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## Community Building in the Classroom to Support Students Dealing with Trauma

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**Community Building in the Classroom to Support Students Experiencing Trauma**

by

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A culminating thesis submitted to the faculty of Dominican University of California in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Education

Dominican University of California

San Rafael, CA

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## **Abstract**

Unfortunately, many students enter school each day carrying the effects of traumatic experiences with them and many times teachers are the ones given the daunting task of supporting these students. Some schools lack the ability to provide counseling to students, but many schools have been able to adopt special programs to help students with their social emotional needs. Other schools do not have counselors, and do not have the ability to implement these programs for reasons, such as cost. Through this study, the researcher hoped to understand what teachers can independently do in their classrooms to help support their students' needs. This study specifically looked at community building in the classroom as a way in which teachers can support their students through traumatic experiences. The data was collected through a longitudinal analysis with second grade students and interviews with three elementary teachers. The study found two main themes for supporting students in the classroom. Safety was the first large theme, with three layers within: safety created through teacher tone, safe physical spaces, and safe spaces for conversations. The second large theme was the playful relationships built on the teacher being a "big kid" with students. Although there were limitations in this study, such as the small population for data collection, the information collected through this study can be helpful in providing context for teachers in supporting students in the classroom who may be dealing with traumatic experiences.

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## Table of Contents

Abstract .....	iii
Acknowledgements .....	iv
Chapter 1: Introduction .....	1
Chapter 2: Literature Review .....	6
History and Evolution of School Health as Pertains to Trauma .....	8
Varieties of Student Trauma and Finding the Health and Will for Learning .....	9
Forms of Trauma Care in Schools .....	11
Conclusion .....	21
Chapter 3: Methods .....	23
Research Questions .....	23
Research Approach .....	24
Research Design .....	25
Chapter 4: Findings .....	30
Space of Safety .....	31
“Being a Big Kid” .....	39
Conclusion .....	40
Chapter 5: Discussion .....	42
Implications for the Literature .....	44

Implications for Practice and Policy .....	45
Limitations of the Study.....	48
References.....	51
Appendix A: IRB approval letter .....	55
Appendix B: Longitudinal Analysis Questions .....	57
Appendix C: Interview Questions.....	59



## Chapter 1: Introduction

In my first year of teaching, I walked into the classroom thinking I was prepared. I had taken all of the courses in my credential, completed all of the tests, and my classroom was pristine. Unfortunately, I was woefully incorrect. My first day began and everything seemed to be going smoothly, the students loved the first day projects I had prepared, and everyone was getting along, except for the student who sat crying. She was not inconsolable but tears often streamed down her face. She participated in some of the coloring and other activities, yet nothing seemed to lift her out of her sadness. I asked if she had any friends in the class, and if she wanted to move closer to one of them to provide her with some comfort, but that did not interest her. I told her all about the fun things we would be doing that day and reminded her that she would be going home soon. She sat quietly, head down, mainly unresponsive to my questions or comments. Luckily, the time for recess began and I walked the students out and went straight to my colleagues hoping to figure out what to do. They assured me student commonly react that way on the first day of school and that tomorrow should be a different. When we came back from recess there were no more tears. She was quiet and seemed more comfortable. I was hopeful for the next day. Unfortunately, there were more tears and she was still unresponsive to my queries and efforts to help her connect. I talked to her teacher from the year prior, who was surprised at the way she was acting. My student had been to school for multiple years with no prior problems. The second week of school we began a morning routine of exercises as a school. She stood by my side for those twenty minutes, again crying. The crying would last for about the first twenty minutes of each day. The next day I grabbed her hand and she held on tight. I exercised with one side of my body and the other side I kept still for her to hold my hand. After about six weeks she finally opened up about what was making her feel sad and cry every day.

Her older brother was coming from a Central American country with a coyote and her family had not heard much from him and they were very concerned, which made her feel sad and scared. I had so many feelings all at once. I felt relieved to finally understand what was making her feel this way each day. I felt horrible that she, her brother, and family were going through this situation. I felt mad that this is the situation in our world. And most of all I felt helpless and unprepared to help her. Although I walked into this year feeling prepared from all of these courses I had taken, none of them had prepared me for this situation. And, unfortunately there did not appear to be much I could provide for my student outside of my classroom, as our school did not have a full-time counselor. Now I had to focus on her needs in the classroom and I felt lost. The best I could do was try to build a strong relationship with her and make her feel comfortable in our classroom. Luckily her brother did arrive safely not long after I figured out what was going on with her, but the relationship we built was something that stayed strong for the rest of the year. Creating that relationship and community with her and the rest of the class was the most valuable thing that I took away from that year and something I have strived for every year from that point on.

Teachers are placed with the duty of educating students, which is an incredible experience, but it can be difficult for a number of reasons including the difficulty of supporting students dealing with trauma. Some school sites are better prepared to support students who are dealing with trauma. Some schools can provide students with resources, such as counselors. Other schools may not have counselors to support students, but are able to bring special social emotional programs into their schools to help support the students in need of extra support. Unfortunately, some schools are unable to provide counseling for students, or social emotional programs, for a number of possible reasons, such as funding. Teachers are then left with the main

duty. Fortunately, there are activities teachers can use in their classroom to support their students' needs. This study hoped to find productive ways for teachers to create a safe and positive place in the classroom for all students, but especially the students who may be dealing with traumatic situations.

Prior research has been done to see what teachers can do to help teachers support their students dealing with trauma, yet much of the research has focused on special social emotional programs that have been added to schools. For instance, Trauma Informed Practices (TIPs), focuses on creating positive relationships with students and the creation of positive environments for students (Nicholson, Perez, & Kurtz, 2019). Trauma Informed Care (TIC), has shown the benefits to students when working with social workers instead of teachers (Norgen, 2018). A third program discussed in this study is Supportive Trauma Interventions for Educators (STRIVE), which had a comprehensive structure used to help support students through aspects, such as community building and empowerment (McConnico, Boynton-Jarret, Bailey, & Nandi, 2016). Unfortunately, many schools do not have the opportunity to add these programs to their school culture, thus there needs to be further research to look for other ways teachers can provide support for their students.

This study endeavored to see what teachers can do independently in their classrooms to support students dealing with trauma. This study was a qualitative and phenomenological study, which hoped to look through the data with a transformative lens to support teachers and students. This study included teachers' perspective and students' perspective on what is needed in the classroom to support students' needs. To understand the perspective of teachers, three teacher participants, with varied levels of experiences of teaching as well as different demographics, were interviewed during this study. Instead of interviewing students directly and in focused

sessions, a longitudinal analysis was used with a group of second grade student participants to understand their perspective of what they find to be a positive aspect of school. The student participants are a part of the same class, all are Latinx, with a mixture of males and females. The student participants and teacher participants were both from the same school site.

Two major themes emerged. First was the sense of safety which can be created in the classroom. This theme has three underlying layers which include the tone teachers set in the classroom, a co-created physical space in the classroom used to promote safety, and the safe space for student centered conversations. Both students and teachers provided evidence to the value of this overarching theme. The second large theme which appeared for both students and teachers was the sense by which teachers could serve as “big kids”. It appears that having the opportunity for play, laughter, and joking between students and teachers helps to build positive relationships which can help to support students and their social emotional needs.

Limitations of the study included that it was only completed at one school site. This study was also only completed with second grade student participants; thus, it would be interesting to replicate this study with other grade levels at the elementary level.

The information gained about the important levels of safety which can be created in the classroom through teacher tone, a co-created physical space in the classroom used to promote safety, and the safe space for student centered conversations. The second theme of being a “big kid” with students is an aspect which can be any teacher can apply into their classroom to begin to build a positive relationship with their students. Both themes are important features of a classroom used to create safety and positive relationships for all students, especially the students experiencing trauma.

This study hoped to understand what teachers can provide for students in their classrooms who need extra support, without extra funding, training, supplies, or programs. Through the longitudinal analysis and interviews the two large themes of safety and playfulness are present for promoting a positive and safe space for students. Although there are limitations to the information discovered through this study there is important information which can hopefully build onto previous information that has been discovered to help teachers support students.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

Trauma is an issue that plagues many individuals, including children. There is a large percentage of elementary students heading to school every day who have dealt or are dealing with trauma (Dong, et al., 2004). Many of these students come from urban, low-socioeconomic situations (Welsh, 2013). Unfortunately, after experiencing traumatic experiences, there can be many issues and negative behaviors that stem from the experience (Welsh, 2013). Students may begin to act differently after experiencing trauma. Some examples include withdrawing, difficulty concentrating, and mood swings or changes (Gurwitch, Silovsky, Schultz, Kees, & Burlingame, 2002). Teachers are often placed in the position of helping these students to deal with the aftermath of the trauma because they spend extended amounts of time with the children and can usually make relationships and have rapport with their students (Bell, Limberg, & Robinson, 2013). Opportunities for students to see clinicians, counselors, or psychologists can also be few and far between, again leaving teachers in a prime position of support to students. Parents may also lack the opportunity to help students deal with their trauma for a number of reasons, such as cost or accessibility (Johnco, et al., 2020). Parents may also be involved in the student's trauma in some way, possibly through parental style including types of discipline, due to prior parental trauma (Berlin, Appleyard, & Dodge, 2011). Parents may be unaware of support available for students. If the family is low income, they may also be unaware of affordable services available for their child. Meiser-Stedman, Smith, Glucksman, Yule, and Dalglish (2007) remarked on the low level of parent-student agreement regarding trauma. Parents and students did not often agree on the student's level of trauma; often students reported more indicators of trauma compared to their parents. With children usually unable to advocate for themselves and parents unable or unwilling to for a number of reasons, teachers often become

the default service provider in student's lives who are able to advocate and support students experiencing trauma.

Although trauma in elementary students is prevalent, there is not one all-inclusive, overarching way for teachers to help their students. Some schools and school districts have started to adopt specific programs they put into their curriculum, so teachers can help their students build resiliency and coping strategies (Desai, 2016; McConnico, Boynton-Jarret, Bailey, & Nandi, 2016). Unfortunately, the opportunity for schools to provide these types of social-emotional programs is not always attainable. When there is a lack of social-emotional programs in schools, teachers are often placed into the position of supporting their students alone, even though teachers often do not feel prepared to support their students, or feel they lack the tools of support (David, 2016). There seems to be a lack of research into what teachers can do in their classrooms to help students who have experienced trauma or are experiencing trauma, unless, in rare instances, the school has invested in a specific social-emotional program, which unfortunately is not available or practical for every school. It is important to figure out how teachers can support their students and help them build resiliency and coping strategies without adopting specific social emotional curriculum.

This chapter investigates the literature on trauma intervention currently being used in elementary schools. The chapter is organized starting with the historical context of the evolution of student care in schools revolving around trauma and then examines varieties of trauma present in elementary school aged children, and then with current research on forms of trauma care in schools. Major programs and strategies that will be explored include Trauma Informed Practice (TIP), Trauma Informed Care (TIC), Supportive Trauma Interventions for Educators (STRIVE), resiliency and coping strategies, mindfulness, and community building.

## **History and Evolution of School Health as Pertains to Trauma**

The mental health of students is an important topic in education currently. There are many discussions at the school level and research in higher education around supporting students' social emotional needs. The language surrounding students' mental health has changed over time.

Bertolote (2008) documents the evolution of the school health as starting when the “mental hygiene” movement began in 1908 with Clifford Beers, followed quickly by the creation of the National Commission of Mental Hygiene in 1909. From there national commissions were created and finally the World Federation of Mental Health (Bertolote, 2008). Creating better care for individuals with mental disorders was the main focus of the mental hygiene movement (Bertolote, 2008). As people began to understand mental health in a more complete way, they began to focus more on preventative measures of mental health care (Bertolote, 2008). People began to recognize that mental health issues can begin in childhood, thus supporting youth and the environments they encounter can help prevent issues with individual’s mental health later in life (Bertolote, 2008). Although the mental hygiene movement began over one hundred years ago and later shifted to mental health, the original focus of the movement, better care for individuals with mental disorder and preventative measures, is still something our society is striving for (Bertolote, 2008).

Allensworth, Lawson, Nicholson, et al., (1997) discussed the evolution of mental health in education beginning as early as 1928 when “mental hygiene” had become popularly recognized as an important aspect of education by the Department of Superintendent of the National Education Association. Since then there have been a few additional pushes for mental health care in the education system (Allensworth, Lawson, Nicholson, et al.,1997). There have



been some programs, such as The School Development Program, which have promoted mental health in the education system (Allensworth, Lawson, Nicholson, et al., 1997). This program specifically promoted having a mental health team with psychologists and other support personnel at schools (Allensworth, Lawson, Nicholson, et al., 1997). Counseling, psychologically, and social services are a few of the programs that have been added to schools to help support students' mental health (Allensworth, Lawson, Nicholson, et al., 1997). Unfortunately although there have been times in the last century when mental health has been more of a priority now with high pressure standards based academics and educational cutbacks mental health resources are often cut back quickly leaving teachers bearing the load of supporting their students mental health (Allensworth, Lawson, Nicholson, et al., 1997).

Jaycox et al. (2009) described the evolution, which trauma interventions in schools have undergone, and identified that many previous programs were created to be distributed by clinicians. Jaycox et al. (2009) also noted that clinicians are now decreasingly present at and available in schools; and thus, there has been a shift from clinician led interventions simply by necessity. The reasons for the lack of clinicians in schools may be questionable, but the results may have an effect on teachers. As mentioned, the absence of clinicians leaves teachers in the primary position to support students when dealing with their trauma. Now it seems there has been a shift to have the teachers deal with students experiencing trauma, possibly simply because there are few other options. -

### **Varieties of Student Trauma and Finding the Health and Will for Learning**

Welsh (2013) noted that when students step into a classroom there are many different outside factors, possibly negative, that they bring with them. Trauma, and the effects of trauma, are major aspects students may bring into the classroom, and that the effects of the trauma

students experience is not something they can leave at the classroom door as they enter each morning. Welsh (2013) also documents how the effects of trauma can manifest in a number of ways, depending on the child. It appears that some schools have not adopted any social emotional programs, and possibly do not have access to many clinicians and counselors, thus it is the teacher's task to support all students experiencing trauma. This can be a large task if the population of students is dealing with a high rate of trauma, such as populations in urban, low socioeconomic areas (Welsh, 2013). It can also be a large task when the students dealing with the trauma, express it in different ways and need support in different ways (Welsh, 2013). In a classroom with one teacher and twenty plus students, it is possible a large portion of the students have experienced trauma and may be expressing it in a number of ways (Dong, et al., 2004). With little support of their own, especially without a specific social emotional program at their school, teachers have a tall task of supporting all of their students' needs.

Dong et al. (2004) conducted research to study traumatic experiences in children. They found that many children had experienced Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), and separated ACEs into ten different categories, including emotional abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional neglect, physical neglect, parental separation or divorce, substance abuse, mental illness, domestic violence, and crime. They found that many of these categories often occur together, thus oftentimes children do not experience one ACE alone, but multiple ACEs. After experiencing one ACE or multiple, children may face different negative results on their behavior, emotions, social abilities, physical health, and overall well-being , and the results caused by experiencing ACEs may be short-term or long-term (Dong et al., 2004).

Although teachers have many different roles throughout their day teachers are not clinicians and therefore don't have the training and diagnostic abilities that clinicians do have.

While teachers may not have the same abilities as clinicians do, teachers do have the ability to recognize when students are in need of support, especially after experiencing trauma. Teachers can also understand the compassion and care necessary to support their students. Obviously, teachers are charged with the education of children, but teachers are also entrusted with students' health and safety, thus teachers should have some tools and understanding on how to support all of the students in their class, especially students dealing with trauma.

### **Forms of Trauma Care in Schools**

Although teachers are tasked with supporting their students, there appears to be many different forms of trauma intervention being placed into some school systems. A few of the different forms of trauma intervention that have been placed in schools have been, Trauma Informed Practices (TIP), Trauma Informed Care (TIC), and Supportive Trauma Interventions for Educators (STRIVE). There have also been practices placed into classrooms in the hopes of supporting students dealing with trauma, such as resiliency and coping strategies, as well as mindfulness. Community building strategies is one technique that seems worth placing into schools to help support students experiencing trauma. Unfortunately, many schools may not be able to place any of these programs into their school setting. Although schools may not have the option of placing one of the specific social emotional programs into their schools, the programs may have valuable skills worth trying, which teachers may be able to use in their classrooms for support. If teachers knew simple skills and activities they could apply into their classrooms, it could help to support the students dealing with traumatic experiences, lower the level of negative emotions teachers feel when unsure of how to help their students, and most likely have positive results for all children in the class, whether or not they are dealing with trauma.

### ***Trauma Informed Practice (TIP)***

Research has shown that through the use of TIPs teachers can support their students who have experienced trauma (Nicholson, Perez, & Kurtz, 2019). Nicholson, Perez, and Kurtz (2019) state the two main components teachers can utilize to support their students are positive relationships, as well as the creation of positive environments. Teachers have an abundant amount of time with students, thus enough time to create the positive relationships needed to support all students, and especially those students in need of a supportive adult, particularly those students dealing with traumatic experiences.

**Positive Environments and Routines.** Creating a positive environment where students feel safe is something teachers should be doing for all of their students, especially students dealing with trauma at home, who need a safe place where they can relax and feel supported no matter what. Creating routines and predictability is a simple thing teachers can do in their classrooms to create a safe environment to support students dealing with trauma (Nicholson, Perez, & Kurtz, 2019). Having consistency in the lives of students who may not be able to find that in their lives outside of school, can be an easy way for teachers to support their students. Prinstein, La Greca, Vernberg, and Silverman (1996) found that the Roles and Routines were found most often to help students to deal with traumatic experiences, then Distraction, and last Emotional Processing. There are many other simple things teachers can do in their classrooms to create positive relationships and environments. If teachers had access to these types of easy supportive systems they could provide in their classrooms, it is possible that students could feel more supported and teachers would feel less lost on how to assist their students.

**Serving as Advocates.** Bell, Limberg, and Robinson (2013) observed how the relationships between students experiencing trauma and teachers, can truly benefit the student.

Although students can experience many different forms of trauma including acute, chronic, or unresolved trauma, teachers can be the advocates students may need, in order to get the support needed to work through their trauma (Bell, Limberg, & Robinson, 2013). Bell, Limberg, and Robinson (2013) acknowledged that many students do not have consistent adults in their lives to recognize changes in their demeanor that may be caused by trauma, except for teachers. Teachers often spend a disproportionate amount of time with their students, compared to the other adults in their lives, thus they are able to not only recognize changes in the student, but can also help to support that student in meaningful ways to help them through whatever trauma they may be experiencing (Bell, Limberg, & Robinson, 2013).

### ***Trauma Informed Care (TIC)***

Prior research with social workers shows when adults, surrounding children experiencing trauma, are trained in TIC there are many benefits for the children (Norgen, 2018). Although this research was completed with social workers, it seems the research could easily be applied to teachers, because they are another type of adult who can have the opportunity to have close relationships with children (Norgen, 2018). A common theme in this research, which connects with TIP, is that adults in a position to form positive relationships with students dealing with trauma, such as teachers, can have a beneficial impact on the students (Nicholson, Perez, & Kurtz, 2019; Norgen, 2018).

Wu, Hughes, and Kwok (2010) hoped to understand the effects of teacher-student relationship (TSRQ) on student's behavior and academic performance. They found four major types of relationships: Congruent Positive relationships, Congruent Negative relationships, Incongruent Child Negative relationships, and Incongruent Child Positive relationships.

**Congruent positive relationships.** One of the types of relationships, Congruent Positive relationships, had the biggest positive effects on the student, compared to the other types (Wu, Hughes, & Kwok, 2010). A Congruent Positive relationship was rated equally by the student, teacher, and peers to have high support and low conflict between the teacher and the student (Wu, Hughes, & Kwok, 2010). A Congruent Positive relationship between students and teachers is something educators should strive to have with all students, especially those experiencing trauma because it appears to have positive results for all students, but it could be the safe and supportive relationship students dealing with trauma need with an adult in their life.

Shahmohammadi (2014) found a positive relationship between teachers having a good attitude toward students and students outlook on self-regulation. On the other hand, the researcher also found that if students do not feel they have a positive relationship with their teachers, the possibility of students not following the rules becomes greater (Shahmohammadi, 2014). Overall teachers' relationships with students can have a positive or negative effect on student behavior depending on what kind of relationship students and teachers have (Shahmohammadi, 2014). Students experiencing trauma may have difficult behaviors as a result of their experiences. If teachers do not understand how to support these students and thus express negative attitudes toward these students, it could exacerbate the issue, making their self-regulation a further issue, creating a positive feedback loop (Welsh, 2013; Shahmohammadi, 2014). The more the students express negative behaviors, the more teachers, who are unsure of how to help students dealing with trauma, express negative attitudes toward the students, the students then have less ability to self-regulate, which leads back to the students expressing more negative behaviors. The problem continues to persist because neither the teacher nor the student can help the situation. With the skills to help support students, such as TIC, teachers could use

their abilities to help students dealing with trauma and help them express their emotions in more positive actions, creating positive relationships, causing the students to better self-regulate, lessening issues in the classroom.

### ***Supportive Trauma Interventions for Educators (STRIVE)***

Prior research has been done to suggest that implementation of STRIVE in schools helps educators to support their students experiencing trauma (McConnico, Boynton-Jarret, Bailey, & Nandi, 2016). STRIVE had many components, but a few of the key components were a sense of community, empowerment, and resilience (McConnico, Boynton-Jarret, Bailey, & Nandi, 2016). STRIVE has some overlapping ideas with TIP, TIC, and other practices being placed into schools to support students dealing with trauma, such as safety.

**Community Driven.** STRIVE is driven by community more than some of the other frameworks that are available. STRIVE focuses on resiliency-based intervention, primarily on three levels of intervention, the student, the teacher, and the general school. This level of intervention focuses on the whole child and their environment in and outside of school. This level of intervention would seem to have many positive outcomes compared to some of the other programs, because this program does not look to only support the child through intervention, but also the school as a whole and the students' lives outside the school through intervention with the parents. According to McConnico, Boynton-Jarret, Bailey, and Nandi, (2016) there are many aspects of STRIVE that are worth embracing in an effort to support students experiencing trauma, especially with the view of community within the intervention.

**Kapwa in San Francisco.** Desai's (2016) research in San Francisco can be linked to STRIVE because both programs focus on supporting students through community building. Desai's (2016) action research focused on providing community building opportunities for

Filipino/a American students living in San Francisco. Desai (2016) focused on creating a pedagogy around *kapwa*, which is a belief of interconnectedness that comes from the indigenous communities from the Philippines. The population struggled with many different kinds of issues, such as domestic violence, substance abuse, mental health issues among others (Desai, 2016). Students worked on community driven projects in the hopes of creating a healing effect with the individuals and the community (Desai, 2016). This form of community involvement appears to be very narrowly focused, but aspects of this form of community intervention seem applicable to other populations of students. The idea of working on community driven projects could help students feel empowered in their own community. While Desai (2016) found this form of intervention to have positive results in this population in San Francisco, it was suggested that it may be hard to duplicate similar results in other populations, especially in elementary school students, and that it could be difficult for elementary school teachers to create community driven student projects as support through the student's traumatic experiences, simply based on the students age. Desai (2016) found this form of trauma intervention had positive results in high school students, thus it could be a worthwhile form of community driven intervention if possibly placed in other populations, such as in elementary schools.

### ***Resiliency and Coping Strategies***

Welsh (2013) looked into the effects of trauma and low socioeconomic situations on urban students' attention, executive functioning, and processing speed, and found that students who were reported with high resiliency had fewer issues with their attention and memory. Resiliency is a skill that can aid every individual through their lives, but it is an especially important skill for individuals who are dealing with trauma (McConnico, Boynton-Jarret, Bailey, & Nandi, 2016). If students are provided with the opportunity to learn how to be resilient at



school that may help them in a number of ways, including ways in which Welsh (2013) found. If students are able to be resilient, they may be able to take the skills they learn at school and apply them throughout their lives in different environments.

Baum, et al. (2013) centered their research on resiliency training of teachers through Building Resilience Intervention (BRI) which focuses on four main aspects: self-awareness and regulation; (2) support for feelings; (3) strengths and personal resources for coping; and (4) significance, meaning, and hope. Teachers were taught skills and activities they could use for their own traumas, as well as to bring back to their classrooms and teach their students (Baum, et al. 2013) . The researchers found a decrease of posttraumatic symptoms and anxiety levels with the students whose teachers participated in the resiliency training compared to the students whose teachers did not participate in the trainings (Baum et al., 2013). Along with teaching their students resiliency skills in the classroom through activities and lessons, students may be able to learn resiliency skills, if their teachers are able to model the skills for their students.

Prinstein, La Greca, Vernberg and Silverman (1996) researched the effects on student relationships after experiencing a traumatic event. The Children's Coping Assistance Checklist (CCAC) was created to evaluate how parents, teachers, and friends can help students cope with trauma (Prinstein, La Greca, Vernberg & Silverman, 1996). Three aspects of student coping were assessed, Emotional Processing, Roles and Routines, and Distraction (Prinstein, La Greca, Vernberg, & Silverman, 1996). The researchers determined that the Roles and Routines were found most often, then Distraction, and last, Emotional Processing (Prinstein, La Greca, Vernberg, & Silverman, 1996). If teachers can provide at least routines and regularity for students, this may help to promote coping skills in students, and if they can provide additional

aids, such as emotional support and distraction, it may be possible to help give the skills needed for students to cope with their own traumatic experiences.

Wolmer, Hamiel, Barchas, Slone, and Laor (2011) focused on the resiliency strategies that were taught through a teacher driven program. They found that after students experienced social emotional and coping lessons through an imaginary character who was dealing with stress and trauma, they had significantly lower levels in the areas related to their traumatic experiences, such as stress, compared to the first levels they had rated (Wolmer, Hamiel, Barchas, Slone, & Laor, 2011). The imaginary character modeled appropriate resiliency and coping skills when dealing with stress and trauma, which had a positive effect on students (Wolmer, Hamiel, Barchas, Slone, & Laor, 2011). This form of resiliency lessons seems like it could be a feasible way for teachers to teach social emotional skills, such as resiliency and coping skills. It would take some effort on the teachers' part to create the character and lessons, but if the teacher is knowledgeable in the trauma their students are experiencing, they would be able to create a character with lessons to fit the needs of their students.

### *Mindfulness*

Harpin, Rossi, Kim, and Swanson (2016) incorporated mindfulness trainings into elementary classrooms and found that teachers reported positive differences in prosocial behaviors, emotional regulation, and academic performance. The students also reported enjoyment of the program and were able to give examples when they had used mindfulness (Harpin, Rossi, Kim, and Swanson, 2016). A similar study completed by Costello and Lawler (2014) who interviewed 16 students and 2 teachers after fulfilling a mindfulness program with 63 elementary students. They used quantitative measures to reveal a decrease in student stress. This research suggests a positive value to adding mindfulness programs to schools to promote

students coping skills with stress. Mindfulness can be simple activities placed into classrooms, such as breathing routines, and quiet times in the classroom used to practice reflection. Practicing mindfulness in the classroom does not need extended amounts of training, time, or money. There is a significant amount of stress placed on teachers to push their curriculum and assess their students, leaving a minimal amount of time for teachers to teach anything else, especially social emotional skills, but mindfulness can be as quick and simple as teaching students to take a break, write your feelings, or take deep breaths when their feelings become overwhelming (Schrodt, Barnes, DeVries, Grow, & Wear, 2019). As simple as this may seem, students may be able to apply this skill outside of the classroom to deal with traumatic experiences (Schrodt, Barnes, DeVries, Grow, & Wear, 2019). If teachers feel unsure of what to do to promote mindfulness, there are free apps available now specifically for creating mindfulness in the classroom. Mindfulness can help to support all students, but optimally, an avenue of support for students facing trauma.

### ***Community in the classroom***

All the different forms of trauma intervention are worth trying in the classroom if they will help to support students who have experienced trauma, but community building is an intervention worth more research. Community building in the classroom differs slightly from programs such as STRIVE, which work to help support students through community building within the school, and sometimes into the wider community, while community building in the classroom can just be focused inside the classroom. Suldo, Riley & Shaffer (2006) found that student well-being is linked to their academic achievement. Three main factors appeared the most in their research as being closely related to student's satisfaction which were student's thoughts on their academic achievement, their perceptions of their teacher's support, and

comprehensive contentment with school (Suldo, Riley, & Shaffer, 2006). They suggested that if educators hope to improve academic achievement student's well-being needs to be considered as well (Suldo, Riley, & Shaffer, 2006). They also mentioned the importance of teacher support on student well-being. There appears to be a link between students' well-being and their academic achievement, which needs to be considered when there is such a strong push in education to raise test scores. Through teacher support and a sense of warmth in the classroom, there can be an impact on student well-being, which in turn can have a positive effect on student achievement in academics (Suldo, Riley,-& Shaffer, 2006). With the teacher's care and support, a positive community can be created in the classroom to promote student well-being, which could also positively impact students in a number of ways, including their academic achievement.

Although teachers may not have much control on supporting their students through traumatic situations outside of the classroom, there are things teachers can do within their classrooms to support students. Teachers may teach coping skills, or resiliency lessons to help students to deal with trauma, but teachers may also be able to create a safe community within the classroom, which could help students to feel supported. Teachers can do activities in their classrooms to create a positive community, such as regular community meetings. The benefits of creating a positive environment for students may not only have benefits for students dealing with trauma, but for all of the students and the teacher as well. With additional research on positive communities in the classroom there could be evidence of a relationship between community and support for students dealing with trauma, as well as specific evidence of what the student's responses are to community in the classroom.

## **Conclusion**

A wide variety of research indicates that specific social emotional programs placed into schools elicit positive results for students who have experienced trauma, yet little research on techniques individual teachers can implement in their classrooms to help their students. There is evidence that it is important to provide students dealing with trauma with the tools to support themselves to help deal with the issues that stem from experiencing trauma (Baum et al., 2013; Welsh, 2013). The programs in the schools have had positive results helping to support students (Harpin, Rossi, Kim, and Swanson, 2016; Wolmer, Hamiel, Barchas, Slone, & Laor, 2011), thus aspects of these programs could be taken so teachers can place them into their classrooms to help their students. After teaching them these skills it could make a positive impact on these students. There are many different routes the specific programs have taken to help students, whether it be community building, relationship building, mindfulness, or resilience and coping skills, there seems to be a multitude of possibilities teachers could try in their classrooms to help their students after experiencing trauma.

Schools have tried introducing specific programs into their schools to help teachers to support their students, with relative success, but there are few research studies to show how teachers can support their students without training and a specific program to follow. Most of the research available about promoting students' social emotional skills after dealing with a traumatic experience is based around programs schools can place into their curriculum (McConnico, Boynton-Jarret, Bailey, & Nandi, 2016; Desai, 2016), but unfortunately that is not practical in all situations. There needs to be more research showing what successes teachers are having alone in their classrooms to support their students who are dealing with trauma. These successes need to be published and spread wide so more teachers can learn

and try new ways to support their students. There needs to be more widespread ideas and tools teachers can use at no cost and with no training. There should be more research being done on what teachers are already doing in their classrooms to help their students, and what successes they have experienced. This research will focus on the kinds of activities and supports teachers can provide to their students to help them build resiliency and coping strategies, specifically through community building.

### **Chapter 3: Methods**

The purpose of this study is to observe and discover what teachers can do in their classrooms to help support students dealing with trauma. Although there is existing research about what teachers have been doing to help support their students, most of it has relied on specific social emotional programs schools have adopted to support students. Although these programs may have positive results for their students, unfortunately, many schools are unable to adopt one of these programs, and thus teachers often end up with de facto responsibility of providing support for their students experiencing trauma. There is little research on what individual teachers can do in their classrooms to support their students through traumatic experiences, therefore there is a need for more data on what teachers are currently doing to support their students through trauma, what positive results they are finding, and the responses from the children.

#### **Research Questions**

This study is focused on teacher responses to questions focused on interventions placed into the classroom to support students facing trauma through interviews. This study is also focused on the responses of students and their feelings surrounding school, through a longitudinal analysis. The interview and longitudinal analysis questions were created based on these main questions:

- What interventions and supports are teachers providing in their classrooms to support students facing trauma?
- What behaviors are teachers seeing in the classroom with students facing traumatic experiences?
- What feelings or emotions are students having while present at school?

These three main questions were used as the design for both the longitudinal analysis, as well as the interviews, to better understand the support being given to students dealing with trauma, as well as the student's emotions at school.

### **Research Approach**

This qualitative and phenomenological study is focused on the transformative view of research, which looks at the needs of marginalized individuals or groups (Creswell, 2018). The research is centered on the hope that there are interventions teachers can provide in their classrooms to help support all students, but especially the students experiencing trauma. Much of the research available currently is based around specific programs aimed at helping students with social emotional skills, but not all schools have the ability to provide specific programs like these. This study is focused on discovering simple interventions teachers can provide for their students to help support them, without going through multiple trainings or paying for special tools and kits. This research is phenomenological in that it aims to promote and learn from student voice on what they feel helps their emotions and emotional needs (Creswell, 2018). And it is transformative focus on empowering teachers and students through community building activities and social emotional learning.

To better understand what teachers can do to support students in their classroom who have or are experiencing trauma I will conduct a sequenced qualitative approach, with both a longitudinal survey with student participants and interviews to follow with teacher participants. The rationale for choosing this approach is to allow for the triangulation of data through an explanatory model of coded data analysis (Creswell, 2018). An explanatory sequential deductive analysis of data toward clarifying survey questions, and then more directed and later interviews with teachers. The qualitative approach of the interviews will give more opportunity for



individual teachers to share how they understand experiences and nuances of student experience in a classroom environment.

I am interested in seeing how students feel supported in a school environment through community and social emotional education, which I have tried to build on this year. I would like to see how working with students on building community and working with emotions at school can support students dealing with trauma. Many of the students in this population have gone through some traumatic events and they are at a school which promotes community and social emotional learning; thus, this population may help to determine what positive results there may be for students who experience social emotional interventions and community building.

The rationale for this qualitative, phenomenological and transformative research is aimed at promoting the interventions teachers can do in their classrooms to help support all students, especially those going through traumatic events. This research is focused on transforming what is done in schools to help teachers with skills they can use to support students to learn coping skills and resiliency. Students have a voice; thus, they need to be given the opportunity to advocate for themselves. We can learn from student's thoughts and feelings to help make a change to better promote healthy opportunities for students to learn social-emotional skills.

## **Research Design**

### ***Research Site and Entry into the Field***

The research site is an elementary school where the researcher has been working for the past two years. Consent was given by the principal to conduct the research with both the teachers and students. The school has approximately 500 students, a majority of the students are Latinx, with a portion of the students being English Language Learners. This elementary school is a Title I site, with many of the students receiving free or reduced lunch.

### ***Participants and Sampling Procedure***

The student participants in this study were chosen because they are the researcher's current students. The student participants are all second graders between the ages of seven and eight, including students from all genders, and all the students are Latinx. The student participants' parents were contacted through the student participants' Friday folders for consent to participate in the study, which also outlined the study. With the parents' consent, the student participants were tasked with answering one question a day, three days a week, for four weeks their emotions as school.

The teacher participants in this study were chosen because they are colleagues of the researcher. The teacher participants are individuals between the ages of 28 and 41, male and female genders, and multiple ethnicities. The teacher participants are individuals who have spoken previously with the researcher about supporting their students through traumatic experiences, but in different ways than the researcher has done, thus promoting curiosity for the researcher.

### ***Methods***

Eight open-ended questions were developed for the teacher participant interviews, which were held in each of the participants' classrooms. The interview questions were developed to better understand what support teachers provide in their classrooms for students dealing with trauma, their feelings on building community in the classroom, and the behaviors they notice in students facing trauma (see Appendix B). The interview was a one-time meeting. The interviews were audio recorded on the researcher's iPhone, which is password protected.

Twelve short-answer questions were constructed for the longitudinal analysis of the student participants. The student participants answered one question a day, three days a week, for

four weeks (see Appendix C). All the students in the class participated in answering the questions for the longitudinal analysis, but only the data from the student participants who were given consent was included in the research. The student participants were given a piece of paper to write their names and answers on. Each question was written on the board and read aloud for the students. Students translated the questions for the two Spanish speaking students, and if needed translated their answers back for the teacher. The teacher understood most of the answers, thus she did not need the other students to translate the responses back. The student participants had five minutes to write their answers to the questions. The teacher then took their slips of paper and later coded the answers. The student answers were kept in a secure file cabinet in the researcher's classroom. Student names will not be used in any of the published research, pseudonyms were used when discussing the students.

### **Data analysis**

The data collected for this research was all qualitative data through interviews with teacher participants and longitudinal analysis of written student responses to twelve questions. Audio recordings were taken during the interviews. The recordings from the interviews were transcribed by the researcher.

Analytic memos were regularly used throughout the interviews to capture ideas discovered throughout the process. The researcher also conducted narrative summaries after the interviews of the teacher participants. The data from both the interviews and the longitudinal analysis were coded by hand. The researcher did an initial open coding of the data looking for keywords and phrases. The researcher then did a second round of coding looking for common themes. The data was also coded for expected results from possible terms discovered in the literature review, such as safety, as well as unexpected results. Results from the interviews were

coded for common themes. The longitudinal analysis data were also coded for common themes. Both data from the interviews and the longitudinal analysis were cross analyzed for common themes. The data from both the interviews and the longitudinal analysis were analyzed for possible biases. After the data was coded twice a concept map was be utilized to sort the themes into different categories to observe possible links in themes or gaps in the data. Common themes and categories within both sets of data were reported in the findings. The data was then again coded for focused coding to find any additional themes to place into the categories which were already created.

The researcher was curious to see what similarities and possible differences in themes which were found between the student participant responses in the longitudinal analysis and the teacher participant responses in the interviews. The researcher looked to see if there were common forms of support teachers were doing and that students were responding to positively, if there are forms of support teachers are providing which students do not reflect on, or if there are student responses to supports which teachers do not comment on providing in their classrooms.

### **Validity**

The researcher has had the opportunity to create relationships with all of the participants before beginning this research. The researcher has prior experiences teaching second grade and has an understanding of creating trust with this age group. The researcher also has prior experience working with the teacher participants, the researcher has had multiple years to form relationships with her colleagues. The researcher has a close relationship with all the participants in this study, as either the student participant's teacher or the teacher participant's colleague, thus internal validity will be presented throughout this study. Creswell (2018) identifies the validity value of "prolonged" time spent at the site of the research so the researcher can have rich

experiences with the participants, which can lead to more complete and credible understanding of results. For validity the researcher further accounted for possible personal biases by comparison in looking for possible crossover themes and identifying “discrepant evidence” in and between both the interviews and the longitudinal analysis. The research has also included designs for triangulation both among participants and over time, respondent validation, and holistically rich data collection (Maxwell, 2013). Data triangulation of the participants responses was used between the teacher participants during the interviews. It was also used between the student participant responses throughout the longitudinal analysis. Data triangulation of the student participant responses was used over time because the longitudinal analysis lasted four weeks. Respondent validation was used during the teacher participant interviews through summarizing and restating the teacher’s responses to determine credibility.

## Chapter 4: Findings

This study endeavored to see how building community and relationships in the classroom setting can support all students, but specifically students dealing with trauma. This study also sought to understand what teachers are currently doing in their classrooms to support students dealing with trauma, and how students are responding to community building strategies currently being used in the researcher's classroom. This study hoped to understand how teachers in schools with few resources, and often lacking counselors, can use community building and positive relationships to create safety to support their own students dealing with trauma.

Through the longitudinal analysis with the student participants and interviews with teacher participants, two main themes emerged which were safety and being a “big kid” as a teacher with students. Safety was the first key theme which appeared, with three underlying layers within. Three nuanced aspects presented themselves as important factors needed to create safety in the classroom, namely: tone a teacher sets in the classroom, a co-created physical space in the classroom used to promote safety, and the safe space for student centered conversations.

After analyzing the data, it appears that students enjoy and find safety in being a part of a classroom that is focused on building community and in which the teacher is also willing to share in the play of learning. The majority of the students reported positive feelings linked to community building strategies. Some of the community building techniques used throughout this study were community meetings, calming corners, art, playful relationships with teachers, as well as feelings check-ins. During this study multiple forms of community building were used to create safety for the students at school and create positive relationships with a teacher.

Throughout this study the key themes of safety and joy with students appeared as important

components for both teachers and students, but especially the students dealing with traumatic situations.

## **Space of Safety**

### ***Tone a Teacher Sets***

It was clear from the beginning that the teacher participants think that it is important to create a safe environment at school for their students. One of the themes which arose from this study as a way for teachers to create safety is the way they talk to their students. All of the teacher participants expressed wanting all students to feel cared for in the classroom, especially if they are dealing with trauma. Two of the teacher participants specifically talked about caring about their students' interests and lives outside of school to incorporate what they like into school. One teacher participant, Spencer, said, "I want to start by showing the kids care, and that I love them." Liam, a second teacher participant, also stated showing the kids that he loves them, "...continue to tell them that you know I love having them in my class and that I enjoy them and that they are great kids." This small gesture can be a way in which to create love and care in the classroom, as well as support the creation of safety and comfort in the classroom. Through the teacher participant interviews it appeared all of them find that building a sense of community, or "family" as one teacher participant referred to it, has positive outcomes for the entire class, and especially the students in their classes dealing with trauma.

Another teacher participant, Mabel, also stated caring about student triggers and understanding how they may need to prepare for certain situations. She said that if teachers' pay attention to their students' triggers when they do get upset or shut down, they can front load with techniques that the teachers have figured out help to support that students' needs. Showing the

students that we care for them may help to support all students, but especially students dealing with trauma, who may not experience that anywhere else.

One of the student participants in this group of students is a new student to our school. Maya and her family moved to this country from a Central American country earlier this year. Her experience thus far in her school year seems to have been a positive one. She has made friends, is showing growth in her academic abilities, and has a happy disposition. Considering the significant change in her life, it would be understandable to imagine that she may feel uncomfortable or unsafe in this new school, let alone a new country. Yet when asked during the longitudinal analysis what made her feel safe, she answered “mi maestra” (“my teacher”). Another student participant, Danielle, identified the “teacher” and “house” as the space for feeling safe. A third student participant, Mary, by extension identified the “school” as a place of safety. Collectively the students situated safety, in the larger context of their lives, as at least inclusive of the space of their school. One example of the ease student participants move through this space comes from Danielle. The first couple days of school Danielle seemed nervous, as most students do so it never raised any red flags. As the time went on, she seemed comfortable in class, she had positive relationships with other students, completed her work, participated individually and within group dynamics, and overall, she seemed quite settled. When it came time for conferences in fall there was nothing but positive things to say about her. Yet at the end of the conference her parents were very concerned that she was not raising her hand and participating with answers, comments, or questions regarding what she was learning. It was a bit surprising because this had never been a problem. In reality she regularly raised her hand to give answers, explain something, or ask a question. I assured them that she did participate in the class and it was nothing I was concerned about or anything they should be concerned about. I did ask



why they were worried, and they explained that it had been an issue the year prior. Her previous teacher had tried to get her to raise her hand and share with the whole class, but she rarely had. I later spoke with her previous teacher and the teacher confirmed it was hard to get her to share, unless it was one on one. There was a big change from one year to the next. Although this situation is not directly related to safety, it does take some level of comfort for students to be able to share in front of their peers. Danielle did write that two things make her feel safe, “school” and “house”. The community building aspects used in the class may have created a sense of safety for Danielle, similar to the feelings she has at home. While in the classroom Danielle showed a sense of responsibility for taking care of the classroom including not only keeping her spaces clean, but helping to clean up common areas of the classroom including the calming corner and research center, without being asked and when she was not to blame for the messes made. The sense of responsibility she showed in the classroom, as well as the sense of comfort she showed, were built through the safety Danielle felt in the classroom created with community building aspects.

During the time that the longitudinal analysis was occurring, a few student participants were having a difficult time with motivation. When it came time to do work, four student participants would often not get started, and instead would ask me or others for answers to their assignments. I chose to have a community meeting to discuss this issue. We all sat in a circle on our carpet and I asked my students, “What is the most important part of being a teacher?” I was hoping to get responses around actually teaching students how to do things, so I could make the point that teachers teach, they should not just do assignments for students or give them the answers to assignments. Instead of responses like that, the first student I called on for a response, Chris, said, “To keep us safe.” Another student participant blurted out, “Like during a fire.”

Granted we had recently had a fire drill, and safety may have been a topic still on my students minds because we had had a few conversations based around fire drills, but I did note that many of my student participants agreed with the response from Chris saying that they considered it important that a teacher makes sure students can feel safe.

All of the teacher participants interviewed stated that they think it is important that all students feel safe at school and specifically in their classroom. Liam said, “The first thing that I do is just try to make them feel safe. Try to show them that it is a safe environment at all times.” They also all stated that it was something that they hope they provide for their students. Spencer said, “Most of all I want them to feel safe especially if they don’t feel that other places. I want this to be the place where they do feel safe.”

Also, through the longitudinal analysis, the student participants were asked to answer, “What is one thing you wish you could change about school?” The biggest change the student participants wanted was “food” (our schools provide breakfast, lunch, and food for our after-school programs), followed by the “school uniforms.” It was surprising to the researcher that most of the student participants remarked on things that teachers are unable to change or control. As the singular exception, one student participant remarked they would like to change “math.” The researcher expected the student participants to identify issues of how the classroom was managed, the activities they were expected to participate in, or even the expectations and rules of the classroom; the absence of these suggest a comfort the student participants have with the space of the classes.

### ***Spaces We Co-Create: The Calm Corner and Coloring***

Another related theme which arose was the importance of a physical space in the classroom where students can go to support their social emotional needs. While conducting the

longitudinal analysis, the students and researcher were also creating a calming corner in the classroom. The calming corner had different objects available for the students to interact with when they were feeling sad, angry, frustrated, or similar, possibly overwhelming emotions. Students discussed the different objects they would want in the calming corner to help them deal with their feelings, things they thought would help them to calm down or feel better. Some of the ideas were balls to squish or stuffed animals to hug. One of the student participants, Marta, raised her hand and said, “Coloring makes me feel happy, can we put paper and colored pencils in the calming corner?” Many others agreed they wanted something they could color or draw, either paper and pens or a white board and marker. The student participants talked about coloring or drawing being an activity that can help them to calm down and feel better in a situation when their emotions feel too much for them to handle. It was finally decided a small whiteboard and different colored markers should be added to the calming corner, as a tool to help students process their feelings and calm themselves down when needed.

Another interesting thing noted in the longitudinal analysis was when the student participants were asked what made them feel calm and then what made them feel safe, a few student participants stated the calming corner as something that made them feel both. The space that is created in the classroom can give the students a sense of safety when dealing with feelings that are difficult, such as frustration or anger. The small space in their classroom has a rug and some pillows, manipulatives the students can use to calm down, stuffed animals to hug, and sand timers.

### ***Safe Space for Student Centered Conversation: Ryan’s Story***

One of the other themes that emerged was that a sense of safety in belonging can be created through building a sense of community in the classroom. One of the student participants,

Ryan, has been experiencing his mother going through stage four cancer treatments. The faculty of the school reported that Ryan's demeanor had changed significantly since the onset of treatments and from the previous year. Many of the changes are related to his behavior, including conflicts with his peers and distracting behaviors. One of his largest behavioral changes had been his depressive or sad demeanor. Throughout the day he had not often get excited or seem happy; there were very few things that will elicit a laugh or smile from him. At the beginning of the longitudinal analysis the first question asked of the student participants was, "Write two feelings you feel at school" and Ryan stated "sad" and "nervous". For the next three questions (on alternating days) the student participants were asked to write one feeling they have when they are participating in a specific community building aspect. In contrast to his first few responses, when asked about community meetings, Ryan stated that his feeling is "happy." At first this did not register with the researcher as significant, because most of the student participants also remarked "happy." However, in the following questions on different aspects of community building, such as working in groups or having a partner, Ryan returned to feeling down by writing "sad" is how he felt during those times. It was a small breakthrough to find a part of the day where he felt comfortable to participate and reengage in expressing himself and identified a quality of the learning community with which the teacher could create stronger connections for Ryan. Ryan may be experiencing difficult emotions through this process, and although he did not respond positively with other aspects of community building, community meeting times are an area of comfort for Ryan. With this revelation aspects of community meetings could be taken into other aspects of the classroom. If he enjoys the sharing aspect of community meetings, then the teacher could add further opportunities for sharing in the classroom to add addition positive moments throughout the day. The understanding that Ryan enjoys this time of day would also be important

information to pass on to his future teachers so they can incorporate that time into their day to create positive moments for Ryan, as well as other students. Many of the other student participants in the longitudinal analysis reported having positive feelings for all of the community building aspects the student participants were asked about. All three of the teacher participants reported including community building aspects in the classroom, such as creating table group conversations each morning on a specific topic or having students work in pairs. It appears that a sense of community is not only an important aspect of the classroom to the teachers, but also the students, including students dealing with trauma.

The nature of the research was that the student participants spent about five minutes over the course of several days reflecting on a new question each time based on their emotions at school. The researcher figured it would be easy to fit in the time for the research process but thought that as soon as the research sequence had ended it would not even register with the students. It was surprising on a day when the space inadvertently was not created for them to have this reflection and conversation. The student participants recognized the absence immediately and gave protests when told all of the questions had been completed. It was apparent that the student participants' protests related to their feelings for having their voice heard in the classroom. These student participants enjoyed this activity because they were asked specifically about their feelings concerning aspects of the classroom and learning. It was also apparent to the researcher that students do not often otherwise have the opportunity to share their feelings about aspects of the class. This activity gave them the voice in our classroom they had not had before. There are community meetings and times for students to share about other things, but the students had not had times to share their feelings about aspects of their community and relationship to the space itself. The research methodology gave these student participants a new

opportunity they may not have had before to participate in sharing their feelings on aspects of their space for learning.

During the course of the research, the researcher attended a training based on supporting students dealing with trauma. While attending this training, a new check-in was introduced called the Feelings Chart. It includes a pocket chart with eight different feelings. The chart works such that each student participant gets a popsicle stick with their name on it, and when they walk in the door each morning the student participants put their popsicle stick into the pocket with the emotion, they most feel that day. This check in became an important part in the student participants daily routine. By extension, it gave the researcher a chance to understand how the student participants were feeling as they walked in each morning, with many different background emotional “baggage” and feelings teachers may be unaware of otherwise. This check in helped provide context to support their needs and gave the student participants an opportunity to assess their own feelings every morning. This skill in understanding what we are feeling is an important skill to begin developing in childhood. On the first day of this new practice, one of the student participants, Raymond, raised his hand and asked, “Can we do this every day?” Although some of that excitement likely just came from adding something new to their routine, it was also evident that there was excitement in having their feelings acknowledged each morning. For some of these students the inquiry and honoring of their feelings does not occur often, thus this activity not only gave them an opportunity to understand and acknowledge their feelings, but also share their feelings with an adult. Both the longitudinal analysis and the emotions pocket chart gave the student participants a more expansive space to have a voice about the aspects of our classroom and an opportunity to share their voice on the emotions they have.

### **“Being a Big Kid”**

While interviewing the teacher participants it was interesting to hear that they find playing with their students and having fun to be a way to support building community in the classroom. Liam said, “I try to be as positive and as happy as laughing and joking with them as I can so that they see that I am having fun.” Building a relationship which promotes fun and play emerged as an important aspect of building community in the classroom. Spencer called himself a “big kid” when discussing playing with students to promote community and noted how playing leads to happiness which can add another positive layer to the relationship’s teachers can build toward a conducive learning space.

This longitudinal analysis took place during the winter months of our school year. Due to the weather there were multiple days when we had raining day recess and lunch, which means playing inside the classroom instead of out on the playground. During inside play times it was interesting to see how students choose to play with their teachers. Most teachers choose to stay in the classroom during these recess and lunch times instead of going to the staff room so they can interact with their students, thus students can ask their teachers to play with them if they would like. The researcher noted the students’ choices to play with their teachers, including the board game Sorry, Hangman, puzzles, Legos, coloring, as well as other games or activities. When walking down the hallway of our school during these inside play times other teachers or other staff members were similarly observed playing games and doing other activities, such as drawing, with their students. One student participant in particular, Evan, who often has had a difficult time with his behavior since starting in kindergarten, was one of the most vocal students when asking the researcher to play with him. His favorite activity was hangman. He would offer a word to decipher and then would want a word given to him to guess; switching roles back and

forth. It began to be a nice time to play and interact without any negative connotations. Although his interruptive behavior did not drastically change, his response after issues did. In the beginning of the year he had a hard time admitting if he had done a negative behavior and an even harder time apologizing; through these forms of positive and playful interactions, he began to apologize after issues occurred. Although there are many components which lead to this change, this relationship was identifiable as a key component to the trust and shared care that caused this change in behavior. Playing and having fun with children is an important aspect in building successful relationships with students.

During the sequence of questions in the longitudinal analysis, student participants also stated art or coloring as things that made them feel happy at school and calm, similar to the conversation that occurred when adding objects to the calming corner. Two of the teacher participants in this study also reported art as an important aspect of their classrooms used to promote community, as well as support students in dealing with trauma. Mabel stated incorporating things into the classroom that promote fun, “ I want them to learn the content and that is important, but I do want them to have fun doing it. Paying attention to that, they gravitate towards, trying to have a balance with the kids who love art, the kids who want to talk and the kids who want to move.” Art, like play, can be used to promote happiness in the classroom, which is important for all students, and can be especially important for the students dealing with traumatic experiences.

## **Conclusion**

Teachers can design their classrooms to build a community of learners. This includes incorporating activities and spaces that support and empower students, especially students most in need of community, including students experiencing trauma. The activities used in this study



to build community, such as community meetings, art, calming corners, and playful relationships with students assisted in creating safety and joyful relationships which can help students to feel comfortable at school. There are different layers to creating safety in the classroom. Teachers can set the tone in the classroom through the things they say and what they promote in the classroom, such as referring to the students as a family. Another layer to creating safety in the classroom would be the physical spaces used in the classroom to promote safety, such as a co-created peace corner or calming corner. And, finally through this study, safety was also cultivated through creating safe space for students to share and talk about their feelings both in their lives and in relationship to the environment of learning. And as Liam notes, another important aspect for teachers to serve the needs of students is by having fun with their students, playing with them and laughing with them, and being a “big kid.” There is a lot more to creating the “space” for safe academics. Teachers need to be able to create a positive place in the classroom for all of their students, especially the students dealing with traumatic experiences.

## Chapter 5: Discussion

The findings in this study showed that incorporating community building aspects into a classroom setting can help to create safety and positive relationships with teachers to support students who are dealing with traumatic experiences. Through the longitudinal analysis with student participants and interviews with teacher participants two main themes became apparent in this study as components in the classroom setting which can help support students experiencing trauma. The first theme was safety in the classroom, which had three factors within that theme. The first factor is the tone teachers can set in the classroom based around positivity. The second factor is the co-created physical space that is present in the classroom, which promotes safety, such as a calming corner. The third component for creating safety in the classroom is creating a safe space for student centered conversations to occur, including but not limited to community meetings. The second large theme present in this study was creating happiness and having fun with students to create positive relationships to better support students dealing with trauma.

There were similarities between the research findings and theoretical frameworks presented in the literature review. In the literature review there were examples of different schools who have recognized the extra care needed for students experiencing trauma, thus they have added programs or opportunities used to support their student populations who may be dealing with trauma (McConnico, Boynton-Jarret, Bailey, & Nandi, 2016; Desai, 2016). In this research study there was data collected from the teacher interviews which showed individual teachers are recognizing the need to support students dealing with traumatic experiences and the implementation of activities and systems they have in place to support their students. It appears

there is an overlying acknowledgement that there are students in most school sites who need extra support to deal with traumatic experiences.

Another similarity between prior research and this research study was the evidence of the importance of creating a positive and safe environment for students. In prior research, such as the research completed by Nicholson, Perez, and Kurtz (2019) TIPs focused on the positive environments that can be created in a classroom to support students dealing with trauma. Although both the prior research with TIPs and this current research study did find that positive environments help to support students, the positive environments were created in different ways. One focus of a positive environment in TIPs was the use of routines and predictability (Nicholson, Perez, & Kurtz, 2019). In this research study there was also evidence of the importance of the kind of environment which can be created in a classroom to support student needs, but the focus was not on routines or predictability. In this research study there were aspects of the classroom used to create a positive environment, such as the tone the teacher set, the physical safe space in the classroom, and the safe space for conversations to take place. There seems to be significant evidence in prior research and this research study that a positive environment in the classroom is an important aspect which should be considered when trying to support the needs of students dealing with trauma.

Another similarity between the literature and this current research study was the evidence that creating positive relationships between teachers and students can be helpful to the students who may be experiencing traumatic situations. Norgen (2018) completed research with social workers and students and found TIC focused on the benefits of positive relationships between an adult and students dealing with trauma, although Norgen's research focused on social workers. In the current research study, there were examples of the importance of positive relationships

created through play through the interviews with the teacher participants, as well as field note examples with the student participants. Many of the examples of positive relationships in the current research study were created through play between teachers and students. It appears through prior research and the current research study that although the positive relationships were built with different adults and in different ways there is evidence that positive relationships between an adult, such as a teacher, and students can help to support students experiencing trauma.

This research also found that building community in the classroom to help support students dealing with traumatic situations is important. McConnico, Boynton-Jarret, Bailey, and Nandi (2016) had previously found that STRIVE in schools helps educators to support their students experiencing trauma through aspects, such as a sense of community. Both STRIVE and the current research project found that community in the classroom can support students who may be experiencing trauma.

### **Implications for the Literature**

One large surprise of this research was the importance of play and having fun to help build relationships between teachers and students. While prior research had found that positive relationships are important to student well-being this research study further found that play can be an important factor for the creation of these positive kinds of relationships.

As the open coding process of this research study began it was not surprising to see safety come up multiple times not only in the longitudinal analysis with the student participants, but in the interviews with the teacher participants as well. Although safety was not a surprise, there were aspects of safety which were unexpected. Specifically, three unexpected layers appeared, the tone teachers set in the classroom, the co-created safe spaces available to students in the

classroom, and the safe space for student centered conversations offered for students to share their thoughts and feelings. While conducting research for the literature review many of the studies did mention the importance of safety for students experiencing traumatic experiences, but there was limited mention of layers or aspects of safety.

Another surprise that occurred during this current research study was during a community meeting when students and the researcher who also served as their teacher were discussing the teacher's role in the classroom. The first thing mentioned by a student was that a teacher's job is to keep the students safe. The central role and important of teaching students content information is well documented, but these students think that the most important job of a student is to keep them safe. Our role as teachers is to serve students and their needs in the best way possible, and that does not only include academics, but whatever they need most and at times that may be their safety.

### **Implications for Practice and Policy**

Throughout this experience many new ideas and thoughts came to light, that could be helpful for changes many teachers could make in their classrooms to better support their students and their social emotional needs. For instance, the exit slip used in the longitudinal component this study provided to be invaluable as a practice for the students and teacher to engage in safe conversations. The information gained from these students through the longitudinal analysis helped to gain important data for this study, but also gave the teacher a whole new way of understanding her students and their feelings. Exit slips are wonderful tools used to collect academic data quickly, especially in subjects such as math, but in this situation data on the students' emotions and feelings can be received and used to shape the classroom to reflect the

needs of the students. This new technique appears to be an important new strategy which could be used to get a better understanding of student feelings in the classroom.

From this study there are techniques or activities which could help to support students, but one of the easiest changes to make in a classroom is playing more with students. Playing with students to help create positive relationships appeared as a large theme during this study. Although there are always academic activities or assignments which may seem more pressing than playing, there are incredible benefits which can appear after spending time playing. Through play and other fun activities like art, positive relationships between teachers and students can be constructed. It may seem unnecessary, or a waste of time to allow time for play, but play can be incredibly helpful in creating positive relationships between students and teachers. There are many benefits when positive relationships are built between positive relationships, including building a strong base to help deal with future issues that may appear throughout the year. It is worth putting in the time to play with students because the relationship that is built from playing can be incredibly supportive for students, especially for the students dealing with trauma.

Although safety is hopefully a priority for most teachers the three layers of safety that came from this study are intriguing aspects that teachers should be considering but may not be. The tone a teacher can set in the classroom through the terms they use is something teachers should consider when addressing students. It often may be difficult to constantly think about the tone of voice being used, the types of terms used, or the structure of the classroom put into place, but it is worth the teacher trying to acknowledge these aspects often because of the sense of safety which can be constructed for students through the tone the teacher sets forth in the classroom. It is important to set the tone in the classroom through the word's teachers use and the

way teachers interact with your students because the tone set in a classroom can be an important step in creating safety for students.

The second layer within the theme safety was the physical space created in the classroom where students can feel safe, such as a calming corner. Creating a space dedicated to feeling safe and comfortable within a classroom can help to support all students when they feel overwhelmed by their feelings, such as anger or frustration. This strategy can be especially supportive for students experiencing trauma because they may have overwhelming emotions more often. The space does not have to be a large space in the classroom, and it does not have to contain a lot of special manipulatives, it could be a simple location with simple tools for the students to use to calm down, such as a teddy bear. The benefits from creating a calming space in the classroom are important, but an aspect which adds to the value of these spaces of safety is to co-create the spaces with students. If the students feel they have input into these spaces, such as what tools they would like in the space, then they will be able to own the space more and hopefully feel even more comfortable in the space. Co-creating a special space to feel safe in the classroom is an important technique more teachers should consider adding to their classroom to support students' social emotional needs.

The last important layer to creating safety in the classroom is to have a space for students to feel comfortable talking and having conversations, such as through community meetings. Creating opportunities in the classroom with time for students to share their feelings and thoughts can give added support to students. Students may not often experience opportunities to share their thoughts and feelings, thus opening up a space in the classroom to give students the opportunities to vocalize their emotions can be a special opportunity, as was the case for Ryan and Danielle. The opportunity to share could be created in different ways, one example is

running community meetings, but the way the spaces for conversation are structured can vary to fit the needs of the students and teachers to ensure that everyone feels comfortable. The spaces created for safe conversations in the classroom are important places for all students to share, but especially students dealing with traumatic situations.

Although there are many independent opportunities for changes teachers could make in the classroom to support students, there are also policy changes which could be made at higher levels to help teachers better support their students. One large policy change which could be made at the county, district, or school level would be providing teachers with more professional development opportunities to help teachers learn even more strategies to support students facing traumatic situations. Giving teachers the opportunity to attend professional development based around learning how to support students and their social emotional needs, specifically students dealing with trauma, can help teachers feel more prepared to serve their students and help to support student needs.

Based on the findings of this research it would also be valuable for credential program classes add more information on ways to support students' social emotional needs, specifically students dealing with trauma. Giving student teachers the opportunity to learn ways to support students' social emotional skills, build community, and enjoy aspects of being a teacher, such as playing with students, could help teachers to better support their students' social emotional needs. Student teachers should learn ways to support their students even before getting into the classroom.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Limitations of this study included the small population size of students. It was a very small sample of students, the population was only second graders (7-8 years old) from one class,



in one school, all the student participants were Latinx, and most come from low income. If this research could be continued it would be important to expand the study to include a broader range of populations. It would be interesting to get data from younger students in kindergarten, all the way up to students in high school. Although the study would have to be changed in different ways to fit the needs of different ages it could be done in a way to gather similar data. It would also be value to track students over time as they progress through their schooling years, to identify important support systems and tools developmentally.

When comparing the data from the interviews with the teacher participants the population was smaller than the student participants with only three teachers participating. The teachers also had different levels of teaching experience. There are limitations for this population because it was such a small sample, and they do currently all teach at the same school site. To further this research, it would be important to collect data from more teacher participants. It would be best to expand the research to include teachers who teach different grade levels and teach at different school sites to get a more comprehensive look into the views of teacher participants based around their thoughts on the support provided for students dealing with trauma.

Another limitation to this study is the missing perspectives from the parents of the student participants. In this study there is no data on what parents think are the best ways to support their students. In the future if this research could be extended further it would be interesting to get information from parents. It could be difficult to obtain information because trauma could be an uncomfortable topic, but if the questions were framed around asking the parents what they think their students enjoy most about school important information could be gained to further this research.

Beyond the changes mentioned above to further this research, if it could be attempted again there should be further questions asked during the longitudinal analysis, as well the interviews. During a future longitudinal analysis, it could be important to ask further questions about student participants feelings on different aspects of classrooms or community building, such as having the responsibility with classroom jobs, group projects, and class games.

One of the biases I came into this research study was that I was hopeful that community building would be a way in which to support students dealing with traumatic experiences. However, to improve validity the researcher looked for similar themes and triangulated information between the longitudinal analysis data with student participants and the data from the interviews with the teacher participants.

Research surrounding support for students experiencing trauma should be continued in new ways to gain a better understanding of the best ways teachers can support the needs of their students to help them through whatever difficulties they may be experiencing. Students need extra support while experiencing trauma, and teachers have the ability to add aspects to classrooms to build a sense of community for the purpose of creating safety. Building community and forming the foundation of positive relationships through play can create the sense of safety all students need, especially the students experiencing trauma.

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**Appendix A: IRB approval letter**



12/10/2019

Kelcey Scannell  
50 Acacia Ave.  
San Rafael, CA 94901

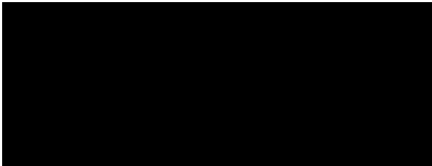
Dear Kelcey,

On behalf of the Dominican University of California Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Participants, I am pleased to approve your proposal entitled **Classroom Lead Support for Students Experiencing Trauma** (IRBPHP IRB Application #10823).

In your final report or paper please indicate that your project was approved by the IRBPHP and indicate the identification number.

I wish you well in your very interesting research effort.

Sincerely,



Randall Hall, Ph.D.  
Chair, IRBPHP

Cc: Matthew E. Davis

Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Participants  
Office of Academic Affairs • 50 Acacia Avenue, San Rafael, California 95901-2298 • 415-257-1310 [www.dominican.edu](http://www.dominican.edu)



## **Appendix B: Longitudinal Analysis Questions**

1. Write two feelings you have at school.
2. Community meetings make me feel\_\_\_\_\_.
3. Working at table groups makes me feel\_\_\_\_\_.
4. Talking with my A/B partner makes me feel \_\_\_\_\_.
5. What are two of your favorite things about school?
6. What is one thing you wish you could change about school?
7. What helps you feel calm?
8. What helps you feel safe?
9. What helps you learn?
10. What makes you feel happy?
11. What makes you feel peaceful?
12. What is something you appreciate?

## **Appendix C: Interview Questions**

1. What things do you do in your classroom to help support students experiencing trauma?
2. What do you notice helps students who have experienced trauma?
3. What are behaviors you notice in your classroom with students dealing with trauma?
4. How do you help students keep calm in your classroom?
5. How do you build community in your classroom?
6. How do you try to make students feel happy at school?
7. How would you like your students to feel at school?
8. What kind of impact do you think you make on your students?