn the nuances of what it means to be trauma-sensitive (TS) and discover how TS approaches are implemented. This research is needed since TS practices are becoming a national focus especially since the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the necessity of addressing social-emotional and mental health needs and wellness. In addition to many local and state initiatives, a nationwide bill was introduced in the House of Representatives to mandate schools address trauma: H.R.4146 Trauma-Informed Schools Act of 2019. This bill seeks to update the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESSA) to include trauma-informed professional development (PD); implementation of TS practices including restorative practices, social-emotional learning, and tiered services; and trauma-informed services and supports for students. Should this or a similar future bill be passed, schools throughout North Carolina might seek collaboration with the NC R&LP; therefore, more should be understood about this framework.

This research increased my knowledge of how educators may take an asset-based approach to trauma. Heisel (2019) notes, "When stories make bold claims about life expectancies being chopped by decades or the rates of serious chronic diseases skyrocketing for those with higher [Adverse Childhood Experience] scores, they can create heightened anxiety without a real solution" (para. 8). Too much of the research and PD emphasize trauma without presenting solutions or provide a deficit-based viewpoint of trauma survivors by framing them as victims with little hope. Through using a positive psychology theoretical framework to make sense of my research and findings, I hope to showcase an asset-based look at TS education and trauma survivors.

## Why Should Schools Address Trauma?

Public schools serve a diverse population of students who increasingly face many stressors including trauma exposure. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA, 2014) defines trauma as what "results from an event, series of events, or set of circumstances experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life-threatening with lasting adverse effects on the individual's functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being" (p. 7). SAMHSA (2014) simplifies this with three words: event, experience, and effect. A wide range of negative life events may be traumatic including abuse, poverty, neglect, natural disasters, pandemics, parental separation, mental abuse, incarceration, witnessing violence, etc. Individuals may experience only one incident for a short or prolonged period, or they may experience multiple events concurrently or spread over time. Each traumatic event exposure counts as one Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE) regardless of how many times or how long exposure to that event lasted. How people respond to their trauma varies widely based on numerous factors including age, personality, support systems, and culture; thus, trauma manifests in a myriad of ways.

Schools in under-resourced areas are likely to have a significant number of students who have been exposed to traumatic occurrences. Woodbridge et al. (2016) note trauma exposure is highest for immigrant/refugee populations, African Americans, and Native Americans. Additionally, the National Council of State Education Associations (NCSEA, 2019) reports students from urban areas suffer from high ACEs, but those in rural communities do as well; for example, rural areas have been hit hard by the opioid

crisis, and low socioeconomics (SES) play a substantial part in elevated ACEs as "More than half—58 percent—of U.S. children with ACEs live in households with incomes less than 200 percent of the federal poverty level" (p. 7). Despite ACEs being higher in schools serving these demographics, all schools serve students impacted by trauma, especially given the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020-2021 which nationally forced all schools to suspend in-person learning. Traumatic experiences are becoming so numerous that "by age sixteen, two-thirds of children in the United States have experienced a potentially traumatic event" (National Child Traumatic Stress Network [NCTSN], 2017, p. 1). Even students lacking direct traumatic experiences are often affected by vicarious trauma (VT). Wolpow, Johnson, Hertel, and Kincaid (2016) interviewed a student about his perception of which group of students' learning was impacted by trauma at his school. His reply was, "'All of them. If you yourself are not personally affected by trauma, you are friends with students who are, and it affects you, too'" (p. 41).

The impact of trauma is vast as it alters cognitive functions and can lead to learning issues and high-risk behaviors. As Dr. Marjorie Fujara explains:

> When we encounter adversity, our brain prepares us to fight, flee, or freeze, ramping up our heart rate, blood pressure, and stress hormones such as cortisol… chronically high levels of cortisol are toxic to the brain, wearing down its ability to function… eat away at the hippocampus, which regulates memory and learning and also drives executive functioning—the skills needed to focus, make decisions, follow directions, solve problems, and multitask. (National Council of State Education Associations (NCSEA), 2019, p. 5)

Frequent, prolonged, or intense stress responses from trauma results in toxic stress creating a "disruption of brain circuitry and other organ and metabolic systems... may

7

result in anatomic changes and/or physiologic dysregulations that are the precursors of

later impairments in learning and behavior as well as the roots of chronic, stress-related

physical and mental illness" (Shonkoff et al., 2012, p. 236). NCTSN (2017) describes

brains of children with trauma as wired for survival mode and easily triggered, even

when no danger is present, which may result in inappropriate behaviors. Students who go

into freeze mode may be withdrawn, put their heads down, and not complete work.

Those in flight mode may have high absenteeism, leave the classroom, or be restless.

Students in fight mode may have conflicts with others and not adhere to policies and

procedures. Studying 701 low-SES, urban youth, Burke, Hellman, Scott, Weems, and

Carrion (2011) found learning and behavioral issues increased with ACEs; those

reporting four or more ACEs exhibited more problems than those with three or fewer:
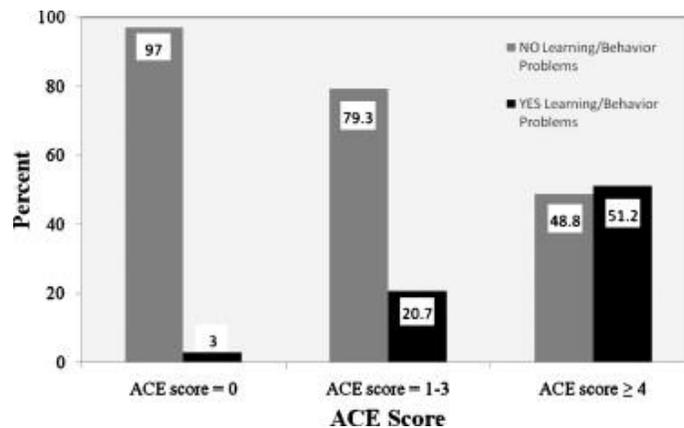


Figure 2. ACEs impact on learning/behavior. Reprinted from "The Impact of Adverse
Childhood Experiences on an Urban Pediatric Population," Burke, Hellman, Weems, &
Carrion, 2011, *Child Abuse & Neglect*, *35*(6), p. 412. Copyright 2011 by Elsevier Ltd.
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Additionally, in a cross-sectional analysis of the 2011-2012 National Survey of

Children's Health which included information from 65,680 children aged 6-17, Robles,

Gjelsvik, Hirawy, Viver, and High (2019) found increased ACEs correlated with increased negative school attitudes and outcomes including being more likely to repeat a grade, not complete homework, and have a poor attitude towards school:
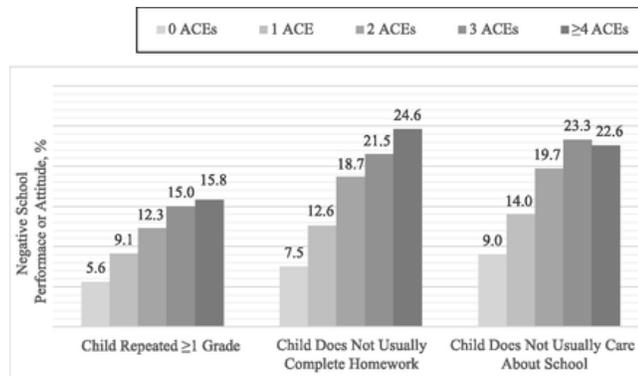


Figure 3. As ACEs increase so do negative school attitudes.  Reprinted from "Adverse Childhood Experiences and Protective Factors with School Engagement," by Robles, Gjelsvik, Hirway, Vivier, & High, 2019, Pediatrics, 144(2), p. 4. Copyright 2019 by the American Academy of Pediatrics. Reprinted with permission.

Students with multiple ACEs "have more receptive and expressive language difficulties …and were more often referred to special education services" as compared to their peers (Hertel & Johnson, 2013, p. 25).  In a systematic review of school-related outcomes from trauma exposure, Perfect, Turley, Carlson, Yohannan, and Gilles (2016) found students with ACEs of three or more have lower standardized test scores than peers, are 2.5 times more likely to repeat a grade level, are 32 times more likely to be identified as learning disabled, and have higher suspension and expulsion rates.  Schools with a high concentration of students with multiple ACEs experience higher rates of unexcused absences and lower rates of academic success, graduation from high school, and progression to post-secondary school than schools with students who have lower ACEs

(Blaustein, 2013; Ristuccia, 2013; Gonzalez, Monzon, Solis, Jaycox, & Langley, 2016; NCTSN, 2017).

Despite research showing negative statistics for those experiencing higher ACEs, resilience research highlights having higher ACEs does not always equate to negative outcomes. The reactions of children with trauma vastly differ since exposure itself varies in form, duration, frequency, and intensity; children have many different characteristics including age of trauma incident; genetic factors for resiliency and coping skills; and availability, level, and frequency of supportive family and community factors fluctuate (Woodbridge et al., 2016). Even those with negative symptoms are not unreachable; luckily, the human brain is a remarkable thing since as much as "traumatic experiences can undermine the brain's development, good experiences can enhance it...the plasticity of brain development and the scaffolding nature of skill development are strong reasons to intervene as early as possible with supportive, ameliorative, and protective experiences" (Cole, Eisner, Gregory, & Ristuccia, 2013a, p. 12). Protective factors can shield those with ACEs from negative outcomes. Robles et. al (2019) found that the more protective factors (safe neighborhood, well-kept neighborhood, supportive neighbors, neighborhood amenities, nonsmoking home, at least five weekly family meals, supportive caregiver, etc.) a child reported equated to less negative school outcomes and attitudes. Those with seven or more protective factors (PFs) were least likely to repeat a grade, most likely to complete homework, and most likely to care about school:

≤3 PFs  4 PFs  5 PFs  6 PFs  7 PFs

Negative School Performance or Attitude, %

**Child Repeated ≥1 Grade**
17.4  12.1  10.7  7.3  5.9

**Child Does Not Usually Complete Homework**
32.5  19.5  14.0  10.4  7.4

**Child Does Not Usually Care About School**
26.4  21.7  15.4  11.3  9.0
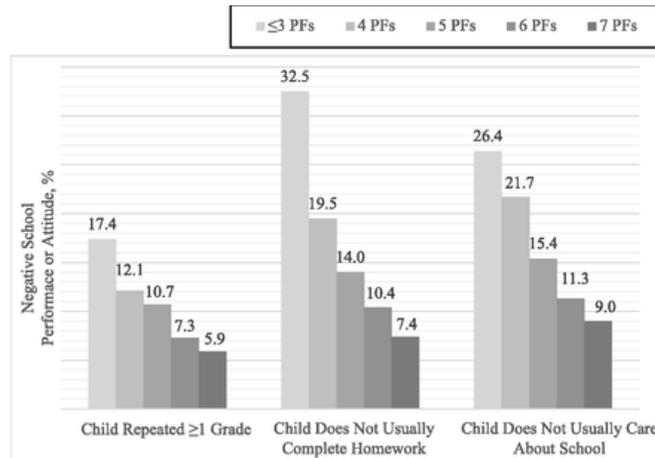
Figure 4. As protective factors increase, negative school outcomes decrease. Reprinted from "Adverse Childhood Experiences and Protective Factors with School Engagement," by Robles et al., 2019, Pediatrics, 144(2), p. 4. Copyright 2019 by the American Academy of Pediatrics. Reprinted with permission.

In a cross-sectional analysis of Wisconsin's 2015 Behavioral Risk Factor Survey of 6,188 adults, Bethell, Jones, Gombojav, Linkenbach, and Sege (2019) found those reporting six or more positive childhood experiences (PCEs) were 72% less likely to have depression or poor mental health, and those with three to five PCEs were 50% less likely; additionally, those having high PCEs were 3.5 times more likely to report having needed social and emotional support as adults. Some children may come to school with sufficient PFs and PCEs and be able to recover from trauma with little intervention; however, others need schools to assist in providing PFs and PCEs through providing safe and supportive environments with caring adults. The results can be transformative for schools; for example, Chicago Public Schools experienced their lowest drop-out rate in district history after implementing whole-school trauma training, social-emotional learning (SEL), and restorative discipline (*Trauma-Informed Care in Schools*, 2019a). Strengthening families and communities, fostering positive relationships, and providing

trauma-informed policies and programs are means Shonkoff et al. (2012) and Sege and

Harper Browne (2017) discuss to promote healthy brain development and improve

physical, mental, and emotional wellbeing for children with toxic stress, but they stress

interventions are most effective when brain plasticity is greatest.

Schools may either assist in the healing process or cause students more harm by

ignoring emotional needs: "...a sensitive, caring, and supportive environment has great

potential to support resilient outcomes, whereas an unsupportive and unstable

environment can worsen the influence of trauma or be the very source of it" (Blaustein,

2013, p. 4). Ginwright (2018) defines resiliency as the capacity to adapt, navigate, and

bounce back from adverse and challenging experiences. A TS approach requires a

positive school climate to offset the impact of trauma and empower students to be more

resilient when encountering future adversities: "When we create safe and supportive

school communities, the benefits to all children are significant and include enhanced

achievement, engagement, improved attendance and graduation rates, and increased

resilience, regardless of exposure to trauma" (Ristuccia, 2013, p. 254). School

engagement, experience, and success are among the most predictive variables of adult

healthy outcomes and help to avoid long-term negative outcomes on immune systems,

neurological development, decision making, high-risk behaviors, physical and mental

health, and intergenerational transfer of ACEs through household stress, abuse, or neglect

(Ford et al., 2019). Given the positive impact of addressing trauma and the detrimental

consequences which may be avoided, all schools have a responsibility to create TS school

cultures by acknowledging trauma, minimizing re-traumatization, and building resilience.

## Study Purpose

The purpose of my research is 1) see how the NC Resilience and Learning Project (NC R&LP) addresses the deficit nature of trauma, 2) become knowledgeable of the trauma-sensitive strategies and practices promoted by it, 3) understand how the framework supports schools in implementation of said strategies and practices, 4) understand how NC R&LP navigated the impact of COVID-19.

## Research Questions

1. Given trauma is a negative construct, how can educators avoid deficit-based thinking when addressing trauma?

2. How are trauma screening, implementation of trauma-sensitive practices, and mitigating vicarious trauma addressed and supported by the NC R&LP?

3. How has COVID-19 impacted NC R&LP now and going forward?

## Background Context

Despite the initial ACEs study exposing the harm of trauma and toxic stress being released in the late 1990s, implementing a trauma-informed plan for schools has evolved slowly. There are organizations dedicated to using the knowledge of trauma to inform health, education, and social service policies and practices. I am a local liaison for the all-volunteer national organization began in 2016 called Campaign for Trauma-Informed Policy and Practice (CTIPP) which seeks to create a trauma-informed society. People in organizations such as this wish to see national legislation aimed at combatting the toxic stress of ACEs. Currently, Title IV of Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2017 provides an opening for the possibility of using a trauma-lens for transforming schools.

In 2017, the Public School Forum of North Carolina supported this new legislation with the formation of the NC R&LP piloting a TS approach in partnering schools.

**Title IV of Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) 2017**

TS school advocates were given a boost in 2017 with the ESSA of 2015 update including Title IV Part A: Student Support and Academic Enhancement Grants providing $1.6 billion to fund student mental and behavioral health programs. School districts receiving $30,000 or more from the grant must conduct a needs assessment to determine students' mental and behavioral health needs and spend a minimum of 20 percent on safe and healthy school activities which include training on trauma-informed policies and practices (ESSA of 2017). Section 4108: Activities to Support Safe and Healthy Students includes schools using school-based and partnership mental health services and programs incorporating evidence-based trauma-informed practices. Title II Part A: Sections 2102-2103 allow districts to use funds for partnerships with outside agencies to provide high-quality professional development for enhanced educator effectiveness or develop, implement, and evaluate programs to improve staff working conditions; increase targeted support for all students with a particular emphasis on students with disabilities and English Language Learners; or to recognize and prevent child abuse (ESSA of 2017).

The Trauma-Sensitive Schools Act of 2019 has not proceeded further than the United States House of Representatives at this moment, but if passed, it would update ESSA (2017) to enhance its provisions for addressing trauma. The House Committee on Education and Labor held a hearing in September of 2019 called: *Trauma-Informed Care in Schools* to get input from educational and health experts on the prevalence of trauma,

its impact on learning, and what schools may do to address it.  CEO of Chicago Public

Schools, Dr. Janice K. Jackson stressed the urgency of the committee taking action since

"Trauma is a complex community health issue that requires an integrated solution.

Resources must be leveraged from all stakeholders, including schools, community

partners, and government.  There is a serious need for increased federal funding to

combat this pandemic" ("Trauma-Informed Care," 2019a, para. 38).  Surgeon General of

California, Dr. Nadine Burke Harris wants to allot federal funds for a coordinated public

health response through health providers, mental health agencies, and schools since

"scientific consensus supports two core principles: 1) early detection and early

intervention improves outcomes, and 2) safe, stable, and nurturing relationships and

environments are healing" ("Trauma-Informed Care," 2019b, para. 16).  COVID-19

temporarily halted Congress acting on this bill; however, the pandemic bolstered the

urgency of incorporating TS practices to support students' wellbeing.  The CARES Act

passed in 2020 allowed states and local districts to allocate emergency COVID-19 funds

for addressing the social-emotional and mental health needs of students.  It is unknown

what additional legislation or revisions to ESSA may be passed to address the

psychological needs of students in a post-COVID learning environment.

**Public School Forum of North Carolina**

Begun in 1986, the Raleigh-based Public School Forum of North Carolina is a

nonpartisan nonprofit funded primarily through donations of organizations and private

donors.  It was created through the partnership of policymakers and school, business, and

nonprofit leaders who wanted to improve public schools for all NC children by

implementing research-based solutions.  Their current mission statement is "To provide

trusted, nonpartisan, evidence-based research, policy analysis and innovative programs

that empower an informed public to demand that education best practice becomes

common practice throughout North Carolina," so their vision comes true that "All North

Carolina children shall have the opportunity to reach their full potential through equitable

and meaningful public education that nourishes our state's civic and economic vitality"

(Public School Forum of NC, n.d., *Our Story* para.4-5).  The organization has evolved by

expanding its programs and initiatives: 1) NC Ed Partners which helps schools,

businesses, non-profits, and elected officials to network and collaborate to achieve

common goals; 2) Education Matters a publicly-broadcasted TV show and podcast

featuring stakeholders ranging from students to politicians for expanding public

knowledge on topical educational issues; 3) Institute of Educational Policymakers which

works alongside the State Board of Education and House and Senate state representatives

to research best practices for addressing key educational issues and compiles findings in

its biyearly *Educational Primer* provided to all elected officials; 4) NC Center for After

School Programs aims to increase access to high-quality after school programs through

its statewide network of learning programs, law enforcement, policymakers, colleges,

business, nonprofits, and philanthropists; 5) Dudley Flood Center for Educational Equity

and Opportunity helps ensure school programs are in place to address barriers to

equitable schooling, primarily racism and poverty; 6) NC Racial Equity Initiative aimed

at combatting systematic racial inequities in our educational system; 7)  NC Resilience

and Learning Project to provide students with safe and supportive schools through

trauma-informed educational practices; 8) Education Policy Fellowship Program to provide fellows with educational policy professional development and leadership; and 9) The NC Teaching Fellows dedicated to developing teacher-leaders through college scholarships. These nine programs highlight the Public School Forum's persistent dedication to providing access to high-quality education for all children of NC, particularly those historically marginalized.

The Public School Forum of NC advocates creating positive school environments with TS strategies. TS schools aid in combatting what members of the Public School Forum view as the rising attempts to "harden schools" with increased zero tolerance measures, armed guards, and metal detectors which foster a negative school climate where students feel less welcomed and unable to focus and contribute to racial disparities that lead to the "school-to-prison" pipeline since students of color disproportionately are suspended and expelled thus falling behind academically then potentially dropping out (Poston et. al, 2019). Additionally, TS schools benefit all students, not just those impacted by trauma, since they create a positive school culture and climate that is learner-centric, safe, and supportive (Public School Forum, 2016).

**Study Group XVI: Expanding Educational Opportunities.**

The Public School Forum has advocated on behalf of Leandro v. State since the 1997 ruling by the NC Supreme Court that all students in NC have the right to a "sound basic education" later expanded with a 2002 ruling adding the right to competent and well-trained teachers and principals along with resources for supporting effective instruction (Institute for Educational Policymakers, 2018). The state was given ten years,

2004-2014, to comply with these rulings, yet in 2015 Judge Manning declared the state had failed to meet these standards.  Due to concerns that the nearly 1.5 million students in low SES Title I schools in NC were not receiving an equitable or high-quality education due to barriers of poverty, racism, and trauma, the Public School Forum decided to form *Study Group XVI: Expanding Educational Opportunities* consisting of over 300 experts in education, business, research, and government who met from October of 2015-April of 2016 to determine what would be necessary to provide all children in NC with a "sound basic education" (Public School Forum, 2016; Institute for Educational Policymakers, 2018).  Study Group XVI separated into three subcommittees of around 100 people each: Trauma and Learning, Racial Equity, and Supporting Low-Performing Schools; these committees researched, heard from national experts, and contributed to the group's report with action plans outlining specific strategies for schools, partnering organizations, and the NC government to immediately implement (Public School Forum, 2016).

The Trauma and Learning committee researched promising TS initiatives across America which had positive impacts such as up to 34% increase in attendance, improved test scores, 30-90% decrease in suspensions, and 20-44% decrease in office referrals (DeKonty, 2018).  Two key programs most influencing the committee's action plan were the Compassionate Schools model based on Washington State's the Heart of Teaching and Learning framework which is being used in North Carolina's Buncombe County Schools and the Flexible Framework developed by Massachusetts Trauma & Learning Policy Initiative (TLPI) at Harvard Law School.  The Compassionate Schools model stresses a mindset shift with educators understanding students' behaviors through a

trauma lens then building students' resiliency through infusing social and emotional

learning (SEL) in a tiered support system partnering with local community agencies to

provide supports for students needing intensive help (Rosanbalm & Hahn, 2016).  TLPI's

Flexible Framework emphasizes a whole-school approach to training and implementing

TS policies, practices, and strategies (academic and nonacademic) with a focus on school

leaders taking a substantial role to support implementation, community partnerships to

provide services and resources, and collaboration with families (Public School Forum,

2016).  Drawing from the expertise provided by these frameworks, the Trauma and

Learning committee provided three primary recommendations in its action plan:

> 1)  Training for educators and administrators about the prevalence and impact of trauma, as well as effective strategies and interventions for creating a safe space where students can learn.
> 2)  Pilot programs modeled where high-need schools receive training, coaching, and support to implement a school-led process of transformation modeled after nationally-recognized trauma-sensitive initiatives.
> 3)  State-level policy to guide, support, and incentivize schools' work around trauma and learning, as well as to remove barriers to this work.  (Rosanbalm & Hahn, 2016, para. 12)

Using these recommendations and following the NC State Board of Education's 2016

adoption of *The Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child* framework which

promotes the importance of supporting students' physical and emotional health and

wellness, the Public School Forum, two partnering LEAs, and Duke University Center

for Child and Family Policy developed the NC R&LP pilot with statewide expansion

plans should it prove successful.  They hope the framework will serve as a model for both

turning around low-performing schools and assisting high-performing schools address the

needs of their underserved students, so the Public School Forum may achieve its goal of all students having an equitable education (Public School Forum, 2018).

**NC Resilience and Learning Project (NC R&LP).**

2017-2018 was the pilot year for the Public School Forum's NC R&LP developed from Study Group XVI's recommendations.  This framework afforded partnering school districts the opportunity to meet new provisions of ESSA (2017) by incorporating a trauma-informed approach to meet needs specific to their demographics of students with ACEs and low SES.  The pilot year began in three low-performing schools in two school districts.  While the original plan was to expand into a maximum of three elementary schools per six districts for a total of eighteen schools, due to early successes and increased donations and grants, it expanded into middle schools and increased its reach to thirty-seven schools in eight school districts throughout North Carolina by its second year ("The Public School Forum's NC Resilience," 2018; "The Public School Forum of North Carolina receives," 2018).  For the 2020-2021 school year, NC R&LP had some form of partnership or trainings planned for twenty-five school districts ("Collective Care," 2021).  The long-term goal is to demonstrate the framework's efficacy to then begin a statewide scaleup, particularly for low-performing, high-need schools ("Public School Forum of NC Launches New," 2017).  Current partnering schools vary with available resources, locale being more urban versus more rural, and staff ranging from 10-50 members, but all the schools struggle with low state accountability system ratings, serve mostly low SES students, and have a lack of family engagement ("NC Resilience and Learning Project Concludes its Second," 2019).   Like the NC State Board of Education,

NC R&LP follows a Whole Child framework "to foster trauma-sensitive schools that will

improve academic, behavioral, and social-emotional outcomes for students" which they

achieve "by emphasizing the importance of creating an enduring culture shift in how

participating schools view and approach children who have adverse childhood

experiences" (Poston et al., 2019, p. 22).  NC R&LP's goals are to

> …increase awareness among educators of the impact of Adverse Childhood
> Experiences (ACEs) on student learning; to improve school climate by creating a
> trauma-sensitive environment; to improve the approach of educators and school
> communities to student discipline, particularly for high-need students; and to
> improve the coordination of services among schools, other school-based actors,
> and social service providers to mitigate the impact of ACEs on student learning
> and behavior by building student self-regulation skills and resiliency within
> inclusive learning environments. (NC Learning and Resilience Project, 2019, p. 2)

Strategies, materials, and approaches used by the NC R&LP to reach these goals were

informed by the Flexible Framework developed by TLPI with direct consultation by the

authors of the framework and ongoing support with a TLPI implementation advisor

during the pilot year (Rosanbalm & Hahn, 2016).  TLPI's Flexible Framework stresses

six key aspects needed in a TS school which I address in more depth in chapter three:

supportive leadership, professional development (PD), access to resources and services,

academic and nonacademic strategies, trauma-sensitive policies and protocols, and

collaboration with families and provides "an organizational tool that enables schools and

districts—in collaboration with families, local community organizations, and outside

providers—to maintain a whole school focus as they create trauma sensitive schools"

(Flexible Framework, n.d., para. 1).  This framework has been used by schools across the

nation since 2005 and became part of Massachusetts' educational laws and policies in

2014, serving as a model to other states wishing to enact statewide trauma-specific reform.  Two core components of NC R&LP from TLPI's Flexible Framework are 1) training and support on trauma and resilience for all school staff to create a mindset shift, and 2) forming a positive school culture promoting student safety and resilience through school-wide TS policies and practices.

The NC R&LP provides support, strategies, and PD to partnering schools in efforts to infuse a TS approach into all aspects of the school through its collaborative effort with the Public School Forum, NC R&LP staff, partnering school districts, and Duke University's Center for Child and Family Policy (CC&FP).  The Public School Forum assists with the behind-the-scenes work needed for the initiative to be successful by providing its research, expertise, and community connections; offering the infrastructure needed for NC R&LP to have funding, staffing, and supports; and assisting with efforts to inform the public about the model and assist expansion (Rosanbalm, DeKonty, & Fleming, 2020).  NC R&LP staff carry out the day-to-day operations including researching and disseminating relevant information on trauma-related issues and resilience building, developing PD materials and resources for schools (with assistance from TLPI and Duke's CC&FP), sending resource-filled monthly newsletters, coordinating opportunities for educators across districts to collaborate, synthesizing information learned from their research and experience to write articles and communicate findings to stakeholders and the public, and working directly with schools to help them on their journey to becoming TS (Rosanbalm et al., 2020).  NC R&LP staff works closely with the each partnering school to provide materials, PD, and resources for all staff to

become aware of ACEs, TS practices, and resilience-building strategies as part of shifting

the culture of the school to one of resilience from a traditional school protocol where

students with maladaptive behaviors are punished to that of an understanding

environment where students are given skills and supports for exhibiting more adaptive

behaviors (Rosanbalm et al., 2020). NC R&LP staff assist schools with establishing a

school-based Resilience Team of diverse staff members which meets bimonthly; this

team leads implementation of TS practices most applicable to the school's needs and

priorities by developing an action plan and energizing the rest of the staff for being

onboard and capable of assisting in the execution (Rosanbalm et al., 2020). Schools are

encouraged to select one or two goals which remain a focus throughout all PD for the

year and continue to be built on in subsequent years while a coach from the NC R&LP

continues to consult with the school and Resilience Team to assist and guide them;

however, coaching becomes less hands-on in year two as schools are encouraged to begin

taking over the work (Rosanbalm et al., 2020). The long-term goal is for schools to have

TS approaches engrained in the fabric of their culture and not need outside assistance

since they have knowledgeable staff who can lead the work themselves. To make sure

the work done by the NC R&LP and partnering schools is evidence and research based, a

researcher from Duke's CC&FP assisted with the model, implementation design, and

material development and uses evaluative tools to monitor ongoing progress; this directs

the overall operation of the NC R&LP as they use the data collected to inform changes as

they continue to evolve and expand (Rosanbalm et al., 2020).

The NC R&LP has grown from the original full-implementation model as detailed in the previous paragraph to provide tiered models schools may choose from to best meet their needs. Tier one service provides either a half or full day PD session on ACEs, trauma, toxic stress, brain development, and resilience-building strategies. Tier two offers a school-specific approach by first conducting a readiness assessment of school staff, then consulting with the school or district to customize PD to meet areas identified as greatest needs. Tier three pairs online PD with personalized school support having staff complete NC R&LP's online courses while consulting with NC R&LP staff for creating a school-specific action plan. Tier four is full implementation with on-site PD, Resilience Team guidance, and ongoing coaching ("Interested in Additional Training," 2019). NC R&LP has also hosted community showings of the documentary *Resilience* to expand public knowledge of ACEs and resilience (NC Resilience and Learning, 2018). With COVID-19, NC R&LP expanded its virtual supports including webinars and virtual summits which will continue post-COVID. These options allow flexibility for schools and districts to determine what best fits their readiness, needs, and logistical situations.

**Dissertation Methods Overview**

A basic qualitative study is most applicable for gaining a deep understanding of the NC R&LP. I collected and triangulated data by using document analysis, being an online participant, and conducting semi-structured interviews. I reviewed thirty-six documents including Public School Forum's applicable reports and articles along with NC R&LP's newsletters, press releases, peer-reviewed articles, and a book chapter. I attended two NC R&LP webinars, one Public School Forum virtual conference, and

joined NC R&LP's online learning platform for a participant experience. For stakeholder

input, I conducted virtual semi-structured interviews (due to COVID-19) with a director,

regional coordinator, and researcher from Study Group XVI who continues to work

alongside the initiative. I kept a reflexive journal to keep track of personal feelings,

thoughts, and points of interest to explore, record notes while participating online, reflect

on biases, and synthesize information for deeper insight into nuances of the framework.

Interviewees had a chance to review transcripts of their initial interviews, so they could

revise, clarify, or extend points if needed. Utilizing multiple data collection methods

with input from multiple stakeholders resulted in a wealth of data to code and analyze

which helped key themes surface and allowed me to create rich descriptions and findings.

**Study Significance**

TS practices are on the rise with many frameworks to choose from. This study

offers insight into a relatively new TS initiative in North Carolina working to create and

sustain TS schools. Schools seeking to implement the NC R&LP will benefit from this

qualitative study by getting a deeper understanding of what it entails. This research

provides a rich look at the model's features and overall structure. Moreover, all

educators will benefit from an in-depth understanding of trauma and how schools may

help to mitigate the effects of toxic stress and vicarious trauma as discussed in the

literature reviews as well as the findings and discussion.

**Theoretical Framework: Positive Psychology**

A TS approach inherently follows principles of positive psychology (PP).

Positive psychologists believe society should work to eradicate social inequities and

traumatic incidents; however, they also maintain that life's tragedies can enrich our lives and build our humanity. Positive psychologists focus on enhancing human potential by building on strengths so individuals and societies flourish. PP research and therapy "focus on the development of positive emotions and adaptive coping strategies" since the "presence of psychological strengths can help people recover from psychological problems" which enhances their long-term success and well-being including increased contentment with life, more rewarding relationships, greater job productivity and satisfaction, resiliency, greater physical heath, and longer lifespan (Compton & Hoffman, 2019, pp. 4-5). People can undergo extraordinary events and circumstances, yet "some adapt so well that they serve as role models of incredible fortitude, perseverance, and resiliency" that psychologists wish "to understand how such people manage to accomplish such high levels of thriving and flourishing," so others in difficult circumstances may do so as well (Compton & Hoffman, 2019, p. 5). The goals of PP include people having high emotional well-being (feeling satisfied with life), psychological well-being (self-accepting with a purpose in life and achieving personal growth), and social well-being (positive relationships, belongingness, and a belief in positive social change). Compton and Hoffman (2019) describe schools using PP as those which focus foremost on students' overall well-being with an emphasis on developing resiliency, cooperative relationships, and personal strengths to become competent, active learners: these features are theoretically inherent to TS schools.

  In the following sections, I describe core principles of PP relevant to TS schools including a) meeting people's basic needs, so they may work towards self-actualization to

achieve a satisfying life, b) developing resilience and posttraumatic growth to overcome traumatic incidents, c) taking a positive approach to the theory of self-fulfilling prophecy and the power of hope, and d) learning optimism and developing an asset-based mindset.

**Maslow's Self-Actualization and Hierarchy of Needs**

Abraham Maslow, humanistic psychology co-founder, followed principles similar to the later construct of PP.  Much of Maslow's work revolved around encouraging people to strive for self-actualization, the highest level of human potential, even though he originally thought obtainment of it was only possible by 1% of people (Compton & Hoffman, 2019).  Later, he published Theory Z revising this with transcendence as the highest, elite level and self-actualization as achievable by the masses (Maslow, 1975). This later theory is in line with a TS approach and PP which both focus on maximizing everyone's potential.  Maslow (1975) encouraged schools to build on the intrinsic strengths of children and assist with identity and values development, so children may reach their highest potential and become self-actualizers.

Maslow (1970) identified fifteen character strengths self-actualized people exhibit which can be organized into several broad categories: self-acceptance, autonomy, positive relationships with others, creativity, strong ethical standards, and living in the realm of peak experiences (moments of bliss).  Maslow (1975) believed schools could assist with developing and enhancing these qualities for children; however, he criticized the educational system for not doing so in favor of obedience and efficiency going so far as describing schools as preventing and crushing children's peak experiences.  These are schools that are hyper focused on meeting data targets for proficiency and complying

with zero-tolerance policies that fail to address the whole child.  Developing and building on individuals' strengths and seeking joy are the central tenets of PP and enable people to develop resilience and feel empowered which is key to a TS school.

As part of his Hierarchy of Needs, Maslow theorized for a person to work towards higher levels of being and self-actualization, first their deficiency needs must be met which include basic needs (safety and physiological requirements of food, shelter, comfort, and health) and psychological needs (belongingness and love; and dignity and esteem).  Maslow (1975) believed an important goal of education is to ensure children's deficiency needs are met before attending to their aesthetic and cognitive needs since they would be unable to focus on these higher needs if the others went unmet.  TS school staff understand that learning is not possible without addressing deficiency needs; thus, leaders of these schools establish environments supportive of both basic and psychological needs before expecting students to focus on higher cognitive tasks.

**Resilience and Posttraumatic Growth**

Resilience allows people to thrive and reach Maslow's higher levels of being despite the difficulties they face.  Resilience science has evolved from the belief that certain people are just unbreakable while others are not, to understanding that all people can become more resilient through protective factors though some people are genetically predisposed to resilience more than others.  Boyce (2019) refers to children as being either dandelions or orchids; those who are dandelions thrive regardless of adversities whereas orchids only flourish with limited or no adversity.  However, Boyce stresses this is just genetic predisposition as epigenetic studies have proven environmental factors can

modify gene expression.  The Bucharest Early Intervention Project studying brain

development of children in Romanian orphanages showed children with the same genetic

predispositions such as a shorter neurotransmitter serotonin gene were able to develop

well mentally when adopted into caring families by a certain developmental time versus

those remaining institutionalized who developed intellectual impairments (Nelson, Fox,

& Zeanah, 2014).  Therefore, with the right environmental factors, children may even

overcome genetic predispositions, so no child is hopeless regardless of ACE scores.

Fostering resilience is important for all children since many encounter significant

stress and anxiety, or may as adults, and benefit from knowing how to cope with

adversity, problem solve, and rebound from incidents.  Much of resilience science

focuses on identifying what factors best develop resilience and effective models for

instilling these in all children (Goldstein & Brooks, 2014).  Goldstein and Brooks (2014)

discuss three main protective factors for resilience: 1) genetically predisposed individual

characteristics; 2) supportive, caring, and trusting family dynamics; and 3) external

community support systems that build self-efficacy and esteem.  TS schools can assist in

promoting these factors by: 1) assisting students in strengthening positive characteristics,

2) providing resources and workshops to families supporting development of strong

family dynamics, and 3) being communal places where students improve self-perception

by reaching goals, improving competency, and experiencing academic success.

Posttraumatic growth (PTG), like resilience, can buffer against negative effects of

trauma and lead to self-actualization.  PTG is both a process of how one handles trauma

and outcome where people become transformed by their trauma through the struggle of

suffering.  PTG marks positive cognitive, emotional, or behavioral changes; for example, individuals grow in personal strength, improve relating to others, seek out new possibilities, increase appreciation of life, or have spiritual and existential changes, and become more resilient to enduring future traumas (Tedeschi, Shakespeare-Finch, Taku, & Calhoun, 2018).  People may experience transformative changes in their lives while still having negative impacts from their trauma, so PTG does not equate to ignoring or negating trauma, or thinking people are happy to have experienced trauma.  Rather, PTG is seeking a silver lining of personal growth within or after a traumatic incident.

Just as certain factors lend themselves to some children being more resilient, there are factors which contribute to a greater likelihood of PTG.  Tedeschi, Shakespeare-Finch, Taku, and Calhoun (2018) found a greater probability of PTG for people with pre-trauma characteristics of optimism, creativity, cognitive flexibility, hardiness, and self-efficacy and who after trauma had access to support networks, were introspective, and used disclosure ranging from talking and journaling about their experience to more artistic modes of expression like dance and drawing.  TS schools can reinforce the positive character traits that strengthen an individual to adversity and provide a supportive and nurturing environment with positive outlets for disclosure.  Disclosure does not require sharing details of trauma; it could be simply sharing feelings and thoughts about core beliefs, such as, all children deserve safety.  Most importantly, schools can combat negative thought patterns children may internalize like being damaged or deserving of trauma, or not good enough:

> The normalization of the responses to trauma allow the person to see that there is nothing wrong with them, that their reactions are understandable in the context of the event(s)…Understanding this can bring substantial relief to people who fear they are out of control, broken, or beyond hope. (Tedeschi et al., 2018, p. 147)

TS schools may go further and provide psycho-educational intervention aimed at promoting PTG.  Taku, Cann, Tedeschi, and Calhoun (2017) conducted a study with high school students in Japan who at Time 1 were tested for their level of PTG and split into three groups.  The first group discussed stress reactions and received PTG intervention, the second group discussed stress reactions and received a posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) intervention, while a third control group received no intervention, just general psychology information.  After three weeks, they tested students' level of PTG and found significant differences between group one with the most increase in PTG at Time 2 opposed to the other two groups with the control group being the lowest.  This experiment shows it is valuable to build on strengths and promote positives such as PTG instead of focusing on negative symptoms such as PTSD and trying to fix issues only.

Personal growth including developing personal strength, relating to others, seeking new possibilities, appreciating life, and broadening one's worldview are achievable by those who experience vicarious trauma (VT) – known as vicarious posttraumatic growth (VPTG).  VPTG typically occurs for those in caregiver roles who encounter others' traumatic narratives.  In a metanalysis of existing VPTG literature, Manning-Jones, de Terte, and Stephens (2015) report common factors lending themselves to VPTG: personal characteristics (empathy, optimism, positive affect); professional characteristics (satisfaction and value in work, professional self-esteem, supportive

31

supervision); external factors (self-care, social support, personal therapy); and time

(initial distress replaced over time by growth through processing and finding meaning).

TS schools will have staff experiencing secondary traumatic stress (STS) from facing

VT, so enhancing staff's VTPG factors would assist with avoiding compassion fatigue

that can result in loss of productivity, negative relationships, burnout, and resigning.

**Self-Fulfilling Prophecy and Hope Theory**

Self-fulfilling prophecy is typically viewed negatively given its history of being

applied in such a way that groups of people are stereotyped and kept from maximizing

their potential. This can happen by people internalizing negative expectations which

result in decreased performance. It can also occur when others treat a person differently

according due to limited expectations and create a situation where the person then

performs according to preconceived notions. It is not so much expectations, but rather

the behaviors people have based on expectations that changes the outcome. In the

context of education, Tauber (1997) outlines five steps to self-fulfilling prophecy:

> Step 1: Teacher Forms Expectations
> Step 2: Based Upon...Expectations, the Teacher Acts in a Differential Manner
> Step 3: The Teacher's Treatment Tells Each Student What Behavior and
> Achievement the Teacher Expects
> Step 4: If This Treatment Is Consistent Over Time, and if the Student Does Not
> Actively Resist, It Will Tend to Shape His or Her Behavior and Achievement
> Step 5: With Time, the Student's Behavior and Achievement Will Conform More
> Closely to That Expected of Him or Her. (p. 18)

While self-fulfilling prophecy is often used negatively, it can enable people to turn

positive thoughts into positive outcomes. In Tauber's steps above, if the teacher were to

have high expectations and perceive the student as being highly skilled in some area, then

32

the teacher's and student's actions may conform to those expectations; consequently, the student develops a higher ability level.  In a TS school, holding high expectations of all students, believing in their abilities, and providing tools for students to meet those expectations builds students' self-efficacy for meeting additional challenges they face.

Snyder's hope theory follows the same basic principle that belief in one's ability will manifest in desired outcomes, although the key difference is Snyder's theory is based on realistic expectations of self, goals, and pathways to goals, unlike the self-fulfilling prophecy which is based in a false narrative of one's abilities.  Snyder (2000) defines hope as "the sum of perceived capabilities to produce routes to desired goals, along with the perceived motivation to use those routes" (p. 8).  Hope is necessary for people to believe in their capabilities and have agency to reach their goals; otherwise, they would not be motivated to try.  People must see a viable pathway for obtainment, or they will lack direction and fail to achieve goals.  Snyder (2000) acknowledges obtaining goals is not simple since often people face many barriers and setbacks.  In his studies, he found those with greater resilience and higher levels of hope were adaptable and remained motivated in the face of obstacles as they kept a positive mindset and envisioned alternative routes to goals.  TS schools need staff who build students' resiliency, develop hopeful thinking, and help students with realistic goal setting and problem-solving skills for overcoming setbacks to follow a positive self-fulfilling prophecy towards success.

**Learned Optimism Cultivating an Asset-Based Mindset**

It is possible to change from pessimism to optimism.  Martin Seligman outlines this path in his theory of learned optimism.  Learned optimism encourages people to

33

reframe thinking of setbacks as being permanent and universal to being temporary and specific.  Seligman (2006) provides examples of pessimistic thinking with the permanent state of "I'm all washed up" instead of the temporary "I'm exhausted," and the universal, "All teachers are unfair" with the specific "Professor Seligman is unfair" (pp. 44-47). The Princeton-Penn Longitudinal Study of 1985 discovered children most likely to have a period of depression and at increased risk for adult depression were those who used pessimistic explanations, whether they had negative life events or not, and those identified as depressed demonstrated helpless behaviors in social and achievement situations (Nolen-Hoeksema, Girgus, & Seligman, 1992).  TS environments can combat depression by assisting students and staff in seeing the temporary and specific qualities of traumatic incidents to prevent the helplessness and hopelessness of pessimistic thinking.

Having an asset-based frame of mind prevents students and school staff from feeding into the negativity of deficit-based thinking.  Deficit-thinking leads to viewing oneself or students and families as victims needing rescue or incapable of rising above adversities.  Asset-based thinking is a necessary paradigm shift from "what's wrong" with students to "what's right" since "Trauma-sensitive organizations build on strengths and assets of clients, staff, and communities instead of responding only to their perceived deficits" (Griffin, Ford, & Wilson, 2013, p. 5).  School staff must recognize all students, families, and communities have strengths and positive aspects, even those in impoverished areas dealing with high crime or students exhibiting behavioral and/or academic challenges.  Getting educators to stop making excuses for why students cannot do something to seeing what students can do with the right supports requires educators to

be willing to shift their mindset and put in the extra effort: since "A trauma-sensitive system is not just about raising awareness, but changing behavior, actions, and responses" where staff act "differently so as not to re-traumatize or introduce additional trauma" and "support the natural resiliency of ...youth and assist them in identifying their unique strengths" (Griffin et al., 2013, p. 4). Educators unwilling or unable to see students' strengths and exhibit asset-based attitudes and actions with students cannot successfully work in a TS school since a deficit perspective undermines creating a positive TS culture and climate (Griffin et al., 2013).

**Integrative Thoughts on Theory**

Many principles related to positive psychology are important for the creation and implementation of TS schools. In alignment with these principles, TS schools ensure students' deficiency needs are met, so they can concentrate on higher cognitive demands and actualize their potential. School staff believe all students have or will face significant stressors in life which may interfere with them reaching their potential unless they build resilience and recognize negative incidents may be fodder for posttraumatic growth. Reaching full potential requires students to remain hopeful by believing in their abilities and seeing the possibility of a positive future. Optimism may be encouraged by teaching students to reframe negative thinking and see alternative pathways to success. Use of positive self-fulfilling prophecy can reinforce students being capable of greatness through high expectations and support. An asset-based mindset helps educators see students' strengths. Ideally, following these principles creates a school environment that is TS and

maximizes students' potential for personal growth and success.  These theories helped me

to make sense of my literature review, research findings, and TS schools in general.

<h3 style="text-align:center">Key Terminology</h3>

Given trauma-informed education is a relatively new idea, and I draw from a

range of different ways scholars have written about this, it is helpful to review some key

terms used in this dissertation.  *Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)* are trauma

exposures children experience or witness.  An incident may occur once or be ongoing.

Ongoing exposure is often referred to as *toxic stress*.  *Toxic stress* describes physiological

effects ACEs have on the body.  Each incident, whether singular or ongoing, counts as

one ACE.  The more ACEs children experience, the greater the risk factors are for high

levels of toxic stress and negative long-term effects for their health and well-being.

Toxic stress often results in *dysregulation* where the brain becomes unregulated as it goes

into survival mode of fight, flight, or freeze.  When students are dysregulated, they often

have *maladaptive behaviors* which are actions that go against personal interests and can

be harmful or disruptive to others as well.  The goal in TS schools is for students to

develop skills for regulating their emotions to exhibit more *adaptive behaviors* which are

actions that assist in meeting goals and are helpful for individuals and those around them.

There are many terms often used interchangeably to describe environments

created to mitigate the impact of trauma including *trauma-informed, trauma-specific,*

*trauma-sensitive*, and *social and emotional learning (SEL)*.  For this study, I will use

*trauma-sensitive* most often and discuss *SEL* as a separate strategy.  *Trauma-informed* is

typically used in the healthcare and mental health fields since to be trauma-informed is to

be knowledgeable of a client's trauma and use that knowledge to inform the trauma-specific treatment. Here trauma-informed is used when referring to instances where trauma has informed specific practice, professional development, or policy. *Trauma-specific* is used when referring to treatments prescribed specifically to those diagnosed with trauma. Anyone can be trauma-informed, but only mental health experts are able to provide trauma-specific therapies; therefore, I will not use this term. To be *trauma-sensitive (TS)* is to have a deep awareness of trauma, seek for others to understand its importance, and establish practices and policies to mitigate long-term effects of trauma. Being TS is more applicable to schools than the other terms since it does not require knowledge of a student's specific trauma or use of trauma-specific treatments; additionally, TS practices may be used with all students regardless of a trauma history as they build students' capacity for responding to potential future trauma. Trauma sensitivity involves an overall awareness of trauma and its impact with the desire of creating an atmosphere that serves to lessen those potential impacts, maximize student's potential, and avoid re-traumatization by minimizing potential triggers. It is possible for an individual or agency to be trauma-informed while not being TS depending upon the implementation of the practices. If a trauma-informed program is implemented from a deficit-perspective, it would not be TS as students with trauma may be viewed as victims incapable of achieving as much as those without trauma. To be TS, the environment needs to be asset-based where students are viewed as survivors and thrivers capable of transcending past, present, and/or future trauma.

I also discuss the impact of students' trauma on staff. *Vicarious trauma (VT)* and *secondary trauma* are interchangeable as both represent indirect trauma faced by those who hear others' traumas. *Compassion fatigue* also known as *secondary traumatic stress (STS)* are terms often used interchangeably with *educator burnout*; however, compassion fatigue or STS are symptoms that direct result from VT while educator burnout can be a result of numerous factors unrelated to hearing others' trauma. Therefore, in this study, I refer to educator burnout only as a possible result of STS.

Two strategies used by many TS schools are: 1) *Social and emotional learning (SEL)* which is a practice of teaching students how to regulate emotions, improve skills, and adjust behaviors for building their intra and interpersonal skills, and 2) *Restorative practices*, *discipline,* and *strategies* which I use in here interchangeably to describe alternatives to typical punitive discipline traditionally practiced in schools. Restorative strategies are meant to repair relationships damaged by behaviors and teach skills for improving and avoiding future maladaptive behaviors. Restorative discipline is a proactive approach to behavior that aims to avoid exclusionary consequences. There is extensive research on philosophy, implementation, methods, and strategies for restorative discipline. I do not go in-depth in this dissertation on restorative practices/strategies /discipline except to touch on them as methods employed by TS schools.

## Overview of the Following Chapters

### Chapter 2-4 Literature Reviews

The purpose of my literature review is to examine and discuss existing research related to three key aspects of TS education: screening for ACEs, implementation of TS

practices, and mitigating vicarious trauma (VT).  Given the depth of recent literature on

these topics, I split my review into three chapters, each focused on one of these aspects.

In chapter two, I review literature covering screening since there is controversy regarding

whether educators are properly trained to screen for ACEs, and even if they are, is it

ethical and necessary?  I discuss rationale for screening and complications should schools

decide to screen.  In chapter three, I review the most common characteristics needed for

forming a TS school: supportive school leadership, family and community partnership,

and classroom-based academic and nonacademic strategies all of which are part of

TLPI's Flexible Framework that helped inform the NC R&LP.  In chapter four, I review

the danger of VT for staff and the school culture, approaches TS schools may take to

avoid STS from VT, and the possibility of working towards positive vicarious

posttraumatic growth by emphasizing the importance of staff wellness.

**Chapter 5 Methods**

In the methods chapter, I describe why a basic qualitative study was the best

approach for this dissertation and provide an in-depth review of my data collection

methods including semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and my online

participation in webinars, a conference, and NC R&LP's online learning platform.  I

coded data into six categories: screening, TS characteristics, staff wellness, program

logistics, policy/funding, and background information.  Policy/funding and background

information proved useful for writing the background context for chapter one but did not

yield themes for the findings.  The topics of COVID-19 and stakeholder feedback

surfaced as well but overlapped into the categories of TS characteristics, staff wellness,

and program logistics, so I combined them within those sections.  Data coding was

guided by a general theory of positive psychology.  I used triangulation, member checks,

and reflexive journaling to enhance trustworthiness.

**Chapter 6-7 Findings**

I divided my findings into seven key thematic topics for a TS school which

emerged from the data: do no harm, whole school, mindset shift, flexibility/adjustment,

staff wellness, whole child, and family/community engagement.  Chapter six provides an

in-depth look at the first four themes which are foundational to a TS school.  The first

priority in a TS school is to do no harm to stakeholders by taking an asset-based approach

and avoiding trauma screeners which could retraumatize.  Having a whole-school

approach with strong leadership facilitating collaboration creates a positive school

climate if staff are ready and willing to put forth the effort.  Having a mindset shift to the

importance of building resilience is necessary for a commitment to implementing

proactive and restorative TS strategies.  Flexibility and adjustment are needed throughout

the process of becoming TS with adjusting to both minor and major difficulties that arise.

The COVID-19 pandemic heightened the need for TS practices yet made implementation

more challenging requiring considerable flexibility and adjustment by both NC R&LP

and partnering schools.  Chapter seven then looks at specific strategies used by TS

schools which include staff wellness, whole child strategies, and family and community

engagement.  Staff wellness must be in place to have staff capable of doing the work of a

TS school before focusing on student-based strategies.  Taking a whole-child approach

with relationship building and SEL are essential components to address before expecting

students to thrive academically.  Lastly, the work of a TS school can only be sustained

with support from families and the community.

**Chapter 8 Discussion**

The final chapter provides an in-depth discussion of the answers I found to my

three research questions, limitations to this study, recommendations for practitioners, and

future research ideas to explore.  I discuss the implications of the themes of do no harm,

whole school, mindset shift, flexibility/adjustment, staff wellness, whole child, and

family/community engagement, the theoretical implications of positive psychology for

TS schools, and reflect on how my subjective "I" selves I discovered while journaling

filtered my understanding of these themes and their practical application.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF TRAUMA SCREENING

The initial step for schools working toward becoming TS is determining whether TS practices will target students with trauma exposure or apply to all students. Schools wishing to target trauma-exposed students only will need to establish how to conduct screening to identify them. In this chapter, I discuss how the research is inconclusive as there are advantages and disadvantages to trauma screening. Personally, I am biased against screening given my negative experience with the ACE survey as I discussed in the preface; however, my experience may be an anomaly, so I sought out examples of schools using screening and researched its benefits. I discovered an interesting debate between screening or not with angles I had not previously considered. I now recognize the merit of screening for trauma symptoms, not for ACEs, provided procedures and resources are in place to ensure screening benefits stakeholders without causing harm. I have major reservations about schools' abilities to avoid re-traumatizing students and causing vicarious trauma for staff and question the need for screeners since a TS approach is meant to meet the needs of all students. Schools must weigh pros and cons to determine whether screening is appropriate or not for their purposes and local contexts.

Policy discussions proposing to implement universal ACEs screening into adult and pediatric health settings are gaining momentum as a way to improve public health by identifying and addressing toxic stress and its long-term health risks with early

42

interventions.  States such as California, Oklahoma, and Washington and some cities

such as Philadelphia, PA and Fort Worth, TX have mandates and taskforces for

 implementing routine ACEs screening within communities primarily through health

clinics, whereas other states and cities such as Massachusetts and Nashville, TN are

leading taskforces to educate the community and address ACES without implementing

universal screeners; regardless of community-based screening, all but two states include

ACEs questions on their annual Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System health

survey (CDC, 2020).  This trend towards universal trauma screening has made its way

into schools and has sparked a debate among researchers on feasibility, validity, ethics,

implementation, and usefulness.  In this chapter, I focus on the complexity of the issue as

it pertains specifically to the educational setting.  For schools wishing to implement

targeted TS practices, screening provides immediate identification of students to assist.

Ideally, it efficiently addresses their needs by quickly funneling them into appropriate

supports.  Also, knowing what trauma students have been exposed to may assist with

identifying potential triggers for staff to avoid, thus potentially averting maladaptive

behaviors.  Others contend screening is an unnecessary use of resources since schoolwide

TS supports will meet most students' needs, and those who need additional support (for

example, they have academic or behavioral issues) should be given it regardless of ACEs.

Trauma screening by schools is a complicated matter: there are multiple screening tools;

a lack of universal protocol; logistical and cost issues; no consensus on who receives

results, nor what follow-up to use; no agreement on the extent students should be

knowledgeable of their trauma and its possible impact; and no protocol for what schools

should do if ill-equipped to handle needs unearthed.  Given the complexities, schools

must be fully aware of the issues before embarking on screening.  In what follows, I

describe the rationale for screening, discuss complexities of screening, and conclude with

recommendations for schools based on common ground in the literature.

## Rationale for ACE Screening

ACEs screening is a diagnostic tool for understanding the scope and depth of

trauma within an environment.  In this section I discuss: (a) advantages to early detection,

(b) maximizing the number of students and families linked to resources, (c) educating

students and families about trauma, and (d) expanding community awareness.

### Advantages to Early Detection

Universal screening is the most scientific and effective way of discovering if

students have experienced trauma in their lives and determining if trauma is manifesting

itself in ways which could lead to complications later in life, if not already.  Gonzalez,

Monzon, Solis, Jaycox, and Langley (2016) argue universal school screening procedures

are more effective than traditional school-based referral methods which are highly

subjective and over-identify youth with maladaptive behaviors while not identifying

youth with internalized symptoms.  Gonzalez et al. (2016) screened 402 elementary

school children, grades 1–5, across four elementary schools and found "several teachers

expressed their surprise about some of the children referred for a subsequent school-

based group intervention, stating that they had not perceived any difficulties in the

children in the school setting despite the child's self-reported emotional distress and

impairment" (p. 84).  Screening may detect trauma before it manifests in overt behavioral

or academic issues or results in students being punished versus given trauma interventions. Universal screening may capture these students since teachers may not yet be aware of issues or may misidentify who is suffering from the toxic stress of trauma.

Early identification is crucial since presence of trauma and increased symptoms are predictive of negative long-term outcomes (Alisic, Jongmans, van Wesel, & Kleber, 2011; Woodbridge et al., 2016). ACEs can physically affect students' neuroendocrine and immune systems and brain development, as well impact their future opportunities, including those related to education, employment, and income level (Johnson, Riley, Granger, & Riis, 2013; Metzler, Merrick, Klevens, Ports, & Ford, 2017; Crouch, Probst, Radcliff, Bennett, & McKinney, 2019). Elevated ACEs puts students at risk for impaired emotional, behavioral, social, and academic functioning, and mental health issues, but these may be mitigated by early identification (Gonzalez, et al., 2016) since discovering the type of trauma exposure and manifesting symptoms can inform the interventions to use (Crouch, et al., 2019) and improve child resiliency to avoid negative long-term effects of trauma (Walkley & Cox, 2013; Pataky, Báez, & Renshaw, 2019).

**Maximizing the Number of Students and Families Linked to Resources**

Implementing a school-based public health approach captures trauma early since 89.7% of school-aged children are enrolled in public schools (NCES, 2019) and those in private schools and homeschooling could be offered screening as well. Gonzalez et al. (2016) believe school-based screening maximizes the identification of vulnerable youth compared to physician-based screening as it captures children who lack health insurance or do not go for regular medical checkups. National Child Traumatic Stress Network

(NCTSN, 2017) advocates for an initial ACEs screening for all students followed up by "a more comprehensive assessment…to direct future interventions...[and] ongoing assessment that is aligned with ongoing intervention" (p. 6). Routine screening of students over time determines if presence of trauma or symptoms arise or increase. Woodbridge et al. (2016) see schools as being "in a strategic position to provide prevention and early intervention services to help students cope with challenges proactively and effectively, thereby increasing learning opportunities and allaying the impact of traumatic events" (p. 90). Screening all students identifies those with high ACE scores, so they are linked to support services and ongoing monitoring to ensure students with the highest needs receive essential services. Ko et al. (2008) advocate for child welfare agencies, educational settings, first responders, health practitioners, and the juvenile justice system to work together to screen all children for trauma exposure, use evidence-informed trauma practices, teach children how to manage their trauma, and provide a continuity of care across systems with trauma resources.

Knowing what trauma and symptoms students are experiencing allows schools to seek out appropriate resources, services, and supports to meet students' deficiency needs, which as Maslow (1970) argued, must be met before they are able to function academically and reach their highest potential. Community partnerships are vital to providing services and resources beyond the scope of the school such as housing, food, employment and utility assistance, medical care, and mental health support. Blodgett and Lanigan (2018) advise schools to incorporate a continuum of multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS) starting with schoolwide trauma-informed practices and resiliency

building activities for all students (including those with low levels of trauma exposure) to more intensive specialized referrals and treatment for those with high levels of trauma or who are experiencing symptoms from trauma. SAMHSA and Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) specify TS MTSS include tier one supports of "widespread screening, social-emotional based learning curricula, and prevention-based activities," tier 2 having "early intervention and targeted support...more directed student screening and interventions to reduce the likelihood of issues developing or resolve early manifestations," and tier 3 containing intensive services for "students identified as experiencing mental health or substance-related difficulties, and may include individual or family/caregiver treatment or other individualized interventions..." (McCance-Katz & Lynch, 2019, p. 3). National Crittenton Foundation (NCF, 2015) stress rescreening students to continually adjust and refine interventions to ensure they are producing the desired results of resilience building and easing symptoms if not, students are progressed to a higher level of service with additional outside resources at the tier three level.

**Educating Students and Families about Trauma**

Making students and families aware of ACE scores and what they mean in relation to increased cognitive and health risks, along with how to mitigate those effects and achieve posttraumatic growth (PTG), follows from the belief that understanding their trauma may allow students and families to work proactively alongside practitioners to engage in the healing process. Pataky, Báez, and Renshaw (2019) did a case study of Wediko Children's Services partnership in two New York City public middle schools employing universal screening with a modified ACE Questionnaire for over 500 students;

77% of students reported one or more ACEs. Follow up by Wediko and school staff to educate and support students and families included: "individual or group counseling, informal follow up..., participation in a mentoring, check-in/check-out programs, attendance monitoring, home visits, in- and out-of-school referrals, increased family outreach, the development of parent workshops and support groups" (Pataky et al., 2019, p. 652). NCF (2015) also advocates using ACE results to start conversations with children, families, and school staff which highlight how prevalent these experiences are, ensuring that those who experience trauma know they are not alone, and that it is possible to mitigate trauma's effects to avoid long-term consequences. These conversations may be difficult, but "Providing psychoeducation about trauma normalizes trauma symptoms, informs children that abuse and neglect is not acceptable, and provides a space for the student to talk" (Pataky et al., 2019, p. 642). Normalizing, reflecting, and having disclosure outlets are part of the PTG process and contribute to an asset-based frame for addressing trauma. All of this may be uncomfortable as the PTG process means facing negative realities of trauma; however, attention must be brought to the issue to increase reporting, improve resilience, and hopefully, prevent future trauma.

At some schools, screenings are done in the regular school setting, but at others, they are part of visits to school-based health clinics. For example, since 2014, the Elsie Allen Health Center located on a high school campus in Santa Rosa, California has screened students on their initial visit and annually for follow up. Clinic nurses report ACE discussions being a positive experience for building relationships with students as they provide an opportunity for students to discuss relevant issues in their lives while also

learning the importance of their traumas (Paull, 2015).  The ACE survey is explained to

students in a generic way like "when difficult things happen to us when we're young, it

can actually affect our health in the future, so we're trying to ask kids when they're

younger to try to prevent some of the bad things from happening and help them have

healthier lives" (Paull, 2015, para. 14).  Students are not given concrete information or

data on trauma's negative impact; instead, staff focus on providing coping strategies.

NCF (2015) maintains it is important for conversations around students' trauma histories

to remain positive, hopeful, and asset-based with a focus on how students may support

their own resilience; however, they believe in sharing specifics of trauma risks as NCF

promotes knowledge as being empowering and does not view awareness of possible side

effects of trauma as detrimental.  Strategies for resilience are the primary focus and

emphasis is on asset-based conversations surrounding the toxic stress of trauma.

**Expanding Community Awareness**

The Center for Disease Control (CDC, 2019) *Essentials for Childhood* framework

was developed to assist communities in preventing ACEs.  They promote using

community-wide data collected from a multitude of private, public, and non-profit

organizations for developing a larger community ACE score which helps determine

community-wide solutions for the most prevalent ACEs-causing factors.  The CDC

(2019) specifically mentions schools contributing to the community data-collecting

effort.  They do not specify that schools must screen all students but acknowledge having

ACEs data would be helpful in seeing what specific needs a community must address.

NCF (2015) sees schools as integral to ACE screening given their position to educate

children, families, and community members in understanding the impact of trauma; nevertheless, they stress the need to first educate community leaders about trauma, in particular the unique experiences of low SES urban youth since government officials, educators, and community agency workers may be lacking knowledge necessary to foster productive and positive conversations on the topic. Dube (2018) states most important to trauma education is "realizing that trauma is widespread; recognizing symptoms of trauma; responding without further escalation and re-traumatization" (p. 183). If these three factors are emphasized, then people will not feel isolated because of their trauma history, can recognize when others need help and refer them for services, learn how to avoid triggering others, and learn their own triggers to know when to use coping strategies. Another important point Dube (2018) makes is that "The purpose [of trauma screening] is NOT for diagnosing (etic), labeling, or judging, but for providing a new perspective to understanding the human experience (emic)" (p. 183). When communitywide screenings are done, ideally, they should contribute to an empowering experience to meet community needs without judgment or hopelessness. Too often people feel alone in their experiences, blame themselves, or worry about others' perceptions of them. Conducting communitywide screenings could normalize trauma exposure and symptoms if done in an asset-based manner; thus, "fostering increased societal awareness about toxic stress exposures that are often hidden, stigmatized, and attached to shame" (Dube, 2018, p. 183). Awareness is the first step to taking productive action to combat the traumas that are most prevalent in given communities. Community agencies, schools, and government agencies could then determine how to best direct their

resources using the ACEs data.  An additional positive result from a communitywide effort to address toxic stress is the possibility of achieving a communal PTG transformation.  Tedeschi et al. (2018) describes how in the aftermath of tragedies such as 9/11, natural disasters, or violent events, community members may experience growth of stronger communal bonds, new opportunities, greater connections between community groups, and new values and social norms as they struggle together to heal and learn from tragedy.  It should not require a singular tragic incident of seismic proportions to shake communities from their apathy to come together to solve issues and make a better place, but if one is needed, the COVID-19 pandemic is certainly an opportunity for this.  Our current societal inequities, ongoing structural and systemic issues compounded with the pandemic have resulted in an epidemic of high ACEs which should be substantial enough for community members to gather around and productively move forward to address these together for creating a "better new normal."

## Complexity of ACE Screening

Screening is a complex process which needs to be carefully considered before rushing into execution.  In this section, I explore the caution of many researchers by discussing: (a) how universal screening may miss students in need; (b) the diversity of screening tools; (c) ethical concerns; (d) implementation issues with training, time, and logistics; (e) accuracy issues; and (f) possible ramifications to awareness.

### Universal Screening Is Not Universal

Universal screening should be unnecessary since as mandatory reporters, educators are already required to make referrals in situations where neglect or abuse are

suspected.  However, students not exhibiting warning signs despite exposure to traumatic

incidents may go undetected and fail to receive needed help for internal struggles.

Additionally, the *Fourth National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect* report

found that school staff do not always report suspicions related to ACEs due to lack of

training, inability to report directly to Child Protective Services, feeling like they have

insufficient evidence to file a report, thinking reporting will make things worse for the

child, or belief in their ability to work out a solution with the family through other means

(Sedlak et al., 2010).  Addressing these flaws in the current referral process is why

universal screening is useful; however, schools may not screen students without parental

consent.  This is challenging as families who have trauma histories may refuse to allow

their child to participate for fear of repercussions.  Even those families who are not trying

to cover up trauma may feel uncomfortable with schools prying into their family life and

their children's mental or emotional health.  Woodbridge et al. (2016) discussed how

race, culture, and SES played important role in families consenting to screening in their

study of 12 middle schools in a large urban district in California serving a high

proportion of immigrant and low-SES families during the 2011–2015 school years:

> White students were more likely to participate than Latino, Asian, or African
> American students. Although screening information and consent forms were made
> available in multiple languages and reviewed by bicultural key informants, the
> differential reaction of parents from various racial, ethnic, cultural, and
> socioeconomic groups to trauma screening opportunities, and the stigma
> associated with receiving school-based mental health assessment and services,
> particularly in the Asian communities, cannot be overlooked as possible
> influences. (p. 101)

Given the stigma of mental health, it is not feasible to get a 100% participation rate which

is the largest issue with universal screening; it is not universal.  Pataky et al. (2019)

critiqued the Woodbridge et al. (2016) middle school study for leaving out students from

receiving educational trauma support: "while families of students with reported elevated

scores received psychoeducation, the students themselves did not get an opportunity to

participate in this conversation.  Further, the students who may have chosen not to

disclose trauma, received no support or education about trauma and its effects" (p. 643).

In contrast, staff featured in the Pataky et al. (2019) study did provide "all students,

regardless of disclosure, access to information about trauma and resiliency, as well as

more opportunity for conversation and follow-up" (p. 643).  School leaders proceeding

with screening need to determine follow-up for all students.  Students lacking parental

consent still need supports for dealing with stress and access to information in a manner

which will not overstep the families' request to be excluded from screening.

**Screening Tools**

Determining which diagnostic tool to use is more daunting than it might seem.

The initial large ACEs study conducted from 1995-1997 by Felitti et al. used a 10-

question survey to screen for seven categories of childhood trauma including household

violence, abuse, neglect, substance abuse, mental health issues, incarceration, and

divorce.  Numerous ACE screening tools have been adopted since then.  In their meta-

analysis of ACE screening tools, Strand, Sarmiento, and Pasquale (2005) identified

thirty-five different instruments available for child and adolescent trauma screening

ranging from quick 5-minute checklists with broad categories of exposure to detailed 2-

hour structured-interview protocols delving into specifics. The range of available instruments makes it challenging for schools to determine which tool to use.

Screening tools serve three main purposes: 1) measuring trauma exposure, 2) measuring symptoms of trauma such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder or other mental health or physical health ailments, and 3) measuring both history of exposure and resulting symptoms. Newer tools screen for a variety of ACEs which also correlate to long-term health risks but were not part of the 1998 Felitti et al. study, such as exposure to community violence and poverty (Crouch et al., 2019); peer rejection, bullying, victimization, discrimination (Finkelhor, 2018); immigration-related issues, deportation, war (Flores & Salazar, 2017); difficulties faced by LGBTQ youth (Vance & Rosenthal, 2018); foster care (Pataky et al., 2019); hospitalizations, natural disasters, and accidents (Woodbridge et al., 2016). Another issue absent from the Felitti et al. survey assessed by some newer tools is chronic trauma which entails looking at multiple exposures to the same event (Pataky et al., 2019). Despite the popularity and availability of many screening instruments, Finkelhor (2018) finds these diagnostic tools to be problematic due to a lack of scientific vetting since "the screening tools are still in very early stages of development and evaluation" (p. 176). Schools choosing to implement screening will have to carefully consider validity, range of ACE exposures, and symptoms measured when determining which instrument to utilize. Strand et al. (2005) recommend selecting the tool based on local context by considering child's age, depth of knowledge sought, cost, user friendliness, and purpose. Also, schools may find it useful to employ multiple instruments as demonstrated in a study by Gonzalez et al. (2016) in which researchers

54

screened students grades 1-5 at four elementary schools.  First, they conducted an initial

quick screening to identify the presence of ACEs with one tool.  For students reporting

ACEs, there was a subsequent more in-depth screening with a different tool to measure

symptoms related to their trauma.  This allowed for a more efficient process to meet their

goal of quickly finding students with negative symptoms to address without taking the

time and resources it would have to screen all students with in-depth interviews.

**Ethical Issues**

Before schools begin screening, there are ethical considerations: 1. Are schools

equipped to screen students without causing harm?  2. Are there effective treatments to

assist with issues screening brings to light?  3. Does the school or community partnership

have the capacity to meet the needs of those who are screened?

Those who conduct the screenings need intensive training on how to properly

conduct sessions to avoid re-traumatizing students and damaging relationships.  Students

who are triggered need immediate support to process their emotions.  Ford, et al. (2019)

discuss the need for more research to "explore the possible unintended harms of routine

ACE enquiry, such as re-traumatization... The current review also found few studies

which provided evidence of any impact from routine ACE enquiry on the service

user/provider relationship" (p. 143).  Screening asks students to be vulnerable and share

their worst moments.  For students who have experienced trauma, they may not know

how to deal with these intense emotions.  The person conducting the screening may have

issues processing emotions and unintentionally intensify the student's distress.  This

disclosure may permanently alter the relationship: students may feel more supported

knowing there is someone they may go to when upset who will understand, or it may make the student angry, resentful, or feel more vulnerable knowing the adult knows something private about them. Students often regret sharing and withdraw from relationships after disclosing trauma; students may seek to avoid the adult or act out for them in ways they had not previously (Flexible Framework, n.d.). The confidentiality of students' trauma and the potential negative impact on the relationship between staff and students may mitigate any benefits to collecting the information.

The key advantage of screening is discovering what traumas students have been exposed to for developing specific intervention plans; however, ACE screening provides a generic ACEs calculation and does not provide details of specific adversities (Purewal et al., 2016). Another issue with calculating a broad ACE score is this score fails to pinpoint specific symptoms students are experiencing which would enable them to determine the most appropriate interventions. Furthermore, there is a lack of any evidence-based therapies or interventions corresponding to an ACE checklist score to effectively improve emotional, mental, or physical health (Finkelhor, 2018; Purewal Boparai et al., 2018, Ford et al., 2019). McLennan et al. (2019) doubt that an ACEs checklist will ever be able to guide effective evidence-based treatment. Since it would be unethical to screen for exposure to ACEs when there is no established effective treatment for it presently, Finkelhor (2018) proposes effective screening should instead "look for the residues of childhood adversity for which we have established effective treatment" such as conditions like "depression, PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome) and other anxiety disorders, alcohol and substance abuse, impulsivity and attention problems" since

treating these "may have more overall success because it matches people with treatable

residues of childhood adversities to existing effective remedies" (p. 177). Schools would

be well served to keep Finkelhor's argument in mind as it would be unethical to screen

students simply to find out they had trauma exposure. Since we can effectively diagnose

and treat many of symptoms of trauma, some researchers argue that screening for those

would be valuable if there are resources and supports for what is discovered. It would be

unethical to identify students' issues but lack appropriate school-based supports or

community partnerships. TS schools need to seek out, build, and maintain strong

partnerships with local mental health providers (Pataky et al., 2019). These partnerships

could allow families to access "many proven behavioral health interventions from

parenting education, family therapy, and individual treatment that have been shown to

help children and families facing adversities and adults suffering from the effects of

adverse childhoods" (Finkelhor, 2018, p. 177). Though the training and funding

requirements to provide adequate resources may be prohibitive for many communities

since unfortunately, not all schools are in communities with resources to provide these

treatments or a high enough level of care for successful intervention (Finkelhor, 2018).

**Implementation Issues: Training, Time, and Logistics**

There are few models for school-based screening and no set protocols of specific

implementation within educational environments (Woodbridge et al., 2016; Pataky et al.,

2019). NCF (2015) suggests schools develop their own protocols, provide extensive

training for creating a proper interviewer-interviewee relationship, and establish a

consistent screening environment. Finkelhor (2018) stresses the importance of screening

being comfortable and not stigmatizing for those screened and dangers of underreporting, overdiagnosis, or false positive results given lack of adequate training school staff have for screening.  Schools may consider partnering with mental health experts for training or have them conduct screenings.  Not only may school staff have difficulty facilitating screenings, but it may also be particularly challenging for them to handle the emotional and mental health issues that arise during the process.  Hodas (2006) claims educators are ill-equipped to handle the intense emotions surfaced during screening and may not react appropriately or know how to guide students with processing emotions.  Trainings are helpful but may not be enough for educators to act in the capacity of a mental health expert even with continual training and supervision throughout the process.

Sufficiently training educators as mental health experts requires significant time. Additionally, screenings themselves are time-consuming, especially when screening all students.  Some schools have addressed this by assessing a different grade level each year or a specific grade level such as the second grade annually until all students in the school have been assessed.  The danger in this is trauma exposure can change from one year to the next, so if a student is only screened once in his/her/their schooling career or screened every few years, then he/she/they may go without supports for a substantial amount of time.  Also, transitory students may be overlooked.  Another time-saving method is conducting large group screenings.  Woodbridge et al. (2016) undertook an extensive screening with participation of 4,076 middle school students over four years and did so efficiently by using outside researchers to facilitate screenings; therefore, mitigating the need to train educators and streamlined the process "via a group administration of the

trauma screener... which took approximately 15 min for students to complete, usually in the classroom setting" while students lacking consent "were provided with word games and puzzles (or another teacher-selected activity) to occupy their time, facilitate privacy, and reduce interruptions" (p. 94). Losing fifteen minutes of class time is not a significant disruption if it provides the school with useful information that could facilitate helping traumatized students; however, a group setting where non-screening students may be occupied with more enticing activities is not conducive to getting the most accurate results. Understanding students may not feel comfortable enough to disclose sensitive information, "The administrators informed students that they had a right to decline participation in the screening at any point, could refuse to answer any question, and that their parents/guardians would be informed of general results but not their specific answers" (Woodbridge et al., 2016, p. 94). To yield the best results from testing where students may be less likely to decline answering, researcher teams in Gonzalez et al. (2016) maximized disclosure by having a private one-on-one setting where students did not miss out on more enticing activities by screenings only during class, not lunch or recess, for three and a half days across four elementary schools. Using outside help simplified the process and took the burden off school staff although it disrupted the school environment for multiple days. Having individualized sessions allowed researchers to end sessions with personalized talks and check each student's emotional well-being before sending them back in front of their peers. Surprisingly, the individual screening did not take much time per student with a total of "5–10 min for students who did not endorse a traumatic event and approximately 15–25 min for students who

endorsed one or more events" (Gonzalez et al., 2016, p. 81), but in a large school, this would amount to a substantial amount of time, especially if outside researchers are not assisting. Having psychoeducation for screened students would also add time. Pataky et al. (2019) discussed employing more lengthy individualized screeners for 500 students at two middle schools which took several months for ten researchers to complete:

> Students were allowed to complete the interview quickly or talk about each traumatic experience as they completed the survey. Further, students were given the flexibility to complete the ACE Questionnaire over several counseling sessions to allow for processing time with the counselor and give the students a sense of control over the interview. If staff members were aware of a recent traumatic event or crisis in the student's life, the ACE interview was rescheduled to a more supportive time. Psychoeducation about trauma and resiliency was provided at every interview session. (pp. 646-647)

Conducting individualized sessions and providing psychoeducation is a burden for many schools but may produce more accurate results since they are sensitive to each child's needs. Marie-Mitchell and O'Connor (2013) suggest digital screenings via email, a website, or lobby kiosks to alleviate the time burden. One-to-one technology schools could save substantial time using digital screenings which can also record and compile data. Students may also be more willing to divulge information online since we live in the technology age where children and teens are used to online disclosure. Determining the best way to obtain the most accurate results depends on the training accessible, time available, outside partnerships, logistical ability, and needs of the educational setting.

**Potential Lack of Accuracy**

Screening for ACEs depends on self-reporting. Sexual abuse victims in particular are unlikely to report their abuse: "Researchers estimate that 38% of child victims

disclose the fact that they have been sexually abused. Of these, 40% tell a close friend, rather than an adult or authority" (*Darkness to Light*, 2015, para. 2). Schools who only focus TS practices for those who self-report risk underserving those in need. Gonzalez et al. (2016) note accuracy issues go beyond students intentionally withholding information:

> ...several methodological challenges given children's developmental level... including subjectivity, poor reliability, and validity of responses, are heightened in a young age group who may not yet possess the cognitive skills to comprehend complex questions or reflect upon internal experiences. (p. 78)

Since some students may not be able to verbalize their situation, Pataky et al. (2019) conclude a multi-informant approach may result in more reliable data by having a triangulated approach with the student's self-report along with caregiver and teacher input. Although, as discussed previously, families may withhold information especially in cases of abuse or neglect, and teachers are not always able to identify signs of trauma.

In attempts to maximize trauma reporting, Woodbridge et al. (2016) noted researchers spent two months in each middle school building rapport with students while commencing one-on-one screenings, and students were matched, when possible, with adults who perceived having a rapport with them to maximize student comfort and minimize underreporting although many students were ultimately screened by people they did not directly know, so researchers hoped student's knowledge their agency's supports would encourage honest participation. While the researchers made a concerted effort to have students feel comfortable, the limited timeframe and minimal activities seem insufficient for building deep connections necessary for vulnerable adolescents sharing innermost traumas. Getting students to feel safe in disclosing is the key to getting

the most accuracy in reporting, but this level of safety may only be achieved through relationships built over substantial time along with efforts to destigmatize trauma.

**Ramifications to Awareness**

Usually knowledge is empowering; however, when it comes to trauma, knowledge can take a dark turn and be disempowering. Knowing one's trauma can cause a host of long-term issues could irrevocably alter a student's budding self-image. Screening can lead to affixing labels on students which "carries the risk of making trauma into a prominent feature of the child's identity" (Cole et al., 2013a, p. 57). Questions remain regarding if it is developmentally appropriate to share possible long-term effects with students, especially those with three or more ACEs. Awareness of cognitive damage and other serious side effects, including early death, may lead to a deficit mindset. Students exposed to trauma are considered academically high risk, so this could lead to an issue of a negative self-fulfilling prophecy where students stop believing in their ability to overcome adversity and see themselves as victims with a low achievement threshold. Not only may students view themselves differently and give up on themselves, staff aware of students' high ACEs may view them with a deficit mindset. Teachers' low expectations of success may contribute to a negative self-fulfilling prophecy by treating high-ACE students differently than peers, potentially further isolating and traumatizing students even though as Cole, Eisner, Gregory, and Ristuccia (2013a) point out:

> School staff will not always know if a given child's problems grow out of traumatic experiences. Nor is it appropriate or necessary to screen all children in an attempt to identify which ones have had traumatic experiences, further stigmatizing those who may already feel alienated and potentially causing more harm. (p. 9)

Not every behavior exhibited by students is a direct manifestation of trauma; however, knowing students' traumas may cause teachers to misinterpret or overanalyze observed behaviors and escalate issues. Understanding why students exhibit maladaptive behaviors is not as important as knowing how to create a TS environment which may avert many of these behaviors in the first place and help with responding in a deescalating manner. According to TLPI, using TS classroom practices does not require knowledge of trauma. Existing research leaves me wondering: Why conduct screening if implementing a TS environment does not require it? Also, if educators do screen, which school staff should be privy to results and to what extent? More research needs to be conducted by following up after screening to explore how staff's knowledge of students' traumas positively or negatively contributes to expectations and treatment of students and to see if students feel empowered or disempowered by screening and whether this varies based on ACE score or other factors.

## Screening or Not, Stress Needs to be Addressed

Despite divergence in the research with screening, researchers agree all students should be taught coping strategies for stress to build resilience and increase learned optimism by being able to handle setbacks. Understanding negative situations and stress are normal parts of life should be reinforced, so students do not feel isolated due to trauma. As part of TS practices, students are taught "the effects of stress and trauma on the body; how to develop healthy coping skills for managing stress... as well as stress management strategies such as slow breathing, mindfulness, effective problem-solving, and asking for help" (NCTSN, 2017 pp. 7-8). Giving students tools for stress and

managing healthy relationships is empowering since they may help them to control their

reactions to difficulties and does not single out students; rather, they are tools in a bank of

skills all students should learn.  Providing stress-busting techniques assists students in

regulating emotions, taking ownership of reactions to negative situations, and practicing

calm, alternative reactions.  This fosters an asset-based approach as students realize they

are not victims, and they have strength and agency for overcoming adversity.

### Conclusions about the Value of Screening

There are many opportunities for more research surrounding screening on a range

of topics: 1) Studies which include student voice to give input on if it is empowering to

take the ACE survey, 2) determining which screening tool best captures the diversity of

contemporary trauma, 3) procedures for implementing screening in an asset-based

manner feasible for schools given tight resources, 4) how to yield accurate disclosure and

results, 5) to what extent students should understand possible effects of their trauma

exposure, 6) practices best for disseminating results, and 7) procedural steps that should

be followed for supporting students with ACEs.

Screening has the potential of targeting students to get them needed resources, so

they can have a positive understanding of how to go beyond the issues in their lives to

become stronger people experiencing posttraumatic growth.  Unfortunately, if not done in

an asset-based manner or with proper implementation, follow up, and supports, screening

has the potential to do damage and make students with high ACEs feel hopeless about

their situation given the increased risks of trauma exposure thus lending itself to feelings

of victimization and a negative self-fulfilling prophecy of failure.

CHAPTER III

REVIEW OF TRAUMA-SENSITIVE SCHOOL CHARACTERISTICS

The core of implementation is defining what it means to be trauma sensitive (TS) to then restructure the school to be TS within the local context of stakeholder abilities, needs, and resources. In this chapter, I review characteristics of TS schools I found cutting across the literature and essential to TLPI's Flexible Framework upon which the NC Resilience and Learning Project (NC R&LP) is based. Three key aspects to TS schools are emphasized by researchers and practitioners: 1) the integral role of school leaders in ensuring schoolwide implementation with ongoing professional development (PD) and supporting TS policies and practices regarding relationship building, scheduling, discipline, and mental health support; 2) the importance of building trusting and authentic family and community relationships and providing appropriate and necessary resources and services to strengthen the home and community environment to buffer against toxic stress and minimize future trauma; and 3) the use of classroom-based academic and nonacademic strategies to strengthen students' mental and emotional wellbeing to promote resilience.

**Leadership**

School leaders need to be at the forefront of school-wide implementation. It is challenging to break normative habits, so it falls upon school leaders to keep everyone energized and onboard with functioning in a new TS model: "Direct engagement from

administrators is central…In fact, principal leadership has been noted as the single most important predictor of quality implementation for whole-school reform" (Ristuccia, 2013, p. 256). A dedicated school leader will consistently keep stakeholder's day-to-day operations strategically aligned to a TS vision. Leadership is key to ensuring procedures, policies, and practices followed by the school are conducive to their demographics by identifying "… priority needs for the students and families in their school and tailor trauma-sensitive solutions that fit with their unique culture and infrastructure" (Cole, Eisner, Gregory, & Ristuccia, 2013b, p. 4). A TS approach requires the mindset of leadership and staff to go from wanting to change students to changing how adults view students and altering their own behavior to meet students' needs. This may be challenging for leadership and staff since it deviates from traditional discipline, policies, and procedures and requires an "…openness to new ways of doing things, intense examination of one's belief systems, and development of critical skills" (Jackson & McDermott, 2009, p. 34). Administrators must constantly evaluate "what, why, and how" to ensure their actions and beliefs align with the mission of a TS school.

**Schoolwide Implementation**

Involving all staff is essential to creating a TS school: "Leadership is not about doing everything oneself, but it is about creating processes and systems that will cause everything to happen" (*North Carolina Standards for School Executives,* 2006). TLPI's Flexible Framework and NCSTN stress the necessity for a schoolwide TS approach. Sweeney and Caringi (2020) describe TS schools as having staff who are knowledgeable about the realities of the multiplicity of trauma faced by students as the one consistent

guiding priority from which all else follows to create a compassionate, supportive, and

trusting culture with a welcoming physical and social environment that facilitates the

achievement of students and decreases triggers and maladaptive behaviors.  Jim

Sporleder is recognized for positively transforming a challenging alternative school in

Washington by centralizing TS approaches which he said would not have been possible

without 100% commitment by school leaders, at least 75% of staff dedicated to the

process, and a diverse leadership team representing all staff to guide and steer

implementation (Sporleder & Forbes, 2019).  Sporleder and Forbes (2019) give three tips

for changing the perspectives of reluctant staff: 1) show them new approaches in practice,

2) seek out their objections and ask reflective questions to make them rethink traditional

practices, and 3) offer supports and resources to assist with changes; however, they

concede some staff may never embrace a TS mindset and may need to transfer to schools

using traditional practices, especially if they oppose restorative discipline.  All staff being

involved is key since together they create the culture, and a fragmented culture is not TS.

**Ongoing Professional Development**

Often, schools implement a PD focus or new program targeting a specialized

aspect for a short timeframe then move onto the next priority.  Sweeney and Caringi

(2020) discuss how competing initiatives often lack longevity, so staff become

overwhelmed and disillusioned; therefore, to successfully implement a TS approach,

schools will need to align all practices and policies to a singular TS focus with clear

communication and ongoing support.  TS is a large umbrella which encompasses all

aspects of a school making it a whole-school reform model.  A TS approach is not a one-

size-fits-all program to be implemented once then in place forever; it requires schools to continually "Adapt school planning and operations to the ever-changing needs/demands of the students" (Ristuccia, 2013, p. 255) since traumas faced by students and effects of their toxic stress may change with incoming groups.  Sweeney and Caringi (2020) say to optimize efficient and effective training of staff, "schools can provide varied phases or levels of training along with systems for tracking who has participated and when" (p. 314).  Providing varying levels of training enables schools to target instruction, so new staff get fundamentals while existing staff develop deeper understanding.  Having universal training for all staff including office assistants, paraprofessionals, bus drivers, cafeteria workers, and custodial staff is vital since the goal is to have TS practices engrained into every aspect of the school.  Buy-in and understanding of the need for a TS school can be fostered with a shared "…understanding of trauma's stress on the brain and body, student learning, their behavior, and the need for a school-wide approach to develop skills for coping with such stress" by using trauma literacy since many are unaware of trauma and its effects or how to mitigate them (NCTSN, 2017 p. 7).

Staff need to be given tools to act in an expanded capacity as caregivers: "School faculty should consistently rethink their roles under the doctrine of in loco parentis, which places teachers in role of both teacher and caretaker during the school day…and includes the role of teaching students how to live and function as members of society" (Ristuccia, 2013, p. 257).  Minero (2017) demonstrates through a teacher interview how unprepared and overwhelmed some educators are by the complexities of roles they fill: "'When you're learning to be a teacher, you think it's just about lesson plans, curriculum,

and seating charts…I was blindsided by the emotional aspect of teaching—I didn't know how to handle it'" (para. 5).  In a TS school, it is not enough for educators to know curriculum, they need to know how to meet the social and emotional needs of students. Cole et al. (2013a) suggest school leaders empower educators to expand on their natural talents to meet students' needs and assist colleagues with devising new strategies by being teacher leaders who facilitate PD for one another which will increase the likelihood of carrying the ideas into practice.  Leaders should encourage "…developing skills and sharing strategies among educators to help students modulate their emotions and gain social and academic competence" (Ristuccia, 2013, pp. 257-258).  This creates stronger teaching for all students by creating an atmosphere of compassion, resilience, and high expectations with supportive structures.

**Trauma-Sensitive Policies and Practices**

For successful implementation, a TS approach is an ongoing effort continuously interwoven into all aspects of school policies and practices.  It is the very fabric of the school, leading to a culture that "promotes a safe and welcoming climate; seeks to create a structured and predictable learning environment that minimizes unnecessary trauma and loss reminders; focuses on building positive and attuned relationships between teachers and students, and among school staff" (NCTSN, 2017, p. 4).  This is an all-encompassing foundation which everything else builds upon and supports including "the integration of academic competency, social and emotional functioning, healthy relationships, physical safety, and student health/well-being to foster positive learning environments for *all* students; this is particularly true for those with trauma histories" (Ristuccia, 2013, p.

253).  TS school leaders must facilitate a school culture that values building positive

staff-student relationships, scheduling to allow for stress reducers, enforcing discipline

through restorative practices, and providing mental health supports.

    **Relationships.**  All staff members are instrumental in making students feel

welcome and personally cared for in schools.  Safe and supportive relationships buffer

against negative impacts of trauma and stressors in a child's life (National Scientific

Council on the Developing Child, 2014).  Children who lack healthy caregiver

attachments "have a much more difficult time decreasing the trauma-induced activation

of the stress response systems. The result is an increased probability of developing

trauma-related problems" (Ludy-Dobson & Perry, 2010, p. 27).  Children in underserved

neighborhoods often have inconsistency with adults in their life as staff in these schools

have high turnover, and children themselves may be transitory thus limiting time to

establish strong bonds.  These relationships are vital though to regulate the stress

response system and restore neuroendocrine and neurophysiological states to prevent

toxic stress from causing lasting harm to the brain and body (Ludy-Dobson & Perry,

2010; CDCHU, 2016).  Sporleder and Forbes (2019) prioritize relationships over

academics since students who are socially and emotionally regulated release less of the

stress hormone cortisol and can focus and learn better which ultimately leads to improved

achievement as students are more attentive to cognitive tasks once in a regulated state.

    Trauma research shows just one stable and supportive relationship with an adult is

sufficient to assist children with reversing negative long-term effects of trauma and

developing coping skills to overcome adversities (Ludy-Dobson & Perry, 2010;

Ristuccia, 2013; CDCHU, 2016; Sege & Harper Browne, 2017; CDC, 2019). This adult

may be any person in a child's life. In the school, this includes administrators, teachers,

counselors, paraprofessionals, receptionists, coaches, cafeteria and maintenance staff,

volunteers, etc. Ristuccia (2013) asserts relationships are best built by having

nonacademic conversations around similar interests, so the more adults onboard, the

more opportunities students have to connect with an adult in a genuine manner. Sege and

Harper Browne (2017) stress these relationships should be protective and create

connectedness, so children feel less vulnerable to negative factors in their environment

and have a sense of belonging and value to form more hopeful personal outlooks. Adults

should act as cheerleaders encouraging and motivating children with high expectations

and guide age-appropriate behaviors and self-regulation (Sege & Harper Browne, 2017).

Emphasizing positive relationships will lead to what Sporleder and Forbes (2019) call an

"us with them" approach where staff and students collaborate to resolve issues and make

the school better instead of a traditional model of "us against them" where adults and

students react to one another with adults trying to maintain control.

Switching to a positive relationship-based model of schooling versus one focused

on academics and test scores may be unfamiliar to staff and students initially. Staff may

need help learning how to interact with students in a proactive and responsive manner. It

may be a substantial change to go from yelling at a student to stop a behavior to quietly

pulling a student aside to ask what is going on and how you may help them get regulated

(Sporleder & Forbes, 2019). Students may need time trusting adults. Ludy-Dobson and

Perry (2010) and Sporleder and Forbes (2019) describe how students may be

uncomfortable and wary of adults showing an interest in them since they may not be used to safe and healthy relationships, so they may react by being avoidant, aggressive, or rude.  Wolpow et al. (2016) and Sporleder and Forbes (2019) stress unconditional acceptance and positive regard where staff continue to show respect and compassion to students without internalizing and overreacting to negative student behaviors but instead persist in attempting to build a bridge to connect with more challenging students.

**Scheduling.**  Incorporation of physical fitness and calming techniques into the school schedule is often overlooked in traditional schools focused on academics.  These are integral to TS schools as they assist in minimizing behavioral issues and maximizing achievement.  The physical and socioemotional components are especially important for students in underserved areas since "No curriculum, instruction, or assessment, however high quality, will succeed in a hostile social climate" (Jenson, 2009, p. 87).  It is necessary to have holistic education incorporating social and physical wellbeing to counter the social conditions and toxic stress students contend with since they help students self-regulate, attend to cognitive tasks, and improve memory (Jenson, 2009; Immordino-Yang, Darling-Hammond, & Krone, 2019).  Physical activity can reduce stress since it "…significantly boosts brain functioning and is integral to learning.  When we exercise, the body produces a protein called BDNF... that mitigates the amount of damaging hormones introduced into the brain" (Hertel & Johnson, 2013, p. 26).  Physical fitness positively enhances the brain's neural networks with improvements reflected in academic achievement as well as behavior in both the short and long term (Immordino-Yang et al., 2019).  Hyvönen et al. (2018) assert physical activity in green spaces

maximizes social-emotional and cognitive benefits, so schools should use outdoor spaces for physical activity or relaxation when available.

Yoga and mindfulness are other valuable activities for students to minimize stress from trauma and reduce behavioral outbursts. These relaxing techniques "…assist them [students] in becoming more reflective thinkers, rather than reflexive, and to reduce impulsive, reactive behaviors" (Hertel, & Johnson, 2013, p. 27). Schools incorporating relaxation and fitness see academic and disciplinary benefits: "One elementary school...instituted Calming Yoga as part of the curriculum for all students along with other physical activities and compassionate school strategies. After 2 years..., test scores rose dramatically, referrals to special education decreased, and discipline referrals dropped precipitously" (Hertel & Johnson, 2013, p. 26). Schools piloting the Quiet Time program by the Center for Wellness and Achievement in Education which targets toxic stress through two daily 15-minute periods of Transcendental Meditation reported increases in standardized test scores, GPAs, and staff wellness and decreases in discipline issues, suspensions, and achievement gap for African-American students (Trauma-Informed Care in Schools, 2019b). TS school leaders prioritize physical education and relaxation when creating the master schedule since a schoolwide culture conducive to the physical, mental, and emotional needs of students combats toxic stress and enables students to be more successful in all aspects of the school environment.

**Discipline.** Traditional discipline procedures are trauma insensitive. A TS approach requires school leaders to "communicate behavioral expectations and disciplinary actions in a clear and consistent manner," avoid "zero tolerance policies and

out-of-school discipline procedures as a primary disciplinary tool," and "refrain from unnecessarily calling on school resource officers (SRO) for punitive responses" (NCTSN, 2017, p. 11).  Proactive environments are essential as "Punitive and exclusionary environments actually create distance, intolerance, and disconnection…These types of reactive school environments may actually increase the frequency of problematic behavior" (Ristuccia, 2013, p. 260).  Punitive practices escalate students' behavior by adding to their stress levels and result in further punishments creating a cycle of dysregulation for students in flight, fight, or freeze mode, and oftentimes, adults respond to these challenging behaviors with increased stress levels of their own causing reactionary behavior on their part contributing to the negative cycle (Ablon & Pollastri, 2018).  Students who lack self-control are often labeled as being at-risk or problem students whose behaviors are viewed as intentionally disobedient which leads to repeated suspensions, expulsion, and an increased risk of dropping out which contributes to the school-to-prison pipeline disproportionately affecting students who have higher ACEs and intensifying behaviors since traditional discipline lacks proper intervention practices (NCSEA, 2019).  To change this dynamic, Cole et al. (2013a) and Dorado, Martinez, McArthur, and Leibovitz (2016) suggest staff should move away from labels and taking behaviors personally by reexamining behaviors through a trauma lens to have compassion and understand what is triggering maladaptive behaviors, so they may connect with students and assist in stopping the negative behavior cycle and build students' skills.  Wolpow et al. (2016) encourage proactiveness by calling for educators to frequently observe students' behaviors to look for patterns, subtle changes, or actions

which may escalate; then take time to discuss observations with students, actively listen to what is going on, and proceed in providing the necessary help.

Traditional behavior programs rely heavily on behavior charts and reward programs which seem innocent; however, they manipulate students into compliance. Students who have regulation issues lack the self-control needed to comply with these systems. Dorado et al. (2016) describe behavior-based discipline and use of reflection sheets as ineffective for students with trauma since they require use of the pre-frontal cortex which is in a state of dysregulation; thus, the child fails to identify what is triggering the behavior. Ablon and Pollastri (2018) add reward-based behaviors systems and punitive discipline practices cause developmental damage for students who experience neglect or abuse since authority figures use power and rewards to control children hence reinforcing toxic dynamics of abusive relationships. Moving away from a traditional discipline model may leave some students or staff feeling as though students are getting away with negative behaviors. It is important for everyone to understand justice is best served through restorative consequences where "Best practices for engaging students in repairing situations and relationships harmed by their behavior are integrated into disciplinary procedures" (NCTSN, 2017, p. 11). TS schools do set limits, have rules, and hold students accountable, just in a restorative manner meant to teach not punish. TLPI stresses that rules and routines need to be clearly communicated and enacted with consistency, students need to be engaged in dialogue about the benefits of rules for the safety of them and others, consequences should focus on learning proceeding with minimal disruptions, and students should be taught self-regulation (Cole et al.,

2013a).  TS school leaders view behavioral issues as learning opportunities to teach skills

for minimizing subsequent behavioral concerns instead of simply removing students from

the learning environment, so students understand the "explicit connection between his or

her behavior and the outcome," and "skill deficits…[are]…addressed" to "provide a safe

and supportive environment for all students – one in which they are accountable for their

behavior, yet accepted as valuable members of the school community" (Ristuccia, 2013,

pp. 260-261).  Ideally, in TS schools, discipline is a teaching tool and not a punitive

measure, helping students to maximize their potential and develop adaptive behaviors.

Despite proactive school-wide initiatives and equitable discipline with restorative

practices meant to repair harm and prevent future incidents, there may be students who

still have trouble regulating their behaviors.  Dorado et al. (2016) found significant

decreases in problematic behavior when they implemented weekly group intervention

sessions for high school students who were frequently dysregulated in freeze, flight, or

fight modes.  Participating students improved attendance, academic focus, emotion

expression, relationships, and daily functioning while also decreasing aggression,

referrals, and suspensions.  Calming rooms and in-school suspension (ISS) are other

methods of assisting dysregulated students by providing a safe space for destressing.  For

these to be most effective, Sporleder and Forbes (2019) emphasize a compassionate

supervisor must interact with students while they are in the calming room or ISS location

to help with processing and developing skills before they reenter learning spaces.  These

are not spaces in which to punish and isolate students, rather they should be spaces for

students to develop the skills necessary to be capable of following school rules without

being removed from the school environment.  Sporleder and Forbes (2019) stress that rules and discipline are meant for the safety of the everyone in the building, so if everything possible has been done to help a dysregulated student, but he/she/they still cannot be safe, then a mental health referral for a higher level of care is needed.  These students should be "assigned appropriate support services to address underlying causes of the behavior.  The school coordinates support services with the student's family and gives appropriate referrals..." (NCTSN, 2017, p. 11).  The focus should always be on helping a student learn how to function safely in a school environment; unfortunately, some students' trauma may be too great for them to be capable of that.  Using trauma as the lens for viewing and handling disciplinary referrals ensures that all students are being respected and treated equitably while being taught valuable life skills for conflict mediation and getting additional support services as needed which will help to end the current school-to-prison pipeline disproportionately impacting students with high ACEs.

**Mental health supports.**  Students with higher levels of toxic stress may need targeted mental health supports.  Schools can work to destigmatize mental health and encourage students to seek support for themselves and peers.  Park (2020) suggests schools follow the lead of New York, Florida, and Virginia which have mandatory mental health education with screenings, awareness, and education.  Mental health is a serious concern as "16-20% of the population of children and adolescents have some disturbance and 5-9% have 'extreme functional impairment'" (American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry [AAC&AP], 2019, par.1), yet "only 21.7% of youth with severe depression receive some consistent treatment (7-25+ visits in a year)" (Mental

Health America, 2018, para. 10) which may be due in part to the shortage of available

mental health practitioners with only "approximately 8,300 practicing child and

adolescent psychiatrists in the US and over 15 million children and adolescents in need"

which causes "average delays of 8-10 years between the onset of symptoms and

intervention" thus making it "more difficult and costly…to treat" (AAC&AP, 2019, para.

2).  In North Carolina, 13.3% of youth aged 12-17 reported a past-year depressive

episode in 2017 and "16% of high school students in 2017 reported seriously considering

suicide. This figure included 12% of heterosexual students, and a staggering 43% of gay,

lesbian, or bisexual students" (North Carolina Institute of Medicine and NC Child, 2019,

p. 5).  North Carolina's availability of school-based mental health professionals are

inadequate to meet these needs as the ratio of available mental health professionals fall

far short of recommended ratios (psychologists are 1:1,798 versus 1:500 recommended,

counselors are 1:353 and social workers 1:1,289 versus recommended 1:250, and nurses

are 1:1,013 versus the recommended 1:750 or 1 per school) (Institute for Educational

Policymakers, 2020).  Fortunately, with the proper training, school staff can effectively

deliver some interventions for helping students with more common mental health issues

(if they are not severe cases) such as anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, and

substance abuse (Government Green Paper, 2017).  Sunderland (2019) discusses the

importance of educators being supported in knowing what language to use when

discussing mental health issues with students as many educators express a lack of

confidence in discussing self-harm and feel they could worsen the situation.  To support

staff in these difficult conversations, Cole et al. (2013a) suggest trainings led by

clinicians who can give staff effective ideas for behavior management and classroom strategies and role-play interactions for how to communicate with students and guardians. Having strong relationships with parents will enable school staff to get permission to speak with clinicians about students' needs such as triggers to avoid; strategies to use to aid with learning, regulation, and coping; and specific supportive accommodations (Cole et al., 2013a). Having mental health support onsite or in the community provides help for tier three students with the greatest needs.

## Family and Community Involvement

Transforming into a TS school requires active participation and support of families and the community. School staff must understand environmental factors which impact students' learning to build genuine connections with families and community members. Once partnerships are created, schools may provide workshops, services, and resources or provide referrals to link families to areas of need. Finally, schools may seek out funding opportunities to maximize means for getting resources into the school. Implementing these practices will allow the school to be an extension of the community with mutually-beneficial relationships engaging families at a deep level for the empowerment and improvement of the whole community.

### Building a School-Family Connection

A strong relationship is needed before families will commit to assisting with supporting TS practices in the school or instituting them at home. School leaders may gain families' trust through deliberate actions showing an understanding of community needs and a commitment to help uplift it. As Khalifa (2012) discusses, this trust is

79

especially important in underserved communities with high ACEs where people have been marginalized since there is a long history of betrayal with policies implemented which fail to serve their best interests; therefore, building trust requires going out and being involved in the community as an advocate for community issues. Then the community and school may become a fluid extension of one another with the community helping to strengthen the school. Khalifa (2012) found school leader involvement in community causes transformed relationships with parents from being unhappy with the school to becoming supportive of initiatives which led to academic gains for students.

Showing the school's commitment by going to families first increases positive connections. Henke (2011) discussed California's undertaking of a home visit program which "resulted in an increase in academic achievement and test scores, improved attendance and homework completion, increased parental involvement, and improved attitudes about school on the part of both students and parents" (p. 39). The Teacher Home Visit Program initiated in Maple Richmond Heights School District near St. Louis, Missouri experienced similar success by seeing "discipline referrals throughout the district were down 45%, and parent attendance at each school's first open house was up by almost 20%" (Henke, 2011, p. 39). Beyond home visits, school staff involved in the community is a step in the right direction. Annapolis High School principal Donald Lilley, featured on NBC Nightly News, encouraged staff to join him at neighborhood barbeques, baseball games, and block parties which connected them to community members who were invited to be role models for underachieving students. This began a weekly mentorship program which changed participating students' perceptions of what

was possible for their future by forging relationships with others from their underserved

community who achieved successful careers (Ellis & Holt, 2013).  Being a visible part of

the community does not cost much, but payoff is immense with the supports that follow.

It is essential for families to feel valued by the school.  Hong (2011) discusses

how negative past schooling experiences, cultural differences, and lack of higher

education may make families feel disconnected, intimidated, and overwhelmed; thus, a

welcome and open school climate is needed to bridge the divide between home and

school.  Auerbach (2009) highlights three school leaders who effectively engaged

families by having meaningful activities such as a Parents as Authors program or house

meetings that gave parents a voice in school decisions.  Leaders in TS schools seek

creative ideas tailored to their demographic's needs to break down barriers between staff

and families for stronger partnerships with a goal of ultimately getting families

supportive of TS practices.  Hong (2011) describes a method of getting parents to become

transformative leaders of the school called Ecology of Parent Engagement following

three steps: introduction- families are welcomed, integration-families participate with

staff in fun activities, and investment- family members transform into leaders in the

school and become invested in larger initiatives for the well-being of schools and the

improvement of the community.  Hong highlights how the Logan Square Neighborhood

Association (LSNA) used this method to transform 30 schools and communities

throughout Chicago.  According to the LSNA Parent Engagement Institute, "real parent

engagement" provides leadership opportunities; in fact, from starting as mentors, many

parents went on to earn GEDs, advanced degrees, and fifty-six were pursuing bilingual

education teaching certification (Hong, 2011). Through a parents-as-leaders lens, families have significant roles for the school's success. Families may be a pillar of strength and support when given ownership and purpose, such as being mentors for other families to connect them to resources and assist in navigating complexities in the school system especially for English Language Learners and Exceptional Children (Wolpow et al., 2016). These roles break the cycle of intergenerational trauma by increasing families' self-efficacy and help shape the community into a more resilient place.

**Family and Community Workshops**

Families must see that being TS is not just a school initiative. With increased awareness on the issue of trauma, its impact, and ways to mitigate it, families and communities may be key supporters, allies, and implementers of TS practices who "recognize and respond to the potentially negative behavioral, relational, and academic impact of traumatic stress…on the system [school and community] itself" (NCTSN, 2017, p. 4). TS schools act in "collaboration with those who are involved with the child, including students' families, community agencies, leaders, and law enforcement" and providing them with "trauma awareness, knowledge, and skills…using the best available science to facilitate and support the recovery and resiliency of the school community" (NCTSN, 2017, p. 4). Professional development (PD) is often thought of as necessary for staff in isolation from the community; however, in a TS school, all stakeholders are offered PD though not as intensive as what regular, fulltime staff receives. Sweeney and Caringi (2020) recommend using videos or concise informative sessions on trauma, ACEs, and STS for substitutes, volunteers, families, and community members. All

community members may be allies in the process of becoming TS "with the goal that the entire community will share the understanding of trauma's impact on learning and will build student coping and protective skills" (NCTSN, 2017, p. 7). NCTSN (2017) emphasizes that parents know their children best and should be taught "effects of stress and trauma on children's brains and bodies, and instructs them in how to develop skills for coping with stress to bolster student's learning-readiness and a sense of psychological safety" (p. 8). At times, family members may be the ones perpetuating the trauma, but when informed of the consequences, they may use supports offered by community resources to stop. Other family members may also be better equipped to assist in these situations once aware of the gravity of them and knowing resources for help. Many organizations offer free resources to assist schools with educating families and community members including the American Academy of Pediatrics Resilience Project; The Attachment, Regulation and Competency Framework; Child Mind Institute; Child Trauma Academy; Child Trends; Child Welfare Information Gateway; Emerging Minds Trauma Toolkit; Iowa ACES 360; National Child Traumatic Stress Network; National Institute of Mental Health; and Wisconsin Trauma Project. Picking resources from a single agency or having one key area of focus at a time will help prevent overwhelming people. The school and community then may work over time to build knowledge, awareness, and skills for limiting and mitigating the ACEs in their community.

Students should be included in understanding trauma; however, researchers disagree about the extent students should be knowledgeable about effects of trauma and their own level of trauma. NCTSN (2017) maintains students should be taught "the

effects of stress and trauma on the body; how to develop healthy coping skills for managing stress... stress management strategies such as slow breathing, mindfulness, effective problem-solving, and asking for help" and provided "activities that nurture healthy peer and family relationships and connections to community organizations; and incorporates practices to increase students' resilience" (pp. 7-8). Giving students tools for stress and managing healthy relationships fosters an asset-based approach for empowerment where they realize there is nothing wrong with them, and they can regulate emotions to take ownership of their reactions. As a level two or three intervention, schools may implement psycho-educational interventions for often dysregulated students. Tedeschi et al. (2018) discussed two school-based programs implemented to assist students with trauma and found positive outcomes and enhanced posttraumatic growth (PTG) for participating students: an elementary after-school program with hands-on activities called "I Fell Better Now!" focused on reframing traumatic experiences to a survivor viewpoint instead of a victim mentality, and a weekly narrative-arts based program called "Tree of Life" directed towards refugees of various ages to help identify their strengths while telling the story of their challenges. Tedeschi et al. (2018) suggest incorporating PTG and asset-based trauma workshops into schooling to normalize adversities students face with constructive ways of expression and support.

To further support students and their families in combatting ACEs, efforts may be made to strengthen bonds between students and their caregivers. Huston (2002) reports the quality of parent-child interactions has a greater impact on social behavior and emotional well-being than income or educational level of families; the lowest distress and

most prosocial behaviors were exhibited by children reporting having loving caregivers who avoid harsh discipline and provide effective supervision. Sege and Harper Browne (2017) assert that because of their developing brains, children need responsive and nurturing caregivers to establish secure attachments that help buffer future stressors and later results in effective social competencies, higher self-esteem, constructive relationships, and improved learning. Schools may improve caregivers' competencies by promoting and modeling active engagement through reading, activities, and fun discourse (Sege & Harper Browne, 2017). School-based parent-support groups and community referrals (including mental health, support groups, parenting classes, and community agency resources) should be offered in a nonjudgmental manner as supports all families may benefit from (Sege & Harper Browne, 2017). Providing targeted classes either at school or through community agencies may improve caregivers' skills to assist with age-appropriate behavior management and alleviates some stress in the home environment.

Caregivers to children of all ages benefit from learning how to handle parenting challenges without resorting to maladaptive practices. Getting information on child development and long-term effects of corporal punishment and as well as learning anger management, enhancing problem-solving, and obtaining effective discipline techniques build stronger and safer families that prevent child abuse (Fortson, Klevens, Merrick, Gilbert, & Alexander, 2016; Morsy & Rothstein, 2019). CDCHU (2016) underscores that caregiver trainings need to promote active and intense engagement in acquiring and practicing skills for supporting healthy child development. Getting into a routine of positive discipline practices may be especially challenging for stressed-out caregivers

85

living in poverty, chaotic home environments, or underserved communities, so CDCHU

suggests providing additional supports and opportunities for strengthening parenting

skills through follow-up home-visiting services.  Home-based services may be difficult or

expensive to execute, so a less intensive intervention would be encouraging family

participation through faith, neighborhood, or school-based opportunities which guide

them with resilience-promoting activities and social-emotional competency development

(Sege & Harper Browne, 2017).  For families experiencing significant stress or using

maladaptive discipline, there are parenting courses shown to reduce neglect and abuse.

Three successful programs include: 1) Safe Care, with 15% of families being rereported

for child abuse compared to 46% of families not completing the program; 2) Adults and

Children Together Against Violence: Parents Raising Safe Kids where participants

increased nurturing and decreased verbal and physical abuse; and 3) The Incredible Years

whose participants displayed higher parenting scores with increased nurturing and

positive discipline, and children exhibited less conduct problems.  Having schools bring

in experts to run classes or provide referrals can greatly assist families in having safe and

healthy homes that buffer against the effects of ACEs (Fortson et al., 2016).

**Environmental Factors**

Environmental contexts affect children's physical, intellectual, and socioemotional

development.  For healthy development, Sege and Harper Browne (2017) list the

necessities of "safe and stable housing, adequate nutrition and sufficient sleep, high-

quality learning opportunities, access to high-quality medical and dental care, and

opportunities to play and engage in physical activity" (pp. S81-S82).  Huston (2002) adds

the importance of "safety from injury, violence, and environmental hazards [since] …environments that poor children experience are often characterized by hardship, hunger, homelessness, exposure to toxins and other dangerous substances, exposure to violence and other hazards to physical safety, and inadequate preventive health care" (p. 64). An eight-year study by Costello, Compton, Keeler, and Angold (2003) showed low-SES children have double the frequency of mental health issues than children never experiencing poverty, but the good news is children moved out of poverty exhibited decreased behavioral mental health symptoms (conduct and oppositional disorders) to the same rate as those never poor. Unfortunately, children moved out of poverty still showed high rates of emotional mental health issues (depression, mood, anxiety) like those in poverty. Sege and Harper Browne (2017) report increased income improves families' ability to meet basic needs and reduces household stressors and caregiver depression which lessens child abuse and neglect. Huston (2002) reports academic gains when children move out of public housing to low-poverty areas. Thus, increasing families' finances benefits many facets of children's wellbeing; however, lingering emotional effects make a TS environment important even for those who escape poverty.

Leaders and staff in TS schools are knowledgeable of negative environmental factors contributing to students' toxic stress, but instead of using them as excuses for why reaching students is beyond their control, they use this to determine how to buffer against these effects. As the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University (CDCHU) (2016) expresses, "The ultimate strategy for preventing the negative effects of stress... would be to reduce poverty, violence, discrimination, and other threats to child well-

87

being as a societal goal" (p. 3). Schools may not prevent all ACEs, but they can implement programs like Health Outcomes from Positive Experiences (HOPE) to promote positive childhood experiences through providing high-quality educational programs, childcare, afterschool activities, and linking families to services and resources to meet basic needs to prevent or mitigate toxic stress and trauma (Sege & Harper Browne, 2017). Schools can assist in promoting healthy child development by providing enriching afterschool environments; encouraging and having healthy caregiver-child relationships; providing and supporting physically and emotionally safe environments; and teaching and offering proper health and nutrition (Shonkoff et al., 2012). It is necessary for schools to connect with families to effectively implement these supports.

**Services and Resources**

Many students with trauma and toxic stress reside in underserved neighborhoods and lack basic necessities. Without proper supports, students exhibit more maladaptive behaviors and are unable to maximize their potential or focus at higher cognitive levels. Bringing together families and community partners, schools may reduce stressors for students and their families. TLPI's Flexible Framework recommends schools have an array of community partners to assist with improving the quality of life for families including educational agencies, higher-education institutions, nonprofits, health services, businesses, housing agencies, faith-based organizations, social services, and other private or public organizations interested youth development. Establishing and expanding partnerships with all available agencies maximizes schools' abilities to connect students and families to needed resources and services. Jackson and McDermott (2009) highlight

principal Martha Davis who is a champion of maximizing services her school provides

since she "believes that rich resources exist in her school's poor community" with the

school being a resource "offering on-site services as dental and medical care" (p. 36). TS

schools disseminate information and connect families to valuable services. Families need

to be aware of government aids such as Food Stamps, WIC, Work First, Unemployment

Insurance, Medicaid and Health Choice, Low-Income Energy Assistance, Summer Food

Assistance, and Weatherization Assistance and provided help on how to file paperwork

properly. Aiding families in getting assistance also benefits the local economy.

Unemployment benefits are the second-best way of stimulating the economy, after

spending for new mass transit, since they added:

> 1.6 million jobs on average each quarter from 2008 to 2010. The unemployed are
> most likely to spend every dime they get. They buy basics like groceries, clothing,
> and housing. As a result, every dollar spent on unemployment benefits stimulates
> $1.64 in demand. (Amadeo, 2020, para. 8)

Getting people assistance decreases economic stressors which lead to additional ACEs.

Even better than aid would be increasing educational levels. Schools, especially ones

with parent as mentors, can be a hub for sharing the benefits of obtaining postsecondary

certifications and degrees, available financial aid and scholarship opportunities, flexible

online learning options, and assist with applications. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics

shows as workers' educational level increases so do their wages while their chances of

being unemployed decrease (Vilorio, 2016). As educational levels of parents rise,

children have a decreased risk of ACES. In fact, "In 2016, among children who had a

parent with schooling beyond high school, 61 percent had no adverse experiences,

compared to 43 percent both among children whose parents completed high school only, and among children whose parents lacked a high school education" (Child Trends, 2019). Encouraging advanced degrees for students, families, and community members could have a significant impact on lowering ACEs communitywide over time.

Immigrant and refugee families need extra support in navigating what assistance they are qualified for, citizenship issues, English language development, and employment and educational opportunities. As Moreland, Birman, Dunn, Adkins, and Gardner (2013) discuss, immigrant and refugees often have high trauma and stress levels due to push factors which brought them to America, separation from family members, issues on the journey here, poor living conditions upon arrival, resettlement challenges, acculturation stress with cultural and linguistic differences, and discrimination by Americans. Undocumented families face additional stressors of deportation, family separation, anti-immigration policies (Jawetz, 2019), low pay, long work hours, little time off, unsafe working conditions, and 6.5 million are victims of wage theft annually by employers (Sethi & Das, 2015). Schools may decrease ACEs for their immigrant students and families through partnerships with immigration lawyers who lead educational workshops on knowing their rights and having immigrant parent leaders as mentors.

Partnerships with businesses and organizations bring needed resources and services to families and are an opportunity for mutually-beneficial relationships through service learning, internships, and growing future employees. Allen (2003) notes a review of service-learning research showed students participating in service-learning increased academic learning, civic responsibility, personal growth, social development, and gained

opportunities for career exploration. Once students see they can make a difference and have a viable future career, they are more invested in their education which is essential for safe communities: "...the strongest predictor of criminal activity is the lack of an education" (Edelman, 2013, para. 1). Growing up in unsafe and underserved neighborhoods contributes to a negative self-fulfilling prophecy and cycle of poverty, but forging strong partnerships where students develop self-efficacy through real-world skills and applying their knowledge, students may develop learned optimism and hope for a more productive future. TS schools seek partnerships to help the community by producing more productive, educated citizens since the future of dropouts is bleak:

> They are three times more likely to be unemployed than workers with a Bachelor's Degree... they'll earn an average of $20,000 a year, compared to $57,000 for workers with a Bachelor's Degree and $32,000 for workers with a high school diploma. They'll be less healthy, more likely to die young, and far more likely to rely on public assistance. (Edelman, 2013, para. 6)

Students actively engaged in education transforms their future and their community into a safer, more ideal place to live and diminishes intergenerational trauma and ACE scores.

**Funding Opportunities**

Seeking out private and public grant money is another way to secure funding for trauma-informed initiatives supporting students and families. Begun in 1994 and reauthorized for 2020, the 21st Century Community Learning Centers Program is a federal grant through the U.S. Department of Education (USDE) (2019a) awarded to rural and inner-city public schools to assist with planning, implementing, or expanding projects for a community's educational, health, social services, cultural, and recreational

needs with the flexibility to assist in different aspects of preventing ACEs and mitigating

toxic stress. Another long-standing grant opportunity begun in 2014 and continued into

2020 is the Project Prevent Grant also through the USDE (2019b). This is specifically

designed to meet mental health needs due to exposure to violence and teach conflict

resolution strategies to prevent getting caught in a cycle of violence through school-based

activities to reduce bullying, gang involvement, substance abuse, and aggression.

COVID-19 has increased federal and state funding opportunities for toxic-stress

and mental health concerns brought on by the stress of the pandemic increasing

unemployment, domestic violence, alcohol consumption, substance abuse, suicidal

thoughts, educational interruption, and housing displacement (CTIPP, 2020). While it is

yet to be seen what the lingering effects of the pandemic are and how much long-term

funding will be allocated to alleviating those effects, as of 2020, there is $30.75 billion

allocated in the Education Stimulation Fund to help schools respond to the effects of

COVID-19 and $9.5 billion in Community Services Block Grants to increase community

services, community development, and child care development which may be done in a

TS manner to help alleviate toxic stress (CTIPP, 2020). The ongoing aftermath of

COVID-19 will require increased funding and focus on implementing TS policies and

practices throughout communities to off-set the negative impact of ACEs caused by the

pandemic. Following Hong's (2011) Ecology of Parent Engagement, families and

community members may assist with the grant seeking, applying, and implementing

which may enhance chances of getting monies by showing a strong school-community

environment capable of spending the money beneficially.

**Collective Efficacy and Learned Empowerment**

Schools that forge strong partnerships with families and community members embolden them to develop collective efficacy and learned empowerment. Compton and Hoffman (2019) describe collective efficacy as the result when people, agencies, and businesses network in trusting relationships to make neighborhoods better places to live and work since they believe collaboration will accomplish goals. Individuals may experience learned empowerment by working to improve local concerns through participation in a democratic process where their voice is heard and action results in tangible community rewards which creates fosters increased community pride and self-autonomy (Compton & Hoffman, 2019). TS schools may initiate this process with education on ACEs and strategies to mitigate effects, so families, agencies, and businesses have a communal concern. Individual and social transformation takes school leaders who are willing to allow all stakeholders to have a voice in the school to reflect the needs and desires of the community, not just the principal's or team's vision. It takes a concerted effort and comprehensive plan of attack to prevent and compensate for societal issues which contribute to higher ACEs; this work may only be accomplished by having all members of the community willing to do their part together.

**Classroom-Based Strategies**

Classroom teachers have a special role in mitigating trauma's impact since most of a student's time at school is spent in the classroom. TLPI's Flexible Framework stresses the importance of academic and nonacademic strategies. The following sections are 1) academic strategies of risk-taking and success, trauma-informed curriculum, and

93

equitable homework policies, and 2) nonacademic strategies of minimizing triggers, social and emotional learning (SEL) practices, and creative expression.

**Academic Strategies**

Students with high ACEs can often be dysregulated which may keep them from focusing on academic tasks, contribute to misunderstanding or not hearing directions, and prevent attending to details in tasks. They may also struggle with gaps in learning due to their attention being in and out of focus. In TS schools, teachers create a safe space for academic risk-taking and provide methods of assisting students in meeting high academic standards by using culturally-relevant materials and providing examples of resilience while avoiding material that could retraumatize. Lastly, TS teachers reflect on homework policies and procedures to ensure equity, so students are held to high standards, yet realities of possible difficulties in home lives are not ignored.

**Academic risk-taking and success.** It is important for traumatized students to experience academic success. This can be done by providing "...differentiated instruction and at least one activity each day that will always lead to success" (Hertel & Johnson, 2013, p. 28). Educators may differentiate by providing manipulatives, graphic organizers, reviewing key vocabulary and background information before reading, doing think-alouds, making learning relevant, and chunking lessons into smaller units (Cole et al., 2013a). Another method is to build on athletic, artistic, verbal, or written strengths to develop students' emotional self-worth. Building student's self-esteem "is an important starting point in mastering academic content and social relations, which in turn can serve as a basis for success at school" (Cole et al., 2013a, p. 57). Using a growth mindset

focused on effort and improvement over final product through providing students with

concrete praise for efforts improves students' resilience for facing tough tasks (Compton

& Hoffman, 2019).  Helping students visualize and track their progress will remind them

that they are capable of academic successes and improvement: "Students benefit from

being able to see their gains, such as through visual charts or tangible rewards for

progress.  In addition, rewarding progress serves as a catalyst for further gains and

increased self-worth" (Hertel & Johnson, 2013, p. 28).  Extrinsic rewards are useful to

begin with, but having students develop intrinsic satisfaction will result in long-term self-

esteem building.  Most importantly, educators need to maintain high expectation since

> ...one of the most effective ways to overcome the impacts of traumatic
> experiences is to make it possible for students to master the school's academic
> and social goals. Children often interpret lowered standards as a validation of
> their own sense of worthlessness, a self-image created by their experiences. (Cole
> et al., 2013b, p. 18)

Hertel and Johnson (2013) elaborate that educators may be flexible and show empathy

and understanding; however, high expectations must continue; otherwise, "Relaxing

academic expectations for traumatized students can send the message that they are being

discarded or that we are giving up on them" (p. 28).  A classroom atmosphere in which

teachers and students value taking academic risks contributes to students engaging in

academic activities to their best ability.  It is up to the teacher to establish a positive

classroom culture where students feel open to taking academic risks since traumatized

students may feel reluctant to make themselves vulnerable.  Cole et al. (2013a) discuss

how teachers in TS schools understand answering questions is intimidating for many

students who may feel scared to make mistakes in front of others.  This fear can lead to

maladaptive behaviors as an avoidance strategy unless the classroom feels like a place

where they will be respected even when incorrect.  It takes time and effort to demonstrate

to students that mistakes are not only acceptable, but positive where all people are

expected to make mistakes in the process of learning and growing.

**Trauma-sensitive methods and curriculum.**  TS teachers use a variety of

pedagogical methods to minimize students' stress while maximizing learning.  Cook et al.

(2018) conducted a study with 2 middle schools and 10 teachers where half of the

teachers were in an intervention group doing daily positive greetings at the door with

proactive behavior reminders; unlike the control group, these teachers saw a decrease in

disruptive behaviors by 9% and increase in academic achievement by 20%.  Izard (2016)

explains maintaining a calm demeanor and voice helps to soothe students who are tense

from voices and painful sounds running through their heads, especially when in a

triggered state, and makes students adjust and become more receptive to engaging in new

activities.  Establishing predictability in routines and knowing students can rely on the

teacher to support them with new activities makes the classroom a more reassuring place

and elicits more engagement (Cole et al., 2013a; Craig, 2016; Crosby, Howell, &

Thomas, 2018).  Having specific activities and tasks tailored to a student's "Island of

Competence" where the teacher knows the student will be successful and providing

student agency through choices such as which text to read, activities to choose, or

questions from a set number to complete improves student's learning and build a trusting

relationship (Cole et al., 2013a; Izard, 2016; Crosby et al., 2018).  Crosby, Howell, and

Thomas (2018) recommend providing leadership opportunities with group tasks or peer tutoring, so students who feel out of control with their traumas may have an area in life where they feel power and pride. These strategies are good pedagogy as they aim to build all students' confidence and trust in the teacher resulting in increased engagement; furthermore, they specifically assist students with staying emotionally regulated.

There are also many curriculum activities beneficial for students impacted by trauma. Cole et al. (2016) discuss how neural pathways are different for students suffering from toxic stress causing attention issues with a hypervigilance to nonverbal cues which comes at a cost to attending to verbal directions; therefore, teachers need to verify students do not miss or misunderstand directions and expectations by presenting information in multiple formats including role-play, visuals, and written. Izard (2016) highlights students with trauma are disproportionately medicated for ADHD and psychological conditions which may contribute to a lack of attentiveness; however, using short-term memory building activities such as word or number sequencing tasks, sentence building, and storytelling may offset side effects of said drugs and build neural pathways to improve attention span overtime. Vocabulary and reading supports are necessary since

> The parts of the brain involved in reading develop over a long period in gestation and are therefore susceptible to problems and concerns. That is why some children from poverty have difficulty reading due to poor nutrition, poor prenatal habits, and limited health care resources. (Izard, 2016, p. 30)

Improving reading and vocabulary development will create more academic success for students and build self-efficacy which, in turn, help students to develop resilience. Reading is especially important for students with trauma since they can read about others

97

triumphing over similar adversities, which builds hope.  Completing character analyses of characters' feelings, motivations, and actions in novels where characters face adversities and societal stigmas increases students' empathy and coping strategies (Moore & Begoray, 2017; Sporleder & Forbes, 2019; Park, 2020).  These activities also help make learning relevant and engaging.  Seelig (2013) provides an example of a high school program, "Reading Like a Historian," where students are given primary documents to study varying viewpoints about a period or event in history, so students can develop their own interpretation and debate with peers.  This approach gets students invested in learning and allows for a high-level of thinking without the fear of wrong answers since there is no one accurate interpretation and all voices are valued.  Keeping learning playful and project-based, not just rote memorization or test-based, is important for academic risk-taking, increased engagement, authentic learning, and building skills which works especially well for those with ACEs while helping all students (Craig, 2016; Immordino-Yang et al., 2019).  The goal of curriculum in a TS classroom is to do no harm, avoid retraumatizing, and build skills to offset negative impacts of trauma and toxic stress while providing high quality, engaging learning opportunities.

**Equitable homework policies.**  Homework is an area of debate for educators since many students experiencing trauma do not have a home environment conducive to success on homework.  However, not requiring these students to do homework would be lowering standards and giving them a lower quality of education than middle and upper-class students who are likely to face less ACEs and are routinely expected to complete homework.  Interestingly, in a meta-analysis of parental involvement for middle

98

schoolers' achievement, Hill and Tyson (2009) found that while parental involvement by encouraging learning and being active in the school does positively correlate to student's success, involvement with homework does not since oftentimes it adds more overall stress and strain on the parent-child bond. Therefore, they suggest homework should not require the help of caregivers and should be something to review and reinforce familiar concepts only. To offset difficulties students with ACEs may face, one method would be to allow time in class to begin homework and check for understanding before students take it home (Cole et al., 2013a, p. 64). Using this strategy makes assigning homework a more equitable practice while maintaining high expectations and sending a message to students that they are capable, their teacher believes in them, and they will be supported.

**Nonacademic Strategies**

Nonacademic strategies create a physically and emotionally safe environment conducive to learning and engaging in challenging tasks where students learn how to regulate their emotions and get along with others. Minimizing triggers to make the environment more calming and avoid re-traumatization decreases freeze-flight-fight behaviors. Using social and emotional learning (SEL) strategies help students develop better self-management and healthy relationships with peers and adults where students productively collaborate, and students accept help and redirection from adults. Lastly, TS classrooms are a space attuned to developing and building on students' creative talents as a means of building self-esteem and releasing tension. Infusing SEL and creative expression into the classroom engages the whole child and helps students become more resilient and able to function in a more regulated emotional state.

**Minimizing triggers.** TS teachers are cognizant of triggers which may cause emotional dysregulation and find ways to assist students in letting out heightened emotions in an adaptive manner. In a school that uses screening or partners with mental health professionals, teachers may be made aware of known triggers from the onset. In schools without these, previous classroom teachers may pass along information, but it will mainly fall on classroom teachers to be observant of changes in behavior and mood and look for patterns. Wolpow et al. (2016) and Sporleder and Forbes (2019) suggest paying attention to triggers and body language of students can help teachers develop practical strategies for assisting students to notice and take control over their emotional state. Wolpow et al. (2016) advise teachers to have an open dialogue with students about their observations to develop an action plan for what students may do to regulate. Sporleder and Forbes (2019) recommend action plans for all students at the start of the school year; for example, students can create destressing choice boards on paint sample strips for quick reference when they recognize they are beginning to feel stressed. Many students will be unaware of their emotional changes, though they will be apparent to teachers especially if teachers make it consistent practice to have regular check-ins with students to gauge students' moods; then teachers may alert students with a signal or brief dialogue and allow time for destressing (Park, 2020). Practice with coping strategies helps students internalize them to improve functioning in the classroom and with others.

Traumatized children operate at a high level of arousal and fear, making it difficult for them to process information. Anything reminding a student of a trauma may trigger maladaptive behaviors. Crosby et al. (2018) warn educators that tone of voice and

physically touching students may elicit strong negative reactions. The best way to prevent triggers is to keep a calm tone; maintain consistency with predictable schedules, routines, limit-setting, procedures; and provide advanced warning and signals for transitions to help students know what to expect next which lessens fears and anxieties (Cole et al., 2013a; Wolpow et al. 2016; Sporleder & Forbes, 2019). Additionally, teachers may help by "alerting children to any loud noises (e.g., bells, fire alarms) before they occur; and giving children goal-directed tasks that involve movement (e.g., passing out papers)" to "help children who are aroused regulate their emotions" (Cole et al., 2013a, p. 54). Having consistently enforced limits is necessary for traumatized students to feel safe but encountering limits may also trigger students since they lessen students' ability to be in control. Wolpow et al. (2016) explains "A time-out can trigger feelings of abandonment. Ignoring or removing a student from a group can trigger fears of rejection. Discipline can trigger fears of inappropriate punishments" (p. 89). It is important to establish a classroom where students can trust the adults in charge and know they will be treated equitably and not fear repercussions of abuse or neglect.

**Social and emotional learning (SEL).** The core components of SEL are self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision-making, social awareness, and relationship skills (CASEL, 2020). Before students can focus on academic learning, they must be emotionally regulated and feel safe. The social, emotional, and cognitive processing areas of the brain work together, so all must be in a regulated state for learning to occur. Immordino-Yang et al. (2019) explain how the three sections of the brain critical for learning are enhanced through SEL: the Executive Control Network

helps with attention, emotions, and controlling impulses, which is enhanced by SEL

activities for self-regulation; the Default Mode Network is needed for comprehension,

conceptual understanding, creativity, and task-oriented behavior, which ties in with SEL

activities for empathy, meaning-making, and cause and effect thinking; the Salience

Network is responsible for determining importance, urgency, subjectivity, and relevance,

which is supported by SEL resilience building, goal-setting, and persisting through

challenging tasks.  CDCHU (2016) reinforces the idea that SEL strategies in conjunction

with brain-based tasks maximizes learning potential and helps children overcome stress.

A physically and emotionally safe classroom makes students feel valued for their

contributions and safe from retribution.  Teachers develop this space by "creating a

culture of acceptance and respect in this community of learners, focusing on building a

school and classroom culture where everyone is seen as having something significant to

offer and is encouraged and supported to do so" (Cole et al., 2013b, p. 23).  SEL provides

students with necessary emotional vocabulary and skills to understand and express

emotions in a manner that does not impede on the physical and emotional safety of

others, share thoughts constructively, and learn to empathize with others which

minimizes conflicts and builds healthy relationships (Hertel & Johnson, 2013; Sege &

Harper Browne, 2017).  Wolpow et al. (2016) suggest teaching students to respectfully

articulate their needs using Rosenberg's "Giraffe Talk": "When I observe…; I feel…;

Because I imagine… I want…/Would you please…" (p. 113) or the DEAR MAN

strategy: describe the situation, express feelings, assert wishes, reinforce positive

consequences, maintain your position, appear confident, and negotiate.  Teachers may

also use these methods to model assertiveness and express themselves, so students are more receptive to redirection. Using mindfulness is also effective for getting students in tune with their emotions, with the added benefits of increased awareness and concentration, improved academic performance and on-task behavior (Jennings et al., 2017), improved psychological well-being, an uptick in parasympathetic nervous system activity decreasing stress response causing freeze-flight-fight (Esch, Fricchione, & Stefano, 2003; Compton & Hoffman, 2019), and rebuilding of neural pathways damaged by toxic stress and trauma for increased resilience and coping ability (NCSEA, 2019).

Supportive and structured classrooms make students feel valued and safe from corporal punishments which is why restorative discipline practices discussed earlier in this chapter are important. TS teachers stress how maintaining order through specific procedures and rules contributes to students' personal safety and wellbeing since traumatized students may be accustomed to situations where rules and limits are arbitrary and harshly enforced at the whim of an adult versus those made with their positive regard in mind (Ristuccia, 2013; Wolpow et al., 2016). Having consistent, fair, and respectfully enforced procedures and limits enhances students' sense of belonging and self-worth since they experience being treated equitably and are shown they deserve a safe environment (Cole et al., 2013; Wolpow et al., 2016). Students need to be aware of procedures and safety plans teachers have in place to keep them safe from hurting others or themselves when they are in a dysregulated state while knowing they will still be treated with compassion while they are helped back to a regulated state (Wolpow et al., 2016). Frequent disruptions to the classroom from a teacher pausing instruction to help

103

dysregulated students is unfair to all students, so it is necessary that educators are proactive in addressing issues to prevent from being reactive and further escalating behaviors thus causing more stress and disruption to the learning environment since this contributes to a cycle of punishment that can further disrupt the student-teacher relationship (NCSEA, 2019).  Students who are prone to getting into a cycle of outbursts and disruptions can be taught to follow their safety plan before getting out of control.  A helpful addition to any safety plan is providing "a safe space" or "peace corner" where "Traumatized children who are prone to acting out feelings of aggression" may be free to go, so they do not "traumatize others or cause harm" as it is necessary for teacher to "address behavior that is out of control or unsafe" (Cole et al., 2013a, pp. 62-63). Sporleder and Forbes (2019) recommend calming areas have tactile objects to assist students in getting to a calm state, which works well in the younger grade levels; for older students, Wolpow et al. (2016) suggest something as simple as students being able to move to a spot near the teacher or to another desk that feels safer when stressed.  Over time, students' need for peace corners or following of a safety plan should decrease since they will build self-regulation skills through practicing regular SEL activities.  Educators must reinforce the whole school is a safe place by making sure abusive parents may not enter and the school is bully-free by being alert to conflicts arising between peers and interjecting immediately to ensure safety (Cole et al., 2013a).  TS schools establish safety from peer harassment and model healthy relationships through SEL activities to create a greater sense of belonging for all students.

**Creative expression.** Incorporating a variety of creative outlets into the school will provide more opportunities for students to express themselves, disclose traumas, heal pain, and feel proficient. Looking at students' creative modes of expression may help identify students who may benefit from tier two or three services since "Through the process of observing and analyzing the drawings of young children, insights can be gained as to the social/emotional, physical, and intellectual development of each child" (Farokhi & Hashemi, 2011, p. 2219). Visual and performing arts provide developmentally-appropriate communication tools that create equity for students who may struggle with more abstract verbal or written expression especially younger students, English Language Learners, and Exceptional Children since they breakdown linguistic and cross-cultural barriers and give voice to those who tend to feel voiceless (Simons & McCormack, 2007; Farokhi & Hashemi, 2011). Mansfield, Welton, and Halx (2018) provide an anecdote of Halx and Ortiz's 2011 study where a student unexpectedly responded through freestyle rap "…when the researcher engaged Alejandro and asked him to reflect on his emotional reaction to his school experience" (p. 19). Mansfield, et al. (2018) interpret this as an act which "enabled Alejandro to express his schooling experiences in a way that would not have occurred through conventional quantitative surveys or structured qualitative methods" (p. 21). The researchers did not deliberately seek creative means of expression; however, often those are the means through which students can express themselves best. By being open to different artistic forms of expression, school staff may uncover more about issues students are facing in their lives.

Engaging in arts helps students build on nonacademic strengths. TLPI encourages schools to have a host of creative and extracurricular activities such as theater, yoga, martial arts, and visual arts for students to engage in for building self-esteem and confidence, regulating emotions and behaviors, and having an area where students may excel, especially for those not academically gifted (Cole et al., 2013a). Compton and Hoffman (2019) describe more resilient children as being more likely to engage in hobbies; this may help them focus, distract from difficulties in life, and become a source of pride. Additionally, NCSEA (2019) states engaging in creative expression and activities can help repair neural pathways that are damaged by trauma and toxic stress. Izard (2016) also encourages the use of expressive writing and discusses how studies have shown benefits in releasing emotion and stress from trauma after only four consecutive days of 15-minute writing sessions where students write about a traumatic event they have had. Carello and Butler (2014) recognize multiple studies have shown physical and psychological benefits to therapeutic expressive writing, but studies also show how it heightens symptoms for those with moderate to severe trauma exposure and warn against requiring expressive writing. They stress providing opportunities for free write only, and never requiring disclosure of personal topics nor requiring students to turn in writing after journaling since it may be private. It is important that opportunities for creative expression are encouraged and offered, but not forced on students.

## Conclusion

Staff who take a TS approach to school consider the emotional and mental well-being of students through the perspective that all students have encountered or will

encounter some form of trauma or toxic stress in life.  Not all students will have

experienced the same traumas, nor will their reactions to their trauma be the same;

however, using a TS approach creates a culture and climate which is supportive and

fosters resiliency for everyone.  New research on resiliency focuses on asset-based

thinking for students impacted by trauma:

> Essentially, researchers have made a paradigm shift from studying what is
> "wrong" with "problem" students to the study of what is "right" with them.
> Resiliency research is the study of how some students, despite the stressors in
> their lives, manage to adapt, and in some cases, thrive... most of the dispositional
> characteristics associated with resiliency, and the coping skills needed to adapt to
> stressors, can be learned and supported. (Wolpow et al., 2016, p. 15)

A TS school reduces the impact of trauma and decreases maladaptive behaviors while

increasing adaptive behaviors; this allows students to be healthy physically, emotionally,

and mentally and creates a better working environment for staff.

School leaders can facilitate a TS school by making it a schoolwide effort by

providing ongoing professional development to strengthen the knowledge and abilities of

all staff who interact with students and families.  Specific TS practices and policies

researchers recommend school leaders implement include: fostering positive relationships

between staff and students; having a school schedule that includes SEL and physical

needs of students by allowing time for relaxation and fitness; maintaining order and

safety, but avoiding traditional reactive punishments in favor of restorative discipline

practices which help students obtain skills needed to improve behaviors; and supporting

students with more intensive needs through mental health programs or a referral system

for a higher level of care.  School leaders following TS practices and policies create an

atmosphere that is fair, understanding, and compassionate to the needs of students with ACEs and fosters increased learning for all students.

Schools cannot operate in isolation from the communities they serve. School leaders and staff must be aware of local contexts which contribute to issues students face which may hinder learning. There is no one single way of transforming neighborhoods to have lower ACEs. It takes great effort and dedication, along with a multi-faceted approach. It starts though with the school reaching out to form deep connections with all stakeholders – especially families and community members, for without their vested interest and support, the community will not improve. TS schools may offer educational workshops to provide opportunities to understand trauma, its effects, and learn ways to counter negative effects of toxic stress. Most importantly, schools can assist with connecting families to services and resources needed to thrive. Funding opportunities such as federal, state, and local grants can get additional monies for programs improving families and the community. Schools need to include families and community members throughout all processes to increase their collective efficacy and learn optimism, so they are not victims but are empowered to lift themselves and others up.

Within the classroom, teachers may use both academic and nonacademic-based strategies to empower students' learning and SEL proficiency. Teachers may improve students' academics by fostering an environment conducive to students feeling comfortable and supported in taking academic risks, utilize teaching methods beneficial for students with ACEs, have trauma-curriculum with empowering stories and activities, and make homework an equitable practice where students are encouraged to meet high

standards but not penalized for obstacles they may encounter within the home. Students with unmet SEL needs may not perform well academically which is why nonacademic strategies are equally important in a TS classroom. Teachers who minimize triggers create calming classrooms where students are less likely to have stress responses. Providing creative means of expressing themselves assists in students letting go of stress. Teaching students SEL methods and having safety plans help increase students' abilities to self-regulate and get along with peers thus creating a positive classroom environment benefiting all students. By establishing physically and emotionally safe and supportive classrooms, students will be less dysregulated and able to focus on learning.

CHAPTER IV

REVIEW OF VICARIOUS TRAUMA AND SECONDARY TRAUMATIC STRESS

This chapter is focused on how TS schools seek to minimize the impact of

vicarious trauma (VT) on staff and may promote vicarious posttraumatic growth (VPTG).

Caring for the traumas of others takes its toll on those in caregiver roles and may lead to

secondary traumatic stress (STS). Constantly thinking of traumas of students and

families and being in a perpetual state of reframing one's interactions in attempts to

mitigate effects of trauma and not trigger students is an exhausting mental and emotional

exertion. Providing supports within the workplace may lessen the impact of VT, build

resilience of teachers, and promote self-care and wellness. This allows school staff to

continue the challenging work of promoting a TS environment without the adverse

effects of STS and may even promote the benefit of VPTG.

**Dangers of Vicarious Trauma (VT) and Secondary Traumatic Stress (STS)**

To create a holistic TS school culture, staff exposure to VT must be addressed.

Blaustein (2013) notes a significant number of school staff are contending with their own

traumas in addition to VT which impacts their individual functioning; furthermore, "in

the case of school or community violence, entire systems may experience traumatic

stress, which likely takes a toll on the functioning of classrooms, schools, and larger

educational structures" (p. 4). Districts and schools are good at sending in crisis teams

after traumatic experiences affect the school or community; however, it is just as important to address VT on a regular basis. NCTSN (2016) describes VT as the result of ongoing exposure to working with others with trauma, not merely solitary events; therefore, efforts to combat it should be part of the daily functioning of the school environment. VT does not just impact classroom educators, school leaders, and counselors; all staff are vulnerable, especially support staff including paraprofessionals, bus drivers, receptionists, maintenance, and cafeteria workers since they often develop close relationships with children and families but lack training on how to process and handle interactions and situations involving trauma (ACF, n.d NCTSN, 2016). NCSEA (2019) states National Education Association members often complain of stress and low job satisfaction due to students, especially in underserved areas, having unmet needs schools lack supports for leaving staff overwhelmed with their effort to help these students at the detriment of time and attention to other students. MetLife's (2012) survey of 1,000 public K-12 educators reported 59% felt great stress and only 39% felt high job satisfaction (Markow, Macia, & Lee, 2013). Working hard yet feeling incompetent to meet the needs of all students, school staff often sacrifice their own wellbeing.

Constant exposure to VT can cause STS. The impacts of STS are just as vast and debilitating as primary trauma. People experiencing STS have the same biological responses as those with primary toxic stress as the "brain emits a fear response, releasing excessive cortisol and adrenaline that can increase heart rate, blood pressure, and respiration, and release a flood of emotions;" the danger is this "can manifest in mental and physical symptoms such as anger and headaches, or workplace behaviors like

missing meetings, lateness, or avoiding certain students" (Minero, 2017, para. 10).  In

addition to physiological reactions, Jaycox, Langley, and Dean (2009) add that students'

traumatic stories preoccupy the minds of educators to the point they dream about them,

develop sleep issues, and have trouble concentrating.  Symptoms of STS overlap the

criteria for posttraumatic stress disorder including intrusive symptoms, negative

cognitions, mood disturbance, avoidance, hyperarousal, and reactivity (Tsouloupas,

Carson, Matthews, Grawitch, & Barber, 2010).  These all contribute to increased

irritability, tendency to be easily startled, and educators becoming cynical since they feel

so overwhelmed, shut off their emotions, and become numb to the experiences of others

(Jaycox, Langley, & Dean, 2009).  Keeping educators effective requires addressing STS

since "Long-term, constant emotional distress can impair teachers' performance leading

to burnout" (Tsouloupas et al., 2010).  Oberle and Schonert-Reichl (2016) found

teachers' who self-reported high burnout levels also negatively impacted their students'

physiological stress regulation as those students had higher cortisol levels.  Eddy et al

(2020) studied 105 teachers and 1,681 K-3 students in 9 elementary schools and found

teachers reporting higher levels of STS were more likely to give office referrals resulting

in higher rates of students given ISS which prompted them to suggest schools go beyond

providing teachers with behavioral strategies and do more to support teacher well-being.

Worse still, Hupe and Stevenson (2019) discovered higher levels of STS make it less

likely for educators to report suspected child abuse and neglect.  Educators suffering STS

jeopardize their health and are less effective for students.

STS impacts the culture of the school if multiple staff members are experiencing STS or there has been systemic trauma within the organization or community served by the school.  Negative organizational effects are absenteeism, poor communication, avoidant behaviors, poor decision-making, low productivity, poor work quality, conflict amongst staff, and high turnover (ACF, n.d.; Alliance for Excellent Education, 2014). Wolpow et al. (2016) suggest school leaders seriously address STS as it is a top reason for turnover for professionals working with children which results in additional costs for schools, negative school culture, and lower educational quality.  The National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (2007) policy brief puts the cost of teacher attrition at approximately $7.3 billion annually as roughly half a million educators move or leave jobs.  Later, Sutcher, Darling-Hammond, and Carver-Thomas (2016) estimated inflation puts the cost over $8 billion and will continue to rise.  This is lost money which could be used to obtain more resources and implement services to directly assist students and families in need and alleviate issues leading to VT and STS. Additionally, low-SES schools experience a disproportionate amount of turnover – 50% higher than more affluent schools, and schools serving predominately students of color have a significant amount of turnover – 70% higher (Sutcher, Darling-Hammond, & Carver-Thomas, 2016).  These students especially need consistent and effective teaching as underserved populations experience a disproportionate amount of toxic stress and higher ACEs due to poverty, racism, and intergenerational trauma.

An important aspect of TS schools is adults modeling how to handle emotions and self-regulate.  Wolpow et al. (2016) ask a pertinent question: "If education professionals

themselves are barely coping and cannot bounce back from the challenges they face, how are they to sustain the strength needed to promote resiliency among their students?" (p. 45). Students need educators to be pillars of emotional strength, yet this is unrealistic given the stressors they face especially when suffering from STS as it leads to becoming pessimistic about their ability to improve circumstances, questioning their worldviews, and developing cynicism (NCTSN, 2016). Trying to maintain composure and keep positive working relationships is a struggle for many staff members exposed to VT.

## Vicarious Posttraumatic Growth (VPTG)

Despite the stark picture painted by the consequences of VT, with the right supports, it can have the positive outcome of Vicarious Posttraumatic Growth (VPTG). After hearing the traumas of others, people may have enhanced personal growth by appreciating life and relationships more, expanding their values, becoming more tolerant or open-minded, or developing a new awareness of themselves (Hyatt-Burkhart, 2014). VPTG can be fostered with strategies to combat STS. Tedeschi et al. (2018) found self-efficacy, strong social supports, and self-care positively correlated with enhanced well-being and predicted individual VPTG. VPTG may also be experienced by organizations which experience growth pertaining to greater long-term perspective, enhanced vision, stronger relationships, and interconnectedness after working together to overcome trauma; overall, having individuals and organizations experience VPTG is important for increasing job satisfaction and safeguarding against STS and potential burnout (Tedeschi et al., 2018). Establishing a supportive culture to combat VT and STS may facilitate the likelihood of staff and schools achieving VPTG.

**School Efforts to Mitigate Secondary Traumatic Stress**

VT and STS are natural occurrences that arise from the interpersonal relationships formed while working with students and families who experience trauma. Fortunately, there are strategies schools may implement to offset the toll they take. Sweeney and Caringi (2020) stress the necessity of an "all-in" approach by ensuring all stakeholders including staff, school board members, volunteers, and community partners have ongoing training regarding trauma to include VT and STS. Borntrager et al. (2012) and Sweeney and Caringi (2020) recommend supporting staff with STS with an MTSS model similar to the model recommended for supporting students with trauma. Tier one universal supports are professional development; alignment of policies, procedures, and priorities; and proactive measures for preventing STS like encouraging self-care, positive peer relationships, and culture building. Tier two offers targeted support to individuals demonstrating signs of STS which may include a buddy system, formal peer support, self-care plans, and supervisor supports. Tier three is for those suffering from STS who need intensive interventions such as mental health support, reduced workload, assistance with implementing self-care, or a leave of absence. Incorporating proactive approaches to destigmatize and mitigate STS into the school culture emphasizes the importance of staff wellbeing and helps staff regulate their emotions thus decreasing stress.

Schools may implement specific strategies to serve as protective factors to prevent or reduce STS. Educators using adaptive coping strategies reflect feeling more positive emotions which leads to increased resiliency, greater engagement, and higher performance (Gu & Day, 2007; Chang, 2013). The following sections focus on

leadership efforts, peer support, self-care, and mindfulness. I discuss these key strategies based on their prevalence in the literature and ease of implementation. Leadership, peer support, and self-care were the three most powerful protective factors found in multiple research studies and advocated for by national organizations providing toolkits for educators and organizations. I discuss mindfulness due to increasing popularity and ease of execution even though to date only a few studies show its positive impact on STS.

**Leadership Efforts**

School leaders set the tone of the school and facilitate an environment conducive to reducing STS. Similar to the idea of screening to identify supports for students, Griffin, Ford, and Wilson (2013) recommend schools collect information about VT exposure and STS symptoms staff are experiencing to determine how STS is impacting both staff and the larger school structure. This information can help inform next steps for professional development (PD) and determine which strategies to implement. Another possible first step is to use the tool, *Secondary Traumatic Stress Informed Organization Assessment*, provided for free by NCTSN (2016) to assist schools in recognizing protective factors already in place and determining which areas to bolster for further combating STS. NCTSN also provides free online resources and webinars for PD on how to prevent and reduce STS by emphasizing strong support structures which destigmatize getting help and promoting self-care for all staff. School leaders may help staff feel safe admitting the toll VT takes and not feel embarrassed when seeking assistance. Pataky et al. (2019) stress for supervisors to acknowledge to staff that struggling is part of the process for personal growth, so they are not afraid to seek help.

When implementing PD for staff, it is important for staff to feel empowered. Hydon, Wong, Langley, Stein, and Kataoka (2015) explain the five components of the U.S. Department of Education's strength-based STS training which helps school staff recover from traumatic incidents by destigmatizing STS and empowering them to act: 1) Conduct an SEL icebreaker to share feelings people have experienced following a traumatic event without discussing the event.  2) Provide knowledge of VT, STS, and burnout with symptoms to look for in oneself and others.  3) Destigmatize the impact of STS by having presenters, leaders, and staff share personal stories with one another. Here the trauma may be named or not; the focus is on the STS or VT and how it impacted one's life.  4) Discuss the importance of self-care and support participants with crafting detailed wellness plans.  5) Lead participants through Psychological First Aid, a peer support model, to feel empowered to support colleagues experiencing STS.  The benefit of an asset-based PD model like this is the empowerment of staff to combat STS which may assist in the benefit of experiencing VPTG through the process.

School leaders need to recognize their susceptibility to STS and be role models of countering it.  Pataky et al. (2019) discussed when they conducted ACEs screening for students, all staff, including school leaders, were supervised and supported by licensed social workers and psychologists since all staff benefit from feedback and support, especially when encountering VT.  NCSTN (2016) promotes leaders modeling proper self-care by emphasizing the importance of boundaries between work and home by not expecting staff to do homework after meetings or sending and expecting email responses outside of work hours.  The STS toolkit provided by ACF (n.d.) suggests leaders create

117

an environment normalizing effects of VT through open dialogue where leaders show

vulnerability when engaged in conversations, so staff are comfortable in sharing their

own STS and voicing needs.  ACF (n.d.) emphasizes staff should feel it is acceptable to

take advantage of resources, including mental health support and Employee Assistance

Programs.  Acknowledging VT creates a compassionate culture showing staff are

valuable and maximizes the ability of all staff, including school leaders, to be supported

in contending with their STS.

**Peer Support**

An important workplace support is having a strong network of collegial support.

Interestingly, in a study of 229 school staff members in 6 urban, rural, and Native

American reservation schools, Borntrager et al. (2012) found educators' personal trauma

histories did not correlate with their STS levels; however, the level of peer support did.

High resilience was demonstrated by those who had strong peer support networks, but in

schools where leaders failed to encourage peer support, educators had high levels of STS

symptoms; thus, Bontrager et al. (2012) recommend peer-pairing and activities that

promote collegial support be added into schools.  The U.S. Department of Education's

Psychological First Aid is a peer support model that outlines five steps people may follow

to assist distressed colleagues: listen, protect, connect, model, teach.  Hydon et al. (2015)

specify what each step entails starting with *listen*.  Staff are encouraged to approach peers

with genuine concern and willingness to listen without judgment or trying to solve the

other person's issue; it is important to just validate the other person's feelings.  Next, is to

*connect* since oftentimes staff experiencing STS feel withdrawn.  Colleagues can reach

out and connect them back to the school community or provide a referral to professional resources. *Model* is where colleagues resist the temptation to feed into STS by modeling calm, optimistic, and resilient behavior. This is when coworkers may begin to problem-solve with the distressed staff member to generate ideas for overcoming adversities. Lastly, *teach* is when coworkers are encouraged to discuss STS, normalize it, and role-play or brainstorm ideas for addressing symptoms. Making these five steps routine practice, coworkers may look out for one another and ensure no one suffers STS alone.

School leaders can adopt the model above and make peer support routine practice within the workday, so people are not isolated to their individual spaces in the building. Educators interviewed by Minero (2017) stressed the importance of peer support for not feeling incompetent since staff recognize their colleagues also experience significant stress. It is important for school leaders to acknowledge peer support is not just for new teachers with mentoring programs but integral for all staff, including veteran teachers, support staff, and administrators. Sweeney and Caringi (2020) recommend school leaders create buddy systems and have "pinch-hitters." School leaders can facilitate a formal buddy class system matching up classes in close proximity where teachers look after one another, for example, watching each other's class when a break is needed, taking a challenging student or two for a little while, and assisting when there is a substitute by checking in and monitoring. Buddy systems work best with manageable class sizes and partnered teachers who have shared expectations. A "pinch-hitter" is a certified in-house roving educator who serves in a multitude of capacities by assisting in classrooms as needed and relieving classroom teachers when in need of a break.

Although it would incur some costs, using a pinch-hitter would be especially helpful for providing tier two and three support to those teachers feeling the strain of STS. ACF (n.d.), NCTSN (2016), and NCBH (2017) all stress that delegating duties, having peer support, and asking for help are necessary for those experiencing STS. All staff must concede to needing help at times and be willing to both give and take assistance.

Feelings of self-efficacy assist in negating STS. ACF (n.d.), NCTSN (2016), and NCBH (2017) underscore the importance of assisting colleagues experiencing STS with creating meaning in their lives since staff will feel a greater sense of job satisfaction and purpose when their accomplishments are recognized, and they are provided opportunities to feel successful and have a positive impact on others. Peer support also promotes optimism by strategizing together alternative strategies for working with students whose traumas have made it difficult to reach them (NCBH, 2017). By addressing STS through a team effort, staff may develop proactive strategies for typical stressful interactions with students; for example, "counting to five, visualizing a calming place, or responding with an opposite action—like talking to a student quietly when you want to yell" (Minero, 2017, para. 20). By creating an environment conducive to peer support, staff will feel uplifted and empowered to combat STS for themselves and others.

**Self-Care**

Educators feel the constant pull to take home papers, lesson plan, make hands-on activities, contact parents, tutor, research best practices, do afterhours PD, complete administrative paperwork and tasks, volunteer for school-related activities, obtain resources for the students, as well as meet the demands of personal lives. As Minero

(2017) acknowledges, "It can be hard to leave work at work," but "teachers need to create clear boundaries between work and home life" (para. 26). While this is not easy for educators when there is so much to accomplish, making time for oneself is important for being effective as compassionate caregivers. Schools may assist in encouraging self-care outside of the workplace by making manageable class sizes and workloads with reasonable deadlines, scheduling time during the school day to manage administrative tasks and paperwork, and providing tools and resources to complete tasks efficiently, so staff may leave work at school and enjoy their personal lives.

TS schools directly address destressing techniques with staff since often adults, feeling pressed for time, ignore their self-care needs, but "experts insist that it's necessary to develop long-term self-care practices—and stick to them—to build up your overall well-being and resilience" (Minero, 2017, para. 25). Hydon et al. (2015) showcase how presenters of the U.S. Dept. of Education's STS training assist participants individually to develop comprehensive self-care plans that are most likely to be followed; for example, if someone writes they will eat healthier, they need to elaborate on what healthier means, which meals, how many days a week, and for how long. Self-care plans encourage individual responsibility; however, schools are also accountable for incorporating self-care into the work schedule to model and begin routine habits. Minero (2017) showcased how one TS high school builds in regular monthly wellness where employees support one another in self-care goals including "hiking, biking, going to the gym, or even learning to knit" (para. 16). By creating regular workplace destressing activities and counting them as PD time, staff are forced to disengage from work and engage in self-care moments.

Having employees pause from work is like giving students brain breaks in the classroom. These breaks allow for more productivity afterward and stimulate greater joy and satisfaction. Schools must consider the self-care needs of staff when building schedules to allow for adequate restroom breaks, a proper lunch break, planning time, and other needed supports. NCBH (2017) recommends staff take breaks to relax, not to continue working and engage in one nourishing activity daily; and for supervisors to walk around checking in on how people are doing without evaluating; celebrate individual and team successes; build staff competency with having tools, resources, and relevant PD; empower and participate in staff support groups; and provide regular teambuilding activities such as staff game nights, tailgating, bowling parties, etc. as positive ways of facilitating collective self-care while building peer social supports. Self-care techniques, stressbusting activities, and learning strategies for handling stress can be incorporated into every Professional Learning Community (PLC) and PD (NCBH, 2017). By engaging in regular self-care and destressing in the workplace, staff may feel the benefits of these activities and carry these benefits forward into their personal lives.

Exposure to students' traumas and the stresses that come with the school environment cannot be avoided; however, educators can learn to focus on positives, limit exposure to negativity outside of the workplace, and use self-care. NCBH (2017) provides a good philosophy for school staff to follow: learn to say no to overwhelming tasks and yes to rejuvenating activities. Following this simple principle provides better balance in life. ACF (n.d.) provides an extensive list of self-care strategies in their STS toolkit. These include: relaxation techniques, time in nature, creative expression,

physical self-care, journaling, reflecting and problem solving, asserting oneself, strong

interpersonal skills, good time management, coping strategies, professional support, and

support groups. Self-care is a highly personalized endeavor based on the needs and

interests of the individual. Most important is for schools to stress the importance of staff

valuing their mental, emotional, and physical health by engaging in these activities and

create a structure and culture that allows staff to do so without being stigmatized for

taking a moment for themselves.

**Relaxation and Mindfulness**

Investing time in destressing is important for decreasing STS and improving

health and wellbeing. Relaxation is crucial since STS lends itself to less self-care and

negative lifestyle factors. Many prevalent diseases are related to lifestyle issues and

stress: "more than 80% of coronary heart disease and about 70% of colon cancer cases

are potentially preventable" (Esch et al., 2003, p. 29). Esch, Fricchione, and Stefano

(2003) researched the impact of relaxation response (RR) techniques such as relaxation

exercises, mindfulness, yoga, and meditation on various diseases and found RR assists

fighting off immunological diseases, combats growth of malignant tumors, reduces

inflammation, prevents and reduces hypertension and some other cardiovascular diseases,

and decreases symptoms for neurodegenerative diseases like Alzheimer's and other

mental disorders. Facilitating and encouraging staff to practice RR can minimize STS

effects and have healthier employees with less absenteeism.

Additionally, RR helps staff recognize and learn how to regulate their emotions

for deescalating stressful situations. Staff who regulate their emotions may serve as

coregulators – modeling and teaching SEL to students for more positive social interactions thus lowering stress levels for staff and students. Jennings, Snowberg, Coccia, and Greenberg (2011) describe mindfulness as self-regulation of attention focusing only on your emotions and thoughts in the moment with non-judgmental awareness – keeping your mind open and accepting of emotions and thoughts you experience. Mindfulness activities enhance self-awareness by giving people insight into thoughts and feelings. Once aware of what they do and why, people can self-regulate better. School staff often interact with dysregulated students who exhibit maladaptive behaviors. Using mindfulness in these intense situations may help staff remain calm and regulated, thus deescalating interactions. Gold et al. (2010), Jennings et al. (2011), and Jennings et al. (2017) found promising results in their studies using mindfulness with urban educators. Gold et al. (2010) conducted an 8-week course with ten educators selected due to reporting elevated work-related stress. Participants identified the cause of their stress and goal for reducing that stress, such as the problem of taking on too much with a goal of better time management and learning to say no. At the course's conclusion, Gold et al. (2010) found "on average, participants reported that they had progressed 60% of the way to their main goals" (p. 186). Within a TS environment, educators could be encouraged within peer support groups to identify a main issue they are having and develop a goal to alleviate some of the stress; then mindfulness PD could help staff achieve their focus and retrain their behavior to obtain their goals. If done over a longer time, they may see greater success or address multiple issues to meet more goals. Jennings et al. (2011) conducted two pilot studies, one with urban educators and the other

with suburban/ semi-rural educators.  Urban teachers were concerned by the lack of

support to address the high academic, behavioral, and mental health needs of their

students.  After conducting five six-hour sessions on mindfulness, 81% of the urban

educators noticed an increase in their self-awareness and 69% reported improved student-

teacher relationships.  Additional improvements Jennings et al. (2011) noted were

"broadening their awareness of their emotions, emotional triggers, and their distress level

in their classrooms and in their personal lives" (p. 43).  These results are promising for

meeting needs of students with trauma backgrounds, especially the improvement of

relationships.  Unfortunately, Jennings et al. (2011) did not have promising results in the

suburban/semi-rural school district with student teachers and their mentor teachers.  At

the start of the study, these educators reported more positive relationships with students,

district support, and less at-risk students than the urban teachers.  While 88% of these

participants felt mindfulness was important for in-service programs, none reported any

classroom changes or relationship building as a result of mindfulness training stating,

"the district they work in already employs a level of community building that left little

room for improvement, and the children they work with rarely present challenging

behaviors" (p. 45).  This shows how educators' needs vary based on students' needs and

school culture.  In the urban environment where teachers were under enormous stress, felt

unsupported, and had students with high levels of needs, mindfulness helped them to

regroup and get themselves, their classrooms, and their relationships with students

regulated.  Jennings et al. (2017) conducted a larger follow-up study providing

mindfulness training to 224 teachers in 36 urban elementary schools which showed

positive results with participants reporting increases in "well-being (88%) and self-awareness (96%) and many (63%) also indicated feeling less job stress as a result of the program." Additionally, 86% of participants felt they could "manage classroom behaviors effectively and compassionately" and 91% were "better able to establish and maintain supportive relationships" with their students (p. 1021). For staff or schools with higher STS, mindfulness may be impactful and can be a low to no-cost strategy staff may employ to help stay emotionally regulated under the pressures of the school environment.

## Conclusion

The strategies in this chapter all contribute to building staff's resilience. Resiliency is crucial to sustain the challenge of working with students and families experiencing trauma and minimize STS, so staff do not burnout and/or quit due to stress. Resilience is an interplay of risk and protective factors (PFs) which can limit or build ability to persevere through adversities. Beltman, Mansfield, and Price (2011) discovered four key areas from their systematic review of research on teacher resiliency: risk factors, challenges, individual PFs, and contextual PFs.

Three greatest risk factors were educators having low confidence in their abilities, feeling unable or having difficulty asking for help, and experiencing a conflict between personal beliefs for what is best for students versus required practices (Beltman, Mansfield, & Price, 2011). Increasing educator confidence is less about educators having all the solutions and more about being in a supportive atmosphere where they do not have to constantly prove themselves and are free to try innovative strategies without criticism or comparison to peers or an unobtainable ideal. Staff in TS schools collaboratively try

new ideas and build on strengths.  Seeking help is inherent to a TS environment where staff and student success are collaborative efforts involving strong support networks.  All schools must follow mandates which may not always be developmentally or emotionally friendly for students like high-stakes testing; however, leaders and staff in a TS school establish an environment that tries to mitigate the stress of those mandates, so educators will not have to feel they are going against students' best interests.

The greatest challenges faced by educators according to Beltman et al. (2011), in order of frequency are: 1) classroom management of disruptive students, 2) inability to meet needs of disadvantaged students, 3) unsupportive leadership and heavy workload including non-teaching duties, and 4) lack of resources and parental support.  TS schools do a lot to mitigate these challenges and reduce stress.  Supportive leadership is crucial since they facilitate ongoing training and follow through for handling disruptions and behavioral concerns, can reduce workload and streamline paperwork, are the key to maintaining positive community partnerships and relations, and sustain a TS environment through policies and practices.  Restorative practices minimize issues over time and remind educators to not take behaviors personally.  Peer and supervisor supports help create a positive climate and culture.  Mindfulness empowers educators and support self-regulation.  TS practices and partnerships with families and communities alleviate issues with staff feeling inept at meeting the needs of students and their families.

Individual PFs are positive aspects people have versus contextual PFs are organizational factors which foster resilience.  Beltman et al. (2011) found a multitude of positive individual PFs of resilient teachers: altruistic and intrinsic motivation for

127

teaching, self-efficacy, tenacity, belief in ability to make a difference, strong social

networks, holding high expectations for students, knowing students, supporting student

success, problem-solving, help-seeking, self-reflection, and self-care. A TS school

culture and climate may foster and encourage these, so they become habits for everyone.

Contextual PFs are directly related to school culture and include strong and caring

leadership, mentor and peer support, and positive student-teacher relationships (Beltman

et al., 2011). All of these are fostered through a TS school culture, are part of efforts to

combat STS, and are essential for experiencing VPTG. Interestingly, Beltman et al.

(2011) found positive PFs had greater influence than negative factors which shows staff

can cope with adversity if sustained with ongoing positive experiences. This is promising

for educators in schools working with students experiencing distress as it is impossible to

avoid negativities; however, with enough positive elements such as strong leadership,

peer support, self-care, and relaxation techniques like mindfulness, educators will

triumph through the challenges and avoid consequences of VT.

CHAPTER V

METHODS

Trauma is a contemporary issue which is becoming more of a talking point in education as its long-term effects are becoming better understood. The Public School Forum of NC's NC Resilience and Learning Project (NC R&LP) expanded from its pilot year, 2017-2018, in three schools in two school districts to thirty-seven schools in nine districts by 2019-2020 with introductory trainings offered in eleven additional districts. To have an in-depth understanding of this rapidly expanding initiative, I initially planned to complete an ethnographic study by spending a year in a school partnering with NC R&LP; however, COVID-19 prevented that possibility, so I reframed my research to a remote-friendly basic qualitative study. The purpose of this research was to gain knowledge of NC R&LP including how it addresses the deficit nature of trauma; how trauma screening is addressed; logistics for the training, implementation, and support of TS practices and policies; knowledge of which TS practices and policies are most emphasized; how VT and STS are managed; and how COVID-19 has impacted the initiative. To gain understanding of these areas, I conducted a document analysis; semi-structured interviews; and was a participant in webinars, a conference, and NC R&LP's learning platform. Throughout the process, I kept a reflexive journal and applied a theoretical framework of the positive psychology principles inherent to TS schools (as discussed in chapter one) to make sense of the information I encountered

## Research Questions

1. Given trauma is a negative construct, how can educators avoid deficit-based thinking when addressing trauma?

2. How are trauma screening, implementation of trauma-sensitive practices, and mitigating vicarious trauma addressed and supported by the NC R&LP?

3. How has COVID-19 impacted NC R&LP now and going forward?

## Methodology

My "how" questions were best answered by analyzing relevant documents, conducting semi-structured interviews, and interacting online as a participant. By first conducting the document analysis, I had a wealth of information, so I was able to go into interviews seeking understanding of how pieces of the framework fit together and inquire about more nuanced facets of the initiative. Attending webinars, an online conference, and exploring the learning platform allowed me to have a wider perspective and richer understanding. Collecting and integrating multiple methods and sources of data collection allowed me to triangulate data for a more complete picture of this initiative. Harrison (2018) discusses the importance of triangulation for identifying multiple existing realities and clarifying meanings of interpretations to make empirical data less subjective despite messiness of the lived world. Finding common themes cutting across the data from the different methods added depth and trustworthiness to my findings.

## Document Analysis

I began document analysis before interviews to get foundational knowledge which helped inform my interview questions. I began by exploring NC R&LP's website. On

there, I first read the mission and vision statement then downloaded, printed, and read

through each of the linked articles and documents.  I signed up for NC R&LP's monthly

newsletter, *Resilience Reader*, and read through previous editions archived on the site

beginning with the first, April 2019.  The newsletters consisted of a feature article by NC

R&LP, typically a featured School of the Month, which I printed and added to my

documents for more in-depth review.  The newsletters had an additional section called

"Resilience in the News" which were articles and information not directly mentioning the

NC R&LP, so they did not add to the knowledge I was seeking for my document

analysis; however, there were some articles with information I added to pertinent areas in

my review of the literature.  The "Resources and Opportunities" section of the newsletter

informed me of their webinars to sign up for and online offerings both directly and

indirectly related to their work, but also did not add to my document analysis section.

Fortunately, it was brought to my attention in the second interview that I should have also

explored the Public School Forum's website since it had more of the foundational

documents and information showing why the NC R&LP was formed.  I then went to the

Publications tab on the Public School Forum's website homepage and began exploring

those documents.  There were many articles and reports pertinent to the foundations of

the framework such as the Study Group XVI report and early press releases.  There were

also additional reports, articles, and documents such as *Top 10 Education Issues* reports

and *Educational Primer* resources which referenced the ongoing work of NC R&LP

which I added to my document analysis; others had supporting information on relevant

topics that added to other areas of my dissertation such as statistics on mental health for NC youth which I added to my literature review in chapter three.

Ultimately, I selected thirty-six relevant documents specifically discussing NC R&LP or directly laying the foundation for the model before its inception, such as the Study Group XVI report. Of these thirty-six documents, three of them were used only for background information which added to the overview of the Public School Forum of NC, Study Group XVI, and/or NC R&LP sections in chapter one and/or to literature review chapters. Thirty-three documents added to data collection for the findings.

**Recruiting Key Informants for Interviews**

I made initial contact with a NC R&LP coordinator by email and a follow up phone call in 2019 when beginning my dissertation proposal to see if staff would be receptive to me conducting my dissertation research on the framework before I became invested in the idea. The positive reception I received encouraged me to proceed with this research. I selected people to interview based on their integral knowledge of NC R&LP. I used the project's website to find contact information for staff members and a researcher at Duke who is partnered with the initiative. I sent emails to five individuals requesting their participation and provided an overview of the purpose of those interviews (see appendix A). I also attached a consent form for their review which provided more details and could answer questions they may have (see appendix B) and encouraged them to call or email with additional questions. The individual who I had contacted previously was the first to respond back, and we setup an interview date. Two other individuals responded back with additional questions about my research, so I

answered the questions they had and provided a more in-depth overview.  We then setup

interview dates in follow-up emails; one individual also replied with documents to assist

my research.  A fourth individual graciously declined and referred me to another

individual (one of the three who had already agreed), and the fifth individual indirectly

responded through one of the interviewees that she felt the other person was the more

pertinent person to speak with.  Ultimately, three of the five individuals agreed to

interviews: a director, coordinator, and researcher referred to in the findings and

discussion as Emma, Maria, and Anna (in no particular order to preserve anonymity).

**Semi-Structured Interviews**

My interviews were with those who are most knowledgeable of the NC R&LP.

These interviews took place virtually due to social distancing protocols of COVID-19.

First, I interviewed the director who was there in the initial stages of the project.  She

spoke to foundational questions about goals, background, funding, initial implementation,

and development of partnerships.  She also provided insight into logistics of the

framework with the training aspect, how they support schools, materials they use, and

characteristics of TS schools.  Additionally, she gave insight on how the model has been

evolving, future plans, and the impact of COVID-19.  This information helped me to

verify the background information I provide in chapter one, while also contributing

significantly to the findings.  In this interview, I discovered the partnering researcher who

is studying the impact of NC R&LP had actually been part of Public School Forum's

Study Group XVI which prompted its formation; knowing this allowed me to adjust my

interview questions.  The interview with the researcher reinforced much of the

information from the first interview while also providing more background information on what led to the creation of the NC R&LP and its continued monitoring and adjustments.  Lastly, I interviewed a project coordinator.  Before working with NC R&LP, she was a licensed clinical practitioner at a school partnering with the framework during its pilot; thus, she provided an interesting perspective as both someone who had worked where it was implemented and someone who helps implement the model into schools through trainings, coaching, and technical support.  All three interviews were focused on understanding the logistics better while also trying to glean information related to the three key focus areas of my literature review to discover the initiative's take on trauma screening, how they encourage schools to implement TS practices, what those practices are, and how they address vicarious trauma for staff in partnering schools.

I used a semi-structured protocol (see appendices C-E for each interview protocol) as there were specific aspects of NC R&LP which I sought knowledge on, but I also wanted flexibility to address additional topics as they arose and to conduct the interview in a conversational manner allowing respondents to direct the conversation. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) state a semi-structured format "allows the researcher to respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic" (p. 111).  I found having the questions beforehand helped remind me of key aspects I wanted to ensure I covered; however, due to the interviews taking conversational path, I only needed to directly ask a handful of my original questions since interviewees naturally addressed the others.  One respondent requested the questions by email to look through and know key talking points beforehand.  This interview was more

time efficient and targeted than the other two but still generated the input sought and additional topics arose in conversation.  When I emailed transcripts for member checking, I also sent follow-up questions for additional clarification as needed (see appendix F). Each interviewee provided follow-up responses via email and approved their transcripts.

**Being a Participant**

NC R&LP began a webinar series for 2020-2021.  I attended two webinars I found to be of most interest to get more information on areas of NC R&LP for which I sought more input.  From the three fall webinars, I choose "Trauma-Informed Discipline Practices" to get an in-depth look at discipline in a TS environment.  I did not attend "Befriending the Nervous System for Regulation and Resilience" as I had a wealth of information on the impact of trauma and did not see benefit in delving into specifics on trauma brain science as it is a small part of what NC R&LP does at the beginning of training to hook people into their larger focus on resilience.  I also did not attend "Self-Compassion: A Heartfelt Response to Stress" as this went into specifics of individual self-care, and I was more interested in seeing how the school structure could promote self-care which is why I attended the spring webinar "Collective Care: Generating a School Culture that Promotes Staff Wellness."  I was unable add additional information from the other three spring webinars as they took place after I submitted a full draft of my dissertation for review.  The other three spring webinars encompass a variety of topics including: building relationships, racial equity, teaching SEL, and having difficult conversations with students.  I also attended Public School Forum's 2021 *Eggs and Issues*.  Typically, this is an annual in-person event where stakeholders across NC get

together for presentations, guest speaker panels, and discussion of key topical education

issues over breakfast.  Due to COVID-19, it was a virtual event which included an

opening presentation on the Forum's recently publicized Top Issues of 2021, a panel with

experts discussing the impact of COVID-19, a second panel focused on equity, then

breakout small group discussions, and closing remarks.  Lastly, I explored the online

learning platform, *Participate*, which NC R&LP began using in 2019.  As of January

2021, the platform had a discussion feed with 24 prompts; a resources area of articles,

videos, assessment tools, etc. inside three folders: 1) "Collective Self-Care," 2) "Trauma-

Informed School Leadership," and 3) "Creating Trauma-Sensitive Schools;" and two

courses: 1) *Self-Care as a Critical Component of Trauma-Informed Schools*, and 2) a

course bundle *Creating Trauma-Sensitive Schools*.  Within the courses are embedded

links to applicable resources in the folders and stopping points for reflecting and

contributing to discussion posts which are also embedded links.  The courses are meant to

provide Resilience Team members with in-depth training to do independently or as a

group.  The eight-week introduction course for *Creating a Trauma-Sensitive School* is

highly structured with NC R&LP staff consulting with participants every two weeks to

help guide them through the material and have discussions on how the information

pertains to their school, so they may develop plans for going forward.

## Data Analysis

In this section, I outline how I analyzed the documents, semi-structured

interviews, and my online participation.  Based on my literature reviews, I had three

specific areas of focus going into data collection (screening, TS characteristics, and

vicarious trauma (VT). After reviewing data, I renamed VT (deficit-based) as staff wellness (asset-based) since the data I collected made very little reference to VT but I had substantial data on staff wellness which is vital to mitigating VT's effects. I added background information, policy/funding, and program logistics too as these additional categories emerged as important for sorting information (although background information and policy/funding only proved useful for adding to my overview in chapter one, not the findings). I had COVID-19 as a distinct category, but while axial coding its data, I realized it overlapped into program logistics, TS characteristics, and staff wellness, so I deleted that category and added that data into its respective categories as applicable. McGarry and Mannik (2017) discuss how research is often an iterative process of continually reviewing data collected and making nonlinear connections as it follows an inductive nature where themes will emerge from the data. I thought being organized and extensive with my literature review would result in very little adjustment with my broad a priori categories for analyzing data, but I quickly realized while sorting and synthesizing that I would need to revise and update my initial coding schema.

**Document Analysis**

For each of the thirty-six document I analyzed, I printed them out and took notes in the margins using open, inductive coding to make meaning of the information. I kept a running journal entry noting topics as they emerged. Reflecting on my list of topics, I was able to group some together, and it helped me to adjust my preplanned four priori codes to better reflect the data that was collected. I settled on six categories which fully captured the key topics of the data collected: background information, policy/funding,

program logistics, screening, TS school characteristics, and staff wellness. There was a

fair amount of data which related specifically to students of color and low SES students

which I did not use unless it also directly mentioned trauma. I did this to keep the scope

of my research narrowed to the topic of trauma which disproportionally effects students

of color and low-SES status, but I did not want to expand too far past a trauma-specific

focus. Next, I created a digital table to collect and organize direct quotes which stood out

the most from the texts and my paraphrasing of key information (see Figure 5 for an

example from page one of my chart).

| Source | background & goals | program logistics | Policy/funding | screening | TSS characteristics | staff wellness |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. 2018 NC Education primer: critical education issues in NC (given to legislators as a resource for understanding the needs and issues for public schools in NC with specific data and resources for them) | Source 1. 2015 Study Group XVI's recommendations led to the Forum's R&L P. *Leandro v. State* 1995 case parents from 5 low-wealth school districts lawsuit against state for unequal access to educational opportunities- wealthier districts joined lawsuit saying state doesn't adequately provide for extra costs of education for low-wealth and exceptional students. 1997 NC Supreme Court ruled all children have right to a "sound basic education" w/ ability to read, write, speak English and sufficient knowledge of math, science, geography, history, economic and political systems; academic and voc. skills needed to engage in post-secondary or vocational training and to compete on equal basis for further education or employment 2002 lower court added right to competent & well-trained | Source 1. "Broad training for all staff fosters unifying language, understanding, and expectations to promote climate and culture change, and helps staff recognize the neurobiological foundations of students' disruptive behaviors." Creation of resilience team as school-based steering committee and provide on-site coaching "to help staff go beyond training and awareness and actually implement trauma-sensitive, whole school strategies and create change." (p. 15 trauma section) "One teacher in one of the pilot schools shared: 'I think we're all just trying to think about the reasons and trying to figure out why things are happening, not necessarily punishing for an action. | Source 1. Title I ~1.5 million children in NC are in schools of 40% or more low SES status qualifying for funds. must use funds to provide "effective means of improving student achievement and include strategies to support parental involvement" (federal role in education section p. 2) National Title I Distinguished Schools program recognizes schools that provide opportunities for all students to achieve, family & community partnership, research-based instructional strategies, and standards-based teaching, sustained research-based PD, and innovation and modeling for other schools. Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 aims to decrease achievement gap and provide equal access to education with high standards. NC ESSA (every students succeeds act) plan includes school improvement through school support through PD in MTSS as a critical area Promoting student resilience | Source 1. N/A | Source 1. 3 pilot schools began using calm down corners in each classroom, restorative discipline practices including ISS reflection sheet, check-in/check-out buddy program with staff and students with highest referral numbers, encouraging positive and stronger staff-student relationships quote from teacher in pilot school: "I think we're all just trying to think about the reasons and trying to figure out why things are happening, not necessarily punishing for an action. So there are consequences, but [it's also about] looking at *What's the problem, [and asking] how can I help you?*" (p. 15 trauma section) p. 16-17- "73% of disciplinary action is directed towards males" & 57% of short--term suspensions are given to black students. (6) only 45 of 115 school districts met nurse-to- | Source 1: N/A |

Figure 5: Page one of my document analysis data organization chart. An example of how I organized data into six categories.

Once I read through and typed up relevant information from each document, I cutout

each category of the chart and grouped the data. The information was labeled with the

source and applicable page numbers to ensure proper citations later. I used axial coding

within each of the six categories to group coded sections into additional thematic

categories depending on "the meanings made explicit by the participants [documents]

themselves" (Mirriam & Tisdell, 2016, 211). The background information and the

policy/funding sections did not yield strong themes, but they did add significantly to my

ability to improve the section titled Background Context in my chapter one to provide an

overview and needed context for the initiative being researched. The remaining four

categories: program logistics, screening, TS school characteristics, and staff wellness

were the focus of my findings and discussion section as they were rich with valuable

themes. I showcase what emerged in my findings and discussion chapters. I sought to

understand the themes in relationship to what I discovered through my literature review.

All of this I filtered through a theoretical lens of positive psychology and reflected on

how the four subjective "I's" [discussed in detail later in the reflexive journal section]

which emerged in my journaling informed my interpretations.

**Interviews**

I conducted three semi-structured interviews via video on the Go-to-Meeting

application. I recorded the interviews, and the Go-to-Meeting application created

computer-generated transcripts. The transcripts were full of errors, so I used the spilt

screen feature on the computer to watch the videos while following along and correcting

the transcripts. I paused and re-watched the videos numerous times to get accurate

transcripts. Once done, I replayed the video a last time while I followed along reading

the transcript to ensure I had not left anything out. I then sent the transcripts to

interviewees and provided ample time for member checking. After confirming the validity of transcripts with members, I analyzed line-by-line using inductive coding for emerging themes. I handwrote the codes in the margins of the transcripts. Once the transcripts were all coded, I cut out the sections and sorted them into my chart with the six categories I already used for document analysis: background information, policy/funding, program logistics, screening, TS characteristics, and staff wellness. The data related to the background information and policy/funding categories were used to verify my chapter one background context was thorough, but as with the document analysis, those categories did not yield strong themes for the findings chapter. I axial coded by emerging themes within the other four categories, selected quotes that best highlighted the themes, and interpreted the findings through a positive psychology framework and my subjective "I" selves which emerged in my journaling. There were no items from inductive coding unrelated to the original categories that were worth making additional categories for or saving for future research; the only items not included from the transcripts were ones I deemed irrelevant to the research since they were of a personal nature or typical distractions of life like a person remarking about having a cold, being interrupted by a phone call, or pausing for a low laptop battery.

**Online Participation**

My reflexive journal was vital for capturing data while I participated online. While attending the webinars, I participated in the chat section, and at *Eggs and Issues*, I interacted in a small group breakout session. On the discipline webinar, I chatted both in the whole group and privately with a school-level colleague of the presenter who was

fielding more detailed questions, so I could get more nuanced information on a couple of points. On the collective self-care webinar, I posed a question to a panelist for clarification in the group chat. For both webinars, I took general notes, jotting down key ideas and thoughts that stood out during the webinar. Then I watched the webinars after receiving a follow-up email with a YouTube link, so I could pause and fill-in my notes. This gave me an opportunity to capture the key points from presenters, participants' questions, and follow-up responses. For the *Eggs and Issues* conference, I took notes while the panelists were speaking on topics of policy and funding, staff wellness, and SEL. Most of the event was too far removed from specifics related to the NC R&LP or my focus area of TS education; however, it did lend insight into the work and mission of the Public School Forum. After signing up for NC R&LP's online learning platform, *Participate*, I took notes on course offerings, types of information and resources I found, and the overall impression I got as I went through some of the coursework as a participant. I also selected some key points and quoted them in the findings.

Once I had my online participation notes completed, I went through and coded them in the margins and sorted them into the six categories I already used for document analysis and interview transcripts: background information, policy/funding, program logistics, screening, TS characteristics, and staff wellness. I axial coded by themes and selected notes with key points to add to the findings. The *Eggs and Issues* conference yielded many additional topic areas and themes unrelated to trauma, resilience, or the NC R&LP framework, so I put that information to the side. I made sense of the findings from my participant experience using positive psychology and my subjective "I" selves.

## Positionality Statement

As I discussed in the preface, my strong personal connection to the topic was an asset which sustained my efforts in this endeavor.  My participants were curious as to what brought me to having an interest in their framework, so I described my experience as a person with ACEs attending a presentation showing adverse effects of trauma without providing the resilience piece which made me eager to learn more about their TS model with resilience in the name. The interviewees knew I was passionate about the topic, valued their input, and wished to learn from them as the experts of the initiative.

Conversely, I know my passion for the topic and positionality as a survivor of trauma may be considered a conflict of interest.  I realize I cannot be objective.  Instead, I often look at things through the eyes of a traumatized child.  I feel this is an advantage that adds depth to my insights.  I internalize experiences and information to imagine how they may impact (both positively and negatively) a traumatized student in subtle ways others may not realize.  I often find myself seeing things differently from colleagues who had not thought about specific aspects of culture and climate, teaching strategies, assignments, and discipline which may be re-traumatizing for some students.  I cannot separate myself from my trauma as it is an engrained aspect of myself, so I cannot divorce myself from it during my research.  I feel my trauma provided a dimension to the analysis of my findings which may not have been done previously since as the statistics show, those with ACEs of four or more are not as successful.  I hope insights from my research will add to the growing conversation around positive ways to build resilience in students who have experienced trauma, so more of us will make it in the future.  It is

important for those of us with ACEs to contribute to the conversation, so we can stop being regulated to the outside and instead join in to provide more depth to the discussion.

Additionally, while conducting this research, I discovered the all-volunteer organization Campaign for Trauma-Informed Policy and Practice (CTIPP) and became a local liaison. This entails me contacting local and state representatives to advocate for implementation of trauma-informed public policies and practices throughout our communities' systems including childcare, child welfare, education, healthcare, law enforcement, and social services. I seek a society where its institutions serve to minimize the potential for ACEs, minimize re-traumatization, and make people more resilient. I have not done any advocating on behalf of the NC R&LP, nor referenced the framework in any of my CTIPP advocating. I do not feel my advocacy for trauma-informed practices in general was a conflict to having an open mind as I conducted this qualitative study to learn about the specifics of the NC R&LP although I am clearly biased towards finding ways to address trauma and mitigate its effects on children and society.

### Ethical Considerations and Trustworthiness

I followed proper ethics and guidelines of the UNCG Institutional Review Board while conducting my study. I still followed IRB protocols despite the board finding that my study was exempt from approval (see appendix G): "The IRB has determined that this submission does not constitute human subjects research as defined under federal regulations [45 CFR 46.102 (d or f)] and does not require IRB approval" (UNCG IRB Notice, personal communication, October 6, 2020). I provided consent forms (see appendix B) to participants to remind them they may opt out at any point without

repercussions and provided contact information for them to report any ethical violations if necessary. I felt this was important for giving my research integrity and respecting my participants. To enhance the overall trustworthiness of my study, I triangulated data, did member checks, and kept a reflexive journal for credibility and reliability.

**Ethics**

I did not use the school staff discussion board posts on the online learning platform as part of my data collection since they did not get an opportunity to consent. For each interview I introduced the scope of the project to respondents; sought individual permission; deleted videos of interviews once transcripts were approved; kept digital copies of transcripts on a secure, password-protected home desktop computer hard drive; used pseudonyms for individuals for writing my findings and conclusions; shared an executive summary of my findings; and reminded respondents they could withdraw from participating at any time, in which case, I would redact that individual's information. McGarrry and Mannik (2017) discuss the importance of keeping all notes private and secure to maintain privacy of information and removing any identifiable information before publishing to ensure no harm professionally or socially from participation. While I did my best to mask the identity of all respondents, with the model being named in this research and having a small staff, it was difficult to ensure full anonymity, so it was imperative they understood and approved of the scope of information on the framework and their input and were comfortable with its contents. I gave pseudonyms (Anna, Emma, and Maria) to participants without attaching their job positions to provide privacy despite being a small staff. Participating in research should be a positive reciprocal

experience for participants, I hope this research aids participants directly by making more

people aware of NC R&LP's work through this dissertation and indirectly by expanding

knowledge of ACEs, trauma, and TS education.  McGarry and Mannik (2017) note

participation in research can be self-affirming by enhancing people's feelings of

importance as they feel valued for the insight and experience they were able to share to

enrich the research, and it can even be an enlightening reflective process by sharing one's

opinions and experiences.  Most importantly, as an ethical researcher, I strove to

faithfully represent NC R&LP while doing no harm to respondents or the initiative.

**Triangulation**

I triangulated data to increase trustworthiness by confirming and cross-checking.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Merriam and Tisdell (2016) discuss triangulation including

multiple sources of data, multiple copies of one source, and multiple collection methods.

I employed data collection methods of document analysis, interviews, and online

participation.  I analyzed thirty-six documents including reports, peer-reviewed

publications, newsletters, articles, and a video.  I reviewed the NC R&LP website

documents before conducting interviews, which helped to refine and enhance my

knowledge of the framework to develop pertinent questions.  I interviewed stakeholders

with three different roles within the model and had follow-up questions to ensure I fully

understood topics they addressed.  Based on information learned during interviews, I then

conducted a document analysis of additional reports and articles found on the Public

School Forum of NC's website.  I participated in two online webinars, one virtual

conference, and NC R&LP's online learning platform.  These interactive experiences

gave me a rich look at information, materials, and resources from a practitioner's lens. The information discovered while researching was confirmed and cross-checked as the same information, concepts, and themes reemerged across data collection methods and in multiple sources several times giving me an in-depth understanding and clear picture of the TS initiative which allowed me to write rich descriptions of my findings.

**Member Checks**

I conducted member checks of the semi-structured interviews. To achieve the most balanced and accurate findings possible, I followed two key aspects to member checking discussed by Simons (2014): showing multiple perspectives of members' interpretation and valuing of a program and having participants verify their data and contextual use of it. I provided transcripts to interviewees via email attachment for them to verify for accuracy and allow for further illumination as needed should interviewees wish to clarify, expand on, or redact any of their previous statements although all of them confirmed their transcripts without making changes. I sent follow-up questions via email to clarify a few points which each participant responded to by email. Stake (2005) highlights that it is important to not just provide transcripts, but to provide drafts of all aspects of the participants' words as well as researchers' observations and interpretations of participants to minimize harm and make sure any concerns in how participants are represented get addressed. In my research, I focused solely on the NC R&LP and did not delve into personal aspects of the participants, nor did I make any judgements about participants, nor did I wish to bring any harm to those participating or the framework. I strove to present the voices of my respondents in a fair and unbiased manner. I provided

an executive summary of the finding's themes to interviewees to review and comment on if desired although none did. I provided the option to participants to read all my research; I wanted to respect participants' time by not asking they member check the findings yet also respect them by being transparent and providing the option to do so. Although allowing for member-checking created a lengthier process by waiting for confirmation, it achieved a more credible and trustworthy analysis that I felt confident with and ensured participants were respected and informed throughout the process.

**Reflexive Journal**

Keeping a journal helped me meet three goals which also enhanced the quality and credibility of my research. First, journaling served as an audit trail of schedule, methods, data, and decisions made during the research process which promoted organization, focus, and transparency by showing me to be an ethical researcher making sound choices for high-quality research (Bradbury-Jones, 2007; Aninnk, 2017; Vicary et al., 2017). This audit trail enhanced my decision making as I documented issues that arose during research especially with COVID-19 changing many of my plans, adjusted my schedule due to the IRB process taking longer than expected, made adjustments as I discovered the online components and decided to add those to my research, and revised interview questions as I learned information that caused some questions to be irrelevant or inaccurate. Most importantly, it assisted when I was interacting online recording notes while participating. Second, journaling was important for keeping track of emerging understandings (Janesick, 1998; Vicary et al. 2007). I was able to develop a deep level of insight on trauma, ACEs, screening, TS practices and policies, vicarious trauma, staff

wellness, and the NC R&LP by taking notes on key themes and personal thoughts that emerged. I was able to add to, adjust, and refine those themes and thoughts as I encountered new research. Bradbury-Jones (2007) sees reflexive journals as an opportunity for early data analysis by discovering emerging thoughts, patterns, and understandings since you are constantly immersed in the data. Journaling allowed me to track how my perspective and understanding evolved from when I first began planning my dissertation. The end product is worlds away from how I first envisioned it, yet I have learned much in this process and gained understanding to be a better educator. Lastly, acknowledging and reflecting on my emotions, triggers, and biases allowed for a greater understanding of my subjectivity which allowed me to separate my personal perspectives from the analysis of the data collected and be more transparent with readers about my subjectivity (Bradbury-Jones, 2007; Vicary et al., 2017). Bradbury-Jones (2007) discusses the importance of realizing the different subjective selves that researchers take on during the process following the subjective "I" approach of anthropologist Peshkin. Through journaling, I found four perspectives which seemed to dominant in my journaling: the "Academic I" who makes connections with data in terms of professional research; the "Educator I" who filters data and understanding through the perspective of previous practitioner experience I and others have had; the "Trauma-Survivor I" who is reflective of my own past experiences and filters data through a trauma lens; and "Pollyanna I" who like the character Pollyanna tends to get very excited and is overly optimistic when looking at all the possibilities the data holds. My different I's had conflicting interpretations, thoughts, and feelings just as Bradbury-Jones (2007)

148

had when interpreting his research, but he discusses that it is important to recognize them, understand their influence on the research, and work to use them in a positive way that enhance the credibility of the research by showing and acknowledging different interpretations and being transparent about subjectivity. It is not possible to ignore my subjectivity, but "Rather than see this as bias or something to counter, it is an intelligence that is essential to understanding and interpreting the experience of participants and stakeholders" (Simons, 2014, p. 9). Monitoring my subjectivity helped to prevent it from unduly influencing the study, so it could be an asset for deep understanding of phenomena under study and not a hinderance to the research speaking for itself.

At the beginning of my research, I had grand plans to keep weekly handwritten entries organized in a binder with eight categories: 1) personal thoughts and feelings, 2) literature review understandings, 3) theoretical connections, 4) scheduling and email/phone correspondence, 5) NC Resilience documents, 6) interviews, 7) objectives and 8) a-ha moments. That did not last long. My journal devolved into more of a schedule with intermittently written reflective entries which at times would be a few days in a row, and at others, would be weeks apart. I journaled after having interviews, during webinars, while exploring the online platform, attending an online conference, and after reading multiple texts during the document analysis and having key thoughts I wanted to write down. While I was not as systematic and organized as I originally intended, I still had many entries over each part of the data collection process which helped me to make sense of my evolving thoughts, subjective "I" selves, and have valuable insights.

## Limitations

The goal of my study is not to prove that the NC R&LP works, nor create a case for its level of effectiveness. My intention is not to make promises of what NC R&LP would look like or do for schools wishing to employ it. Schools may have very different experiences given local contexts and varying individuals participating in its implementation. Perspectives presented in this research are limited to interviews with stakeholders who develop, work for, and evaluate the initiative. Perspectives of school partners and students are limited to already published feedback found during document analysis. I did not seek or discover family and community member perspectives. While I am a career educator, my participation with online activities was different from staff doing this alongside colleagues as part of a school initiative. With me participating in isolation as a researcher who has knowledge of the topic already, my experience was likely much different from average participants, yet it gave me an opportunity to showcase the types of online supports and resources offered through NC R&LP.

My goal is to provide a broad overview of logistics, implementation, and supports provided by NC R&LP based on document analysis, interviews, and online participation. Yin (2014) discusses using qualitative research for analytical generalizations by expanding or generalizing theories even though they may not be used to generalize probabilities. This research may provide readers with a deep awareness and understanding of TS characteristics and practices and how these expand on positive psychology principles and insight into TS initiatives. Educators may then evaluate their own schools in terms of how they embody TS practices and enhance positive psychology

150

principles; thus, learning from, but not generalizing.  Universalities people may take from this study include recognition of trauma, its impact on students and staff, and the ability of schools to take a multitude of steps towards addressing it in an asset-based manner aligned with positive psychology to avoid re-traumatization.

## Data Reporting

In the following chapters, I report the key themes which emerged from my four data categories of program logistics, screening, trauma-sensitive characteristics, and staff wellness.  Chapter six focuses on the foundational aspects of TS schools following a "do no harm" principle; using a whole-school approach to create a mindset shift where staff recognize the importance of trauma and resilience and use proactive TS strategies, especially with discipline; and how flexibility and adjustment are an important part of tailoring NC R&LP's work to meet the individual needs of schools and persevering through issues such as COVID-19.  Chapter seven focuses on strategies implemented by TS schools.  The first strategy is to ensure there is an appropriate amount of support for staff wellness, so staff will be empathetic and work effectively to then take a whole-child approach to meeting student needs.  Once staff and students are cared for, family and community engagement strategies become a priority.  In chapter eight, I provide an in-depth discussion of how literature review and findings addressed my research questions and interpret them through a lens of positive psychology.  I also use reflections from my four subjective "I's" ("Academic I," "Educator I," "Trauma-Survivor I," "Pollyanna I") discovered through my reflexive journaling to make sense of my research and findings.

CHAPTER VI

FINDINGS: PART ONE

I divide my findings into key themes which arose from the document analysis,

three semi-structured interviews with NC Resilience and Learning Project (NC R&LP)

staff (identified here by the pseudonyms Emma, Maria, and Anna), and online

participation with NC R&LP's webinars, Public School Forum's *Eggs and Issues* event,

and the *Participate* learning platform. In this chapter, I focus on four themes: 1) Trauma

Sensitive (TS) schools should follow the principle "do no harm" by taking an asset-based

approach avoiding trauma screeners and instead use strength-based assessments for

identifying student needs; 2) TS schools need to use a whole-school approach with strong

leadership that facilitates collaboration with all staff to create a positive school climate;

3) successful TS implementation requires staff having a mindset shift to the importance

of building resilience, implementing TS strategies, and using restorative practices which

will create an overall TS culture shift in the school; and 4) the need for flexibility with TS

initiatives and schools using progress monitoring to evaluate and adjust to local contexts

and unexpected situations like COVID-19.

### "Do No Harm:" An Asset-Based Approach

NC R&LP takes a trauma-informed approach by teaching educators about

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), trauma, and toxic stress to create a TS learning

environment that follows an asset-based principle of doing no harm. Their mission

statement states they wish to "increase awareness among educators of the impact of ACEs on student learning; to improve school climate by creating a trauma-sensitive environment" and "mitigate the impact of ACEs on student learning and behavior." Yet, their name NC Resilience and Learning Project fails to mention ACEs, trauma, or toxic stress, instead highlighting the last part of their mission which is "building student self-regulation skills and resiliency within inclusive learning environments" (NC Learning and Resilience Project, 2019, p. 2). I did not find input on how the name was selected in my document analysis, so I sought clarification when interviewing. Anna remarked the word "trauma" was intentionally left out since it "tends to always have such a negative or a deficit connotation," and they wanted something that "focuses more on the...what can we do? ...there is hope, and there are things that we can change." Moreover, as Maria noted, she assisted in the process of selecting a name that would resonate "bipartisanly" with a diverse group of people. She explained how "resilience" emerged opposed to words like "compassionate" and "trauma":

> The Compassionate Schools model...was being tried out in one place in North Carolina, but most of the state was like, "Oh, we don't want- that's not a name we jive with at all." And people didn't want the name "trauma" in the title, because a lot of times that leads people to think about, like, I remember in Massachusetts when they first started their model, everyone thought they were a trauma magnet school... just for kids with trauma... and so there's a lot of misconceptions about what that means....[so the Public School Forum held] focus groups with several people... and resilience was the one that rose to the top.

When asked about the issue with the word compassionate, Maria explained people thought it sounded like the model proposed "being all squishy with these kids... baby them, and not hold them accountable for anything" with people remarking that "'We

153

don't need to be compassionate.  We need to make them tougher.'" The idea of making

kids tougher led to a focus on resilience since it has a "compassionate ring, but also a

'we're going to be stronger together' ring."  Maria added that the word, "learning" was

the easy part of the name since as the primary focus of schools, "you can't argue with

learning."  The focus on having a positive and asset-based namesake demonstrates the

overall approach NC R&LP takes to implementing TS strategies – to do no harm.

In the discipline-webinar, the idea of "do no harm" came up when the speaker

was talking about the importance of addressing trauma "right" since otherwise you could

do more harm.  His idea of addressing it "right" is by building relationships, using Social

and Emotional Learning (SEL) for discipline, and having a positive environment.  He

promoted staff being observant of behavioral triggers such as noticing a student blows-up

after interactions where people touch him/her/them (e.g., hand on shoulder or high five).

He did not say it is necessary to screen to find students with trauma but said establishing

strong relationships will result in students being comfortable enough to share their

traumas with staff, so staff must be prepared to respond appropriately and supportively.

While I was taking the introduction course on *Participate*, I was struck by the

gravity infused into the material when there was a sidebar moment for digesting the

information on the negative impacts of ACEs and helping students with trauma:

> We want to take a minute here to pause... for those seeing this for the first time
> (and even for those who were already familiar with the ACE study and the
> research), that seeing these numbers and hearing these health outcomes is
> overwhelming and scary,... **But, we want to encourage you by letting you know
> that there is hope!**  There are so many things that we can do as educators that
> help build student resilience – relationships, SEL interventions, and more... Kids
> brains are ever-changing and there is so much we are already doing or can be

doing to make a positive impact, even for kids with a high ACE score. ("What Is Trauma?" n.d., Section "Long-term," para. 3)

This was an important reminder for staff to not get stuck on the deficiency nature of trauma, but to instead focus on the hopeful aspect of resilience-building. NC R&LP continues this asset-based framing by reminding staff to focus on students' strengths:

> Children with trauma histories may have challenges, but they can also have incredible areas of strength and ability. By highlighting their achievements and competencies and praising their developing skills and successes, you will encourage children to grow. The parts that will grow are the parts that you water – so water the strengths, not the deficits! ("What Is a Trauma-Informed," n.d., Section "What Is the Process" para. 6).

Because of this do-no-harm, asset-based philosophy, NC R&LP discourages use of trauma screeners and instead advocates use of strengths-based assessments.

NC R&LP's stance on trauma screeners is quite clear: understanding trauma does not mean schools must screen for it. In a scholarly chapter written by staff of NC R&LP and their partnering Duke researcher, Rosanbalm et al. (2020) explain it is important for staff to "understand the impact of trauma as well as ...recognize that behaviors in school may have a basis in trauma exposure" this allows educators to implement strategies "to promote academic success and well-being... and use this understanding to inform policy and practice to build resilience and give students skills for success" (p. 6). Trauma screening is not necessary to implement these TS initiatives though:

> This does not mean that schools need to assess students for trauma experiences or conduct their own ACE surveys! Schools are there to support students but are not likely to be adequately equipped to manage the emotional trauma or legal quandaries that such a survey might engender. (Rosanbalm et al., 2020, p. 6)

155

Trauma screening is unnecessary since a TS approach is described "as a universal

precaution, assuming that any student may have experienced adversity and need support.

Indeed, the kinds of strategies promoted by a trauma-informed practice can be beneficial

for all students, regardless of trauma exposure" (Rosanbalm et al., 2020, p. 6).  NC

R&LP's emphasis (noted by their italicized statement) is on resilience for all students:

> *...trauma-informed schools are NOT about needing to identify* which *children in*
> *your school have experienced trauma! Rather, it is about creating an environment*
> *that will support students with trauma histories... a trauma-informed school is*
> *good for ALL kids – we want all students to feel safe and supported when they*
> *come into the school building whether they have experienced trauma or not.*
> ("What Is a Trauma-Informed," n.d., Section "Anything Else?" para. 2).

Maria elaborated on why trauma screening is problematic for students due to

issues with 1) the screeners themselves since none of them address "all the areas of

trauma and adversity that you can get" and they "equally weight different adversities; I

mean, sexual abuse and divorce, not the same thing," 2) screening is inappropriate to the

school environment, in part because of the "...issue of schools now being put in a position

of asking and knowing about these really intimate details of a child's life.  That makes

school no longer a safe place for that child," 3) a lack of valuable information from them

for school purposes since the original ACEs study was meant to provide population level

input but provides little information on an individual level since "You've got kids with 10

ACEs who are really doing pretty well, and kids with no ACEs who are struggling really

hard. And so, knowing that a kid has four ACEs, you gotta know a lot more about that

kid for that to mean anything," 4) implementing a screener is a complicated endeavor

with the likelihood of causing issues which goes against the principle of a TS school to

"first, do no harm. So, we need to be sure that whatever we're doing is not going to make things worse for anybody... that screener has a ton of potential to make things worse," and 5) it goes against the goal of a TS school being "a safe place... focusing on that child's strengths and competencies and how we can support them" since "each person has their own path, right, and we don't want to like put this weight on someone's shoulders."

Additionally, NC R&LP advises against schools having staff take trauma screeners. Anna discussed how NC R&LP does provide staff with information on the ACEs study and shows the ACE survey but does not have staff take it or encourage doing so since it could be a negative experience for some staff. After introducing the ACEs research, many schools are eager to commence with the work and find out which staff and/or students have ACEs, so they ask for guidance on that as Anna describes: "...one thing we also get asked a lot is... should we distribute the ACEs questionnaire, or should we do some kind of other trauma screener and have our families fill that out for our students?" Anna stated that ultimately "a school can still decide on their own... to do what they want to do," but NC R&LP advises against ACEs screeners since "people are gonna give you a large response, and most schools are not equipped – with just 1 or 2 counselors and social workers and not a lot of mental health support, to... provide the support and the response needed." Maria is concerned by schools forging ahead with ACEs screenings at staff meetings since there is a lack of appropriate support for those who discover they have a high ACE scores. She believes there needs to be individual support in a therapy setting with a therapist to guide people, so they do not feel hopeless when confronted with ACE statistics. She does acknowledge though that ACEs screeners

can be powerfully lifechanging in a positive way for some, but large group settings are still not the appropriate place for them since "there's too much potential for damage."

After becoming knowledgeable of NC R&LP's stance against trauma screeners, I was surprised to hear one district's panelists in the self-care webinar say they begin addressing staff self-care by first having staff complete the ACE screener. The principal disclosed the screener was too personal to use with students, yet she feels staff benefit by knowing their ACEs. She encourages staff to share their personal histories to serve as an inspiration to students who may have similar issues to overcome. This resonates with a statement made by a panelist during the Forum's *Eggs and Issues* event, "Give people with trauma a purpose to move forward through it." In addition to helping students, the principal also expressed how it is important for staff to face their ACEs, so staff may recognize and work to minimize reactions that are a manifestation of their own trauma being triggered. This idea had been brought up by the restorative facilitator in the discipline webinar who discussed how our own ACEs influence how we view and respond to students' behaviors which may be unfair to the students. The second principal on the self-care webinar agreed doing the ACE survey with staff was transformative and got staff onboard with doing TS work. The district leader added what he enjoyed most about screening sessions is that they breakdown misconceptions and stereotypes people may have when they find out their colleagues have numerous ACEs but appear so well put together on the outside. It serves as a reminder that you never know what issues or problems a person may have or still be dealing with in the inside. When I asked what supports were in place for staff discovering they have high ACEs, I was told district

counselors were onsite to assist.  NC R&LP staff sent a follow-up email after the webinar

informing people that the district using the screener did so with training to leadup to it

and by having ample follow-up supports; however, NC R&LP cautioned against

screenings, provided an overview of why, and encouraged staff to reach out to them for

further discussion and information.

Instead of trauma screeners, NC R&LP suggests schools wishing to survey

students use a school-wide standardized teacher-reported screener of SEL competence to

identify student strengths and areas for growth to direct SEL lessons and identify students

with the most needs for targeted supports within an MTSS plan including appropriate

SEL activities to assist with identified needs (Rosanbalm & Ali, 2020; Rosanbalm et al.,

2020).  As Anna explains, SEL screeners do not address sensitive issues: "It's not at all

about someone's life experiences.  It's specifically about social emotional learning skills,

and it has teachers' rate," so students would not even know teachers are evaluating their

SEL abilities.  Emma discussed how some schools use screeners to capture data that

assists with progress monitoring of goals; one school is using a program called Capturing

Kids' Hearts, so NC R&LP assisted with doing a pre- and post-Devereux Students

Strengths Assessment (DESSA) SEL screener to collect data.  Emma discussed multiple

ways NC R&LP tries to make screening less stressful and easy for staff: 1) using the

DESSA mini with eight questions instead of the full 72-question version, 2) limiting the

paperwork and time involved for teachers by having data managers printout demographic

stickers to pre-fill the screeners, and 3) having NC R&LP staff score the assessments for

teachers.  Maria discussed encouraging schools to use a SEL screener to provide targeted

skill building to "kids that are struggling [but] fly under the radar... [since] everyone

notices the kids that have behavior problems, but people don't notice the kid who's sitting

in the corner quietly."  Maria believes this can help to control for the "racial bias in who

gets noticed" and help school staff to "systematically explore which of the kids are

struggling, so that we can think about within a multi-tiered system of support model"

since the goal is to use the data from SEL screeners to "put into place a universal, social,

emotional curriculum, as well as kind of tiered support for kids that need more."  Anna

also encourages the use of SEL screeners for developing the school's MTSS model and

targeting students for different tiers of support but explained some schools may be unable

to utilized screeners since there is "a cost associated with it, so not everyone can afford it.

But ...we've been able to purchase it [DESSA] for some schools."

**Summary of "Do No Harm"**

Document analysis, interviews, and online participation all demonstrated NC

R&LP's commitment to an asset-based approach of "do no harm" with universal TS

implementation and discouraging trauma screening.  The webinar revealed schools may

proceed how they wish, so, in practice, things may be different than what the framework

promotes, especially when it comes to some schools' desire to identify ACEs.

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**Whole-School Approach**

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A TS transformation requires a whole-school approach with stakeholder

collaboration and district leaders, school leaders, and staff who are ready and willing to

take on the challenge.  There needs to be a strong school-level leadership team

established to guide continual efforts, and all staff must have universal training with a willingness to collaborate towards achieving TS school goals.

The level of district and school readiness effects the ability to engage in lasting TS transformation. NC R&LP staff conduct a readiness assessment before solidifying partnerships. They want to ensure staff and leaders "understand the process, roles, and commitments of Project involvement ... are dedicated to a trauma-informed transformation and have laid the groundwork necessary to be successful" which helps determine each school's starting point and may mean certain schools are selected first in a district to pilot and model the initiative before getting additional schools with lower readiness levels onboard (Rosanbalm et al., 22020, p. 18). NC R&LP also works with districts to make sure they "understand what strategies are being piloted and why, review findings from early data, and determine what funds, resources and materials, or administrative support are needed within each school to maintain the Project work" (Rosanbalm et al., 2020, p. 28). Ideally, partnering districts reflect dedication to TS schools by enacting policy-level changes with policies, practices, and resources aligned to systemically support a TS agenda for long-term success (Rosanbalm et al., 2020). On the self-care webinar, panelists emphasized that school board, district, and school leadership support are vital for policies and resources that sustain implementation of TS. They also stressed school leaders need to be clear and direct about staff expectations which helps to ensure everyone is onboard with the mission, goals, and strategies needed for TS initiatives to operate effectively.

Having a high level of school readiness with staff who support the initiative creates positive results. NC R&LP attributes one partnering school's successes with reducing discipline referrals and in and out-of-school suspensions to "leadership readiness and buy-in from the district as well as from the leadership at [the school] and the entire resilience team, focusing on that 'mindset shift' to get behind the why of student behaviors, and a whole school's willingness to be creative and try new things" ("Mindset Shift Leads," 2020, p.10). NC R&LP suggests school leaders infuse TS practices into "school policies as well as the onboarding process for new staff...[for] long-term implementation of strategies and culture shift through policy-level change... outcomes monitoring should continue, promoting ongoing quality improvement and tracking" (Rosanbalm et al., 2020, p.28) Emma discussed how some districts make their partnership with NC R&LP and commitment to TS practices part of their accountability model with district goals and year plans aligned to supporting the endeavor which impacts hiring practices since they want staff who will support this vision.

Since district and school interest is vital, NCR&LP does not actively seek new school partnerships. According to Anna, the original pilot schools were selected due to those districts/schools having leaders involved with Study Group XVI and being active with the Public School Forum of NC. Districts and schools begin the process and express interest in forming a partnership: "...the principal and other school administrators must voluntarily elect to initiate this process because they see a significant need and believe strongly in the capacity of trauma-informed understanding and strategies to address that need" (Rosanbalm et al., 2020, p. 18). This is necessary because after two years, NC

R&LP transfers control to school staff, so it is important "that administrators remain engaged and willing to serve as champions of the work" (Rosanbalm et al., 2020, p. 28). Pilot year results showed the importance of school leaders dedicated to the process as "School educators tend to mirror the level of engagement of administrators, so administrator buy-in and modeling determines the likelihood of collective buy-in" (Rosanbalm et al., 2020, p. 30). Anna noted "buy-in and strong leadership from the principal" is the "key characteristic that impacts success with this work" since "There is always a clear difference between schools who have an engaged principal versus those who don't and almost four years into the work, that is the clear differentiator." This is why NC R&LP is doing more to grow TS leaders through leadership cohorts as Maria described, "principals and assistant principals are coming together to really think through [the question of] how do I lead this at my school?... so that they're doing this in teamwork with one another and kind of have partner schools that they're holding accountable."

From the first two years of implementation, NC R&LP discovered staff readiness and buy-in are highest when staff sees the need for a TS approach themselves instead of it being a top-down mandate and school leaders actively work alongside staff without dictating how it must be done ("NC Resilience and Learning Project Concludes," 2019). TS initiatives are "...not something that can be mandated or something that an interventionist can 'do to' a school. It is a whole-school shift in the knowledge base, attitudes, and culture that drives changes in policy, practice, and staff–student relationships" (Rosanbalm et al., 2020, p. 18). Anna and Maria noted that Eastern NC districts and schools have demonstrated high levels of staff and school leader buy-in

since they have experienced collective trauma as a community due to natural disasters over the years.  One school saw a collective need for change after yet another catastrophic hurricane; thus, they altered their school mission, belief, and vision statements to reflect a new TS model (Downs & Combs, 2020).  Additionally, attending webinars, online conferences, and completing online courses is most valuable when done out of personal interest and desire; hence, the Public School Forum and NC R&LP promote these as optional activities to learn, share, and be supported.  The webinars feature a range of topics from a variety of presenters from partnering schools which allows participants to decide which are most relevant to their interests and needs.  NC R&LP provides participation certificates to attendees which principals and districts may choose to accept for CEUs thus motivating some staff to participate.

Each partnering school has a school-based leadership team called a Resilience Team (RT), comprised of "6–10 highly invested staff members who elect to lead the planning process and champion the work," but emphasize one of these needs to be the principal "to provide top-level leadership and enable decision-making" and "student support staff member, such as a counselor, social worker, or school nurse, as these individuals are likely to interact regularly with students struggling with trauma exposure and sequelae" with remaining members representing a diversity of stakeholders (Rosanbalm et al., 2020, p. 20).  Diversity enriches RTs, as noted by a school counselor who said, "Our team is made up of people with diverse roles in the school, so all our grade levels and support areas have a voice in the group" (Battle, 2020, para 4).  One school includes parent representation to have insight from families (Stern, 2020).  Emma

discussed having the right RT people is the key to the school successfully continuing the work since they need to be motivated to take over as NC R&LP's involvement begins to lessen in year two. Anna discussed how this transition can be tricky since NC R&LP staff "really embed ourselves in schools for an entire year, with the training and the coaching... with those RTs every other week" which creates a challenge in year two of finding the perfect balance of ongoing support yet a more hands-off approach that allows school-level staff to be empowered without feeling abandoned, but with strong RT leaders, the transition is smoother. Strong RTs are more likely if schools follow NC R&LP's reminder on *Participate* that being an RT member is optional: "We encourage schools to ask those who WANT to be on the team, rather than telling staff they need to participate" ("Introduction: The 'Why,'" n.d., Section "Welcome" para. 16).

Members of RTs undergo intensive training, so they may spearhead efforts for building a safe and supportive school, be resident experts for the rest of the staff, communicate goals and strategies, and monitor TS implementations (Institute for Educational Policymakers, 2018; NC Resilience and Learning Project, 2018). During training, some RTs may realize their school is not yet ready to undertake full implementation. This is why NC R&LP has staff pause after introductory course completion to reflect on "if and why you believe creating a trauma-informed environment is critical for your school, and identify what you believe should be your school's top priorities for moving forward," if ready, then they work with a project coach to "widen your discussion to include the rest of the staff, to help the whole school develop a shared understanding of trauma and its impacts, identify top priorities, and determine if and how

165

to move forward" since there is a need for "a shared understanding and... consensus around prioritizing the work of becoming a trauma-informed school" ("Introduction: The 'Why,'" n.d., Sections "How Will We" para. 1 and "Welcome" para. 16).

Once schoolwide readiness is established, the next step is to review school data to determine priorities for actionable change. NC R&LP learned from piloting schools that those who reviewed data including attendance, achievement, and discipline were able to implement strategies which more successfully met goals and resulted in most change ("NC Resilience and Learning Concludes," 2019). Common issues RTs have discovered are "staff burnout, student behavior, attendance, and academic achievement" which they then share out with all staff "to reach consensus" on what goals to create and strategies to try with NC R&LP staff giving "examples of strategies that other schools have used and then invite staff to work in small groups to brainstorm strategies that might fit their specific school and community" (Rosanbalm et al., 2020, p. 21). In addition to getting staff input, one school's RT also sought out student feedback and ideas (Craig Riberdy, 2020a). While schools may seek to make drastic changes and fix everything at once, lessons from piloting schools showed those who started small with one or two goals were able to better monitor effects of small changes, overcame staff resistance easier, got more staff excited for the process, had staff implement strategies with fidelity, and made a larger impact (DeKonty, 2018; "NC Resilience and Learning Project Concludes," 2019).

A passionate RT helps to create a positive atmosphere enabling larger staff transformation. The RT must "clearly articulate why becoming trauma-informed is an urgent undertaking for their school, this creates the energy and momentum needed to

engage the rest of the staff" ("What Is a Trauma-Informed" n.d., Section "Course One Final" para. 1). Emma noted the positive influence RT members have on the whole staff by showcasing and modeling strategies they have found to be successful which other staff are then more likely to try than if "this lady from some project they're doing after 59 other projects comes in and says it's a good idea" since it "is really helpful when they can see it [colleague's using strategies] in action... whatever it may be, if it's a circle up or a breathing technique." During the webinars, RT members presented practical examples of how TS strategies looked and worked in their settings. In the chat box, multiple participants noted feeling energized to try strategies in their schools. NC R&LP offered a virtual summit in August 2020 for RT members and district leaders to network with other schools and hear ideas for how they planned to continue TS work in the 2020-2021 school year despite COVID-19 disruptions. This summit, along with discussion boards in *Participate* and the webinars, are all ways for school staff who are still in the early stages of partnership and TS work to gain insight, input, resources, and information from other school staff who are further along in the process. Even those far along may be inspired to try a new idea or expand on things they are already trying. One self-care webinar panelist stressed school leaders and RT members should not be the only ones doing things. Staff should be encouraged to take initiative and given outlets for action to create a more positive climate where all staff feel respected and empowered.

All school staff need to be involved with the process to become TS; otherwise, there cannot be a whole-school TS culture and climate. Whole staff collaboration is necessary for NC R&LP's goals of trauma training. The first goal is "To create a shared

understanding: ...[of] what trauma is and its impacts... to build readiness for collective, whole-school change," and the second goal is "To lay the groundwork for discussion about trauma-informed action planning: [since] a strong sense of why being trauma-informed is critical to achieving the school's mission" ("Introduction: The 'Why,'" n.d., Section "Welcome" para. 2). Collaboration ensures the wellbeing of all students instead of staff only worrying about students they directly serve. One partnering elementary teacher described how this transformation looked at her school: "I've seen as an entire school that we are now becoming... a village-raising school versus just everybody deal with what's going on in your own classroom" (Rosanbalm et al., 2020, pg. 29). The central aspects to achieving this are having whole staff universal trauma and resilience training and ongoing support of a NC R&LP coach.

Universal training for all staff "fosters unifying language, understanding, and expectations to promote climate and culture change, and helps staff recognize the neurobiological foundations of students' disruptive behaviors" ("NC Resilience and Learning Project," 2018). NC R&LP provides universal training through multiple sessions as needed to help with varying schedules of staff. Holding a variety of sessions also allows them to adjust the strategies they present to be most applicable to the staff roles represented in those sessions. It is imperative classified staff get the same training as educators since they have vital roles within the school environment:

> For instance, bus drivers are the first and last school-related adults that most students see each day, and they can set the tone for school engagement even before students walk through the door of the school. Front-office staff are the ones who welcome students and family members alike into the school. Custodial and cafeteria staff have regular, nonacademic interaction with students and may

become buddies or confidants. Indeed, each adult within the school has an opportunity to build relationships and foster resilience skills with the students of that school.  (Rosanbalm, et al., 2020, pp. 20-21)

Maria discussed how providing "All the adults; every single person" with training is in alignment with TLPI's Flexible Framework.  When I asked if that applied to substitutes as well, she replied, "No, subs have not been a focus.  They tend to come and go so much and often work in several schools," but she emphasized the importance of training for classified staff and inviting them to be part of Resilience Teams.

In addition to trainings, NC R&LP coaches work alongside staff to provide ongoing support and coaching, so staff may "go beyond training and awareness and actually implement trauma-sensitive, whole school strategies and create change" (Institute for Educational Policymakers, 2020, trauma section p. 15).  The coach is an active presence "across the school and throughout the school year...as an important reminder of Project goals, keeping staff focused on the work of infusing trauma-informed practices" and providing support through "small-group meetings of staff, such as peer learning communities or grade level teams, to provide additional training and discussion" and even personalized individual coaching after discovering areas for growth from performing "climate walks (whole-school observations) or classroom observations of specific skills implementation" (Rosanbalm et al., 2020, p. 27).  Anna discussed how NC R&LP staff spend time in schools building relationships and rapport that make staff comfortable in asking, "Hey, can you come into my room and kind of observe things, and give me just some thoughts and feedback that you have on things that could change." Maria mentioned individual coaching as an area for growth in the framework since it is

vital but providing these supports can be time intensive and logistically difficult "because

there's so many teachers, but how do we build those systems of support better so that we

have more of that coaching going on, one-on-one, when we can?" The combination of

training and coaching assists schools in all staff collaborating for the common interest of

creating a TS environment which benefits students since

> Creating a strong sense of community throughout the entire school is essential to
> improving school climate and culture and helping kids feel safe. When kids feel
> like they have a connection to a strong, tight-knit community and know that they
> belong, resilience increases. They can begin to let down their guard and LEARN!
> ("What Is a Trauma-Informed," n.d., Section "What Is the Process" para. 4)

Rosanbalm et al. (2020) describes training and coaching as leading to systemic

schoolwide supports for the greatest impact:

> ...integrating interventions and trauma-informed practice throughout the school
> day for all students to build a whole-school culture of positive coping and social-
> emotional skills and taking universal initiatives such as PBIS to the next level by
> infusing training in trauma and consideration of whole-school trauma-informed
> strategies to promote changes in educational practice at the infrastructure, policy,
> and practice levels. (p. 16)

A challenge NC R&LP has discovered is a lack of readiness at the secondary

school level. Currently the model is primarily in elementary schools (ES) with few

partnering middle schools (MS) and no high schools (HS) despite it being "...a highly

needed practice and skill set for older students as older kids need help coping with

complex emotions and issues they face" (Rosanbalm & Ali, 2020, p. 8). Anna discussed

ES being a good starting point for TS work since "the earlier that you can start to provide

some of these interventions for kids, the better" and just not seeing much readiness or

interest for it on the MS and HS end despite NC R&LP's willingness to partner at the secondary level. Emma views MS and HS as a target to get to once the model has been solidly implemented at the ES level and districts can scale it into upper grades as students with a foundation for the strategies advance. She remarked that she looks forward to having it in the MS and HS levels since "you can be a lot more concrete about what skills and strategies worked for them. And, you know, they can be lifelong strategies." Maria commented that the main issue is that there just is "Not much SEL for MS and HS... even having a curriculum. There's just not that many out there." She also discussed one day getting into HS after expanding and strengthening the initiative at the ES and MS level but there are many issues to overcome considering differences with scheduling, emphasis on academics and testing, and the amount of students teachers work with in a day. Maria did remark they are making positive inroads past primary schools: "...we've been growing middle schools... some of our biggest successes have actually been in middle schools," and that at all levels, "teachers are more ready for it now than they ever have been because of COVID." A willingness to engage in a TS initiative is key to its success.

**Summary of Whole School Approach**

Supportive leadership, including school-level RTs, is needed for guiding and supporting TS initiatives. Leaders championing the model need an overall school atmosphere of readiness with all staff willing to collaborate and shar a vision of the importance of a TS school. It is important to seek out incoming staff aligned with a TS vision for ongoing success. A future area of growth is getting secondary schools onboard with transformation to a TS model.

## Mindset and Culture Shift

Creating a culture shift from traditional practices to TS ones requires staff have a mindset shift to get necessary buy-in and follow through for implementation. Laying a foundation of trauma knowledge gives staff the purpose behind why TS strategies are essential, but the focus is on resilience to give staff hope for making a difference in students' lives. The biggest thinking shift required is going from traditional behaviorism-based practices that are reactive and punitive to ones that are proactive and restorative.

When asked to describe defining characteristics of a TS school, Anna remarked "the biggest thing is buy-in and mindset shift – do the adults in the building understand and believe that kids need to be supported in this way, understand the impact of trauma, and recognize the importance of building in SEL and connection time into their day" which Anna believes is possible to determine by evaluating

> – do they have designation SEL time or SEL curriculum they use school-wide? What is their discipline system – are there teachers who still use things like the clip chart of giving public rewards and punishments or is there more of a restorative approach? And lastly, are relationships valued – is there time set aside to build community and connection with students?

### Understanding Trauma and Resilience

NC R&LP begins online and in-person training with an understanding of trauma, its impact on the brain, and how this may manifest in maladaptive behaviors for students. Emma described her conflicting feelings about the trauma part of the training since she worries educators may get stuck in a deficit mindset, or it could take the focus from the resilience piece but ultimately concluded trauma knowledge is an important for getting

172

educators onboard with fostering resilience as long as "they don't get stuck there just on the kids who've experienced adversity." Maria also described using the brain science of trauma to hook the attention of staff and make them care, but she wants staff to focus on their power to change the negative influence of ACEs "Because the more we do now, as they're young, it will change everything. And so then, the rest of the whole conversation is about hope and change." Anna emphasized background on trauma is simply the foundation, so staff can have a better understanding of the resilience piece which they need to act on since "things like relationships and social emotional learning, and... having certain structure and routine and different strategies help to rewire the brain and have a positive impact on brain development and learning and behavior." After initial trauma training, ongoing training focuses on concrete actions staff may take to build resilience.

The Trauma and Learning subcommittee of Study Group XVI found many educators lack awareness of how trauma and toxic stress effect the brain and lead to maladaptive behaviors which may negatively impact learning; additionally, they lack understanding of how educators and a TS environment can address these issues (Public School Forum of NC, 2016). In the "Creating Trauma-Sensitive Schools" course on *Participate*, staff are asked what percentage of their students they think are affected by trauma in their schools. Then they go through a chapter learning more about trauma and are asked at the end to reflect again on what percentage of students they think are impacted by trauma and how their newfound knowledge of trauma may impact their future interactions with students. This is an attempt to prompt staff to reflect and have a mindset shift from traditional student-staff relationships to ones that consider students

could be coming from a place of trauma.  Achieving the needed mindset shift to create a lasting culture shift in schools requires "helping *all* staff to shift from 'what's wrong with you' to 'what happened to you' when they see a child who is struggling with learning, behavior, or relationships" in an ongoing process of transformation "- it is a marathon, not a sprint!... This is not a one-time, one-year program, but rather a shift in the way educators think and interact" ("What Is a Trauma-Informed," n.d., Section "What Is the Process" para. 1-3).  Having the foundational understanding of the brain science behind trauma results in staff being "more intentional in their engagement with students, aiming to meet students where they were and to determine underlying factors influencing students" (Rosanbalm et al., 2020, p. 29).  In trainings, Maria says the "most powerful thing we do with schools" is use the "flip your lid hand model of the brain" also called the "wise owl and barking dog analogy" to simplify the brain science piece since "it really shifts their understanding for why social emotional support is important."  Maria gave in-depth description of the analogy using hand signals to help her act it out as she would in trainings:

> This [thumb] is your stress response center in your brain... that's where your amygdala is...[The four fingers] your cortex and your pre-frontal cortex... thinking brain... in this analogy, we're going to call this [thumb] your barking dog. And this [four fingers] your wise owl. Ok?  So when your brain is functioning well as a team [closed fist], the owl, the dog are in close contact... and they can make really good decisions together. But the dog's biggest job is to keep you safe, guard dog. And so, it's going to be looking in the environment, listening, smelling, any cues that there's danger coming in. It's going to bark its head off so that you can stay safe. Well, what is an owl going to do? When a dog nearby is barking its head, it's going to fly away [open hand]. It's going to go to safety...So the owl flew up into the treetops. Now you're only operating out of stress response out of emotion, out of instinct. Your impulse control has gone, your language is gone.  Your problem solving and clear thinking is gone; its way up in the rafters.

Maria added NC R&LP coaches encourage educators to keep this analogy in mind to understand and adjust their response to students with maladaptive behaviors:

> So if I'm a teacher working with a child... what's my first job? It's not to come over and say, Why are you acting like that? Their language has gone. They can't tell me, they have no idea, And it's not to come over and fuss them because that's another queue of danger. And now I'm going to bark louder! So my first job is to help them settle down and feel safe and give them signs of safety and calm. Once their owl comes back, we can have those discussions... they can't learn while their owl is gone. So nothing that's happening in the classroom is going to be productive until that owl comes back. But then the second part of that is, if you live in a neighborhood with dogs and one dog starts barking, so do all the other dogs; it's contagious... And so, when that child's dogs are barking, your dog might start working, too. So now we've got a dogfight if the teacher and the child try to interact. So then the teacher's first job is to calm themselves, get their own stress response system in order, use their self-regulation; get their owl back. Now, they can calm the child. Now, we can have a conversation.

Having this mindset shift to viewing behaviors as a brain response and not intentional helps staff interact more effectively with students.

Describing this mindset shift further, Maria also pointed out many schools have begun using the analogy with students for them to also have an understanding of their stress reactions and as a cue when staff notices a student is beginning to become dysregulated by prompting them with, "'Oh, your owl flew away. Let's do some deep breathing.' And it just becomes this language of understanding why we're dysregulated and learning how to bring ourselves back down." DeKonty (2018) discusses how this awareness of the stress response system results in "a-ha" moments for partnering school staff who were able to see the connections between the science to issues of fight (verbal and physical aggression), flight (absenteeism and leaving the classroom), and freeze (withdrawn and lacking engagement) in their classrooms thus making them eager to learn

how to positively address these difficulties.  Rosanbalm et al. (2020) remark "These "a-ha" moments are crucial to motivation, but they are not sufficient – training alone cannot sustain practice change in the face of competing demands and ongoing pressures of a busy school day" (p. 21).  That is why NC R&LP emphasizes the importance of coaching and Resilience Teams (RTs) for taking motivation and knowledge gained from training and making it implementable daily for a lasting mindset shift.

Strong RTs along with ongoing NC R&LP coaching assists staff with seeing the benefit of a TS approach by using resources and strategies that assist students thus solidifying the mindset shift initiated through training (DeKonty, 2018).  Anna described how coaches encourage RTs to "be the champions of it [TS practices]... with the rest of the staff...because we can...talk about things all day long in a PD or a training, but that's not going to be what ultimately changes anyone's mindset" instead a shift comes when RT members "collaborate to work out the kinks of the strategy, streamline implementation, and then encourage others to join as positive outcomes emerge" (Rosanbalm et al., 2020, p. 27).

The main purpose of NC R&LP coaching is to keep the momentum of the RT and school staff focused on their selected goal and strategies to meet that goal through a school-based action plan with the coach assisting through necessary training; determining resources needed and getting access to those resources; developing achievable steps; helping to create a schedule for implementation, monitoring and evaluation methods; and keeping staff on board with progressing towards meeting their goals (Rosanbalm et al., 2020).  DeKonty (2018) described how by fall, staff in piloting schools acknowledged

176

students with most adversities were the ones spending the most time in In School

Suspension (ISS) and were easily triggered and in need of self-regulation strategies.

Seeing the correlation between what was learned in training and everyday witnessed

actions leads to actionable change.  On a NC R&LP school staff survey, one piloting staff

member remarked, "When you see teachers chatting in the break room, it used to be just a

venting session. Now they are problem-solving and brainstorming ideas" (DeKonty,

2018, para 14).  This problem-solving mindset is needed for devising resilience-based

strategies for a schoolwide culture shift.  DeKonty (2019) describes this large culture

shift experienced by a partnering elementary school which led to a positive school

climate and students with more self-regulation:

> ...a shift in the students, with many who now know how to recognize on their own when they are getting upset and need to use the calm down space – without any prompting from a teacher. Many students also love Mind Yeti for brain breaks and some are even calling themselves "Mind Yeti Masters," and will use new breathing techniques they've learned in the middle of class when they start to get frustrated. Overall discipline numbers are down compared to this time last year, teachers are handling behavior issues themselves by keeping kids in the classroom more often and trying alternatives to referrals rather than sending kids out, and the school climate as a whole feels better than it has in a long time according to several teachers on the team.  (DeKonty, 2019)

NC R&LP found some staff initially express concerns with the time commitment

for training, losing academic time, or "coddling" students; however, piloting school staff

discovered TS strategies embedded into everyday practice lead to long-term timesaving

with less behavioral incidents, more time on-task, less need for reteaching concepts, and a

more positive working and learning environment; ultimately, it is important for the RT to

regularly communicate these positive end products, so staff continue to be dedicated to

the process ("NC Resilience and Learning Concludes," 2019). The Project coach works with the RT to address "concerns of staff members who are hesitant or skeptical about the process to facilitate discussion of barriers and solutions" since these conversations are "critical not only to adjusting strategies for maximum success, but also for cultivating the respectful, accepting community required for a trauma-informed school culture" (Rosanbalm et al., 2020, p. 27). Emma stated she knows staff have had a mindset shift "when I hear teachers say they're using it at home with their kids." In feedback from staff, Maria finds "the most exciting, just talking to people about their mindset shifts." She pointed out one example where someone remarked to her that he initially thought using TS practices "was the dumbest thing I ever heard" since "it was going to undermine our academics" and just seemed "crazy," but then he decided to "give it a shot" and discovered "it is the best thing we've ever done. It is the most impactful" since it has "changed the way that we connect with the students, and everybody [staff and students] is doing better" and has resulted in less kids getting office referrals. Hearing personal examples like these and getting positive feedback from teachers who tell her how excited they are with the change since "we don't have blow-ups in class anymore, because the kids know that we care" are what motivates Maria in her work with the TS initiative.

**From Reactive to Proactive Practices**

A key aspect to having a mindset and culture shift is changing how staff approach student behaviors and discipline. Early findings of schools switching to TS methods of discipline have shown dramatic improvements with students not receiving exclusionary punishments and teachers having more positive regard for students, as Maria notes:

But in terms of numbers... so many of the schools we've seen drastic shifts in their... office referrals, their suspensions... that discipline stuff... if kids are staying in the classroom, they're still learning, and they're learning coping skills. And they're learning that the teacher cares about them enough to keep them in the classroom and keep trying with them... people feel like they've got their passion for teaching back because they feel like they're connecting with kids again which is what they wanted in the first place.

Understanding behaviors may be a brain response and not an intentional action can help staff demonstrate more empathy towards students with challenging behaviors.  This understanding can prevent staff from reacting negatively and escalating incidents or contributing to the negative cycle or patterns of behavior which can result in students losing substantial learning time (Public School Forum of NC, 2016).

In the discipline webinar, the restorative facilitator discussed improving staff-student relationships by staff viewing maladaptive behavior as a form of communicating stress which is described on *Participate* as "instead of seeing a child who is *giving* people a hard time, we see the child who is *having* a hard time" ("What Is a Trauma-Informed," n.d., Section "What Is the Process" para. 10), so staff feel passionate about helping students build resilience through belief in the power of SEL and TS practices.  Staff can guide students with concrete actions to build self-regulation and develop skills to reduce maladaptive behaviors with "discipline policies and procedures which respond to behaviors in ways which... maintain safe limits, teach skills, and repair and restore relationships ("What Is a Trauma-Informed," n.d., Section "Shifting Our View" para. 1).

Looking at national TS initiatives, Study Group XVI's Trauma and Learning committee learned it is important for educators to help students develop coping strategies instead of taking more traditional punitive approaches (Public School Forum of NC,

2016).  One partnering staff member describes this as starting discipline conversations with "'Tell me what's going on.' 'Tell me what's wrong' so we can get to the root of the problem,' instead of 'Why did you do what you did?'" (DeKonty, 2018, para 16).  These conversations may be challenging or not come naturally to some educators, but staff feedback reminds us that "'Sometimes we need to get out of our comfort zone in order to better understand our students'... 'We never know where a child is coming from'" ("At Overton Elementary," 2019, paras. 3-4).  One concern Maria often hears staff express in trainings is that a TS school will not hold students accountable for their behaviors.  Maria notes that expectations and consequences are indeed a part of a TS environment, but punishments that seek retribution for a student's behavior are not.

The *Participate* trainings elaborate that "punishment tends to shame students in ways which further activates their stress response system and erodes relationships" which is why schools should focus on consequences to "support students' sense of safety and build connections in the part of the brain capable of self-regulation" ("What Is a Trauma-Informed," n.d., Section "Shifting Our View" para. 1).  Rosanbalm et al. (2020) stress seeking understanding and being compassionate with discipline "does not mean that expectations should be lowered in trauma-informed schools," but instead the focus is on consequences that "help to motivate and guide behavior and clarify acceptable actions" and create "a consistent and predictable environmental structure that can promote calming of the stress response system" which particularly benefits those with toxic stress (p. 10).  Rosanbalm et al. (2020) describe restorative practices as having "clear expectations, limit setting, and rule enforcement" but also a "concern and active

assistance to promote well-being" thus schools have a balance with "maintaining high expectations where students are responsible for trying their best and being active partners in their education and skills building" which includes "consequences for breaking the rules" although the other key aspect to restorative practices working is "school staff commit to the other half of the partnership, providing the instruction and support to scaffold students in their efforts" (p. 11).

It is important for staff to have this mindset shift in how they view their role in discipline and get resources for how to implement this new approach so "instead of resorting to punishment and referrals out of the classroom, teachers are equipped with knowledge and tools to create safe and supportive environments in the classroom" (Rosanbalm et al., 2020, p. 20). One partnering assistant principal remarked, "'It has really been all about the mindset shift and the willingness for staff to take the time to peel back the layers with students to better understand what happened versus always just asking why and moving quickly to punishment'" ("Mindset Shift," 2020, para. 2).

Moving to restorative practices is valuable since traditional reactive punishments remove students from the learning environment, hinder supportive staff-student relationships, and fail to prevent future incidents since there is a lack of practicing alternative behaviors and coping skills; whereas restorative practices teach skills to minimize future incidents, strengthen student-staff relationships, and create a more positive environment (DeKonty, 2018). Maria expressed her concern that schools are increasingly becoming "hardened" with a focus on more security through metal detectors, school resource officers (SROs), and even calls for teachers with guns, yet this creates a

more negative place where students feel less safe.  To get away from "hardened" school models, Maria argued staff need a mindset shift taking the reasons for behavior into consideration to create new discipline policies with a more effective behavior matrix that responds well to maladaptive behaviors.

In attempts to avoid reactive punishment models, some schools have switched to positive behavior programs such as PBIS; however, these often fail to improve students' behaviors since they lack the skill development promoted by TS schools.  Rosanbalm et al. (2020) use an analogy to struggling readers to describe limitations both traditional and positive behavior systems have since they fail to build students' coping strategies or SEL:

> It is akin to telling struggling readers that they will be suspended if they cannot read a book, or... they will win a trip to the prize box if they can. Those motivators will not be enough to make struggling readers read if the underlying skills are not in place. Just like struggling readers, students with trauma histories and/or self-regulation deficits are likely to need active skills instruction and coaching in a safe, supportive, and structured environment.  (p. 10)

Maladaptive behaviors may stem from "environmental triggers and possible stress reactivity and/or skill deficits on the part of the student," so there is not a set method for addressing an issue as it may require "environmental changes and supports," or specific skill instruction on self-regulation or coping strategies (Rosanbalm et al., 2020, p. 25).  It is important to "identify alternatives to classroom removal and suspension, including use of collaborative problem-solving, restorative practices, and creation of discipline flowcharts [for] specific in-classroom consequences;" these will not prevent all behavioral escalations, so students may still need to leave the classroom at times but should be "first given space and support to calm down" then "supported in reflective

182

writing or discussions to consider what happened, what the early warning signs were, and how both they and staff might respond differently next time to support a different behavior and outcome" with "natural consequences or loss of privileges" as appropriate, but the focus is to limit the time out of the learning environment "and promote skills and behaviors that will improve self-regulation in the future" (Rosanbalm et al., 2020, p. 25).

While Anna and Maria both remarked on the value of restorative approaches to discipline, they pointed out they are not trained on the model but will help schools get linked to resources for going in-depth with restorative practices if desired. Anna added that restorative practice is a "popular tool" and "possible intervention, or potential strategy" mentioned in staff trainings, but the focus is more on the bigger picture of "discipline, not being something that's punitive, but being something that's used to teach skills" to help staff "reframe what discipline is, and that mindset shift around ...how discipline can look and the purpose of it," so although NC R&LP cannot provide in-depth training, they "can give kind of some of the general intro and overview to it."

The discipline webinar presenter spoke extensively on how a mindset shift in discipline that is meant to teach, not harm students has positively impacted his school by establishing a structure with clear policies and practices which staff consistently expect students to follow and consistently follow through with themselves. The presenter shared his school's discipline structure acronym: Communicate, Accountability, No nonsense. If everyone follows it then they CAN have a positive school environment through clear two-way communication, accountability with all stakeholders actively doing their part, and no nonsense by being consistent and following through on what you say you will do.

He said the students respond well to this, and it creates a respectful atmosphere where everyone knows what is expected and staff can be counted on to do what they say.  He discussed the importance of determining the belief behind the behaviors; what led the student to react as he/she/they did because often the belief comes from an unfounded fear that causes a student to react in a maladaptive way, so when you can figure out what belief triggered the behavior, you can change the thought process and reaction.  He gave some strategies they use at his school to assist with this including providing a student with an SEL pass upon request to go speak to someone before having issues.  If there already was a behavioral issue, then support staff come and take a brief walk with the student to provide calm down time or go to a separate room for REST (Reset, Educate, Solve, Transition) time for whatever amount of time is needed to get back into a regulated state to learn.  In REST, staff assist students with Resetting their emotional state and getting calm, Educate by identifying the belief behind the behavior that caused the reaction, Solve and brainstorm together what can be done moving forward, and Transition to go back into the classroom which may include needing to have a restorative circle with peers or staff who may have been on the receiving end of an outburst or incident.  Students are later followed-up on to check things are still going okay and see if they need extra support.  For minor issues, teachers will also follow this REST process within the classroom and send an email to support staff to check-in on the student later.  These measures have provided staff with more time to focus on teaching and diminished the amount of learning time students have lost due to in or out-of-school suspension.

I discovered many other examples of partnering schools and staff noting positive outcomes on students, staff, and the school culture with a shift to TS discipline. One piloting school noted a reciprocal benefit: "'Teachers feel more empathic and students notice it. Students are more respectful in class and have far fewer blowups'" (NC Resilience and Learning Project, 2018, p. 2). DeKonty (2018) received staff feedback noting an increase in "'restorative conversations with students... Teachers have been a lot more attentive to the needs of students' [and]... 'teachers are calmer when we're talking to the kids now, and so it makes the whole atmosphere calmer'" (para. 17). A middle school teacher discussed the importance of balancing classroom needs by teaching students how "to behave in the classroom and what's required in order for you and everyone else to learn" while taking the individual needs of students into consideration realizing "traditional punishment isn't necessarily the best approach" (Rosanbalm et al., 2020, p. 30). One elementary school found having options of students being bounced to another room with a positive mentor or using a classroom calming corner for a short time to be effective for most students with staff and visitors noticing a welcoming and positive shift in the climate (Downs & Combs, 2020). Another elementary school highlighted use of calming spaces with "sensory tools, soothing sounds, coloring sheets, and various flexible seating... lighting is dim and... calming visuals" for dysregulated students to become regulated with counselors providing a high level of support to model "calming techniques and strategies" and "follow up every Peace Room visit with a session with a counselor to make a plan and ensure that students have the opportunity to practice coping strategies" ("Selma Elementary Begins," 2019, para. 7). An assistant principal gave input

on how his school experienced dramatic positive changes after only one year of implementation with "a 50% decrease in referrals and in-school and out-of-school suspension" which came from staff taking a TS mindset shift to heart by implementing universal strategies such as "SEL into all classrooms using Second Step in some and Stanford Harmony in others, created classroom calm-down corners... Mind Yeti mindfulness app for transitions" and targeted strategies such as "using restorative questioning during office referral student conversations, SEL groups for tier 2 students w/social worker and counselor, check-in/check-out mentoring program..., a mental health therapist visits the school one day a week to meet with tier 3 students" which have done so well they plan to go deeper with this work "to incorporate more supports and services for tier 2 and 3 students" ("Mindset Shift Leads," 2020, p. 10). A middle school that also experienced substantial improvement with a TS approach continued to do virtual restorative circles with staff, students, and families during COVID-19 to help "students... learn skills for reflection, conflict resolution, restitution and repair" which "build trust with the students, helping them feel understood and respected, and that they matter," so students gain "greater understanding of themselves and others, and greater skills for being successful in the school environment" (Craig Riberdy, 2020c).

No matter how much training and support are offered or success schools experience with a TS approach, there may be staff who disagree with TS principles and do not wish to use TS strategies. Anna described how even their long-term partnership schools "still don't have 100% staff buy in," but notes "They're further along than they were when we started." Anna discussed the difficulty of this reality:

...at what point do we start to kind of, nicely encourage staff to leave? ... no matter where you work... personal and professional goals [need to] align with the vision... and mission of the organization... we heard a speaker who was talking about that specific thing, and he said, "I've always told staff... in some of those hard conversations... I'm happy to... be a reference for you and have a lot of positive things to share about you.  It's just that your ...vision and your purpose don't align with the vision of our school as a whole.

Over time, need for these difficult conversations will lessen since remaining staff will be aligned to a TS vision and incoming staff can be selected based on TS priorities.  Anna discussed the importance of "upfront, clear conversations" in the hiring process about a TS approach with SEL practices being a priority to get staff who also believe in these. Overall, it is important for staff to share a common purpose towards creating a TS school environment which can be done through universal training, coaching, and a shared vision.

**Summary of Mindset and Culture Shift**

A TS school is not possible unless staff genuinely undergo a mindset shift in how they view student behaviors.  This is difficult to accomplish; however, it is necessary to do and can be facilitated through ongoing training, support, and peer/leader modeling. Having foundational knowledge of the brain science behind trauma contributes to developing staff empathy and compassion needed for a transformation to TS practices. Staff must go beyond a deficit view of trauma to understand the science of resilience and view students as capable of adaptive behaviors when provided a supportive environment teaching emotional understanding and coping skills.  A school with proactive and restorative discipline minimizes students' time away from learning and helps to maintain positive staff-student relationships.

**Flexibility and Adjustment**

NC R&LP is flexible framework with core components. NC R&LP stresses "this is designed to be a FRAMEWORK, NOT A PROGRAM!... There are many strategies and approaches to consider, and each school will choose those that are the best fits with their needs and community" ("What Is a Trauma-Informed," n.d., Section "Anything Else?" para. 1). Since the pilot year and with the impact of COVID-19, NC R&LP's services and virtual supports have expanded. Partnering schools are encouraged to use progress monitoring to evaluate policies and practices for effectiveness and make ongoing adjustments. COVID-19 drastically impacted schools causing a greater need for flexibility and adjustment with how they continued to implement TS strategies.

Flexibility is what Emma likes best about the framework, yet it can make it confusing for others to understand what a partnership with NC R&LP will mean for their school since "sometimes people want a checklist" to follow. Anna also discussed this point emphasizing schools need to understand "There's never going to be a checklist... that says... if you do all 90 of these things..., you are deemed trauma informed" since being a TS school is "a journey that keeps going" with "never an endpoint." The full implementation model NC R&LP began with in piloting schools consisted of Resilience Team formation, universal training, brainstorming sessions, action planning with a targeted school goal, and intensive coaching to support TS strategies (Rosanbalm et al., 2020). Anna explained the full model is "customized by the individual school and the members of that team, so it doesn't at all look the same for every school" since NC R&LP wants to assist in addressing the school's "biggest challenges" by determining "main

goals or focus areas....then, helping them... brainstorm and think through specific

strategies... to meet those goals and... put in place a specific action plan or

implementation plan to get those strategies going and... consistent whole school." Emma

explained the Project coach reviews school data and conducts climate walks to inform

training and guide goal creation; this customization is important since "...no school is

starting at the same place... [or] going to receive things the same way, ...the overall goal

is to have that buy in, that we can try things a different way." Maria asserted that NC

R&LP follows TLPI's Flexible Framework by using "individualized action plans."

Partnering schools have a wide range of goals for their action plans which require

training, implementation, and monitoring of different strategies. Some of the school

goals include: "school-wide approach to Social and Emotional Learning, integrating it

into their existing restorative approaches to discipline, and into their support mechanisms

for staff wellness and self-care" (Craig Riberdy, 2020c, para. 1); establishing "calm-down

spaces in each classroom, restorative discipline practices, new self-care initiatives for

staff, mindfulness breaks, school-wide self-regulation messaging for students, and a

checkin/check-out buddy program for students with high numbers of office referrals"

(NC Resilience and Learning Project, 2018, para. 7); creating more supportive and safe

learning environment by finding a good way for staff to begin the day, so kids would be

in the right mindset for learning and using alternative discipline techniques to avoid

removing students from the learning environment (DeKonty, 2020a, p.); increasing

students' feeling of respect at school, improving student-teacher connections, enhancing

student ability to self-regulate (Craig Riberdy, 2020b); building more resilience in school

culture to reach students with adversity at home/community... increase parent engagement ("At Overton Elementary," 2019); or even having NC R&LP integrated into supporting existing frameworks schools are using such as Capturing Kids' Hearts which focuses on relationship building for positive climate ("Selma Elementary Begins," 2019).

On the topic of goals, Emma described how some schools take on larger goals and projects which are more time intensive such as assisting a school with forming a two-year "partnership with UNC and their department of counseling where we had doctoral students and grad students working directly with the teachers and also a professor from UNC to teach child-teacher relationship training" while other schools make smaller changes that do not require as much coaching and support such as monitoring students who are frequently getting office referrals or starting schoolwide SEL morning meetings. No matter the goal or strategies, schools need to observe implementation and adjust as needed since not all strategies will work as intended; it may take trial and error to reach desired outcomes. For example, one school "began by eliminating negative feedback from teachers such as giving kids frowny-faced stickers on behavior charts;" however, to their surprise, "they saw no changes which promoted the resilience team to take a deeper look at what might be behind the meltdowns kids were having and try more strategies after reflection" (Stern, 2020). In addition to adjusting strategies, schools may need to adjust goals given changes to their local context. Emma gave an example of a partnering school that added a staff wellness goal after administrative turnover negatively impacted the school culture and diminished staff morale which previously had not been an issue.

Despite NC R&LP being a very individualized model, they do stress the need for certain TS components to be in place before others. Maria describes it as moving through tiers "depending on where the school is at the moment and where their biggest areas of challenge are" with the tiers starting at "staff wellness first, relationships second, co-regulation, structure of environment, SEL skills, discipline model, then parent engagement, and IEPs," and each of these follow a MTSS model for varying levels of strategies and supports. A school-level Resilience Team is also a universal feature of partnering schools, Anna added, but NC R&LP is flexible with this by not forming a new committee if schools have "an already existing SEL team or something similar... and they really don't want to form a brand-new committee or team. We'll just kind of embed the work into that team that's already existing." NC R&LP staff tries to be accommodating to meet the needs of each school's situation and adjust to changes. Emma described how multiple schools have experienced administrative changes which makes it challenging to continue TS work especially when new leaders "come from out of district midyear" which "really makes it challenging, not because they're not interested, or they weren't asked. It's just a really overwhelming situation," so one way NC R&LP assists is by being "more involved in the second year than we typically would be" to support "resilience for everyone, including the adults." Anna reflected staff turnover "makes it really hard for sustainability purposes" and "a lot of the districts that we're in have high turnover."

Reviewing the pilot year helped inform changes for the framework going forward which included providing more school staff trainings, making training curriculum more interactive, spending more time building district and school readiness, and offering

additional models for increased flexibility ("The Public School Forum's," 2018). NC

R&LP sought to reach more staff to educate them on trauma, stress, and behaviors;

provide ways to build resilience; shift perspectives on behaviors as a means of students

communicating a deeper need that is not personally directed at teachers; and offer tools

for how to use trauma-informed supports to ensure staff feel supported by the system and

one another (NC Resilience & Learning Project, 2020). They did this by expanding

training options with building online learning courses on *Participate* and including one-

hour to full-day in-person sessions which can include consulting for targeted training;

however, NC R&LP staff stress the full implementation model with ongoing training and

coaching is most impactful ("Interested in Additional Training," 2019).

Maria expressed how they are continuing to grow and improve the framework

with "building new components every year" as part of "development and continuous

quality improvement... professionalizing the materials." Emma noted the largest

improvement being the online learning platform which was begun in 2019 before

COVID-19, but it wound up being very useful for continuing training after social

distancing protocols. Specifically, in response to COVID-19, Maria remarked they added

a myriad of supports including:

> Online self-care course...; virtual coaching; summer virtual conference...; [are]
> starting equity learning collaborative in 3 schools; online community where we
> send emails 2-3 times per week with ideas, thoughts for the day, self-care
> practices..., etc....[and] did a wellness month in the online community.

Anna remarked the positive from COVID-19 is exploring and developing more virtual

resources and supports to enhance efficiency even after the pandemic. Emma described

how these supports have decreased her travel time, virtual time with schools increased, and meeting virtually is "easier to schedule and structure especially trainings or PLCs." In the self-care webinar, panelists discussed COVID stretching everyone very thin with staff stressed by all the adjustments to abruptly shifting policy changes abruptly. The district leader said the silver lining in all this change is COVID highlighting significant areas for improvement, so education may be forever changed, but we may use this as an opportunity for improvement by continuing to develop virtual possibilities and going deeper into SEL and resilience-building.

Before the pandemic, NC R&LP had been garnering increased interest which enabled significant scale up to have a greater impact on districts. Anna described how they are "starting to transform a whole district" since the model has "been in 7 or 8 of their schools out of...13 or 14 schools" for schools in the model for just two years and with "some of the districts, especially that are a little smaller that we've now been in for 3 or 4 years, we're in... up to two-thirds or three-fourths of their schools." This growth speaks to the transformative nature of NC R&LP's framework and its positive impact on schools though a complication Anna mentioned is "figuring out the balance of what is the right rate to keep adding new schools but making sure that we're still supporting schools that we previously worked in;" fortunately, NC R&LP has received extra funding which has assisted in expansion with hiring more staff members. Unfortunately, COVID-19 impacted this momentum of growth NC R&LP. Anna described how typically they add "a whole new cohort of schools," but only added a few schools for the 2020-2021 school year since the pandemic halted the progress many of their new schools the year before

were beginning to make, so they "wanted to be able to still support all of those schools knowing they were going to need it even more this year in that same capacity."  Maria feels that while COVID has temporarily stalled growth, it will propel further growth going forward since the pandemic has brought attention to trauma and SEL through our society experiencing collective trauma, so the buy-in will be greater:

> ...schools are much more willing now to prioritize social emotional learning. They get trauma at a whole different level because they felt it... so I think people will be more ready for this, and they will need it more than ever before, but, at this moment, it's really hard to do.

NC R&LP and schools had to be flexible and adapt to the COVID-19 pandemic which caused all schools nationwide to move to remote learning.  Twenty-eight schools were partnered with R&LP when COVID-19 hit, but NC R&LP continued to provide coaching and training virtually to assist schools through the challenges and stress of this abrupt change (DeKonty, 2020b).  To ease some of the stress, NC R&LP released a guide to inform re-entry for the 2020-2021 school year that provided ideas for both remote and hybrid models.  They suggested schools "prepare staff and students for potential changes early" while remembering to "Calmly talk about how the school is preparing for changes that may arise" to serve as a "model to our students how we manage unexpected changes and emergency preparedness by explaining in developmentally-appropriate ways how we prepare... stay safe, and... have their back regardless" and review over and adjust "discipline policies, expectations, and classroom rules" to make "a safer and more supportive environment for students and staff" with "approaches that serve as alternatives

to suspensions such as restorative practices" and "how these can be adapted for virtual or hybrid learning models" (Bousquette, 2020, para. 14-17).

NC R&LP newsletter articles showed many schools found ways to adapt to a remote environment yet continue with TS strategies using virtual PD for staff on SEL, working remotely with other schools to share ideas, conducting morning meetings virtually with students, offering online SEL lessons for students, and encouraging creative student self-expression such as poems about the pandemic (Craig Riberdy, 2020b). An elementary school in the early stage of implementation had already seen a drastic decline in behavioral issues by using the check-in/check-out system when the COVID-19 pandemic hit and disrupted their scaleup plans; despite this, they pressed on and adjusted by changing to a staff wellness goal adding virtual supports including a daily staff Google Hangout for wellness checks and reducing the sense of isolation staff reported feeling (Downs & Combs, 2020). Maria articulated how "...the level of stress in kids and staff, is just through the roof" which hampered their "ability to have time with staff" since "they're so busy... So, there's been a lot of challenges in terms of how we can connect with and engage and... have that time with the schools," yet COVID has made them need TS strategies "more than ever...when we do get in there with them, they're so hungry for this information."

A considerable challenge faced by NC R&LP was the disruption of data collection for studying the framework. Anna and Maria both conveyed how they are struggling with how to proceed with the evaluation of NC R&LP because the data collection was thrown off in multiple respects. Maria gave an overview of their research

entailing "a stepped wedge cluster randomized trial... you get a group of schools who are all eligible for the intervention. You randomly select a few to start in the first year, a few to start in the second year and few to start in the third year" with the goal of collecting "the same data from all of them all the way across" to get a "time series, and with when the intervention starts, is their point that you expect to see change. And then you can look at that interrupted time series curve and see if change happens at the point of the intervention beginning," but COVID caused a major complication since "You can't do longitudinal studies when there's a pandemic in the middle of it." Maria went on to describe the data they were collecting before COVID hit that they are trying to still capture when possible are "changes in discipline, especially racial disparities and discipline; changes in attendance; changes in achievement" and surveying staff and students "looking at school climate, so student and teacher, staff perspective of how warm does their school feel, how supportive does it feel, how do they feel coming in there?" and surveying "families at the end of the year in terms of what they've seen change in their kids' school across the year during the implementation" in addition to conducting "climate walks [with]... lots of different indicators that I rate... in the classroom, in the hallways, and the recess, and the lunchroom of how the school is interacting and doing" throughout the year at different points "as the intervention moves on, and see... where things are changing, and where we need to keep working."

Reflecting on data collection, Anna pointed out that they were still able to obtain a "large response rate" on their electronic staff surveys which they "revamped... last spring and this fall to include a more customized one really related to the impacts of

Covid and the pandemic and virtual learning." Anna commented trying to get

administrative data has been more difficult: "we are still in the process, both from last

year [2019-2020] and even for some districts the year before [2018-2019] trying to

collect around discipline numbers, attendance rates, and test scores." Fortunately,

individuals and organizations who contribute to funding NC R&LP's continued work

have been "pretty understanding and knows that the circumstances of this year are just so

different and so unexpected. Whether it's, you know, the fact that we didn't add very

many new schools, or the data collection is going to look so different... they've been

really flexible and understanding of that" (Anna).

The Public School Forum adjusted to COVID-19 by moving their annual *Eggs*

*and Issues* conference to a virtual platform which was well received by guests, a few

commented in the chat section that they should continue doing the virtual symposium as

it made it much easier and convenient to attend. The Forum's *Eggs and Issues* stressed

the need for flexibility which was presented as one of the Forum's Top 10 Issues in

Education for 2021. A couple of superintendents and a senator all agreed local LEAs

need to have flexibility to meet the individual needs of their schools since the counties

and cities across NC differ substantially, so they should be able to adjust their calendar,

seat time, budgets, and programs to do what best meets local needs.

**Summary of Flexibility and Adjustment**

The flexibility of NC R&LP's model allows it to meet differing needs of

partnering schools. This flexibility and adjustment have also aided in expanding the

model and adapting to the challenges brought on by the pandemic. They have helped

schools to adjust and meet the increased social-emotional needs of both students and staff as they navigated through COVID. The silver lining of COVID are plans to continue to adjust and adapt for better meeting needs of all students going forward.

## Findings Part One Conclusion

NC R&LP is a trauma-informed model, but they use an asset-based approach by taking the principle of "do no harm" to heart by focusing on resilience and SEL screeners to avoid the deficit nature of trauma and ACEs screeners. To successfully become a TS school, NC R&LP stresses district and school leaders and staff must be ready for the process and willing to commit to the level of work needed for a full TS transformation. Dedicated school-level leaders on RTs are needed to keep all staff focused on implementing TS policies and practices which is fostered through universal training and staff collaborating to achieve action plan goals. Commitment requires staff to have a mindset shift in recognizing the value of TS policies and practices especially proactive, restorative discipline ones that are based in understanding the brain science behind trauma and resilience. The flexibility of NC R&LP allows it to meet the varying needs of partnering schools from those who want an introduction to trauma and resilience to those ready to fully embed TS strategies. Since its pilot year, NC R&LP has adjusted based on evaluative feedback to better meet partnering schools' needs and expand their reach. They also assist schools with progress monitoring to adjust strategies as needed. This flexibility and dedication to continual improvement was helpful for sustaining efforts through the COVID-19 pandemic with increased virtual supports.

CHAPTER VII

FINDINGS: PART TWO

In this section of findings, I focus on three primary goals of trauma-sensitive (TS) schools: increasing staff wellness, fostering whole child wellbeing, and building family and community connections. NC Resilience and Learning Project (NC R&LP) staff emphasize TS initiatives must begin with a foundation of positive staff wellness as it is necessary to have staff who are well-regulated to act as calm emotional co-regulators for students, be most effective at performing all aspects of their jobs, and avoid compassion fatigue and burnout which leads to turnover. Once there is an atmosphere of collective staff wellness, schools' goals may emphasize student-centered TS strategies that consider the whole child including physical, emotional, and social needs in addition to academic ones. Building positive relationships and teaching social-emotional learning (SEL) skills are foundational to students thriving academically. Once staff wellness and strategies for the whole child are addressed, then schools need to reach out to families and communities to expand and build on their efforts for a sustained TS endeavor.

**Staff Wellness is Number One**

NC R&LP considers staff wellness as one element of a school's readiness level. If supports for wellness are not in place, they assist schools in creating them since it is necessary for staff to be well themselves to implement TS strategies. There are many ways schools can create an atmosphere supportive of collective staff wellness.

**Well Staff are Needed for Well Students**

NC R&LP brings wellness to staff's attention through their schoolwide training where they "explore issues of compassion fatigue and secondary traumatic stress that can exhaust and deplete educators who spend all day caring for children and youth with significant trauma exposure" (Rosanbalm et al., 2020, p. 22). Anna highlights they "spend a good bit of time on" these issues during the universal training sessions since as Maria stressed, it is necessary for staff to value their own wellness and schools need to prioritize it before beginning other TS initiatives: "In terms of the components, like the strategies or... areas of intervention, it really starts with staff wellness." Rosanbalm et al. (2020) reiterates staff wellness is "perhaps the most foundational element of the model" since "Educators cannot respond effectively to student stress until they can successfully manage their own... [and staff] deserve to have their well-being prioritized and supported" (p. 22). Emma compared it to "the oxygen mask thing. Teachers aren't OK. The kids aren't going to be OK." Just as people on planes need to care for less-able loved ones after having secured their own wellbeing, school staff are in the position of caring for students, but it should not come at their own personal detriment. Self-care webinar panelists discussed schools being student-centered, but that does not mean staff should be ignored. Dangers of disregarding wellness include "becoming overwhelmed by the needs of students, families, and communities ... more conflicts with their students as well as higher rates of burn-out, contributing to job turnover" (Rosanbalm et al., 2020, pg. 6). Anna discussed wellness to remain effective, so "you're not having those feelings of

burnout or secondary traumatic stress or compassion fatigue.  So that your tank is full, and you are equipped to pour into your kids in the ways that they need you."

Despite the importance of self-care, staff often seem reluctant to do things for themselves.  Anna acknowledged doing self-care is easier said than done, especially with the increased burdens of COVID-19 since "teachers have so much on their plate, and that's what continues to get pushed to the bottom of their to-do list of taking care of myself."  COVID-19 has heightened staff feelings of being in survival mode.  Maria remarked staff view it as, "Yeah, that's important, but I can't even breathe right now." This awareness and value of self-care has increased Maria's time addressing it with staff: "I've spent most of the time doing in these past several months... staff self-care webinars."  This increased need prompted NC R&LP to give staff more support with practicing short regulation and self-care activities, so they would see it is doable in small doses when time is limited.  Anna described their November of 2020 self-care month which had "specific strategies that... could take just 2 or 3 minutes, like breathing practices or Mindfulness clips" to get staff to see self-care does not need to be time consuming; additionally, these small acts of wellness allow staff to build coping strategies for self-regulation "so when you're in a classroom with 30 other kids... if you just have two minutes at your desk to be able to regulate, so that you can somewhat recharge and...not...be the one to further escalate the situation"  The self-care month strategies were 1) "Heavy Work – push and pull movements of your muscles and joints," 2) "Deep-Breathing," 3) "Sensory Practices with the 5 basic senses," and 4) "Mindfulness" (DeKonty, personal communication, October 30, 2020).

NC R&LP also has a *Participate* course dedicated to self-care with information on the importance of it for avoiding traumatic stress and developing resilience and practical ways to form habits of self-care with discussion posts and resources including videos, websites, articles, and reports. They also include surveys to determine your number of protective factors for promoting resilience and a personal self-care assessment to identify personal strengths, but also areas for growth in one's wellness journey. The course concludes with staff making a personal commitment to self-care with a personal action plan. Staff leaders on the self-care webinar discussed concern with staff refraining from voicing their need for time for themselves or failing to follow through with self-care since wellness is not something that should be ignored; they stressed staff will need to continue to care for themselves even after the pandemic ends.

A focus on staff wellness does not mean staff cannot have personal trauma, it means staff need to practice self-care to be emotionally regulated regardless of trauma history. Maria says staff trauma background may impact how staff interact with TS practices "because they are more or less capable of hearing the information, and implementing the information depending on where they are in their journey [through processing their trauma]," and their level of coping may either improve or impair their interactions with students since "you've got the teachers who have a lot of ACEs who are fabulous as a result...[since having ACEs] can give you empathy and understanding in a way that you can't have without it," but there are also "teachers who have a lot of ACEs who are really not capable of that connection because it's too much... [since ACEs can be] constantly putting you into fight, flight, or freeze [making staff with ACEs] triggered

all day." Staff who have processed traumas well are an asset since they "can be finely

attuned to the struggles and needs of students impacted by trauma; they may be quicker

to recognize signs and symptoms of stress and have more experience with de-escalating

emotions and implementing calm-down strategies" (Rosanbalm et al., 2020, p. 6).

Having regulated staff, whether they have a history of adversity or not, is

important for helping students learn self-regulation. Students may need assistance when

in emotional crises to get to a regulated state, this is when co-regulation comes into play.

Staff work in the moment with students to model and support implementing of coping

strategies which is only successful if staff are emotionally well themselves:

> A critical first step for co-regulation is for the staff member to remain calm: upset emotions or dysregulation can be contagious... [and] triggers the child's stress response system to go on high alert, flooding the body with chemicals that promote the fight, flight, or freeze response. [Staff need to] pay attention to their own feelings and reactions... and use strategies to self-calm before and during the interaction. This helps keep a child's feelings and behaviors from escalating while also modeling regulation skills. (Rosanbalm et al., 2020, pp. 24-25).

Staff wellness is an important aspect to staff being able to remain calm coregulators and

continue doing this work on a regular basis without feeling burnout.

**Supportive School Culture**

Systemic support is needed for effective staff wellness. At *Eggs and Issues*,

panelists discussed how district and school leaders need to remember that staff are

valuable human capital who need their "mind, body, and soul nourished" to be most

effective, but too often, especially considering COVID, they are functioning in survival

mode which is not healthy for them or helpful for students. Educators need to be

respected, heard, and supported in this work. NC R&LP stress it in the best interests of schools for district and school administration to spearhead the process of implementing policies and practices that create a systemwide culture of care and wellness since staff may succumb to burnout, compassion fatigue, or vicarious trauma (NC Resilience & Learning Project, 2020). Additionally, "staff who are experiencing stress and burnout will not have the capacity to either take in the information at school trainings or implement the strategies selected by the school" (Rosanbalm et al., 2020, p.18).

Districts and schools need to go beyond encouraging staff to practice their own self-care to have specific strategies in place to address this need. Maria suggested they may begin the process of self-care by asking staff in trainings not only "What strategies can you use to take care of yourself? But what strategies can the school use to promote your wellness... improve staff opportunity to take breaks..., and staff collaboration?" Anna added staff need to feel safe in communicating their wellness needs since she often hears "teachers say, 'I want to take care of myself. I want to take time for myself. I want to ask for help, but I don't feel like I can, or that I should.'" Anna emphasizes Resilience Teams and school leaders need to let "staff know that it's OK, and it's a safe thing to ask for help or to say that they need a break."

NC R&LP provides many proactive examples of how schools can communicate the importance of self-care to staff including:

> ...visual reminders for practicing self-care to eat lunch, drink water, practice mindfulness, deep breathing; make getting substitute coverage low stress, do quality of life surveys..., self-care trainings, communicate changes effectively and quickly, duty-free lunch at least once weekly;... "a Tap-in/Tap-out program" to provide short breaks to teachers when needed...; a day of the week focused on

wellness...; positive community of staff praise; have time for regular teambuilding activities. (NC Resilience & Learning Project, 2020, p. 2)

Additional staff wellness strategies employed by piloting schools include: "a group incentive system for using self-care practices ...community-building group activities such as potluck meals, staff 'shout outs' to celebrate successes, and wellness opportunities such as weekly yoga classes;" the NC R&LP framework also encourages schools to personalize initiatives by having staff assist in "brainstorming strategies that would feel most supportive and stress-relieving to them" (Rosanbalm et al., 2020, pg. 22).

One piloting school discussed their realization that most of their support strategies were geared towards students and staff were left out of the equation. The resilience team's goal was to rectify this and ensure staff had the means to get support and calming breaks. To accomplish this, they gave teachers duty-free lunch and instituted a tap-in/tap-out program which resulted in staff "starting to ask for support when they need it, recognizing their own burnout and turning to colleagues more often to decompress in a healthy way" (DeKonty, 2019). One elementary school describes their calming staff room which "features dim lighting and a variety of resources for calming down or resetting" where staff may "do short guided meditations, doodle, listen to music or just relax" since school leaders there "encouraged them to utilize this room..., emphasizing the reality of compassion fatigue and the risk of burnout" which are important to address as they work on their "journey towards becoming a trauma-informed campus" ("Selma Elementary Begins," 2019). During the discipline webinar, the presenter discussed making sure staff feel respected and heard through doing regular restorative circles.

The self-care webinar was focused on how schools can foster collective staff wellness.  One panelist discussed how the Teacher Working Conditions Survey revealed teachers were unhappy which was also reflected in the poor staff attendance data.  She decided the best way to improve work satisfaction and attendance would be to make staff enjoy coming to work starting with a brief daily staff meeting filled with positive shoutouts, celebrations, and an energizing morning chant to get everyone excited.  She also encourages personal shares then checks in on staff who are having personal issues and allows them to take one personal day a year with no questions asked or approval needed.  Her school has each grade level plan and implement staff wellness activities which have included yoga and nonalcoholic Paint N' Sips.  The panel's district leader discussed hosting coloring events at schools with a DJ playing music while staff have a variety of coloring sheets and supplies to choose from to color and relax with intermittent breaks where a speaker discusses the importance of wellness.  These were so well received, staff asked to do them more often.

In another example of encouraging wellness, panelists from one school showcased how they keep things exciting for staff with a slideshow of pictures from some of their engaging activities such as spirit competitions, dress-up days, room service days (staff select a drink, sweet, and salty treat from doorknob hanger list and get it delivered to them later in the day), early dismissals (non-student days), and Wellness Wednesday with a food truck coming for lunch and exercise class later in the day.  A counselor on the panel shared how her staff has been virtually supporting one another through two Google Slide Decks: 1) self-care competition slides where staff post a

picture or say what they did for self-care that week and are entered into weekly drawings for small, typically free items like getting class coverage and monthly prizes which are bigger, and 2) shout-out slides to share positive words about something a colleague did that they appreciate. Both slide-sharing platforms have been very successful at encouraging and normalizing self-care and making people feel appreciated. Her school also helps teachers by support staff taking over SEL lessons or enrichment activities while teachers get a short break to use the restroom or a moment to recharge, and they setup a faculty workroom to promote more relaxing breaks by relocating the work elements in it (copy machine, paper cutter, etc.) and amplifying the lounging elements. A trickledown effect that panelists discovered from high staff wellness is the ability of staff to deal with maladaptive behaviors more effectively because staff are in a better mindset when interacting with students which prevents many issues from forming or escalating.

Self-care panelists also observed a wellness emphasis led to school leaders valuing staff at a deep level to have a more supportive working environment. This included prioritizing staff voice in decision-making. They are also careful to avoid toxic positivity by truly listening and not minimizing other's suffering dismissing them with positive sayings. It also helps if school leaders themselves are vulnerable, share their struggles, admit that they cannot fix everything or do it all, and acknowledge that it is okay for everyone to be human. Leaders need to model self-care and seeking support by participating in wellness activities. This establishes trust that staff may seek out support without looking incompetent and makes staff feel validated and valued as people. One school regularly monitors wellness using Google Forms to send out brief questionnaires

checking in on how staff are doing and if they would like any follow-up support with counseling. These leaders also show respect for work-home boundaries. One principal noted having a time in her building where everyone needs to shut off from work mode and go home. Another mentioned telling staff not to take papers home over holidays since grading could wait – just to go recharge and enjoy the break.

NC R&LP had a targeted collective self-care month in February 2021 with a weekly school challenge. The weekly themes were: 1) "Creating a safe and supportive environment," 2) "Providing check-in or break opportunities," 3) "Promoting fun, team-building, and PLAY for staff together," 4) "Offering time and space for staff to use and practice adult SEL skills" (DeKonty, personal communication, January 29, 2021). To encourage participation, NC R&LP did a weekly prize drawing for those who shared a post on how they met the challenge with a collective care item for the winning school. The online *Participate* self-care course also provides resources and tips to assist schools in developing collective self-care. They include a leadership survey for school leaders to recognize their strengths and areas for growth with how they encourage and support staff and a survey they may use to assess the level of staff wellness in their schools. There are resources for developing a school wellness plan, questions for directing brief wellness check-in conversations individually with staff, and resources on facilitating different staff circles: restorative, healing, responsive, and listening ones.

The global COVID-19 pandemic heightened the need for collective wellness as school staff faced increasing strain and stress from adapting to changes in their work environment while also balancing personal and societal issues brought about by the

pandemic.  Adding to these stressors was economic instability; in fact, "Budget cuts resulted in 500,000 public ed jobs lost in first 3 months of pandemic...[and] NEA predicts 1/5th of educators could lose jobs in next three years as a result of the pandemic" ("Budget Cuts and Lost Learning," 2020).  To address these added stressors, NC R&LP conducted a survey at the end of the 2019-2020 school year to see what staff's greatest concerns and needs were for moving forward during the pandemic.  Rosanbalm and Ali (2020) reported staff were most concerned about students, but 69% expressed concerns with staff health, 12% noted concerns with staff mental health and wellbeing, and stated they were seeking support from school leaders and districts through "clear and regular communication; flexibility and reasonable expectations...; words of appreciation...; facilitation of teacher connection and team building; and resources and supports for teacher mental health" (p. 3).  To meet these needs, Rosanbalm and Ali (2020) suggest, "expanding the Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs), which connect staff with mental health and behavioral health resources [and]... develop a list of community resources...shared with both staff and families;" provide self-care PD and resources; develop wellness plans for schools, teams, and individuals; provide time to practice wellness; and "Establish a set day of the week focused on promoting the physical and mental well-being of both students and staff... where there is an intentional focus on wellness and team building" by having "a set self-reflection and/or self-care goal" (p. 4). DeKonty (2020b) stresses that taking the time for wellness and focusing on things within individual's control amid the pandemic will result in more effective educators.

Partnering districts and schools which provided wellness supports during the pandemic have given positive feedback about their impact. The superintendent of an Eastern NC school district began having weekly calls with her principals to provide them a safe space for releasing emotions, processing, and brainstorming which in turn prompted the principals to do something similar for their staff and students by instituting "Feel Good Fridays" where teachers were free from virtual teaching, and students did not get new work but instead focused on wellness challenges (Battle, 2020). They also began a virtual happy hour time for district and school staff to come together for fun activities and teambuilding, including games and music which staff reported raised morale and improved connections (Battle, 2020). One principal noted, "Social interaction and having an outlet is the only way we will make it through these tough times" (Battle, 2020).

Even in schools with wellness initiatives, things can still become overwhelming especially in the pandemic when teachers were experiencing technology issues, high student absenteeism, issues connecting with students and families despite many tries, and simply feeling ineffective as educators despite working very hard which is why resilience teams need to continually look at what strategies are in place and see how they may be improved or expanded (DeKonty, 2020d). One school addressed these rising wellness needs by having a "staff community circle giving staff time and space to share some of their own emotions and feelings as well as some positive stories of hope they've seen in such a difficult year" followed by a "brainstorming session with the team on SEL supports they'd like to have" which led to forming an "SEL vision statement" and "three ideas to begin implementing right away" one of which was exclusively focused on staff

self-care "by setting up a small table in their lounge where staff can enter into a competition for doing their own self-care activities and then have the opportunity to win a prize" (DeKonty, 2020d).  Finding ideas that staff buy into and the school and district support helps transform to a TS climate of wellness.  Instituting a strong foundation of staff wellness allows schools to shift their climate and pursue additional goals.

**Summary of Staff Wellness**

Implementing of TS strategies begins with creating a school culture that is conducive to staff wellness since staff need to be emotionally regulated before undertaking the challenge of implementing TS student-centered practices and becoming effective coregulators.  Self-care is not just the personal responsibility of staff; schools need to provide an atmosphere where practicing self-care is accepted and encouraged.

## Whole Child

Taking a whole child approach means the physical, emotional, and mental needs of a child are considered in addition to academic needs.  It is vital that these underlying needs are met and cared for; otherwise, students will be unable to focus on learning.  TS schools recognize the importance of addressing these needs through an MTSS model that allows for additional supports for students with the greatest needs.  Emma stated schools having many students with maladaptive behavioral issues typically stems from either environmental issues or lack of support which NC R&LP assists schools in addressing through relationship-building to create a more positive school climate and teaching SEL strategies to improve self-regulation and interpersonal skills.

Advocating for a whole-child educational approach was one of NC Public School

Forum's focus areas in *Top 10 education issues 2018* since "a child's academic

achievements can't be separated from his or her mental health and social-emotional

learning" (Public School Forum of NC, 2018, p. 16).  A child's brain is not receptive to

learning unless the child feels physically and emotionally safe (Public School Forum of

NC, 2018).  In the *Creating Trauma-Sensitive Schools* introduction course on *Participate*,

staff review the NC Healthy Schools Whole Child Initiative since "Being trauma-

informed includes consideration of ALL the needs of the child... academics will only be

successful when other aspects of a child's functioning are on track" ("What Is a Trauma-

Informed," n.d., Section "What Is the Process" para. 5).  *Eggs and Issues* panelists

discussed how many students do not come to school for academics but for other enriching

activities that interest them more such as music, art, and social interactions which is how

we may best reach them to get them engaged in learning.  Panelists also stressed

respecting students as whole people beyond test scores and academics through listening

to them, giving them voice in the school, and facilitating restorative conversations.

NC R&LP's shift to the importance of the whole child "aligns with Maslow's

Hierarchy of Needs (1954), which suggested an individual has basic needs

(physiological, safety and security, belonging and love, esteem and self-actualization)

that must be met in a hierarchical order starting with physiological needs..." (Rosanbalm

et al., 2020, pp. 29-30).  Rosanbalm et al. (2020) discussed how NC R&LP's qualitative

survey "findings indicated that educators engaged with the Project realized that they

needed to be sensitive to students' unmet needs in the form of hunger, sleep deprivation,

or a lack of safety or security" (p. 29) and began to do more to attend to these needs after

learning more about the importance of the whole child as expressed by one teacher:

> If a child has not had anything to eat the night before, and they come in and we
> give them maybe a Pop Tart for breakfast. That's not enough to sustain that child
> while I'm asking that child to read Chapters 1 through 3 in a novel... That child is
> not thinking about what is going on at school because their stomach is talking to
> them. (p. 30)

In addition to ensuring structures are in place to address physical needs, NC R&L

highlights having mental health supports with supportive partnerships to give student

referrals, telehealth options, and hotlines; additionally, school staff are trained to

normalize seeking and using mental health supports and promote the priority of mental

health in SEL lessons and morning meetings (NC Resilience & Learning Project, 2020).

To address the increased mental health needs brought on by the COVID-19

pandemic, NC R&LP suggested schools expand and create new partnerships to meet

increased demand, continue offering supports virtually, revise their support structure as

needed to best meet needs (NC Resilience & Learning Project, 2020), and developed a tip

sheet that contains links to useful resources such as SAMHSA's healthy habits, low to no-

cost teletherapy options, and free 24/7 crisis support hotlines ("Accessing Mental

Health," 2020). Having more SEL supports and support staff to assist with mental health

was one of the top issues for 2021 discussed at *Eggs and Issues*. A superintendent noted

there were already not enough mental health supports in schools and COVID has

increased need. The restorative justice facilitator for the discipline webinar noted all staff

need to be willing to step up and act as counselors; teaching cannot look the same as it

did years ago since there is such an increased need for mental health, but not enough

support staff.  An educator on the *Eggs and Issues* panel described both staff and students

experiencing heightened "anticipatory grief" from constantly looking forward to things

canceled due to COVID and abrupt shifting in school plans which has added to the

already present epidemic of mental health and stress.

The primary focus of a TS school is doing more to meet the emotional needs of

students through four necessary components: "staff support; a structured environment;

warm, supportive relationships between staff and students; and skill-building and

coaching in emotional self-regulation skills for students" (Stern, 2020, par. 5).  These

components can be neglected in traditional schools where the focus is on academics and

meeting state accountability measures through standardized-test proficiency scores.  One

partnering elementary principal explained how she was baffled by her school having low

scores despite educators who were working extremely hard and using academic best

practices.  Attending a NC R&LP training shortly after her school community suffered

losses from yet another hurricane she reflected:

> ...a light turned on; 'that's the missing link,'" she thought, so she decided to bring
> back what she learned about trauma and the brain to share with her staff, "and
> remembers a number of them crying and saying 'that makes sense.'" Finally, they
> had an understanding as to why their work wasn't translating into higher student
> test scores, and they had hope that they could do something about it.  (Craig
> Riberdy, 2020a, para. 3)

Another elementary school principal described having the same epiphany, "'This puts a

name to what we've all known and felt, but didn't have words for...This is the missing

piece to all of our work'" even though her school had a very different concern since they

214

"already had strong staff support, positive relationships, structure, and SEL in place;" instead, they were struggling with "how to reach a small minority of kids who struggled to succeed in school, despite everyone's best efforts" which resulted in these students missing key instructional time since they "were repeatedly out of class for behavioral infractions or melt-downs... Most of the students in this group had significant... ACEs, and the team wanted to do more for them, but didn't know what that 'more' should look like," so forming the NC R&LP partnership gave them additional strategies for providing tier two and three supports (Stern, 2020, para. 2-5). The restorative facilitator from the discipline webinar discussed it is difficult for those students who are "emotionally locked up" to learn, so it is important to build trusting relationships and provide emotional supports to help "unlock" them by not only looking at external behaviors, but also focusing on what may be internally occurring. Students could be experiencing minor (bad day) or major (trauma) "emotional lockup," so his school uses Zones of Regulation to have regular "temperature checks" of how students are emotionally doing to help identify issues early. He also stressed staff need to avoid power struggles with students since they damage relationships and trust is needed to work effectively with students.

Strong staff-student relationships are crucial to TS schools since "Supportive relationships are key to mental health and the healthy development" (Bousquette, 2020, para. 7) and "a cornerstone to resilience building and healing from trauma, [and] 'the number one predictor of positive child outcomes'" (NC Resilience & Learning Project, 2020, p. 4). Rosanbalm et al. (2020) describe staff-student relationships as "the most central strategy pertaining to students" since "Attachment... forms the secure base that all

students need as a foundation for learning in schools" which helps them grow academically while becoming more socially competent which results in less maladaptive behaviors (p. 22). Additionally, "A teacher's use of instruction, modeling, prompting, and reinforcement will not be effective at promoting long-term skills building unless the child has a relationship with that teacher in which they feel respected, valued, supported, and understood" (Rosanbalm et al., 2020, p. 9). This level of relationships helps staff be effective co-regulators for students. Rosanbalm et al. (2020) defines co-regulation "as the manner in which caring adults interact with children and youth to help them regulate in day-to-day situations." This is not taught to students when they are regulated as a preventative strategy, rather it "is an in-the-moment strategy for helping a child regulate as challenges arise... to understand, express, and modulate their thoughts, feelings and behaviors during times of distress..." (Rosanbalm et al., 2020, p. 9).

Co-regulation and supportive relationships are helpful for students with trauma histories since they "are likely to have over-reactive stress response systems, constantly on high alert scanning the environment for cues of potential danger," so by having "an adult who is perceived as safe and supportive can help to calm this stress reaction, providing the context in which a child can let down his or her guard and be ready to learn" which enables co-regulation to be effective since "a trusted adult is more likely to be successful in modeling and coaching a child in self-regulation, providing a secure environment for practicing new skills" (Rosanbalm et al., 2020, p. 22). Relationship-building alters how staff approach students and creates a warmer school climate. Rosanbalm et al. (2020) gives an example of a teacher describing this transformation:

216

> ...now we are more quick to question and get to the underlying cause than we are to react... it's a lot easier to say, 'You know what? I need this kid gone.' Just write them up, send them out. But if you've built that relationship... 'Hey, this is not like you today. Talk to me and tell me what's going on.' You don't have to do it. That's something we don't get paid for. We get paid academic-wise to teach the kids.... [but] You have to meet them where they are, and then just give them that encouragement that they can do it. You can overcome whatever challenges it is, and you can be yourself and just flourish. (p. 29)

To help facilitate positive changes such as these, NC R&LP trainings begin with "exploring the staff-student relationships" by having "staff work in small groups to consider what positive connections with a student look like and how they can promote these;" then they "visualize staff–student connections across the school and identify those students that are disconnected," so that "school staff can better identify the strategies that they might consider in building stronger relationships across the student body" (Rosanbalm et al., 2020, pp. 22-23).  Rosanbalm et al., (2020) list the most common TS strategies partner schools use to facilitate positive staff-student relationships:

> ...intentional one-on-one connections, staff-led clubs, focusing on at least a 5:1 ratio of positive to negative interactions with a student (to help teachers focus on the positive), and use of a check-in/ check-out process for children with behavioral challenges in class. This last strategy centers on creating an in-school staff buddy for each identified student, who starts and ends every day by chatting with the student one-on-one. These check-ins build a special in-school relationship, help staff gauge how a child is doing at the start and end of each day, provide information for specific child interventions and supports, and help the child focus on a few behavioral goals across the day. (Rosanbalm et al., 2020, pp. 22-23)

By building strong relationships, schools demonstrate their dedication to the whole child.

When I asked during interviews what made a TS school different from one that is not, in attempts to get a defining characteristic of all TS schools, all three interviewees

217

unequivocally declared – relationships.  Emma described relationships as creating a "supportive environment for everyone... from... teachers, to parents, to kids, to administrators" which creates the biggest difference since "we can do skills and... policies and all these things all day long, but if you're missing that connectivity and true sort of trust in relationships, then we're probably not gonna make it very far."  Emma maintains positive relationships can help overcome other negative issues at schools such as one partnering school which "has had two administration changes... they talked of closing the school and consolidating the school," yet "the relationships that the adults have with kids...regardless of what is happening all around" have contributed to maintaining a positive climate.  For Anna, relationships make kids feel safe and supported where "they have at least one adult there who cares about them and has their back....  We want every kid to... know that they're not just going to learn about math and reading, but they're gonna learn other social emotional skills, too."  For Maria, relationships change the dynamics of the school climate: "It's when the kids walk in in the morning, everybody's glad to see them, and the kids know it. And the staff are glad to see each other.  That it's just connecting all the time, and it's warmth."  Maria sees relationships as being the factor that gets students to perform at higher levels:

> The word I really like that we've been using recently is warm demander.  Now, I'm going to hold you to high accountability.  At the same time that I support the heck out of you, and I'm right here with you... This is their [educators] immediate pushback, so we have to address it quickly. We're not lowering standards.  We're not giving kids a free pass. We want them to reach success, and we've gotta hold them to high standards as a result. It's just that we have to also love them and support them along the path.

Maria also pointed out relationships get staff to "see behavior differently" improves "buy in with the students, so that we can demand behaviors from them because...they know we care about them" and staff can then use "co-regulation" to practice regulation with students, but it requires having "first that relationship piece."

NC R&LP staff stressed the heightened emotional needs of the pandemic required schools to delay academics and devote increased time to relationship-building activities to start the 2020-2021 school year (Rosanbalm & Ali, 2020; reentry plan, 2020). NC R&LP provided schools with ideas for continuing relationship-building during the pandemic including: connecting students to their previous year's teacher; conducting socially-distanced home visits with masks on outside students' homes, getting to know each other activities, morning meetings, monitoring with daily SEL checks, adding play into the academic schedule, doing student school climate surveys (Rosanbalm and Ali, 2020; NC Resilience & Learning Project, 2020), wearing an easily visible happy picture when wearing masks, showing a video of you with no mask, engaging relationship and teambuilding activities (Bousquette, 2020), calling homes, providing virtual office hours, having virtual spirit weeks, and doing virtual show and tells (DeKonty, 2020b).

Many of NC R&LP's 2020 newsletters were devoted to helping schools share and learn strategies for promoting relationship building and forging connections while schooling during a pandemic. Strategies they compiled and shared out from partnering schools included: walking students one-on-one to classes at the beginning, using air hugs to remain socially distanced but show caring, one-to-one check-ins with virtual students (DeKonty, 2020c), morning meeting and relationship-building, using "Choose Love's:

219

Brave New World" Curriculum, having calming spaces for in-person, (Craig Riberdy, 2020c), using Panorama surveys measuring students' feelings of safety and connection, and "I wish my teacher knew..." activity (DeKonty, 2020d).

Once there are trusting relationships, staff can work to develop students' SEL skills since often maladaptive behaviors are simply a result of a lack of having skills and strategies to better express themselves.  On the *Participate* course, schools are reminded that it is important to teach SEL and practice school-appropriate behaviors: "Just as we would not punish a child for reading below grade level, we need to provide children with developmentally appropriate instruction and practice for how to behave and regulate themselves effectively in the school environment" ("What Is a Trauma-Informed," n.d., Section "What Is the Process" para. 9).  A qualitative survey with partnering schools showed a TS transformation is a long, ongoing process, but revealed staff went from feeling frustrated and hopeless to feeling problem-solving and SEL strategies made a difference, teachers act calmer, and students express needs more positively; having tools and support for TS strategies like SEL were noted as most useful (DeKonty, 2018).  To develop SEL skills, partnering schools directly teach self-regulation and provide opportunities for practice usually through using "school-wide delivery of an evidence-based curriculum for social-emotional learning" for all students to have "consistent developmentally appropriate information that builds in complexity across the grade levels;" many schools also "implement some form of digital mindfulness app to teach and practice mindfulness skills, particularly after classroom transitions" and provide

"individual or small-group targeted intervention" since "some students may need extra support" or referrals "to services in the community" (Rosanbalm et al., 2020, pp. 23-24).

SEL supports are also beneficial for staff "to learn and practice self-regulation skills, and they can become a normative part of the school culture" (Rosanbalm et al., 2020, p. 24) which helps staff remain more effective as co-regulators. Emma remarked "The Child Teacher Relationship training one is really interesting, and I think helps with the self-regulation on both end of the spectrum... for teachers and kids." The self-care webinar panelists discussed doing SEL activities with staff translated into staff then using these same strategies with students since they directly experienced the benefit of them. In the discipline webinar, the restorative justice facilitator noted that he models one new fun SEL strategy weekly with staff which they can take and use with students. The schools on the self-care panel also discussed how they allot time within their school day specifically for SEL. Elementary school staff mentioned morning classroom SEL meetings while middle school referred to a brief homeroom block for SEL.

One elementary school described how staff were reluctant to incorporate a daily 15-minute SEL block with the concern of taking time from academics, but staff discovered it saved time since students were less disruptive and actively engaged during learning during academics after getting their talking out in SEL time, and there was no additional burden of lesson planning since they used the scripted "Jesse Lewis Choose Love" free curriculum (Downs & Combs, 2020). After a few months, staff noticed they were forming deeper connections and being less judgmental of students and developing a more positive classroom dynamic since both staff and students were more compassionate,

patient, active listeners, and used more positive self-talk with less negative words and phrases while interacting with others with the added benefit of students handling their own conflict resolution and taking ownership of their actions (Downs & Combs, 2020; Craig Riberdy, 2020a). Emma explained how routine practice of these skills make them an embedded part of the school culture that students are receptive to doing:

> The more we can make it a routine, like a muscle, the more we practice better off we are.... elementary kids eat it up. They love breathing and doing all their things because... it makes them feel empowered... think about [when you are] feeling... out of sorts... like you're coming unglued, and you take deep breaths and all of a sudden, you're better. You're like, holy moly, and you want to do it.

This is being seen in practice in partnering schools such as "A Kindergarten teacher... [who] noticed her students using the "brave breath" technique, without prompting, when feeling overwhelmed and trying to focus" (Craig Riberdy, 2020a, para. 6).

NC R&LP provides and suggests many SEL strategies that are nonacademic; however, as Emma explains, these strategies positively impact academics: "...we use the neuroscience to understand that... if you take this 30 second SEL break, you're going to transition into math... it's preparing kids, teachers, and the classrooms to be able to listen new information in a healthy and supportive way." Anna adds that these nonacademic strategies follow the "mindset that when you focus on things like relationships and SEL, you're helping kids to regulate" this makes students "feel safe and in a state that's ready to learn. So, ultimately, those strategies... are impacting learning and academics." Partnering schools have found success with nonacademic strategies such as "alternative seating areas, calming lighting and music, and aroma diffusers to set a more positive

environment in their classrooms (Rosanbalm et al., 2020, p. 24) and incorporating SEL

into ISS when students need an alternative environment, so they may reflect and work on

skill building to be able to successfully rejoin the classroom (Stern, 2020).

Within the classroom, most partnering schools have calm-down spaces/ peace

corners with "multi-sensory calming materials and signage" to help students get

regulated; "teachers might prompt a student to consider the calm-down space if emotions

are escalating, but it is up to the child to elect to use the space" (Rosanbalm et al., 2020,

p. 25). Emma described how peace corners assist students in "pre-regulation, so that

they're able to kinda communicate their feelings before it becomes an issue [and] utilize

the skills that they have been taught" to avoid larger behavioral issues. She added peace

corners are structured in a range of ways; some teachers have kids go on their own, while

others will give permission or encourage a student to go use it: "It depends on the kid and

the classroom because... we work with the teachers and what they're comfortable with."

There are signals teachers and students can determine and practice at the beginning of the

year such as "have cards at their table that they flip. There can be like a subtle cue where

the teacher just continues teaching but puts a hand on the kid's back."

An elementary school which implemented peace corners in all classrooms also

had students keep individual self-regulation glitter bottles for mindfulness practice "at

their desks that they can use (shake and watch glitter settle) when needed... Staff,

including administrators, keep them on their desks too and model using them when they

need a moment to re-center;" this has helped teachers "keep lessons going while students

get back to being regulated, so the disruptions have decreased, students' attention to task

has increased, and teachers' stress level are lower than in past years" which has resulted in more learning time as "Less students are needing to be removed from the classroom due to disruptive behaviors, and the school has had a decrease in suspensions" with the added perk of "increasing staff morale" (DeKonty, 2020a, para. 9-11).

Another popular technique used by partnering schools are restorative circles where staff and students sit facing one another in a circle to share one at a time; conversations revolve around doing "temperature checks" for gauging how students feel, discussing a selected topic, teambuilding, and resolving issues as needed (DeKonty, 2020a). One principal mandates 10 to 15-minute circles in all lesson plans, so core and enrichment teachers use them to start the day with students to the positive reception of staff who have noticed they benefit students in attending to tasks and remaining self-regulated (DeKonty, 2020a). One elementary teacher discussed how restorative circles and peace corners have improved her teaching since she "'can more readily deal with the issues that come up in my class as they happen. I am not as stressed this year. Now when I teach, they are actually able to listen and learn'" (DeKonty, 2020a, para. 10). Two students also gave their feedback on why they enjoy having restorative circles:

> One third grade student shared: "Circles help me calm down if I am mad, and if I am frustrated, I can start to feel better." A fourth grader shared: "When we do circles, it lets my teacher know more about me. I can also get ready to learn for the day." (DeKonty, 2020a, para 8.)

Engaging students in the process and them feeling the benefits of these activities helps ensure their success. One school's Resilience Team sought students' input for what coping strategies work best for them when frustrated and used this information to create

reminder signage around the school on safe ways of expressing emotions ("Resilience &

Learning: The First," 2018). Overall, partnering school staff have given positive

feedback on the changes they have witnessed from keeping SEL in the forefront of their

interactions with students. One staff member noted, "Instead of acting out, now they're

[students] ready to express, 'This is how I'm feeling. This is why I'm feeling this way,'"

and another reflected, "'students are more open to verbalizing that they need a minute.

Knowing that there is a place for them... and they don't necessarily have to tell anybody

what's going on'" ("Resilience & Learning: The First," 2018, para. 19).

COVID-19 was an unprecedented time testing people's stress levels and ability to

stay regulated. In newsletter articles, NC R&LP staff encouraged schools and educators

to give themselves grace with COVID challenges and use it as an opportunity for more

peer support and modeling healthy self-regulation of "big emotions" for students to

emulate through teaching calming activities such as creative expression, deep breathing,

and grounding/mindfulness exercises to process and release emotions (Bousquette, 2020).

NC R&LP gathered ideas to share out on how partner schools were meeting students'

SEL needs virtually and received the following:

> "'advisory time, twice a week and using relationship-building SEL lessons...[and] a planned interest inventory with students to group kids into ..(advisory groups);" "collecting feedback from students each week after 'Den [advisory] Time'...to guide our next steps... and ...following up with any students who submit alarming responses;" "Sanford Harmony in the classroom to teach SEL and to foster a sense of community;" [and] "Zones of Regulation in their classroom as a way to do feelings check-ins with students... (DeKonty, 2020c)

Some partnering schools used remote time to revamp and plan out their efforts for once students returned (Craig Riberdy, 2020b; Stern 2020). For schools returning to in-person during COVID, NC R&LP recommended these safe practices: individual calm-down kits; mindfulness apps; school/district mental health hotlines; creative expression opportunities; policies, practices, and discipline are TS; positive age-appropriate signage for new procedures and practice often; and fun safety protocols and procedures for instance "add 'lava flow' to the center of walkways where students are not allowed to step in order to promote distancing" (NC Resilience & Learning Project, 2020, p. 7).

In a NC R&LP newsletter, DeKonty (2020d) described one school's back-to-school meetings focused on "specific ideas on how teachers could still build relationships with their new students – even through a screen – and how their entire staff could still infuse SEL skills and lessons into their regular routines;" these ideas included:

> ...using a video for students to watch or doing a read-a-loud of a mindfulness script...using a feelings chart with different emoji faces or check-in tool like a feelings thermometer, an analogy to something like weather (feeling sunny, cloudy, or stormy), or the Zones of Regulation... then share how they are feeling out loud or share in the chat... Morning Meetings [with]... the Sanford Harmony curriculum and conversation cards... Digital "breathing boards" and digital calm-down rooms. (para. 2-3)

By taking a proactive approach and keeping SEL in mind, partnering schools attempted to ease the strain of schooling in the middle of a pandemic.

**Summary of Whole Child**

TS school staff keep the whole child in mind to create a positive, holistic school environment that values all aspects of children's development. TS schools value students

as people, not test scores, and provide supports for the whole child, including mental health resources, building supportive staff-student relationships, and practicing SEL.

## Family and Community Engagement

NC R&LP encourages schools to connect with families and partner with community members and agencies to better serve and support students although establishing these connections is more of a year two focus. The first year of partnership is to form a Resilience Team, train on trauma and resilience, establish an action plan with goals, begin implementation of TS strategies to get staff and students regulated, and launch policies and practices for a more positive school climate. Then schools begin strengthening family and community relationships. Some schools are ready to form partnerships sooner; it depends on their readiness level and goals. NC R&LP provided resources and ideas to assist schools in navigating the increased needs to connect with and support families and have community partners during the pandemic. The Public School Forum continues to raise public awareness and advocate for TS schools to create policy change and increase funding for TS initiatives including their NC R&LP.

On *Participate*, NC R&LP stresses how family and community partnerships provide the emotional support needed to benefit student wellbeing: "A whole-school approach which is shared with families, and connects students with their peers and their community, creates a robust web of these relationships which can turn toxic stress into tolerable stress" ("What Is a Trauma-Informed," n.d., Section "What Is the Process" para. 7). "By soliciting parent/caregiver engagement and making connections to community" students build their resilience since they "have a connection to a strong, tight-knit

227

community and know that they belong" ("What Is a Trauma-Informed," n.d., Section "What Is the Process" para. 4).  Rosanbalm et al. (2020) discuss the importance of partnering schools forging these strong outside connections once staff have implemented TS policies and practices to promote a positive school climate since "Ultimately, school commitment to trauma-informed practice will be most effective and sustainable if the within school practices are expanded to the broader community and the school, in turn, receives support from families and community-level organizations" (pp. 25-26).

The level of parent engagement in partnering schools varies though based on schools' goals and readiness levels.  Emma says parent engagement is not the first priority despite believing it to be "a very important one for sure" since there is a need for staff and students to be regulated enough since "we certainly don't want the parents not to be OK."  She stressed that there are "baseline goals that need to be accomplished before parents can come in and... [staff begin] working with them" with schools needing to be in "that prime area, where... the relationships in the classroom and climate is good."  Maria noted that it is important "when parents come in, they feel a part of the team" which requires looking at school practices and policies to ensure they are welcoming to parents especially "How do we think about policies for how we do IEP meetings, individualized educational plans?"  Having policies and practices in place that are conducive to a positive climate is important before having high parental involvement, but once ready, Maria stresses sharing the TS practices used in the school with community members and families, "so that they're consistent at home, so that they find the supports and connections they need, and so that they're connected with the school."

Family engagement needs to be meaningful, yet fun. One elementary school leader discussed how they were able to get parents to understand their work with SEL to increase family support of these initiatives. Instead of having a guest speaker or PPT presentation, they had students in each grade level acting out the brain science behind stress reactions and different SEL strategies that help with getting regulated which resulted in high attendance by families, a more engaging manner of learning about these important topics, and knowledge of how they could use these in the home (Downs & Combs, 2020). Emma declared how "it always surprises the teachers and everyone, how much participation you actually get when you do things like that... [but families] come especially when you have snacks and goodies, and you make it fun." She stated how partnering schools have gotten increased parent engagement with support of school goals such as a middle school with a staff wellness goal were able to get assistance from parents with supplies and decoration of a staff wellness room; another school with a goal of improving the child-teacher relationship included "a parent component where we would have coffee and donuts and...[families would] learn more about... what the teachers were doing therefore... they could communicate in the same way;" and a school which already had classrooms with successful calm down corners and were trying to get more parent support with school initiatives, so NC R&LP assisted in "doing little kits for at home and working with the parents on how to use them. Having...a morning coffee time, where they would have speakers come in that really focused around the goals that the school was doing, whether it was self-regulation or SEL."

Making proactive positive calls home, holding parent brunches, having a weekly coffee hour with guest speakers, sending home positive postcards, and conducting home visits resulted in one of the piloting elementary schools getting increased Title One night attendance and positive feedback from families who expressed having a better understanding of what their children are learning and feeling more connected to staff ("At Overton Elementary," 2019). Knowing more about students' personal lives and being connected to families has led to educators scaffolding, adjusting their teaching to better meet students' needs, and having increased support from families who had traditionally been disconnected from the school ("At Overton Elementary," 2019). A district superintendent said she believes increased effort to connect families will result in improved engagement and attendance but understands results do not come immediately: 'It's really going to take five years to get where we want to be and we're learning that, but we're still excited about it" (Moomey, 2019).

In the self-care webinar, one of the principals promoted seeking assistance from parents by utilizing their skillsets; for example, she had a parent who is a Zumba instructor come lead classes for staff; another principal took a very different approach, she provides families with her personal cellphone number and asks that they contact her in an emergency, not teachers or other staff when it is outside of work hours. She has this conversation to stress to parents that staff's personal time needs to be honored and non-emergencies can always wait until the next school day while still valuing families need to connect in an emergency. The discipline webinar presenter mentioned doing restorative circles with families, and since they are doing SEL well at the school level, they are

beginning next steps by looking at how they can bring SEL out into the community and reach families with it.  Anna discussed how NC R&LP is working to increase engagement and awareness with families by creating "some documents that would kind of serve as a school starter pack."  This has been a work in progress since they began giving newer partnerships schools materials for parents "but they've not been kind of nicely all put together in one place."  In the packet they are working on, there is "a sample letter that they could share and sent home with parents and caregivers that would kind of introduce the partnership that they have with us and what the work will look like."  Before they created a packet, schools would "share with parents how they're... doing social emotional learning or how they're teaching and providing that type of support, and it's not always directly tied back to a partnership with us."  However, Anna says they do "encourage schools to... formally share with parents about our partnership."

The COVID-19 pandemic impaired the ability to connect with families, especially those lacking internet connections, while also enhancing the need to do so: "In a survey of nine rural, low-resource schools in North Carolina, the NC Resilience and Learning Project found that 41% of students did not have sufficient internet or device access for remote learning and 22% of students had no contact with the school after March 15th" (Bousquette, 2020, p. 11).  When working alongside families to address barriers, NC R&LP recommends schools focus on what was within their control and "Meaningfully include staff, parents, and students in decision-making...Providing opportunities for voice and choice is a trauma-informed principle" (Bousquette, 2020, p. 10).  To create some stability amid the chaos of a pandemic, NC R&LP encourages schools to "Include

families and students in setting your new norms and expectations for the year" with focus on "helping staff and students adjust to the new routine and expectations" since "Lack of structure, routine, and manageable expectations can leave students and adults feeling anxious, irritable, and hypervigilant" (Bousquette, 2020, p. 13).

In NC R&LP's April newsletter, guided schools in assisting with in-home structure through providing ideas for setting up a small separate space for learning and send home sample schedule ideas that keep the whole child in mind by incorporating art, recess, music, lunch, and snacks in addition to academic time to establish routines and noted it is also important to consider emotional needs of students by providing simple and clear assignments with easy directions to limit frustration and supporting SEL at home with at-home kits and tips for calming and online mindfulness videos and apps (DeKonty, 2020b). NC R&LP also created a tip sheet schools could give to parents with ideas for creating no to low-cost calm-down spaces with sensory objects that are easy to make at home such as a glitter bottles or homemade stress balls, mindfulness video links, and age-appropriate SEL children's books ("Social Emotional Learning Resources," 2020).

The August 2020 NC R&LP newsletter was focused on tips for re-entry as schools were debating whether to continue remote schooling or do a hybrid model since the COVID-19 pandemic still posed a health and safety threat. NC R&LP gathered feedback from schools on what they did to continue connecting with families during the spring semester of remote learning and compiled these to assist schools learning practical ideas from one another for continuing connections through virtual learning. These included: using the Remind app to text important communications; support videos

teaching families how to login to remote learning platforms; reminders via Facebook;

orientation and informational videos posted on YouTube, school websites, and social

media; ClassDojo app for school counselor support; virtual parent coffee hour with an

interpreter available and engaging topics; quarterly family outreach using Zoom; virtual

parent-teacher conferences; sending home learning supplies such as workbooks,

flashcards, and books; making personalized student schedules with when/where/how to

log in (DeKonty, 2020c).  Having many strategies for increased engagement allowed

schools to pick what suited their needs best.

TS strategies help students and staff improve their self-regulation and

interpersonal skills which allow them to be better citizens who can change their

community.  One piloting staff member remarked, "Instead of having a chaotic

environment that feeds INTO the school, we are building an organized caring effort that

extends OUT of the school" (NC Resilience and Learning Project, 2018).  To assist

efforts to help students become better regulated individuals with strong SEL skills, NC

R&LP staff encourages schools to create a diverse array of strong community

partnerships to assist with providing services and resources to students and families,

especially students with more complex needs getting tier two or three supports:

> Community connections are likewise critical for schools to support students
> appropriately and, by extension, to support their families. Schools are not
> equipped (nor should they be) to provide all the services necessary to meet the
> entire array of possible child and family needs. By building active relationships
> and collaboration with community services, school personnel can develop a
> streamlined referral process and work on strategies for improving family access.
> Likewise, community groups and faith-based organizations may be a wonderful
> source of volunteers within the school who may, among other things, help with
> raising funds and resources. (Rosanbalm et al., 2020, p. 13)

One elementary school which "has worked hard to develop community relationships" has been able to "secure resources for students and families whose needs exceed what the school can provide" as a result of these efforts; additionally, they have increased mental health services through a referral system to outside agencies and also partner with a meditation center that has sent staff in to lead small groups, "Girls in Power" and "Boys in Power" (Craig Riberdy, 2020a, para. 8). What has excited the principal is seeing the more "word gets out about what the school is doing to address trauma and build resilience for its students, the more community organizations are reaching in to help" (Craig Riberdy, 2020a, para. 8). Additional ways to assist students with higher levels of need are to "include co-location for some services at the school, development of school-based family resource centers, and creation of community resource guides to inform families about local services available" (Rosanbalm et al., 2020, p. 26). School-community connections allow for more possibilities in serving students and families.

The Public School Forum of NC and NC R&LP make efforts to get the word out about the need to address trauma and their framework model. They do this through newsletters, features on the *Education Matters* public TV programming, the biannual *Education Primer* provided to elected officials, partnering with Duke University Center for Child and Family Policy for progress monitoring of NC R&LP, and the numerous articles and reports they publish. These serve to educate the public about the impact of trauma on students and how schools may assist with resilience building to combat these negative impacts. Maria discussed engaging politicians through the *Education Matters* show which she noted "has a lot of policy impact," and the Public School Forum's

advisory board: "there's like, 60 people... tons of legislators on that [board]. So, in our advisory meeting yesterday, we had a representative and a senator both speaking to kind of what are the things up and coming.  How can we best influence the legislation that's on the table?"  These advisory meetings give NC R&LP the chance to provide updates on their positive impact on schools, students, families, and communities.

The Study Group XVI report especially stressed the need to develop comprehensive legislative policies and funding to support TS initiatives by instituting local and state ESSA plans that maximize opportunities to address ACEs through federal funding allotted for Title I Part A Section 4108 and Title II Part A Sections 2102-2103 of the ESSA (2017) which fund trauma-informed PD, programs, services, interventions, and supports to meet the needs of underserved students (Public School Forum of NC, 2016). Study Group XVI also advised NC legislators to create statewide TS policies and initiatives following national TS model schools and frameworks such as Massachusetts' TLPI or Washington's Compassionate Schools and state legislation like the 2014 Massachusetts House Bill 4376 or the 2016 Oregon House Bill 40002 with a state task force to oversee implementation (Public School Forum of NC, 2016).  The Public School Forum encourages partnering schools take advantage of School Safety Grants through NC Department of Public Instruction (Craig Riberdy, 2020), advocates for increased state funding for "access to school-based mental health supports. Create a multi-year plan to address the severe deficit of school social workers, nurses, psychologists and counselors" (Poston et al., 2019, p. 21), and points to the success of NC R&LP as a reason to "Invest in training for trauma-sensitive schools and classrooms" since the framework "has made

great progress since its pilot year in 2017-18.  We are continuing to expand this work and added 16 schools in 2018-19 to the project. With increased support, we hope to bring this model to more schools across North Carolina" (Poston et al., 2019, p. 23).

In addition to seeking state supports, the Forum also reaches out to businesses, nonprofits, private donors, and educational agencies to fund implementation of TS schools; these efforts have supported NC R&LP thus far allowing it to expand the model (Public School Forum of NC, 2018).  Due to the early strides the initiative has made, Maria remarked "the Department of Public Instruction...our state education group includes us on their list of, of recommended interventions and are really interested in pursuing this work further."  Despite this, Maria noted most of their funding is foundation based with very few monies coming from the state.  She attributes this lack of funding despite having state recognition to "our state legislature is very heavily republican, and very heavily don't fund things like this.  So, I think it's going to take some shift in our legislative body before we're going to make a lot of traction in terms of that funding." Maria described current funding going more towards the "hardened schools" model instead of TS models: "They really want to fund school resource officers... fund police in the schools... fund teachers having guns, they want to fund [school safety], but [its] not the same thing [as funding TS approaches]."

Beyond a party shift in the legislative body, Maria agreed showing TS approaches result in academic gains with increased test scores might help shift opinions and policies. The Forum's annual *Eggs and Issues* attempts to improve education by bringing together community stakeholders (including politicians, educators, business leaders, nonprofit

236

leaders, parents, and students) from across NC to engage in discussing practical solutions for addressing topical educational issues and presses for policy and funding changes necessary for many of those solutions to work. One educator on the panel discussed how schools and communities are mutually-dependent ecosystems which COVID has reminded us of with the disruptions it has caused to this, but the pandemic can serve as a reminder of the needs schools fill for the community and be an opportunity to strengthen partnerships. A school superintendent also discussed how COVID is an opportunity to move forward to create a better educational system that is good for all students in every community to end persistent inequities in the system. A point stressed by Public Forum staff is that equal is not equitable, and there are many structural inequities in communities which must be addressed before the state will live up to its constitutional requirement to provide all students with a sound basic education, but this cannot be done without community support, policy changes, and increased funding.

**Summary of Family and Community Engagement**

Family engagement and community partnerships strengthen the abilities of TS schools to provide needed services, resources, and supports and have students' SEL skills reinforced outside of school. While the NC R&LP framework and staff discussed the importance of these connections, partnering school staff are encouraged to first have a solid understanding of trauma, resilience, and sufficient practice with TS strategies such as SEL skills before sharing these with families and making deeper connections within the community. Once ready though, these connections and partnerships will both improve and sustain the TS efforts which have begun.

## Findings Part Two Conclusion

NC R&LP focuses TS strategies on staff, students, families, and communities. They begin with staff since adequate supports addressing staff wellness are needed before staff will be effective and regulated to best meet student needs and serve as co-regulators. NC R&LP assists schools in developing strategies for creating a collective culture of self-care and wellness. Once staff are supported, then TS strategies become increasingly student centered. NC R&LP promotes a whole-child approach to go beyond academics and support students physically, mentally, emotionally, and socially. When these areas are met, students may learn at their fullest potential. A tiered-MTSS support model ensures a variety of TS strategies to meet differing student needs. Fostering safe, trusting, and supportive staff-student relationships and developing students' SEL skills are key TS supports. Schools that forge strong partnerships with families and communities are best able to support larger TS initiatives and get needed tier two and three supports for students with the greatest needs. Families can assist schools by reinforcing SEL strategies at home. Having better regulated staff, students, and families positively contributes to and influences the larger community as well. With the COVID-19 pandemic heightening stress for everyone, there was an increased need for all stakeholders to be supported through TS strategies

CHAPTER VIII

DISCUSSION

For my research, I was interested in what may be done to support students with
trauma since ACEs can cause a host of behavioral, social, and academic problems, while
also helping school staff avoid vicarious trauma (VT) which can be equally damaging.
My review of existing literature revealed a trauma-sensitive (TS) approach can transform
schools into supportive places that mitigate trauma's impact for students and staff.

I split my literature review into three chapters: trauma screening, TS
characteristics, and mitigating VT.  In the first one, I discovered researchers are
undecided on whether ACEs screening should be done with some arguing it helps target
students for support while others contend it is unnecessary, complicated, and potentially
damaging.  For the second review, I focused on TS characteristics as highlighted by
TLPI's Flexible Framework since it helped inform NC R&LP: 1) school leaders who
encourage schoolwide implementation with ongoing training and implement TS policies
and practices including relationship building, scheduling for health and relaxation, TS
discipline, and mental health support; 2) family and community engagement with schools
considering environmental factors, building strong connections, providing workshops,
finding funding for services and resources, and empowering families and the community;
3) use of academic and nonacademic classroom strategies including encouraging
academic risk-taking and success, TS pedagogy and curriculum, TS homework policies,

minimizing triggers, creating a safe space using SEL, and creative expression. My last review focused on VT by discussing the dangers while also pointing out vicarious posttraumatic growth as a positive end product schools can foster through supportive leadership, peer support, self-care, and mindfulness.

To deepen my understanding of TS schools, how to support students and staff, and know more about the practical application of topics from my literature review, I studied the NC R&LP which has helped schools in NC transform to a TS model since 2017 by following aspects of TLPI's Flexible Framework (throughout schools since 2005). For an in-depth understanding of NC R&LP, I conducted a document analysis, had semi-structured interviews, and acted as an online participant. The data I collected revealed seven themes about TS schools: **1) Do No Harm:** TS schools must do no harm by avoiding trauma screeners and the deficit mindset which can accompany knowledge of trauma. Instead, schools should be asset-based by implementing universal TS strategies and utilizing only strengths-based screeners; **2) Whole-School Approach:** For greatest success, TS schools begin with supportive district and school leaders who work alongside all staff to collaborate for a TS environment; **3) Mindset and Culture Shift**: For staff to buy into using TS strategies, it takes viewing maladaptive behaviors as a form of communication and a natural stress-response. This mindset shift creates a TS culture of caring and supportive adults who view behaviors as an opportunity to practice co-regulation and teach skills for more adaptive expression; **4) Flexibility and Adjustment:** TS initiatives are best when they are frameworks that can adjust to the individual needs of schools. Progress monitoring is essential for continual improvement for TS models,

TS implementation, and for meeting unforeseen challenges that arise such as the COVID-19 pandemic; **5) Staff Wellness:** The first priority in a TS transformation is having a school culture which facilitates collective self-care and wellness to foster emotionally well staff who are effective at instituting TS strategies; **6) Whole-Child Approach:** Student-centered TS supports keep the whole child in mind as students require their physical, emotional, mental, and social needs to be met for higher cognitive attainment; **7) Family and Community Connections:** Schools need to forge strong partnerships with families and communities to sustain and support TS initiatives.

In this chapter, I discuss how these seven themes and the literature review assisted in answering my research questions. I discuss the theoretical implications of how positive psychology relates to the findings and my four subjective "I's" which emerged from journaling. I also provide recommendations for practitioners and future research questions to be explored and acknowledge limitations of this study.

## Research Questions

### Research Question One

1. Given trauma is a negative construct, how can educators avoid deficit-based thinking when addressing trauma?

Trauma is inherently a deficit-based concept. Trauma means an individual has endured a mentally, physically, or emotionally damaging event with a lasting adverse impact on their lives. Research is filled with the detrimental effects of trauma on people's lives with long-term negative outcomes on immune systems, neurological development, decision making, high-risk behaviors, physical and mental health, and intergenerational

transfer of ACEs through household stress, abuse, or neglect (Ford et al., 2019). Research points out the increased risks children with trauma have as it can physically affect students' neuroendocrine and immune systems and brain development (Johnson et al., 2013; Metzler et al., 2017; Crouch et al., 2019); puts students at risk for impaired emotional, behavioral, social, and academic functioning and mental health issues (Gonzalez et al., 2016); causes issues with receptive and expressive language (Hertel & Johnson, 2013); and those with 3 or more ACEs have lower academic achievement, are identified more often as learning disabled, and have more discipline issues (Perfect et al., 2016). Educators with a deficit frame of thinking who are aware of these issues may view students with trauma as hopeless victims of life's circumstances doomed to negative outcomes which lends itself to negative self-fulfilling prophecy for their students. To combat this, TS initiatives should emphasize an asset-based approach that features the power of resilience and the possibility to repair the brain with protective factors and positive experiences through TS practices and policies such as relationships and SEL.

Viewing trauma as part of the human existence and using the power of knowledge is one attempt at an asset-based approach. NCF (2015) advocates using ACE results to have positive, hopeful, and asset-based conversations with children, families, and school staff which include the importance of highlighting how prevalent these experiences are, knowing they are not alone in experiencing trauma, and understanding it is possible to mitigate trauma's effects to avoid long-term consequences with the idea that having this knowledge is empowering. Trauma is a reality in lives, so having knowledge of the power a person has to overcome it is turning something that is a negative presence in one's life

and making it more productive.  Dube (2018) supports normalizing trauma and its

symptoms by increasing community awareness to destigmatize it and decrease the feelings

of hopelessness people have thinking they are alone in their suffering.

Other researchers reframe trauma in an asset-based manner by focusing on the

concept of resilience.  Resilience is possible given the brain's "plasticity" which is the

ability of our brains to learn from experiences and be rewired in a positive manner

although the brain's ability to do this decreases with age (CDCHU, 2016) which is why

researchers who look at our brain's malleability target early identification of trauma for

implementation of early interventions in hopes of preventing lasting negative impacts

(Alisic et al., 2011; Woodbridge et al., 2016; Crouch, et al., 2019).  TS schools focus on

the science of resilience by creating safe and supportive TS school cultures filled with

caring adults who focus on resilience building practices, so all students with past or future

trauma will be able to overcome their adversities (Ristuccia, 2013).  This is meant to be an

asset-based concept since students in TS schools are viewed as people with strengths to be

built on who are capable of success, although it is possible to have a deficit perspective by

thinking of students with trauma as damaged and in need of repair and viewing those

without trauma as weak and unable to handle adversity if it came their way, so they need

to be toughened up.  Once trauma is brought into the conversation, a deficit lens is hard to

avoid, but resilience can lead to deficit conversations as well since resilience implies there

are challenges that people are needing strength to overcome.  When there is a power

deferential with one person helping another, often it is due to one person having a deficit

and the other person trying to assist in closing it.  Our entire educational system can be

viewed through a deficit lens if educators see students as in need of experts to fill them

with knowledge and abilities; therefore, I've concluded it can be difficult to avoid deficit-

based thinking; however, it is still possible to take a more asset-based approach and

reframe our interactions with students with trauma, so they do not feel damaged, and

others do not treat them as though they are weak or lacking in ability to handle adversity.

Staff need continual reminders to not take maladaptive behaviors personally and to seek

out the strengths of students.  Having more positive, nonacademic interactions such as

SEL and relationship-building activities between staff and students can help to develop

and reinforce an asset-based mindset.

NC R&LP purposely selected a name without the word trauma to decrease

viewing the framework from a deficit perspective or thinking it is only for students with

trauma.  Resilience and learning are more empowering terms which lend themselves to

asset-based thinking as long as people do not think too deeply about what is lacking that

one needs to be resilient for or learn.  NC R&LP also takes an asset-based approach by

primarily focusing on the idea of building resilience with TS policies and practices

schools may institute to build resilience and develop SEL skills in a whole-child

approach.  NC R&LP encourages schools to use proactive discipline and avoid punitive

measures.  Discipline is primarily done through SEL with maladaptive behaviors viewed

as a form of communication and opportunity to improve skills to avoid future

dysregulation.  Going beyond academic instruction to provide SEL, helps all students, not

just those with trauma, add to their ability to self-regulate and empathize with others.

This empowers them as individuals who can be in control of themselves and navigate

social interactions.  NC R&LP also has schools take a "do no harm" approach by avoiding trauma screeners which could re-traumatize students and instead promote SEL screeners which avoid personal questions and focus on SEL skills a student has.  This is meant to be asset-based as it does not find issues in a student's life; however, screeners do identify which SEL skills are stronger and which are weaker, so a deficit view would point out students' weak areas as problematic.  Looking at weaknesses through an asset-based lens though sees these areas as opportunities for growth for how you can build on the strengths already there to enhance other areas as well.

While trauma will always be a deficit concept, it is possible to reframe trauma from a more asset-based perspective and see it as an opportunity for personal growth. When working with all students, regardless of trauma history, it is most important to view them as capable people who have many innate strengths which can be developed and enhanced for increased resilience.  TS schools foster this by focusing on SEL, proactive and restorative practices, caring about the whole child, and doing no harm by avoiding re-traumatizing.  TS schools need staff who are willing to reframe things in an asset-based manner to truly be TS and not just trauma-informed.

**Research Question Two**

2. How are trauma screening, implementation of trauma-sensitive practices, and mitigating vicarious trauma addressed and supported by the NC Resilience and Learning Project?

**Trauma screening.**  As stated previously, scholars are divided over whether schools should implement trauma screening.  Advocates argue that it assists in early

identification to avoid negative long-term outcomes (Alisic, Jongmans, van Wesel, &

Kleber, 2011; Woodbridge et al., 2016), identifies youth with internalized symptoms

(Gonzalez et al. 2016), is the most effective way to capture children since many children

lack health insurance or do not have regular medical checkups but are enrolled in public

school (NCES, 2015; NCTSN, 2017), and identifies students for levels of support within

an MTSS structure (NCR, 2015; McCance-Katz & Lynch, 2019). However, others

contend screening is problematic since the ACEs screener leaves out other relevant forms

of trauma (Woodbridge et al., 2016; Flores & Salazar, 2017; Finkelhor, 2018; Vance &

Rosenthal, 2018; Crouch et al., 2019; Pataky et al., 2019), weighs all traumas equally,

and does not consider prolonged exposure to one trauma (Pataky et al., 2019). There are

other screeners, but they have similar issues and are not fully vetted (Strand et al., 2005;

Finkelhor, 2018); besides, screeners do not provide details of negative symptoms

(Purewal et al., 2016). Other factors to consider are: mental health stigma and race,

culture, and socioeconomics impact families' willingness to consent (Woodbridge et al.,

2016); abuse victims are unlikely to self-report (*Darkness to Light,* 2015); students often

regret sharing which impacts negatively impacts behaviors and relationships (TLPI,

2019); little research has explored unintended harms of screening and possible re-

traumatization (Ford et al., 2019); school staff are not adequately trained or equip to

conduct trainings and could re-traumatize or have VT (Hodas, 2006); awareness of

potential long-term issues of trauma could damage students' self-image and cause

negative self-fulfilling prophecy (Cole et al., 2013a); schools are not equipped to handle

all the issues screeners would reveal (Finkelhor, 2018); and there is a lack of evidence-

based therapies or interventions corresponding to an ACE score (Finkelhor, 2018; Purewal Boparai et al., 2018, Ford et al., 2019).  With all the issues ACEs and trauma screeners have and the potential to re-traumatize students, I have concluded it is too problematic for schools to conduct these.  Additionally, TS schools are meant for all students, with or without trauma, so screening is unnecessary for the educational setting.

NC R&LP follows TLPI's model by taking a "do no harm" approach and advocating against use of trauma screeners.  NC R&LP does provide information on trauma and shows the Feletti's ACE survey and research on long-term negative impacts of trauma, but they discourage schools from using the survey for staff or students and provide this training only for foundational knowledge on why building resilience is important.  NC R&LP promotes TS schools provide universal TS policies and practices for all students since all students encounter stress and may have future trauma or toxic stress even if they have not already experienced any.  This is in alignment with NCTSN (2017) which advocates teaching all students healthy ways to cope with and manage stress.  NC R&LP seeks all students becoming more resilient individuals with strong SEL skills which does not require identification of those with trauma histories.

Despite NC R&LP cautioning against use of the ACE screener, there are partnering schools giving it to staff in training sessions and encouraging staff to process their traumas for understanding their reactions to student behaviors and sharing with others to serve as an inspiration.  While I understand school leaders feeling this will be beneficial, this is a dangerous practice since there is a lack of research on the impacts of this and possible unintended harm by doing these personal screeners in a non-therapeutic

247

setting with staff feeling pressured to share out intimate aspects of their lives.  Griffin et al. (2013) recommend schools collect information about staff's stress symptoms to determine the impact of VT.  Doing this would not be as intrusive and would provide valuable information on issues staff presently are having that need addressed since someone could have high ACEs but no longer have stress from it versus someone with low or no ACEs may be experiencing extreme stress from current situations or working conditions which is supported by Borntrager et al.'s (2012) finding that educators' personal trauma histories did not correlate with their secondary traumatic stress levels which demonstrates that doing ACEs screening with staff is inappropriate.

**Implementation of trauma-sensitive practices.**  Flexibility and adjustment are needed for tailoring TS practices to school needs.  Sweeney and Caringi (2020) discuss a TS approach is not a one-time, one-size-fits-all program; it requires continually adapting to changing needs and trying new TS practices.  NC R&LP is not program but framework since it is flexible and adjusts to the individual needs of schools.  NC R&LP uses progress monitoring and stakeholder feedback to adjust and improve the model and assist schools in evaluating TS strategies and making needed adjustments.  Schools are encouraged to start small and build on their TS goals, policies, and practices over time.

A whole school approach requires supportive leadership and a willing staff ready to collaborate towards a common TS mission.  Ristuccia (2013) reveals supportive school leadership is the most important factor for successful school reform which was reinforced in Anna's interview which revealed NC R&LP's most successful partnering schools have supportive administrators leading the initiative.  NCTSN (2017) stress authentic inclusion

of support staff in a whole-school approach since all staff are vital to embedding TS practices into the schools' culture. NC R&LP notes the need for strong Resilience Teams (RT) of passionate school-level leaders who direct and encourage continued TS efforts by all staff. NC R&LP and the RT work together to assess the readiness of school staff and develop goals for getting staff onboard if not ready. NC R&LP includes all staff for universal training for shared understanding, language, and implementation and encourage RTs include diverse stakeholders.

Staff must undergo a mindset shift to get needed buy-in for a culture shift to a TS school. All staff need to recognize the importance of addressing trauma and actively collaborating to implement schoolwide TS policies and practices (NCSTN, 2017; Sporleder & Forbes, 2019, Sweeney and Caringi, 2020). NC R&LP stresses the importance of staff having a mindset shift with understanding the necessity for implementing TS approach to build resilience, so there will be a schoolwide culture shift. They introduce trauma as a hook to get staff emotionally connected to the need for change then provide input on resilience and the power staff has to build resilience in students. The hope is staff will be compassionate and willing to try new TS approaches. As Sporleder and Forbes (2019) and Anna's interview revealed, some staff may never embrace a TS mindset and may need to transfer to schools using traditional practices if they are unwilling to follow TS practices. TS schools also have a mindset shift away from traditional punitive discipline to a restorative approach that communicate expectations clearly, provide supports to assist student in following them, use proactive measures, and avoid using punitive discipline which damage relationships and remove

students from the learning environment (Ristuccia, 2013; NCTSN, 2017).  NC R&LP

encourages staff to see behaviors as part of the stress response system that is not

personally directed at them, determine the belief behind the behavior to help students

reframe situations, and teach SEL skills to find more adaptive ways of expressing

emotions that do not bring harm to themselves or others.  Paying attention to students'

triggers can help for devising strategies for assisting students with regulation for

improved future behaviors (Wolpow et al., 2016; Sporleder and Forbes, 2019).  The

discipline webinar discussed staff adjusting their own behaviors to minimize issues.

Sporleder and Forbes (2019) encourage schools to have calming spaces not to punish and

isolate students but to assist them in calming, practicing skills for regulation, and

transitioning back to the learning setting when ready.  NC R&LP encourages peace

corners for preventative self-regulation, and staff using co-regulation when students

cannot regulate themselves.

TS schools keep the whole child in mind by going beyond academics to nurture

all aspects of children's development with mental health supports, positive relationships,

and SEL.  NC R&LP has staff look at all aspects of their policies and practices to

determine what is not TS, what could be built on to be more TS, and what areas need TS

practices to be infused for greater support for all students.  Holistic education

incorporating social and physical wellbeing helps to counter the social conditions and

toxic stress students contend with since they help students self-regulate and improve

ability to engage in cognitive tasks (Jenson, 2009; Immordino-Yang, et al., 2019).  NC

R&LP staff encourages schools to make sure students' basic needs are met since students

cannot focus on academics if other needs are going unmet. Park (2020) advises schools

prioritize mental health through screenings, awareness, and education. NC R&LP

provides tip sheets for schools and families with available mental health resources and

services and gives suggestions on how schools may support mental health.

Building good relationships and using Social Emotional Learning (SEL) are key

aspects to addressing the needs of the whole child. Trauma research shows having one

stable and supportive adult relationship is sufficient to assist children with reversing

negative long-term effects of trauma and developing coping skills to overcome

adversities (Ludy-Dobson & Perry, 2010; Ristuccia, 2013; CDCHU, 2016; Sege &

Harper Browne, 2017; CDC, 2019). One of the key TS practices NC R&LP highlights is

a focus on building caring and supportive staff-student relationships and their school

reentry plan discussed the need to delay academics to focus on relationship-building

activities at the beginning of the 2020-2021 since the pandemic created a heightened need

for these bonds as a buffer against stressors. The social, emotional, and cognitive

processing areas of the brain work together, so all must be in a regulated state for

learning to occur (Immordino-Yang et al., 2019). SEL provides students with the

necessary emotional vocabulary and skills to understand and express emotions in a way

which does not impede on the physical and emotional safety of others to minimize

conflicts and form healthy relationships (Hertel & Johnson, 2013; Sege & Harper

Browne, 2017). NC R&LP has a large focus on SEL. SEL is what informs the discipline

structure in their partnering schools, is built into the daily structure of the school for

stand-alone lessons, and is used for transitions and brain breaks. Relaxation and

mindfulness techniques assist students with reflecting, connecting to their emotions, and being less reactive behaviorally (Hertel, & Johnson, 2013). Mindfulness is one of the SEL strategies NC R&LP recommends for schools to incorporate especially when transitioning between activities and for brain breaks and suggests mindfulness apps for schools and families to use.

Forming connections with families and communities is needed to sustain TS efforts. Khalifa (2012) and Henke (2011) described how educators need to go out into the communities and reach out to families before expecting families to come to them. NC R&LP discussed schools needing to be ready to have these deep connections with families by first getting themselves and students regulated, but then making concerted efforts to involve families and community members through a variety of strategies. TLPI recommends schools have an array of community partners to assist with improving the quality of life for families to maximizes connections to needed resources and services. NC R&LP encourages schools to use community partnerships to support and further TS initiatives. Many schools use referral systems for connecting tier three students to outside partners. Hong (2011) describes Ecology of Parent Engagement where parents become transformative leaders of the school and Compton and Hoffman (2019) describe how forging strong partnerships with families and community members embolden them to develop collective efficacy and learned empowerment to build a cohesive community. NC R&LP is still in the early stages as it is their fourth year in schools (one has been unusual given the pandemic), so they are focused on strengthening schools still by fostering a TS culture shift, improving staff wellness, and implementing student-centered

TS strategies.  While some partnering schools have begun to forge family and community partnerships, most are not yet far enough along to form deep connections.  Once further along, they may begin building stronger parent and community partnerships that create more systemic changes in the ecology of communities to lift up everyone.

In my review of literature, I described many academic strategies of TS schools which were not present in the NC R&LP document analysis, interviews, or online participation such as safety for academic risk-taking, scaffolding and differentiating to meet high academic standards, culturally-relevant curriculum, using texts featuring resilience, avoiding retraumatizing material, and having equitable homework policies with high standards but also supports.  Instead, currently NC R&LP is focused on providing nonacademic supports and strategies which indirectly benefit academics since students have better self-regulation, increased attention and engagement during academics, and lose less instructional time by staying in the classroom.

The literature review also featured creative expression. This came up minimally in the document analysis.  NC R&LP did have creative activities listed in TS strategy tip sheets, and their advice for at-home learning schedules during COVID-19 encouraged time for music and arts.  One of the schools discussed how they were having students write poetry to express their feelings during the pandemic.  Creative expression was not a feature of the online participation or the interviews.

**Mitigating vicarious trauma.**  Staff wellness is a necessary component of TS schools.  School staff have continued exposure to VT from working with traumatized students and families and are vulnerable to negative side effects from the resulting

secondary traumatic stress (STS) which can impair effectiveness and lead to burnout

(Tsouloupas et al., 2010; Blaustein, 2013). Staff with higher STS levels negatively

impact students' stress levels (Oberle & Schonert-Reichl, 2016), were more likely to

report disciplinary issues (Eddy et. al., 2020), and less likely to report suspected child

abuse (Hupe & Stevenson, 2019). School leaders need to address STS to improve staff

efficacy, reduce turnover, improve school culture, and raise educational quality (Wolpow

et al., 2016). All staff need to be trained to recognize STS, and schools need to use an

MTSS model with universal preventions and higher-tiered supports for those with

symptoms (Borntrager et al., 2012; Sweeney and Caringi, 2020). Collective staff

wellness can be fostered through leaders modeling self-care, respecting staff's personal

time (NCSTN, 2016), encouraging peer support (Borntarager et al., 2012), assisting staff

with creating self-care plans (Hydon et al., 2015), encouraging staff breaks, providing

teambuilding activities, celebrating successes, personal check-ins with staff, building

staff competency with tools, resources, and relevant professional development,

empowering and participating in staff support groups (NCBH, 2017), creating an

environment that normalizes STS, discussing symptoms, seeking help, and providing

mental health supports (ACF, n.d.). In addition to school's fostering collective wellness,

staff are encouraged to take responsibility for their own wellness by utilizing a variety of

strategies (NCBH, 2017).

The knowledge of the risks and dangers of VT and STS and diminished efficacy

of staff suffering from these is why NC R&LP has partnering schools first establish

practices and policies for promoting staff wellness if there is not already an atmosphere

of collective self-care and wellness. The NC R&LP model stresses that well staff are needed for implementing TS practices to have well students. *Self-Care as a Critical Component of Trauma-Informed Schools* is a separate course module on NC R&LP's *Participate* learning platform which has more resources attached to it than any other course. NC R&LP hosted two challenge months with one dedicated to individual self-care and another dedicated to collective self-care. Two of their seven webinars were also focused on the topic of self-care with one featuring individualized self-care and the other focused on collective self-care. Many of their newsletters highlight staff wellness as critical and showcase practical ideas for implementation. From document analysis data and the webinar presentations, partnering schools have implemented a variety of TS strategies focused on improving staff wellness individualized to their needs. Once staff wellness has been established, then schools move onto student-centered TS strategies.

**Research Question Three**

3. How has COVID-19 impacted the program now and going forward?

Originally, I did not have a research question pertaining to COVID-19; however, it was relevant to add given that I conducted this research during the pandemic, and it became a substantial feature of my data collection. Most of the 2020 articles and newsletters were focused on adapting to being in a pandemic, it was at the forefront of interviewee's conversations, and it played a prominent role in the *Eggs and Issues* conference and webinars as presenters struggled to make sense of things and share practices for pressing on through the unique and unprecedented challenges brought on by the pandemic. Given time constraints and continued developments with COVID-19, I did

not do a literature review on it. I read extensively about it though and selected pertinent information from four peer-reviewed articles to include in the following paragraphs.

The closure of schools across the nation in March of 2020 came as an unparalleled disruption to schools which had little to no protocol for how to handle schooling in a global pandemic of this magnitude. School leaders, staff, students, and families alike struggled under enormous stress and uncertainty. Conolly, Crepeau-Hobson, Kennedy-Paine, and Woitaszewski, (2020) state COVID-19's characteristics of being intense, over a long duration, unpredictable, and having significant consequences on a myriad of aspects in people's lives will contribute to a widespread development of complex trauma symptoms for many students and staff especially those who experienced loss of loved ones; health issues; financial hardships; food and housing insecurities; increased domestic violence, abuse, or neglect; or had previous traumas or underlying mental health issues which were triggered during the pandemic. Aponte (2020) adds the negative impact COVID is intensified for adolescents in difficult home environments "e.g., domestic violence, neglect, emotional, physical and sexual abuse, disease or injuries, and the death of a loved one" which could lead to an increase in "reckless and self-destructive behaviors (e.g., self-medicating or substance abuse, speeding, aggression, self-injury, high-risk sexual behaviors, suicide) to decrease their distress and exert some independence from their abusers" since they are "at risk of experiencing extreme anxiety, anger, crave to be protected, and have difficulties regulating emotions" (pp. 133-134). Weisbrot and Ryst (2020) discuss how COVID-19's impact disproportionately impacted low SES students, students of color, and students with special education needs further

widening the educational inequities faced by these students especially with having less

access to technology and "live" remote instruction, so they highlight the need to provide

"sufficient access to equipment, services, and technology, and mental health support to

address systemic cultural disadvantages in education and mental health worsened by

COVID-19" which include "heightened fear, anxiety, and depression, leading to further

difficulty in emotion regulation and behavior, learning, and interpersonal relationships"

which were exacerbated since "Lost learning opportunities during school closures result

in possible regression of educational and emotional coping skills" (p. 258). Not only is it

important to address the mental health needs of students, but staff also have increased

fears, distress, and mental health needs which must be addressed for them to be effective

caregivers to their students. This means there should be increased funding for staff

wellness and mental health identification and supports to prevent compassion fatigue and

burnout (Weisbrot & Ryst, 2020). Phelps and Sperry (2020) contend we need to go

beyond schools providing mental health supports to have "a continuum of services within

a public health model" and work to "develop a public health framework to understand the

various risks and protective factors for COVID-19 and its aftermath" since other disasters

such as Hurricane Katrine taught us "communities and schools need to invest in robust

public health infrastructures to meet the needs of those impacted by a traumatic event

(Shapiro et al., 2006)," yet there remain "few or no guidelines for planning and delivering

mental health services in our current quarantine context" (pp. S23-S24).

It is important to highlight a TS approach with an emphasis on socioemotional

and mental wellness over academics as we continue through the pandemic and even post-

COVID-19. Conolly et al. (2020) notes being TS "acknowledges that a crisis such as the pandemic can limit an individual's ability to attend and learn and to regulate their behavior and emotions. This includes both students and adults in the school setting" (p. 27). Staff also need training on how to communicate with students about the pandemic in a TS manner to minimize traumatization and facilitate students adjusting to the ever-changing school environment, especially as reopening plans begin with new unfamiliar safety protocols in place (Weisbrot & Ryst, 2020). Conolly et al. (2020) stress both staff and students must first feel physically safe before psychological recovery or a focus on academics may begin, so "schools must clearly demonstrate to students and staff that they are returning to a safe environment" by knowing "measures the district is taking to clean and sanitize the schools, both prior to opening and ongoing," and it is vital for staff to feel it is safe, so they will be able to reassure students of their safety as well (p. 26). Relationships and maintaining social connections are crucial to TS strategies. Conolly et al. (2020) note the "reestablishment of natural social support systems is one of the most powerful of crisis interventions and is often the only crisis intervention needed for many individuals;" in fact, these relationships are key since having "Positive, nurturing interactions with trustworthy peers, teachers, and other caregivers is regulating and can calm the stress response that may be a consequence of a chronic stressor such as the pandemic" (Conolly et al., 2020, p. 27). Aponte (2020) also stresses the importance of social interactions whether virtual or in-person to help provide much needed supports to counter the loneliness and identity crises adolescents in particular may be facing with the pandemic. Both Conolly et al. (2020) and Aponte (2020) instruct schools to delay

258

focusing on academics when schools restart even once the pandemic ends as students will need to gradually transition back into learning through engaging, nonacademic teambuilding and social activities; starting academics too abruptly may delay students' academic recovery as they will not be able to process information if not psychologically ready. The COVID-19 pandemic has been an unparalleled event, so school crisis teams need to be actively engaged in the healing process for staff and students for a prolonged time since direct and indirect effects of the pandemic may linger for an extended time for many individuals who suffered personal losses and great economic or household upheaval, and it may take some time before they feel secure and emotionally stable (Aponte, 2020; Conolly et al., 2020; Weisbrot & Ryst, 2020).

While COVID-19 was disruptive to NC R&LP in many ways, the staff found ways to use this time of uncertainty to provide more supports to schools and staff. The data collection for NC R&LP's longitudinal study was compromised since it is impossible to collect comparative data when a pandemic shutdown schools and disrupted education as we know it. Collecting data on discipline, behavior referrals, and test scores is vital to demonstrating the quantitative impact of the framework for schools. This data could help prove its efficacy in terms of decreasing discipline problems, raising attendance, and increasing test scores which politicians and funders are eager to see. This data could help get policies and funding in place that allows for a statewide scaleup of this initiative, so it is a major setback to have lost that key data for an extended time. Another loss for NC R&LP was the inability to bring in a large cohort of new schools for the 2020-2021 school year as they had steadily been doing since its pilot. It was

important for them to pause though, so they could offer the increased supports needed for their existing partners.  Unfortunately, most of these supports had to be virtual as in-person was precluded or very limited for schools.  This scaled back the ability to provide one-on-one time going into classrooms to give teachers needed feedback and supports. Despite having less in-person support, the virtual supports not only increased, but their methods and platforms expanded.  NC R&LP made the best of a bad situation by figuring out what virtual platforms may assist schools in getting resources, supports, and being able to share best practices with one another by starting a virtual summit, webinars, and building on the newly started *Participate* learning platform.  Virtual consultations and coaching also allowed NC R&LP staff to reach more schools and educators in a day. These virtual pieces are lasting components NC R&LP plan to keep post-COVID. Another positive has been increased staff buy-in.  Staff who may not have recognized the importance of SEL, mental health supports and use of TS practices and policies now see their merit and intense need.  NC R&LP should have more politicians willing to concede that TS frameworks are an asset for our school staff and students, so although the data may have been disrupted, the lived experiences of everyone as we have collectively undergone this crisis should help guide stakeholders to make trauma-informed decisions as we move forward to make a better tomorrow after this pandemic ends.

## Implications for Theory

**Maslow's Self-Actualization and Hierarchy of Needs**

Maslow's (1975) hierarchy of needs stresses people needed to have their safety, physiological, physical health, and mental health needs addressed before reaching higher

260

cognitive and aesthetic levels or reach transcendence where they make a substantial difference in the lives of others. TS schools attend to the self-care and wellness of staff, so they may be effective at operating on a higher level and attending to the needs of others. Maslow (1975) believed children's deficiency needs must be met before children may attend to higher cognitive demands at their fullest potential. TS schools take a whole child approach which acknowledges the importance of meeting students' basic needs and supporting mental and emotional wellbeing before expecting them to function at high academic levels. TS schools aim to provide many supports within the school and forge partnerships to get families needed resources and services. Taking a whole child approach also helps foster attainment of self-actualization. Maslow (1975) believed schools could develop and enhance children's self-acceptance, relationships, creativity, and sense of joy if schools provided peak experiences, built on intrinsic strengths, and assisted with values and identity development; focusing on these would help children reach their highest potential and be self-actualized. Using SEL, nurturing creative expression, building relationships, engaging in fun teambuilding activities, and fostering children's strengths are aspects of TS schools which contribute to self-actualization.

**Resilience and Posttraumatic Growth**

Resilience science shows people are capable of building resilience to overcome both genetic predispositions and negative environmental factors that can potentially lead to lifelong difficulties (Boyce, 2019). TS schools assume that with the right supports and opportunities for practice, all students are capable of high achievement and adaptive behaviors. Protective factors for overcoming trauma include positive SEL traits,

261

supportive families, and external supports outside of the family unit (Goldstein and Brooks, 2014). TS schools foster these protective factors through developing students' SEL and using proactive discipline, developing partnerships with communities and families, getting students and families needed resources and supports, sharing resilience-building strategies for families to use in the home, and developing caring and supportive staff-student relationships.

Posttraumatic growth (PTG) is the positive personal growth someone may achieve from undergoing trauma which is fostered by having strong social-emotional characteristics, support networks, and means of disclosure (Tedeschi et al., 2018). By adding to students' protective factors, TS schools can help students be more resilient and achieve PTG. Just as TS schools help students overcome their trauma, they may also foster vicarious posttraumatic growth (VPTG) for staff by emphasizing wellness and staff supports. VTPG is the positive personal growth someone may achieve from often interacting with the traumas of others which is fostered by having strong social-emotional characteristics, a supportive workplace doing work that holds personal value, and support networks (Manning-Jones et. al., 2015).

**Self-Fulfilling Prophecy and Snyder's Hope Theory**

Tauber (1997) shows teachers' expectations alter their treatment of students, which in turn shapes students' behaviors and achievement over time. Teachers holding high expectations of all students can contribute to a positive self-fulfilling prophecy from students building their self-efficacy and optimism. TS schools have staff who are "warm demanders" and have high expectations in the context of caring relationships where they

provide supports for students to achieve high goals.  TS school leaders believe strongly in

the ability of staff to collaborate for a positive impact on students, and their passion helps

make it a reality.  Similar to this, Snyder's hope theory is that one's hope for a positive

outcome will manifest in attainment, but only if based on realistic expectations of self,

goals, and paths for achieving those goals with the ability to adapt and remain motivated

in the face of obstacles and use a positive mindset of hope to envision alternative paths to

achieving goals (Snyder, 2000).  TS schools encourage hope for both staff and students.

Staff are hopeful of their abilities to collaborate to make a difference and build resilience

in students.  Staff create action plans with realistic goals and strategies.  TS schools are

environments of high, but achievable expectations and use flexibility and adjustment to

plan alternative strategies to meet goals when obstacles arise.  SEL lessons teach students

skills for dealing with setbacks to be persistent and persevere.

**Learned Optimism Cultivating an Asset-Based Mindset**

Learned optimism is the ability to reframe trauma and stress as temporary and

specific instead of permanent and universal to remain positive about the future

(Seligman, 2006).  TS schools which refrain from using trauma screeners show that they

believe people's past traumas to be temporary and specific and have hope for them

having a better tomorrow by focusing on building strengths and having a caring and

supportive environment that minimizes triggers and re-traumatization.  TS schools that

persisted with TS strategies during COVID-19 were using learned optimism as they saw

the temporary nature of the pandemic and forged ahead to remain hopeful about having a

"new normal" of a more equitable educational system that better meets the needs of the

whole child.  The documents written during COVID, webinars, and the online event all featured this positive mindsight for a better tomorrow in education.

Asset-based thinking focuses on the strengths and viewing individuals as being capable, both of which are necessary to be effective in a TS school since a deficit perspective frames people with trauma as victims and undermines building students' resilience (Griffin et al., 2013).  TS schools foster a mindset and culture shift in staff, so they see the importance of fostering resilience and see students' strengths and seek out restorative discipline, so students may be their best selves through learning skills for more adaptive and regulated behaviors.  Asset-based TS schools refrain from trauma screening since they do not wish to seek out students' deficiencies.  If they do screenings, they use SEL ones to seek out students' strengths and SEL competencies.  A focus on what students can do and building on that is a much more humanistic approach than seeking out what is wrong with students and trying to "fix" them.  An asset-based approach does not view people as broken.

### Subjective "I" Interpretation

#### "Academic I"

Throughout the process, my "Academic I" was in the back of my head questioning which information to highlight and how deep to go since I wanted to have in-depth information, but I also wanted to showcase the many facets of being a TS school. Determining how to organize information was most difficult since everything seemed so interrelated, and I wanted to showcase a complete picture of building a TS school which has a multitude of aspects and possible strategies since it follows a whole-school reform

model.  Hindsight from the knowledge I have gained through this process revealed some

areas I would have done differently had I conducted my document analysis and

interviews before doing the literature review although taking that approach may have

made different themes stand out since the literature review framed what I sought.  I could

have reframed my dissertation to be more asset-based and focused more heavily on

resilience instead of trauma, such as having the screening chapter focus on SEL screeners

(which I had not heard of before the document analysis and interviews) and refocused the

vicarious trauma chapter on the positive construct of staff wellness.  I would have

featured staff wellness as a primary characteristic of a TS school instead of its own

distinct chapter since the more I researched and discussed the topic with others, I came to

agree that without staff wellness at the forefront, a school cannot be TS as staff will be

too dysregulated for a positive school climate that effectively implements TS strategies.

Throughout my journaling, my "Academic I" revealed that I was often questioning

myself with how I was making sense of the material since I naturally went to deficit

wording despite wanting to feature an asset-based look at TS initiatives.

**"Educator I"**

My "Educator I" was constantly trying to think of how I would apply what I was

learning to a high school setting since my background is primarily at the high school

level, yet most of what I encountered during the document analysis, interviews, and

online participation was geared towards elementary and middle school.  The literature

review was also highly biased towards younger grade levels when it came to practitioner

strategies.  I had worked previously in daycare and as a summer reading teacher at the

elementary level, so I readily saw connections and application for those environments. Unfortunately, seeing what TS strategies could be done schoolwide to help high school students was more of a challenge despite the reality that incorporating TS approaches at this level is imperative since high schoolers are in danger of dropping out, more likely to be suspended, and can wind up with arrests for fighting on school campuses which could impact future jobs and education. This also made me reflect over the things I did which were my attempts at addressing the whole child and think on how I could extend those practices in a TS school environment. I have done restorative circles before to resolve issues within the classroom or during planning by mediating an issue between students in hopes of preventing further issues and referrals. I also kept adult coloring books, art supplies, word puzzles, and enrichment activities in my room, but they were for when students finished assigned work, not as a calming corner regulation method. I also had a hand signal where students could put four fingers up which meant they were having personal issues and wanted to step outside the door for a moment. I would then check on them after two minutes and have a discussion to help calm them or give them a pass to counseling which is similar to the REST method from the discipline webinar but not as structured. When my students were assigned ISS, I would go over in my planning to meet with them, talk a little about what happened, encourage them to do an alternative behavior next time, and explain the work I was leaving for them. I would not say these interactions were to the level of being restorative or building skills for adaptive behaviors, but they were my small attempt at showing personal care for students who were missing out on the learning environment. This research gave me many ideas for

266

how I would revamp the ISS structures I have seen to be more restorative.  Although I have used some TS practices, I have never worked in a TS environment, so my attempts at being TS within the classroom were never fully realized since as the research shows it is difficult to do in isolation without a larger support structure in place.

**"Trauma-Survivor I"**

My "Trauma-Survivor I" was thinking often about how I personally would have reacted to TS strategies if they were used when I was a child, and I had many mixed feelings about them despite being a strong advocate for TS school practices.  I kept thinking about how many of the strategies may have helped me, but also, how much I most likely would have hated them.  Then I kept reminding myself that my reactions were unique to me, so my feelings about strategies may be very different from others.  I was a child who operated in freeze mode often, fight and flight were not my go-to stress response mechanisms.  I could put my body in a state of nothingness where it was like I ceased to exist and could tune out everything around me and within myself.  I preferred to go unnoticed and found my escape through reading.  I would not ask to go to the bathroom, let alone ever take myself to a peace corner where others would know I was having an issue.  Doing a restorative circle or SEL morning meeting discussing my thoughts and emotions in front of others would have mortified me.  It wasn't until eleventh grade that I had a teacher who forced us to sit in a large circle and discuss texts (daily!); this made me quietly upset with her for quite some time until I got more comfortable with speaking in front of others.  At least discussions were based specifically on texts, so it was not as personal as SEL time would be although perhaps over time I

267

would have also adjusted to those and became more comfortable. A teacher trying to develop a relationship with me may have made me uneasy when I was younger although in twelfth grade, I finally did let my guard down to have a relationship with one teacher who went above and beyond showing students she cared. Had anyone attempted to give me an ACEs screener, I would have lied and said I had zero issues, and had any teacher been asked to fill out a survey on me, they most likely would have thought I was fine since I behaved and completed my work to avoid punishment or negative attention which reinforces my belief that ACEs screeners are pointless for schools to spend time and resources conducting.

During the self-care webinar, I was triggered when leaders from one district were talking about doing ACEs surveys with staff as though it was not intrusive. I was particularly bothered when one leader talked about staff sharing their ACEs with each other and how it was surprising to learn that one person who was appeared so well put together had so many ACEs as though having ACEs means you cannot be emotionally and mentally healthy having processed your issues or that people with ACEs are supposed to look some disheveled way. It was meant to be a compliment or a reminder not to judge others since you can never tell what another person has been through just by looking at them, but it struck me as offensive. I agree that it is important for people to be far enough along in processing their trauma, so they may be effective teachers, and I also agree that sharing adversities you have faced can be inspirational for students, but I wholeheartedly disagree with putting people on the spot in a large group setting to do that. Additionally, the amount and extent of adversities people choose to disclose with

others, especially students, is a completely personal decision in determining comfort level and appropriateness.  While disclosure should not be discouraged, people should not feel as though they ought to.

While much of the brain science and negative predictors for those with ACEs was hard to continually encounter and digest since it often comes across as very deficit based, the research on positive psychology and TS strategies renewed my hope for school staff to make a positive difference in the lives of students and families.  Something as simple as just forging positive relationships can have a substantial impact on a student's future like it did for mine.  My "Trauma-Survivor I" was reminded to keep pushing through setbacks and the negative research, so I could complete this dissertation and add to a positive look at the potential of TS schools for supporting more students like myself in reaching their potential to find personal success.

**"Pollyanna I"**

I kept getting enthusiastic while coming across new concepts and strategies, yet disappointed that I do not have a school to share or try them out in while I am on educational leave.  The webinars and online course were particularly exciting since they had many practical ideas and tools for implementation.  I am happy though to have this time to really think through my list and prioritize all the new information, strategies, practices, and policies I may want to consider once I begin the next stage of my career as a school leader especially the importance of staff wellness.  Before, I was so focused on student-centered strategies, that I had never emphasized the importance of staff wellness which I will do so as I go forward.  I realize I will need to wait until I know my local

269

context to form a plan of action, but I am excited for all the possibilities that lie ahead. While COVID-19 has certainly been a tragedy, I feel grateful that it came at a time where I will be transitioning from the classroom to a leadership role. The pandemic helps to situate the importance of creating a TS environment with supports for staff and students, so I think my next school will be receptive to many of the new ideas I will bring with me.

## Limitations

In this basic qualitative study, I provided an in-depth look at the NC R&LP, so educators and school staff may understand more about what its goals are, the structure and flexibility it offers, the principles and core components of it, suggested strategies, adaptions to it since the pilot year especially in response to COVID-19, their plans for going forward, and how NC R&LP staff work with school staff to assist them in becoming TS. While I originally hoped to have additional interviewees, I had only three who agreed. Fortunately, the three who participated were able to provide different information given their varying roles within the organization. The interviewees reinforced many of the same key points, which also aligned with what I discovered through document analysis and my online participation. This made me feel the information I found was reliable and credible and further interviewing with NC R&LP staff would most likely have resulted in more overlapping data. The scope and time of this research did not allow for interviewing district and school staff partnered with the program, nor did I conduct interviews with students, families, or community members. Interviews with these stakeholders could be beneficial for future research. I did use some of the staff and student feedback I found in the document analysis and input from online

presenters to add more depth to the research.  The number of presenters and amount of

published feedback from stakeholders was limited, so they do not represent all the

possible perspectives people have of the program.

My experience of a being a participant was limited as I did not have the benefit of

participating alongside colleagues in a school using the program or get to try strategies

with students.  While I was not an authentic participant from the perspective of being a

partnering school employee, I did authentically participate from the role of a community

member, former teacher, and college researcher.  Participants' experiences are filtered

through their own cultures, backgrounds, and prior experiences; therefore, there could

never be research that fully duplicates what it is like to engage in the program from the

participant point-of-view as these experiences will always be very individualistic.  I was

able to provide insight into what information I encountered during my experience.

<p align="center">**Recommendations for Practice**</p>

This research showcased the need for TS supports within the educational system.

TS schools support staff wellness to ensure staff remain effective and avoid burnout.

Given the high number of students who have current ACEs or who may encounter future

adverse experiences that create toxic stress, universal TS policies and practices within a

positive school culture of supportive and caring staff are beneficial.  Having staff,

students, and families who are well creates stronger communities that are better able to

face adversities and communal crises.  Policymakers need to create legislation and

provide needed funding to create more TS educational settings for the benefit of students,

staff, families, and communities.

NC R&LP is still in its early stages, but it is already showing a lot of promise for improving staff wellness and decreasing discipline issues in high-need schools. There is a lot of opportunity for the expansion of this program in the future. Politicians and the public are the key to pushing forward this initiative to get the funding and policy support needed for larger scaleup. A push towards this initiative may help move away from the present accountability model which emphasizes standardized test proficiency and academics without taking the needs of the whole child into consideration. Beyond structural changes supported through policy change and funding, the following are recommendations stakeholders may use to work towards TS schooling.

NC R&LP is not in high schools, so that is an area for possible exploration. High school leaders need to assess the needs of their staff and students and look at how TS initiatives may assist in meeting those needs. Staff wellness, relationship building, and SEL are applicable to all people, so high school staff need to be receptive to considering implementing these in their schools.

District and school leaders need to restructure school schedules and staff accountability to allow more time and flexibility to meet the needs of the whole child. With testing being such a focus area, little room is left for physical, mental, emotional, and social needs of students. More time for SEL and creative expression would enhance students' ability to attend to higher cognitive demands of core academics. Educators could also rethink their pedagogy and curriculum to be more TS. NC R&LP could assist schools by compiling TS academic strategies and providing ideas for how to infuse more creative expression into learning. As we move forward past COVID, students may still

272

have lingering psychological effects from the prolonged stressors of the pandemic. This makes a focus on the whole child even more imperative for schools and warrants school leaders reflecting on how TS current structures, policies, and practices are, and what could be done to make them more TS.

There is substantial research showing the benefit of addressing staff self-care and wellness for improving work satisfaction, worker efficacy, and lower costs from less turnover. Districts and school leaders need to look at policies and practices which can be implemented to address collective self-care and wellness. There are many strategies that are low-or no-cost but require supportive leadership such as schedules that allow for duty-free breaks, giving praise, and fostering work-life balance by not sending emails after hours and limiting unnecessary paperwork. District and school leaders may use one of the many tools available to assess staff wellness in their schools and discuss results with staff to brainstorm ideas to best address areas of need. They could then use those to build a school self-care plan that is implemented immediately. Staff should be encouraged to also create and follow individual self-care plans.

NC R&LP should reconsider showing the ACEs screener to school staff since some are deciding to use it despite a lack of empirical studies showing benefits, possible unintended harm, and NC R&LP advising against it. NC R&LP is an asset-based approach by featuring resilience-building as the main emphasis of implementation; however, trauma is the foundation of the training and the first concept staff learn. While this does serve as a motivating hook for some, it is possible some staff may get stuck in a deficit lens or overemphasis the role of trauma. To highlight how TS schools benefit all

students, discussion of trauma could be very limited or even removed altogether with training on the stress response system and dangers of toxic stress in lieu of trauma. This would help those staff who are inclined to think from a deficit perspective from getting stuck on some students having issues to instead focusing on stress being inherent to all people and important for addressing with all students to develop stronger protective factors and SEL skills.

Families and communities would benefit from knowing more strategies for combatting stress and improving SEL. Schools and community agencies could devise educational outreach opportunities to inform the public and assist children and families with being more emotionally and mentally healthy. This is especially important as we are in the midst of a global pandemic which has added increasing emotional and mental burdens from increased stressors COVID has brought with health and disruptions to social life, finances, work, school, and sense of safety and security.

## Recommendations for Future Research

I am left with many more questions than I have answers for from doing this research. Rather than list or discuss research projects that could be done, I am posing the list of questions that still linger in my mind. Perhaps these questions will be fodder for someone else to explore or for my future exploration.

### Questions about the Deficit Nature of Trauma

1) Is it ever truly possible to remove the stigma that accompanies trauma? If not, what would be a more asset-based name schools could use instead of TS schools? Does the program name make a difference in stakeholder perceptions and actions? 2) Is a

274

foundational background in the science of trauma and ACEs necessary for staff to be motivated and understand the importance of resilience building and wellness initiatives?

**Questions about Universal Implementation and Screening**

1) If a TS environment can be implemented without screening, why do so many schools still conduct screeners?  2) How do students and families feel about trauma screeners and what impact does the knowledge of trauma science and ACEs have on them?  3) What are the pros and cons of the resilience and SEL screeners available?  4) What impact is there on schools and programs that give resilience or SEL screeners?  5) Are SEL screeners truly asset-based or do staff view and use them in a deficit manner? 6) What are the impacts of conducting ACE screeners on school staff in group settings?

**Questions about Trauma-Sensitive Characteristics**

1) What is the impact of increased staff wellness on students?  2) What impact does collective self-care and staff wellness have on STS, burnout, and turnover?  3) What are ways to foster the mindset shift for staff to have increased buy-in and readiness for implementing TS practices?  4) How may schools smoothly continue a TS transformation amid staff turnover?  5) Which proactive, restorative practices best reduce maladaptive behaviors?  6) How may current SEL curriculums geared towards younger children be adapted to meet the needs of secondary students?  7) What are effective methods of getting families to support and use SEL strategies in the home?

**Questions about Stakeholder Perceptions**

1) What are students' feelings about TS initiatives?  2) What long-term impact do TS schools have on students' SEL skills, sense of worth, and academic achievement?  3)

What are staff perceptions before and after implementing TS strategies?  4) Do staff in

TS schools report higher levels of satisfaction with working conditions?  5) Do staff in

TS schools exhibit less burnout and have higher retention rates than non-TS schools with

similar local contexts?  6) How do families perceive TS strategies?  7) How do strong

staff-family connections impact families' in-home discipline and interactions with their

children?  8) How does changing to a TS school impact the community's impression of

the school and its staff, students, and families and interactions with the school?  9) How

does the implementation of TS strategies impact community partnerships?

**Questions about the Lingering Impact of COVID-19**

1) Which TS strategies were effective for buffering against the emotional and

mental stress of the pandemic?  2) What TS strategies will best address the lingering

impact of COVID-19?  3) What lessons for TS schools can be learned from COVID-19

for moving forward?

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**Final Thoughts**

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As a person who does not like statistics given their propensity to lend themselves

to deficit-based thinking and a negative self-fulfilling prophecy, I nonetheless included

many in my dissertation, especially in my chapters where I reviewed literature which

demonstrated the possible detrimental impact of trauma and vicarious trauma.  I wanted

to provide a full and complete picture of the importance and necessity for school leaders

to address trauma and develop more TS schools.  My hope is this research gave a strong

voice to positive psychology principles of having optimism and an asset-based viewpoint

with an emphasis on how forming TS school environments may empower students, staff,

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276

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families, and communities by working together to become more resilient in the face of adversities. All people are worthy of being viewed as capable human beings who may achieve high expectations and accomplish personal goals and should be provided the encouragement and supports to do so which is why taking a TS approach is critical for schools especially as we move forward in a post-COVID society.

It is time for schools to become more sensitive to fostering the whole child through TS strategies that consider students' mental, social, physical, and emotional needs in addition to academic ones for a more enriching educational experience and promotion of self-actualized individuals. Schools need to end zero-tolerance policies that contribute to the school-to-prison pipeline and instead use restorative practices sensitive to the whole child. Often school staff expect more from students than what is developmentally appropriate or possible especially when students have trauma and toxic stress. There are many triggers in the school environment which staff should be cognizant of and do their best to minimize. Students who go into freeze, flight, or fight mode need to be met with compassion and understanding by adults who are able to remain calm coregulators and model more adaptive responses to stress. Staff themselves often struggle to remain calm and often escalate situations. Having staff continually trained and supported in de-escalation and prioritizing their own wellness and self-care is imperative for creating a compassionate, restorative, and proactive school environment with staff who effectively work with students.

Schools need to go beyond being trauma-informed to be truly TS by not conducting ACEs screeners and constantly seeking out students' deficiencies to instead

focus on strengths, relationship building, restorative practices, and developing resilience and SEL competencies, so all students may handle adversities and minimize future conflicts with others.  Schools also need to stop conducting ACE screeners on staff and take the time to instead seek out how staff feel about their working conditions and do more to create a less stressful environment that allows for self-care, so staff may be their best for the students they reach.  District and school leaders have the power to implement TS practices and policies which benefit students and staff; subsequently, it is up to them to pave the way for a supportive school environment since it is difficult for staff to have effective self-care and a TS environment without the support of leadership.

School leaders and staff must also reach out and form community partnerships to get much needed resources and services into the schools to assist staff, students, and families.  Supporting students and families can contribute to improving the larger community and minimizing future ACEs.  Families themselves are an often-overlooked asset.  Once families are taught TS strategies, they can be champions of them and reinforce them outside of the school, so they become engrained aspect of students' lives to create lasting change.  While eliminating ACEs entirely from society would be best, the reality is there will always be issues which create toxic stress such as the unforeseen COVID outbreak; therefore, there is a need for effective practices within the educational system for combatting those stressors and building resilience.  This research has really accentuated for me the need for a TS whole-child, whole-school, whole-community approach that highlights principles of positive psychology to create a positive transformation in the lives of students, families, staff, and communities.

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APPENDIX A

EMAIL INTERVIEW REQUEST

Dear _____

I contacted you last year when I was beginning to shape my research topic, and you were kind enough to help direct me a bit in those early stages.  I now have 5 chapters written and my IRB completed, so I am ready to move forward.  I am hoping to conduct a video interview with you to learn more about the Resilience and Learning Project and how the pandemic has impacted or shaped the ongoing efforts of the program.  Originally, I had wanted to do mostly school observations; however, the pandemic has scaled me back a bit.

I am an educator of 20 years (currently on unpaid sabbatical with Guilford County Schools while I complete my doctorate at UNCG in educational leadership).  I have been researching trauma and trauma-sensitive education.   While researching, I discovered your program which seems to be the most comprehensive attempt to mitigate the impact on trauma for NC students.

It would be most appreciated if you would be able to set aside approximately 45-60 minutes of your time, so I may ask questions which will allow me a greater understanding of the Resilience and Learning Project.  My literature review is broken into three sections: trauma screening, trauma-sensitive characteristics, and vicarious trauma for staff.  I would like to ask questions about these areas in regard to your program (for example: whether you recommend screening, the practices and policies promoted for use in schools, and how you assist staff in mitigating vicarious trauma while doing this challenging work), but I also have some background questions to understand the formation of the program and questions concerning goals as you move forward especially given the unforeseen pandemic.

Please contact me at your earliest convenience to set up an interview time or to ask additional questions about my research before deciding if you would agree to participate or not.  I have attached an interview consent form for your participation which may answer some questions you may have.

Thank you so much for your time in reading this email and considering participation in my doctoral research.  I look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

Laura Aberg

APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW CONSENT FORM

**UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT GREENSBORO**
**CONSENT TO ENGAGE IN SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS**

Project Title: Trauma-Sensitive Education: A Look at The Public School Forum of North Carolina's Resilience and Learning Project

Principal Investigator: Laura Aberg- ljaberg@uncg.edu
Faculty Advisor: Kathryn Hytten- kahytten@uncg.edu

**What are some general things you should know about research studies?**
You are being asked to take part in a research study. Your participation in the study is voluntary. You may choose not to join, or you may withdraw your consent to be in the study, for any reason, without penalty.

Research studies are designed to obtain new knowledge. This new information may help people in the future. There may not be any direct benefit to you for being in the research study. There also may be risks to being in research studies. If you choose not to be in the study or leave the study before it is done, it will not affect your relationship with the researcher or the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Details about this study are discussed in this consent form. It is important that you understand this information so that you can make an informed choice about being in this research study.

This is your copy of this consent form. If you have any questions about this study at any time, you should ask the researchers named in this consent form. Their contact information is above.

**What is the study about?**
This basic qualitative research study will consist of document analysis and semi-structured interviews to gain a greater understanding of trauma-sensitive educational practices, particularly those implemented and supported by The Public School Forum of North Carolina's Resilience and Learning Project which has rapidly expanded throughout N.C. since its inception in 2017. This will help generate more discussion and ideas for how schools may address the urgent needs that trauma exposure poses to both students and staff.

**Why are you asking me?**
The reason you are being asked to participant in an interview is due to your knowledge of the N.C. Resilience and Learning Project and/or trauma-sensitive educational practices. Your participation is voluntary.

**What will you ask me to do if I agree to be in the study?**
Full participation would include correspondence by email to setup an interview, a semi-structured recorded video call, and reviewing a transcript from the interview to clarify, redact, or expand on any comments from the initial interview as needed through email or in an additional video call if desired. Participants are also being asked to share any documents or materials that may provide more insight into The Public School Forum of North Carolina's Resilience and Learning Project's trauma-sensitive practices, goals, and implementation beyond what is already readily available online to the general public. Sharing of documents and materials is optional and voluntary.

**Is there any audio/video recording?**
The video interview will be recorded solely for the purpose of generating a transcript of the interview. The recording will not be shared with anyone beyond the researcher for the project and the faculty advisor for

the project.  The recording will be downloaded and stored on a flashdrive until the transcript of the interview is confirmed and agreed upon by the participant.  After the transcript has been confirmed as accurate by the participant, the video recording will be destroyed to preserve confidentiality.

**What are the risks to me?**
The Institutional Review Board at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro has determined that participation in this study poses minimal risk to participants.

If you have questions, want more information or have suggestions, please contact Laura Aberg and Kathryn Hytten who may be reached at ljaberg@uncg.edu and kahytten@uncg.edu.

If you have any concerns about your rights, how you are being treated, concerns or complaints about this project or benefits or risks associated with being in this study  please contact the Office of Research Integrity at UNCG toll-free at (855)-251-2351.

**Are there any benefits to society as a result of me taking part in this research?**
Your participation in this study will enable people who read the study to have a greater understanding of how the NC Resilience and Learning Project supports trauma-sensitive practices for students and staff, increased understanding of trauma-sensitive practices in general, the need for those practices, and the vicarious trauma faced by staff working with students experiencing trauma.

**Are there any benefits to *me* for taking part in this research study?**
This study may indirectly benefit participants by expanding public knowledge of trauma, trauma-sensitive educational practices, The Public School Forum of NC, and the Resilience and Learning Project.

**Will I get paid for being in the study?  Will it cost me anything?**
There are no costs to you or payments made for participating in this study.

**How will you keep my information confidential?**
All information obtained in this study is strictly confidential unless disclosure is required by law. Recordings will be downloaded onto a flashdrive and erased once transcripts are verified by participants, transcripts and documents will be downloaded and stored on a flashdrive and kept secure, participants will not be identified by name in the research, and
your data will be destroyed after the dissertation has been approved, not to exceed a year and a half from the time of the interview.  De-identified data will not be stored and will not be used in future research projects.

**What if I want to leave the study?**
You have the right to refuse to participate or to withdraw at any time, without penalty.  If you do withdraw, it will not affect you in any way.  If you choose to withdraw, you may request that any of your data which has been collected be destroyed unless it is in a de-identifiable state. The investigator also have the right to stop your participation at any time if research is halted.

**What about new information/changes in the study?**
If significant new information relating to the study becomes available which may relate to your willingness to continue to participate, this information will be provided to you.

**Voluntary Consent by Participant:**
By participating in the semi-structured interview, you are agreeing that you read, or it has been read to you, and you fully understand the contents of this document and are openly willing consent to take part in this study.  You will be asked at the start of the interview if you consent to participate in the recorded interview. By saying yes and proceeding with the interview, you are agreeing that you are 18 years of age or older and are agreeing to participate in this study as described to you by Laura Aberg.

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS: DIRECTOR

1. Please give me a little background on what led to you working for NC R&LP?
2. Were partnerships in place when you came in or did you have to forge those?  If not addressed: So how did you determine the initial school partners and get those going?
3. Tell me a little background about the program and what it was like in the first year.
4. I read somewhere that the program was influenced by the Flexible Framework created by Trauma and Learning Policy Institute (TLPI). Does your program also stress the six key elements of supportive leadership, professional development, access to resources and services, academic and nonacademic strategies, trauma-sensitive policies and protocols, and collaboration with families?  Follow-up: Do you introduce all six elements at once, or you do focus on one at a time and build on them?   Which ones are the focus areas for your program?  Why did you pick those or start there?
5. Are there any other frameworks, beliefs or research that have had a large impact on your program?
6. Despite being a trauma-informed program that provides trauma-sensitive approaches, the program's name does not include the word trauma, can you tell me the reasoning behind that?
7. While doing this research, I've encountered people who say trauma-sensitive schools are inherently deficit based since the foundation is an acknowledgment of something bad in a child's life.  They ask why not a compassionate school model or something more positive?  Do you think having a foundation of being trauma-informed creates a deficit mindset or is there an asset-based way of looking at it?
8. I also heard they would not want to send their children to a school focused on trauma, or as an educator, they may avoid working there since they may not feel equipped to deal with trauma.  What would you say to these parents and to educators to change their minds?
9. What are future goals concerning middle and high schools?
10. The NC Resilience and Learning Project has expanded from three schools in two districts to numerous schools and districts across NC in a very short time span.  What do you attribute that growth to?
11. What are benefits to this growth?  What are drawbacks to this growth?
12. What are the long-term goals of the program?
13. How is a partnership school different from one that consults with the program?
14. Pretend I am a new district seeking a partnership to bring trauma-sensitive practices into some of my schools.  Walk me through what that process would look like.
15. Once implemented, describe what the partnership looks like and how the school is supported.
16. What feedback have you had from varying stakeholders about the program?

***If not already described, ask applicable questions, skipping those already addressed.***

17. Does the NC Resilience and Learning Project have a screening process for identifying students with trauma?  If so, ask for detailed description of it.  What is the philosophy driving that choice?
18. Do you recommend schools use an MTSS model for identifying students needed additional supports?  If so, how are those students referred and what supports are recommended?
19. What trauma-sensitive academic strategies do you encourage teachers to use? What nonacademic strategies do you promote?
20. On yesterday's webinar, they use the REST method, avoid suspension, and see discipline as a learning experience.  Is this the same at all partnering schools as a NC R&LP approach, or do they each have their own discipline strategies and philosophies?  Are you familiar with the restorative discipline model? Does your program encourage schools to use restorative discipline such as restorative circles and to what extent do you provide training with those practices?
21. I find it's possible to be trauma-informed without necessarily being trauma-sensitive.  How do you get staff onboard and get them to take an asset-based approach instead of giving up on students with trauma?
22. Working with students and families with lots of toxic stress can be emotionally draining.  What supports are in place or how is vicarious trauma and the stress of it addressed for staff?
23. The pandemic has made toxic stress and vicarious trauma even more widespread.  How has the pandemic impacted your program?
24. I attended the webinar yesterday.  Were those already something the organization was working towards or did the pandemic help drive those?  There were over 70 people on yesterday.  Have those numbers been fairly consistent, or do you see interest expanding?  Will those continue after the pandemic and continue featuring different key speakers from schools using the program, or what may future webinars look like?
25. How confident are you with the stability and longevity of the program?  What would you say to a potential partnering school which is on the fence since they are concerned that the program is too new and may not stick around long and are worried about it being just another thing that will come and go?
26. Two of your funding partners: Reynolds's and Belk Foundation have mission statements that are very data-driven for how they select partnerships to donate to.  How do you meet the missions of funding partners when the program is in early stages and may not have much data yet?
27. What kinds of data do you have on the project, how is it collected, and how is it used?
28. How did the partnership with Duke come about?  What is their role?
29. Is there anything else you would like me to know about the NC Resilience and Learning Project that we haven't discussed?
30. Is there anyone else you think it would be beneficial for me to speak with to know more about funding, the program's features, or visions for the future for it?
31.  I would like to provide you with a transcript from today's interview for you to review over and verify.  Would you prefer to have follow up email, phone conversation, or virtual meeting to give me your input on anything you'd like to clarify or revise later?

APPENDIX D

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS: COORDINATOR

1. What led to you becoming a regional coordinator for this program?
2. What role have you had in forging or expanding partnerships?
3. The NC Resilience and Learning Project has expanded from three schools in two districts to numerous schools and districts across NC in a very short time span.  What do you attribute that growth to?  What are the benefits to this growth?  What are drawbacks to this growth?
4. Do you foresee more middle schools or high schools as partners in the future?  Why or why not?
5. How many school districts and schools are you directly involved with?  Describe what your working relationship looks like with the schools you are currently in.
6. I read that the program was influenced by the Flexible Framework created by Trauma and Learning Policy Institute (TLPI). Does your program also stress the six key elements of supportive leadership, professional development, access to resources and services, academic and nonacademic strategies, trauma-sensitive policies and protocols, and collaboration with families?  Follow-up: Do you introduce all six elements at once, or you do focus on one at a time and build on them?   Which ones are the focus areas for your partnering schools?  Why start there?
7. While doing this research, I've encountered people who say trauma-sensitive schools are inherently deficit-based since the foundation is an acknowledgment of something bad in a child's life.  They ask why not a compassionate school model or something more positive?  Do you think having a foundation of being trauma-informed creates a deficit mindset or is there an asset-based way of looking at it?
8. I also heard they would not want to send their children to a school focused on trauma, or as an educator, they may avoid working there since they may not feel equipped to deal with trauma.  What would you say to these parents and to educators to change their minds?
9. Follow-up questions if needed:  How do you encourage schools to get parents onboard?  Are they aware of the school taking a trauma-informed approach?  To what extent are they included?
10. Being a non-profit, you rely on outside funding.  How confident are you with the stability and longevity of the program?  What would you say to a potential partnering school which is on the fence since they are concerned that the program is too new and may not stick around long and are worried about it being just another thing that will come and go?
11. What kinds of data do you have on the program, how is it collected, and what is it used for?
12. Do any of the schools you work with have a screening process for identifying students with trauma?  If so, ask for detailed description of it- tools, process, logistics.  What is the philosophy driving that choice?

13. What does the MTSS process look like for identifying students needing additional support?  How are those students referred and what supports are recommended?
14. What trauma-sensitive academic strategies do you encourage teachers to use? What nonacademic strategies do you promote?
15. Are you familiar with the restorative discipline model? Do your partnering schools use restorative discipline such as restorative circles and to what extent do you provide training with those practices?
16. I find it's possible to be trauma-informed without necessarily being trauma-sensitive. How do you get staff onboard and get them to retain an asset-based thinking model instead of giving up on students with trauma?
17. Working with students and families with lots of toxic stress can be emotionally draining.  What supports are in place or how is vicarious trauma and the stress of it addressed for staff?
18. The pandemic has made toxic stress and vicarious trauma even more widespread. How has the pandemic impacted your program?
19. What feedback have you had from varying stakeholders about the program?
20. Is there anything else you would like me to know about the NC Resilience and Learning Project that we haven't discussed?
21. Is there anyone else who you think would be valuable for me to interview about the program?
22. I would like to provide you with a transcript from today's interview for you to review over and verify.  Would you prefer to have follow up email, phone conversation, or virtual meeting to give me your input on anything you'd like to clarify or revise later?

APPENDIX E

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS: RESEARCHER

1. Can you describe how you got started with the Public School Forum and came to be on the Child Study Group and give me some background on that?
2. How many people were on that initial Study Group?
3. How was the name decided for the Resilience and Learning Project?
4. While doing this research, I've encountered people who say trauma-sensitive schools are inherently deficit-based since the foundation is an acknowledgment of something bad in a child's life. They ask why not a compassionate school model or something more positive? Do you think having a foundation of being trauma-informed creates a deficit mindset or is there an asset-based way of looking at it?
5. I also heard they would not want to send their children to a school focused on trauma, or as an educator, they may avoid working there since they may not feel equipped to deal with trauma. What would you say to these parents and to educators to change their minds?
6. I read somewhere that the program was influenced by the Flexible Framework created by Trauma and Learning Policy Institute (TLPI). Does your program also stress the six key elements of supportive leadership, professional development, access to resources and services, academic and nonacademic strategies, trauma-sensitive policies and protocols, and collaboration with families? Follow-up: Do you introduce all six elements at once, or you do focus on one at a time and build on them? Which ones are the focus areas for your program? Why did you pick those or start there?
7. Are there any other frameworks, beliefs or research that has had a large impact on your program?
8. What are the objectives of your research?
9. What kinds of data do you have on the program, how is it collected, and what is it used for? How long will you continue to conduct your research?
10. Are there any interesting findings from your research thus far that you are able and willing to share with me today? Who is funding your research?
11. Currently the program is primarily in elementary schools. What are future goals concerning middle and high schools?
12. The NC Resilience and Learning Project has expanded from three schools in two districts to numerous schools and districts across NC in a very short time span. What do you attribute that growth to?
13. What are benefits to this growth? What are drawbacks to this growth?
14. What are your thoughts on schools conducting trauma screening? Get elaboration on how to best do it and why or why not.

15. What are your thoughts on schools using MTSS?  If agrees with using it, how would you suggest doing referrals?  What supports would you offer at tiers 1-3 specifically for students with trauma?
16. What do you feel are the key characteristics integral to a trauma-sensitive school?
17. What are specific academic strategies schools should implement to be trauma-sensitive?
18. What are specific nonacademic strategies schools should implement to be trauma-sensitive?
19. How should schools address vicarious trauma and secondary traumatic stress disorder?
20. I find it's possible to be trauma-informed without necessarily being trauma-sensitive.  How do you get staff onboard and get them to take an asset-based approach instead of giving up on students with trauma?
21. The pandemic has made toxic stress and vicarious trauma even more widespread.  How has the pandemic impacted your program?
22. What is the overall feedback you have received from stakeholders regarding the program?
23. Is there anything else you would like me to know about regarding your knowledge of trauma-sensitive schools or the NC Resilience and Learning Project?
24. I would like to provide you with a transcript from today's interview for you to review over and verify.  Would you prefer to have follow up email, phone conversation, or virtual meeting to give me your input on anything you'd like to clarify or revise later?

APPENDIX F

FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONS


1.  Are schools encouraged to also include classified staff on their resilience teams?  Do some schools have those staff members included that you are aware of?  Any of them also include parents, or do the teams discuss student-specific information that may violate privacy if a parent representative were involved?


2.  I'm wondering if you would say there are some defining characteristics of schools who are successfully engaging with being trauma sensitive or not.  If you could pinpoint just a few key aspects or characteristics that you feel are central to a school being trauma-informed what would those be?


3.  What are some more examples of how your schools incorporate restorative justice in addition to morning meetings and check-in/out sheets?


4.  You mention your curriculum you use a few times in the interview.  Can you give me more insight into what that curriculum is?


5.  You mention the program has all sorts of new pieces since the pandemic.  I know the webinars and offering virtual coaching support are two of them.  Are there other specific examples you may give me?


6.  Are there other big trauma-informed initiatives like the Resilience and Learning Project that you've been able to join forces with here in NC?  Which are those, if any?


7.  You mentioned the importance of all adults working in the school getting the training. Are substitute teachers and volunteers included as well or made aware of the information?  To what extent are classified staff involved with things; for example, are they encouraged to be on resilience team?

APPENDIX G

IRB

**To**: Laura Aberg
Ed Ldrship and Cultural Found
Ed Ldrship and Cultural Found

**From**: UNCG IRB

**Date**: 10/06/2020

**RE**: Determination that Research or Research-Like Activity does not require IRB
Approval
**Study #:** 21-0142
**Study Title**: North Carolina Resilience and Learning Project's Trauma-Sensitive
Practices: Goals, Implementation and Supports

This submission was reviewed by the above-referenced IRB. The IRB has determined
that this submission does not constitute human subjects research as defined under federal
regulations [45 CFR 46.102 (d or f)] and does not require IRB approval.

**Study Description:**
This basic qualitative research study will consist of document analysis and semi-
structured interviews to gain a greater understanding of trauma-sensitive educational
practices, particularly those implemented and supported by The Public School Forum of
North Carolina's Resilience and Learning Project which has rapidly expanded throughout
N.C. since its inception in 2017.  This will help generate more discussion and ideas for
how schools may address the urgent needs that trauma exposure poses to both students
and staff.

- If your study protocol changes in such a way that this determination will
  no longer apply, you should contact the above IRB before making the changes.

# APPENDIX H

# COPYRIGHT APPROVALS

## Approval for Figure 1: Feletti's ACEs Pyramid

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| Title | Trauma-Sensitive Schools: A Look at The Public School Forum of North Carolina's Resilience and Learning Project | | Portions | Figure 2. Potential influences throughout the lifespan of adverse childhood experiences. |
| Institution name | UNCG | | | |
| Expected presentation date | Apr 2021 | | | |

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| Institution name | UNCG |
| Expected presentation date | Apr 2021 |

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|---|---|
| Portions | Fig. 2. Learning/behavior problems by ACEs score. |

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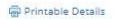
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| Institution name | UNCG |
| Expected presentation date | Apr 2021 |

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| | |
|---|---|
| Portions | Figure 1: Prevalence of negative school performance and attitude outcomes by number of ACEs among children ages 6 to 17 and Figure 2: Prevalence of negative school performance and attitude outcomes by number of PFs among children ages 6 to 17. |

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