Leading with Hope: A Grounded Theory Exploration of Trauma Informed Leadership for School Principals

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Abstract

Before the age of 18, 60% of U.S. youth are estimated to have experienced at least one adverse childhood experience (ACE), with 1 in 6 experiencing four or more ACEs. This study sought to uncover the ways in which school principals understand and enacted ways to support students that have experienced trauma. Using grounded theory methods (n=15), we explored how school principals utilize trauma-informed leadership as a means to support students. The impact of this study may help in the revision of how school principals are evaluated, professional development for school principals, and the academic preparation for school administration candidates.

Keywords: educational leadership, trauma-informed leadership, school administrators, school principals, Hope Theory, grounded theory, qualitative research

Introduction

School principals play a critical role in the success and well-being of the students they serve. Considering continued social inequities impacting U.S. youth (Jackson & Holzman, 2020; Litvinov & Long, 2021), one of the most confounding challenges that face school leaders today is how to support students experiencing trauma. Research consistently illustrates how exposure to adverse experiences including, but not limited to, poverty (Silva-Laya, 2020), racism (Jackson & Holzman, 2020), homophobia and transphobia (Fields & Wotipka, 2020), abuse (Slade & Wissow, 2007), and or gun violence (Bergen-Cico et al., 2018) negatively impacts not only physical and mental wellness, but often has a deleterious impact on academic success.

Prior scholarship on ACEs has indicated that by age 18, over 60% of U.S. youth had experienced at least one ACE, with 20% experiencing at least four (Centers for Disease Control, 2024). These numbers greatly increased during the COVID-19 pandemic, with the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention reporting 75% of high school students experiencing at least one ACE during the pandemic (Anderson et al., 2022). While childhood trauma was clearly an issue before the pandemic, addressing the outcomes of these circumstances is more important now than ever. Schools are uniquely positioned to mitigate the impacts of childhood trauma as they can offer safe spaces that not only support students' intellectual well-being, but also mental and physical health. Unfortunately, U.S. education remains woefully underfunded (The Century Foundation, 2020), leaving building-level educators stretched thin. One way in which schools have shifted their philosophies to better serve their students is through the adoption of trauma-informed practices (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014) in teaching and community building.

To date, much of the literature intersecting trauma-informed care and education centers on teacher preparation or training (Brown et al., 2022; Thomas et al., 2019) and trauma-informed teaching practices (Crosby, 2015; Minahan, 2019). Yet, principals also have an important role to play in promoting student success and creating trauma-informed school environments. In a systematic review of two decades of research, Grissom et al. (2021) demonstrated how one standard deviation increase in principal effectiveness increases the typical student's achievement by 0.13 standard deviations in math and 0.09 standard deviations in reading.

Unfortunately, empirical inquiry into the use of trauma-informed care within school leadership is sparse at best. Despite the power and impact school principals have within their schools, and many times in their communities, there is a significant gap in understanding the role

of school principals in developing and maintaining a trauma-informed academic environment for students. To that end, the purpose of this study is to understand how school principals with some level of trauma awareness use such knowledge within their leadership practice. The school support provided was viewed from the perspective of the school principal.

Research Questions

Specially, this study was guided by the following research questions:

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

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

Literature Review

Trauma is a complex phenomenon, and one for which a widely accepted definition remains in debate among scholars (Weathers & Keane, 2007). From a diagnostic perspective, trauma may be considered an event that threatens life or sanity (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), yet other scholars have critiqued diagnostic criteria as too restrictive (Weathers & Keane, 2007). For example, such diagnostic criteria fail to account for situational factors that contribute to trauma responses including racism, homophobia, poverty, etc. These examples are not to be viewed as a comprehensive list, but instead offer an idea of the types of circumstances that are understood to be traumatic. May and Wisco (2016) explain that direct and indirect exposure to trauma as well as proximity to trauma, are important pieces of information when trying to understand experiences of traumatization. Considering these perspectives, this study considers trauma to be the, "...existence of a recognizable stressor that would evoke significant symptoms of distress..." (Weathers & Keane, 2007, p. 108).

School-Based Impacts of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)

Research has shown childhood traumatic events may be linked to the health and well-being of the child when they reached adulthood (Felitti et al., 1998). *Adverse childhood experiences* (ACEs) have been studied through multiple disciplinary lenses including public health, social work, and education. Romano et al. (2015) showed that ACEs had a negative impact on the child's school success. Furthermore, the more stressors a child experienced, the more likely the child was to show a gap in academic performance and emotional well-being in the classroom. ACEs are traumatic events to which children are exposed. These events and/or circumstances can be physical/emotional abuse or other forms of neglect such as prolonged hunger and witnessing domestic violence. The number of ACEs a child is exposed to can have an impact on the child's physiology and behavior. Children experiencing chronic abuse and/or neglect are at a higher risk for trauma-related challenges. This is due to a constant fear of harmful events. Children in these conditions are likely to develop totally different views of the world and may adapt dysfunctional behavior patterns for relating to the world (Swick et al., 2013).

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

There is also literature that suggests the initial ACEs study may not have gone far enough in understanding the experiences faced by different socioeconomic and ethnic groups. By

expanding the criteria used from the initial ACEs study, researchers have been able to include racial discrimination, danger of unsafe neighborhoods, living in foster care, bullying, and witnessing violence (Cronholm et al., 2015). The expansion of this research is the logical process to determine how other life circumstances surrounding trauma impact the lives of children. The expanded criteria for ACEs should be included in future research to learn more about these ideas.

Trauma-Informed Leadership

The literature on trauma-informed leadership is often ingrained in studies aimed at creating a trauma-sensitive school or classroom. Research on trauma-informed school leadership arose out of research aimed at trauma-informed care applied to school settings and is not a specific field of inquiry, but complementary to studies involving trauma-informed practices (Greig et al., 2021). Leadership theories, such as transformative and distributive leadership, have been popularized in educational research and administrative preparation programs. These philosophies lack a critical perspective regarding the lived experiences of trauma often present in public schools. In postsecondary education, Lynch (2022) introduced the notion of trauma-informed leadership as a new approach needed to lead such institutions in the 21st century. From a K-12 perspective, trauma-informed leadership requires schools systems to address the mental well-being of students. The United States has high rates of child poverty, with a limited social net, meaning that economic security for families can have a tremendous positive effect, where economic distress will have a tragic one (Shanks & Robinson, 2013). Trauma-informed leaders emphasize the importance of increasing teachers' and institutional capacity in understanding the effects of ACEs. Building the capacity of teachers to support students by gaining an understanding of trauma and its impact on learning and behavior is critical. If teachers can understand how important it is to establish and maintain positive, caring, and supportive

relationships with their students, they will be able to prevent some problem behavior.

Understanding will also help to develop a sense of trust, security, and hope among their students

that have been exposed to trauma (McConnico et al., 2016). It is through this understanding of

trauma-informed practices, and the drive to implement them within the school, that a principal

begins to understand themselves to be a trauma-informed leader.

Trauma-informed leadership strategies can also lead to school principals seeking

opportunities for the school to partner with mental health professionals and community

organizations. Larson et al. (2017) suggest that high quality, accessible, and culturally responsive

mental health screening and treatment services are needed for children and adolescents,

specifically within school settings. School-based therapy being provided by mental health

professionals is an important intervention. While school counselors are not mental health

professionals, it is important to incorporate them in the leadership decisions on how to provide

tiered support for students that have suffered through trauma (Howell et al., 2019). Partnering

with community organizations can also provide additional support to students that have been

exposed to ACEs. Mendelson (2015) has discussed the success urban schools have had with

partnering in communities using existing ties to workforce development programs. Community

partnerships have proven successful in rural areas as well. The close ties felt in rural

communities should be leveraged by school leaders to have a positive effect on students that

have suffered from chronic trauma (Hartman, 2017). Partnerships with the local Rotary Club or

area churches can help with providing mentors or buddies for students.

Hope Theory

During this research study it became evident that themes emerged that, when referenced

through the literature, concern Hope Theory. The concept of hope is the idea that the future will

be better than it is today, and that people have the power to make it so (Hellman, 2021). Hope

Theory was a concept first developed by Snyder (2000) and defined as being positively

motivated by a sense of successful agency and pathways, with the plan to meet goals. Snyder's

model is built from the ongoing mindset and determination of the individual. This model

suggests that as a person faces adversity, the higher-hope individual would learn from the

negative results to achieve their future goals. Later researchers refined the concept of hope as the

convergence of three central tenets; goals, pathways, and agency (Baxter et al., 2017; Hellman

2021).

Methodology

The study's design utilized qualitative methods to capture the knowledge created through

the interactions of the researcher and the participants of the study. Through qualitative methods it

is the hope to develop a theory to understand the phenomenon experienced by school principals

and trauma-informed leadership. Theory generation should be grounded in research, which is

exactly what grounded theory does. Birks and Mills (2015) explain the evolving nature of

grounded theory research due to the fluid, dynamic nature of the research methods used. The

emergence of theory and explanation of a phenomenon comes after a process of deduction and

reasoning.

Sampling & Recruitment

Participants were recruited using purposive criterion sampling techniques. Criteria for

participation included: 1) serving as a public-school principal, 2) possessing more than a year of

experience as a school principal, and 3) demonstrated knowledge of trauma-informed care within

the context of education. To assess the third criterion, a questionnaire was included in

recruitment materials assessing knowledge of trauma-informed care (See Appendix.). This

questionnaire was based on trauma-informed practices employed by schools, and based on

research of what schools can do to be trauma sensitive. While not a specific criterion, care was

taken to recruit principals from all grade levels, including elementary, middle, high, and non-

traditional schools, such as early colleges. Such diversity in experience helped to triangulate

specific leadership practices common across school contexts.

Participants were recruited via state and national listservs, as well as social media posts

including Facebook. No compensation or incentives were provided for involvement, and the

study was considered exempt from oversight by the Appalachian State University Institutional

Review Board. Ultimately, a total of 15 school principals completed the study. According to

Creswell (2007), 15-20 interviews are the minimum recommended for grounded-theory research.

Most participants identified as white, with half identifying as men and half as women. Nearly

half worked within elementary school contexts, with the average participant having 21 years of

professional service. See Table 1 for a summary of participant demographics.

Table 1

Summary of Participant Data

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

Data Collection

The procedures in this study included common qualitative methods used in grounded theory such as semi-structured interviews, unstructured interviews, and analytic memos. Each participant initially participated in a 60-minute semi-structured interview conducted over Zoom web conferencing, which was audio recorded and transcribed. The interview protocol covered two topics: leadership and trauma-informed practices. Memos were used to analyze data taken from the interviews in the moment and also from questionnaires and provide a written record of decisions made during the study. The memos served as a part of the constant comparative analysis needed for grounded theory research (Birks & Mills, 2015).

Upon completing initial interviews and review of memos, additional unstructured Zoom interviews were used to help with the comparative analysis of the data, and to develop the categories that are lacking in data (Birks & Mills, 2015). During this time in the research study, themes, and categories, were refined through further literature review to find that there were connections to current literature on Hope Theory. Categories explored during second-round interviews related to hope, resilience, and trauma-informed leadership. These interviews were also audio recorded and transcribed.

Data Analysis

Data analysis took place in three phases: initial constant comparative, intermediate coding, and advanced coding. Initial analysis used constant comparative techniques to create several categories and subcategories (Table 2). Further refinement led to the creation of two key categories, *leading with hope* and *being trauma informed*. The story line technique (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) was also used to provide a rich narrative to bring the research together in a way

that is more accessible to the reader and integrates the theory into the current body of literature surrounding trauma-informed practices, leadership theory, and Hope Theory.

Intermediate coding represented the next major stage of analysis. This intermediate coding connected the initial categories in a more conceptual way than the thematic coding used in the previous stage. The concepts developed were able to connect data that had previously been isolated in themes. Theory development was achieved through continuous refinement of the core category until further data and analysis failed to add new properties or dimensions to an established category, i.e. theoretical saturation.

Advanced coding helped provide a comprehensive explanation by allowing for variation in the research question. The storyline technique was again used to provide a narrative that explained the theory while at the same time allowed for variations, limited gaps, and proved the evidence was grounded in the research. By using theoretical codes, existing theories from leadership and Hope Theory were utilized to facilitate integration into the larger body of literature.

Findings

Analysis of participant interviews led to several thematic categories used to better understand trauma-informed leadership within school principals.

Leading with Hope

Leading with hope is an abstract idea that is a central concept to the trauma-informed leadership theory generated from this research study. This concept examines how the school principal is one of the central leaders of the school and how the school principal instills hope and resilience in the students and staff. *Leading with hope* means leading systems that help students develop goals, find pathways to success, and reinforce student willpower (Figure A1). Helping

students find hope, or the understanding that their situation can improve, is a powerful

component of the theory of trauma-informed leadership that emerged from this research study.

Principal Nick was a veteran principal and his ideas for instilling hope were an important way of

utilizing the relationships principals build every day. Below, Principal Nick discussed the

importance of using these relationships with instilling hope:

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

> Creating goals is also an important feature of the concept of *leading with hope*. Not only

is it important for the principal and staff to develop goals for the school but also instill the goal

of hope in students. Principal Kimberley discusses how this happens at her early college high

school:

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

Principal Derek brings up pathways, another aspect of *leading with hope*. This involves helping students find a path that will help them achieve their goals and improve their current situation. He explains how instilling hope is an important part of helping students that have experienced trauma break the cycle of generational trauma.

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

Leading with hope cultivates willpower. Hellman (2021) explains how as humans, we can only take so much defeat when it comes to working towards our goals. Principal Steve has a passion for his students' potential that was inspiring. This passion gave him a remarkable vision for his students. His description below of a child's 'hero journey' is an incredible message that aims to help students with overcoming the challenges they will face.

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

Being Trauma Informed

Having the knowledge of trauma-informed practices and strategies impacts a school principal's capacity to be a trauma-informed leader. Another essential characteristic in this concept of *being trauma informed* is experiencing trauma. The principals in this research study provided details of how they have personally experienced trauma of varying degrees in their personal and professional lives. These themes are essential to the Trauma-Informed Leadership theory that emerged (Figure A1). The experience of trauma firsthand further reinforces the principal's sense of knowing what trauma is. The professional development of trauma-informed practices expands this knowledge, as well as provides the school leaders with insight on trauma that they personally may not have experienced.

The participants self-identified as trauma-informed and had varying degrees of knowledge of the impact of trauma within education. Many of the principals had received formal training on mental health, ACEs, and had a knowledge of the strategies some schools have found to be successful in making school trauma informed. Principal Alan describes why he believes it is important for his school to be trauma informed.

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

The participants of this research study shared some of their own personal experiences in coping with traumatic events. Principal Sonja was deeply impacted by the events and/or circumstances surrounding her disabled brother's experience of bullying and struggling for services in his school.

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

Principal Karen was impacted by being a survivor of domestic abuse and seeing her children also experiencing the same. She says, "I've had two massive trauma events. My children and I are survivors of domestic violence, and I watched the effects through them." Our worldview is greatly impacted by our experiences in the world around us.

Toward a Model of Trauma-Informed Leadership in School Principals

While the themes themselves stand as separate foci of participant interviews, their relationship with each other lends to a model of trauma-informed leadership for school principals depicted in Figure A1. The model applies the ideas of a principal leading systems that help students develop goals, find pathways to success, and reinforce student willpower. Also found within this concept are elements of distributive leadership (Hairon & Goh, 2015) and transformational leadership (Goktas, 2021). When combined with the school principal having the

capacity to understand trauma through experiences and professional development, trauma-

informed leadership emerges.

Additionally, trauma-informed leadership can be seen when the inputs or concepts of

leading with hope and *being trauma informed* come together by the actions of a school principal.

Leading with hope is defined as leading systems that help students develop goals, find pathways

to success, and reinforce student willpower. *Being trauma informed* is defined as having the

capacity to understand trauma through experiences and professional development. The outcomes

of trauma-informed leadership come to be support systems for all students, the creation of a

trauma-sensitive school and safe school. An interconnectedness between the students and staff of

the school can also be found because of trauma-informed leadership employed by the principal.

Connection to the Research Questions

I examined the school support provided to students impacted by trauma from the

perspective of the principal in the hope of explaining a grounded theory of trauma-informed

leadership. The aim of the research study went beyond description of the phenomenon and

explained why trauma-informed leadership is important in education. To guide this study, I

focused on two research questions. Note my findings as follows in relation to the research

questions.

Question 1

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

leaders?

My data collected from the participants led to the realization that these principals were

trauma-informed leaders. Principals come to this understanding through reflection on how they

lead their schools, support their students, and create systems with the aim that all students at their respective schools will be successful.

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

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

Question 2

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

Principals that have participated in this research study have utilized trauma-informed principles in their leadership by the ways they have created systems of support within their schools. Each of the principals has worked within their school community to build an understanding for teachers, students, and parents of key characteristics of this research study.

These principals have worked to instill hope and resiliency within their students through different strategies discussed in the narrative above.

The participants' personal and professional experiences of trauma have informed how they lead their schools. Each participant has developed systems of interventions to support students impacted by trauma emotionally, socially, and behaviorally. These systems took the shape of intervention teams, Social Emotional Learning (SEL) lessons, student mentor (sherpa) programs, and school discipline strategies that focused more on the student learning from inappropriate behavior as opposed to punishment. The resounding rejection of zero-tolerance policies, except for when applicable to the safety of the school environment, is an example of how student behavior has become more restorative than punitive in the schools of these participants.

Discussion

This study sought to understand how school principals came to view themselves as trauma-informed school leaders, as well as how they utilize trauma-informed practices in their work. Systematic investigation revealed that deep reflection is key in how principals lead their schools, support their students, and create systems with the aim that all students at their respective schools will be successful. Such reflection helped principals make meaning of experiences within their careers that have formed their leadership styles and philosophies. For example, school principals who have experienced trauma in their own lives reported how these experiences shaped their approach to their principalship. These experiences also spurred principals to obtain further training to learn trauma-informed practices and the impact of trauma in their school communities.

Additionally, while deep reflection, training, and personal trauma histories led principals to see themselves as trauma-informed leaders, it was through the concept of "instilling hope" that school principals helped students understand themselves beyond the traumatic circumstances they may experience outside of school. Through visibility, authentic relationship building, and empowerment, these school principals sought to inspire their students to dream big and connect with resources that may be of help.

The role of school principal has changed, beginning in the early 2000's. Previously, the school principal was more of a facility manager or administrator. The change of school administrator to school executive was reflected in the change of professional development and academic preparation for school principals. This research study may impact the standards used for evaluation, training, and academic preparation of school principals. This study is significant as it extends the current understanding of trauma-informed practice in schools beyond that of the teacher and classroom-level experience and to the leadership of school principals. It also extends the works of scholars such as Lynch (2022) and Hellman (2021) by examining trauma-informed leadership and Hope Theory through the lens of K-12 organizations. The theory of trauma-informed leadership that emerged shares common traits with current leadership theory used in education. Proponents of transformational leadership help their followers grow and become leaders themselves. This happens by responding to the needs of their followers, by empowering their followers, and facilitating a common set of objectives and goals for the team and the whole organization (Gotkas, 2021). The theory presented also fosters teacher leadership, by building teacher capacity for trauma-informed care, and developing the systems necessary for student success. This study also goes beyond a conceptual or theoretical framing of the issue through the systematic comparative analysis of school principal experiences.

Implications for Practice

An effort to reform school administrator standards to reflect the trauma that students have experienced is essential. COVID-19 cast a light on an area concerning trauma-sensitive schools that could help schools be more successful in supporting all students. Another practical application of the results of this study is the professional development of school principals to be trauma-informed leaders. Trauma-informed leadership can help school principals in understanding the difficult behavior sometimes exhibited by students impacted by trauma. This professional development will help principals understand how to develop support systems within the school that can offer interventions for students who need support in coping with trauma and stress. As the emerging theory contends, a trauma-informed leader must have the capacity to understand what trauma is and recognize it within the school environment. The other input of the theory maintains that the school principal must also provide the leadership necessary to foster and create systems in the school that will help students create goals, provide pathways for success, and support the willpower of students as they try to follow the pathways to accomplish their goals. Principals must recognize the necessity of leading with a hope mindset for students. That practical application would also transmit to staff and students through feedback loops within the school, distributed leadership for teachers and students, and the application of transformational leadership practices to the school culture and environment.

The academic preparation in university school administration programs must give principal candidates a clear picture of the everyday world of a principal. Being a trauma-informed leader requires building a framework of understanding for how a principal supports students' social, emotional, and behavioral wellbeing. School administration graduate programs should begin the process of building the principal candidates' capacity of understanding what

trauma is, how they can recognize trauma in the school setting, and how to recognize the trauma they have already experienced from their personal journey. Making these connections with principal candidates within an administration graduate program would have a great impact on the development of school administrators.

Implications for Future Scholarship

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

Further research should also explore the role of principals' use of trauma-informed leadership practices in creating trauma-informed school cultures, as well as the work environment for teachers and staff. The application of the principles of Hope Theory may also be utilized to examine hope from the perspective of students, teachers, and student support staff counselors.

Conclusion

In marrying the findings of this grounded theory with that of Hope Theory, this study underscores the importance of trauma-informed leaders within schools. This is particularly true for cultivating trauma-informed school principals. The institutions of our society must

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

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Appendix

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Table A1

Demographic Profile of Principal Participants

Pseudonym	Gender	Race	Years of Service	Grade Level
Steve	Male	Black	30	Elementary
Karen	Female	White	25	Elementary
Ramone	Male	White	8	Middle
Kerri	Female	White	17	Elementary
Nick	Male	White	28	High
Laura	Female	White	25	Elementary
Derek	Male	White	28	Early College
Serena	Female	White	25	High
Jackie	Female	White	9	Middle
Kimberley	Female	White	23	Early College
Alan	Male	White	18	Middle
Emily	Female	White	15	Elementary
Barry	Male	White	13	High
Sonja	Female	White	26	Elementary
John	Male	White	18	Elementary

Table A2

Themes as Categories and Subcategories

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

Being Trauma Informed	Trauma-Informed Practices

Figure A1

Model of Trauma-Informed Leadership in School Principals

Leading systems that help students develop goals, find pathways to success, and reinforce student willpower		Outcomes of Trauma- Informed Leadership
	Trauma-Informed Leadership	Support Systems for All Students
		Interconnectedness of Staff and Students
Having the capacity to understand trauma through experiences and professional development		Safe Environment
		Trauma-Sensitive School