WRITING AS TRANSFORMATION: AN ACTION RESEARCH STUDY ON TRAUMA-INFORMED CURRICULUM

Nena L. Weinsteiger Guzman
University of the Pacific

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WRITING AS TRANSFORMATION: AN ACTION RESEARCH STUDY ON TRAUMA-INFORMED CURRICULUM

By

Nena Larieze Weinsteiger Guzman

A Dissertation Submitted to the
Graduate School
In Partial Fulfillment of the Degree of
Requirements for the Degree of
DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

Benerd College
Leadership and Innovation

University of the Pacific
Sacramento, California

2023
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WRITING AS TRANSFORMATION: AN ACTION RESEARCH STUDY ON TRAUMA-INFORMED CURRICULUM

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By

Nena Larieze Weinsteiger Guzman
DEDICATION

This study is for every student who has been misunderstood and for every educator who has misdirected judgment. I have been both. This study is for every child, adolescent, and adult struggling with symptoms of post-traumatic stress or complex, post-traumatic stress. We heal through acknowledgment. This research is for every student who was not labeled with high expectations but thrived anyway.

I am dedicating this research to my children, Evan Joaquin, Oliver Mateo, and Camila Demi. May you stand in resilience on the bleakest days and bask in presence on the brightest. I am also dedicating this to their devout father and my love, Juan Jose. Your humility, presence, and devotion fulfill us daily.

Next, I want to dedicate the process to my mother, Susan Larieze, who was a definition of resilience and agency. Your courage burns bright in me each and every day. Adjacent to this courage is the unwavering emotional support provided by my grandmother, 99 years young, Vivian Larieze Schroeder, who taught me emotional intelligence, empathy, and the power of compassion. I dedicate the devotion required to complete this study, to you.

This accomplishment is dedicated to my inner child. You never forgot the goal you scribbled into that notebook at seventeen. Finally, this experience is dedicated to my childhood, to recalling more than the trauma.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

As a survivor of a traumatic past and as a storyteller, as someone rooted deeply in narrative theory, I want to acknowledge that statistically, I should not be here. Less than 2% of displaced youth earn a degree. Blossoming from a student who was nearly expelled, to an advocate for students facing expulsion; transforming from a youth who was chronically absent, to graduating with honors; and as someone who raised myself, I should not statistically hold two master's degrees or have defended a dissertation, but here I am, standing in resilience, and I am far from alone.

I want to express gratitude to my husband of eleven years, Juan Jose Guzmán Barahona, who mindfully crafted and delivered breakfast, lunch, and dinner, as I researched; who held our children while I studied; who believed in me when I lost sight. *I could not have completed this study without your devotion.* I want to thank my children, Evan Joaquin, Oliver Mateo, and Camila Demi, who patiently waited for me to tuck them in, after evening classes. I hope that you see the time I have invested as an encouragement to achieve all of your dreams, no matter how challenging.

Finally, I want to thank all the teachers and colleagues who recognized my potential before I could see it in myself. This includes Dr. Martin Martinez, Dr. Delores McNair, Dr. Fred Estes, Dr. Laura Hallberg, Dr. Nancy Huante-Tzintzun, Dr. Robert Calvert, Mrs. Erickson (Kindergarten), Ms. Jones (3rd grade), Mr. Carey (10th grade English), Ms. Smith (12th grade Math), and Mr. Mahoney. This list also includes Dr. Kristen Laviano Snow, Dr. Abraham Madrigal Barajas, Guy Ollison, Janine Mixon,
Mustafa Radif, Nikki Lowery, Susan Vang, Jason Xiong, and all of cohort 5! Thank you for believing in this study and supporting my self-worth along the way.
WRITING AS TRANSFORMATION: AN ACTION RESEARCH STUDY ON TRAUMA-INFORMED CURRICULUM

Abstract

By Nena Larieze Weinsteiger Guzman
University of the Pacific
2023

Trauma exposure is endemic, and this study seeks to address childhood trauma in a compassionate and restorative manner. Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are serious childhood traumas that manifest as toxic stress which can damage the developing brain of a child and affect overall health. The implications are expressed dualistically: academic performance of youth is subdued & diminished, and behavioral interactions can range from unreceptive to erratic and aggressive. Trauma exposure is a predictor of adverse outcomes, which range from higher rates of suspension, expulsion, and incarceration, to dire outcomes, such as lower life expectancy and quality of life. Streamlining trauma-informed curriculum and restorative behavioral responses will ensure that resilient and nurturing classrooms mediate and heal our nation’s youth. Instead of disproven and punitive, zero-tolerance consequences, schools must familiarize themselves with the effects of trauma, anticipate traumatic reactions, and respond accordingly. This study reveals how trauma-informed care informs trauma-informed curriculum and trauma-sensitive schools. A consistent and effective response to childhood trauma exposure is the missing link in our nation’s educational system.

Keywords: education; trauma; toxic stress; trauma-informed care; TIC; trauma-informed curriculum; trauma-sensitive schools; resilience; restorative justice; compassionate teaching; nurturing classroom, healing centered experience (HCE)
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

“Everyone has a story that will break your heart. And, if you really pay attention, most people have a story that will bring you to your knees.”

– Brené Brown, American sociologist

Students are telling us a story—lean in, it could unearth many injustices and release many stigmas if we are courageous enough to listen. Open your mind and heart because their stories can devour them whole. Students are telling us a story, but sometimes words aren’t involved, sometimes they are told through actions in the classroom, like rage or detachment, or more subtle manifestations like perfectionism and people-pleasing. Yet, the translation of these narratives holds the keys to our students’ well-being, stability, and academic access. Their quality of life depends on vigilance today.

The National Survey of Children’s Health reveals that close to 35 million children have grown up suffering violence, neglect, and other forms of trauma, with one in three having suffered an adverse childhood experience (2012; 2018). By the age of 16, three out of four students have experienced or been exposed to a traumatic event (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2014). In 2022, the U.S. Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reported that at least one in seven children has experienced child abuse or neglect in the past year. Childhood trauma has been labeled as America’s hidden health crisis.

The impact of trauma affects several domains of functioning related to school performance. Behaviorally, exposure to trauma and chronic stress has been associated
with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), separation anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation, and oppositional behavior. The Center for the Developing Child at Harvard University outlines toxic stress response as occurring when children experience prolonged adversity such as long-term emotional and physical abuse, chronic neglect, and exposure to violence in the absence of protective relationships (Center on the Developing Child, n.d.). Academically, trauma exposure predicts poorer reading, math, and science achievement scores, and a three-fold increase in the odds of having an Individualized Education Program (IEP) (Goodman et al., 2012). The urgency is evident and even though schools are the largest national mental health provider for children, most struggle to implement consistent strategies to support youth who have experienced trauma. While the concept of trauma-sensitive and trauma-informed schools is gaining ground, not enough is known about trauma-informed curriculum and its potential impact. This chapter begins by providing context on trauma-informed practices as they relate to the treatment of school-aged students impacted by traumatic exposure. Later, the purpose will be defined, and the research questions articulated. Lastly, the proposed methodology and theoretical framework will be established and contextualized.

**Background and Necessity**

Toxic stress and trauma affect millions of children nationally. To prevent and mitigate childhood trauma, it is important to understand the causes and consequences of exposure. Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are interwoven within the foundation of this cause. ACEs are serious childhood traumas that result in toxic stress that can harm a child’s brain. Toxic stress may prevent children from learning and can
cause long-term health problems. Adverse childhood experiences include, but are not limited to emotional abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional neglect, physical neglect, domestic violence, witnessing substance abuse, household mental illness, having one or more incarcerated household member(s), homelessness, bullying, and witnessing neighborhood violence. The CDC defines and describes ACEs as “...affecting children and families across all communities and having long-term effects on health, wellness, and life opportunities” (CDC, 2019). Because traumatic exposure is endemic, intervention is necessary. Crosby et al. (2019) depicted the empowerment within this cause: trauma-informed teaching is an act of social justice.

**Trauma-Informed Care**

Harvard Medical School describes trauma-informed care as practices that promote a culture of safety, empowerment, and healing (Tello, 2018). It is expected that every patient may have experienced trauma, so all treatment is provided through a trauma-informed lens. Trauma-informed teaching and curriculum are born from this medical movement. If trauma-informed care is expecting that every patient may have experienced trauma, trauma-informed teaching is expecting every student has experienced trauma and responding accordingly. This includes classroom and school-wide practices that promote a culture of safety, empowerment, and healing.

**Intergenerational and Vicarious Trauma**

Students do not have to experience trauma directly to be affected. Even witnessing violence or having biological parents who have been exposed to traumatic experiences can deeply affect the psychological well-being of the children we educate. Phipps and Throne (2019) outline and synthesize the fascinating dynamic of inherited
trauma by describing that the complexity of traumatic experiences and their influence on psychological well-being expand far beyond the current diagnostic symptom descriptions available in the latest edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. Nevertheless, the number of children impacted may be difficult to calculate because not only can students be deeply impacted by direct experiences, but they can also be affected by intergenerational trauma.

Beyond the concept of vicarious traumatization, researchers and practitioners also note the experience of intrafamilial PTSD symptoms driven by the display of symptoms in one or more family members (Phipps & Throne, 2019). Trauma-focused therapy and trauma-informed care have effective and streamlined approaches, which can be applied to trauma-informed curriculum prototypes and interventions.

**Trauma-Informed Intervention**

Trauma-informed intervention requires mindfulness and vigilance, as intervening without resources or guidance can result in punitive responses. Maintaining a strength-based approach during compassionate interaction is crucial. To build positive relationships, school staff need to be empathetic, warm, and create a space where students feel respected and valued. It is recommended that educational staff interact with students in this way, regardless of students’ behavior or response (Brunzell et al., 2018; Conradi & Wilson, 2010). These methods can be applied to trauma-informed curricula.

Trauma-informed educational practices are a paradigm shift. Despite the frequency of traumatic exposure, the intense behaviors that can manifest, and the learning constraints with which they are accompanied, most teachers are not prepared
to recognize traumatic reactions or to respond in a trauma-informed manner. Because there is a correlation between students who have experienced trauma and their school performance, intervention is necessary (Honsinger & Brown, 2019). Trauma-informed intervention begins with a trauma-informed curriculum.

**Trauma-Informed Schools**

A trauma-informed school is an environment where all students feel safe, welcomed, and supported. According to SAMHSA, “trauma-informed” includes an understanding of trauma and the awareness of the impact it has across settings, services, and populations (“SAMHSA’s Concept of Trauma”, 2014). Public and charter schools are at a critical crossroads. They face a myriad of challenges—legislative mandates and educational policy written by legislators who have never been in a classroom; negative public opinion ratings; a growing number of students with behavior problems who are unprepared for and disconnected from the learning environment; and despite great effort, only minor improvements in student performance (Craig, 2017). Yet, at the Lincoln Alternative High School in Walla Walla, Washington, when a trauma-informed approach was implemented in 2011, optimistic results emerged, including increased attendance rates and the reduction of suspension rates by 85% (Craig, 2017).

Education is at an integral crossroads and a trauma-informed curriculum, rooted in resilience, can be applied across 6th-12th grades to mitigate these challenges. Curriculum integrated with resilience highlights a pathway for trauma-informed interventions for secondary schools by addressing adolescent trauma. The streamlining of trauma-informed schools through a trauma-informed curriculum is possible, beneficial, and necessary.
Problem of Practice

In public and charter school settings, childhood traumatic exposure and adverse childhood experiences are widespread. Students impacted by a history of traumatic exposure and adverse childhood experiences struggle to thrive in school and are at risk of being suspended, expelled, and incarcerated. Trauma can significantly undermine a student’s ability to thrive in school (Sitler, 2009). ACE Connection and the Center for Disease Control (CDC) caution trauma can contribute to negative behavioral responses, including discipline referrals and school suspensions (Cole et al. 2005; Wolpow et al., 2016). There is a positive correlation between being suspended in school and later life engagement with the criminal justice system (Fabelo et al., 2011 as cited by Bacher-Hicks et al., 2019). Adverse childhood experiences are widespread and often unidentified and untreated. Depending on the population surveyed, anywhere from 61% to 97% of youth have experienced one or more ACE (Adverse Childhood Experience), with only 2.8% of some populations of incarcerated youth reporting no childhood adversity (Baglivio & Epps, 2015; Sacks & Murphey, 2018).

Hypervigilance and power imbalances can ensue within the classroom environment without a focus on connection. Students, especially adolescent students, often test boundaries, as trauma can be reenacted in relationships with adults who react to the child’s search for safety (Dombo & Sabatino, 2019). Students affected by trauma may be overly defensive, anticipating adult criticism, or defiant to assert control. Because trauma interferes with the development of relationship skills and emotional regulation, students often find themselves in conflict with peers as either victims or the perpetrators of bullying (Jennings, 2019). Exposure to trauma or chronic stress
negatively impacts several domains of functioning related to performance (Ridgard et al., 2015). Trauma-informed interventions and curricula are required to respond to unmet, student needs and to facilitate new pathways in classrooms across the country.

**Purpose**

The purpose of this action research study was to design a customized trauma-informed curriculum, centered in creative writing, to enhance academic attitudes and social-emotional development. The objective of this trauma-informed curriculum was to address the effects of childhood exposure to trauma through narrative reflection. Through the review and application of trauma-informed concepts, the goal was to cultivate positive academic attitudes and improved social-emotional development in students. Creative writing sessions centered on the review and application of the following trauma-informed concepts— emotional intelligence, empathy, empowerment, agency, and resilience.

Narrative theory and transformational learning theory informed the curriculum design, delivery, and data analysis. Student narratives from 6th-12th grade youth, derived from creative writing sessions, advised findings and future iterations. Spaces where students are predisposed to adverse childhood experiences, such as youth detention facilities and community schools were included in this study. Innovators in trauma studies, including Dr. Bessel van der Kolk, advocate for the necessity of constructing meaning from the narrative: “People cannot put traumatic events behind until they are able to acknowledge what has happened and start to recognize the invisible demons, they are struggling with...Telling the story is important; without stories, the memory becomes frozen; and without memory, you cannot imagine how
things can be different” (2015). Students are telling us a story and if we are courageous enough to listen, change may be realized.

**Research Questions**

Three questions guided this inquiry.

1. In what ways, if any, can student writing influence the design of a trauma-informed curriculum, centered in creative writing?

2. What effects, if any, can a trauma-informed curriculum, centered in creative writing, have on academic attitudes and social-emotional development?

3. What are the components of an effective and customizable, trauma-informed curriculum design?

Trauma-informed curriculum can provide schools with alternative methods that are key to reaching all students, those exposed to trauma or not, by promoting a culture of healing through safety, equity, and empowerment. This action research study centered on trauma-informed, creative writing sessions.

**Methodology**

In this action research study, pre-existing data in the form of student writing and survey feedback informed the design and modifications of a trauma-informed curriculum based in creative writing. The trauma-informed curriculum was delivered by facilitators at a local, educational nonprofit within classrooms (using the push-in/inclusive method) and after school, depending on the setting.

To determine which adjustments can positively alter academic attitudes and social-emotional development in future curriculum iterations, students completed a pre-survey at the beginning of a twelve-week cycle and a post-survey at the end. Student writing was reviewed to observe their insight and application of trauma-informed concepts. Student narratives were analyzed and coded through the trauma-
informed themes: emotional intelligence, empathy, agency, resilience, and empowerment.

During each workshop, the participating educational nonprofit collects survey data from students to better understand the perceptions of academic behaviors and social-emotional development. It is common practice for student writing to be collected and published if consent is provided.

**Qualitative Data**

Student writing was hand-coded using a trauma-informed narrative writing rubric centered on principles of narrative theory and transformational learning theory. Trauma-informed concepts and themes were assessed to determine the impact of a trauma-informed curriculum, centered on creative writing. Student writing was analyzed through a combination of content and thematic analyses. The trauma-informed, narrative writing rubric centered on the research question centered in student writing: In what ways, if any, can student writing influence the design of a trauma-informed curriculum? The rubric also included a transformational learning theory assessment: Is the psychological understanding of self-demonstrated in the student writing? Finally, the rubric sought to analyze student writing through a narrative theory assessment: Is the writing or narrative coming to terms with the fundamental elements of experience? Is evidence of time, process, or change clear in student writing? The goal of the rubric was to determine how student writing could inform future curriculum iterations.
Quantitative Data

Descriptive statistics were used to analyze student pre- and post-surveys, and to summarize the characteristics of the data set, especially in relation to academic attitudes and social-emotional development. Descriptive statistics were utilized to respond to the research question: In what ways, if any, can a trauma-informed curriculum, centered in creative writing, enhance academic attitudes and social-emotional development? If there were to be an increase in either category, it would be central to the development of an effective trauma-informed curriculum.

Pre-Existing Data

At the advice of our IRB board at the University of the Pacific, student and parental consent was exempt because the data used for this study was designated as pre-existing. Because the survey data and student writing are part of the operational procedures in place at the educational non-profit, it is considered exempt from consent, category 4 (Secondary Use of Data) by the IRB. Parental consent is typically obtained via registration forms for each student who has completed surveys and submitted their writing. Student writing and student survey data collected since the implementation of the trauma-informed curriculum were analyzed. In this action research study, instead of data being actively collected, pre-existing data in the forms of student surveys and student writing from Summer 2020 to Fall 2021 were analyzed. Any applicable adjustments to curriculum delivered in future iterations were noted to be expanded upon within future recommendations. The original informed consent form is listed in the appendix for review.
Theoretical Framework

A theoretical framework provides a representation of relationships. Because at the heart of this study, students’ stories will be told, narrative theory is central. This theory informed the review of student writing. This action research study was rooted in narrative theory and transformative learning theory. In this study, narrative theory informed the review of student writing and transformative learning theory informed the creation and delivery of a trauma-informed curriculum.

Narrative Theory

Narrative theory asks how we articulate our life experiences in the structure of a story. This theory recognizes the relationships between stories, identities, and meaning-making and often intersects with narrative inquiry, which is defined as “...a broad term and may include various approaches, such as life history, oral history, biography, or autoethnography” (Glesne, 2011 as cited by Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Because the theoretical framework and theory are so similar, it is important to differentiate; Narrative inquiry is interested in how people articulate their life experiences in the structure of a story (Bhattacharya, 2017), while narrative theory is interested in studying the story.

Narrative theory views people as storytellers. Project Narrative, located at The Ohio State University states “narrative theory starts from the assumption that narrative is a basic human strategy for coming to terms with fundamental elements of our experience, such as time, process, and change” (n.d., para. 1). Further, a study on narrative learning in the adult classroom identified narrative as a fundamentally human way of making meaning (Clark & Rossiter, 2008).
Within the context of this action research study, narrative theory functioned to weave together the narrative of each student participant, through their writing. While narrative theory attempts to understand the general rules of narrative and the forms narratives can take, for this study, narrative theory is regarded as “…a set of professional and analytical techniques to break down narratives to their component parts that generally govern story and discourse” (Garrett, 2018, p. 15). Through this understanding, as data sets were analyzed, perspective was not only construed from student surveys, but also through the lens of narrative writing. The goal was to achieve a whole-child perspective of each student participant. In this study, narrative theory was at the heart of the theoretical framework and informed the analysis of student writing.

**Transformative Learning Theory**

Transformative learning theory asserts that the process of perspective transformation has three dimensions: psychological (changes to the understanding of the self); conviction (revision of belief systems); and behavioral (changes in lifestyle). Moreover, this theory integrates the transformation of worldview and applies student-centric principles during facilitation.

Transformative learning is the expansion of consciousness through the transformation of basic worldview and specific capacities of the self; transformative learning is facilitated through consciously directed processes such as appreciatively accessing and receiving the symbolic contents of the unconscious and critically analyzing underlying premises (Elias, 1997, p. 3).

In addition to the curriculum development, transformative learning theory guided the delivery of a trauma-informed curriculum and adjustments made during and after cycles.
**Action Research: Trauma-Informed Cycle**

Informed and inspired by the action research cycle from The Creative Educator and by Liberatory Design, also known as equity-centered design thinking, I created an Action Research Cycle to analyze a trauma-informed curriculum, specifically reserving space to “Notice” and “Reflect”. The intention was to approach data collection and analysis in a trauma-informed manner, by creating a safe, empowering, and healing space.

Liberatory Design or equity-centered, design thinking engages the processing of noticing, which incorporates several aspects of narrative theory, including the lens of self-awareness. *Reflecting* is also a step with a focus on building relational trust, which is central to key values of transformative educational theory. The steps of notice and reflect act as bookends to this framework. Yet, design thinking, like action research, is not a linear process. By applying self-awareness to identify identity, beliefs, and biases, more authentic connections may be fostered. Figure 1 outlines how the process of action research operated per school site and cycle. Each cycle was delivered through a two-part, six-step process, and was administered at multiple school sites. Curriculum adjustments often incorporated personalized decisions, based on students’ interests shared in writing and themes drawn from pre-survey data, such as low scores in self-reported confidence ratings. Since this study qualified for the approval of incorporating pre-existing data, the focus for this cycle within this study, transitioned from collection to analysis.
Figure 1. Action research: Trauma-informed curriculum cycle.

Trauma as Concept

Trauma has been perceived and defined in different ways over the years, contingent on the development of knowledge and the understanding of the impact of traumatic experiences on the individual, family, community, and society (van der Kolk, 2015). In recent decades, the definition of trauma has included the following elements: (1) an identified event or series of events; that is (2) experienced by the individual as physically or emotionally harmful, threatening, or overwhelming; and (3) has lasting and holistic effects on the individual’s functioning (Herman, 2012; Laplanche &
Pontalis, 1973; Ringel & Brandell, 2012; Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), 2012; van der Kolk, 2015).

**Research Protocol**

The research protocol was centered in the design and implementation of a rubric I developed, outlined further in Chapter 3 and Chapter 4. Student writing was analyzed using a rubric. Themes were coded through a trauma-informed lens, reviewing the impact of prompts encompassing emotional intelligence, empathy, agency, resilience, and empowerment. To enhance consistency and trustworthiness, the rubric and action research cycle served as a research protocol and assisted in coding and assembling data into trauma-informed themes. This study produced a robust data collection, including student surveys and student writing samples.

**Significance**

It is imperative that teachers and school administrators are intentional about creating a safe learning environment through instruction, providing opportunities for emotionally healing adult and peer relationships, and integrating content that focuses on students’ social-emotional learning and development. Trauma-informed curriculum can guide students to not only acquire content but also to assemble the social and emotional skills needed for academic success (Crosby, et al., 2019). Research that determines how to reach and redirect millions of students exposed to trauma, who are experiencing any combination of the following symptoms and diagnoses: PTSD, separation anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation, oppositional and aggressive behavior; as well as poorer reading, math, and science achievement scores (Goodman, et al., 2012) is vital to American society. A successful study could reveal replicable ways of delivering
trauma-informed curriculum in a way that reduces suspensions, expulsions, and incarcerations and enhances student academic reengagement and autonomy.

**Narrative Mindset**

Since narrative inquiry is interested in how people articulate their life experiences in the structure of a story (Bhattacharya, 2017), I will share my experience to further structure the significance. I’ll tell you a story. When I was in school, it was my perception that many teachers struggled to respond to reactive classroom behavior, without frustration. Reactive behavior was often viewed as misbehavior, and not as an expression of anxiety, depression, or PTSD. Most educational leaders did not seem to know what it was like to witness death as a child or to not know safety. Dinner was not waiting for me; there was no safe space to complete homework. Drugs really were being sold at the kitchen table. Addiction and violence were omnipresent, within my household and within my neighborhood.

Fast forward 15 years, and as an educator, I still witness injustices within classrooms, especially in the responses to reactive students. Many schools are now applying restorative justice principles and engaging in social-emotional learning, and some are implementing trauma-informed practices, but there is not a consistent curriculum or set of behavioral standards to respond to trauma exposure in schools. There are no state or federal guidelines to determine how to structure a unified response regarding trauma-informed interventions or curriculum.

If school systems really are to alter the school-to-prison-pipeline and to put a dent in mass incarceration made commonplace, trauma-informed practices must occur within every classroom and in every behavioral response. Most students have
experienced trauma or will experience a trauma in life. The aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic is still a collective trauma we are all navigating and has further exposed the inequities in our educational system. I look forward to the stories of secondary schools incorporating principles of trauma-informed curriculum and interventions within their school culture, such as compassionate teaching; social-emotional learning; restorative justice, and healing-centered experiences.

Principals, vice principals, deans, school counselors, social workers, and teachers will benefit from a system that mediates academic and emotional disruptions resulting from childhood trauma. Yet, the most vital aspect is the intent to positively impact the lives of youth, who may be struggling with the effects of toxic stress after exposure to trauma, or who will benefit from the introduction and application of trauma-informed concepts, such as resilience, to assist with emotional regulation and empowerment.

**Delimitations**

This study analyzed preexisting data based on the implementation of a trauma-informed curriculum, from Summer 2020 to Fall 2021. Through an established partnership with a local, educational nonprofit, a trauma-informed curriculum was designed, analyzed, and adjusted. The curriculum was delivered after school and through the push-in method, within existing classrooms. This action research study included pre-existing data of 136 student participants, in 6th-12th grade. This action research study analyzed qualitative and quantitative data, guided by narrative and transformational learning theory.
Essential Definitions

This study requires the discussion of many acronyms. Terms referenced during the introduction and throughout this study are listed below.

**Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs):** Adverse childhood experiences are serious childhood traumas that manifest as toxic stress which can damage the developing brain of a child and affect overall health.

**Agency:** Sociologists define this term as the capacity of an individual to actively and affect change, free will or self-determination. Also, the process of behaving with intention.

**Childhood Trauma:** The National Institute of Mental Health (USA) defines childhood trauma as: “The experience of an event by a child that is emotionally painful or distressful, which often results in lasting mental and physical effects.”

**Compassionate Teaching:** Compassionate teaching builds resiliency in students and Jennings (2019) points out that in 1998 a critical study found the following three factors predicted the resiliency that students could build: Including a strong parent-child relationship, or a strong relationship with a surrogate caregiver who serves as a mentor if a parent is unavailable; good cognitive skills, which are predictors of academic success and lead to prosocial behavior; and the ability to self-regulate emotions, attention, and behaviors.

**Empathy:** Psychologists and socialists define empathy as the ability to recognize, understand, and share the feelings of others.

**Emotional Intelligence:** This study defines Emotional Intelligence as the ability to identify and manage one's emotions. Emotional Intelligence was introduced in 1990 by Mayer & Salovey who defined EI as the “ability to monitor the emotions, the feelings of one's own and others, to discriminate between them and use this information to guide our thinking and actions” (185).

**Empowerment:** Sociologists define this term as exercising autonomy, choice, and responsibility.

**PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder):** Stanford Children’s Health defines a child with PTSD as experiencing constant, scary thoughts and memories of a past event. A traumatic event, such as a car crash, natural disaster, or physical abuse, can cause PTSD. Children with PTSD may relive the trauma over and over again. They may have nightmares or flashbacks.

**Resilience:** Psychologists and sociologists define this term as the ability to recover from or adjust to misfortune or change.
Restorative Justice: The Justice and Prevention Research Center conducted a report in 2019 and defined restorative justice as a broad term that encompasses a growing social movement to institutionalize non-punitive, relationship-centered approaches for avoiding and addressing harm, responding to violations of legal and human rights, and collaboratively solving problems” (Fronius, et al., 2019).

School-to-Prison-Pipeline: The ACLU describes this phenomenon as a “...disturbing national trend wherein children are funneled out of public schools and into the juvenile and criminal justice systems” (“School-to-Prison-Pipeline”, 2021).

Trauma-informed care: Harvard Medical School describes trauma-informed care as practices that promote a culture of safety, empowerment, and healing. It is expecting that every patient may have experienced trauma and responding accordingly.

Trauma-informed curriculum/trauma-sensitive curriculum: Trauma-informed teaching and trauma-sensitive curriculum are born from trauma-informed care. If trauma-informed care is expecting that every patient may have experienced trauma and responding accordingly, trauma-informed teaching is expecting every student has experienced trauma and responding accordingly.

Toxic Stress: Toxic stress and trauma affect millions of children worldwide. ACEs are serious childhood traumas that result in toxic stress that can harm a child’s brain. Toxic stress may prevent children from learning and can cause long-term health problems. The Center on the Developing Child (n.d.) defines toxic stress response to occur when a child experiences strong, frequent, and/or prolonged adversity—such as physical or emotional abuse, chronic neglect, caregiver substance abuse or mental illness, exposure to violence, and/or the accumulated burdens of family economic hardship—without adequate adult support.

Chapter Summary

Students are telling us a story, and if we are courageous enough to listen, change may be realized. Trauma exposure is endemic, and whether our students have been directly affected by adverse childhood experiences; affected indirectly through traumatic reactions of parent/guardians(s); or have inherited tendencies through intergenerational trauma, trauma has and will continue to adversely affect millions of students nationally and worldwide. The COVID-19 pandemic has inflicted imbalances and inequities further. It is our duty as educators and defenders of education to
intervene in a way that is compassionate, restorative, and healing, so that students can thrive academically and socially.

The action research study followed six, action research steps within two cycles. It involved two primary measurements to collect a robust set of data to respond to the problem and research questions. During trauma-informed creative writing workshops, 6th-12th grade students completed a pre- and post-survey on their academic attitudes and social-emotional development. Student narratives were coded for evidence-based trauma-informed themes, including emotional intelligence, empathy, resilience, agency, and empowerment.

Trauma-informed behavioral interventions and trauma-informed curriculum can be streamlined and tailored to classrooms across the country. Trauma-informed creative writing curriculum that reminds students of their worth, their agency, and their resilience, may allow them to redefine their past and draft brave, new chapters. It may be the first step towards streamlining and integrating trauma-informed curriculum into classrooms across the country.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

“And the day came when the risk to remain tight in a bud was more painful than the risk it took to blossom.”
– Anaïs Nin, Essayist and novelist

To bloom is to become. And to become requires encouragement. Blossoming requires healing and space. Yet, by the age of 16, three out of four students have experienced or been exposed to a traumatic event (SAMHSA, 2020). Students impacted by trauma often struggle to thrive and even though schools are the largest mental health provider for children in the United States, most struggle to implement consistent strategies to support youth who have experienced trauma. This problem is prevalent and persistent. According to the National Survey of Children’s Health, close to 35 million children have grown up suffering violence, neglect, and other forms of trauma. Traumatic exposure remains one of the largest public health issues facing our children today (CDC, 2019; 2022).

The impact of trauma affects several domains of functioning related to school performance. Behaviorally, exposure to trauma and chronic stress has been associated with PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder), separation anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation, and oppositional behavior. And, academically, trauma exposure predicts poorer reading, math, and science achievement scores (Goodman et al., 2012). In consideration of the dire effects, both academically and behaviorally, the purpose of this literature review is to contribute to the construction of an intervention system and
trauma-informed curriculum to mitigate and heal traumatic exposure from adverse childhood experiences.

There is extensive literature to discuss trauma-informed themes and trauma-sensitive classrooms, which is heartening, but a gap remains in consistent and robust application across multiple classrooms and school districts. Some schools have transitioned to trauma-informed models, yet these schools are few and usually are smaller, alternative school spaces. Thus, data collection that provides context on strategies that are most effective, as well as an application across multiple schools and school districts, will provide vital context to address traumatic exposure within our school systems.

This literature review uncovers key components and themes from trauma-sensitive and trauma-informed principles to develop a trauma-informed classroom and the mechanisms of a trauma-informed curriculum that is replicable, for eventual largerscale application. Before reviewing trauma-sensitive spaces and curriculum, it is vital to comprehend all that is at risk if school systems do not act. It is essential to understand how youth are exposed to trauma; how they experience trauma; and how they react to traumatic exposure.

Schools, educators, and administrators cannot, in good conscience, continue to disregard, suspend, and expel students exposed to trauma, which often directly places them into the “School-to-Prison-Pipeline”. Undeniably, schools with zero tolerance policies often expose students to the criminal justice system early; additionally, there is a positive correlation between being suspended in school and later-life engagement with the criminal justice system” (Fabelo et al., 2011 as cited by Bacher-Hicks et al., 2019).
This literature review seeks to inform educators, administrators, and researchers of the depth of childhood traumatic exposure and the gravity of inaction, beginning with the theoretical framework that guides this literature review.

**Theoretical Framework**

Literature will be reviewed through the lens of narrative theory, to ensure that potential bias is realized; power is acknowledged, and complexity is embraced. In consideration of narrative theory, clarity will be crafted through reflection. Meaning making will be endeavored through the power of narrative, including my own. Trauma-informed curriculum design and modification will be structured through transformational learning theory. Since the term “narrative” can influence the direction of a study, it is necessary to define and delineate narrative theory, as it relates to this study and literature review.

**Narrative Theory**

The *Cambridge Companion to Narrative Theory* describes narrative theory as a varied set of techniques for dialectically approaching the relationship between stories and their social and historical ground (Garrett, 2018). Narrative theory views people as storytellers. There are many interconnected movements and parallel theories, so it is important to delineate the narrative theory that will be applied to this study, by first differentiating. The literary theory, narratology often intersects with narrative theory, formed around 1958 and led by Fernand Braudel as a historical project in France. This theory is often associated with literary criticism, focusing on *longue durée*, with the purpose being not to “...deny the existence or the significance of how different
movements, people, and events form together to create ‘narratable’ wholes (Garrett, 2018, p. 13). Narratology is often linked to historical themes and literature analyses.

Further, narrative psychology and narrative therapy are connected to the storied nature of how individuals process experiences by writing, observing, and listening to the stories of others. Michael White and David Epson are attributed as the founders of narrative therapy and narrative psychology (Madigan, 2019). This therapeutic theory is founded on the idea that each of us have interacting narratives to make sense of who we are. A driving signifier within this concept is the investment in not just the individual experiences, but also the influence of interrelated cultural discourse about identity and power.

Historically, narrative theory is associated with the rise of structuralism in the 1960’s but is also, as indicated, linked to classical or postclassical narratology. Within *Narrative Theory: A Critical Introduction*, this philosophy is outlined as incorporating several intellectual movements from the 21st century including phenomenology, psychoanalysis, Marxism, feminism, post-colonial theory, queer theory, cognitive science, and evolutionary theory (Puckett, 2016). In fact, this theory can be traced all the way back to Aristotle.

While narrative theory attempts to understand the general rules of narrative and the forms narratives can take, for this study, narrative theory is regarded as “…a set of professional and analytical techniques to break down narratives to their component parts that generally govern story and discourse” (Garrett, 2018, p. 15), with the objective of determining if trauma-informed concepts can influence perspective transformation. Aspects of narrative therapy will influence the data analysis. Since curriculum design is
central in this action research study, narrative theory will support transformational
learning theory.

**Transformational Learning Theory**

Transformational learning theory centers on construing meaning from
experience to guide action. This theory views the process of “perspective
transformation” through the lens of three dimensions: psychological, including changes
in understanding of the self; convictional, revision of belief systems; and behavioral,
changes in lifestyle (Clark, 1991). Transformative learning requires students to make
new meanings of their experiences, which contrasts clearly with narrative theory,
through the lens of meaning-making. This type of learning can take place because of a
shift in the sense of self. According to Crossing Borders Education, “[students] who
experience this shift, experience it as a change in their identity or a fundamental shift in
their way of experiencing the world” (2021). Stanford University defines transformative
learning as a process of examining, questioning, validating, and revising our

Jack Mezirow developed transformative learning theory in 1978. Mezirow sought
to question assumptions and expectations: “transformative learning is learning that
transforms problematic frames of reference – sets of fixed assumptions and
expectations (habits of mind, meaning perspectives, mindsets) – to make them more
inclusive, open, reflective, and emotionally able to change. Such frames of reference are
better than others because they are more likely to generate beliefs and opinions that will
prove true or justified to guide action” (Mezirow, 2003, pp. 58–59). Through the
combination of narrative theory and transformative learning theory, this study seeks to empower meaning making and transformation through narrative writing.

As a storyteller and a child who has experienced nearly every adverse childhood experience, this issue is deeply personal. As an educator who has become an advocate for youth impacted by trauma, this is critical to me. As a researcher now aware of the depth of this crisis, I am communicating how vital this issue is to our society, beginning with traumatic exposure.

**Trauma as Exposure**

To genuinely comprehend traumatic exposure, it is first essential to understand Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), including the types and effects. The American Academy of Pediatrics asserts ACEs often have lasting effects (Shonkoff & Garner, 2012). Shonkoff & Garner (2012) also indicate that to secure a more promising future, we need to meet economic and social challenges alike, including the outcomes of early childhood adversity.

*Figure 2. ACEs: Stages (CDC, 2019).*
As revealed in the figure above, without intervention, the progression of consequences extends beyond “social, emotional, and cognitive impairment” as is evidenced within the problem statement of this study. Exposure affects life potential and can cause early death. Adverse Childhood Experiences can include a myriad of traumatic events.

**Adverse Childhood Experiences**

The CDC (2021) describes Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) as potentially traumatic events that occur in childhood (0-17 years), and they include but are not limited to the following categories: experiencing violence, abuse, or neglect; witnessing violence in the home or community; and/or having a family member attempt or die by suicide. Other aspects of a child’s environment, which can undermine their sense of safety, stability, and bonding include substance use problems, mental health problems, and instability due to parental separation or incarceration.

Traumatic exposure is pervasive. Depending on the population surveyed, anywhere from 61% to 97% of youth have experienced one or more ACE, with only 2.8% of some populations of incarcerated youth reporting no childhood adversity (Baglivio & Epps, 2015; Sacks & Murphey, 2018). The impact extends far beyond learning, it affects life expectancy, especially for individuals with four or more adverse experiences. More than learning outcomes are at risk. As illustrated in the graphic published by researchers at the CDC in 2019 and 2021, 1.9 million cases of heart disease and 21 million cases of depression could have potentially been avoided by ACE prevention.
It’s important to note that girls and children of color are at greater risk for experiencing four or more ACEs. Moreover, figures three and four, illustrate the depth and complexity of America’s Hidden Health Crisis. Beyond graduation rates and academic achievement, quality of life is severely disturbed. To better understand how traumatic exposure manifests as reactions in the classroom setting, it is vital to review both PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) and CPTSD (Complex, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) in depth.
Figure 4. ACEs: ACEs can have lasting effects (CDC).

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

Children and youth with adverse childhood experiences may show signs of behavioral and mental health challenges. Symptoms presented include irritability, depression, “acting out” behaviors, difficulty sleeping or concentrating, and related traumatic stress symptoms (Houry & Mercy, 2019). The development of long-term symptoms from stress, which disrupts relationships and activities, can lead to a diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The CDC outlines common symptoms of PTSD.

Symptoms of PTSD. Schools often outline codes of conduct, including punishments that range from a referral, detention, in-school suspension, out-of-school suspension, and expulsion. Often, punishments are based on teacher’s or staff’s
perceptions of student behavior. Thus, an educator or staff member, could unknowingly, view a child’s reaction as “disrespectful” or “defiant” instead of a symptom of traumatic stress or PTSD. Symptoms of PTSD in children are listed for review.

1. Reliving the event over and over in thought or play
2. Nightmares and sleep disruption
3. Becoming upset when something causes a memory of the event
4. Lack of positive emotions
5. Intense, and ongoing fear or sadness
6. Irritability and angry outbursts
7. Constantly looking for possible threats, being easily started
8. Acting helpless, hopeless, or withdrawn

As healthcare professionals assume any patient could have experienced trauma, it is our role as educators to assume the same within our classroom and to respond in a trauma-informed manner by promoting a culture of safety, empowerment, and healing (Tello, 2019).

**Complex, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder**

Common knowledge does not inform educators, administrators, or parents that the longer an individual is exposed to a traumatic event, the direr the circumstances. In fact, it may be surprising to some to learn that Complex, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (CPTSD) often involves more intense symptoms than PTSD, which was originally associated solely with triggers from exposure to stress during war. The following
research by Haselgruber, et al. clearly articulates the differences and similarities within each classification of stress disorder:

In the 11th edition of the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11), the World Health Organization (2018) introduces posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and Complex Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (CPTSD) as two distinct trauma-related disorders... PTSD comprises three symptom clusters – re-experiencing the trauma here and now, avoidances of traumatic reminders and persistent sense of current threat. CPTSD comprises the three symptom clusters of PTSD and additionally Disturbances in Self-Organization (DSO). DSO comprises three symptom clusters which are affective dysregulation, negative self-concept, and disturbances in relationships. (2020).

Our students are suffering equally or more intensely than many of our veterans. CPTSD differs from PTSD regarding traumatic exposure resulting from years of repeated events, as opposed to one event.

**Symptoms of CPTSD.** Symptoms include symptoms of PTSD and vary by person (Palic, et al., 2014). The details are listed below for review.

1. Lack of emotional regulation: explosive anger or uncontrollable sadness
2. Changes in consciousness: disassociation from mind and/or body
3. Negative self-perception: guilt or shame that affects image
4. Difficulty with relationships: avoidance or seeking out harmful ones
5. Distorted perception of an abuser: preoccupied, seeking revenge, or handing over power
6. Loss of systems of meanings: religion or beliefs about the world; a powerful sense of despair or hopelessness.

By studying the ACE Pyramid (Figure 5), it becomes unmistakable that there is a gradual pattern and hierarchical system. It is never as simplistic as a child is impacted and nothing can be done. If school systems and medical systems can intervene,
disrupted neurodevelopment can be diminished or prevented. The return on that investment for each child is currently immeasurable.

![Figure 5. The ACE pyramid (CDC, 2021).](image)

**Preventing and Mitigating Adverse Childhood Experiences**

Preventing Adverse Childhood Experiences with the goal of alleviating traumatic symptoms and their dire effects on education, quality of life, and life expectancy will involve many communities coming together. In the graphic below, six strategies are matched with approaches.
While it is heartening that social-emotional learning is gaining ground and the trauma-informed movement is gaining speed, it is glaring, that a trauma-informed intervention system in schools has not yet been developed. A trauma-informed curriculum and behavioral response system have not been developed with the goal to be streamlined and provide consistent access and healing to students in every public and charter school across our nation. Students who are suspended or expelled out of the educational system, will not have access to social-emotional learning; healthy relationship skills; or most mentoring and after-school programs. This is to reiterate that the gap in literature, application, strategies, and approach couldn’t be more relevant to the needs of our youth today.

Figure 6. Preventing ACEs (CDC, 2019).
Trauma as Genetic

Perhaps our fault as a society is that when we set inclusion aside, when we assume there are those that suffer and those that are exempt, we are missing all the points. Students do not have to experience trauma directly to be affected. Even witnessing violence or having biological parents who have been exposed to traumatic experiences can deeply impact the psychological wellbeing of the children we educate. Phipps and Throne (2019) outline and synthesize the fascinating dynamic of inherited trauma by describing that the complexity of traumatic experiences and their influence on psychological well-being, which expand far beyond the current diagnostic symptom descriptions available in the latest edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (5th ed.; DSM-5; American Psychiatric Association, 2013; Burstow, 2005). Researchers and practitioners acknowledge that posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) has been observed in individuals not directly affected by narrowly defined traumatic experiences, creating the occasion for the study of such phenomena as vicarious traumatization or secondary traumatization (Pearlman & Saakvitne, 1995).

Further, the number of children impacted may be difficult to comprehend because not only can students be deeply impacted by direct experiences, but they can also be affected by intergenerational trauma. Beyond this concept of vicarious traumatization, researchers and practitioners also note the experience of intrafamilial PTSD symptoms driven by the display of symptoms in one or more family members (Phipps & Throne, 2019). When this phenomenon involves the effects of trauma extending to other generations in the same family beyond the generation of the person
experiencing primary trauma, mental health professionals have labeled this transgenerational trauma or intergenerational trauma (Danieli, 1985).

After comprehending the background and significance of transgenerational and vicarious trauma, it is vital to understand the potential changes educators and innovators will need to make in our classrooms today. Trauma-informed curriculum and interventions can lend to the healing of our youth.

**Trauma as Reaction**

Students impacted by trauma often have trouble with self-regulation, negative thinking, and trusting adults (Lacoe, 2013; Terrasi & de Galarce, 2017). Children who have experienced trauma and abuse may seek power and control in a classroom setting, which can be viewed as defiant and provocative behavior" (Dombo & Sabatino, 2019). If the actions of a student feel threatening or defiant, teachers often refer students out of class without understanding how a developing brain reacts to traumatic exposure. In the book “What Happened to You: Conversations on Trauma, Resilience, and Healing,” Oprah Winfrey and long-time trauma advisor, Dr. Bruce D. Perry, evocate the history of PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) research and specifically focus on the effect of trauma exposure on the developing mind and the series of reactions that often ensue, such as hypervigilance, aggression, defensiveness, and resistance (2022). When teachers understand the needs of students coping with traumatic stress and ensure that the classroom emits a feeling of safety, it enhances students’ ability to learn (Minahan, 2019). Trauma-informed curriculum is the next step to assist schools already aligned in trauma-sensitive and trauma-informed practices, to transition to consistent trauma-informed application and implementation.
**Trauma-Informed Intervention in Education**

Trauma-informed intervention requires mindfulness and vigilance, as intervening without resources or guidance can result in further harm to students. Maintaining a strength’s-based approach during compassionate interaction is crucial. Neurobiologically, students can’t learn if they don’t feel safe, known, and cared for within their schools (Aupperle et al., 2012).

To build positive relationships, school staff needs to be empathetic, warm, and ensure that students feel respected and valued. It is recommended that staff interact with students in this manner, regardless of the student’s behavior or response (Brunzell et al., 2018; Conradi & Wilson, 2010). Exposure to trauma or chronic stress has a negative impact on several domains of functioning related to performance (Ridgard et al., 2015). First teachers must realize how pervasive trauma is in the lives of children; Next, teachers must recognize the signs and symptoms of trauma; Third, teachers should use a trauma-sensitive lens (Honsinger & Brown, 2019). The trauma-informed care movement suggests creating safe classroom environments, building relationships and connections, supporting, and teaching emotional regulation is how all school systems can care for youth.

**Restorative Justice**

Restorative justice is the opposite of “Zero Tolerance” behavioral practices and policies, which impose a punishment for every infraction. It asks, “What happened?” instead of “What is Wrong with You?” in a variety of ways. The Justice and Prevention Research Center conducted a report in 2019 and defined restorative justice as a growing social movement to institutionalize non-punitive, relationship-centered approaches for
avoiding and addressing harm, responding to violations of legal and human rights, and collaboratively solving problems (Fronius, et al., 2019). Compassionate teaching builds resiliency in students and Jennings (2019) points out that in 1998 a critical study found the following three factors predicted the resiliency that students could build: Including a strong parent-child relationship, or a strong relationship with a surrogate caregiver who serves as a mentor if a parent or guardian is unavailable; good cognitive skills, which are predictors of academic success and lead to prosocial behavior; and the ability to self-regulate emotions, attention, and behaviors.

This practice gives voice to the victim and the accused and focuses instead on the harm caused, instead of solely the act. This principle has been introduced to decrease the instances of suspension, expulsion, and police referrals from schools. When trauma is considered, it essential to recall that intense and sometimes even violent reactions and activity are often in response to triggers and can be students’ unconscious cry for help. If schools respond with punishment, often students act out even more intensely or become emotionally withdrawn; both reactions that can impede their progress as scholars and citizens of our world. Applying effective practices, such as restorative justice and compassionate teaching, to the development of trauma-informed curriculum, can build resiliency in students and enhance academic success, prosocial behavior, and the ability to self-regulate emotions and behaviors. Restorative Justice should be a pillar in any trauma-informed curriculum or intervention.

**Forming a Trauma-Informed Classroom**

The classroom setting sets the tone for acceptance or defiance. If some students are surrounded by chaotic and dysfunctional environments constantly, it is essential
that all classrooms counterbalance this. One of the first principles of establishing a trauma-sensitive or trauma-informed classroom (these terms are often used interchangeably) is ensuring that the classroom space feels safe for all students.

**Safety.** Safety is key. “Teaching in a Trauma-Sensitive Classroom” promotes a sequence to enhance consistency: “The first step in providing support to children and teens exposed to trauma and adversity is helping them to feel safe and school and demonstrate alternative working models of relationships” (Jennings, 2019). With time and consistency, students learn that school and the classroom are safe spaces and that teachers can be trusted, unlike some inconsistent and unhealthy relationships they may have witnessed or encountered. Building relationships with traumatized youth is often difficult because they may interfere with classroom learning and they display difficulty building trusting relationship with peers and especially with authority figures, such as teachers, “they may be overly defensive, anticipating adult criticism, or defiant, to assert control. Because trauma interferes with the development of relationship skills and emotion regulation, they often find themselves in conflict with peers, either victims or perpetrators of bullying” (Jennings, 2019).

Instead of responding to intense reactions in students and asking, “What is wrong with them?” it may better serve the student, especially those exposed to trauma, with a more precise line of questioning, such as “What happened to this student and how did they learn how to cope with it?”. This mind shift is encouraged in both “Teaching in a Trauma-Sensitive Classroom” and “Social Justice Education through Trauma-Informed Teaching” and realigns the focus of trauma-informed teaching and a trauma-sensitive classroom. It is easy to become frustrated when a student or group of
students acts out, especially in the middle of a lesson or when the behavior is repeated; however, if educators can respond calmly, inquisitively, and non-reactively, students will learn the appropriate type of behavior to model.

**Connection.** Hypervigilance and power imbalances can ensue within the classroom environment without a focus on connection. Students, especially adolescent students, often test boundaries, as “trauma can be reenacted in relationships with adults who react to the child’s search for safety” (Dombo & Sabatino, 2019, p. 19). Because children who have had traumatic experiences often feel adults are not to be trusted, it is essential that the classroom disprove these perceptions with connection and relationship building. An inquisitive behavioral response from teachers will allow students to see that a connection can be formed with educators and staff on campus, even in response to behavior that is initially viewed as negative. Because research concludes overwhelmingly “exposure to traumatic events in childhood and adolescence can have lasting negative social, emotional, and educational effects”, schools seek methods to best reach children through the lens of three educational pillars to develop and maintain a trauma-sensitive school: safety, connection, and behavioral regulation.

Trauma reenactments occur when adults respond reactively and punitively. “Trauma Care in Schools: Creating Safe Environments for Students with Adverse Childhood Experiences” encourages educators to respond to seemingly provocative and self-sabotaging behaviors with curiosity instead of with anger. Consistent classroom routines and clear expectations will allow students to view their classroom not only safe, but as a space where they can be themselves and connect with peers. With focus on the
establishment and maintenance of these pillars, a trauma-informed environment can be formed.

**Resilience.** Research attributes resilience as the direct antidote to trauma and adverse childhood experiences. Within “Evaluating a Trauma-Informed Resilience Curriculum in a Public Alternative High School”, Judge (2019) outlines the implications of childhood trauma and the necessity to utilize the lens of resilience to REACH (Resilience, Education, Action, Choices, Hope) students through curriculum (2018, p. 108). The REACH curriculum includes therapeutic themes such as “Resilience: Optimism & Hope” which include subcategories, such as “introduction to resilience”, “resilience and motivation”, “optimism”, “overcoming obstacles” and reflection circle. The resilience curriculum outlines invested reflections and applications after the first two weeks being centered around “Understanding your Brain” and “Childhood Trauma: What it means for your health and Future” which directly correlate to SAMSHA (2014), as cited by Judge, who recommends framing such practices around the “Four R’s” of trauma: realization of what trauma is and its effects; recognition of the signs of trauma; a response that embraces trauma understanding across multiple tiers of services, and; resisting practices that could re-traumatize students.

All trauma-informed curriculum and inquisitive, nurturing, and restorative behavioral responses should consider the framework of the Four R’s of Trauma. Despite understanding the urgency of trauma intervention and the realization that schools are the largest mental health provider for children, many schools struggle to implement strategies to assist youth who have experienced trauma. Judge (2019) evaluates the implications of a nine-week trauma and resilience curriculum developed by teachers
and administrators in an alternative, public high school. Only seven out of ten educators fully participated and while the curriculum was praised as strong, it was also described as “ineffective”. In the end, this study (Judge, 2019) suggests not fully disrupting traditional curriculum to deliver trauma-driven curriculum, but rather adding it to complement other lessons, for example, an educator might include a trauma-informed writing assignment at the beginning of each English class or incorporate emotional awareness and regulation within an advisory or extracurricular class. Resilience curriculum is strong, and students are invested, but each school and educator may wish to determine how to tailor it to their curriculum and classrooms.

**Compassionate teaching.** Compassionate teaching embodies many of the factors of a trauma-informed and trauma-sensitive environment. This includes a culture of safety, connection, and social-emotional awareness. A compassionate teacher “models [compassion] to the students with [their] actions, and as a result, students [become] more open to understanding the world around them” (Alrubail, 2015). Further, much research captures compassionate teaching as requiring empathy and positivity even and especially during moments of stress or behavioral correction. It is imperative that teachers are intentional about creating a safe learning environment through instruction, providing opportunities for emotionally healing adult and peer relationships, and integrating content that focused on students’ socioemotional learning and development. Through the three goals of Compassionate Teaching (Wolpow et al., 2009), a resilient curriculum assists students not only learn content but also, the social and emotional skills needed for academic success (Crosby et al., 2019).
Compassionate teaching is a trauma-sensitive and trauma-informed practice so its principles would ideally be ingrained within all trauma-informed academic and behavioral adaptations. Compassionate teaching builds resiliency in students and Jennings (2019) points out that in 1998 a critical study found the following three factors predicted the resiliency that students could build: Including a strong parent-child relationship, or a strong relationship with a surrogate caregiver who serves as a mentor if a parent is unavailable; good cognitive skills, which are predictors of academic success and lead to prosocial behavior; and the ability to self-regulate emotions, attention, and behaviors. Compassionate teaching causes students to feel safe and accepted, despite outbursts. In classrooms, compassionate teaching equates to inquisitive inquiry and the building of resiliency, so that all students can thrive. Forming trauma-informed classrooms involves fostering resilient curriculum, compassionate teaching, and restorative justice are beginning interventions that can be streamlined and tailored to classrooms across the country.

**Classroom Application**

To establish resilient classrooms and embrace restorative justice, it is important to consider the application of best practices collected from research on forming trauma-sensitive and trauma-informed environments. While establishing consistent classroom routines, it is important to expect and even welcome reactions from students. The following five, themes can address reoccurring themes in trauma-informed literature and can inform the development of trauma-informed or resilient curriculum. As outlined in Cole et. al., 2005 & Wolpow et al., 2016, and cited in Crosby (2019) the next steps toward classroom application are defined within the following action steps.
**Emotional intelligence.** Model feeling words so students can verbalize emotions and self-regulate. Monitor tone of voice and be cautious of physical touch.

**Empathy.** Model empathy and social skills as measured by maintaining a calm tone. Use feeling words to describe why a difficult behavior is not acceptable.

**Resilience.** Expect difficult behavior. Create safety plans for students to prepare when difficult student behavior surfaces. Prepare for transitions. Discuss transitions or changes in advance and to consider applying the next steps as part of the classroom environment. Apply patience and empathy if a student acts out following a transition or change.

**Agency.** Embed opportunities for students to have control (ability to partner, select readings and homework, and options for classroom leadership). Expect and prevent triggers. Take intentional steps to amend potential triggers from the classroom environment.

**Empowerment.** Provide curricular opportunities for students to practice social skills such as activities that include assertiveness, nonviolent communication, and writing/journaling activities that allow students to discuss stress and other emotions.

Just as student narratives can be analyzed and coded through the trauma-informed lens of emotional intelligence, empathy, resilience, agency, and empowerment, trauma-informed curriculum and behavioral intervention models can consider the emerging themes examined throughout this literature review.

**Forming a Trauma-Informed Behavioral Intervention Model**

A great beginning step to streamlining a trauma-informed curriculum is educating students on the basics of trauma, stress, and emotional regulation through
MTSS (Multi-Tiered System of Support) which is a data-based problem-solving practice for supporting students and restorative justice models. Though the following data is very technical in nature and originally meant for school psychologists and school counselors, many administrators can employ simplistic definitions for trauma, stress, and emotional awareness without breaching the boundaries of educator/administrator and diving into the role of therapist. Research suggests that students, teachers, deans, counselors, and social workers must be involved. Clear roles and boundaries must be clarified.

Jaycox et al. (2004) explained the focus of cognitive behavioral intervention for trauma in schools (CBITS) is to provide students, as well as teachers and parents through separate modules, with psychoeducation about stress and trauma; (b) to assist students in understanding which types of past experiences are traumatic; (c) to educate students about symptoms; (d) to facilitate group discussion in a safe environment to process traumatic experiences; and, (e) to meet individually with each student to provide an additional opportunity for students to tap into the depth of their trauma-related experiences and emotional resources.

Thus, the primary goals of CBITS intervention were to: (a) introduce the sources and effects of stress and trauma through psychoeducation; (b) explore how group members’ lives have been affected by stress and trauma; and (c) address process issues that arose (Reynolds et al., 2019). For example, within the implementation of a 10-week school-based integrated cognitive-behavioral group counseling intervention at a school in the Bronx, NY for middle school boys who had experienced complex trauma utilizing CBITS, facilitators found that control was threatening. When students were approached
with an invitation to interact with the therapy, it greatly reduced defensiveness and resistance in class.

It was best when students had a consistent, safe space to share; were able to share their trauma individually, and when their intense behavioral reactions were not labeled as bad or even as reactive but as necessary to process their trauma (Reynolds, et al., 2019). The work of Jaycox et. al, contends to hope as their study states that CBITS has produced statistically significant reductions in the most debilitating symptoms of PTSD, anxiety, and depression (Jaycox et al., 2010; Kataoka et al., 2003; Stein et al., 2003). A trauma-informed behavioral intervention system and a trauma-informed curriculum can apply findings to best reach students exposed to traumatic events.

**Trauma-Informed Curriculum and Behavioral Interventions**

Curriculum integrated with resilience highlights a pathway for trauma-informed, secondary schools by addressing adolescent trauma. It divides ways to do so through steps for administrators and teachers. Becoming a part of the trauma-informed movement must involve both school culture and practices. The streamlining of trauma-sensitive schools through trauma-informed curriculum and classroom management strategies is possible, beneficial, and necessary. Jessica Minahan (2019), in the article “Trauma-Informed Teaching Strategies,” reminds teachers of strategies that can be applied to everyday classrooms.

1. Expect Unexpected Responses: Put student reactions into context. Reactions are necessary to process trauma.

2. Employ Thoughtful Interactions: Consider private redirection, space, and individualized requests that meet students where they are.

3. Be Specific About Relationship Building: Trust-building behavior must be individualized.
4. Promote Predictability and Consistency: Again, consistent transitions are vital: “Not knowing what is coming next can put anyone on high alert, especially traumatized students” (Minahan, 2019, pp. 1-3).

5. Give Supportive Feedback to Reduce Negative Thinking: “Many traumatized students interpret information through a negativity amplifier” (Minahan, 2019, pp. 1-3).

6. Create Islands of Competence: “Recognizing areas of strength in students is a powerful way to combat the poor self-concept and negative thinking associated with trauma” (Jennings, 2018, as cited in Minahan, 2019).

7. Limit Exclusionary Practices: Ignoring behavior and sending students away can trigger feelings of abandonment and neglect, which can intensify reactions.

Teacher Support and Advocacy

To maintain healthy boundaries, teachers require resources that may be scarce in some school systems. They need time and space to reflect on their relationships with students (Venet, 2019). They need administrators who recognize the nuance and complexity of this work and provide a safe professional environment in which to grow. Teachers need guidance from emotionally intelligent leaders. As a community, we need to advocate for these conditions so that teachers can be fully supported to create trauma-informed learning environments. This requires advocacy on many levels—personal and political, local, and national (Venet, 2019).

Gaps in Trauma-Informed Educational Application

There is much support for designs that incorporate trauma-sensitive and trauma-informed intervention and curriculum designs, yet not much data to support successful, consistent, and effective implementation. In some instances, single classes, grades, or schools have been studied, but there is not much support for district-level or regional implementation.
There is also much progress through the application of restorative justice principles and social-emotional learning (SEL) to be recognized. However, there are not many studies on the application of large-scale trauma-informed systems, especially not for entire districts or counties. Most research is theory-based and not packaged in a way that is customizable, applicable, or practical.

It is essential to review, combine, and apply research from grade-level and campus-level applications so that a trauma-informed model can be developed to determine the most effective ways to implement a trauma-informed curriculum.

**Chapter Summary**

Yet, all is not lost. A new perspective is necessary. This literature review uncovered key components and themes from trauma-sensitive and trauma-informed principles to develop a trauma-informed classroom and the mechanisms of a trauma-informed curriculum that is replicable, for eventual larger-scale application. The Academic Academy of Pediatrics cites the power of progress and hope for a new chapter:

“Advances in the biological, developmental, and societal sciences now offer tools to write the next important chapter. The overlapping and synergistic characteristics of the most prevalent conditions and threats to child well-being—combined with the remarkable pace of new discoveries in developmental neuroscience... and the behavioral and social sciences — present an opportunity to confront a number of important questions with fresh information and a new perspective.” (Shonkoff & Garner, 2013, p. 233)

The next steps and recommendations for future study include investigating and implementing consistent trauma-informed intervention methods, including a compassionate, trauma-informed curriculum within the classroom, and providing nurturing, behavioral alternatives within school discipline frameworks.
CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH DESIGN

“Without excavation, the wounded parts of you will affect everything you’ve managed to build.”
--B. D. Perry, trauma expert with O. Winfrey, Author and philanthropist

Trauma can significantly undermine a student’s ability to thrive in school (Sitler, 2009). In the public and charter school setting, students who experience trauma are rarely diagnosed or treated and while struggling with their own mental health, are often suspended, expelled, and incarcerated. Although trauma can contribute to negative behavioral responses, including discipline referrals and school suspensions (Cole et al. 2005; Wolpow et al., 2009), most schools have not successfully innovated or implemented trauma-informed intervention measures, including trauma-informed curriculum. In fact, most research is centered on trauma-informed practices within the medical field, mental health field, and teacher training, but not much research has displayed the effects of implementing a trauma-informed curriculum.

In this action research study, quantitative data sets were assembled from students in the form of surveys. Qualitative data sets were examined from collections of student writing, to determine the outcomes of a trauma-informed, curriculum centered in creative writing. Student narratives were analyzed and coded through the trauma-informed categories of emotional intelligence, empathy, resilience, agency, and empowerment. In reframing perceptions of students viewed as disengaged or difficult, is essential to reinvest and re-engage students academically (Sitler, 2009).
Pre-existing data from the 2020-2021 school year was obtained to determine the effects of implementing a trauma-informed curriculum at multiple school sites.

**Purpose**

The purpose of this action research study was to design a customized trauma-informed curriculum, centered in creative writing, to enhance academic attitudes and social-emotional development. Narrative theory and transformational learning theory informed the curriculum design, data collection, and analysis. Student narratives from 6th-12th grade youth, derived from creative writing sessions, advised findings and future action research studies and cycles. Spaces where students are statistically more likely to be predisposed to adverse childhood experiences, such as youth detention facilities and community schools, were included in this study, along with traditional middle and high school settings.

**Research Questions**

1. In what ways, if any, can student writing influence the design of a trauma-informed curriculum, centered in creative writing?

2. What effects, if any, can a trauma-informed curriculum, centered in creative writing, have on academic attitudes and social-emotional development?

3. What are the components of an effective and customizable, trauma-informed curriculum design?

**Theoretical Framework**

Because trauma fractures one’s sense of control, connection, and meaning (Herman, 1997, as cited in Sitler, 2009), narrative theory informed the stories of students. Because students require space to heal and adjust, transformative learning theory informed future curriculum sequences. In this study, narrative theory was at the
heart of the theoretical framework and informed the method of reviewing student writing.

Narrative theory weaved together the narrative of each student participant through their writing and the surveys, with the goal of achieving a whole-child perspective. This theory informed the construction of a rubric and trauma-informed categories from which to code student narratives. These trauma-informed categories included emotional intelligence, empathy, resilience, agency, and empowerment, which will be expanded upon further in Chapters 4 and 5.

There is no official definition of narrative theory, but theorists often use the following default definition to ground their framework: narrative is something telling somebody else, on some occasion, and for some purposes, that something happened to someone or something (Herman, et al., 2012). And rhetorical narrative identifies a feedback loop among authorial agency, textual phenomena (including intertextual relations), and reader response (Herman, et al., 2012). Thus, student narratives can be part of a feedback loop and an integral part of the action research cycle.

Conceptually, the intent was to determine the impact of embedding trauma-informed concepts to determine if a connection exists between trauma-informed curriculum and student re-engagement with regard to academic attitudes and social-emotional development.

**Methodology**

This action-research study involved a trauma-informed curriculum, which was fully implemented with the partnered, educational nonprofit, beginning in the summer of 2020. This partnership encompassed all contracted school sites. Pre-existing data
sets from Summer 2020 through Fall 2021 have been analyzed. This study began with a qualitative analysis of student writing reviewed using a trauma-informed rubric developed to specifically identify trauma-informed themes. The purpose of this rubric was to establish trauma-informed themes within the trauma-informed curriculum and to determine if additional themes would emerge—to inform a more effective and student-centric curriculum. Thereafter, a quantitative data analysis, comprised of descriptive statistics, was used to interpret student survey data.

Qualitative and quantitative data sets were analyzed to vigorously address the research questions. The phases of this action research study were followed within one-two cycles. The phases are outlined and mapped out in detail below. The use of pre-existing data shifted the typical process of data collection to a focus on analysis, which is reviewed in more depth within this chapter and in Chapter 4.

**Action Research Development and Reflection**

Because the typical, cyclical, and iterative action research process involves the stages: planning, acting, developing, and reflecting, phases have been developed to include data analysis, reflection, and student-informed innovations to trauma-informed curriculum. After data from phases 1-6 have been compiled, the cycle will continue following the reflective nature of action research, through the lens: create, implement, and review. Curriculum was developed outside of the scope of action research, pre-proposal, so cycles of create, implement, and review have already taken place.

**Planning.** The stage of planning has already begun. It is important to disclose that for the past two years, inspired by the determined gaps in the literature review, I
began planning, developing, acting, and reflecting on trauma-informed curriculum by restructuring the participating nonprofit’s curriculum through a trauma-informed lens.

**Acting.** Advocating for trauma-informed curriculum and to seeking to apply advice of trauma-informed, trauma-sensitive, and compassionate teaching measures, some experience has been obtained with piloting trauma-informed curriculum. This experience has led me to create my own educational consultancy to further design and implement trauma-informed curriculum to meet the individualized needs per campus. Acting has included prototypes and testing.

**Developing.** As, action research is purposely cyclical, aspects of development exist within the stages of planning and acting. Development has involved ideation and defining how trauma-informed practices can best exist with youth in way that is not overly prescriptive, in a way that does not re-traumatize, and in a space that is not deficit driven, so when it’s presented to youth and campuses, we refer to creative writing as “healing-centered experiences” and not has ways to fix or prescribe any youth’s trauma or personal experiences. Rather, space is held to be reflective, creative, and mindful of themes that have been recommended, such as, a focus on emotional intelligence, empathy, resilience, agency, and empowerment.

**Reflecting.** By embracing complexity and holding space for an equity pause and reflective writing, as equity-centered design thinking encourages, I determined which gaps existed within the curriculum, and adjusted and developed recommendations as necessary.
Action Based Inquiry Approach

In partnership with a local, educational non-profit, this study innovated and modified trauma-informed curriculum, based on student feedback obtained from preexisting data sets. As discussed, this action research study involved student surveys and narratives from students in 6th-12th grade public schools, charter schools, community schools, and youth detention facilities within the greater Stockton and Sacramento regions of California. This study sought to identify, analyze, notice, adjust, reflect, and act throughout six iterative steps, entitled: Action Research: Writing as Transformation, trauma-informed curriculum steps. Thus, a customized, Action Research Cycle was innovated with the intent to eventually inform, a customized, trauma-informed curriculum, centered in creative writing. See Figure 7.

Description of Student Writers

Pre-existing data from students previously enrolled into a program lead by a local, Sacramento area educational non-profit, aged 12-19 were analyzed. Settings where students have historically reported higher instances of trauma, such as youth detention facilities and community school settings were included. The participants attended local middle and high schools, with the exception of a few, post graduates. In some cases, within their writing, the students identified as being foster youth, in other cases they identified as being suspended or expelled. Still yet, some identified as having a traditional household and upbringing. Often, the student writers considered themselves writers if they had attended the writing workshops previously. It was typical for about half of the students from each, new group to not identify as being a “good writer” or thinking that the stories they told mattered, according to pre-survey data.
In an effort to protect and maintain anonymity, students will not be described with visual characteristics. To maintain validity, I selected sites where I had delivered the lessons and sites where other instructors had delivered the lessons. In some cases, I have not personally met the students, nor do I know them outside of their survey responses and writing submissions. Especially in consideration for youth who were incarcerated, counties have specific policies and protocols. To preserve student anonymity, students will be described through their writing solely, and through the safeguard of their pseudonyms, as outlined by the IRB.

Figure 7. Action research: Trauma-informed curriculum steps.
Because action research is a process where educators and participants can examine their practice through their research, this study was rooted in this methodological design. Moreover, this approach centered on expectations that I believed would bring meaningful change and innovation to educational systems: a disciplined inquiry intending to inform and change (Ferrance, 2000). Nonlinear pattern of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting on the changes in the social situations (Noffke & Stevenson, 1995) are sustained by the theoretical frameworks of narrative theory and transformational learning theory, to support the methodology. Because pre-existing data has been collected via student surveys and student writing with the goal of resolution and reformation within the educational system, action research is best suited to this type of study. Furthermore, because this study pursued to answer research questions that sought the perceptions of students, it was essential to have a design that allowed multiple types and phases of data to be analyzed, with the intent for student writing and survey data to inform future, trauma-informed curriculum models.

**Action Research in Education**

Inspired by the process of action research outlined by Mertler and Charles (2011), I designed a customized, action research cycle for the review of trauma-informed curriculum. Figure 8 outlines an action research cycle for collecting data. This initial figure assumes data is collected in real time.
Figure 8. Data collection process and timeline.

**Action Research Cycle for Trauma-Informed Curriculum**

A quantitative review of 136 student surveys sought to determine how student results could best inform curriculum delivery practices. However, it was not until active data collection became a limitation from a point of access, that the study had to pivot from a structure based on actively collected data, to one that analyzed pre-existing student data.

**From Data Collection Sequence to Data Analysis Sequence**

The data collection sequence assessed within Figure 8 is structured for active data collection. However, in working with vulnerable populations such as youth and incarcerated youth access to data being actively collected was the largest obstacle in this
study. Thus, I designed a new cycle tailored for the review of preexisting data to guide this study and future, action research cycles that may involve preexisting data sets.

**Pre-existing pivot.** As a result of the data transforming from data collected in real time during a 12-week cycle, to preexisting data informing active adjustments, the process has transformed to the following model, which incorporates content and thematic analysis. Figure 9 illustrates the revised data collection sequence that I adjusted to accommodate preexisting data.

![Action research: Trauma-informed, curriculum analysis](image)

**Figure 9.** Action research: Trauma-informed, curriculum analysis.
From Lack of Access to Turning Point

Initially, lack of access felt like an incredible loss to an action research study on trauma-informed curriculum. Yet, this pivot became a turning point. Creating an action research cycle that incorporated preexisting data and data collected in real time can benefit future action research cycles. This additional research cycle means that work can be done in a way that is not dependent on in-person data access. In turn, this will allow future researchers to study, analyze, and seek to provide potential solutions to trauma-impacted, youth populations.

Data Analysis

As indicated, surveys were analyzed through descriptive statistics. Line by line coding was used to determine how trauma-informed themes are manifested within student writing. A rubric was designed to analyze themes within writing. A rubric and protocol assisted in hand coding and assembling data into trauma-informed themes. This action research study sought to collect data with a focus on narrative theory and it will be analyzed through the lens of narrative theory and transformative learning theory to create accessible trauma-informed curriculum. Data from student writing will be validated by a customized rubric to review trauma-informed categories such as empathy, empowerment, agency, and resilience. The rubric was developed to ensure that each writing sample was analyzed with consistency and integrity.

Curriculum Adjustments

After reviewing the averages of pre-survey data and student writing, I was able to adjust the curriculum in two ways. Since I designed and altered the curriculum for the educational nonprofit when I was an active instructor, I could alter the next writing
assignment in real-time, based on pre-existing data. Findings could also be applied to the curriculum for the following semester, in the form of culturally relevant poetry/nonfiction mentor-text examples and tailored prompts that would allow for even more personalized reflection. For instance, as the evidence-based, trauma-informed categories were developed and applied, more nuanced and personalized adjustments could be directed. The curriculum could be altered to allow for more development in emotional intelligence for middle school and more focus on resilience and empowerment for high school, based on student engagement. In essence, though the process of curriculum adjustment was not linear and not able to be applied in real-time in light of the pre-existing data status, it was still invigorating and engaging to apply evidence-based and student-led adjustments for the following semester.

**Research Protocol**

Student writing was analyzed by a rubric influenced by narrative theory and transformative learning theory. The writing was coded conceptually and thematically. From each school site, multiple pieces of student writing were analyzed. It is important to note that the writing was derived from writing prompts centered in the established trauma-informed categories, emotional intelligence, empathy, resilience, agency, and empowerment. These categories will be further developed in Chapter 4.

**Trustworthiness and Reliability**

This action research study innovated a customized, trauma-informed curriculum grounded in narrative theory and transformational learning theory. A trauma-informed, narrative writing rubric was developed to conduct both a content and thematic analysis of student writing. The customized action research cycle and rubric
were developed to maintain the rigor of the study. Likewise, several methods were used to ensure the quality of the study. Since this study included both qualitative and quantitative data, trustworthiness was ensured by the data analysis system, the customized action research cycle, and the trauma-informed narrative writing rubric.

Whereas, reliability was upheld by the amount of student surveys analyzed, 136 in total, and the consistency of the tools, the identical pre- and post-surveys students completed at the start and the end of the 12-week writing workshop never wavered. All student participant details and data were analyzed consistently. A spreadsheet was utilized to cross-reference all coding, to take reflective notes, and to create tables.

**Ethical considerations.** Because the student participants involved are considered to be part of a vulnerable population, careful considerations have been taken to protect their identities, including pseudonyms and additional protections obtained from IRB. Consent and assent forms through each participating school site were developed to ensure all participation is fully voluntary and adheres to each participating school board’s provisions. In the end, because I intended to focus on a period that had passed, the IRB approved access to collect pre-existing data. A full board review was anticipated, but since the use of pre-existing data sets were incorporated in the form of student surveys and student writing, it was not necessary. Yet, confidentiality and anonymity have been honored. Pseudonyms for each student participant have been developed to fully conceal their identity on each trauma-informed, narrative writing rubric. Further, it was a conscious decision not to describe their demographics and to rather describe them through their writing. First, I was not the primary instructor for all courses. Second, I wished to protect their anonymity, especially incarcerated youth.
**Researcher positionality.** As an educator and writer of trauma-informed curriculum, I am an insider. Because pre-existing data sets were collected from sites where I had relationships with students and teachers, I needed to take care that my background knowledge of student participants did not affect the way data would be interpreted. Further, as a writer and a child exposed to a multitude of adverse childhood experiences, it is essential that I developed a process for reflection on biases. To mitigate my insider status, I have included sites where I led lessons and also sites where other instructors facilitated the curriculum. I also included reflective notes as I analyzed the qualitative data.

**Limitations.** The limitations of this study include sample size and reviewing pre-existing data. While my goal was 200 student participants, participation depended on the extent of access to pre-existing data through each participating site. While pre-existing data may be viewed as other than ideal for an action research study, it may be a strong alternative to analyze protected youth populations in a limited time frame. Further, because much of trauma-informed research is set within non-school settings, I sought out insight from narrative theory and transformational learning theory to inform the structure through the categories of trauma-informed themes for students to review, reflect, and apply within a creative writing setting. Because I could not follow-up with students directly, this limited their feedback and influence.

**Chapter Summary**

This action research study analyzed pre-existing data with a focus on narrative theory, with the intention to uplift student voice. Qualitative and quantitative data sets were analyzed through six phases and two action research cycles to construct and
amend accessible trauma-informed curriculum. The Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reports that at least one in seven children have experienced child abuse and/or neglect in the past year (“Preventing Child Abuse and Neglect”, 2019) and childhood trauma has been labeled as “America’s hidden health crisis” (ACEs Connection, 2016). Instead of disproven and punitive “zero-tolerance” consequences, schools must familiarize themselves with the impacts of trauma, anticipate traumatic reactions, and respond accordingly. Chapter 4 will provide more context on the data analysis process and procedures.
CHAPTER 4: DATA ANALYSIS PROCESS AND PROCEDURES

“Eternal darkness. Nothing there, just black upon black upon black. No, wait. What could that be? Light. One tiny, flickering light, the only something within the nothing.”
Zara, Student participant

Acquiring and reviewing student writing and student surveys have been thrilling pursuits. Pre-existing data from Summer 2020 through Fall 2021 has been acquired and reviewed. The focus of this action research study was to review data in the form of student writing and pre- and post-surveys from middle and high school students, aged 12 years or older, who participated in a series of creative writing workshops. Within these workshops, writing prompts included trauma-informed concepts, such as emotional intelligence, empathy, resilience, agency, and empowerment.

Pre-existing data from four school sites, including traditional districts to alternative school settings, have been reviewed through a combination of content and thematic analysis. A total of 15 pieces of student writing from ten classrooms, within four school sites have been reviewed to determine if student writing can influence the design of a trauma-informed curriculum.

Pre- and post-surveys from 136 students have been analyzed to determine if a trauma-informed curriculum, centered on creative writing, can enhance academic attitudes and social-emotional development. In this chapter, I begin with an overview of the study. I then describe how the findings were organized through a trauma-informed narrative writing rubric. Findings will be explored in chapter 5. In-depth analysis will occur in chapter 6.
Overview of the Study

The purpose of this action research study was to design a customized trauma-informed curriculum, centered in creative writing, to enhance academic attitudes and social-emotional development. Narrative theory and transformational learning theory informed the curriculum design and analysis. Narratives from students in sixth grade through 12th grade, derived from creative writing sessions, were analyzed to identify how student survey responses and writing could inform trauma-informed curriculum.

Research Questions

1. In which ways, if any, can student writing influence the design of a trauma-informed curriculum, centered in creative writing?

2. What effects, if any, can a trauma-informed curriculum, centered in creative writing, have on academic attitudes and social-emotional development?

3. What are the components of an effective and customizable, trauma-informed curriculum design?

Qualitative Analysis

The heart of this study is creative writing. Consequently, the presentation of the findings begins with a review of student writing. Because this study was an action research study seeking to understand in which ways student writing can influence the design of the trauma-informed curriculum, I used both elements of content analysis and thematic analysis to review the data. Thematic analysis can be used to analyze a multitude of research designs while content analysis is often used to analyze both qualitative and quantitative data. As a result, I developed a dual design to inform the trauma-informed, narrative analysis rubric.
Content Analysis

Content analysis can be employed for studies involving qualitative and quantitative data. Further, “content analysis is a research tool used to determine the presence of certain words, themes, or concepts within a given piece of qualitative data” (Columbia Public Health, 2019). To better analyze the content and thematic elements of each trauma-informed category, a set of applicable definitions, as they relate to student writing and prompts are outlined in the Table below.

Table 1
*Trauma-informed Concepts by Definition*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Trauma-informed Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emotional Intelligence</td>
<td>The ability to identify and manage one’s emotions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empathy</td>
<td>The ability to recognize, understand, and share the feelings of others.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resilience</td>
<td>The ability to recover from or adjust to misfortune or change.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agency</td>
<td>The process of behaving with intention.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empowerment</td>
<td>Exercising autonomy, choice, and responsibility.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The goal of the content analysis was to quantify the trends within student writing in response to a trauma-informed curriculum, centered in creative writing. These trends can become identifiable components of an effective and customizable, trauma-informed curriculum design.

**Thematic Analysis**

In contrast to content analysis, thematic analysis is primarily a tool used for qualitative data. I sought the depth of content analysis and for the richness that thematic analysis can provide, to complement the review of student writing. For these reasons, elements of content analysis (trauma-informed categories) and thematic analysis (student writing) have been applied to the trauma-informed narrative analysis writing rubric (see Figures 12 and 13) so that it can be an effective and robust tool to analyze student data. Since the goal of thematic analysis is to establish a structure for the research, I employed trauma-informed categories for both content and thematic analysis: emotional intelligence, empathy, resilience, agency, and empowerment. The rubric design incorporates both content and thematic analysis.

**Trauma-informed, Narrative Analysis Writing Rubric**

To enhance reliability and to reduce instances of coding errors, I developed a rubric to analyze student writing. The goal was to consider the corresponding research question while keeping in mind the theoretical frameworks thematically, including both transformative learning theory and narrative theory. This rubric was used to analyze 15 pieces of student writing. The framework of the rubric assisted with the organization of data, by opening with the following details: grade range, pseudonym, age range, semester collected, and prompt/topic, when available.
The body of the document calls attention to the title; lines identified as substantial in content or voice; and what may be defined as thought-provoking and representative of the referenced trauma-informed, thematic categories or codes. There is a section to identify a code or a set of codes for each piece of writing as well as a section for thematic analysis to aid in analysis: “Themes present in this piece of writing include...” and aiding in the investigation through the question: “How can this inform trauma-informed curriculum development/design?” Within the rubric, there are sub-categories of analyses for consideration through the lens of the theoretical framework.

For transformational learning theory, the question: “Is the psychological understanding of self, demonstrated in student writing?” is posed. Anytime the students wrote about themselves or mentioned their self, this was emphasized. Regarding narrative theory, the rubric prompts: “Is the writer or narrative coming to terms with fundamental elements of experience, such as time, process, or change?” Anytime the writing content touched on time, process, or change, this section was highlighted.

Finally, the second page of the rubric included a section where I could copy and paste student writing without any indication of their identity. If any future researchers seek to review the study, I thought it vital that they could access the complete copy of student writing. As is natural with content and thematic analysis, human error and variance of perspectives and biases are factors. Including student writing, ensures that the full picture can be attained for future review and research. Figures 12 and 13 presented below, provide a visual into the organization of the findings of this action research study centered in trauma-informed curriculum.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade range:</th>
<th>Pseudonym:</th>
<th>Age range:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Semester collected: Fall 2021</td>
<td>Prompt/Topic:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Trauma-informed, Narrative Writing Analysis Rubric**

**TITLE AND OUTSTANDING LINES:**

Title: ....  
Lines: ....

**CONTENT ANALYSIS:**
Indicate trauma-informed themes addressed in writing:
- Emotional Intelligence
- Empathy
- Resilience
- Agency
- Empowerment

**Research Question:** In what ways, if any, can student writing impact the design of a trauma-informed curriculum?

**Transformational learning theory assessment:** Is the psychological understanding of self demonstrated in student writing? Yes/No

**Narrative theory assessment:** Is the writer or narrative coming to terms with fundamental elements of experience, such as time, process, and change? Yes/No (Time, process, change).

**THEMATIC ANALYSIS:**
Themes present in this piece of writing include...

**OVERALL ASSESSMENT:**
In summary,

How can this inform trauma-informed curriculum development/design?

---

*Figure 10.* Trauma-informed, narrative writing analysis rubric, page one.
Figure 11. Trauma-informed, narrative writing analysis rubric, page two.
Qualitative Process

The qualitative portion of the data is comprised of student writing analyzed through the lens of narrative theory and transformation learning theory. Themes and recommendations will be expanded upon in Chapter 6. The trauma-informed, narrative writing rubrics display the qualitative analytic process. The purpose of the rubric was to define trauma-informed categories as they related to student writing, specifically after trauma-informed concepts had been introduced and after students have been provided with the opportunity to apply the concepts to their writing.

In asking, “In what ways, if any can student writing influence design of a trauma-informed curriculum?”, through the vigorous lens of narrative theory and transformational education theory, I identified several potential answers to this research question. Though, even before the research question was added to the trauma-informed, narrative rubric, elements of the content and thematic analysis reinvigorated the purpose for the action research study in the first place. As the purpose is to design a customized trauma-informed curriculum, centered in creative writing, to enhance academic attitudes and social-emotional development. Yet, the most significant part of action research is the ability and hope to apply it to a dire problem in real-time. The problem of this study inspires the analysis. Students impacted by trauma often struggle to thrive and even though schools are the largest mental health provider for children in the United States, most struggle to implement consistent strategies to support youth who have experienced trauma. As outlined in chapter one, this problem is prevalent and persistent; According to the National Survey of Children’s Health, close to 35 million children have grown up suffering violence, neglect, and other forms of trauma.
Trauma remains one of the largest public health issues facing our children today (CDC, 2019). In the spirit of innovation within Action Research, this study seeks to explore the edges outside of the bureaucracy that can confine curriculum and progress.

Teachers and facilitators are not licensed health care providers, but they can integrate peer-reviewed concepts that seek to allow students to develop and harness their own sense of emotional intelligence. Students can be provided with daily practices on empathy, to extend to others and to themselves. When students know their strengths, they can comprehend the resilience they already embody, with the hope that they will acknowledge it and more precisely practice agency as the process of behaving with intention, and empowerment as exercising autonomy, choice, and accountability.

These examples of student writing display the transformative capacity of narrative theory and transformational learning theory applied to self-reflection and creative writing. For this chapter, I will provide two examples of student writing along with the rubric, see figures 15-18; provide context to the qualitative and quantitative analysis process and procedures; and transition into Chapter 5, which will summarize findings and discuss implications for an action-research practice based in the trauma-informed curriculum. These examples of student writing and qualitative analyses display the ways in which the findings respond to the research questions. The entirety of student writing is available for review within the appendix. The findings included within Trauma-informed Writing Analysis Rubric will be analyzed in more depth in Chapter 6.
Domestication

Small lessons we learn as children—don’t let them see you cry, some foods are good, and some are bad, and laziness is the bane of productivity, and if he hits you, it means he likes you, and don’t snitch, don’t tattle, not ever—

Are, in some ways, damming.

But the one that has chased me the farthest through the tunnels of this unsolvable labyrinth that we call growing up is: the most humane thing you can do for a firefly is to poke holes in the lid of the jar you catch it in. I thought I was so charitable to shove a toothpick through the tinfoil cinched stop the Mason jar and its flickering captive. So it’s only natural that as I grew, I became content with semi-suffocation so as long as I was offered a few gulps of fresh air every now and again. And it’s only natural that I thought the people who fed me oxygen through straws like a jar-bound firefly were saints for being so kind as to even let me breathe.

The most humane thing you can do for a firefly is to not catch it at all.

Figure 12. Student writing, submission two.
Figure 13. Student writing analysis, submission two.
What's Free?

what's free?
is love free?

is your boyfriend dead on his own block from the bullet of a gun owned by his own color the price you pay for love? or maybe it's the price he paid for pride, or possibly the price he paid for being in the wrong place at the wrong time, is his mother finding out her baby's dead, another statistic, another one dead on the news, the price she pays for love? or is it the price she paid for not knowing who his father was, or even the price she paid for letting him sell drugs?

what's free?
is education free?

when we have to choose between feeding our family or the honor roll, when most boys' only chance at college is through an athletic scholarship, is that the price we pay for being in the lower class? is that the price we pay for our moms and dads being too strung out to put dinner on the table, or maybe it's the price we pay for not being smart enough, for not testing well, or not having any teacher that believed in us — so, what's free?

---

*Figure 14. Student writing, submission ten.*
Trauma-informed, Narrative Writing Analysis Rubric

Title: "What's Free?"
Lines: "is education free? when we have to choose between feeding our family and honor roll, when most boys' only chance at college is an athletic scholarship, is that the price we pay for being in the lower class?"

CONTENT ANALYSIS:
- Emotional Intelligence
- Empathy
- Resilience
- Agency
- Empowerment

Research Question: In what ways, if any, can student writing impact the design of a trauma-informed curriculum?
Transformational learning theory assessment: Is the psychological understanding of self demonstrated in student writing? Yes/No
Narrative theory assessment: Is the writer or narrative coming to terms with fundamental elements of experience, such as time, process, and change? Yes/No (Time, process, change).

THEMATIC ANALYSIS:
Themes present in this piece of writing include a deep understanding of systemic limitations and the injustices they cause. The writing displays resilience, emotional intelligence, but mostly empathy. The writer understands the elements of their own limitations and the realization of the injustices that they convey. The student understands their self and their place within their environment.

OVERALL ASSESSMENT:
In the piece of writing, the student analyzes the concept of freedom. They ask what is free? Is love free? Is education free? I hope eventually policy makers are able to review this poem when they consider funding for food access and education.

In what ways, if any, can student writing influence the design of a trauma-informed curriculum? This piece of writing can inform opportunities for students to write about their psychological understanding of self within societal constructs.

Figure 15. Student writing analysis, submission ten.
Chapter Summary

Moreover, students reflected deeply and displayed several instances of transformational views within their writing. The ways in which student writing can influence trauma-informed curriculum will be reviewed in more depth, within Chapter 5 and 6. Chapter 5 will review and verify the findings; Chapter 6 will examine implications for future action research practices and provide recommendations for future study.
CHAPTER 5: FINDINGS AND RESULTS

"We are the phoenix rising from the ashes. The witches that they could not burn. We are the life that grows after devastation. The Earth that keeps on spinning, the pages that continue to turn.”
– Gisselle, Student participant

In this action research study, pre-existing data in the form of student writing and survey feedback informed the design and modifications of trauma-informed curriculum centered on creative writing. Facilitators delivered the trauma-informed curriculum at a local, educational nonprofit within classrooms (using the push-in/inclusive method) and in after-school settings at participating school sites. To determine which adjustments can positively alter academic attitudes and social-emotional development in future curriculum iterations, students completed a pre-survey at the beginning of a 12-week writing cycle and a post-survey at the end. Moreover, student writing was reviewed to observe their insight and application of trauma-informed concepts. Student narratives were analyzed and coded through the trauma-informed categories: emotional intelligence, empathy, agency, resilience, and empowerment. The settings of this study varied from middle to high school and included both traditional district settings and trauma-impacted settings, such as youth detention facilities and alternative schools. Yet, the data suggests that themes were constant across settings. Themes of self-worth, acceptance, and inner liberty were as evident in qualitative data for students studying at an arts-centered high school as for students who did not have the liberty to leave their facilities. Student writing asserts that a trauma-informed, creative writing curriculum can be transformative for student perspective. Before reviewing the findings in the form
of student writing, it is essential to set the stage of the students served by the participating sites and educational nonprofit.

**Quantitative Results**

Reviewing student survey data from the 2020-2021 and 2021-2022 school years, was a heartening experience. First, from a point of impact. In the 2020-2021 school year, despite the pandemic and dwindling enrollment in programs considered extracurricular nationwide, 349 students were enrolled and of those students surveyed, 92.9% increased their academic attitudes in one or more categories and 96.99% enhanced social-emotional development in one or more categories.

In comparison, the following school year, 2021-2022, close to 800 students were enrolled, nearly double from the previous school year, yet the consistency of reaching more than 80% in both categories remained consistent. Of the students surveyed, 86% increased their academic attitudes in one or more categories and 88% increased their social-emotional development in one or more categories.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program</th>
<th>Program Name</th>
<th>Students Enrolled</th>
<th>Academic Attitudes</th>
<th>Social-emotional Development</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Willow Valley High School</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>86%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Project Resilience</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Creativity Academy</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>94%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Sunrise Middle School</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>92%</td>
<td>97%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2
*Descriptive Statistics Overview*
The table above synthesizes pre-existing, student survey data from Summer 2020 through Fall 2021. Out of 4 focal programs from 2020-2021, 136 students completed a pre-and post-survey and responded to questions analyzing their academic attitudes and social-emotional development. The results have been averaged by program and by category. The data suggests that the following research question was answered: “In what ways, if any, can a trauma-informed curriculum, centered in creative writing, enhance academic attitudes and social-emotional development?” The quantitative findings are outlined in Tables 3, 4, and 5.

This action-research study incorporated both qualitative and quantitative data. The findings will be analyzed in more depth in Chapter 6, followed by implications for practice and recommendations for further research. The following charts have been designed to guide in the analysis of findings, beginning with student enrollment numbers. To illustrate the results further, the following graph breaks down each category and compares each program by focal category.

Regarding the focal programs of this study, consisting of 10 separate classes, which included 136 students and had a fully implemented trauma-informed, creative writing curriculum, more than 91% increased their academic attitudes and 94% enhanced in one or more categories of social-emotional development. Pseudonyms have been used for each program site to protect the identity of students. Tables 5 and 6 examine the program by the increase in one or more categories of academic attitudes and social-emotional development by each site.
Table 3
Student Enrollment by Program

|| Students Enrolled |
|-------------------|
| Willow Valley High School | 12 |
| Project Resilience | 51 |
| Creativity Academy | 38 |
| Sunrise Middle School | 35 |

**Academic Attitudes and Social-Emotional Development**

136 student surveys were analyzed using descriptive statistics. The survey data analyzed asserts that 91% of students self-reported a change in one or more categories of academic attitudes, and that 94% of students surveyed self-reported an increase in one or more categories of social-emotional development. The graph above displays that the category of social-emotional development slightly increased more than academic attitudes or was equal to this category for three programs. These surveys incorporated the pre- and post-survey data of 136 students, across multiple settings. Further, when the data were broken down by each category, the results and responses were unequivocally positive. Of the 136 students surveyed, 91% increased their academic attitude in one or more categories.
Table 4
Social-Emotional Development by Program

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program</th>
<th>Social Emotional Development</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Willow Valley High School</td>
<td>86%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project Resilience</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creativity Academy</td>
<td>94%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunrise Middle School</td>
<td>97%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5
Academic Attitudes and Social-Emotional Development by Program

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program</th>
<th>Academic Attitudes</th>
<th>Social Emotional Development</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Willow Valley High School</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project Resilience</td>
<td>93%</td>
<td>95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creativity Academy</td>
<td>98%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunrise Middle School</td>
<td>103%</td>
<td>105%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The data suggest that students who receive a trauma-informed curriculum may increase in the categories of academic attitudes and social-emotional development by 5 to 10%, in comparison to students who received a traditional creative writing curriculum. In relation to the number of participating students in the participating nonprofit, which totaled 800 last year, the evidence suggests that a creative curriculum, centered in trauma-informed principles, could potentially increase the academic attitudes and social-emotional development of up to 40-80 students. If this phenomenon were to be studied across the state, region, or on the national level, this could equate to many thousands or even millions of students experiencing an increase regarding their academic attitudes and social-emotional development. As evidenced by the data, trauma-informed writing, centered in creative writing can enhance academic attitudes and social-emotional development. Yet, it is essential to deduce how and in which ways, if measurable, within Chapter 6.

**Qualitative Findings**

Student writing was central to this study. Students reviewed ranged in age and grade, from 12-19 years of age; in middle school and high school; in traditional district classrooms as well as trauma-impacted environments, such as alternative schools and schools constructed within prisons; all creative writing curriculum delivered to the participants was trauma-informed. The trauma-informed curriculum included the following evidence-driven categories: emotional intelligence; empathy; resilience; agency; and empowerment. In this chapter, student names have been converted to pseudonyms to conceal identity. All writing is the original work of students; titles and content have not been altered. Grammar and spacing has not be altered to maintain the
authentic voice of each student participant. To protect the identity of students, instead of describing them in a way that could unveil their anonymity, I describe them through their writing and perspective. In-depth analysis will occur in Chapter 6.

Regarding the first research question: “In what ways, if any, can student writing influence the design of a trauma-informed curriculum?”, the results and findings of this study suggested additional categories or motifs to consider with future curriculum iterations, such as inner liberty, acceptance, and self-worth. Returning to the trauma-informed concepts, from which the trauma-informed curriculum centered, the findings indicated the following themes and subthemes as reported below.

**Emotional Intelligence, Self-Worth, and Inner Liberty**

Writing has the power to transfix the reader. As I reviewed the findings in the form of student writing, I was often inspired by natural wisdom and wondered if this is influenced by the number of experiences or traumatic experiences a student has encountered. The following student referred to as Emiliana, reviewed liberation. "Domestication" is a deep and emotionally evocative piece on inner liberty. The themes presented in the writing included liberation and empowerment. This poem also addressed not only societal norms on acceptance but also alluded to the writer’s own experiences in coming to terms with existence within the lessons provided to us as children. Using a version of the block quote format, I will present the student writing by category and theme. To ensure students’ authentic tone and voices are preserved, I will present findings using the same spacing and grammar, as published.
“Domestication”

Small lessons we learn as children — don’t let them see you cry, some foods are good, and some are bad, and laziness is the bane of productivity, and if he hits you, it means you likes you, and don’t snitch, don’t tattletale, not ever — Are, in some ways, damning.

But the one that has chased me the farthest through the tunnels of this Unsolvable labyrinth that we call growing up is the most humane thing you can do for a firefly is to poke holes in the lid of the jar you catch it in. I thought I was so charitable to shove a toothpick through the tinfoil cinched atop the Mason jar and it’s flickering captive. So, it’s only natural that as I grew, I became content with semi-suffocation so long as I was offered a few gulps of fresh air every now and again. And it’s only natural that I thought the people who fed me oxygen through straws like a jar-bound firefly were saints for being so kind as to even let me breathe.

The most humane thing you can do for a firefly is not catch it all. (Emiliana)

"Domestication", was written in response to trauma-informed, creative writing lessons on emotional intelligence. This piece of writing emphasized all five of the trauma-informed categories, and yet it also reviewed a theme on liberation or inner liberty and touches on a concept of fleeting freedom, which was present in several pieces of student writing, from both middle and high school student participants.

Another piece of student writing that accessed the heart of emotional intelligence and self-worth, is “Worthy” by Analise. The student presented the subject of self-worth in alignment with emotional intelligence and confidence in relation to a lesson on
empowerment. Themes within in this piece of writing included self-awareness, lack of self-confidence, and an awareness of the lack of self-confidence. This writer made the following conclusion at the end of the poem: "...to have the opportunity to have the things I created and look at my work through my eyes, to see that what I make is not worthy to be hated...". This line seemed to articulate acceptance.

“Worthy”

I’m never happy with anything I make
Anything I create
Anything I say
Anything I do
It’s all tough to chew.
It seems I cannot create anything new
Even my brightest star is still dim to me
But everyone else is too bright to see
Why do I feel this way about myself?
Why do I stop smiling when I look at myself?
When will I bloom?
When will I grow
Into something that’s worthy?
Can it be defined
In the way that I live,
In the way that I rhyme?
When will I be worthy?
That’s a tough question to ask
If worthy is a thing
It’s a hard thing to grasp...
To see that what I make is not worthy to be hated. (Analise)

In summary, "Worthy" details the narrative of a student conceptualizing their understanding of their ability to create and their relationship with self-worth and how that gets in the way. Thematically, the student presented the subject of self-worth in alignment with emotional intelligence, in that the student assessed their emotional state even to the point of defusing the inner emotional conflict of self-worth.

**Empathy and interconnectedness.** One of the trauma-informed categories that was identified the least was empathy. I do not think it’s because the student participants lacked empathy, but rather it may be a response to the type of prompts in which they responded. Yet, an unexpected theme that emerged within the findings was connection or interconnectedness through a sense of communal identities. "Stars" discussed identity as it relates to our universe and existence. Empathy is present as the writer explored the connectivity of existence while also recognizing the vital role of individuality, "that doesn't mean stars are any less important than the galaxy."

**“Stars”**

We are all stars in a solar system of planets; that doesn't mean stars are any less important than the galaxy. (Amelia)

In the poem, "Stars", the writer analyzed the weight of the universe and our place in it as a species, with a short number of sentences, just two. This young writer used a metaphor comparing human beings to stars and seemed to allude to the galaxy as the
setting or meaning. In another piece of writing, “Introduction”, the writer explored empathy and connection, through emotional intelligence. Santiago analyzed the resilience the characters might require to survive. Furthermore, the narrator considered the fate of others, expounding on the concept of empathy and emotional intelligence.

“Introduction”

William looked at the expanse of ocean before him reverently, akin to a Worshipper at the feet of their all-encompassing deity. Maybe that was exactly What it was. He, a simple man who wanted no more than to play his guitar For an eternity, and the ocean, this vast existence he had no hope of knowing, no hope of understanding.

Who did he think he was, to explore those depths? Who did he think he was? A simple man, to know the wave’s secrets?

It was a place not meant for the likes of him, the country born, nature known. William cast his thought back to a boy he met when he dared to venture into the tremulous water of the city. Thomas the boy’s name. Wet behind the ears, bright of eyes, and with his companion Toby. They were young, children no less, left to fend for themselves in the shark-infested waters of the capital.

He prayed, he prayed to whoever would listen, that the two boys knew how to swim. Either that, or they would sink. (Santiago)
This piece of fiction writing served as an introduction to a world of characters that the writer further expanded upon. "Introduction" considered the nature of both of the characters developed, and their psychology in contrast to the setting.

**Resilience.** In “What’s Free,” Aisha analyzed the concept of freedom. She asked, “what is free? Is love free? Is education free?” I hope policy makers will be afforded the opportunity to review this poem when funding for food access and education is reviewed.

**“What’s Free?”**

what’s free?

is love free?

is your boyfriend dead on his own block from the bullet of a gun owned by his own color the price you pay for love? Or maybe it’s the price he paid for pride, or possibly the price he paid for being in the wrong place at the wrong time. is his mother finding out her baby’s dead, another statistic, another one dead on the news, the price she pays for love? Or is it the price she paid for knowing who his father was, or even the price she paid for letting him sell drugs?

is education free?

when we have to choose between feeding our family and honor roll, when most boys’ only chance at college is an athletic scholarship, is that the price we pay for being in the lower class? is that the price we pay for our moms and dads being too strung out to put dinner on the table, or maybe it’s the price we pay for not being smart enough, for testing
well, or not having any teacher that believe in us—
so, what’s free? (Aisha)

Additionally, themes presented in this piece of writing included a deep understanding of systemic limitations and the injustices they cause. The writing displayed resilience, emotional intelligence, but mostly empathy. Aisha articulated elements of their own limitations and the realization of the injustices that are responsible and often overlooked.

Another piece of student writing that indicated resilience was “Takis Are my Hero” by a student called Malakai. This piece of nonfiction writing explored the concept of a nonhuman hero or an antihero. Who does one rely on if heroes are not present? Many stories and personal histories are not clear-cut. Malakai explored pressure points through the lens of relief and comfort food can bring. It has caused me to wonder what we lean on when we cannot lean on the law or a fellow human being?

“Takis Are my Hero”

Sometimes when I had nothing to do, nowhere to go, and nothing to eat,
I’d grab some Takis and call it a day...

When the police kicked my door in and took my two brothers at two in the morning,
I jumped on the top bunk bed, grabbed my Game Boy and a bag of Takis.
When I had a good day at school and mom said I could take the EBT card and get some snacks,
I got some Takis.
When the police kicked in my uncle’s room,
I was dumping Takis crumbs into my mouth.

When I was arrested,

I was eating a sandwich with an unopened bag of Takis nearby. (Malakai)

Malakai analyzed coping mechanisms during heightened moments of trauma, such as witnessing the arrests of his brothers; uncle; and experiencing arrest himself.

While the tone is light, the topic is the opposite.

**Agency and self-worth.** "Mosaic" is an introspective piece of writing that explored the concept of interconnectedness. It questioned individuality and alluded to the weight of self-judgment.

"Mosaic"

*So, he wandered out into the dark and stormy night...*

Wondering why he was never his own person.

He walked past the woman sitting on the terrace,

Cigarette in hand, contemplating her existence.

He closely observed the little boy, who was patiently waiting for his mother to tell him that his heart was in fact still beating.

There is something so human about hating something you love.

He came the realization that no one is an individual.

We are all a mosaic of the people we've encountered.

He is that little boy, and that woman, and that old man he helped cross the street—and that is magic.

We are all a reflection of our history and our knowledge.

We do not live under the shadows of others,
We are the shadow. (Audrey)

"Mosaic" was written in response to a prompt called the sentence thief and involves beginning with a sentence starter or line from a favorite writer and then developing the rest of the story, based on this line. Audrey reflected the trauma-informed concepts of emotional intelligence and agency.

Another piece of student writing, titled “The Spark” explores growth mindset and autonomy. This poem is based on a growth mindset prompt, I can/can’t yet inspired by Caroline Dweck’s research on mindsets and their influence on motivation. This student writer encompassed many of the trauma-informed categories, from emotional intelligence to empowerment, in that the voice of the piece acknowledges the ability to exercise autonomy, choice, and responsibility.

“The Spark”

Eternal darkness. Nothing there, just black upon black upon black.

No, wait. What could that be?

Light. One tiny, flickering light, the only something within the nothing.

Suddenly: “I can’t.”

The words echo around the nothingness.

The light dims.

“No, it’s ‘yet.’”

Again, the voice reverberates.

“I can’t yet.”

The tiny glow brightens steadily.

Where might this nothing and this light be?
Why, in you, of course. In all of us.

Around us.

Pulsating through the universe.

A dance of thought and flame, flame, and thought.

What could it be, you ask?

Joy.

Positivity.

Self-confidence.

The spark of a heart, mind, soul, aflame with inspiration. (Zara)

Zara referenced darkness and light and the absence of each. There was an extended metaphor that referenced acceptance of limitation as temporary and acceptance of the possibilities of capacity as a light that can guide and inspire.

Empowerment and coping. Empowerment was a focal point in the trauma-informed writing series. While writing on this topic, another subtheme emerged, one of coping through empowerment. In the next piece of writing, Apollo analyzed the alternative paths when adversity is present. As I read, I wondered when tangible resources and inner strength is absent, how do we cope? This writer has shared how they have.

“When I found... ME”

When I had no love, I loved others. When I had no sympathy, I gave out empathy. When I had no mother, I became my own. When I had no father, I created a home. When that home was broken, I created a castle. And when it faded, I had to fix that home. When I had no me, I relied on you. When I had...
no you, I relied on truth. When I couldn’t trust, I had to see. And when I was blind, I used my hands irrevocably. When I had no regret, I was miserably happy. And when I lost what I had, I learned the meaning. When I had no more strength, I used my wisdom. When knowledge wasn’t enough, I had to find my strength. When I found my strength, I found my power, and when I found my power, I found me. (Apollo)

“When I found... ME” used resilience as a series of extended metaphors. The writer considered their moments of greatest challenge and examined the way they coped and the strength they displayed, even at the most difficult moments of adversity. In the end, the piece of writing acknowledged the reward of self-empowerment and self-recognition. All 15 pieces of student writing can be found in the appendix.

**Chapter Summary**

Acquiring and reviewing student writing and student surveys has been a thrilling pursuit. Pre-existing data from Summer 2020 through Fall 2021 were reviewed. The focus of this action research study was to review data in the form of student writing and pre- and post-surveys from middle and high school students, who participated in a series of creative writing workshops. Within these workshops, writing prompts included trauma-informed concepts, such as emotional intelligence, empathy, resilience, agency, and empowerment. Pre-existing data from four school sites, ranging from traditional districts to alternative school settings, were reviewed through a combination of content and thematic analysis. A total of 15 pieces of student writing from ten classrooms, within four school sites have been reviewed to determine if student writing can influence the design of a trauma-informed curriculum. Pre- and post-
surveys from 136 students were analyzed to determine if a trauma-informed curriculum, centered on creative writing, can enhance academic attitudes and social-emotional development.

This action research study, centered on trauma-informed curriculum provided valuable context on the potential impact trauma-informed curriculum can have on students from an academic standpoint and through a social-emotional developmental lens. Students positively self-identified in multiple categories of the pre- and post-survey. I was not expecting that the averages would exceed the programmatic averages for the 2021-2022 school year by multiple percentage points. The ways in which students can enhance their academic attitudes and social-emotional development and the ways in which student writing can influence trauma-informed curriculum, will be examined in Chapter 6.
CHAPTER 6: RECOMMENDATIONS AND REFLECTIONS

“When I found my strength, I found my power, and when I found my power, I found me.”
– Apollo, Student participant

Transformation is painful. Students impacted by trauma are transforming in ways that overwhelm many educational systems, and instead of supporting them when they require it most or before an intense act is committed, they are often shunned from school and often subsequently rejected from community and from society. When nurturing and reflection are required to make sense of their experiences, students impacted by trauma, face detentions, suspensions, expulsions, and incarcerations that harm them further. Yet, there are alternative methods that can provide space and grace for students to reflect and the agency to make a change.

Problem of Practice

In the public and charter school setting, childhood traumatic exposure and adverse childhood experiences are widespread. Students impacted by a history of traumatic exposure and adverse childhood experiences struggle to thrive in school and are at risk of being suspended, expelled, and incarcerated. Trauma can significantly undermine a student’s ability to thrive in school (Sitler, 2009). The ACE Connection and the Center for Disease Control (CDC) caution trauma can contribute to negative behavioral responses, including discipline referrals and school suspensions (Cole et al., 2005; Wolpow et al., 2016). There is a positive correlation between being suspended in school and later life engagement with the criminal justice system (Fabelo et al., 2011 as
Adverse childhood experiences are widespread and often unidentified and untreated. Depending on the population surveyed, anywhere from 61% to 97% of youth have experienced one or more ACE (Adverse Childhood Experience), with only 2.8% of some populations of incarcerated youth reporting no childhood adversity (Sacks & Murphey, 2018; Baglivio & Epps, 2015).

Hypervigilance and power imbalances can ensue within the classroom environment without a focus on connection. Students, especially adolescent students, often test boundaries, as trauma can be reenacted in relationships with adults who react to the child’s search for safety (Dombo & Sabatino, 2019). Students affected by trauma may be overly defensive, anticipating adult criticism, or defiant to assert control. Because trauma interferes with the development of relationship skills and emotion regulation, students often find themselves in conflict with peers as either victims or the perpetrators of bullying (Jennings, 2019). Exposure to trauma or chronic stress negatively impacts several domains of functioning related to performance (Ridgard et al., 2015). Trauma-informed interventions and curricula are required to respond to unmet, student needs and to facilitate new pathways in classrooms across the country.

**Purpose**

The purpose of this action research study involved designing a customized trauma-informed curriculum, centered in creative writing to enhance academic attitudes and social emotional development. The objective of this trauma-informed curriculum was to address the effects of childhood exposure to trauma through narrative reflection. Through review and application of trauma-informed concepts, the
goal was to cultivate positive academic attitudes and improved social-emotional development in students. Creative writing sessions centered on the review and application of the following trauma-informed concepts—emotional intelligence, empathy, empowerment, agency, and resilience.

Narrative theory and transformative learning theory informed the curriculum design, delivery, and data analysis. Student narratives from 6th-12th grade youth, derived from creative writing sessions, will advise findings and future iterations. Spaces where students are predisposed to adverse childhood experiences, such as youth detention facilities and community schools were included in this study.

Innovators in trauma studies, including Dr. Bessel van der Kolk, advocates for the necessity of constructing meaning from narrative: “People cannot put traumatic events behind until they are able to acknowledge what has happened and start to recognize the invisible demons, they are struggling with...Telling the story is important; without stories, memory becomes frozen; and without memory you cannot imagine how things can be different” (2015). Students are telling us a story, and if we are courageous enough to listen, change may be realized.

**Research Questions**

Three questions led this inquiry.

1. What ways, if any, can student writing influence the design of a trauma-informed curriculum, centered in creative writing?

2. What effects, if any, can a trauma-informed curriculum, centered in creative writing, have on academic attitudes and social-emotional development?

3. What are the components of an effective and customizable, trauma-informed curriculum design?
Trauma-informed curriculum can provide schools with alternative methods that are key to reaching all students, those exposed to trauma or not, by promoting a culture of healing through safety, equity, and empowerment. This action research study was centered on trauma-informed, creative writing sessions.

**Methodology Review**

In this action research study, pre-existing data in the form of student writing and survey feedback informed the design and modifications of a trauma-informed curriculum based in creative writing. The trauma-informed curriculum was delivered by facilitators at a local, educational nonprofit within classrooms (using the push-in/inclusive method) and in after-school settings at participating school sites. To determine which adjustments can positively alter academic attitudes and social-emotional development in future curriculum iterations, students completed a pre-survey at the beginning of a twelve-week cycle and a post-survey at the end. Student writing was reviewed to observe their insight and application of trauma-informed concepts. Student narratives were analyzed and coded through the trauma-informed categories: emotional intelligence, empathy, agency, resilience, and empowerment.

Student writing influenced future curriculum iterations by influencing the future topics and content reviewed, including personalized and individualized prompts, such as acceptance, self-worth/self-confidence, growth mindset, freedom/inner liberty, interconnectedness, and coping.

**Summary of Findings and Results**

This action-research study incorporated both qualitative and quantitative data. The findings and results will be analyzed in more depth here, followed by implications
for practice and recommendations for further research. Several tables have been designed to guide in the analysis of findings. More in depth Figures and Tables are available in Chapter 5.

Table 6
*Average of Social-Emotional Development*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program</th>
<th>Average of Social-emotional Development</th>
<th>Sum of Students Enrolled</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Project Resilience</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunrise Middle School</td>
<td>97%</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creativity Academy</td>
<td>94%</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Willow Valley High School</td>
<td>86%</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>94%</strong></td>
<td><strong>136</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7
*Average of Academic Attitudes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program</th>
<th>Average of Academic Attitudes</th>
<th>Sum of Students Enrolled</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Project Resilience</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunrise Middle School</td>
<td>92%</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creativity Academy</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Willow Valley High School</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>91%</strong></td>
<td><strong>136</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Quantitative Data Analysis**

Since pre-existing site data sets were reviewed from the participating educational non-profit, I will begin with a review of how the participating nonprofit quantifies increases per student and per category. The rate of increase per student is determined by an increase in one or more areas per category. For example, if the student indicated an increase in “How I feel about writing” and “If the student enjoys writing their ideas”, 
they would be indicated as showing increase in the category of academic attitudes. Similarly, if a student indicated an increase in one or more of the social-emotional development categories, the student will be indicated by the database as increasing in the category of social-emotional development. For ongoing studies, a more precise depiction of overall increase by question and not category may be formulated by future action researchers.

**Quantitative Process**

Before analyzing the quantitative results in more depth, it is vital to reveal the focal points of the survey analysis. The student pre- and post-survey is analyzed through academic attitudes, academic behavior, and social-emotional development. Though, for the purposes of this study, academic attitudes and social-emotional development were reviewed to respond to the applicable research questions. Academic attitudes are associated with questions that include, but are not limited to the following considerations:

1. How does the student feel about writing?
2. What does the student think about writing?
3. Does the student think writing is fun?
4. Does the student think writing is a waste of time?
5. Does the student enjoy writing their ideas?
6. Does the student is afraid to write for a grade?

Regarding social-emotional development, the following elemental questions have been posed to students at the start of a 12-week program and at the end.
1. How confident does the student feel?
2. Does the student use their imagination?
3. Does the student think their stories matter?
4. Does the student usually give up?
5. Does the student feel worried, mad, or sad?
6. Does the student feel in control?
7. How well does the student communicate with peers and adults?

The following questions are represented in the survey. The pre-survey can be found in appendix C-D and the post-survey in appendix E-F.

**Quantitative Review**

136 student surveys were analyzed using descriptive statistics. The survey data analyzed asserts that 91% of students self-reported a change in one or more categories of academic attitudes, and that 94% of students surveyed self-reported an increase in one or more categories of social-emotional development. The graph above displays that the category of social-emotional development slightly increased more than academic attitudes or was equal to this category for three programs. These surveys incorporated the pre- and post-survey data of 136 students, across multiple settings. Students increased in the category of social-emotional development most of all.
In consideration of the second research question, “What effects can a trauma-informed curriculum, centered in creative writing, have on academic attitudes and social-emotional development?” the results are conclusive. The quantitative results assert that a trauma-informed curriculum, centered in creative writing can positively affect the academic attitudes and social emotional development of students. In fact, the data suggests that a trauma-informed curriculum centered in creative writing could potentially enhance the increase of academic attitudes and social-emotional development more than a curriculum that is not trauma-informed.

**Qualitative Data Analysis**

The goal while reviewing student writing was to determine if and how it could influence future trauma-informed curriculum iterations. Again, returning to the first research question, “In which ways, if any, can student writing influence the design of a trauma-informed curriculum, centered in creative writing?” the findings are expressive. Overwhelming, the qualitative findings have confirmed that student writing can influence the design of a trauma-informed curriculum, centered in creative writing.
First, by providing more applicable themes. The trauma-informed, creative writing curricula, was centered on evidence-based research from Chapter 2. To simply focus, the central, trauma-informed categories used were emotional intelligence, empathy, resilience, agency, and empowerment. Yet, student writing asserts more themes must be researched and applied. These include, but are not limited to acceptance, self-worth/self-confidence, growth mindset, freedom/inner liberty, interconnectedness, and coping. Further, student writing influenced how young writers could benefit from writing prompts which allowed them to study their own self-concept within multiple social constructs. Below are two examples of student writing and analysis within the rubric designed for this study. See Figures 16, 17 and 18. This first piece of student writing depicts many of the aforementioned themes, yet also inserts a theme of interconnectedness. The next figure provides the in-depth analysis. This second piece of student writing was examined as displaying evidence of having outlooks included within both transformational learning theory and narrative theory, both central to this study. The final piece of writing to provide more context to the findings is an apex piece of data, in that it touches on nearly all five of the trauma-informed concepts.
Mosaic

So he wandered out into the dark and stormy night...
Wondering why he was never his own person.
He walked past the woman sitting on the terrace,
cigarette in hand, contemplating her existence.
He closely observed the little boy, who was patiently waiting for his
mother to tell him that his heart was in fact still beating.
There is something so human about hating something you love.
He came to the realization that no one is an individual.
We are all a mosaic of the people we’ve encountered.
He is that little boy, and that woman, and that old man he
helped cross the street—and that is magic.
We are all a reflection of our history and our knowledge.
We do not live under the shadows of others,
we are the shadow.

Figure 16. Student writing, submission three.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade range: 7-12</th>
<th>Pseudonym: Audrey</th>
<th>Age range: 12-19 years</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Semester collected: Fall 2021</td>
<td>Prompt/Topic: &quot;The Sentence Thief&quot;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Trauma-informed, Narrative Writing Analysis Rubric**

**Title:** "Mosaic"

**Lines:** "We are a reflection of our history and our knowledge. We do not live under the shadows of others, we are the shadow"

**CONTENT ANALYSIS:**
- Emotional Intelligence
- Empathy
- Resilience
- Agency
- Empowerment

**Research Question:** In what ways, if any, can student writing impact the design of a trauma-informed curriculum?

**Transformational learning theory assessment:** Is the Psychological Understanding of self demonstrated in student writing? Yes/No

**Narrative theory assessment:** Is the writer/narrative coming to terms with fundamental elements of experience, such as time, process, and change, demonstrated in student writing? Yes/No (Time, process, change).

**THEMATIC ANALYSIS:**
"Mosaic" is an introspective piece of writing that explores the concept of interconnectedness. It questions individuality and seems to allude to the weight of self-judgment.

**OVERALL ASSESSMENT:**
"Mosaic", was written responding to a prompt called the sentence thief and involves beginning with a sentence starter or line from a favorite writer and develop the rest of the story, based on this line. This particular piece of writing reflects trauma-informed concepts of emotional intelligence and agency.

---

**Figure 17.** Student writing analysis, submission three.
When I found... ME

When I had no love, I loved others. When I had no sympathy, I gave out empathy. When I had no mother, I became my own. When I had no father, I created a home. When that home was broken, I created a castle. And when it faded, I had to fix that home. When I had no me, I relied on you. When I had no you, I relied on truth. When I couldn’t trust, I had to see. And when I was blind, I used my hands irrevocably. When I had no regret, I was miserably happy. And when I lost what I had, I learned the meaning. When I had no more strength, I used my wisdom. When knowledge wasn’t enough, I had to find my strength. When I found my strength, I found my power; and when I found my power, I found me.

*Figure 18. Student writing, submission eleven.*
By providing an opportunity for students to acknowledge their inner strength during times of adversity, students can re-write their inner narrative and self-concept and to see themselves as more than flawed. By allowing young writers to come to terms with the fundamental elements of experience such as time, process, and change, students can reevaluate the whole picture, not just losses or difficult moments. As stated in Chapter 1, narrative theory asks how we articulate our life experiences in the structure of a story? This theory recognizes the relationships between stories, identities, and meaning making and often intersects with narrative inquiry, which is defined as “...a broad term and may include various approaches, such as life history, oral history, biography, or autoethnography” (Glesne, 2011 as cited by Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

As developed in Chapter 1, Transformational learning theory centers on construing meaning from experience to guide action. This theory views the process of “perspective transformation” through the lens of three dimensions: psychological, including changes in understanding of the self; convicitional, revision of belief systems; and behavioral, changes in lifestyle (Clark, 1991). Transformative learning requires students to make new meanings of their experiences, which contrasts clearly with narrative theory, through the lens of meaning making. This type of learning can take place because of a shift in the sense of self. According to Crossing Borders Education, “[students] who experience this shift, experience it as a change in their identity or a fundamental shift in their way of experiencing the world” (2021). Stanford University defines transformative learning as a process of examining, questioning, validating, and revising our perspectives (“The Origins of Transformative Learning Theory,” 2016).
When we ask students to structure their life in a story, meaning making can begin. Regarding transformational learning theory, students can identify and develop a psychological understanding of the self. They can process, examine, question, validate, and revise their perspectives.

**Qualitative Reflection**

Originally, the goal was to review 35 pieces of student writing; however, the themes that were presented were repetitive and as a researcher, I made the decision to stop at 15. Further, as I analyzed pieces of student writing, I finetuned the design of the trauma-informed, narrative analysis writing rubric. Once all 15 pieces of qualitative data were analyzed, a spreadsheet was created to group by trauma-informed category to determine emerging themes that could potentially influence future curriculum iterations.

**Implications for Practice**

As mentioned in Chapter 1, it is imperative that teachers and school administrators are intentional about creating a safe learning environment through instruction, by providing opportunities for emotionally healing adult and peer relationships, and by integrating content that focuses on students’ socioemotional learning and development. Trauma-informed curriculum can guide students to not only acquire content, but also to assemble the social and emotional skills needed for academic success (Crosby, et al., 2019). Research that determines how to reach and redirect millions of students exposed to trauma, who are experiencing any combination of the following symptoms and diagnoses: PTSD, separation anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation, oppositional and aggressive behavior; as well as poorer reading, math,
and science achievement scores (Goodman, et al., 2012) is vital to American society. A successful study could reveal replicable ways of delivering trauma-informed curriculum in a way that reduces suspensions, expulsions, and incarcerations and enhances student academic re-engagement and autonomy.

**Quantitative Implications**

It is evident that students can increase in the categories of academic attitudes and social-emotional development, but to the extent that this is in relation to the practice of creative writing, most specifically the process of positive feedback, and to the extent this shift is related to trauma-informed curriculum and trauma-informed themed prompts is difficult to calculate. So, to better understand to differences, if any, I reviewed the data before the trauma-informed curriculum was implemented across the first targeted sites as a pilot and later across all contracted school sites and districts. In contrast to all sites, increasing in the category of academic attitudes by 86%, students participating in selected sites of the study with a focus on trauma-informed prompts and themes, increased in the category of academic attitudes by 91%. Similarly, 88% of students overall increased in contracts to 94% of the 136 in the study. The data indicates that academic attitudes and social-emotional development can be measured and influenced by a trauma-informed curriculum. One way a trauma-informed curriculum can be deemed effective is through the measurement of social-emotional development. One of the ways trauma-informed curriculum can be customizable is through a set of evidence-based themes that are further personalized by student needs and interests, which can be applied in any classroom setting.
Qualitative Implications

The findings of this study imply that a trauma-informed curriculum can positively influence the academic attitudes and social-emotional development of students by focusing on evidence-based categories such as emotional intelligence, empathy, resilience, agency, and empowerment. Yet, the qualitative findings also asserted that students connected and sought to unearth other themes within their writing, such as acceptance, self-worth/self-confidence, growth mindset, freedom/inner liberty, interconnectedness, and coping. Trauma-informed writing curriculum that is rooted in narrative and transformative learning theories, allows students to process, examine, question, validate, and revise their perspectives. Student writing can influence a trauma-informed curriculum centered in creative writing by presenting the level of impact and revealing potentially applicable themes to incorporate in future action research cycles. The following table outlines key findings and implications to apply to classroom settings.
Further, and perhaps most vital, trauma-informed writing curriculum that is rooted in narrative and transformational learning theories, allows students to process, examine, question, validate, and revise their perspectives. Student writing can influence a trauma-informed curriculum centered in creative writing by presenting the level of impact and revealing potentially applicable themes to incorporate in future action research cycles.

**Recommendations for Research**

Future studies may want to consider the following recommendations, beginning with data. A key pivot and unintentional benefit was access to pre-existing data. At first, I thought pre-existing data as part of an action research study would be not just a conflicting element but could prove to alter the entire structure of the methodology.
Fortunately, as discussed in Chapters 3 and 4, access to pre-existing data in the context of studying trauma-impacted youth, was fundamental to access. After returning to the action research cycles created for this study, I revised them to incorporate both the use of pre-existing and standard data.

Next, recommendations will include consideration of the constraints and limitations of this study. First, with regard to quantitative data analysis, it would be beneficial to narrow down the questions of each survey and to focus future studies on specific survey questions, rather than by categories, so a greater degree of clarity can be obtained with regard to academic attitudes and social-emotional development. Too many questions per category, make it difficult to synthesize and assert which questions yield which results.

It is vital to consider the scope. This study reviewed 136 students across four settings, within ten classrooms. Future research would benefit from expansion and potentially securing access to up to 10 school districts to analyze a region. Researchers with access could potentially conduct a study on trauma-informed curriculum state or nationwide.

In returning to the final research question, “What are the components of an effective and customizable, trauma-informed curriculum design? The final question of this action research study will be answered within the recommendations for future research. This question was too broad to fully answer within this study; however, I hope for it to become a focal point of study within my research career and will share the insight this study has collected. Effective trauma-informed curriculum designs employ student feedback, and a customizable trauma-informed curriculum design can benefit
from a customizable action research cycle and data analysis rubric. Though the extent of these findings can be expanded through future studies.

The most vital applications for future study include student writing to inform future curriculum iterations; the creation of customizable, trauma-informed action research cycles; implementation of a data analysis rubric; the significance of applying both narrative and transformational learning theories as frameworks for trauma-informed curriculum; and the transforming nature of student’s self-concept when provided the space to write and reflect. Finally, the next researcher to engage with this topic should consider the significance of the framing, should it be labeled as “Healing-centered experiences” or “Trauma-informed curriculum and interventions”, or perhaps ideally a combination of both: “Healing-centered curriculum” centered in trauma-informed practices.

The next two figures provide applicable context for research recommendations and potential classroom applications. As outlined, this kind of structure is more easily applied in an English Language Arts or Creative Writing setting for middle school, high school, or college students; however, applying trauma-informed concepts such as emotional intelligence, empathy, resilience, agency, and empowerment can be applied to Geometry or Physics with lessons of growth mindset through the lens of agency and overcoming systematic limitations through the concept of resilience. For example, who is the mathematician or the scientist who developed the focal theory? What did these academic pioneers face when they questioned faith and the accepted science of the time? How did resilience allow them to create movements? It is not enough for students to connect to theories and equations, what are the stories behind them and
how can the themes apply to their own lives and to the scientific discoveries today?

Student-driven themes can be applied to any subject or grade level. Please review Figure 19 for more context.
Figure 19. Study recommendations
In returning to the purpose and significance of this study, as identified in Chapter 1, many schools are now applying restorative justice principles and engaging in social-emotional learning, and some are implementing trauma-informed practices, but there is not consistent curriculum or set of behavioral standards to respond to trauma exposure in schools. There are not state or federal guidelines to determine how to structure a unified response regarding trauma-informed interventions or curriculum.

If school systems really are to alter the school-to-prison-pipelines and to put a dent in mass incarceration made commonplace, trauma-informed practices must occur within every classroom and in every behavioral response. Most students have experienced trauma or will experience a trauma in life. The COVID-19 pandemic is still a collective trauma we are all still navigating and has further exposed the inequities in our educational system. Principals, vice principals, deans, school counselors, social workers, and teachers will benefit from a system that mediates academic and emotional disruptions resulting from childhood trauma. Yet, the most vital aspect is the intent to positively impact the lives of youth, who may be struggling with the effects of toxic stress after exposure to trauma, or who will benefit from the introduction and application of trauma-informed concepts to provide context to their experiences and to provide them with ways to cope. The final figure was created to be a guide that teachers and administrative staff could reference and apply to coaching, curriculum, instructional practices, and behavioral interventions, as soon as today.
Figure 20. Trauma-informed curriculum
Whether you are an educator or an administrator looking to create your own trauma-informed curriculum; an educator looking to transform a curriculum to be trauma-informed; or a researcher looking to further this study, please consider the trauma-informed categories and the themes that will influence future trauma-informed curriculum iterations. More specifically, consider the following: a trauma-informed writing curriculum that is rooted in narrative and transformative learning theories, allows students to process, examine, question, validate, and revise their perspectives; one way trauma-informed curriculum can be deemed effective is through the measurement of social-emotional development; and one of the ways in which trauma-informed curriculum can be customizable is through a set of evidence-based themes that are further personalized by student need and interest.

**Chapter Summary**

Students are telling us a story—lean in, it could unearth many injustices and release many stigmas, if we are courageous enough to listen. Open your mind and your heart because their stories can devour them whole. Students are telling us a story, but sometimes words aren’t involved, sometimes they are told through actions in the classroom, like rage or detachment, or more subtle manifestations like perfectionism and people-pleasing. Yet, the translation of these narratives holds the keys to our students’ well-being, stability, and academic access. Their quality of life depends on vigilance today.
EPILOGUE

“Hate generalizes, love specifies. Or: The movements of hatred are toward generalization; love’s movements are toward specification.”
– Robin Morgan, American poet

As a storyteller, I will share a mini memoir, compressed and customized through the context of a child living through trauma and within the confinement of a traditional educational system. When I was eleven years old, I lost my mother, after a courageous battle with breast cancer. In contrast, I want to share that before my mother passed, I had never had a “B” on a report card. My mother’s passing was a turning point in my life, not only because I had lost my protector and source of light and inspiration, but because my father had descended deeper into the kind of despair that intensifies addiction, and into the neglectful and abusive behaviors that addictions can accelerate. My little brother and I were left alone for weeks at a time with no food or supervision. Through the lens of students, we had to grow up quickly and the fallout of these kinds of circumstances is often that academic progress is no longer viewed as vital because survival is instead. Through the lens of defiance, in this setting, anyone that could be perceived as a figure of authority became viewed as an enemy, or as another adult who might also fail us. As the referrals, detentions, suspensions, and near-expulsions accumulated, I wondered if the schools ever questioned my circumstances. Was I just another bad kid, or a child disrupted by turmoil? Was suspending me teaching me a lesson or was it excommunicating me further from healing?
As a teenager, I observed friends and family members descend deeper into substance abuse, as I did myself in 9th and 10th grade. Were we just *delinquents*, or individuals coping with trauma? Would imprisonment teach us a lesson, or would it ostracize us further? By the time I graduated high school, I had been living on my own since the age of 14, first as a runaway, preferring abandoned homes to the violence and addiction that littered my battered address. Then, as an informally adopted child of families that took me in, who also barely had enough. As I put myself through college, I knew statistically that my feat was rare and I was propelled by the resolve, that it wasn’t enough to have made it, if there were and are millions of children struggling through trauma, while also navigating stifling limitations within the educational and justice systems of our country—systems that routinely label a child as defiant or disrespectful, before inquiring on context, structures that often assume ill-intent.

As a survivor of a dysfunctional childhood and as someone who lives with complex, post-traumatic stress, I want to share that though it’s beyond the scope of this study, I did grapple with determining whether the study should be labeled as “trauma-informed curriculum” or “healing-centered experiences”. In the end, it was a conscious decision to maintain the term “trauma-informed curriculum”. Primarily, to add to the research on this topic. Further, I do not view “trauma-informed” as deficit-based thinking any more than I view the term “unhoused” as so. Some circumstances are our realities and I believe acknowledging them is a step in the healing process. Finally, I want to insert a possibility—why can future research not embody both? Why can a healing-centered curriculum not be trauma-informed? There is nothing deficit-framed about curriculum or interventions being trauma-informed, rather they are centered on
the data that provides context to the academic and behavioral experiences of students impacted by traumatic experiences.

If you are reading this and are an educator or administrator, I implore you to check in with students one-on-one before assigning a consequence, the answers, may provide not only closure but true comprehension and compassion. When we generalize, we miss all the significant plot points, themes, and motifs. When we specify, we begin to understand the plot beneath the prejudice. Writing with incarcerated students and students more predisposed to traumatic experiences was enlightening because their stories are significant in their specificity, and that allows light in, that allows love in, and this facilitates not just forgiveness and healing, but opportunity, which is an ultimate act of love.
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https://doi.org/10.1080/00940771.2018.148870


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APPENDIX A: TRAUMA-INFORMED NARRATIVE WRITING RUBRIC, PAGE ONE

Trauma-informed, Narrative Writing Analysis Rubric

**Title and Outstanding Lines:**
Title: ...
Lines: ...

**Content Analysis:**
Indicate trauma-informed themes addressed in writing:
- Emotional Intelligence
- Empathy
- Resilience
- Agency
- Empowerment

**Research Question:** In what ways, if any, can student writing impact the design of a trauma-informed curriculum?

**Transformational Learning Theory Assessment:** Is the psychological understanding of self demonstrated in student writing? Yes/No

**Narrative Theory Assessment:** Is the writer or narrative coming to terms with fundamental elements of experience, such as time, process, and change? Yes/No (Time, process, change).

**Thematic Analysis:**
Themes present in this piece of writing include...

**Overall Assessment:**
In summary,

How can this inform trauma-informed curriculum development/design?
Grade range:  
Pseudonym:  
Age range:  
Semester collected: Fall 2021  
Prompt/Topic:  

Title
APPENDIX C: PRE-SURVEY PAGE ONE

First, we want to know what you think and feel about writing...

1. How do you feel about writing?
   - I love to write
   - I hate to write
   - I think writing is just okay
   - I do not like to write

2. How many hours per week do you spend writing just for fun (not for school)?
   - 0 hours
   - 1 hour
   - 2 hours
   - 3-5 hours
   - 6-10 hours
   - More than 10 hours

3. How often do you write in a personal diary or journal?
   - Almost everyday
   - Usually
   - Sometimes
   - Rarely
   - Never

4. How do you feel when you are given a new writing assignment in school?
   - Great
   - Good
   - Okay
   - Bad
   - Terrible

5. How would you describe your writing ability?
   - I'm an excellent writer
   - I'm a good writer
   - I'm an okay writer
   - I'm a poor writer
   - I'm a terrible writer

6. How often do you worry about what others (such as family and teachers) think about your writing?
   - Never
   - Rarely
   - Sometimes
   - Usually
   - Always

7. How confident do you feel when you have to write at school?
   - Not at all confident
   - Sort of confident
   - Confident
   - Very confident

8. How comfortable or uncomfortable are you asking others for help with your writing?
   - Very comfortable
   - Sort of comfortable
   - Sort of uncomfortable
   - Very uncomfortable

9. Please mark how strongly you agree or disagree with each of the following statements about writing.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
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Next, tell us about reading...

10. How do you feel about reading?
    - I love to read
    - I like to read
    - I think reading is just okay
    - I do not like to read
    - I hate to read

11. How many hours per week do you spend reading just for fun (not for school)?
    - 0 hours
    - 1 hour
    - 2 hours
    - 3-5 hours
    - 6-10 hours
    - More than 10 hours

12. How would you describe your reading ability?
    - I'm an excellent reader
    - I'm a good reader
    - I'm an okay reader
    - I'm a poor reader
    - I'm a terrible reader

The next few questions ask about school...

13. How do you feel about school?
    - Great
    - Good
    - Okay
    - Bad
    - Terrible

14. How often do you come to school with your homework finished?
    - Always
    - Usually
    - Sometimes
    - Rarely
    - Never

15. When you turn in a writing assignment, what grade do you expect to get?
    - A
    - B

16. Do you feel close to people at your school?
    - No
    - Yes, some of the time
    - Yes, most of the time
    - Yes, all of the time
APPENDIX D: PRE-SURVEY PAGE TWO

This section asks more about you and your future plans...

17. Please mark how strongly you agree or disagree with each of the following statements.

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<th>Agree</th>
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18. What's it like to communicate your thoughts and feelings to people your own age?

[ ] Very difficult
[ ] Somewhat difficult
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[ ] Very easy

19. What's it like to communicate your thoughts and feelings to adults?

[ ] Very difficult
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20. How often do you...

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<tr>
<td>Feel worried</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>Feel mad</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Feel sad</td>
<td></td>
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21. What do you plan to do after high school? (check all that apply)

[ ] Get a job
[ ] Attend trade school or get other job training
[ ] Go to a 2-year community college
[ ] Go to a 4-year college or university
[ ] Enter the military
[ ] Other (please describe)

[ ] I don't know yet

Lastly, we have just a couple more questions...

22. What school do you attend?

23. What grade are you in?

[ ] 6th grade
[ ] 7th grade
[ ] 8th grade
[ ] 9th grade
[ ] 10th grade
[ ] 11th grade
[ ] 12th grade
APPENDIX E: POST-SURVEY PAGE ONE

First, we want to know what you think and feel about writing...

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    - [ ] D

16. Do you feel close to people at your school?
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APPENDIX F: POST-SURVEY PAGE TWO

This section asks more about you and your future plans...

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21. What do you plan to do after high school? (check all that apply)

- Get a job
- Attend trade school or get other job training
- 2-year community college
- 4-year college or university
- Join the military
- Other (please describe):

- I don't know yet
APPENDIX G: STUDENT WRITING, SUBMISSION ONE

Worthy

I'm never happy with anything I make
Anything I create
Anything I say
Anything I do
It's all tough to chew
It seems I cannot create anything new
Even my brightest star is still dim to me
But everyone else is too bright to see
Why do I feel this way about myself?
Why do I stop smiling when I look at myself?
When will I bloom?
When will I grow
Into something that's worthy,
Worthy to show?
But what does it mean to be worthy?
Can it be defined
In the way that I live,
In the way that I rhyme?
When will I be worthy?
That's a tough question to ask
If worthy is a thing
It's a hard thing to grasp
So, I should just be glad
That I have the opportunity to have the things I created and
Look at my work through my eyes
To see that what I make is not worthy to be hated
Domestication

Small lessons we learn as children—don’t let them see you cry, some foods are good, and some are bad, and laziness is the bane of productivity, and if he hits you, it means he likes you, and don’t snitch, don’t tattle, not ever—

Are, in some ways, damming.

But the one that has chased me the farthest through the tunnels of this unsolvable labyrinth that we call growing up is the most humane thing you can do for a firefly is to poke holes in the lid of the jar you catch it in. I thought I was so charitable to shove a toothpick through the tinfoil cinched atop the Mason jar and its flitting captive. So it’s only natural that as I grew, I became content with semi-suffocation as long as I was offered a few gulps of fresh air every now and again. And it’s only natural that I thought the people who fed me oxygen through straws like a jar-bound firefly were saints for being so kind as to even let me breathe.

The most humane thing you can do for a firefly is to not catch it at all.
So he wandered out into the dark and stormy night...
Wondering why he was never his own person.
He walked past the woman sitting on the terrace,
cigarette in hand, contemplating her existence.
He closely observed the little boy, who was patiently waiting for his
mother to tell him that his heart was in fact still beating.
There is something so human about hating something you love.
He came to the realization that no one is an individual.
We are all a mosaic of the people we’ve encountered.
He is that little boy, and that woman, and that old man he
helped cross the street—and that is magic.
We are all a reflection of our history and our knowledge.
We do not live under the shadows of others,
we are the shadow.
A Time to Remember

A time not too long ago, there was a middle child. No one wanted to play with her because she was too old for the little kids and too young for the older kids. She didn’t want to be alone because lonely was cold and scary. Her brother used to pull her hair and make fun of the things she didn’t have control over. She thought maybe if she stopped eating, they couldn’t say anything about the one thing she couldn’t hide. She was born with the nose she has on her face, and they still pointed and laughed. She ran away from her fear of not being accepted; she shut the world out. No one would ever understand her pain. She cut, she cut, she cut, purged, purged, purged; and the girl who looked back in the mirror was still not beautiful. Hot tears rolled down her face, pouring. It was never ending.

At school, she was the fat girl no boy wanted to be around. She just wanted to know what it was to be loved by a boy, like all the other girls. At home, she was annoying and called out for attention from anyone. The girl finally got attention and thought this was her happy ending. Only to find out, years later, that the older neighbor boy was hiding it for a reason.

Now, she’s running away from boys and the fear of never being normal again. She chops her hair off and looks in the mirror only to see the lonely little girl still standing there with the biggest fake smile she’s ever seen. It’s all too familiar. Soon she vanishes from the bathroom mirror. She gets lost in books and paintings. She doesn’t think anyone is watching her. Nothing ever seems to make this smiling girl happy. Not even the boys who give her five seconds of their attention.
A Time to Remember

Until one day, she finds out at sixteen, she's expecting a baby. She's scared and worried about what people will say about her. Months pass by, and she gets happier and happier, even though her belly is growing with the stares of people that pass by. The people around her are disappointed in her. But no one can steal this joy, this light that really was at the end of the tunnel, all the kicks and turns she feels going on in her body. The heartbeat she hears isn't her own when she goes to the doctors.

She has a baby girl. She's brought life into this world, so innocent and soft. She finally doesn't feel like she's drowning; she's come up, and she's breathing. Finally. Bright eyes look at her, not knowing what's coming next. She looks back in the mirror with saggy skin and cracked and bleeding nipples. Her eyes want to shut down on their own, but she's happy because the little human she brought into this world doesn't expect anything more or less of this girl. There are no more tears left to cry, no more fear of being unwanted. She knows things will be hard, but she'll never be alone again, and all thanks to this little beam of light.
Locked in the Past

I'm stuck.
I'm stuck, and I don't know where to go. I long to reach out to you, to stay in this escape from reality. But logic is telling me that I should turn around so that I don't miss my flight. The flight that’ll take me away from you. Who in their right mind would willingly leave someone that they’ve longed for, for so long? Me, apparently.
I'm stuck.
I'm stuck, and I feel myself slowly tearing in half. I feel like I'm losing the part of me that I've only just got back again, and no matter how hard I try to keep ahold of it, it's slipping away through my fingers. We've hugged countless times, unable to bear having that be the last time we embrace each other. I can see the pain glistening in your eyes by the twin waterfalls that mirror my own.
I'm stuck.
I'm stuck, and I feel myself getting dragged away from you by the cursed monster known as “Responsibility.” I desperately want to fight against it and tear it to shreds the same way it's torn me apart, but I know deep down that the battle is already lost. A cold, empty pain slices through me as our “goodbyes” reverberate in my head like a bell that won't stop ringing. I long back for the time when they were simply “see you later,” but I know that wishful thinking won't give me anything but more heartache.
### Scary

When I think of this emotion, I think that his/her favorite color is black or all dark colors. It dresses up with baggy clothes, all comfy. It lives in a haunted house. Its favorite season is winter. Their best friend is Brave, so it can go into his/her haunted house and sleep, relaxed. He/she really likes to scare people.
APPENDIX N: STUDENT WRITING, SUBMISSION SEVEN

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade range: 6-8</th>
<th>Pseudonym: Amelia</th>
<th>Age range: 12-15</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Semester collected: Fall 2021</td>
<td>Prompt/Topic: Empathy</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
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Stars

We are all stars in a solar system full of planets; that doesn't mean stars are any less important in the galaxy.
Truth Hurts

1
They say I'm blind
But...
I flash a fake smile
Every day
And they believe it...

2
If only they knew...
That...
Their words cut deeper
Than a knife—

3
When someone ignores you
Just leave 'em
Alone
You don't need 'em

4
I used to be afraid of the
DARK
Now I'm afraid to love
Without overthinking that
You'll leave me...

5
If I could, I would be
A loner
'Cause I wouldn't have to
Deal with all
This—DRAMA
When I found... ME

When I had no love, I loved others. When I had no sympathy, I gave out empathy. When I had no mother, I became my own. When I had no father, I created a home. When that home was broken, I created a castle. And when it faded, I had to fix that home. When I had no me, I relied on you. When I had no you, I relied on truth. When I couldn’t trust, I had to see. And when I was blind, I used my hands irrevocably. When I had no regret, I was miserably happy. And when I lost what I had, I learned the meaning. When I had no more strength, I used my wisdom. When knowledge wasn’t enough, I had to find my strength. When I found my strength, I found my power; and when I found my power, I found me.
What's Free?

what’s free?

is love free?

is your boyfriend dead on his own block from the bullet of a gun owned by his own color the price you pay for love? or maybe it's the price he paid for pride, or possibly the price he paid for being in the wrong place at the wrong time. is his mother finding out her baby's dead, another statistic, another one dead on the news, the price she pays for love? or is it the price she paid for not knowing who his father was, or even the price she paid for letting him sell drugs?

what’s free?

is education free?

when we have to choose between feeding our family or the honor roll, when most boys' only chance at college is through an athletic scholarship, is that the price we pay for being in the lower class? is that the price we pay for our moms and dads being too strung out to put dinner on the table, or maybe it's the price we pay for not being smart enough, for not testing well, or not having any teacher that believed in us — so, what’s free?
APPENDIX R: STUDENT WRITING, SUBMISSION ELEVEN

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade range: 6-12</th>
<th>Pseudonym: Yomi</th>
<th>Age range: 12-19 years</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Semester collected: Fall 2021</td>
<td>Prompt/Topic: Emotional Intelligence</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Mad

Mad is my best friend: always with me and knows everything. He knows how I act and how I am at practice and my games; he’s always there, always makes me play my A game. But sometimes Strong comes in and pushes him to the ground, and then at my game it’s scary. Then I’m playing fun, speeding, jumping, sliding, everything. That’s where it happens. I get us the win, passing, shooting, defense, offense, pressuring, covering.
The Spark

Eternal darkness. Nothing there, just black upon black upon black.
No, wait. What could that be?
Light. One tiny, flickering light, the only something within the nothing.
Suddenly: “I can’t.”
The words echo around the nothingness.
The light dims.
“No, it’s ‘yet.’”
Again, the voice reverberates.
“I can’t yet.”
The tiny glow brightens steadily.
Where might this nothing and this light be?
Why, in you, of course. In all of us.
Around us.
Pulsating through the universe.
A dance of thought and flame, flame and thought.
What could it be, you ask?
Joy.
Positivity.
Self-confidence.
The spark of a heart, mind, soul, aflame with inspiration.
Takis are my Hero

Sometimes, when I had nothing to do, nowhere to go, and nothing to eat, I’d go grab some Takis and call it a day.

When the police kicked my door in and took my two brothers at two in the morning,
I jumped on the top bunk bed, grabbed my Game Boy and a bag of Takis.

When I had a good day at school and my mom said I could take the BRT card
and get some snacks,
I got some Takis.

When the police kicked in my uncle’s room,
I was dumping Takis crumbs into my mouth.

When I was arrested,
I was eating a sandwich with an unopened bag of Takis nearby.
Introduction

William looked at the expanse of ocean before him reverently, akin to a worshipper at the feet of their all-encompassing deity. Maybe that was exactly what it was. He, a simple man who wanted no more than to play his guitar for an eternity, and the ocean, this vast existence he had no hope of knowing, no hope of understanding.

Who did he think he was, to explore those depths? Who did he think he was, a simple man, to know the wave’s secrete?

It was a place not meant for the likes of him, the country born, the nature known. William cast his thoughts back to a boy he met once when he dared to venture into the tremulous water of the city. Thomas was the boy’s name. Wet behind the ears, bright of eyes, and with his companion Toby. They were young, children no less, left to fend for themselves in the shark-infested waters of the capital.

He prayed, he prayed to whoever who would listen, that the two boys knew how to swim. Either that, or they would sink.
We are the Phoenix

We are the phoenix
Rising from the ashes.
The witches
That they could not burn.
We are the life
That grows
After devastation.
The Earth that keeps on spinning
The pages
That continue
To turn.
APPENDIX W: INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Dear parent(s)/guardian(s):

During each writing workshop, [redacted] collects survey data from students to better understand their perceptions of academic behaviors and social-emotional development. Student writing is also collected and published. If consent is provided, this is to inform you that surveys and writing collected this year from [redacted] will be analyzed within an action research study. If you choose to opt in.

Purpose

The purpose of this action research study is to design customized, trauma-informed curriculum and determine how a trauma-informed curriculum can enhance academic attitudes and social-emotional development. Narrative theory and transformational learning theory will inform the curriculum design, data collection, and analysis. Student narratives will advise findings and future iterations.

Please be advised that participation in this study is fully voluntary. Pseudonyms for each student participant and participating school will be developed to fully conceal participant’s identity.

Investigator: Nena Weinstein Guzman, doctoral candidate EdD in Leadership & Innovation
School: University of the Pacific
Duration: 2022-2023 School Year

Please sign, date, and initial.

[ ] I consent to having my student’s survey data and writing be applied toward this study.
[ ] I do not consent to having my student’s survey data and writing be applied toward this study.

Signature: ______________________________
Date: ________________________________

Contact: n_weinstein@u.pacific.edu; nena__@pacific.edu