Educator perceptions and practices following trauma-responsive intervention implementation:

A case study in a Midwestern elementary (K-5) school

by

Chelle Leininger

B.A., Barclay College, 1985
M.Div., Azusa Pacific University, 1993
M.S., Fort Hays State University, 2022

AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

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Department of Educational Leadership
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Abstract

Existing literature on the importance of trauma-informed care in elementary (K-5) education, including supportive relationships, predictable classroom environments, and opportunities for student choice and empowerment is vast. However, limited attention has been given to changes in educators' perceptions and practices following targeted trauma-responsive professional development and the implementation of selected classroom strategies.

The purpose of this qualitative single case study was to explore how elementary educators in a Midwestern elementary (K-5) school perceived the impact of the *Becoming Trauma Responsive* (Lane et al., 2025) professional development and how their perceptions and practices evolved following implementation of trauma-responsive interventions. Guided by a constructivist paradigm and a theoretical framework composed of the five principles of trauma-informed care identified by Harris and Fallot (2001), the study examined the experiences of eight educators, including seven classroom teachers and one principal. Data were collected through participant journals, artifacts, and three rounds of individual semi-structured interviews conducted before professional development, following training, and after a three-week implementation period. Data were coded and analyzed to identify patterns, and themes were aligned with the theoretical framework.

Five findings emerged from the research: 1) relationships are foundational, 2) educators provide intentional care, 3) relational climate is communicated through promoting acceptance, 4) structured environments strengthen trustworthiness, and 5) safety empowers student self-advocacy. The study contributes to the literature by confirming the value of integrating daily caring intentional actions and interactions into the elementary (K-5) classroom.

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> It is a strange feeling to be so completely dependent on other people; but at least it teaches one to be grateful, and I hope that I shall never forget that. In ordinary life we hardly realize that we receive a great deal more than we give, and that it is only with gratitude that life becomes rich (Bonhoeffer, 1951/1997, p. 12).

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Chapter 1 - Introduction

Childhood trauma is a pressing issue in the United States, particularly in elementary schools, due to its profound effects on students' well-being and academic success. Trauma encompasses experiences such as abuse, neglect, household dysfunction, and exposure to violence (Felitti et al., 1998). According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA, 2024), over two-thirds of children report experiencing at least one traumatic event by age 16, with one in seven children experiencing abuse or neglect annually.

Trauma can manifest in various ways within the school setting. Students may exhibit difficulties with concentration, memory, and executive functions, affecting their ability to plan, think critically, and regulate behavior (Peterson, 2018). Difficulty with emotional dysregulation and challenges in forming relationships hinder their academic performance and social development (Peterson, 2018). These challenges can lead to academic underachievement, increased absenteeism, and behavioral issues (Peterson, 2018), and trauma is often compounded by factors such as poverty, substance abuse, and limited access to mental health services (Frankland, 2021). This scarcity of resources leaves educators to manage complex emotional and behavioral needs without sufficient support (Schuermann, 2023). Educators, facing high stress and burnout, often lack training in trauma-informed practices, which can affect their well-being and the classroom environment (Pas et al., 2012)).

Addressing childhood trauma in the elementary (K-5) school setting is crucial for several reasons. First, it supports the mental and emotional well-being of students, enabling them to engage more fully in their education and to learn to form healthy relationships with both peers and adults (Chafouleas et al., (2016). Second, it can improve academic outcomes by reducing barriers to learning, such as trouble with attending to classroom tasks, difficulty with self-

regulation, and comprehension of cause-and-effect relationships (Cole et al., 2005). Finally, early intervention can prevent the long-term effects of trauma, such as chronic health issues, mental health disorders, and the continuation of the trauma cycle in future generations of families (SAMHSA, 2014).

The growing awareness of the effects of trauma on children's learning, behavior, and emotional well-being underscores the importance of equipping educators with trauma-informed practices. Students who have experienced trauma may exhibit behaviors such as withdrawal, defiance, or difficulty concentrating, responses that are often misinterpreted as intentional misconduct rather than attempts to seek safety and empowerment (Frankland, 2021; Peterson, 2018). Without appropriate understanding and strategies, educators may respond with punitive measures that can retraumatize students or create relationship barriers that hinder learning (Frankland, 2021; SAMHSA, 2014).

Becoming Trauma Responsive (Lane et al., 2025) is a professional development resource that incorporates trauma-informed care principles to equip educators with strategies to recognize and respond to trauma, enhancing their effectiveness and reducing burnout. By learning to address childhood trauma through trauma-responsive practices, educators can make a significant difference in the lives of their students, the environment of their classroom and school, and their own personal well-being (SAMHSA, 2014).

The five principles of trauma-informed care, safety, trustworthiness, choice, collaboration, and empowerment, developed by Harris and Fallot (2001), can be integrated into educational settings to support both students and educators. Implementing trauma-informed practices, such as creating safe and supportive classroom environments, building trust, and providing for choice and collaboration empowers students (Carolino, 2024). Creating an

environment where children feel secure and valued fosters engagement and resilience which can help mitigate the effects of trauma (NCTSN, 2017).

Existing literature establishes the importance of trauma-informed practices in elementary education, but limited attention has been given to how educators' perceptions and practices change following targeted trauma-responsive professional development and classroom implementation. This study addresses this gap by examining eight educators' experiences before and after participating in the *Becoming Trauma Responsive* (Lane et al., 2025) professional development and implementing self-selected strategies in a Midwestern elementary (K-5) school. The findings provide insights into educators' perceptions, the perceived effectiveness of strategies, and anticipated plans for sustained implementation.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative single case study was to explore how elementary (K-5) educators in a Midwestern school perceived the impact of trauma-informed professional development and how their beliefs and practices evolved while implementing self-selected trauma-informed interventions in their classrooms. Building on the five principles of trauma-informed care identified by Harris and Fallot (2001) and utilizing the *Becoming Trauma Responsive* (Lane et al., 2025) professional development program, the study sought to understand how educators in a Midwestern elementary (K-5) school internalized and applied trauma-informed principles in daily practice. The study aimed to identify patterns in educator understanding, perceived effectiveness of strategies, and how educators anticipated sustaining trauma-responsive practices over time.

Research Questions

This study was guided by one overarching research question and three supporting questions:

Overarching Question:

After implementing *Becoming Trauma Responsive* (Lane et al., 2025) strategies, how did the perceptions and practices of elementary (K-5) educators change?

Supporting Questions:

1) How did teachers' perceptions of their relationships with students evolve after engaging with the professional development e-book?
2) What specific strategies or practices did educators identify as feasible to implement following the training?
3) How did educators anticipate sustaining trauma-responsive practices in their classroom or school?

Research Design

This study utilized a constructivist approach within a qualitative single case study design. The purpose of the study was to explore the lived experiences and evolving perceptions of elementary teachers who participated in trauma-informed professional development. Qualitative research is an inquiry process of understanding based on a distinct methodological approach to learning about a social or human problem (Creswell & Poth, 2025). Hence the qualitative method was appropriate for collecting, analyzing, and interpreting comprehensive narrative data in a natural setting to build a holistic picture (Creswell & Poth, 2025). Qualitative single case study research methodology allowed for the use of multiple sources of data to understand current beliefs and practices. Constructivism emphasizes the co-creation of knowledge between

researcher and participants, assuming that individuals seek to understand the world in which they live and work (Creswell & Poth, 2025). This understanding includes how they interpret events or why they behave in certain ways. Within the constructivist view, meaning is created through interactions with others and shaped by cultural and historical contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2025). The use of a constructivist paradigm in the context of a qualitative single case study allowed me to examine participants' experiences with the *Becoming Trauma Responsive* (Lane et al, 2025) materials and their individually selected strategy implementations through their self-reported observations and perspectives.

Qualitative single case study research is particularly suited to in-depth exploration of bounded systems, such as specific groups, institutions, or programs, within their real-life contexts (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014). In this study, the case is defined as one Midwestern elementary (K-5) school where teachers and the principal participated in the same professional development training and strategy implementation process. A qualitative single case study design was appropriate for this study because it facilitated an in-depth examination of a contemporary educational phenomenon within its natural, real-world context (Yin, 2018). Unlike designs that primarily seek to identify common experiences across individuals or establish relationships among variables, qualitative single case study research emphasizes understanding the complexity of a particular case and how its contextual circumstances shape participants' experiences (Stake, 1995). In this study, examining one Midwestern elementary (K-5) school allowed for exploration of how educators interpreted trauma-responsive professional development, implemented selected strategies, and perceived changes in their practices within the bounded system of their shared school environment. Qualitative inquiry further supported this purpose by providing a structure

for understanding participants' perspectives and the meanings they constructed through their experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Data collection occurred in three sequential phases. In the initial phase, I interviewed each participant individually and gathered baseline data by assessing the participants' existing knowledge, beliefs, and practices regarding trauma-informed care. An additional purpose of this first set of interviews was to begin building rapport with educators to establish a working alliance for the next phases.

Following completion of the *Becoming Trauma Responsive* (Lane et al., 2025) professional development, the participants met as a group to agree upon one intervention strategy they would use school-wide during the intervention research period. They agreed that they would try to greet each student by name at least once a day. Then, they participated in individual interviews to discuss what they learned from the professional development modules, to explain how their understanding of trauma-informed teaching changed as a result of the professional development, and to select an individual intervention strategy they would implement in their classroom in addition to the school-wide strategy.

After a three-week period of applying their selected interventions from the training, I again met individually with each educator to reflect on their experiences, perceptions, and challenges in implementing their selected trauma-responsive strategies. Creswell and Poth (2025) explained the value of triangulation of multiple and different sources to provide corroborating evidence for validating the trustworthiness of a study. Data from baseline documentation, multiple sets of interviews, educators' reflection journals, teacher evidence of strategy implementation, and artifacts such as check-in tools, lists of check-in questions, and detailed descriptions of educators' responses to their students' feedback provided a

comprehensive understanding of how professional learning influences teachers' perceptions and classroom practices within their school context.

Limitations of the Study

Several limitations were inherent in this study. First, as a qualitative single case study, findings were not intended to be generalizable to all schools or educators. Rather, they provided in-depth insight into the experiences of one group of educators within a specific context. Similarly, although the setting was a rural elementary (K-5) school, rural was not a significant area of interest but merely provided context for the study. Next, I acknowledge that participant responses may not have been entirely honest but could have been influenced by a desire to make a good impression, particularly when discussing sensitive topics such as trauma or discipline. Responses could have also been colored by a bias to respond negatively, particularly if educators were overwhelmed by trauma behaviors in their classroom. Additionally, the three-week implementation period limited the ability to assess sustained changes in teacher behavior or student outcomes. Finally, my own professional commitment to trauma-informed education introduced a risk of interpretive bias, though this was mitigated through trustworthiness strategies such as reflexive practices and triangulation of data through multiple sets of interviews.

Delimitations of the Study

The study was deliberately bound to ensure focus and manageability. Participants included one principal and seven classroom teachers from a single Midwestern elementary (K-5) school. The study focused exclusively on the *Becoming Trauma Responsive* (Lane et al., 2025) professional development program, without comparing alternative trauma-informed models. Additionally, the three-week implementation period was designed to capture immediate educator

perceptions rather than long-term outcomes. These delimitations ensured a cohesive and contextually rich understanding of the professional development experience.

Theoretical Framework

This study was grounded in the five principles of trauma-informed care developed by Harris and Fallot (2001): safety, trustworthiness, choice, collaboration, and empowerment. These principles offer a comprehensive framework for creating environments that promote healing, resilience, and empowerment among individuals who have experienced trauma. Each principle functions as an essential pillar of trauma-responsive education. The principle of safety serves as the foundation of trauma-informed care, emphasizing the creation of both physical and emotional security so that individuals feel protected from harm. Building upon this foundation, trustworthiness strengthens the sense of safety by fostering reliable and transparent relationships, supported through consistent communication and clear expectations. The principle of choice allows individuals a sense of agency and control over their experiences which reduces feelings of helplessness and promotes autonomy. As an extension from choice, collaboration highlights the importance of shared decision-making and partnership between individuals and caregivers, allowing individuals to be the experts in their own experiences. Finally, the principle of empowerment weaves through all the others by focusing on identifying and reinforcing personal strengths, validating self-efficacy, and supporting ongoing growth and resilience.

In the context of schools, these principles translate into classrooms that prioritize relational safety, emotional regulation, and student empowerment. Harris and Fallot's (2001) framework provided a structure for understanding how educators internalized and applied trauma-informed principles following professional development, revealing shifts in their beliefs, classroom practices, and approaches to student relationships.

Definition of Terms

The following terms are defined as they relate to the topic of this study and of importance to this dissertation:

Congruence is the ability to remain genuine and authentic and to listen with acceptance (Rogers, 1961).

Empathy is the ability to enter into the world of another as if it were one's own (Rogers, 1961).

Felt safety is a subjective experience of feeling safe based on an individual's internal state, relational experience, and their environment (Gobbel, 2024).

Regulation is remaining emotionally and physically in control by managing the ebb and flow of the energy and arousal in one's nervous system (Gobbel, 2024).

Trauma is an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual's functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being (SAMHSA, 2014).

Trauma-informed is a system in which all parties involved recognize and respond to the impact of traumatic stress on those who have contact with the system including children, caregivers, and service providers (NCTSN), 2017).

Trauma-informed practice is an approach to trauma practice based on four key assumptions known as the Four R's of trauma-informed systems: 1) realize the widespread impact of trauma and understand paths to recovery, 2) recognize the signs and symptoms of trauma, 3) respond by integrating trauma knowledge into all practices and policies and 4) resist re-traumatization through intentional systems design (SAMHSA, 2014).

Trauma-responsive is a system that embraces the six key principles of a trauma-informed approach: safety; trustworthiness and transparency; peer support, collaboration and mutuality; empowerment, voice and choice; cultural, historical and gender issues (SAMHSA, 2014).

Unconditional positive regard is warm acceptance of another as a person of value no matter what his condition, his behavior, or his feelings. It includes the safety of being liked and prized as a person (Rogers, 1961).

Summary

Childhood trauma is an increasing concern in U.S. elementary schools due to its significant impact on students' development, behavior, and learning. More than two-thirds of children experience trauma, such as abuse, neglect, household dysfunction, or exposure to violence by age 16, which often leads to disruptions in cognitive and emotional functioning (SAMHSA, 2024). In schools, these effects appear as difficulties with attention, memory, emotional regulation, and relationships, resulting in academic struggles, behavioral incidents, and absenteeism. Additional impact is felt when children face challenges such as poverty, family instability, substance abuse, and limited access to mental health services. Educators are often not prepared to manage trauma-related needs which increases their risk of stress, burnout, and the use of disciplinary practices that retraumatize children and increase trauma related behaviors (Pas et al., 2012).

Implementing trauma-informed care is essential to supporting the whole child. Early, intentional intervention can enhance emotional well-being, strengthen relationships, and improve learning outcomes while preventing long-term health effects. The five principles of trauma-informed practice–safety, trustworthiness, choice, collaboration, and empowerment–which were

identified by Harris and Fallot (2001) and reinforced by SAMHSA (2024), provide a framework for creating supportive school environments that build resilience and connection.

This qualitative single case study examined how Midwestern elementary (K-5) educators applied these principles after completing the *Becoming Trauma Responsive* professional development program (Lane et al., 2025). Grounded in a constructivist paradigm, the study explored changes in teacher perceptions and practices to show how trauma-informed strategies can be effectively adapted to better support students and educators.

Chapter 2 - Review of the Literature

While the body of literature on trauma and trauma-informed care is vast, this review intentionally focuses on the aspects most relevant in understanding how trauma-informed principles in an elementary (K–5) school in a Midwestern state can affect and support children's learning and development within an educational system. This chapter seeks to review the evolution of trauma research, explore the physiological and psychological foundations of trauma, and examine how educational systems can effectively respond to academic needs through evidence-based and compassion-centered approaches. The literature review is organized into the following four sections that collectively provide a comprehensive understanding of trauma-informed care in education: 1) Trauma, 2) Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Studies, 3) The Impact of Trauma, and 4) Trauma-Informed Care.

Understanding Trauma

Initially used for physical injuries, the word, “trauma,” derived from the Greek word meaning “wound,” is now commonly used to describe both physical and psychological wounds where a distressing event causes lasting emotional and psychological damage (Corey & Corey, 2016). SAMHSA (2014) defines trauma as an event perceived by an individual as harmful or threatening which results in intense emotional distress and disrupts one’s sense of safety, stability, and core beliefs about the world. Trauma produces enduring negative effects on one’s functioning and overall well-being and overwhelms an individual’s ability to cope (SAMHSA, 2014). Trauma is therefore not simply the event itself, but the emotional and psychological injury that results when the experience exceeds a person’s capacity to manage it.

A wide range of experiences can be traumatic. Examples include physical, sexual, or emotional abuse; neglect; discrimination and oppression; bullying; community or family

violence; natural disasters; war; historical or vicarious trauma; and institutional practices that marginalize or disenfranchise (American Counseling Association [ACA], 2018; SAMHSA, 2024). Peterson (2023) emphasized that such events may involve direct harm or witnessing harm to a loved one and can be physical, verbal, emotional, sexual, or psychological in nature. Traumatic experiences may also include serious accidents, life-threatening illness, terrorism, school shootings, refugee experiences, or chronic conditions such as persistent neglect or unpredictable caregiving. For children, ongoing instability, such as uncertainty about whether a caregiver will be home, whether food will be available, or the home will be safe, can be a source of trauma (Felitti et al., 1998).

Although many experiences can be classified as traumatic, the level to which similar events may cause lasting traumatic impact can vary widely in different individuals. SAMHSA (2024) describes trauma using the three E's: event, experience, and effect. Referring to the event, trauma may stem from a single event, from repeated events, or from ongoing circumstances perceived as physically or emotionally harmful or threatening. Depending on the perspective of the individual, the psychological state at the time of the event, and the severity or frequency of the event, along with the presence or absence of appropriate buffers, a given experience may become an exciting story to tell later, or it may have the traumatic effect of a lifetime of mental and emotional pain and distress. Ultimately, it is the subjective experience, not merely the objective facts of an event, that determines whether something becomes traumatic (SAMHSA, 2024).

Trauma can impact individuals across all demographic groups, including race, ethnicity, age, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, and geographic location (SAMHSA, 2014). It may stem from a single incident, multiple experiences, or ongoing exposure to adverse

conditions such as chronic neglect or domestic violence. The effects of trauma extend beyond individuals, influencing families, communities, cultural groups, and even entire generations. Because such experiences often exceed an individual's or community's capacity to manage or recover, trauma typically activates the body's instinctive "fight, flight, or freeze" stress response and can leave lasting feelings of fear, vulnerability, and helplessness (van der Kolk, 2014). The three interrelated components, event, experience, and effect (the three E's), observed by SAMHSA (2024) should be the primary considerations in clinical work and research studies regarding trauma (Perry & Winfrey, 2021).

The Role of the ACE Study

The Centers for Disease Control (CDC)–Kaiser Permanente (ACE) Study is one of the largest and most influential investigations into the relationship between childhood abuse, neglect, household dysfunction, and long-term health and well-being (van der Kolk, 2014). The study examined how early adversity contributes to major public health concerns across the lifespan, including risk of disease, health care utilization, quality of life, and mortality (Felitti et al., 1998). Conducted from 1995 to 1997, the study surveyed more than 17,000 adult members of a Southern California Health Maintenance Organization. After undergoing medical examinations and lab testing, the participants completed confidential surveys about their childhood experiences and current health behaviors.

The CDC (2023) defined adverse childhood experiences as potentially traumatic events occurring from birth to age 17. To create their survey, Felitti and Anda (1998) developed ten survey questions representing three categories of adverse childhood experiences: abuse, neglect, and household dysfunction. The questions covered physical and sexual abuse, emotional and physical neglect, and family risk factors such as parental divorce, mental illness, substance

misuse, or incarceration. When they analyzed the surveys, the interviewers looked carefully at each participant's story to discover how frequently and how severely the events were experienced. Then, they compared participants' ACE scores with their medical records, health-risk behaviors, and long-term health outcomes. Their findings revealed a strong connection between the number of ACEs the participants had experienced (their ACE score) and their current health conditions. The higher an individual's ACE score, the greater their likelihood of negative health outcomes and life challenges, including chronic disease, incarceration, and employment difficulties (Felitti et al., 1998; Harris, 2018; Webster, 2022).

ACEs disrupt a child's developing stress response system, creating toxic stress that can have a harmful ripple throughout their lives. Of relevance to educators, the ACE Study discovered that the effects of childhood trauma may first become evident in school when students must compete with their peers who have not experienced trauma (Felitti et al., 1998). Over half of participants with ACE scores of four or higher reported having learning or behavioral problems, compared with only three percent of participants with an ACE score of zero (van der Kolk, 2014). These challenges can also affect their own children, resulting in intergenerational trauma.

Since the original Felitti and Anda (1998) ACE Study, several other ACE studies have been conducted, and their results have contributed to the growing body of knowledge in the area of trauma-informed care. The research population of the original ACE Study was primarily white and middle to upper-middle-class and focused on experiences that had occurred within the home. Subsequent studies have incorporated additional factors such as bullying, community violence, poverty, racism, discrimination, and experiences in foster care, expanding the framework to

include the social and environmental conditions that shape children's lives (Merritt et al., 2013, Sasaki et al., 2024; World Health Organization (WHO), 2018).

Research by Webster (2022) underscored the importance of nurturing, stable relationships as buffers against toxic stress, emphasizing that connection and care are vital in supporting healthy emotional and social development. Similarly, Madigan et al. (2023) found that early adversity disrupts brain development and self-regulation, contributing to long-term health and behavioral risks, yet protective relationships and supportive communities can foster resilience. These studies found that children experience adversity not only in their homes, but also in their communities and even within their schools, affirming the critical role of trauma-informed practices in education. A profound implication for educators is that the supportive communities they create in their classrooms and the protective relationships they form with their students function as powerful strategies for healing trauma and building resilience.

In the twenty plus years since the first ACE Study, much has been learned about how to help victims heal from traumatic events, but Kumar et al. (2024) reported that ACEs persist as a major public health concern in the United States. Their research found new information on ACEs over four time periods using national data which shows that adverse childhood experiences have significantly increased from 2009 to 2022.

The Impact of Trauma

Children who experience trauma often carry invisible wounds that profoundly shape their emotional, psychological, and behavioral development. For children, whose brains and regulatory systems are still developing, trauma can profoundly alter patterns of attachment, stress response, and self-regulation. Within educational settings, these effects manifest in patterns of dysregulation, withdrawal, aggression, avoidance, and difficulties forming trust-based

relationships (Forbes, 2013). For educators, understanding the neurobiological and psychological impact of trauma is critical for creating trauma-informed classrooms that promote safety, connection, and learning. Researchers typically categorize traumatic events into acute, chronic, and complex types, each producing distinct but overlapping outcomes (Cook et al., 2005; van der Kolk, 2014).

Three Types of Traumatic Events

Acute trauma results from a single sudden and overwhelming event that activates the body's stress response system, such as being the victim of a crime, serious accident, or a natural disaster. For most children, once the threat passes and they receive comfort and support, the nervous system gradually returns to its normal regulated state. If acute trauma occurs in the absence of consistent emotional support, however, or if the event is exceptionally terrifying, the stress response can remain elevated long after the danger has passed (Perry, 2006).

Chronic trauma is the result of experiencing repeated, prolonged exposure to stressful events without sufficient periods of safety or recovery. Children living in unpredictable environments, such as with domestic violence, chronic neglect, community violence, or persistent bullying develop adaptive strategies to survive those ongoing threats. Continuous exposure to threat keeps the stress response system in a state of hyperactivation. Elevated levels of cortisol and other stress hormones can impair the development of memory, executive function, and impulse control (Teicher & Samson, 2016).

Complex trauma, often the result of early, repeated harm caused or allowed by trusted caregivers, has the most pervasive and enduring effects on a child's development (Perry, 2017). When the person responsible for safety and comfort is also the source of fear or neglect, the child's sense of self and others becomes profoundly distorted (Cook et al., 2005; van der Kolk,

2014). From a developmental perspective, complex trauma can disrupt attachment formation, emotion regulation, and identity development. Psychologically, complex trauma can lead to dissociation, chronic anxiety, and difficulties integrating emotional and sensory experiences. These children often operate in a state of survival, making it difficult to access higher order thinking necessary for problem solving and academic engagement (Bath, 2008; Perry & Szalavitz, 2017).

In contrast to the overwhelming sense of threat, insecurity, and fear caused by trauma, felt safety is a cornerstone of healthy development. It refers not only to the physical assurance of being safe but also to the internalized, neurobiological experience of safety (Bath, 2008; Porges, 2011). Trauma fundamentally alters a child's sense of felt safety, their internal perception of whether the world and the people around them can be trusted (Perry & Szalavitz, 2017; Porges, 2011). When that sense of safety is disrupted, the developing brain prioritizes survival over curiosity and connection, influencing attention, behavior, and emotion in ways that can be misinterpreted as defiance or disengagement. Since the impact of the trauma is dictated by the child's personal experience, rather than the perspectives of onlookers, it is important to remember that any type of trauma–whether acute, chronic, or complex–may affect a child's felt safety, emotional and mental health, and coping mechanisms, resulting in attitudes and behaviors motivated by an instinct for survival.

Understanding the profound and lasting influence of traumatic experiences naturally leads to an examination of the biological mechanisms that underpin these effects. Central to this discussion is the body's stress response system, which plays a critical role in how individuals perceive, process, and adapt to adversity. When activated appropriately, this system enables humans to respond effectively to challenges; however, chronic or repeated activation, as often

seen in children exposed to trauma, can have harmful consequences on brain development, emotional regulation, and overall health.

The Brain's Stress Response System

Stress is frequently perceived as negative, but it is actually just a demand on one or more of the human body's many physiological systems. Hunger, thirst, cold, working out, or a promotion at work are all stressors. The human body's reaction to stress triggers an automatically generated sequence of rapid and nearly instantaneous hormonal shifts and physiological adjustments that work together in a highly coordinated manner (LeWine, 2024). To process these intricate interactions, the body utilizes a set of neural networks called Core Regulatory Networks (CRNs). Perry and Winfrey (2021) used an analogy they called the "Tree of Regulation" (p. 52) to show that the CRNs originate near the brainstem (roots), spread throughout the whole brain (trunk and branches), and work together to keep the body regulated in the face of various stressors.

One of the CRNs, the autonomic nervous system (ANS), has two parts which work together to automatically control the body's natural survival functions such as heart rate, breathing, eating, and sleeping. The two parts are the sympathetic nervous system (SNS) and the parasympathetic nervous system (PNS). The SNS triggers the fight-flight-freeze response enabling the body to respond to dangerous situations, while the PNS calms the body down once it recognizes that danger has passed. In calm situations, when the body feels safe and is not experiencing stress, the stress response system remains quiet, releasing few stress chemicals and keeping the person feeling relaxed.

The amygdalae are a pair of small structures deep inside the brain that act as the brain's emotional center, especially for fear, threat detection, and attaching emotions to memories. They

interpret images and sounds and even use proprioception (the body's sixth sense), to distinguish between its perceptions of safety and danger. Immediately upon perceiving a stressor, the amygdalae relay a signal through the autonomic nerves to the adrenal glands, supplying energy to all parts of the body to help a person fight off a threat, flee to safety, or freeze in an attempt to hide or become invisible (LeWine, 2024). The amygdalae interpret situations as stressful or dangerous based on prior experiences and existing beliefs, so a person's stress response reactions may not always make sense to observers who do not have the same experiences or beliefs. For example, just as a veteran's arousal response may be triggered by associating a car backfiring with the sound of gunshots, a child's arousal response may be triggered by the scent of a body care product worn by his teacher because his abusive father wore the same scent.

Attempts to calm a child will not be effective until the information the amygdalae believe is dangerous has made its way to the cortex (the thinking and decision-making part of the brain), and the brain realizes it is not truly in danger. At this point, the PNS can take over to calm the body down (LeWine, 2024). Only after a sense of calm has returned will the caregiver be able to successfully interact with the child to help them engage in discussing what happened, problem solving, and teaching for the future. This neuroscience-based tool known as "Regulate, Relate, Reason" was designed by Perry (2020) as a model for trauma-informed care, emphasizing safety and connection before learning or correction.

Long-Term Effects of Traumatic Stress

Educators have become increasingly aware of childhood trauma and its effects on the daily well-being of affected children and their classmates and teachers, and many schools provide training for their teachers on how to respond to behaviors that stem from traumatic stress. These training courses do not, however, always inform educators of the profound changes

that occur in children's brains as a result of the trauma they have experienced. Understanding the long-term effects of traumatic stress on children is an important part of recognizing the importance of integrating trauma-informed care into the school setting.

Researchers have studied why some people develop a psychological stress disorder and others do not, looking at variables such as biological factors, personal styles, social support systems, and the severity and nature of the traumas (Comer & Comer, 2018). Stress is a normal and accepted part of life for most humans, but when people appraise a stressor as threatening, they often experience a stress response that includes arousal and a sense of fear (Comer & Comer, 2018). This stress response, although experienced because of a traumatic occurrence, is not trauma (Comer & Comer, 2018). Individuals can experience the same event in a variety of ways and exhibit a variety of responses. Developmental psychopathologists have learned that the timing of stressors and traumas over the course of development has a profound influence on the development of the individual's brain (Comer & Comer, 2018). Some of the most vulnerable members of the population are infants. In his research about the timing of developmental risk, Perry (2017) learned that maltreatment in the first year of life followed by a healthy, safe environment for the next eleven years leads to worse outcomes than a safe and healthy first year followed by eleven years of adversity. "The first year of life can either poison or inoculate depending on the child's circumstances" (Perry, 2017, p. 329).

The brain is designed to notice danger and respond to stress in ways that keep people safe, but that does not mean stress is something to eliminate or to be avoided. Stress is a key element in learning and mastering new skills, and appropriate interactions with stress are necessary in order to build resilience, an individual's ability to adapt to stressful situations. It is not possible to develop resilience without experiencing stress. Referring to the previously

mentioned “three E’s” definition of trauma described by SAMHSA (2024), the degree of traumatic stress (the effect) a person experiences as a result of any event depends not only on the way the person experiences the event(s) but, on the availability, or absence of resources that can help the person respond to the situation, manage their reaction, or regain a sense of control. The more frightened, powerless, unwanted, or alone a person feels, the more likely they are to experience the event as traumatic and to store the experience in their brain as an imprint contaminated by the past (van der Kolk, 2014).

The long-term effects of stress on the brain are determined by the pattern of stress activation, the frequency and predictability with which stress happens, and the level of support the person experiences during the stress activation process. Beginning in utero and particularly during the most influential periods of the child’s brain growth (ages 2-7 and during adolescence), if the stress the child experiences is appropriately predictable, moderate, and controllable, stress response systems will respond by developing a healthy resilience for future stressful experiences. An example of ways to help a child develop this resilience is to encourage them to participate in sports, music, and academic activities which provide a level of stress that will stretch them while providing opportunities for buffering as parents, teachers, and coaches provide appropriate levels of support (Souers & Hall, 2016).

On the other hand, if the stress-response systems are repeatedly activated in unpredictable, extreme, or prolonged ways that do not include support from caregivers, a child may develop what is known as a sensitized stress response system. This means that the body's alarm system becomes overly reactive, lowering the threshold for tolerating stress. In these cases, minor events are perceived as major threats, leading to a condition of constant hyperarousal, exaggerated physical/emotional responses (such as anxiety, irritability, or poor focus), and

difficulty calming down after stress. When a person's nervous system has developed a sensitized stress response, it can be understood to be stuck in a mode of self-protection where a situation that should seem commonplace is misinterpreted as threatening, and the person responds as if it were. A sensitized stress response system can be caused by one or more adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) but can also include such common circumstances as food or housing insecurity, unfamiliar people in the home, particularly at night, or frequent loud parental disagreements (Perry & Winfrey, 2021). Repeated and prolonged activation of the stress response systems, especially without the support necessary to develop resilience, can lead to functional vulnerability, and since the stress-response systems collectively reach all parts of the brain and body, a "cascade of risk" in emotional, social, mental, and physical health occurs (Perry & Winfrey, 2021, p. 57).

Other Psychological Responses to Trauma

To create trauma-responsive learning environments that foster safety, connection, and healing, it is essential that educators understand the psychological responses commonly observed in children who have experienced and/or are experiencing acute, chronic, or complex trauma. Trauma alters brain functioning in areas tied to attention, memory, and executive function. Teicher and Samson (2016) found that traumatic stress can disrupt neural integration, making it difficult for children to plan, organize, or retain new information. A highly reactive stress response system diverts energy from learning toward survival. Consequently, children who have experienced trauma may fall behind academically, appear inattentive, or struggle with problem-solving. Educators should interpret these challenges as symptoms of stress rather than lack of ability and respond by using trauma-sensitive strategies like repetition, movement breaks, and co-regulation (Craig & Sporleder, 2017; Perry, 2017).

A common reaction among children who have developed a sensitized stress response is hyperarousal. Perry (2006) explained that when the brain perceives constant danger, the body remains in a state of fight, flight, or freeze, causing exaggerated reactions to minor stressors. In classrooms, children may appear anxious, easily startled, irritable, or impulsive, and hyperarousal may manifest as difficulty sitting still, overreacting to redirection, or difficulty focusing, all behaviors that stem from survival physiology rather than intentional misbehavior.

Other children respond to trauma through dissociation, mentally detaching from overwhelming experiences to survive. Van der Kolk (2014) described dissociation as a disconnection between thoughts, emotions, and body awareness, allowing a child to endure what feels unbearable. These children may seem spacey, disengaged, or forgetful. Chronic dissociation can impair attention, learning, and memory (Ford et al., 2018) and can look like apathy or lack of motivation, when in reality it reflects an adaptive attempt to manage emotional overload.

Trauma also interferes with a child's capacity to regulate emotions. Prolonged exposure to stress hormones alters brain regions responsible for self-control and emotional balance (Teicher & Samson, 2016). Children may oscillate between explosive anger and deep withdrawal or respond disproportionately to frustration or correction. Cook et al. (2005) noted that such dysregulation is not intentional misbehavior, but a reflection of a nervous system conditioned for survival.

Exposure to trauma significantly elevates the risk for anxiety and depression. Acute trauma may result in hypervigilance, nightmares, or intrusive thoughts, while chronic adversity fosters feelings of hopelessness and self-blame (Nurius et al., 2015). A persistent fear that the world is unpredictable and unsafe interferes with concentration and academic engagement. In a

similar vein, children frequently internalize traumatic experiences as evidence of personal failure. Herman (2015) emphasized that chronic exposure to maltreatment fosters shame stemming from the belief that one is fundamentally unworthy of love or safety. Guilt may also develop, especially when children blame themselves for violence or neglect. These internalized beliefs distort self-image and increase vulnerability to self-destructive behaviors.

For some individuals, reactions to traumatic events are brief and resolve naturally over time, while others experience persistent responses that evolve from acute distress into more serious and lasting mental health conditions, such as posttraumatic stress disorder, anxiety, depression, or substance use issues, as well as physical ailments like chronic pain, headaches, or arthritis. Some may not meet the formal diagnostic criteria for trauma-related disorders but still experience substantial trauma-related or culturally specific symptoms, such as somatization, where emotional distress manifests through physical complaints (SAMHSA, 2014). Therefore, even in the absence of a clinical diagnosis, it is essential to acknowledge that trauma can exert a significant impact on an individual's overall well-being and daily functioning.

Trauma and Academic Performance

Cole et al. (2005) examined how traumatic experiences from family violence fundamentally alter children's ability to succeed academically, behaviorally, and socially in school settings. Children exposed to family violence often develop a fundamentally negative worldview, entering classrooms believing the world is unpredictable and threatening rather than safe and benevolent. Perry et al. (1995) explained that when children live in persistent fear, the brain areas that control survival responses become overdeveloped, dominating behavior even when calmer, higher-level brain functions are needed. Survival responses become the default mode of functioning for children living in chronic states of fear, even when no immediate danger

is present. Consequently, trauma fundamentally alters how a child's brain processes information and responds to the school environment.

Trauma and Relationships

Since children suffering from chronic trauma frequently struggle to manage their emotions, their dysregulation can be seen as impulsiveness, aggression, or misinterpretation of emotional cues (NCTSN, 2017). Behaviorally, their responses may seem erratic or disproportionate because they are driven by internal states shaped by fear and confusion. Some children react with heightened aggression, perceiving minor incidents as threats, while others withdraw or dissociate, emotionally detaching from their surroundings as a defense mechanism (Sokol et al., 2020). As a result, relationships within the school context can be deeply affected. Children who experience unsafe or inconsistent care outside of school often struggle to trust adults at school (NCTSN, 2017). Their vigilance about physical and emotional safety may cause them to misread teachers' intentions or resist forming relationships altogether (Souers & Hall, 2019). Peer relationships can also suffer as trauma can delay social development, making it difficult for children to initiate or maintain friendships or to view peers as potential allies (Sokol et al., 2020).

Implications for Educators

Trauma responses are shaped not only by the nature of the traumatic event but also by the support provided by the surrounding community. When communities, including schools, respond in compassionate and predictable ways, they can help restore a sense of safety and control for children suffering from trauma. Schools are uniquely positioned to act as stabilizing environments where students can begin to heal because school is a place where notice will be taken if a child is present (or not) every day and where at least one adult can interact with him in

a caring, relational way. Trauma, particularly when inflicted by caregivers, can distort children's ability to trust and connect with others. Cook et al. (2005) and Bath (2008) described how complex trauma undermines secure attachment, leaving children fluctuating between clinging dependency and avoidance. They may test relationships through oppositional behavior, anticipating rejection or betrayal. In school, this can manifest as difficulty forming connections with teachers or peers. Trauma-informed educators can understand these patterns as survival strategies and should emphasize relational safety, empathy, and consistency to rebuild trust.

Trauma-Informed Care

As awareness of trauma's impact and effective response practices expanded, the term "trauma-informed care" emerged in mental health research and practitioner circles (SAMSHA, 2014; Siegel, 2012; van der Kolk, 2014). The development of trauma-informed care represents what is viewed by many as one of the most significant paradigm shifts in mental health, social services, and healthcare over the past five decades (Harris & Fallot, 2001). Trauma is no longer simply a clinical issue but is understood as a pervasive public health and social concern affecting individuals, families, and entire communities (SAMHSA, 2014).

The Beginnings of Trauma-Informed Care

The evolution of trauma-informed care began in the 1800s when the concept of trauma began to include the understanding that wounds could be emotional as well as physical. Terms like shell-shocked after World War I and combat fatigue after World War II, were coined to describe the trauma of war experienced by soldiers (Friedman, 2018). Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) was added to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-III) as an anxiety disorder in 1980 (American Psychiatric Association (APA), 1980), an insightful acknowledgement that the cause of a psychiatric condition was the result of an event

an individual suffered. Salasin (2011) observed that since PTSD's designation as a mental disorder, awareness of the psychological and developmental damage caused by experiences of violence and trauma has increased, and these experiences are frequently marked by shame, humiliation, and guilt. Given the numbers of trauma survivors and their often debilitating posttraumatic responses, trauma has gained noteworthy attention as a public health challenge.

Following the establishment of PTSD in the DSM-III (APA, 1980), initial clinical interventions were developed to address PTSD symptoms and integrate trauma into daily functioning. As awareness expanded to include survivors of natural disasters, terrorism, and displacement as trauma victims, clinicians' focus shifted to psychosocial education and empowerment through group and peer support models that complemented clinical care by fostering social connection and self-healing (Salasin, 2011). Following the realization that these efforts lacked sustainability outside of trauma-informed organizational systems, a trauma-informed paradigm that emphasized the assumption that every individual seeking services may be a trauma survivor was introduced, and the central question shifted from "What is wrong with you?" to "What has happened to you?" (Yadav et al., 2024). Within this framework, survivors take an active role in designing their own path to healing by setting their own goals and managing their own progress, supported by professionals in a collaborative, non-hierarchical partnership (Salasin, 2011). This model is now viewed as essential for creating humane, effective, and person-centered systems of care across diverse service environments including schools and classrooms.

Van der Kolk and the Biology of Trauma

When traditional psychiatric treatments failed to address the persistent symptoms displayed by veterans, van der Kolk (2014) began to investigate how trauma affects both the

brain and body. His pioneering studies revealed that traumatic experiences alter brain function, particularly in regions governing memory, emotion, and arousal. Van der Kolk (2014) demonstrated that ordinary memories are stored as coherent narratives while traumatic memories are fragmented and sensory based. He also learned that childhood trauma is strongly correlated with adult psychopathology. Van der Kolk helped establish PTSD as a legitimate psychiatric condition and advanced the idea that trauma is both a psychological and physiological phenomenon. His findings that traumatic experiences are stored in the body, becoming parts of a person's biology (van der Kolk, 2014) became a cornerstone for understanding trauma as a whole-body experience that lingers long after the precipitating events have ended.

Perry's Neuroscience Research

While van der Kolk's work was mostly with adults, Dr. Bruce Perry's research beginning in the 1980s and continuing to the present day has illuminated how trauma affects the developing brains of children. Perry (2006) discovered that chronic childhood stress and trauma alter the brain's architecture, particularly the stress response systems. He developed the Neurosequential Model of Therapeutics (NMT) as a framework for understanding and treating individuals who have experienced trauma. The NMT is based on combining insights from neuroscience, developmental psychology, and traumatology to guide interventions, therapy, and other forms of support. It was developed through Perry's experiences of helping children during the Branch Davidian siege, the Oklahoma City bombing, and Hurricane Katrina as a developmentally sensitive way to address the long-term effects of developmental trauma (Perry & Salavitz, 2017). His model provides a neurobiologically informed approach to clinical problem-solving that moves away from blame and shame and instead focuses on a child's history and current functioning to meet their needs in the most appropriate sequence (Perry & Winfrey, 2021).

Perry's findings revealed that early relational trauma disrupts attachment, emotional regulation, and social development (Perry, 2006). His work with children exposed to severe trauma demonstrated how behavior often represents adaptive survival responses rather than pathology. This insight has significantly influenced later educational and child welfare practices, emphasizing that understanding the why behind people's behavior is essential to supporting healing and learning.

Harris and Fallot's Framework for Trauma-Informed Care

The term, trauma-informed care, was formally introduced by Harris and Fallot (2001), whose framework at Community Connections in Washington, D.C., provided the first comprehensive model for trauma-responsive systems. In their work, Harris and Fallot (2001) advocated for integrating trauma awareness into the entire service delivery model, not just specific treatments, creating a true paradigm shift in the treatment of trauma that influenced mental health, substance abuse, and other human services. Their publication *Using Trauma Theory to Design Service Systems* (Harris & Fallot, 2001) established that trauma-informed care is not a set of clinical interventions but an overarching organizational philosophy. Their model also identified five guiding principles–safety, trustworthiness, choice, collaboration, and empowerment–that would become the foundation of subsequent federal and institutional frameworks. Importantly, Harris and Fallot (2001) emphasized a focus on universal precautions with trauma treatment, advocating for practices that recognized that most individuals who access public mental health services have trauma histories. With this mindset, systems must assume everyone is a trauma survivor and design environments that foster safety and healing for all people.

The SAMHSA Framework and Expansion of Trauma-Informed Care

Founded by Congress in 1992, the SAMHSA built on the foundation laid by Harris and Fallot (2001) by promoting and standardizing the concept of trauma-informed care through initiatives like the National Center for Trauma-Informed Care (NCTIC) established in the mid-2000s. In 2014, SAMHSA continued to adapt and strengthen the work of Harris and Fallot (2001) by publishing its *Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach.* This approach is based on four key assumptions originally established by SAMHSA (2014) known as the Four R's of trauma-informed systems: 1) realize the widespread impact of trauma and understand paths to recovery, 2) recognize the signs and symptoms of trauma, 3) respond by integrating trauma knowledge into all practices and policies and 4) resist re-traumatization through intentional systems design.

SAMHSA (2014) also adapted and expanded on Harris and Fallot's (2001) five principles of trauma-informed care by defining six fundamental principles: 1) safety, 2) trustworthiness and transparency, 3) peer support, 4) collaboration and mutuality, 5) empowerment, voice, and choice, and 6) consideration of cultural, historical, and gender factors. SAMHSA's (2014) version of the principles of trauma-informed care emphasizes the importance of addressing the diverse backgrounds and experiences of individuals, including the effects of intergenerational and systemic trauma, expanding the framework to include a wider range of populations and service systems such as education, housing, and behavioral health.

SAMHSA (2014) emphasized that trauma-informed care must operate at an organizational and systemic level, rather than being confined to individual practice, an approach which encouraged schools, health agencies, and justice systems to transform their structures and cultures. Other federal agencies also recognized the prevalence and lasting impact of trauma and

the need for a comprehensive public health approach which catalyzed widespread adoption, integrating trauma-informed care into public health initiatives, education reform, and child welfare policy.

Trauma-Informed Care Through the Pandemic

The declaration by the WHO on March 11, 2020, that the Covid-19 outbreak was a pandemic launched the worldwide disruption of nearly every aspect of life, reshaping the landscape of trauma, adversity, and resilience by intensifying existing trauma and introducing new stressors. In less than a month, millions of people, both adults and children, who had never before experienced a lack of felt safety, were suddenly overwhelmed by the unpredictability of indefinite school and work shutdowns, travel restrictions, and required hygiene measures such as the use of masks and six-foot distancing. Thus, Covid-19 and all its components that resulted in people experiencing lack of security, stability, and safety can be understood as events that created a shared traumatic experience leading to the effect of trauma for many people who had not previously encountered such a disruption of their sense of safety, stability, and core beliefs about the world (ACA, 2018; Briere & Scott, 2013).

For many children, disrupted routines, social isolation, economic instability, and increased exposure to family conflict created a previously unknown level of risk (Absher et al., 2021; Scott et al., 2021). About one in four children displayed clinically significant trauma symptoms (Absher et al., 2021), and school closures removed critical safety nets, reducing access to educators, counselors, and protective services (Baron et al., 2020). As trauma exposure increased, the capacity to deliver trauma-informed care was strained. With the implementation of remote learning, many educators reported heightened stress, limited resources, challenges with relational connections, and insufficient preparation for addressing trauma in remote or hybrid

settings (Housel, 2023; Jeffrey et al., 2022) also found that teachers and staff experienced elevated burnout and secondary trauma as workloads and emotional demands increased.

The journey from van der Kolk's (2014) early observations to today's widespread acceptance of trauma-informed principles represents a fundamental shift in how the world understands the effects of trauma. This transformation over the past century has resulted in increased empathy, creativity, and resilience, laying the groundwork for more responsive and equitable systems. Trauma-informed care must remain central to educational practice, focusing on the ever-growing realization of the widespread impact of trauma and paths to recovery, recognizing the signs and symptoms of trauma, responding by integrating trauma knowledge into all practices and policies, and resisting re-traumatization by focusing on asking what happened rather than what's wrong, a simple shift that has revolutionary implications for how we care for one another.

Trauma-Informed Care in the School Setting

Traditional educational models have often treated instruction as separate from relationships, viewing teaching as something that is accomplished regardless of any connection between the teacher and student. Research demonstrates that positive teacher-student relationships correlate with virtually all desirable educational outcomes including achievement, engagement, and social-emotional development (Cornelius-White, 2007). In her TED Talk, Pierson (2013) made the point that children do not learn from people they don't like, and Pianta et al. (2012) emphasized that relationships are foundational to school success, particularly for students facing challenges. Souers and Hall (2019) added that children don't learn when they don't feel safe, emphasizing that relationships are not supplementary to teaching but rather the foundation that makes teaching possible. According to Jennings and Siegel (2019) the first step

in providing support to children who have experienced trauma and adversity is to help them feel safe at school by building strong caring relationships with them. Safety is the first of the five principles of trauma-informed care that form the theoretical framework for this study, and a key focus of the study is to gain an understanding of educators' perceptions of their relationships with their students. Safety is built in the context of trusting relationships, and it is within the safety of caring relationships that healing from trauma can happen.

Forming trusting relationships presents unique challenges for trauma-affected students, as children who have experienced relational trauma have learned that relationships are dangerous or unpredictable (van der Kolk, 2014). Their attachment systems are often disorganized, leaving them simultaneously desperate for and terrified of connection. Perry and Winfrey (2021) explained that children suffering from trauma have internalized the lesson that adults cannot be trusted and that closeness leads to hurt. Building trust with these children requires a commitment to patience and consistency as they enter classrooms with heightened threat detection, often sabotaging relationships before they can experience the rejection they anticipate. (Blaustein & Kinniburgh, 2019). The importance of empathy as teachers seek to build relationships with their students is well documented (Jennings & Siegel, 2019; Perry & Winfrey, 2021; Souers & Hall, 2019). In addition, congruence (authenticity) and unconditional positive regard have been shown to be effective in building relationships (Norcross, 2002; Rogers, 1961; Wampold, 2015).

Empathy

Perry and Salavitz (2011) described empathy as the ability to stand in another's shoes, feel what it's like there, and care about making it better if it hurts, and Warren (2015) stated that teachers are also often expected to be empathetic, noting empathy is essential for raising academic outcomes and establishing productive student-teacher relationships. Educators can

respond to trauma research by teaching and modeling empathy in school settings and extending empathy to all students, particularly those known to have experienced trauma. Souers and Hall (2019) emphasized empathy's fundamental importance by stating that students need two things to be successful members of society: empathy and academics.

When teachers demonstrate empathy by genuinely seeking to understand students' perspectives and experiences, they communicate that the student's inner world matters and is important enough to try to understand. This connection helps students develop their own capacity for self-understanding and emotion regulation. Importantly, empathy requires teachers to recognize and validate students' emotional experiences even when it is inconvenient or their reactions seem not to make sense. The reactions of students who are affected by trauma often seem disproportionate to the situation at the time because the intensity of their emotions connect to past traumatic experiences. Part of demonstrating empathy involves the educator’s efforts to communicate understanding back to the student in ways they can comprehend, so an empathetic educator recognizes the reality behind the emotions rather than dismissing them (Perry & Winfrey, 2021).

Congruence

Congruence represents the alignment between what a person experiences internally, what they are aware of, and what they communicate to others (Rogers, 1961). McCombs (2014) noted that educators who demonstrate authenticity help students feel safer, more connected, and more motivated to learn. A meta-analysis of 119 studies found that teacher genuineness correlated positively with student participation, critical thinking, satisfaction, and positive motivation (Cornelius-White, 2007). Congruence takes on additional significance for students affected by trauma as they often struggle with trust, have difficulty reading social cues accurately, and may

have learned that adults are unpredictable or dishonest (van der Kolk, 2014). When these students encounter incongruence in their teachers—mismatches between words and facial expressions, emotions contradicting body language, or broken promises—their threat detection systems activate, making learning nearly impossible. Souers and Hall (2016) explained that trauma-impacted students are hypervigilant to danger signs and can detect inauthenticity immediately, demonstrating the importance of educators eliminating any semblance of a fake persona and cultivating authenticity in their relationships with their students.

In the school setting, congruence involves appropriate self-disclosure that humanizes teachers without confusing students (Thomas et al., 2019). Examples of this are acknowledging mistakes and genuinely apologizing, strategies that teach children that teachers are human, too, and that relationships can survive ruptures (Siegel & Bryson, 2020). Blaustein and Kinniburgh (2019) clarified that trauma-informed professionals must be genuine within their professional role, demonstrating authentic care while maintaining the structure and safety of clear boundaries.

Unconditional Positive Regard

Venet (2021) described research applying unconditional positive regard to the classroom explaining that "unconditional teachers accept students for who they are, not what they do" (p. 98). She added that unconditional positive regard in her classroom is based on an "ethic of care" in which learning how to be cared for and learning how to care for others are central tasks of education (Venet, 2021, p. 100). Unconditional positive regard becomes critically important for students affected by trauma as children who have experienced trauma often believe themselves fundamentally bad or unworthy (van der Kolk, 2014). Many have learned that love and safety are contingent on their behavior. Children who have experienced abuse or neglect internalize messages of worthlessness and unconsciously test adults to confirm these beliefs (Blaustein &

Kinniburgh, 2019). When they encounter conditional relationships with teachers whose warmth evaporates during misbehavior, these core wounds deepen. Perry and Winfrey (2021) noted that children hurt in relationships can only heal in relationships, requiring adults to demonstrate consistent worth-affirming messages regardless of behavior. As Souers and Hall (2016) emphasized, students need to know they are valued especially on their worst days, when they seem most unlovable.

Evidence has shown that being positively regarded by one's teachers significantly correlates with student engagement, achievement, and social connection (Cornelius-White, 2007). Educational systems have traditionally operated, however, from models making regard conditional, offering approval primarily when students comply with expectations or achieve academic goals. An example of this is the token economy reward system. Although used by many educators as a classroom management tool, it has been shown to be contrary to appropriate trauma-informed practice (Berardi & Norton, 2019), and it contradicts the unconditional acceptance Rogers deemed essential for growth.

The trauma-informed response involves staying present and committed rather than withdrawing warmth. Teachers must also demonstrate consistent care regardless of academic performance, recognizing that trauma significantly impacts cognitive functioning (Perry & Daniels, 2016). Brunzell et al. (2016) emphasized recognizing the student behind academic struggles while maintaining belief in their inherent worth. Importantly, unconditional positive regard does not mean accepting all behaviors without limits. Teachers can maintain appropriate boundaries and consequences while preserving student worth. Blaustein and Kinniburgh (2019) clarified that providing structure and limits expresses care when delivered with unconditional positive regard for the student.

Collective Teacher Efficacy

Berg (2020) described collective efficacy as a group's shared confidence in its ability to perform its work effectively and create meaningful impact. In a similar way, Hattie (2019) characterized collective teacher efficacy as the shared belief among teachers within a school that they possess the skills needed to influence student learning in positive ways—in essence, a collective conviction that they can make a difference for students. The difference that can be made by collective teacher efficacy is so significant according to Hattie (2018) that it has a 1.58 effect size, making it the highest-ranking factor on Hattie's list of 252 influences related to student achievement.

Donohoo (2017) emphasized that this shared belief should be a central priority for school systems because it becomes visible when educators genuinely trust that their joint efforts make a difference. Leadership practices play a key role in strengthening these beliefs. Creating meaningful collaboration, empowering teachers through shared decision-making, establishing goals and high expectations, and engaging staff in frequent data-informed reflection all help teacher teams align their work and build confidence in their joint impact. For schools implementing trauma-informed strategies, collective teacher efficacy is especially essential. Trauma-responsive work requires consistent practices, shared understanding, and coordinated responses across all classrooms. When teachers believe deeply in their collective capacity, they are more willing to adopt new approaches, maintain predictable and supportive environments, and persevere through challenges. A school which has invested in building collective teacher efficacy is ready to do the work of transforming trauma-informed principles into sustained, schoolwide action.

Teacher Care and Self-Care

As a result of their work with children who have trauma stories, educators who daily bear witness to the socioemotional, academic, and behavioral costs of being victims of trauma are at particular risk of experiencing secondary traumatic stress, compassion fatigue, and burnout. Elementary teachers typically work with the same group of students throughout the day and across the academic year, fostering deep relationships that increase emotional investment. Even when professional helping resources are available to support children who share traumatic experiences or exhibit trauma-related behaviors, elementary educators must continue providing daily instruction and emotional support. This sustained close contact intensifies the potential for secondary trauma while at the same time making it difficult for teachers to create psychological boundaries from students' trauma.

Perry (2014) explained several reasons why professionals such as teachers who work with maltreated or traumatized children are at increased risk of experiencing secondary trauma or developing compassion fatigue. First, empathy, while a valuable tool for educators, makes them vulnerable to internalizing some of the child's trauma-related pain (Perry, 2014). A second significant risk is insufficient recovery time as educators are often required to witness or listen to children describe the horrific situations they have experienced without the opportunity to emotionally resolve the stories (Perry, 2014). Third, unresolved personal trauma plays a role as many educators experience triggering reminders of their own unhealed trauma when they work with a student who has suffered a similar trauma (Perry, 2014). The susceptibility to secondary trauma and compassion fatigue creates a critical paradox for educators. To regulate traumatized children, adults must remain regulated themselves, (Perry, 2014), yet the very act of teaching children suffering from trauma threatens educators' own regulation.

While trauma-informed self-care is beneficial, individual strategies alone are not enough in cases where the stress of secondary trauma becomes overwhelming (Walker, 2023). Souers and Hall (2016) noted that when educators receive training on identifying and responding to student trauma, they often receive minimal guidance on protecting their own emotional well-being. Administrative turnover creates instability that prevents the development of trusting relationships between teachers and school leaders, and when crisis situations occur, schools often provide mental health support for students while overlooking teachers' parallel needs.

Despite the challenges, Perry (2014) pointed out that a teacher can be a calm, stabilizing factor for children living with chaos, anxiety, and fear. Souers and Hall (2016) provided resources for educators to manage their own self-care focusing on self-regulation and self-management. They also outlined strategies to help educators process and cope with strong emotional reactions when faced with disruptive student behaviors. School leaders can provide opportunities for educators to process their experiences, assist with boundary-setting, and ensure access to counseling (Perry, 2014). Relational support through meaningful peer networks, structured debriefing after crises, and sustainable workload expectations are other strategies that can help mitigate risks (Aguilar, 2018; Souers & Hall, 2019).

Principles of Trauma-Informed Care: A Framework for Educational Practice

The theoretical framework for this research study is based on the five foundational principles of trauma-informed care developed by Harris and Fallot (2001). These principles include safety, trustworthiness, choice, collaboration, and empowerment and were originally developed for mental health and addiction service systems to address the impact of past trauma on individuals seeking treatment. The approach recognized the high propensity for trauma in this clientele and advocated for a paradigm shift in service delivery to prevent re-traumatization and

create a more effective therapeutic environment. Since it began, this framework has been adapted and expanded by multiple organizations, including the SAMHSA (2014) which added peer support and attention to cultural, historical, and gender issues to create a six-principle model. The NCTSN (2017) further adapted these principles for child-serving systems, emphasizing their application across settings including schools, child welfare, and juvenile justice.

Safety

In educational contexts, safety encompasses both the absence of threat and the presence of conditions that allow students to feel secure enough to engage in learning. For traumatically affected students, safety takes on heightened significance. Van der Kolk (2014) explained that victims of trauma exist in a state of chronic hypervigilance, with threat-detection systems constantly scanning for danger. Perry and Winfrey (2021) noted that traumatized children's brains are organized around survival, making learning impossible until safety is established. Bath (2008) emphasized that felt safety—the subjective experience of security—matters more than objective safety conditions.

Creating safety in trauma-informed classrooms requires multiple strategies. Physical safety involves predictable environments, clear sightlines, designated safe spaces, and elimination of sensory triggers that might activate trauma responses. Psychological safety requires that students can express themselves without fear of humiliation, make mistakes without harsh consequences, and trust that adults will respond predictably and supportively. Souers and Hall (2016) emphasized that safety is established through consistent routines, transparent expectations, and adult regulation that helps students feel protected rather than threatened.

Trustworthiness

In educational settings, trustworthiness means that routines are established and consistent, adults do what they say they will do, rules and consequences are applied consistently, and students can depend on educators to be reliable and honest. Trustworthiness is particularly critical for students affected by trauma because many have experienced profound betrayal by adults who were supposed to protect them. Blaustein and Kinniburgh (2019) explained that traumatized children have learned that adults are unreliable, that promises are broken, and that safety can disappear without warning. These experiences create hypervigilance around adult behavior and deep skepticism about adult trustworthiness.

Establishing trustworthiness in trauma-informed classrooms requires educators to demonstrate a high level of consistency in their words and actions. Craig (2016) emphasized that trauma-informed teachers must follow through on every commitment, apply rules consistently across all students, explain the reasoning behind decisions, and admit mistakes when they occur. Thomas et al. (2019) noted that building trustworthiness is a slow process requiring sustained reliability over time, with teachers understanding that trauma-affected students will repeatedly test whether adults can be trusted.

Choice

Van der Kolk (2014) explained that trauma occurs when individuals are rendered helpless in the face of overwhelming threat, creating profound feelings of powerlessness that persist long after the traumatic events. Bath (2008) noted that providing opportunities for choice helps traumatized individuals reclaim a sense of agency and control. Implementing choice in trauma-informed classrooms requires educators to build meaningful decision-making opportunities into daily routines and academic work. Brunzell et al. (2016) described trauma-informed teachers as those who offer choices in seating arrangements, learning activities, assignment formats, pacing,

and behavioral responses. Perry and Daniels (2016) emphasized that even small choices, whether to use pen or pencil, whether to work alone or with a partner, help students experience themselves as capable agents rather than passive recipients. Souers and Hall (2019) noted that choice must be authentic rather than illusory, with students genuinely empowered to make decisions about matters that affect them.

Collaboration

Blaustein and Kinniburgh (2019) showed that trauma often occurs in contexts of extreme power differentials where the traumatized person has no voice or influence. For students who have experienced trauma, collaboration in educational contexts addresses these power imbalances by engaging students as partners in their own learning rather than as passive recipients of instruction. Creating collaborative relationships helps students experience themselves as valued partners whose perspectives matter and who have genuine influence over their experiences.

Establishing collaboration in trauma-informed classrooms requires fundamental shifts in traditional teacher-student power dynamics. Crosby (2015) emphasized that collaboration requires educators to genuinely listen to and incorporate student perspectives rather than maintain authoritarian control. Craig (2016) described trauma-informed educators as those who actively seek student input in classroom decisions, co-create behavioral plans and academic goals, and position students as experts on their own experiences and needs. Additional strategies include collaborative problem-solving when conflicts arise, student participation in developing classroom agreements, and regular opportunities for students to provide feedback about what is and is not working for them.

Empowerment

Van der Kolk (2014) explained that trauma leaves individuals feeling fundamentally powerless and incapable of protecting or helping themselves. For trauma-affected students, empowerment addresses the helplessness and incompetence that often accompany traumatic experiences. Bath (2008) noted that empowerment involves helping these individuals discover and develop their own strengths and capabilities. In educational contexts, empowerment means helping students recognize their own capacities, develop skills for self-advocacy and self-regulation, and experience themselves as competent and capable. Fostering empowerment in trauma-informed classrooms requires educators to identify and build on student strengths rather than focus exclusively on deficits and problems.

Brunzell et al. (2016) described trauma-informed teachers as those who explicitly name student strengths, provide opportunities for students to experience success and mastery, teach skills for self-regulation and problem-solving, and support students in recognizing their own growth and capabilities. Souers and Hall (2019) noted that empowerment requires educators to believe genuinely in students' capacities and to communicate that belief consistently. Perry and Winfrey (2021) emphasized that empowerment involves helping students understand their trauma responses not as signs of weakness but as adaptive survival strategies that can be built upon.

Integration into Educational Systems

Although the five principles of trauma-informed care that define the theoretical framework of this study originated in behavioral health contexts, their application to education represents recognition that schools can either support healing or compound trauma. The NCTSN (2017) emphasized that child-serving systems, including schools, must be organized around these principles to avoid retraumatizing vulnerable children. Cole et al. (2005) noted that

traditional educational practices often violate these principles through rigid control, limited student voice, punitive consequences, and deficit-focused approaches.

Creating trauma-informed educational systems requires alignment of the principles across multiple levels. At the classroom level, individual teachers can implement the principles through their interactions with students, instructional approaches, and classroom management strategies. At the school level, administrators must ensure that policies, procedures, and disciplinary practices reflect the principles rather than contradict them. Plumb et al. (2016) emphasized that trauma-informed care requires systemic change, not simply individual teacher behavior modification.

The cultivation of trauma-informed practice organized around these five principles requires comprehensive professional development and systemic support. Teachers need explicit training about the principles, opportunities to examine how current practices align with or violate these principles, and ongoing coaching as they implement new approaches. Schools must engage in systematic review of policies and practices to identify where systems inadvertently retraumatize students. Chafouleas et al. (2016) found that successful implementation requires leadership commitment, adequate resources, and sustained attention over multiple years.

Summary

This chapter reviewed the literature discussing the history of trauma, the ACE study, the impact of trauma throughout the lifespan, and the five principles of trauma-informed care which form the theoretical framework for this study. Trauma in childhood, whether acute, chronic, or complex, affects children's sense of safety, emotional and mental health, and their patterns of coping and behavior. Children who experience trauma often develop survival strategies they hope will keep them safe, but which later interfere with learning and relationships (Bath, 2008;

Brunzell et al., 2016). These adaptive behaviors should be understood as the child's best efforts to navigate what they believe to be a threatening world. The evolution of trauma-informed care includes the paradigm shift ushered in by Harris and Fallot (2001) when they introduced their philosophy that the concept of trauma-informed care should inform the work of all organizations which exist to help people, including schools. Understanding the psychological effects of trauma enables educators to interpret behavior through a compassionate lens. Rather than asking, "What's wrong with this student?" trauma-informed educators ask, "What happened to this student?" and "What does this behavior communicate?" (Bath, 2008; Perry & Winfrey, 2021). As Perry (2014) and Souers and Hall (2016) emphasized, trauma-responsive schools cannot exist without educators who are equipped with an understanding of trauma's impact. Educators who are trained to understand trauma and respond appropriately to children who have experienced it should be supported with sustainable workload expectations, trained in awareness of secondary trauma and compassion fatigue, and taught the importance of self-care. This will provide them with the capacity to transform their classrooms into spaces of healing and growth for students who suffer from trauma and to sustain their work over time. Schools that have developed high collective teacher efficacy as described by Donohoo (2017) are especially well equipped for the work of persevering through the challenges of implementing trauma-informed systems.

Although the literature establishes the importance of trauma-informed care in elementary education, including supportive relationships, predictable classroom environments, and opportunities for student choice and empowerment, attention to how educators' perceptions and practices change after engaging in specific trauma-responsive professional development and implementing selected strategies is not present. This study addresses that gap by examining the experiences of eight educators in a Midwestern elementary (K-5) school before and after

participating in the *Becoming Trauma Responsive* (Lane et al., 2025) professional development and implementing classroom interventions. By documenting educators' reflections, perceived effectiveness of strategies, and anticipated plans for continued implementation, the study contributes context-specific insights into how trauma-responsive professional development can translate into intentional classroom practices.

The following chapter describes how research was conducted through a qualitative single case study approach to explore how elementary (K-5) educators in a Midwestern school perceived the impact of trauma-informed professional development and how their beliefs and practices evolved after implementing self-selected trauma-informed interventions in their classrooms. In the next chapter, the research paradigm, research questions, and research design of the qualitative single case study are discussed along with a review of the data collection methods and data analysis. A description of the setting and participants is provided as well as a description of the theoretical framework that will form the foundation for this study. The chapter concludes with a presentation of the trustworthiness methods, ethics, and research standards that were used in this study.

Chapter 3 - Methodology

The purpose of this chapter is to describe the research methodology used to explore how elementary educators perceived the impact of trauma-informed professional development. This study sought to learn how educators understood, selected, applied, and evaluated trauma-responsive practices before and after participating in evidence-based professional development. In the *Becoming Trauma Responsive* feature documentary and e-book, Lane et al. (2025) provided training on how educators applied trauma-informed strategies. By examining educator perceptions before and after the training, this qualitative single case study aimed to provide insights into how trauma-informed practices could be integrated into classrooms and school environments. This chapter is organized into the following sections: 1) research paradigm, 2) research questions, 3) research design, 4) participant recruitment and selection, 5) data collection methods, 6) theoretical framework, 7) data analysis, and 8) trustworthiness, ethics, and research standards.

Research Paradigm

Guba (1990) defined paradigm as "a basic set of beliefs that guides action" (p. 17). The research paradigm used for this study was the constructivist paradigm which recognizes that people are seeking to understand the world in which they live and work. According to Creswell and Poth (2025), in the constructivist paradigm, meanings are formed through interaction with others and through historical and cultural norms that operate in individuals' lives. Using the constructivist paradigm, I sought to better understand a phenomenon through self-reported observations and perspectives of experiences. Throughout this study, I maintained a focus on meaning constructed by humans based upon their interpretations of the world around them. As

each individual constructed their own knowledge and experience, I was able to gain understanding of the subjective experiences and interpretations of trauma-informed teaching.

Research Questions

This research study contains one overarching question and three supporting questions providing a robust framework for investigation and exploration. The overarching question is: After implementing *Becoming Trauma Responsive* (Lane et al., 2025) strategies, how do the perceptions and practices of elementary educators change? The supporting questions for study are as follows:

1) How do teachers' perceptions of their relationships with students evolve after engaging with the professional development e-book?
2) What specific strategies or practices do educators identify as feasible to implement following the training?
3) How do educators anticipate sustaining trauma-responsive practices in their classroom or school?

Research Design

For this research, qualitative single case study methodology was used to support the construction of meaning through the experiences of the educators who chose to participate. Yin (2014) defined a case study as an empirical inquiry that investigates a phenomenon within its real-life context. A qualitative single case study is not a single method of data collection but a research strategy that allows for an in-depth and holistic examination of a social unit. Because case studies require close attention to context and meaning, they draw upon multiple sources of evidence, making the design especially suitable for studying complex educational settings such as schools. The qualitative single case study approach aligns with the purpose of this study,

which was to understand how educators conceptualized and integrated trauma-informed practices within their local context. Additional benefits to choosing qualitative single case study methodology for this research included the ability to conduct the study within its natural setting and the opportunity for participants to deeply reflect on their experiences. For this study, then, a qualitative single case study design was chosen so that my own understanding could be co-constructed with participants through our mutual engagement within one elementary (K-5) school setting in a Midwestern state.

Case Study

Case studies are a qualitative research design in which the researcher performs an in-depth exploration of a program, event, activity, or process of one or more individuals (Miles et al., 2020). The method chosen for this study was a qualitative single case study which focused on an isolated issue or concern and selected one bounded case (e.g., one school or classroom and individual educators) to illustrate the issue (Stake, 1995). In a qualitative single case study, the case is bounded by time and activity, and researchers gather rich, detailed information through multiple data collection strategies over an extended period of time.

Effective qualitative single case study research requires thorough preparation and strong research skills. According to Creswell and Poth (2025), a case study is recognizable by seven defining characteristics. These characteristics include: the identification of a specific case, the intent of the case study, an in-depth understanding of the case, a comprehensive approach to data analysis, a description of the case which identifies the specific themes or issues uncovered, presentation of the case study in a chronological or theoretical model, and a conclusion describing the general lessons learned from studying the case (Creswell & Poth, 2025).

Yin (2014) emphasized that inadequate preparation can jeopardize a case study, noting that researchers must be able to ask meaningful questions, listen attentively, remain adaptable in the field, demonstrate deep familiarity with the phenomenon being studied, and avoid bias while protecting human subjects. As evidence is collected, the researcher must review information promptly and continually question how and why events unfold as they do. This reflective stance strengthens the credibility and interpretive quality of the qualitative single case study.

The identified concern in this qualitative single case study was the impact of childhood trauma on students and educators in an elementary (K-5) school in a Midwestern state. The intent of the qualitative single case study was to understand how elementary (K–5) educators in a Midwestern school perceived the impact of trauma-informed professional development and how their beliefs and instructional practices evolved as they implemented selected trauma-informed interventions in their classrooms. Qualitative single case study design was selected for this study to deeply examine educators' perceptions and experience by collecting information through multiple sets of interviews initiated and guided by the researcher. This design allowed for an in-depth understanding of individual experiences and the collective dynamics of the school community. By focusing on a single case, the study could explore nuanced changes in educators' perceptions and practices resulting from professional development, while providing rich contextualized data for analysis. To gain an in-depth understanding of the case, meaningful qualitative data was gathered by inviting eight educators from a Midwestern elementary (K-5) school to journal their responses to reflection questions I provided for them, provide an artifact that portrayed their experience with implementation of trauma-informed strategies, and participate in three sets of individual interviews I conducted with them. The educators who were

interviewed included the principal, two kindergarten teachers, and one teacher from each grade level, first through fifth grade.

Interviews

Interviews are one of the most valuable sources of evidence in case study research because they allow the researcher to focus directly on the topic of the study and obtain insight into participants' perceptions, beliefs, and experiences (Yin, 2014). Stake (1995) described interviews as a primary way to access participants' multiple realities. He emphasized that the goal is not to get simple yes and no answers but to strive for descriptions of episodes, explanations, and connections that illuminate meaning from the participant's perspective. Stake (1995) stressed that during the interview, the most essential skill the researcher can bring is listening, which may include taking notes but also requires staying in control of the data gathering, keeping in mind what form the participant's account might take in writing. He believed it is more important to focus on listening, take a few notes, and ask for clarification, as this can be much more effective than trying to write down everything the participant says during the interview. Stake (1995) also stressed the importance of keeping the main questions in mind and carefully creating probes to add to the interview's repository. Despite the benefits, Yin (2014) also noted potential limitations such as bias due to poorly articulated questions and inaccuracies from poor recall. Recognizing both the strengths and limitations of interviews underscores the importance of skilled interviewing and clear procedural structure.

Semi-structured Interviews.

To support both focus and flexibility, this study employed semi-structured interviews. Building on Stake's (1995) view of interviewing to access lived experience and Yin's (2014) recognition of interviews as a powerful source of case evidence, semi-structured interviewing

offers a balanced approach that is widely used in qualitative research. Using this format for my study provided a consistent framework across interviews while allowing me to pursue unanticipated topics that emerged from participants' responses. Patton (2015) identified the interview guide as a key tool in semi-structured interviewing, consisting of open-ended questions and core topics that maintain alignment with the research purpose while remaining adaptable to individual perspectives. Along with the constructivist approach, semi-structured interviews supported the co-construction of meaning, allowing participants to describe their experiences in their own words while ensuring that essential areas of inquiry were addressed (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015).

The interview guide used in this study included open-ended questions organized to examine how the educators integrated principles of trauma-informed care and how these efforts contributed to the school's social and cultural capital. The interview process unfolded in three phases: 1) gathering participants' baseline perceptions of current challenges and understandings related to trauma-informed care, 2) collecting reflections on the professional development modules and the participants planned implementation of selected strategies, and 3) exploring participants' perceptions after a three-week period of applying those strategies in their classrooms.

Collecting perspectives across these three points in time produced a comprehensive understanding of participant experiences and generated robust data that supported a thorough and credible analysis of the school's trauma-informed practices. Using the interview guide with semi-structured interviewing ensured consistency across interviews while providing opportunities to ask follow-up questions, seek clarification, and probe for deeper meaning when appropriate. The flexibility allowed by the interview guide strengthened reliability and supported

rich, authentic data. By structuring interviews in this manner, the study maintained methodological rigor while preserving the conversational, participant-centered nature of qualitative inquiry (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015; Patton, 2015; Yin, 2014). The defining features of this qualitative single case study as delineated above provided a solid foundation for the research methodology to be used in exploring the development of trauma-responsive care in an elementary (K-5) school setting in a Midwestern state.

Participant Recruitment, Setting, and Selection

The 2024-2025 enrollment of the elementary school used for this study was 109 students at kindergarten through fifth grade levels (Kansas State Department of Education (KSDE), 2025). The school's ethnic makeup was 65.1% white and 34.9% African American, American Indian/Alaska Native, Multiracial, Hispanic, with 49.5% males and 50.5% females. The school was designated as a Title I school having met this classification for several years, and 60.6% of the school population was designated as economically disadvantaged.

I selected this school because it allowed me to study all grade levels. Additionally, data gathered from the school's 2024-2025 needs assessment identified student poverty and trauma and the need for high-quality professional learning as key barriers to achieving its goal of grade-level proficiency (KSDE, 2025). In response to a question regarding the training considered necessary for teachers to support student success and meet the school improvement goals, school leaders listed both social emotional and trauma-informed as priorities. Elaborating on the roadblocks to their students reaching grade level proficiency, they described the difficulty of putting a specific time frame on all students reaching grade level proficiency, due to factors that students brought to school with them, such as poverty, trauma, and learning challenges.

The purposive convenience sampling method (Creswell & Poth, 2025) was used to select participants who have direct classroom responsibilities and a demonstrated interest in professional development related to trauma-informed practices. This was a non-probability type sampling method that relied on data collection from population members with specific, predefined characteristics, knowledge, and expertise relevant to the study and who were conveniently available to participate in the study (Creswell & Poth, 2025). Selection criteria included: 1) educator currently working in a K-5 school, 2) willingness to participate in both professional development and reflective interviews, and 3) willingness to implement selected trauma-informed practices.

The elementary school principal and seven elementary classroom teachers from one elementary (K-5) school in a Midwestern state were recruited and secured as participants. Recruitment involved sending a school-wide invitation to eligible teachers and the principal along with a form to secure voluntary consent from each participant prior to data collection. The invitation and consent form, contained in Appendix A, was emailed to prospective participants to describe the anticipated study. The letter functioned as a professional and formal introduction to the study, inviting participant stakeholders to contribute their expertise, experiences, and insights into trauma-informed care in their classrooms. The letter described the elements and scope of the study, along with its purpose, what would be done with the data, and the time commitments for participating in the study. The letter also identified the measures and ethical commitment that would be put in place to ensure all data from the interviews would remain confidential during the study. Signed consent forms were obtained from each participant in the study. The consent forms included participation in the professional development training and all three sets of individual interviews. Prior to administering the data collection steps, I requested and obtained consent

from the principal and the seven elementary K-5 teachers via the consent forms that each educator signed and returned to me.

To protect participant confidentiality and maintain ethical research standards, pseudonyms were assigned to all participants, and identifying details about grade levels, classrooms, and the school remained anonymous. This procedure ensured anonymity of individual identities while allowing for clear and consistent reference to participants throughout the data analysis and reporting process. Table 3.1 presents information about the educators who participated in the study.

Table 3.1

Study Participants

Participant	Gender	Teaching License	Years of Experience	Assignment
Aster	F	Yes	12	K-2
Bluestem	F	Yes	2	K-2
Coneflower	F	No	11	K-2
Goldenrod	F	Yes	13	K-2
Indigo	F	Yes	32	3-5
Lavender	F	Yes	11	3-5
Prairie Rose	F	No	1	3-5
Sunflower	F	Yes	6	Principal

Data Collection Methods

The first step in the data collection process was to meet with the principal to review the purpose, scope, and proposed timeline of the study. This initial meeting ensured shared expectations, and it established the foundation for a clear and organized research process. The planned data collection process included three sets of face-to-face interviews with the principal and the seven elementary (K–5) teachers.

Initial data collection began with interviews with the individual educators to gather their existing beliefs prior to experiencing professional development training. The week after the first

round of interviews, the educators prepared for the professional development by watching the *Becoming Trauma Responsive: Feature Documentary* (K-State, 2026) during their scheduled professional learning community (PLC) time. I was not present for that viewing, but I did personally present the formal professional development training from the *Becoming Trauma Responsive* (Lane et al., 2025) e-book on day two.

I selected the *Becoming Trauma Responsive Feature Documentary* (K-State, 2026) and the *Becoming Trauma Responsive* e-book (Lane et al., 2025) for the professional development resource because it provided clearly explained, specific, and easy-to-implement strategies for practitioners. It also provided an economical, easily accessible, and freely available resource for K-5 elementary teachers seeking to better understand and support students affected by trauma. The feature documentary illustrates how schools in Kansas have responded to students' social, emotional, and behavioral needs, while the free, online e-book provides practical information about trauma, brain development, student behaviors, self-regulation, relationship-building, and classroom strategies. The resources connect evidence-based concepts that emphasize intentional relationships, practical strategies, and ongoing educator reflection. They also support sustainable impact by helping teachers develop actionable practices that can be integrated into everyday instruction and classroom management.

The educators were invited to take notes as they watched the *Becoming Trauma Responsive: Feature Documentary* (K-State, 2026), looking for their three biggest takeaways. Following the video, they reflected on their notes and recorded their takeaways in a journal I had left for them at the day one initial interview. They returned their journals to me at the Day 3 final interview session, and during that interview, they shared their video takeaways with me along

with their responses to two additional questions they were asked to answer in their journals during the time frame of the research. Those questions are explained below.

On Day 2 of the professional development, the educators gathered in the school workroom on a late start day. During the two-hour time frame, I presented the *Becoming Trauma Responsive* (Lane et al., 2025) e-book then led the educators in a short discussion to brainstorm and select a school-wide strategy they believed they could all implement with fidelity. The strategy that was chosen by the group was, "At a self-designated time each day, teachers will individually greet each student in a meaningful, connecting way while also smiling and saying their name."

Following this two-hour training, the teachers returned to their classrooms, but I met with them individually at their scheduled time slot during the remainder of the day for the second set of interviews, to debrief the feature documentary and the e-book, and to select a strategy they would introduce and implement in their classrooms over the next three weeks. At this time, they were also asked to reflect on the feelings that came up for them as they anticipated implementing the strategies they had chosen and to record these feelings in their journals. Their descriptions of the feelings that came up when they anticipated implementing their strategies was the second of three entries in their journals. Due to constraints caused by the time of year the research was scheduled, including its proximity to spring break and state assessment, I had made the decision to limit the time frame for the implementation of interventions to three weeks. After a three-week implementation of interventions, the final set of interviews were held. Prior to this third set of individual interviews, the educators were asked to record in their journals their responses to the third question which asked them to share a meaningful experience that resulted from their implementation of their selected strategy.

The first two sets of interviews lasted thirty minutes each, and forty-five minutes were allotted for each iteration of the third and final interview. The interviews included questions derived from the aforementioned research questions, guided by the five principles of trauma-informed care as a theoretical framework. Interviews were conducted in person and recorded through a digital platform to produce verbatim transcripts so they could be viewed, listened to, and read at a later time. Confidentiality was maintained by redacting or omitting all names from the transcripts.

Summaries of the conversations were reviewed and coded to identify themes. In accordance with Stake's (1995) advice, minimal notes were taken during interviews to allow the researcher to focus primarily on listening, and reflections were documented afterward in a reflexive journal. The reflexive journal contained personal observations about the interview process and provided a record of key ideas and episodes immediately following each session, a practice Stake (1995) emphasized as essential. Table 3.2 and the narrative that follows illustrate the timeline and process of the research study.

Table 3.2

Timeline and Tasks

Phases	Tasks
Day 1	Initial Individual Interviews
Professional Development Preparation	Watch *Becoming Trauma Responsive: Feature Documentary*
Professional Development and Interview Day 2	Presentation of *Becoming Trauma Responsive* E-book Modules, Post-Professional Development Group Consensus, and Second Set of Individual Interviews
Weeks 1-3	Individual Implementation of Selected Interventions plus All-School Implementation of Selected Group Intervention

Day 3	Final (Post-Intervention) Individual Interviews
Weeks 4-9	Data Analysis & Thematic Coding

Day 1: Initial interviews to build rapport and gather baseline data

The research process began on interview Day 1 with individual interviews with each of the educator participants. The questions for the initial interviews are in Appendix B. The purposes of this set of interviews were to begin building rapport with the educators, to establish a working alliance, to gather baseline information regarding the beliefs and perceptions of this group of educators about trauma-informed care including the strategies and interventions they might be familiar with, and to allow participants to share any challenges they might have been experiencing in their classrooms or in the school. On Day 1, I met individually with each participant for thirty minutes. I recorded the interviews using digital transcription services so that verbatim accounts would be available. The transcripts were reviewed and coded to identify themes from the data. I was primarily focused on listening to the answers provided by the participants; however, in accordance with Stake's (1995) recommendation, I also needed to keep written notes in a reflexive journal which included personal comments and reflections about the interviews.

Day 2: Becoming Trauma Responsive (Lane et al., 2025) professional development and selection of intervention strategies

At the beginning of Day 2, professional development training was presented to all the participants as a group using modules from the *Becoming Trauma Responsive* (Lane et al., 2025) e-book. Immediately following the professional development presentation, I met with all the participants as a group to discuss which strategies from the professional development training

they saw as most beneficial for implementation across the entire school and to collectively select a strategy to be used school-wide over the next three weeks. The protocol for this interview is in Appendix C. Educators were encouraged to provide input about reasonable expectations for implementation of the selected trauma-responsive intervention without it being too overwhelming and to arrive at an agreement for what they could commit to each day.

Once the group agreed on the intervention that was to be implemented school-wide which was to greet each student by name at least once a day, I began to meet individually with each educator participant for thirty minutes to interview them regarding their reflective feedback on the professional development experience, to record their goal of one intervention from the professional development modules they had chosen to implement in their classroom over the next three weeks, and to hear their personal concerns about implementing the interventions (see Appendix D). Meeting with each educator individually provided protection for participants who may have been triggered during the professional development session or at any time during the research process. Additionally, individual meetings allowed me to respond more sensitively to participants who may have struggled with the emotional nature of trauma-informed practices, creating a supportive environment in which concerns could be addressed privately and without judgment.

As with the first set of interviews, all second set interviews were recorded through digital transcription services to provide complete verbatim accounts of participant responses. In order to identify emerging themes within the data, I systematically reviewed and coded the transcripts from these interviews. Throughout each interview, I remained fully engaged in listening to participants, while also keeping a reflexive journal in accordance with Stake's (1995) recommendations.

Weeks 1-3: Educator implementation of selected strategies

The educators as a group and each individual classroom teacher began implementing their chosen strategies on the day following the professional development training. On that first day, I sent an email to all the educators to encourage them and to make sure all the participants had a plan in place and were confident about implementing their interventions. During the first week of implementation, I advised the educators of two days I would be available from 3:30-4:00 p.m. in case anyone would like to check in with questions or concerns. These brief check-in meetings were intended to remind educators to begin the interventions if they had not yet done so and to allow for consultation and clarification as needed. I also sent an email at the beginning of week three to remind educators of the end of the three-week research period. Educators implemented their chosen strategies during weeks 1-3.

Day 3: Post-intervention interviews on perceptions after practice

After a three-week period of classroom implementation, during which participants applied their selected interventions from the training, I again met individually with each participant to collect their journals and an artifact and to conduct the third and final set of interviews (day three). Using the questions in Appendix E, these interviews provided a space for each participant to reflect on their experiences, perceptions, and challenges while implementing trauma-responsive practices. Educators were asked to share their perceptions of how well they implemented the intervention they selected and the regularity with which they implemented it. They were also asked to describe any changes they observed in their relationships with their students, including the students' attitudes and behaviors as well as their own, to what extent they anticipated sustaining trauma-responsive practices in their classroom and school into the future, and a meaningful experience that resulted from their strategy implementation. To allow time for

participants to fully share their responses, a time period of forty-five minutes was allotted for this final set of interviews.

In keeping with the protocols established in the first two sets, all interviews were recorded using digital transcription services to ensure verbatim accounts of participant responses. I utilized these transcripts to review and systematically code data to identify emerging themes. As previously discussed, a reflexive journal served as a space to support both reflexivity and the management of subjectivity throughout the research process (Creswell & Poth, 2025; Stake, 1995). Review of the educators' journal responses and artifacts along with the sequential approach of using the three sets of interviews described above enabled a comprehensive examination of the professional development experience as a bounded system, one group of educators engaging in the same intervention, while also situating their insights within their unique classroom and school contexts. The journals, artifacts, and three sets of interviews provided rich, descriptive data that captured the nuances of educators' evolving knowledge, reflections, and shifts in practice.

Weeks 4-9: Data analysis & thematic coding

Following the data collection from the journals, artifacts, and three sets of interviews, the transcripts derived from recordings using digital transcription services were reviewed and coded to identify themes emerging from the data. While the primary focus was on listening to participants' responses, written notes were also kept in a reflexive journal (Creswell & Poth, 2025; Stake, 1995). Data analysis followed a process of thematic coding and interpretation which is described in a later section. After organizing and reviewing the data, initial codes were developed to capture meaningful patterns and refined through successive cycles into broader categories and themes.

Theoretical Framework

Harris and Fallot's (2001) five principles of trauma-informed care were designed to create a supportive environment that fosters healing, prevents re-traumatization, and promotes resilience for individuals affected by trauma. For this study, the principles were intended to be understood by educators as a way to shift their approach by prioritizing their students' well-being and focus on their strengths and resilience rather than solely on how their attitudes and behaviors affect the school environment. The principles included: 1) safety, 2) trustworthiness, 3) choice, 4) collaboration, and 5) empowerment.

Alignment of Research Questions to Theoretical Framework

Designing a school with the principles of trauma-informed care in mind recognizes that students' emotional and physical wellbeing, sense of security and belonging, and their past and current traumas influence their ability to learn. In other words, a trauma-responsive school responds to the reality that students are people with whole, complicated lives, in and out of the classroom, and how they have experienced safety, trustworthiness, choice, collaboration, and empowerment outside of school affects how they think and act inside their classroom and school. Educators must consider how they will respond to their students who are affected by trauma, to understand how traumatic experiences impact their students' ability to learn, and to consider how their relationships with their students, the procedures and routines in their classrooms, and the overall atmosphere in the school might be helping or hurting the children the school exists to serve. In considering the principles of trauma-informed care, it is important to note that these strategies and practices create an inclusive and welcoming environment that can be utilized with all students, whether or not they have experienced trauma. Table 3.3 provides an analysis of the

alignment of the theoretical framework and research questions for each question asked in the initial interview.

Table 3.3

Protocol Alignment of Trauma-Informed Care – Initial Interview

Research Strategy	Research Question	Protocol Question	Theoretical Framework
Initial Interview	OQ, SubQ1	Can you describe your beliefs about what educators' relationships with their students should look like and how they are created and developed in the classroom?	
Initial Interview	OQ, SubQ3	How do you create an environment in your classroom where students feel both physically and emotionally safe for learning?	Principle 1
Initial Interview	OQ, SubQ1, SubQ3	How do you build and maintain trusting relationships with students, particularly those who may have experienced trauma or struggle to feel safe with adults?	Principle 1
Initial Interview	OQ, SubQ1, SubQ3	What specific routines, communication strategies or expectations do you use in your classroom to help students see you as consistent and trustworthy?	Principle 2
Initial Interview	OQ, SubQ3	How do you provide students with opportunities to make meaningful choices in their learning or daily routines in the classroom?	Principle 3
Initial Interview	OQ, SubQ1, SubQ3	How do you offer students a sense of control or agency in your interactions with them, especially when addressing behavior, conflict, or emotional needs?	Principle 3
Initial Interview	OQ, SubQ1, SubQ3	How do you work alongside students to set goals, solve problems, or make decisions, rather than making choices for them?	Principle 4

Initial Interview	OQ, SubQ3	How do you help students recognize and build on their strengths and successes within the classroom environment?	Principle 5
Initial Interview	OQ, SubQ3	How do you encourage students to develop self-efficacy and confidence, particularly those who have experienced challenges or adversity?	Principle 5

Table 3.4 provides an analysis of the alignment of the theoretical framework and research questions for each question asked in the group consensus discussion following the professional development presentation.

Table 3.4

Protocol Alignment of Trauma-Informed Care – Group Consensus Post-Professional Development

Research Strategy	Research Question	Protocol Question	Theoretical Framework
Group Consensus	SubQ1	What did you learn from the professional development modules about safety, trustworthiness, choice, collaboration, and empowerment?	Principles 1-5
Group Consensus	SubQ2	Why are these principles important for people who have experienced trauma?	Principles 1-5
Group Consensus	SubQ2	Which strategies that you learned about (see list) do you see as most beneficial for your students? Why?	
Group Consensus	SubQ2	Can you describe one strategy you believe you can implement throughout your school over a three-week period?	
Group Consensus	SubQ2	How do you see yourselves carrying out the implementation of the strategy?	

Table 3.5 provides an analysis of the alignment of the theoretical framework and research questions for each question asked in the second interview which follows the professional development presentation.

Table 3.5

Protocol Alignment of Trauma-Informed Care - Second Interview Post-Professional Development

Research Strategy	Research Question	Protocol Question	Theoretical Framework
Second Interview	SubQ1	How did the content in this training confirm, challenge, or expand what you already believed about teaching and trauma?	Principles 1-5
Second Interview	SubQ2	Which strategies that you learned about (see list) do you see as most beneficial for your students? Why?	
Second Interview	SubQ2	Can you describe one strategy you believe you can implement in your classroom over a three-week period?	
Second Interview	SubQ2	How do you see yourself carrying out the implementation of the strategy?	

Table 3.6 provides an analysis of the alignment of the theoretical framework and research questions for each question asked in the third and final interview.

Table 3.6

Protocol Alignment of Trauma-Informed Care – Final Interview

Research Strategy	Research Question	Protocol Question	Theoretical Framework
Final Interview	SubQ2	With what level of fidelity would you say you implemented your strategy? What frequency and what quality?	
Final Interview	SubQ2	Can you describe the effects the strategies you implemented had on your students' attitudes and behaviors?	
Final Interview	OQ, SubQ1	Can you describe your beliefs about what educators' relationships with their students should look like and how they are created and developed in the classroom?	
Final Interview	Stem for the remaining questions:	After experiencing the training and implementing the strategies during the last three weeks,	

Final Interview	OQ, SubQ3	How will you create an environment in your classroom where students feel both physically and emotionally safe for learning?	Principle 1
Final Interview	OQ, SubQ1, SubQ3	How will you build and maintain trusting relationships with students, particularly those who may have experienced trauma or struggle to feel safe with adults?	Principle 1
Final Interview	OQ, SubQ1, SubQ3	What specific routines, communication strategies or expectations will you use in your classroom to help students see you as consistent and trustworthy?	Principle 2
Final Interview	OQ, SubQ3	How will you provide students with opportunities to make meaningful choices in their learning or daily routines in the classroom?	Principle 3
Final Interview	OQ, SubQ1, SubQ3	How will you offer students a sense of control or agency in your interactions with them, especially when addressing behavior, conflict, or emotional needs?	Principle 3
Final Interview	OQ, SubQ1, SubQ3	How will you work alongside students to set goals, solve problems, or make decisions, rather than making choices for them?	Principle 4
Final Interview	OQ, SubQ3	How will you help students recognize and build on their strengths and successes within the classroom environment?	Principle 5
Final Interview	OQ, SubQ3	How will you encourage students to develop self-efficacy and confidence, particularly those who have experienced challenges or adversity?	Principle 5

Data Analysis

In qualitative research, the researcher's goal is to look beyond the surface of the data that has been collected from interviews and other sources and to use the coding process to organize and condense the data into meaningful categories and themes aligned to the study's research questions. In this study, I approached data analysis as an iterative and reflexive process. Guided

by Saldaña's (2021) framework for coding and theme development, I sought to understand how the data was connected to the school and interconnected between the educator participants. Consistent with Saldaña's (2021) perspective that qualitative inquiry requires analytical, theoretical, and critical thinking, I also worked to understand not only what participants said, but how their experiences and reflections intersected with one another and within the larger context of trauma-informed practice in an elementary (K-5) school. The next section details the specific process of analyzing the data.

Immediately after the interview, I captured the key ideas and episodes in written form in a reflexive journal. Stake (1995) defined reflexivity as the process where the researcher critically examines their own biases and perspectives and how these may influence the research process and findings. He emphasized that the researcher is an instrument in the study, making it crucial for them to acknowledge and reflect on their own role, assumptions, and how their presence might affect the case. Creswell and Poth (2025) defined reflexivity as the "active, ongoing process of engaging in critical reflection on how the researcher constructs knowledge from and during the research process" (p. 503).

In writing a reflexive passage, the researcher discusses their experiences with the central phenomenon and how these experiences may potentially shape their interpretation (Creswell & Poth, 2025). Reflexive passages can be used to organize thoughts, generate insights, and otherwise help the researcher consider their influence on the study. The process of reflexivity involves sensitivity and empathy to understand the case deeply, so an important consideration when collecting data from an interview is for the researcher to schedule ample time immediately following the interview to record notes in their reflexive journal (Stake, 1995).

Saldaña (2021) recommended manual coding and qualitative data analysis using paper and pencil on printed copies of the data as the best option for beginning coders. Therefore, an important preliminary step in data analysis, which the I followed, is to prepare the data corpus, the entire body or collection of data that will be analyzed. I used a word processing program to organize printed interview transcripts, field notes, and other researcher-generated materials. Rather than leaving the text as one long unbroken passage, I followed Saldaña's (2021) recommendation to separate it into shorter units whenever the topic appeared to change. Organizing the data in this way gave me some initial familiarity with the contents of the corpus and allowed for initial organizing and labeling.

My analytic work was also informed by Bogdan and Biklen's (2007) phases of qualitative analysis, which include discovering, coding, discounting, and asking questions about the data. Once the data corpus was prepared, the next step in the research process was to read through the data from the interviews, examining the case both contextually and holistically. As I immersed myself in the data, I focused on identifying the core patterns that emerged from the data collection and from there to determine what made this single case unique. While I acknowledge that audiences may draw valid but limited generalizations from this qualitative single case study, the central aim, consistent with Stake's (1995) framework, remains particularized.

During the discovery stage, I repeatedly watched and listened to the recordings of the interviews, read and reread the transcriptions, and considered the entries the educators had recorded in their journals as well as the artifacts they had shared with me. The purpose of this prolonged exposure to the data was to allow my brain to become familiar with it, decipher its core meaning, and begin the process of finding and explaining patterns. The discovery stage

included what Saldaña (2021) calls “pre-coding” (p. 30) which entails noticing and marking those words or phrases which initially stand out as worthy of attention. As I moved through the analysis, I added to the reflexive journal I began during the interviews by using what Saldaña (2021) termed “preliminary jottings” (p. 31) to create analytic memos intended to document my thoughts and observations as I read. These memos attempted to capture emerging insights, potential patterns, emotional tone, and analytic questions. This process allowed me to document all my thoughts rather than relying on my memory for future writing (Saldaña, 2021). Throughout the data analysis process, I persistently asked how the participants’ perspectives aligned, diverged from, or expanded understanding of trauma-informed care in their school setting. The goal was to examine how educators’ perceptions are interconnected, how their insights related to the implementation of trauma-responsive strategies, and how these insights aligned with the study’s research questions.

The next step in Bogdan and Biklen’s (2007) process is the coding phase. Vogt et al., (2014) explained that in qualitative data analysis, a code is generated by the researcher to translate the data, and Saldaña (2021) added that a well-developed code captures the essence of data in the same way that a well-conceived title encapsulates a book. Bernard (2018) stated that analysis is simply searching for patterns in the data and for ideas to explain why those patterns are there. During the coding phase I began the process of data analysis by synthesizing the data, assigning codes to it, looking for patterns in the codes, then organizing the patterns into categories. Once the categories were developed and the data assigned thereto, I began identifying themes and working to show how the relationships between the themes led toward the development of findings (Saldaña, 2021).

Saldaña (2021) described two types of coding processes. First cycle coding processes happen during the initial coding of data, and their primary purpose is to break the data apart. Once the data is analyzed, the researcher can begin putting it back together, or synthesizing, which is accomplished using second cycle methods. I approached the coding process by conducting first cycle coding using a combination of descriptive and In Vivo methods (Saldaña, 2021). Descriptive coding allowed me to assign labels that summarized the basic topic of a passage, while In Vivo coding preserved participants' own words to maintain closeness to their lived experiences (Saldaña, 2021). Examples of descriptive coding included identifying themes such as ask for input, boundaries, communication, consistent routines, controlled choice, goal setting, modeling through personal experiences, and teachers building positive, family-like relationships with their students. Through In Vivo coding, I identified significant statements the teachers made and narrowed the initial themes and highlighted quotes to use as evidence. These first-cycle codes helped identify crucial concepts related to perceptions of trauma-informed care, classroom application of strategies, and contextual factors influencing implementation.

After first-cycle coding, I engaged in second-cycle coding where I used pattern coding to reorganize and condense the initial codes into more meaningful clusters as described by Saldaña (2021). Saldaña also explained that second-cycle coding supports the transition from fragmentation toward synthesis, enabling the researcher to see larger segments of meaning. Through this process, code clusters developed into preliminary categories, which I continually refined by returning to the interview transcripts, journal entries, artifacts, and the study's research questions. To accomplish second-cycle coding, I used a spreadsheet to organize the themes and quotes from the first cycle of coding, looking for patterns and putting the data into

groups according to their themes. The headings for these groups of data included attunement, consequences, differentiation, mistakes, and unconditional acceptance.

Once it was coded, I intensified the process of sorting the data into categories to begin refining the analysis. Bogdan and Biklen (2007) identified two important considerations during the coding phase: to consider the data that does not seem to fit and to think about what is not in the data. In accordance with the considerations about when to discount data, I focused on each of the following: the context in which the data was collected; the role that was played in the data analysis process by the actions of soliciting, or not soliciting, the data; the influence of the setting on the observer and participants; and my own assumptions. Bogdan and Biklen's (2007) final phase of data analysis is asking questions about the data. Some questions that can be asked include: What stands out in the data? What are the patterns? What questions are related to the theoretical framework? These questions can be used to connect the data and weave it together in the analysis process (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).

By comparing the alignment of emerging themes with the theoretical framework, I observed some potential inconsistencies between educators stated beliefs and their corresponding actions. In some situations, they expressed conceptual support for choice, collaboration, and empowerment, but their actual classroom practices did not reflect their stated beliefs. For example, when I asked them how they provided students with opportunities to make meaningful choices in their learning or daily routines in the classroom, almost all the teachers said they were not comfortable with offering their students open-ended choices. Two of the teachers expressed dismay when they realized they had never considered offering choices to their students, but upon further reflection, they admitted they would only be comfortable with giving their students two prior approved options. A second area of contradiction with trauma-informed practices is the

custom in this school of using token economies, candy, and prizes as rewards when students meet behavior expectations. This method has been shown to be contrary to appropriate trauma-informed practices (Berardi & Norton, 2019). Although specific praise was described as a common strategy for acknowledging desirable actions, tangible rewards were also a popular option. Additionally, I observed a tension between educators' understandings of unconditional positive regard and providing discipline, particularly in the area of implementing consequences. The educators did not seem to have a clear conceptualization of how to address misbehavior while maintaining unconditional positive regard.

Once the themes were finalized, I studied them considering Harris and Fallot's (2001) five principles of trauma-informed care to interpret how educators' experiences reflect safety, trust, choice, collaboration, and empowerment in an elementary (K-5) school context. As described in the next section, I verified credibility through member checking to confirm accuracy with the participants and ensured the findings reflected their intended meanings. I also engaged in peer review to ensure appropriate contextual application. This final analytic step allowed me to connect educators' voices with the theoretical framework and to construct findings that demonstrated how trauma-informed practices intersected with existing relationships, resources, and routines in the school.

Trustworthiness, Ethics, and Research Standards

Creswell and Poth (2025) explained that ethical situations can develop at any stage of the research process, so they must be anticipated and planned for as the researcher designs the qualitative study. Hence, I viewed ethical practice, not as a single step, but as a continuous commitment throughout this study. Transparency, reflexivity, and communication with participants was used to establish a foundation of trust and integrity through which the I

attempted to ensure a balanced and ethical representation of participants' voices, resulting in a study that upholds the highest standards of qualitative research practice.

Adhering to the research policy outlined by the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB), this study was also guided by a commitment to trustworthiness, ethics, and rigorous research standards. Throughout the research process, an ethical lens was consistently applied to ensure validity and integrity (Dibley et al., 2020). I employed several strategies to strengthen ethical practices and credibility, including modeling and encouraging vulnerability and openness, engaging in member checking, and utilizing both peer review and peer debriefing. Fostering vulnerability and openness was crucial to the interview process in case the educators found it difficult to share honestly about their perceptions and experiences. Peer review and debriefing helped ensure academic rigor and quality throughout the process.

Vulnerability and Openness

Morse (2015) emphasized that prolonged engagement and persistent observation are essential for developing the level of trust necessary for generating rich, meaningful data. In this study, I worked to establish trusting relationships with participants to create a safe environment that encouraged authenticity and vulnerability. Tracy's (2010) criteria of sincerity and resonance was established as participants were treated with dignity, respect, and compassion. I remained present and attentive, suspending judgment while acknowledging my own preconceptions. This reflexivity helped participants feel heard and allow their perspectives to emerge naturally. My efforts to consistently confront personal subjectivities and assumptions throughout data collection and analysis deepened the transparency and credibility of the study.

Member Checking

To ensure accuracy, trustworthiness was strengthened through a variation of member checking. Creswell and Creswell (2017) emphasized the importance of carefully checking to ensure the accuracy of the transcription, while Birt et al. (2016) advocated moving beyond basic verification to refine the researcher's understanding of participants' experiences. In this study, I returned a summary of findings to the research participants via email to allow them to verify the accuracy of my work and to invite any questions or clarifications. As a professional courtesy, I provided the principal with a summary of her findings and debriefed her on the collective findings of the school. Tracy (2010) called this process member reflections, describing it as the opportunity for participants to offer additional insights and reflexive elaboration rather than simply confirmation of findings. This exchange enhanced the validity and credibility of the findings and reaffirmed my understanding of participants lived experiences.

Peer Review and Peer Debriefing

The study's rigor was further reinforced through peer review and peer debriefing. These are critical processes in research methodology for ensuring the quality and scholarly integrity of qualitative research. Peer review involves evaluation of the research by practitioners and other experts in the field which contributes to credibility and adherence to academic standards. This plays a critical role in maintaining integrity prior to dissemination of the study's findings (Creswell & Poth, 2025). Peer debriefing provides an additional layer of scrutiny through conversations with colleagues who challenge assumptions, identify potential biases, and scrutinize interpretations (Creswell & Poth, 2025). The processes of peer review and peer debriefing complement each other to contribute to the overall quality and validity of the study by providing a more thorough evaluation from multiple perspectives. As peer review ensures the

academic rigor of the research, peer debriefing offers critical insights and scrutiny. I conducted one peer debriefing session with a professional colleague to review my data analysis process and findings. Through these combined processes, the study benefited from both expert evaluation and critical dialogue, strengthening its trustworthiness and the integrity of its findings.

Subjectivities

I acknowledge my positionality as both an educator and counselor who has personally and professionally witnessed the effects of trauma on children and educators. My empathy and advocacy for trauma-informed care served as valuable lenses for understanding participants' experiences, while also introducing potential bias. I selected my topic after becoming aware of the impact of trauma on children and adults. I began my research while observing my adopted son, who experienced trauma in early childhood by being unexpectedly but permanently separated from his birth mother at a train station in Mumbai, India. This trauma continued to impact his life during high school, college, and adulthood in situations where the results of his trauma were not understood or accepted. My research continued through the adoptions by my daughter and son-in-law of six children from two family units who experienced abuse and neglect at the hands of their biological parents and separation from each other in a series of foster homes. The children's brains had developed patterns to keep them safe which were necessary in their homes of origin but not in their school classrooms. Many classroom management issues arose which could have been prevented or circumvented if their teachers had been trained and able to implement the principles of trauma-informed care. Finally, working as a teacher and school counselor, I observed the challenges faced by school personnel from behaviors of children in the school system whose attempts to seek empowerment and choose ways to feel safe were met with disciplinary actions by teachers and principals who saw their behavior as inappropriate

and disruptive. The trauma histories and school experiences of my family members and students have made a significant impact on my personal views about the importance of educators' understanding and integration of trauma-informed strategies in their classrooms.

To address these subjectivities, I employed reflexivity throughout the study by maintaining a reflexive journal that documented assumptions, emotional responses, and interpretive decisions (Creswell & Poth, 2025). I addressed potential issues of trustworthiness by considering my own subjectivity and role in the study, which included establishing trust through transparency and ongoing communication. Reviewing the contents of my reflexive journal taken during the interviews provided important insights into this process. These additional trustworthiness strategies, along with maintaining vulnerability and openness, member checking, and peer review, were used to ensure transparency and mitigate bias (Guba, 1990). These practices strengthened the credibility and confirmability of the findings while honoring the authenticity of participants' voices.

Summary

This study used a qualitative single case design to explore how elementary educators in a Midwestern (K–5) elementary school understand, select, apply, and reflect on trauma-responsive strategies before and after participating in the *Becoming Trauma Responsive* professional development (Lane et al., 2025). Participants included the principal and seven K-5 classroom teachers, and data was collected over three sessions using semi-structured interview protocols. The data from the interviews was transcribed, coded, and analyzed using Harris and Fallot's (2001) five principles of trauma-informed care including safety, trust, choice, collaboration, and empowerment as the theoretical framework. The findings from the data analysis will be discussed in Chapter 4.

Chapter 4 - Findings

In this chapter, I present data gathered from a qualitative single case study with selected educators from Midwestern elementary (K-5) school. Case study design was selected for this study to deeply examine educators' perceptions and experiences by collecting information through participants' journal entries, artifacts provided by the participants, and multiple sets of semi-structured interviews. Case study design allowed for an in-depth understanding of individual experiences and the collective dynamics of the school community. By focusing on a single case, the study explored nuanced changes in educators' perceptions and practices resulting from professional development, while providing rich contextualized data for analysis. To gain an in-depth understanding of the case, I gathered meaningful qualitative data by reading responses to reflective questions which the educators discussed in their journals, reviewing artifacts created by the educators to support implementation of their strategies, and conducting three sets of individual interviews.

The data presented in this chapter was gathered from journal entries, artifacts provided by the participants, and interviews with the principal, two kindergarten teachers, and one teacher from each grade level, first through fifth grade. A set of initial interviews was completed to gather baseline data prior to the participants receiving professional development training, and the participants recorded journal entries of their three biggest takeaways after watching the *Becoming Trauma Responsive: Feature Documentary* (K-State, 2026). The second set of interviews was completed after the participants completed *Becoming Trauma Responsive* professional development (Lane et al., 2025), and during this interview set, participants recorded in their journals the feelings that came up for them as they anticipated starting the new strategies in their classrooms. The final set of interviews was completed after the participants implemented

the strategies they selected following the professional development session for a period of twelve days. Prior to their final interviews, participants recorded a significant experience that resulted from their strategy implementation in their journal. Each participant also brought to their final interview an artifact they had designed and used to support their trauma-responsive practice. During each set of interviews, I explored the participants' perspectives on teachers' relationships with students and their beliefs about how they fostered the five principles of trauma-informed care in their classrooms. The journal entries were more intimate, thoughtful, and detailed providing information that did not come up in the interviews, and the artifacts provided a clear picture of what the strategies looked like and how they were experienced by the students.

Presentation of Data

During first-cycle coding, I used descriptive and In Vivo coding methods to discover the initial themes as they emerged. The themes from first-cycle coding were: boundaries, routines and consistency, communication, don't understand goal setting, ask for input, independence, controlled rather than open choices, share personal experiences, modeling being "human," maternal, and teachers building positive, family-like relationships with their students. Pattern coding was used to uncover the themes derived from second-cycle coding which were: attunement, consequences, differentiation, expect mistakes, learn from mistakes, and unconditional acceptance.

Following the data analysis, seven themes emerged as representative of how teachers from a Midwestern elementary (K-5) school perceived and practiced their beliefs about teacher-student relationships. The themes that were identified are: 1) ethics of care/empathy, 2) growth mindset, 3) positive and negative reinforcement, 4) attunement, 5) self-advocacy/student voice, 6) structure, and 7) connection. Once the seven themes were identified, I refined my analysis by

reviewing the themes while considering how the educators interpreted them in the context of Harris and Fallot's (2001) five principles of trauma-informed care. I then created Table 4.1 which shows the alignment of teacher-student relationships and the five principles of trauma-informed care with the seven themes identified through the data analysis.

Table 4.1

Alignment of Themes with Theoretical Framework

Themes:	Ethics of care/ empathy	Growth mindset	Positive/ Negative Reinforcement	Attunement	Self-advocacy Voice	Structure	Connection
Relationships	X	X					
Safety	X			X			X
Trustworthiness						X	X
Choice			X	X	X	X	
Collaboration		X	X		X		
Empowerment	X	X	X	X			

Next, I present a discussion of each of the seven themes that emerged through the data analysis process. For each theme, I give a brief introduction followed by an explanation of the rationale for the formation of the theme and how it intersects with relationships and the five components of trauma-informed care: safety, trustworthiness, choice, collaboration, and empowerment.

Theme 1 - Ethics of Care/Empathy

Putting themselves in the shoes of their students is the definition of empathy used by the school in this study. Recognizing the importance of empathy and showing care to their students was the strongest and most universal theme among the educators who participated in the interviews. Each educator acknowledged that in one way or another empathy and care were necessary parts of their classroom, particularly in how they build relationships with their students, how they help their students feel safe, and how they empower their students to develop confidence and self-efficacy.

Relationships

The most compelling way the educators expressed their understanding of empathy and their ethic of care was through their beliefs about relationships. The participants agreed that relationships with their students are an essential component of teaching, and that without them nothing else they say or do matters. The principal articulated this best when she called relationships the most important tool an educator has in their tool bag. She said, “Relationships are everything. If you try to teach a kid that doesn’t think you know or care about them, it’s not gonna stick.”

Viewing relationships through the lens of empathy was described in different ways, one of which was through personal connection. The teachers emphasized the importance of connecting with students one-on-one and getting to know them outside the traditional teacher-student relationship. Indigo said she tries to “be their teacher but also be their friend,” adding, “You're in their corner; your door is open.” Lavender echoed this idea by explaining that she acknowledges her students both in and outside of school and “always just acts like they’re kind of my buddy,” a strategy she believes helps her build rapport with her students and makes them more apt to come to her when they need something. These comments emphasize the importance of connection, portraying the educators as approachable, personal, and on the student’s side.

A second feature of the participants’ beliefs about relationships centered around making them positive with a focus on trust, reassurance, and support. Lavender described students’ needs to have “a safe place they can trust and value.” Prairie Rose added that students, “need to know there is somebody they can trust and to have the confidence that this person may get mad at me, but they also have my back." This belief was echoed by the principal who shared that she models

the importance of relationships between the teachers and herself, saying the teachers know she "has their back" and cares about them.

The educators also emphasized the role of encouragement to express care within relationships. Both Indigo and Lavender told how they write supportive notes to their students. Lavender typically writes them as comments on students' assignments while Indigo only recently began writing notes to her students. In response to the professional development training, Indigo implemented the strategy of asking her students to complete a daily check-in she made available to them via a QR code. She shared that she tends to get overwhelmed with tasks and sometimes forgets the personal connection and relationship part. Initially, she did not believe she had time to add the strategy, but she "tried really hard to get it done," and she loved it. Even better, her students also loved it. Although the students didn't complete the form consistently at the same time of day, they did do it every day. Indigo found that her students shared honestly, and the strategy helped her "dive in deeper" to get to know her class. In response to her students' comments on the daily check-in form, she has had some one-on-one chats with students as needed. Additionally, she began writing "little notes" and leaving them for her students to find in their lockers, in books, or on their desks. Writing encouraging notes has become a powerful way for the teachers to show personal attention and one-on-one care and empathy to their students.

Several teachers compared their relationships with the students in their classrooms to their relationships with their own children. One of these was Bluestem who described her relationships with her students as "almost maternal." She explained that in her relationships with her students she realizes that they will fail; she will get mad at them and be disappointed in them, but "that doesn't mean I don't love you," and it doesn't mean she won't do everything in her power to make sure they have everything they need. Coneflower also described the maternal

aspect saying, “As a parent, you have a different level of empathy. You see kids in a totally different way, so you . . . treat them in that way, really just kind of viewing them in a motherly way.” Coneflower related that this type of connection with her students is the foundation of what creates the relationship, and for her is “just kind of second instinct.”

Analysis of the data focusing on how participants demonstrate empathy and the ethics of care through their relationships with their students showed that the educators value focused, one-on-one attention, reassurance, support, and encouragement. These educators understand their roles to extend beyond instruction to the level of caring for their students like a friend or a parent. They place high value on being available to their students and on demonstrating that, even when they “get mad” at them, they care about them and will stand with them.

Safety

As with her explanation of the importance of relationships, the principal’s position on the role of empathy and the resulting ethics of care has clearly made an impact on the school’s culture. Sunflower shared her belief that if empathy is putting oneself in the shoes of another, and if she is putting herself in her students’ shoes, that implies understanding that they may not feel safe at home, so a culture of care would require her to “make here feel the safest that I can.” For this group of educators, creating a safe environment means creating a place where students receive consistent attention and can interact with educators who are understanding and supportive.

Although most of the educators did not use the word “empathy” in their responses to the interview questions, their answers showed they understand and value empathy and its role in how their day-to-day interactions contribute to their students’ perceptions of safety. Both Aster and Bluestem described their efforts to demonstrate empathy when students struggled, either

with challenges from home, such as a mother who was in the hospital, or circumstances at school such as a change in the daily schedule or conflicts with peers. For example, when the day's schedule needs to change, Bluestem lets her students know that "chaos is coming" by telling them that they are having a "wonky day today." Bluestem has created what she calls the "wonky donkey routine" so a change in the day's schedule is not so startling for her young students. When she uses this routine, Bluestem will make a comment such as, "Oh, those wonky days—they mess with us," showing her empathy and connection by acting like she is relating to her students and what they are feeling.

Check-ins and encouragement were another way the educators described how they show empathy and care to create an environment of safety in their classrooms. Lavender sends her students little notes while Indigo gives them "hugs and encouragement." Goldenrod maintains an atmosphere of positivity in her classroom, connecting with her students through positive feedback, being aware of when they need to talk, and making time to listen to them. She shared, "I have a conversation with them every day, check in with them, just continue to have conversations, positive ones, and show them I care." Prairie Rose, who works with older students, described her check-ins with students as opportunities to listen and wait for "honest answers."

Coneflower makes it a priority to give students "focused attention and time," sitting with each student for at least a few minutes a day, "even those who don't need academic help." If something comes up, even if they are in the middle of a lesson, she will say, "Let's just pause for a second. I can see that so-and-so is getting a little bit worked up, so we're gonna wait for our peer to catch up." Her goal with this pause is to show her students an example of what showing empathy to a friend can look like. She said her students thrive with this level of emotional

support, and it plays a significant role in helping them feel safe. It is a priority to her to recognize if any of her students are "having a crisis," and she will lead the rest of the class to "just be patient with them and be calm and work through that with them." Where previously she would pull a student from class and work on their challenge in the hallway, she said she "quit doing that," and she now works through it in the classroom, engaging the rest of the students in the process. She said she has opted for this strategy because the actions of one student may be affecting someone else in a different way, leaving that student out, and she wants to avoid that. She added that including the whole class in the conversation allows everyone to regroup, calm down, talk about the situation, then just move on to the next thing.

This group of educators believes that safety is relational and intentional, something that each adult in the building actively works to create through planned daily interactions. Students experience safety through hugs, positive conversations, focused attention and listening, routines based on empathy, honest conversations, and purposeful efforts to make the school experience as safe as possible.

Empowerment

Once again, the principal's perspectives on empathy and ethics of care set the tone for the other educators in the school. When asked how she encourages students to develop self-efficacy and confidence, Sunflower shared her philosophy of acceptance which mirrors unconditional positive regard, one of Rogers' core conditions of counseling. She said, "Even if you're not who other people think you should be, I don't care, I love you. You belong here." This attitude of unconditional acceptance is empowering to the students because it communicates to them that they have value and they belong regardless of how others may view them. The teachers model

acceptance, but they also teach it. Bluestem said the “number one rule” in her classroom is “you gotta be kind, and that solves a lot of things right there.”

Coneflower focuses on choosing her own words and guiding her students’ wording, so everyone feels valued for who they are. She explained her belief that one of her responsibilities as an educator is to, “guide that conversation and use examples so we know what to say and what not to say.” From her perspective, “Sometimes I don't think that they are trying to be mean. They just blurt out things not even really thinking about what they say.” Monitoring her own speech and guiding students to monitor their words empowers them because it keeps the conversations positive and accepting and allows everyone to be who they are without fear of criticism or shame. A final example of acceptance happened on Twin Day when a student arrived at school and was sad because he didn’t have a twin. He was wearing a white t-shirt, and the principal had an extra white t-shirt in her office, so she put it on so he could have a twin.

Individualized check-ins in this school also contribute to empowerment. The educators described one-on-one check-ins that are frequent, intentional, and focused on getting to know the students on a personal level. They also build on students’ strengths by looking for opportunities to make a big deal of their successes. Lavender provides reflective activities which helps her students learn about themselves. She reads their reflections and writes notes on them to reinforce their strengths. She explained her conviction that taking the time, although hard to find, to write an individualized note which will be meaningful to the student, is a powerful way to build on the student’s strengths. So, she is careful to write “not just vague things,” but “in depth” comments, saying, “They will take more away from that” than from a more superficial comment. These check-ins and other similar actions provide opportunities for teachers to attend directly to individual students rather than just treating their needs generally.

Reassurance and support are additional means of empowerment. Indigo tells her students that she has “Dumbo ears,” and if they ever want to talk, she is open to listening. Prairie Rose described how she communicated her care and belief to a student who had been treated at home as though he had no value. The student’s confidence was low, and he struggled with generalizing that everyone saw him as worthless, but when Prairie Rose acknowledged his efforts to keep trying, she realized that providing a listening ear and communicating her confidence in his capacity were helpful strategies for his empowerment. Lavender shared about former students who sought her out when they got in trouble at school. After hearing their story, she accompanied the students to the office, supported them in the investigation into the situation, and tried to prove to them that they matter by showing up for them and encouraging them. She said, “They see me show up for them, and if it's worth fighting for, I will do that.”

Educators show empathy and care through unconditional acceptance, one-on-one check-ins, reassurance, and support to build their students’ confidence and self-efficacy. These strategies communicate to the students that they are valued, that they belong, that they are seen and deserve to be heard, and that they do not have to navigate difficult situations alone because someone will stand with them when they need help.

Theme 2 - Growth Mindset

Educators’ perspectives on growth mindset reflected a shared belief that students can learn, improve, and develop when educators implement strategies such as supportive relationships, collaboration, and empowerment. A growth mindset was seen within relationships when educators emphasized creating safe environments where mistakes become opportunities for learning while maintaining high expectations. Educators demonstrated collaboration when they worked with students to improve by establishing goals, solving problems, and reflecting on

progress. Empowerment happened when educators normalized individual differences, encouraged persistence, and reinforced the belief that current challenges do not define future capabilities.

Relationships

To this group of educators, a growth mindset within relationships means creating an environment in which students feel safe to make mistakes and then to learn and grow from those mistakes. Hence, they come to see mistakes as a natural and necessary part of learning. In the context of relationships both Lavender and Prairie Rose stated that "it's okay to make mistakes," and Bluestem added that "knowing it's safe to mess up is key to growth & learning." Growth mindset within relationships is also reflected by the educators' role in helping students grow while remaining supportive. Indigo described her role as, "I'm there to push them and help them grow, but I'm also on their side." A significant observation is that the educators' beliefs challenge the students to grow with a genuine desire to support them in that growth. This observation is important because it indicates that helping students develop in the context of supportive relationships does not require removing high expectations. This emphasis on the connection between trying, failing, being supported through failure, and growing demonstrates a growth mindset attitude in which teachers' relationships with their students allow students to take risks without fear of being defined by their mistakes.

Another insight that emerged from the interviews was the emphasis on educators' roles in helping students grow in character and integrity. Prairie Rose described a situation in which she had to confront her class about an issue involving their choices when they had a substitute. The substitute had written a positive report about the class's behavior, but upon further investigation, Prairie Rose learned that, rather than completing an assignment on their iPads, they had been

watching YouTube videos and listening to music. Explaining why it was a breach of integrity for the students to goof off on their iPads while leading the substitute to believe they were completing the assignment, Prairie Rose told her students, “This is what we mean when we talk about character–when nobody is watching. That's literally our school pledge, guys.” In this context, she demonstrated her belief that the purpose of her relationships with her students was to help her students grow, not only through academic learning, but also through learning from mistakes related to their behavior and character. Even through this challenging example, Prairie Rose was able to maintain a balance between allowing mistakes, providing support, and encouraging continued growth. She echoed Indigo’s perspective of pushing her students to grow while showing them that she was also “on their side” when she explained that she wasn’t mad at them, but “Y'all made a decision, now we're gonna live with it together. We're gonna move on. Now respect my decision and what I have to do now, for consequences.”

Collaboration

Collaboration in the context of this research focused on how educators work alongside their students to support them in setting goals, solving problems, and making decisions rather than simply doing those things for them. Collaboration within a growth mindset showed up primarily through shared goals, frequent reflection, and a willingness to view mistakes as part of the learning process. Aster shared that she “gives lots of hugs” and believes it is important to get down on their eye level when she is talking to them, whether she is redirecting or giving positive feedback.

After making mistakes, the most common area that collaboration appeared was around goal setting between the educators and students. A common belief was that K-5 students are still learning what goals are and what it means to independently set and achieve a goal. As a teacher

of some of the youngest students, Aster explained that her goals and her students' goals are completely different. Whereas she wants them to learn to keep their hands to themselves, they want to learn about dinosaurs or about being a princess, so she meets them in the middle by telling them, "You get a goal; I get a goal." In areas like problem solving or making choices, a common strategy, rather than making the options open-ended, was to give their students two choices that they were equally fine with.

The K-2 teachers all acknowledged in various ways that they have primarily been the ones to set the goals, but they would like to involve their students more in setting goals for themselves. Coneflower shared, "I kind of am frustrated with myself, because over the whole year, I've set their goals." She stated that she has been working with her students on independence, so working with them to set their own goals "would be one way to give them confidence and independence." Goldenrod admitted, "I don't do a very good job with that right now," and Indigo said, "I need to do more of this." Bluestem, Coneflower, and Goldenrod all shared that their primary use of goal setting with their students has been to "do at least one better than last time" on FastBridge, to get one more smiley face colored on the behavior chart, or to read a certain number of pages or books. Goldenrod's students "chose what goal they wanted to do," then made a goal chart for 2026 and hung it up.

Another area where collaboration showed up was in reflecting together about areas where growth had happened. Lavender described a packet she provides for her students to use all year long which includes opportunities for them to write about themselves as well as space to write their goals. She explained that she helps her students develop their first goal by allowing them to write it, then giving them written feedback in the margin if needed. She also checks back with them periodically to see if they feel any goals need to change. Toward the end of the school year,

they discuss whether the goal was accomplished, why it was or wasn't, and whether it was okay that they didn't reach the goal. Both Indigo and Lavender mentioned the value of goal setting activities with their students when it comes time for student-led conferences. Indigo reported that it was "good kind of hearing what they were thinking about, where their mind was going, which might have been polar opposite of what I was thinking, but it was their goal, so I let them set their goal." Lavender continued, "Even though we don't always have student-led, I'm always prepared," so if the Board suddenly decided to make the conferences student-led, "I'm already halfway there."

Collaborating with their students while accepting that mistakes are normal and to be learned from creates the foundation for growth mindset in this school. Teachers and students work together to set goals, solve problems, and make decisions, reflecting as they go and working toward improvement without expecting students to achieve everything correctly the first time. Through this shared process, students learn what a goal is, what they need as they work toward improvement, and how to learn from the process, whether the goal was reached.

Empowerment

Empowerment plays a key role in growth mindset because it increases students' agency, helps reduce their feelings of helplessness, and strengthens their belief in their ability to act or change. Educators can empower their students by helping them understand that their capabilities are not fixed and that different people have different areas of strength as well as different areas in which they need support. Educators at this school used differentiation, progress toward goals, and "the power of yet" as tools to empower their students.

Since they are working with a variety of students with differing capabilities, educators understand they must keep a perspective that recognizes differences among learners without

viewing or presenting those differences as limitations on their students' abilities to grow. Coneflower explained that she and her students talk openly about differences to normalize them, explaining that "we all have special brains, and all of our brains are very different and unique." Coneflower believes strongly that part of her job is to have these conversations with her students as a whole group to acknowledge the value of each student despite, or because of, their differences. She emphasized the importance of "letting the whole class hear what they may struggle with and what they need to work on, and letting that be normal, because that's totally normal for that to be like that." She added, "At 34, I still have things that I'm not very good at." Goldenrod shared a similar perspective when talking about differences among her students. One of her students was upset because he kept getting out at Knockout, so she told him, "If I ran a race, I would probably lose right now, but I'm really good at crocheting. So, I mean, not everybody's good at the same thing. And that's okay."

Goldenrod also acknowledged the role of the power of yet in fostering both growth mindset and empowerment. She explained that she tells her students that just because they don't have it now doesn't mean they won't have it. "We talk a lot about the power of yet. It's okay not to have it right now, but that doesn't mean you won't ever have it." She added, "I'm almost 35 years old, and I still make mistakes, and that's just part of being human, and there's nothing wrong with that. That's how you learn. I'm still learning, and that's okay." She then connected the idea of empowerment and growing toward future success with working hard and sticking with it, saying, "I accept as long as there's some effort, we're good. I've failed a million times" and "When there's another hard challenge, they remember, or you can remind them, that they're a hard worker, so they can make it."

The educators' responses regarding growth mindset clarified their beliefs that students can develop, improve, and learn. When educators value everyone, treat mistakes as part of learning, and encourage their students to ask for help and keep working hard, they build belief that current challenges do not determine future accomplishments. When teachers talk about the power of yet and when they model and freely discuss their own struggles and growth, students grow in their own development and are increasingly empowered to believe in themselves and their own ability to set and achieve their goals.

Theme 3 - Positive and Negative Reinforcement

Although educators shared both positive and negative reinforcement strategies in their responses to the interview questions, the positive strategies were most common, and examples of positive reinforcement were provided by all eight educators. The negative reinforcement strategies were primarily reported by the principal and the fifth-grade teacher along with responses from two other teachers which described conversations with students about how they could have made better choices during incidents of behavior and conflicts between peers.

Choice

When asked to describe how they provide students with opportunities to make meaningful choices or how they offer students a sense of control or agency, two themes emerged. The first theme was to respond in a kind and affirming manner, particularly when students advocate for themselves. Bluestem described an example of a girl who asked her if she could have another girl at her table if they ever changed seats. Bluestem thanked the girl for asking her that, declaring, "I can't fix it if you don't tell me. And you told me so nicely, you asked me so nicely." She explained that she always praises her students for advocating for themselves when they don't understand a concept, when they need to use the calm down bucket,

or for any other reason. She provides positive reinforcement in the form of kind and affirming words because she wants them to feel free to express themselves and to ask for anything they need. Aster also teaches her students about the importance of being kind. In a lesson about Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King, Jr., the students observed that slavery and slave owners were not kind. Aster told her students, "We want to teach you how to be kind because being mean is ugly." One of her students replied, "Oh, that's why. I've been wondering." Reflecting on that discussion with her students, Aster shared, "They were just into it, and we were just into the conversation, and I'm like, that is why we do this."

Sunflower believes that the opportunity to do the right thing or to make the right choice is always there, and the expectation is that students default to making the right choice. She said she expects the adults in the building to make the right choice, and it seems logical to her that if the students are observing the adults making the right choices, they would realize that "it seems fair" that they would also have to do so. She holds a Morning Meeting at the beginning of every school day, and one thing that is always on the agenda is for the students to recite the school pledge:

> We choose to show respect, say kind words, and listen. We choose to be responsible for our behavior and our learning. We choose to care about ourselves, each other, our school, and our community. We have character even when no one is watching.

She goes beyond expectation, however, using positive reinforcement in the form of celebrations and incentives with the goal of "reworking" her students' thinking into believing they only have one choice, to do the "right thing." Sunflower said, "We celebrate, maybe too much, the good choices."

In the hallway near the front door, are two bingo boards, one for students and one for staff, and all the items on the board are “good things.” Examples of items on the students’ board include helping a friend, giving one’s best effort, or doing something even though it was hard, and examples of items for staff include drinking water or making the best of an unexpected change in the schedule. When an adult sees a student making a good choice, they give them a small plastic coin named after the school mascot, and the student writes their name on the bingo board. The students have little containers on their desks to hold their coins, and at the end of each month, they get to “go shopping” for a selection of prizes on the stage.

Another incentive Sunflower has incorporated is school mascot prize certificates where adults nominate students for showing kindness, or responsibility, or other “good things,” then she draws names at the end of the month and she and the students whose names are drawn go to lunch together. She also implements rewards for the teachers such as a kindness vending machine where teachers write something kind about someone as payment for a drink or snack that she has stocked in the teachers’ lounge. Sunflower explained that the purpose of these incentives is to give both students and staff chances to feel good about what they've done. She believes that most of them want to do the right thing and will take the opportunity to do so when it is given to them. She also believes they want to be celebrated, so she is willing to “go over the top” to celebrate everyone’s good choices.

Collaboration

The teachers also used rewards and fun activities like candy and a bubble gum party to acknowledge their students’ accomplishments such as improving their FastBridge scores or reaching their reading goals. As mentioned above, Goldenrod allowed each student to choose a goal they wanted to pursue, then created a 2026 goal chart to hang on the wall. Indigo

collaborated with her students to set reading goals, maintaining minimum expectations for school nights but allowing her students to establish a higher goal if they wanted "to push" themselves. When Aster does progress monitoring for FastBridge, she prints out the sheets that show each student's results along with the grid on which she has drawn her target line for them. She draws stars in the area above the target line and colors the area below it brown. As she meets with each student, she explains that she wants their scores to be above the line, "up here in the stars, not down in the dirt," and she encourages them to celebrate by saying, "I'm out of the dirt!"

Along with those tangible rewards, the educators are intentional to create positive environments in their classroom and to find reasons to give specific praise that identifies what students are doing well. Aster described the positive environment as "where safety, trust, and learning happen" and shared the importance of "finding" specific praise. She shared that she focuses a lot on the positive adding, "You find the praise because you don't want to ruin their self-esteem; you want to build it up. You want to give them belief, like, realistic, but belief." Prairie Rose also emphasized the role of specific praise to recognize positive behavior while adding the incentive of an additional reward. She gave this example, "I appreciate you sitting there quietly and getting it done. Matter of fact, go grab a candy."

Empowerment

Empowering students by using positive reinforcement strategies such as creating a positive environment, recognizing their strengths, and celebrating their successes was mentioned by several educators. Within this theme, the educators identified the importance of specific praise for students from educators but also for students from their peers. Sunflower shared that she uses specific praise to brag on students at Morning Meeting and celebrates them for even the tiniest thing. Goldenrod shared that she makes a big deal of her students' successes and strengths

and builds on them for future success. Especially when a student experiences success after struggling, she empowers them with praise for working so hard, then when there's another hard challenge, “they remember, or you can remind them, that they're a hard worker, so they can make it.”

In a similar vein, Prairie Rose and Cornflower valued specific praise, adding the importance of noticing when traits that seem annoying are waiting to be turned into strengths. One of Prairie Rose’s students makes it their job to tell the class when it is time to transition to a new subject or area of the building, but always a minute ahead. Rather than reprimanding him or telling him to “wait til the bell rings,” Prairie Rose decided to focus on the positive; punctuality is a good skill to have. Instead of turning it into an argument, she just allows the transitions to happen a minute early. For Coneflower, identifying a strength to praise may mean changing her perspective and her wording: “I'll change it to a positive, and I'll word it a little bit differently.”

Positive words and individual attention provide another form of reinforcement. One participant identified “positive words, one-on-one attention,” while incentives can include allowing a student to earn a privilege, such as extra recess, for the whole class. Aster, Bluestem, and Goldenrod all emphasized the quality of positivity as a characteristic of the environment as well as a behavior modeled by the adults in the building, and Indigo included students in the positivity equation, stating that creating a positive environment is a collective responsibility, “For people to feel good about their strengths and things, you have to help build each other up. It takes a group effort.” Part of this group effort on the part of the students includes taking the initiative to compliment, praise, and encourage their peers which, according to Indigo is "a good way to bring out their strengths and just get that good warm feeling once again." She encourages her students to celebrate one another by initiating responses like giving two claps when someone

bumps up a level in Extra Math, but she emphasized that when that praise from peers is genuine and unsolicited (such as a “Way to go!”), it is even more powerful. Indigo reiterated that it always feels good to hear praise from teachers and parents, but when the students are encouraging each other, “that’s important, too.” She shared that she has, “quite a few little ‘rah’ leaders in my group, guys and gals, who will just, out of the blue, say or acknowledge, and they need to hear that. Praise doesn’t only have to come from the adults.”

Negative Reinforcement

Although it played a less prominent role compared to positive reinforcement in the educators’ responses, some of them did describe their use of negative reinforcement, especially with the use of consequences when they discussed what they thought teacher-student relationships should look like and when they communicated with their students about certain behaviors. Prairie Rose explained that if she gets onto her students, it is because she is thinking ahead to their future. She tells them, "This is real-life based, why I'm hard on you, because it's gonna be harder out there." When her students were praised by the substitute for behaving well, but were goofing off on their iPads, she told them, "Y'all made a decision; I respect it. Now respect my decision and what I have to do now, for consequences." Goldenrod has conversations with her students about how they could have made better choices when they misbehave, and when Indigo’s students have a conflict, she brings the two parties together to allow each to share their side, then think through what they've done to how they could have made a better choice. While Sunflower is focused on developing relationships, others think she should dole out more severe punishments such as in-school suspension. She explained that some people think that “fair is equal,” but she disagrees because children are not all the same. Sunflower’s habit is to get students’ input on what they feel is a fair consequence. She shared that this also helps her gauge

how remorseful the student is and how serious they perceive their infraction to be. In the end, though, Sunflower shared, "It's such a hard line for me, because everybody's watching how I discipline," and it is unsettling when they disagree with her methods.

Theme 4 - Attunement

This group of educators showed an intentional awareness of their students' emotions, circumstances, and sense of security. Their responses to the interview questions showed their recognition of the importance of paying attention to what was happening to their students and responding with kindness and patience. This attunement and the responses it evoked are understood most significantly in the trauma-informed practices of safety, choice, and empowerment.

Safety

In the era of school shootings and bullying, the importance of maintaining physical safety in schools cannot be overlooked. Indigo talked about a child in her class who has shared that she is stressed about her mother who works "in the bad people place" (i.e., the courthouse). The child is so concerned that she struggles to sleep at night and recently opened up that she was worried about someone with a gun getting into the courthouse or the school. Although she acknowledged that they were "just words," Indigo had a private "chit-chat" with the child to reassure her that her mom is a "smart lady" in a "really, really safe place," and she would be "constantly thinking" because she wants to be able to "walk in the door to see" the child and her sister. Indigo said her class also knows that she is always aware of whether the outside door is propped open. She said, "We do not do that, and I'll stop my lesson and close it to try to keep them safe there." She thinks that when they see her make closing the door a priority, it surely makes them feel like, "Oh, she's taking care of us."

Even more than physical safety, the educators emphasized their roles in creating and maintaining emotional safety. Attunement begins with being aware and noticing how another person is doing. Bluestem helps students feel emotionally safe by being aware of their emotions and changes that are happening in their lives. Both Aster and Coneflower described the importance of noticing differences in their students and letting students know their differences are recognized and appreciated. When Sunflower visits with students, she focuses on creating an environment that feels safe, so students feel "free to talk." Just spending time with her students and getting to know them on a more personal level are also priorities for Sunflower. She said, "When kids feel known, they feel seen."

Emotional safety through attunement is also reflected in how the educators communicate with students, particularly in the tone of voice they use. Coneflower said, "I really think it is the teacher's tone of voice, my tone of voice." She explained that speaking with patience and kindness rather than showing frustration or using a rude voice when talking to her students helps them feel safer with her. Bluestem described the "constant interaction" and "open-ended conversations" that keep her attuned to her students' emotional needs, "letting them feel safe to tell me those things and trying to figure out when it comes to behavior, why it's occurring." When she notices that her students are struggling with their emotions or behaviors, she gives them a hug and gently invites them to spend some time with the calm down bucket. She reassures them that "everything is figure-out-able," with one of her favorite call and response phrases, "Every problem . . . has an answer!"

Choice

Educators offer their students a sense of control or agency in their interactions with them by using attunement. They primarily focus on adapting their interactions to meet their students'

needs rather than relying on a predetermined structure or discipline protocol. Prairie Rose described a student who frequently becomes dysregulated in her classroom. She tries to keep both herself and the student "calm, cool, and collected," but once a discussion "starts becoming conflict," she will let them stand up, and she will sit down "to lose that intimidation authority." She explained that she would sit down, lower her tone of voice, and intentionally pronounce her words more slowly, all as attempts to help the student stay calm.

When engaging in potentially conflictive conversations with students, Sunflower is careful to maintain a posture of listening. Rather than structuring the conversation according to her agenda, she said she "just lets them talk," and she listens "which helps them feel seen." Sunflower also referred to Gaskill's (Lane et al., 2025) discussion about the early childhood teacher who learned that rocking her student for fifteen minutes as soon as dysregulation was noticed allowed them to avoid a two-hour meltdown. She encourages her teachers to allow for short "minute conversations" as soon as they notice a student is escalating in order to give the student an opportunity to "get something off their chest." According to Sunflower, this strategy will hopefully help the student "be okay to move on" and "save a meltdown later on."

Empowerment

Similar to their beliefs about using attunement to build safety, the educators viewed noticing and acknowledging their students' differences as a strategy for empowering their students. Helping students recognize and build on their strengths and develop confidence increases student self-efficacy. Both Aster and Prairie Rose emphasized the importance of letting their students know that their teacher notices them. Aster reiterated the value of specific praise, adding that she tells them when she notices their individual successes.

Prairie Rose explained that she is intentional to notice and acknowledge that she sees her students working hard and giving their best effort. She recognizes individual students' abilities and gives them a "leadership spot" in their area of strength by allowing them to tutor a peer or to spend time with students in a younger grade. She also allows students to work with a peer to provide them with opportunities to share their learning with others and gain practice in a leadership role.

In addition to seeing their students as individuals, noticing their bids for attention requires attunement on the part of the educator. Aster described a strategy she uses when a student is talking, and another student raises their hand. She says, "Hey, you're next! I'll get to you in a second," a phrase which reassures the student that they are seen and valued. In her words, "Knowing they're next, and that I see them. I can't get to you, but I will. And just acknowledging that they're people." Indigo is also intentional to show her students that "they're seen, they're heard, and that someone cares and loves them while they're here at school." She said she had attempted to greet each student by name when they came in the door after Morning Meeting. She also described moments throughout the day when she will make eye contact with a student and they will share a smile, a connection she hopes communicates to the child that she sees them, and "she actually knows I exist."

For these educators, attunement in the context of empowerment means that teachers are actively noticing and acknowledging students. Students' presence, their names, differences, effort, and individual successes are all identified as details the educator notices. When educators notice and give attention to their students, the students feel recognized and valued.

Theme 5 - Self-advocacy/Student voice

Most of the themes of this research are tied directly to the work of the educators, but the theme of self-advocacy and student voice shifts the focus to reveal how students are allowed to express themselves in the classroom and school setting. Self-advocacy and student voice reflect practices that provide students with opportunities to freely express their thoughts and ideas, to share their needs and goals, to make their own choices, and to participate in other meaningful ways in the classroom community. Educators support self-advocacy and student voice by intentionally seeking students' input, creating opportunities for students to exercise independence, and allowing them to take an active role in decisions that affect them.

Choice

Looking at self-advocacy and student voice within the theme of choice, Lavender shared her strategy of allowing her students control and agency in making decisions about the classroom rules. She asks them what they would like to see and encourages them to share their opinions. She said there have been times when she has already implemented a rule or procedure, but it isn't working well. In those cases, she will sit down with her students to ask for their input and to explore why things might not be working. She has had students share ideas that she has then implemented in the classroom to see if things work better. Lavender thinks these types of interactions get her students more involved, and when they buy into the interactions and the classroom culture, they are more likely to be intentional about following it. Lavender believes allowing her students to make choices and be part of the process will make the decisions more meaningful to them, and that is the kind of investment she is hoping for. She shared, that sometimes, "when I know we've had a really bad week, I might say, give me three things you'd like to see different because sometimes they're tired of certain things, and they want it switched

up.” Then, after her students have shared their ideas, she “will try to take two of those or something and try it.” She added, "It's not just my room, but it's also theirs, and asking for their input gives them their voice back."

Lavender shared a specific example which involved her students’ request to use YouTube. She had experienced what she called a “traumatizing” situation several years earlier when she was gone, and her students had used YouTube and other computer resources inappropriately. It took her several weeks to figure out what was going on, and by then, the situation had become “very bad, just awful.” Lavender said she shares this story with her students every year in order to help them see that she is trying to honor their efforts to exercise their voice and advocate for themselves, but she also needs to explain to them why it is still hard for her to trust them with YouTube and why it is important that they reward her trust by following her rules.

Indigo and Prairie Rose described how they incorporated self-advocacy and student voice in relation to learning. Indigo said she does not ask students for input about what they want to learn in math, but she will ask for their ideas in social studies and science. She shared that she would ask the students to come up with questions they would like to further explore or research, and she will “find a very safe site” where she can type it in. Indigo believes that when her students can “have ownership in something like that, they're probably gonna get more learning and understanding of each other.” Indigo also supports her students’ self-advocacy by asking them to think about “making some choices out of their own brain, instead of always what an adult tells them.” Prairie Rose described providing “equal opportunity” for her students to contribute to the classroom. Students who finish an assignment early or have their work all done receive the opportunity to participate are allowed to go around and help other students. This

provides subtle ways for students, especially with behavior issues, to advocate for themselves and have a chance to be perceived differently by other classmates.

Providing controlled choices was another way teachers described giving their students a voice. Prairie Rose tells her students, “I'm going to give you choices to make. Not too many. It's one or… it's two, but still options.” She said she thinks giving them even controlled choices is a way to give them a voice, “which gives them that opportunity to thrive, and to be more engaged.” Aster, Bluestem, and Coneflower, who teach younger children, support their students’ self-advocacy and voice through their use of controlled choices such as choosing to sit at their desks or on the carpet or choosing the two colors they want to use when decomposing ten in math. Supporting self-advocacy and student voice also means creating an environment where it feels safe to ask questions. Bluestem related the story of the student who advocated for herself by asking, “If we ever move can I have another girl at my table?” Bluestem said she always praises her students and tries to make them feel safe when they advocate for themselves by asking questions. She tells them, “I'm so glad you came and asked me, because now I can help you. I can’t fix it if you don’t tell me.”

Collaboration

In the area of collaboration, educators described self-advocacy as supporting their students to be independent, specifically, when it comes to handling conflict productively and with kindness. When addressing behavior, conflict, or emotional needs, Coneflower encourages her students’ independence by asking the students to tell her what happened and getting “to the end of the nitty-gritty.” She explained her perspective on the importance of taking that time in the classroom to really address the issues that arise. She acknowledged that each day is so full of scheduled activities that it is tempting to “just sweep it under the rug. But these are little guys,

they need opportunities to feel like they have a little bit of say, and if I didn't allow that it would basically be me taking their voice away."

Bluestem also discussed how she gives students a sense of control or agency when addressing behavior, conflict, or emotional needs. She frequently asks them what they need, how she can help, or what would help them. This technique gives them some control and agency but within set boundaries. If a child is upset, the teacher might ask, "Do you need a hug? Do you need a few minutes with the calm down box?"" She also described situations when a student has asked independently if they could use the box.

A significant area where the educators collaborated with their students to speak up and self-advocate was with setting boundaries for themselves and their bodies. Bluestem recently added a song to her class's daily routine which teaches vocabulary and strategies children can use to establish and enforce personal boundaries. The song says, "Please stop, I don't like that, I'm feeling uncomfortable, I need more space. Not around me, don't take it personally, that's just a boundary" (Pace & Pace, 2017). Bluestem teaches her students to take ownership of their voices and to be able to say, for example, "Hey, you've hurt me," but to do it respectfully. She explained that she gives them, "the words, the vocabulary to use, and how to say it correctly and how to respond when somebody apologizes to you." Coneflower teaches her students to use their voice when enforcing their boundaries, as well, explaining that her students "are learning about boundaries and social cues." Rather than just expecting them to automatically know how to work through things, she sets aside class time to teach them.

Sunflower also described a strategy she uses to create opportunities for students to practice self-advocacy. She created a student ambassador team made up of fifth graders who apply for the team by meeting specified criteria. The members participate in volunteer work in

the community and raise funds for the school store. The structure of the team provides its members with opportunities to take responsibility and participate in meaningful activities outside their classroom work. Lavender believes the goal-setting packet she uses each year provides her students with the opportunity to speak for themselves. Each student writes down at least one goal early in the year. Then, at the beginning of the second semester, Lavender asks her students whether their goals have changed. This practice teaches students that they can use their voice in strong ways, and they are also allowed to reconsider their message. Indigo engages her students in conversations about their goals, as well, allowing them to express themselves through those goals. She shared that it was good, "kind of hearing what they were thinking about, where their mind was going, which might have been polar opposite of what I was thinking, but it was their goal, so I let them set their goal."

Bluestem shared one final story about the self-advocacy for an English language learner. Throughout the year, the student had not understood when Bluestem read the lunch menu in English, so she would ask her to come to her desk where she would show her a picture on the computer. One day, Bluestem announced the menu, and the child didn't raise her hand for either option. When Bluestem asked her which menu item she wanted, the child responded, "I see a picture?" To Bluestem, this was such an exciting victory because not only did the child advocate for herself; she advocated for herself in English, and she felt comfortable doing it. Bluestem said she was "jumping up and down with excitement" at the student's ability to use her voice to advocate for herself.

Theme 6 - Structure

The theme of structure was foundational to the understanding of this group of educators as it applied to trauma-informed care in their classrooms, and structure appeared most

overwhelmingly in their discussion of the principles of trustworthiness and choice. The K-2 teachers without exception stated that routines, predictability, and consistency were essential to their expectations for their classroom environments. Although the 3-5 teachers allowed for more flexibility, they also emphasized the importance of predictability and consistency along with the resulting sense of calm and safety created by regular routines.

Trustworthiness

Fundamental to their perceptions of how to create and develop trustworthiness in their classrooms were the educators' insights into the role of consistency. From the first day of school, they begin teaching their procedures with the goal of their students learning the feelings of safety and trustworthiness that result from knowing and keeping to a schedule. Goldenrod explained that her days are "pretty scheduled" with "the same thing at the same time." Aster and Bluestem have their class's daily schedule along with illustrations at the front of the classroom. They want their students to know the schedule, to be able to depend on the schedule for tomorrow being the same as today's, and to know they can count on their teacher to inform them ahead of time if the schedule is going to change. Aster explained, "I have little symbols and have taught them what those mean. If we don't have it that day, I'll put an X on it just so they are prepared. I don't like them to have surprises."

Bluestem also emphasized the importance of predictability and knowing what comes next because "the unknown is scary." In her class they always do English Language Arts (ELA) in the morning and math in the afternoon; they always do their centers the same way, and worksheets all follow the same predictable format. When they do have a "really mixed-up day," Bluestem warns them that the chaos is coming by telling them that they are having a "wonky day today." For Lavender, teaching and establishing procedures is rooted in the approach taught by Wong et

al. (2024), “If you don't get it right the first time, you set them right back down. We keep modeling it and doing it until it gets to exactly the way it's supposed to be. So, I really like that.”

Lavender explained that she uses fun ways to manage her procedures such as a bell for one thing and a frog clicker for another. These strategies help the class stay focused on the learning tasks of the day. She believes these firm and clear boundaries help students learn to regulate themselves and recognize what it feels like to be safe. She said, “There’s certain expectations; it’s not negotiable. This is just how it’s gonna be. It feels safe; it does.” Another benefit of managing her classroom in this structured way according to Lavender is that it “keeps her sanity intact.” She realized that there was “a lot of chaos” and her students were “running her around like a whip,” so she implemented the routines that allowed her to “take some of that energy and refill” herself so she could be “in a calm space” with all her “stored energy.”

Structure was also associated with clear expectations for behaviors including time management and organization. Bluestem described how she uses consistency in the way she handles things, in the way she talks to her students, and in her expectations. On days when her students are struggling with their behaviors, she takes time to revisit her expectations for the classroom and reminds them that those expectations have not changed from the beginning of the year. Coneflower referred to her perspective of structure when she described her strategy of making it a priority to support her students “when they are having a freak-out moment.” She said, “I don't care what I'm doing, where we are in anything, I'm over there immediately, and I'm saying, okay, let's talk through it. The consistency and me showing up for them is everything.” After implementing the strategy she selected following the professional development training, Coneflower carried out that consistent connection to the next level by choosing to make connecting one-on-one with every student part of her own daily routine. Indigo also prioritizes

structure. She explained that she works hard to adapt to the new ways of things in most areas, but when it comes to organization, she likes to stick to the structured routines she has always used. In her third-grade classroom, she believes she needs to be getting her students ready to "fly on their own," so she works to train them to be ready for the next level.

Like Indigo's philosophy about preparing her students, Prairie Rose is constantly working to get her students ready for that next step, and she also credited consistency as the principle that supported her work to build relationships with her students. Prairie Rose acknowledged that the daily discussions she selected to implement in her classroom were important not only to her but also to her students, and the progression in her daily journal entries illustrates the rewards her consistency produced. On the first of implementation, her journal entry reported, "Greeted everyone at the door to say good morning. Had quite a few students disregard me. I will see how it works out with the check-in at 8:30." Following that 8:30 check-in, she wrote, "Asked how everyone was doing this morning, had a handful of students interrupt other students responding, hoping to better facilitate expectations of being seated and listening to others." Prairie Rose's journal entry for Dy 2 said, "Greeted students, still had a couple that didn't acknowledge me. Check-in was better as more students were actively participating with listening and being seated." On Day 3, she wrote, "Today looks like we are starting off good. Greeting the students went better. Check-in went well, had full participation, and students were excited to tell me how their weekend went." Day 4's entry reflected increased positivity, "Today was great greeting everyone. Check-in is really going well. The students are really looking forward to it. Everyone was expecting to give their part. I had one student out of the fourteen complain, but then he joined in and did better." By Day 6, Prairie Rose's journal entry said, "The students remind me to do the check-in. They are still excited about us checking in and me being aware of their plans

or how they feel." On Day 10, she wrote, "Students looked more comfortable with our conversations. They even wanted the paras to participate in the check-in." By Day 13, the class had progressed beyond simple check-ins about their feelings and their plans to discussions about current events. This day's journal entry recorded, "Today our topic during check-in was the Gen 2 unemployment crisis and factors that lead to this crisis. Asked students to relate school with the workplace environment."

The progression of her journal entries reflected a growing trust and connection between Prairie Rose and her students, which was a result of her consistency in implementing the strategy each day. She knew the students appreciated and enjoyed the discussions because they became increasingly engaged in participating, and they reminded her when she forgot to initiate them. She also acknowledged that the discussions were helpful in building relationships with her students and communicating her classroom expectations, both of which contributed to a more positive classroom environment.

Prairie Rose declared that she wished she would have implemented the check-in/discussion strategy "way back" at the beginning of the school year "because it does help facilitate, okay, these are my expectations, even though it's in a less formal way, but still stating where I stand and where they need to be, and then their participation." She added that using this strategy earlier would have helped her "gain a little bit more of their trust early on." Next year, she would like to begin right away with "this give and take, maybe have it open up a little bit sooner," and added that she hopes making those connections sooner would help alleviate some of the earlier behaviors she had dealt with. Prairie Rose explained her belief that her students also valued the daily discussion and relationship building time she had implemented because "every day, even if I forget, like, we're in the thick of it," her students will call out, "Hey, we didn't do

that today. And I'll say, ‘Alright, well, then we're gonna pick it up right now.’” So, even if she forgets, her students remind her, and “they hold me to it, and I'm like, you're right, this was important to y'all, so we're gonna stop what we're doing, we'll give the 10 minutes, 15 minutes, and then we'll go on.” Although Prairie Rose did not begin the year with this routine, once she did add it, she attempted to implement it consistently even though her students sometimes had to remind her. She was able to see the value of structure in her classroom for communicating her classroom expectations and building relationships with her students, which contributed to a more positive classroom environment.

Choice

Educators also saw the importance of using structure and consistency to support students’ opportunities to make meaningful choices in their learning and daily routines in the classroom. Choices were not presented as unlimited freedom; rather, they were almost always offered within a structured framework. The most common framework was allowing students to make a choice between one of two options that were both acceptable to their teacher. For example, Bluestem offered her students a choice between sitting on the carpet or sitting at their desks and between a hug or time with the calm down box. Goldenrod admitted that “second grade is kind of hard to make choices, because they don't always make good ones.” She does, however, provide a consistent time on Fridays for her students to write in their journals. The structured part is the routine of Friday journal writing and that she gives the students a topic, usually about school; the choice part is the students are allowed to choose what they want to tell someone about the assigned topic. None of the educators were comfortable offering their students more than two options with any given choice. Aster explained her strategy stating that “it just seems routine to me to just do that.” She said, “I'll give them two choices that I'm okay with, and I walk away.

Because if you're towering over them, or even eye to eye they're not going to make those kinds of decisions." Describing a scenario of a student who was hanging back from joining the group, she might say, "You can come join us," then, she would remove eye contact or continue with the rest of the group, allowing the child space to make their choice. Usually, the child joined the group, and once they were comfortable, she casually thanked them for joining and acknowledged them with a wink. She added that she gives them more positive feedback the longer they stay there, "making sure they know that it makes me happy that they came and joined us. I just try to ease them into getting to where I want them to be."

Another strategy which emerged as part of the overall structure of the school was an emphasis on consistently maintaining a calm demeanor and tone of voice, especially in situations where students were escalated or moving toward conflict. As discussed in the section about attunement, Coneflower and Bluestem rely on kind, patient, and calm conversations to stay attuned to their students and to keep them feeling safe. Rather than relying primarily on a predetermined discipline plan, teachers adjusted their demeanor, tone of voice, and even posture to address conflict or undesired behaviors. In one student interaction, Prairie Rose described her routine of lowering her tone of voice, speaking more slowly, and changing her stance so as not to appear intimidating. When Sunflower's office is engaging with students about their behaviors, her routine is to focus as much as she can on listening to the students. She encourages the other educators in the building to do the same thing, to take a few minutes to listen to a student when they initially want to talk or when the teacher notices the student is agitated. Oftentimes, a short, minute-long conversation early on can stave off a costly eruption later.

Theme 7 - Connection

The theme of connection was most evident in the educators' responses to the questions about the trauma-informed care principles of safety and trustworthiness. The educators described several strategies they use to connect with their students, including intentionally creating opportunities to build relationships and frequently finding opportunities for positive interactions. Educators also built in meaningful communication activities ranging from role-playing in the classroom to maintaining visibility with students in other grades as well as in the wider community.

Safety

Several educators shared that giving hugs and being sensitive to when students need a hug is one of the primary ways they connect with students. Sunflower described an incident that occurred when she was covering a class for another teacher. A student came to Sunflower crying because the PE teacher told her to move to the back of the line. Sunflower considered that she might worry about the event enough for it to impact her learning all week, so she chose to take "a few extra minutes to understand why it was frustrating for her" to get her "back on track to be ready to learn." Sunflower shared that prior to this incident, the student was very reserved and wouldn't even give her a high five, but after Sunflower listened to the student's perspective about the situation with the PE teacher, the student gave Sunflower "two hugs." Sunflower stated that this was a perfect example of the child now feeling safe with her, and the experience supported her rationale that some students may need a softer tone, and some may need more hugs.

Bluestem frequently offers hugs to her students when they are sad or upset, and Indigo described hugs, including side hugs, and high fives as a strategy to make sure students know

“they're seen, they're heard, and that someone cares and loves them while they're here at school.” Goldenrod and Aster both explained the importance of “getting on their level” or “getting down on their eye level” as ways to connect with their students. Goldenrod said, “They're still little, so they don't understand a lot of things, so I just get on their level and try to explain why we do something, why we don't, and why we act this way, not that way.” Aster shared that she “gives lots of hugs” and believes it is important to get down on their eye level when she is talking to them, whether she is redirecting or giving positive feedback.

The teachers in this study also credited playfulness and showing they are human as strategies that help them connect with their students to help them feel safe. Aster builds rapport by being silly with her students and “letting them know that you're human, too.” Sunflower admitted that she will "screw around" at Morning Meetings, dress up to match a student for Twin Day, hold impromptu dance parties and otherwise “totally embarrass herself” to help her students feel more comfortable. Lavender asks parents for permission to invite her students to interact outside the school setting, such as an ice cream date, to shoot baskets, or to go to the water park. She explained that these efforts to connect with her students outside of the school have helped her develop lasting relationships with her students. Lavender said the students she taught her first year at this school are in high school now, and it makes her feel good that they still “come find me . . . because I just know that I built something, or they wouldn't want to do that. And some even ask me to their birthday parties. I try to go because they're reaching out.”

Trustworthiness

The educators also described how they connect with their students to communicate that they are trustworthy. Several teachers mentioned the connections they have with students’ families and neighborhoods because they grew up in this town or now live in this town. Aster

explained that since she was “born and raised here,” she likes to know where her students live so she can have a better understanding of what home is like for them, and “it just tells me to give them more grace.” Aster also connects with her students by creating a slide show at the beginning of the year which has a slide for each of her students alongside someone they both know. For example, she lives across the street from the grandma of one of her students, so she included a picture of her and her children visiting grandma on this student’s slide. She had taught the brother of another student, so she put the brother’s picture on a slide. She didn’t really have a connection with one of her students, but the student’s mother is a teacher, so she made that connection on a slide. These connections with people and places that are familiar to her students help Aster establish immediate connections with them.

Lavender shared that the backbone of her environment of safety is the work she puts into building relationships and bonding with her students. She says this priority is “first and foremost” because if her students don’t feel safe, they are not going to be able to open up when they are having a bad day or about any other hard things. Lavender begins building relationships with her students even before they get to her classroom by learning their names and being friendly when she sees them in the hallway. With the students in her classroom, she builds bonds and rapport by “mainly just being more human with them” and responding to them. She said other things that help include sharing some of her own experiences, including how she overcame certain hard things. She shared that when she tells these stories, she sometimes cries in front of her students, but she believes this helps them see her as more human. Her philosophy is to “try to be really real and tell it from the heart." She works hard to identify with and support her students because she doesn’t want them to feel like they are struggling alone.

Sunflower described the activities of Morning Meeting as an example of connections she fosters between herself and her students. Most students in the building ride the bus to school, so she has established a routine for them to go to the gym as soon as they get off the bus and do the flag salute, the school pledge, and birthday celebrations all together. Sometimes, Sunflower incorporates other activities such as doing the worm or running jellybeans. The students expect this time together, and they enjoy the fun activities and getting to see their friends. Sunflower continues her visibility throughout the day, ending it by greeting them at the bus as they leave, and waving at them as they drive away.

Indigo's experience with implementing check-ins with her students is a powerful example of how her empathy and intentional care impacted her students. Initially, she did not believe she had time to implement a daily check-in as she was feeling the pressure of getting her students ready for the upcoming state assessments. She was also skeptical that it would be successful because she had done an emoji-style check-in a few years ago, and it seemed that her students just put their sticky notes where their friends hung theirs, so she didn't feel like she got an honest picture of on how they were feeling. She was also concerned about how much time the check-in would take, wanting it to be a "quick yet insightful piece" that she could commit to making part of her routine. Journaling about her feelings prior to implementing the strategy, she wrote her desire to develop a check-in that would encourage students to open up and to instill faith that she truly did care for them. She wanted them to feel that she was listening, in-tune with them, willing to work through daily problems and struggles, and willing to enjoy positive celebrations as well some playful fun and humor. This educator learned that both she and her students loved the daily check-in, and the students were more honest with their responses than her previous group had been. She attempted to read her students' responses to the daily check-in

and wrote “little notes” to her students to express her care for the concerns they expressed that day. She shared stories of connections with students that resulted from this addition to her daily routine. One boy came up to her after he opened his library book and found a note she had left for him there. He gave her a hug, asked if he could take the note home, and left it on his desk for the rest of the day. Another student found her note and kept it in her book, using it as a bookmark. A more subtle but just as meaningful indication that her strategy was working were the big smiles on several students’ faces when they found the notes she left for them, and her journal entry confirmed the impact of her strategy on both teacher and students, “I’m seeing how kids respond when they feel seen and heard. Most love it and simply want more. It is a good feeling exchange that has been happening for me, too.”

Findings

From analysis of the themes, five findings emerged: 1) relationships are foundational, 2) educators provide intentional care, 3) relational climate is communicated through promoting acceptance, 4) structured environments strengthen trustworthiness, and 5) safety empowers student self-advocacy. Table 4.2 illustrates the strong connection between the seven themes and the five findings.

Table 4.2

Alignment of Themes with Findings

	Ethics of care	Growth mindset	Positive/ Negative Reinforcement	Attunement	Self-advocacy Voice	Structure	Connection
Relationships are foundational.	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Educators provide intentional care.	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Relational climate is communicated	X	X	X	X	X	X	X

through promoting acceptance.							
Structured environments strengthen trustworthiness.	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Safety empowers student self-advocacy.	X	X	X	X	X	X	X

The most prominent finding to emerge from the study was that intentional, trusting teacher-student relationships are foundational for supporting learning, particularly for students who have experienced trauma. In short, relationships matter. Educators built these relationships through empathy, individualized attention, attunement to students' needs, and consistent, caring responses. Within this context of safety and trust, students were more willing to seek support, take risks, learn from mistakes, and express their needs and goals. Predictable routines, positive reinforcement, and meaningful opportunities for connection strengthened the teacher-student relationships, helping students feel valued, develop confidence, and recognize that their teachers were dependable sources of support.

The second finding, educators provide intentional care, was demonstrated through consistent, individualized actions that communicated to students that they were seen, heard, valued, and supported. Through daily check-ins, empathetic responses, specific praise, attentiveness to individual needs, and opportunities for student voice, educators made caring an observable part of classroom practice. These actions strengthened students' sense of safety and belonging while supporting their growth and self-advocacy and giving them confidence that their needs and perspectives mattered.

Relational climate is communicated through promoting acceptance was the third finding. Educators understood that their unconditional acceptance of their students was a powerful piece

of building relationships with them. They communicated that every student belonged and was valued when they demonstrated acceptance by intentionally recognizing each student's unique strengths, needs, and differences. Through empathy, attunement, positive reinforcement, and authentic connections, educators created environments where students could learn from mistakes without shame, develop a growth mindset, and feel confident expressing their needs and perspectives. Within clear expectations and consistent boundaries, acceptance allowed educators to honor students as individuals while supporting their growth, responsible choices, and self-advocacy.

The fourth finding, structured environments strengthen trustworthiness, was significant because it revealed that predictable routines provided students with a foundation of safety and trust while creating opportunities for growth, choice, and connection. When educators maintained clear expectations and boundaries while responding with empathy to students' individual and emotional needs, the students viewed the educators as worthy of their trust. Within the structured environment, students were encouraged to learn from their mistakes, make positive choices, express their needs, and develop independence. In this school, structure did not restrict student agency; rather, it provided a dependable framework within which students could feel safe, build relationships, and grow in their ability to advocate for themselves.

The fifth finding that emerged was safety empowers student self-advocacy. The educators viewed student self-advocacy as a skill that could be formed through safe, supportive relationships, intentional care, and meaningful opportunities for students to express their needs, make choices, and participate in decisions. Self-advocacy developed gradually as students experienced being heard and valued, practiced setting goals and boundaries, navigated conflict, and exercised agency within predictable classroom expectations. By listening attentively,

responding to emotional cues, affirming strengths, and explicitly teaching communication and problem-solving skills, educators helped students build the confidence and independence needed to speak up for themselves.

Summary

Analysis of the data from the journal entries, artifacts, and three sets of interviews revealed the perceptions and practices of eight educators from a Midwestern elementary (K-5) school regarding trauma-informed care in their classrooms. Empathy and the need to show care to their students emerged as the most universal theme along with growth mindset, positive and negative reinforcement, attunement, student self-advocacy and voice, structure, and connection. An understanding of these seven themes led to the determination of five findings: 1) relationships are foundational, 2) educators provide intentional care, 3) relational climate is communicated through promoting acceptance, 4) structured environments strengthen trustworthiness, and 5) safety empowers student self-advocacy.

For elementary educators, the clearest message across these findings was that the day-to-day actions of adults were closely connected to how they perceived students experiencing the principles of trauma-informed care. When adults listened, noticed, checked in, maintained predictable routines, offered choices, recognized effort, allowed mistakes, and in any other way made time to connect and show interest in and care for their students, they reported that students felt safe, trusted the adults, and were empowered to enjoy opportunities to collaborate and make more informed choices.

Chapter 5 - Conclusions and Recommendations

In this qualitative single case study, I examined how elementary (K-5) educators in a Midwestern elementary (K-5) school perceived the impact of trauma-informed professional development and how their beliefs and practices evolved while implementing selected trauma-informed interventions in their classrooms. I studied the experiences of eight educators before and after they received the *Becoming Trauma Responsive* (Lane et al., 2025) professional development training and then implemented an individually selected strategy in their classrooms and an agreed upon collective strategy following the training. This chapter discusses the major findings as they relate to the research questions and contributions to the related body of literature and connections to the theoretical framework. In addition, the I propose implications for practice and school leaders, limitations of the study, and finally, I present recommendations for future research.

A review of the literature revealed trauma-informed care as an approach that recognizes how trauma can affect children's safety, emotional regulation, relationships, behavior, and ability to learn. Harris and Fallot's (2001) five principles of trauma-informed care which include safety, trustworthiness, choice, collaboration, and empowerment provide the theoretical framework for applying trauma-informed care in this elementary (K–5) setting. Across these principles, the literature emphasized that trauma-informed practice in elementary schools should be relational, consistent, compassionate, and responsive to students' individual experiences rather than focused primarily on correcting behavior. Educators are encouraged to understand trauma-related behaviors as survival responses, build trusting relationships through empathy, authenticity, and unconditional positive regard, and create classroom environments that support safety, connection, learning, and student agency. The review also emphasized that to achieve maximum

effectiveness, trauma-informed care must extend beyond individual teachers to schoolwide policies, practices, professional development, leadership, and sustained systemic support.

The purpose of this study was to identify patterns in educator understanding, perceived effectiveness of strategies, and how educators anticipated sustaining trauma-responsive practices over time. Building on the *Becoming Trauma Responsive* (Lane et al., 2025) professional development and the five principles of trauma-informed care identified by Harris and Fallot (2001), the study looked to understand how educators in a Midwestern elementary (K-5) school internalized and applied trauma-informed principles in daily practice.

Discussion across Research Questions

In the previous chapter, I described seven themes that emerged following data analysis and presented alignment of the theoretical framework with the themes. Further in-depth analysis led me to arrive at five overall findings for the study. These findings included 1) relationships are foundational, 2) educators provide intentional care, 3) relational climate is communicated through promoting acceptance, 4) structured environments strengthen trustworthiness, and 5) safety empowers student self-advocacy. In this section, I discuss how the findings relate and apply to each research question.

Overarching Research Question: After implementing *Becoming Trauma Responsive* (Lane et al., 2025) strategies, how do the perceptions and practices of elementary (K-5) educators change?

During the initial interviews, it became apparent that the educators already possessed significant levels of trauma awareness. They defined relationships as essential for creating safety, trust, and connection with students, and they expressed a sensitivity to how intentional care and

acceptance contributed to relationship development. They also possessed an understanding of the importance of routines and consistency in promoting safety and trustworthiness.

After the three-week period of implementing the *Becoming Trauma Responsive* (Lane et al., 2025) strategies they had chosen, their perspectives emerged as more specific and intentional. They recognized that establishing caring relationships supported not only their classroom procedures and expectations but also students' willingness to participate, accept guidance, and learn from mistakes. Educators' journal entries, the artifacts they shared, and their responses to the final interview questions demonstrated their deepened understanding of teacher-student relationships as the foundation for balancing high expectations with care, respect, and belief in students' potential.

Through their experiences with the *Becoming Trauma Responsive* (Lane et al., 2025) training, the educators gained access to trauma-responsive language for attitudes and beliefs they already valued, and they adopted an increased intentionality and depth of knowledge with some practices they were already using. The professional development training also prompted several concrete additions to educators' existing routines such as daily greetings, check-ins, regulation activities, and personalized connections with students in the form of individual conversations and encouraging notes. In addition to providing opportunities for students to feel heard, valued, and understood, the educators reported that the strategies they implemented strengthened the classroom community, encouraged students to share their feelings, and helped them better understand the concerns that affected their students both inside and outside of school.

Implementing the *Becoming Trauma Responsive* (Lane et al., 2025) strategies increased educators' reflections about choice, student voice, and emotional needs while also revealing areas of potential tension between their trauma-responsive ideals and some of their behavior

management procedures. Even when the educators acknowledged the validity of trauma-responsive beliefs, some practices persisted due to habit or convenience or were maintained in an attempt to meet the perceived expectations of others. One area of tension that stood out was educators' increasing recognition that students needed to experience correction within the context of both high expectations and unconditional positive regard. Educators' reflections also revealed greater awareness of the emotional demands of teaching, including secondary trauma and compassion fatigue. They recognized their need for self-care as an essential part of sustaining their capacity to care for students.

Rather than transforming educators' foundational beliefs, the primary contribution of the strategy implementation was how it appeared to deepen educators' intentionality and translate existing relational commitments into more explicit trauma-responsive practices. Overall, implementation of the *Becoming Trauma Responsive* (Lane et al., 2025) strategies served to affirm what educators already knew and validate what they were already doing while refining their skills, increasing their intentionality, and deepening their commitment to building a trauma-responsive classroom environment. Finally, educators acknowledged a shift in their own attitudes as they simultaneously experienced the necessity of self-care and the rewarding feelings of connecting with their students in more intentional and meaningful ways than before.

Supporting Question 1: How do teachers' perceptions of their relationships with students evolve after engaging with the professional development e-book?

The educators participated in the *Becoming Trauma Responsive* (Lane et al., 2025) professional development in two parts; first watching the *Becoming Trauma Responsive: Feature Documentary* (K-State, 2026), then meeting as a group to participate in my presentation of the *Becoming Trauma Responsive* (Lane et al., 2025) e-book. A major theme, as recorded in

participants' journals after watching the *Becoming Trauma Responsive: Feature Documentary* (K-State, 2026), was the recognition that students' experiences are complex and that trauma affects students' abilities to focus and meet instructional expectations. An additional angle to this awareness of the complexity of trauma acknowledged the misconception of "fix" versus "help."

A second theme educators noted following the professional development centered around the importance of attending to students' individual needs by focusing on relationships, consistent presence, and safety. Key to this understanding was an emphasis on meeting students' personal needs before addressing instructional needs and a realization that trauma-responsive teaching prioritizes relationships over checking boxes. The educators acknowledged their roles in supporting safety at all levels, including emotional safety by intentionally connecting and listening to students and physical safety by making sure outside doors were closed.

Educators' perceptions of their relationships with their students after engaging with the professional development were mostly positive and hopeful, but some participants expressed concerns about how students would respond, whether their strategy would work, and how they would successfully fit it into the structure of their day. Compassion fatigue was an additional concern shared by educators as they considered their worries about time constraints, student cooperation, and the challenge of responding to students' traumas while also attending to their own.

Supporting Question 2: What specific strategies or practices do educators identify as feasible to implement following the training?

Educators identified a variety of strategies as feasible to implement following the professional development training. One educator scheduled twice-weekly meetings with a student who frequently experienced behavioral consequences with the goal of building a positive

relationship rather than every encounter centering around discipline. Other strategies included simplified instructions for focusing during transitions, a magic wand grounding technique during reading practice, and sensory tools to support students' thought processes as they considered reflection questions. Five educators implemented student check-ins using daily questions, emotional rating forms, or reflection activities. Some educators also responded individually to student feedback through personal notes and intentional follow-up.

Prairie Rose was the only teacher who specifically described her experience implementing the school-wide strategy of meeting each student at the door and greeting them by name. Her journal records her daily implementation of this strategy with increasing success at connecting with her students. She described how engagement increased over time, moving from several students "disregarding" her to "pretty much whole class participation."

Although the strategies all differed in format and structure, each one created space in the classroom for teachers to connect with their students, get to know them on a personal rather than only academic level, and demonstrate care for them by listening to each student and following up with individuals as needed. The strategies also provided opportunities for the students to have a structured time each day to be calm and reflective, to share their thoughts, feelings, and needs with their teacher, and to be seen, heard, and known as an individual person.

Supporting Question 3: How do educators anticipate sustaining trauma-responsive practices in their classrooms or school?

All the educators expressed enthusiasm about the results of the intervention they selected, and they all planned to continue using it. Several of them even shared ideas about how they could adjust for next year to strengthen their students' independence, engagement, and relationships. Practicing breathing during transition periods, using magic wands to improve focus

during reading time, and maintaining the daily check-ins were meaningful interventions that educators intend to carry forward to increase their students' abilities to keep themselves regulated while remaining engaged in the classroom activities.

Relationship-building practices included continuing daily questions, expanding small-group discussions, and facilitating students to act as summarizers. These strategies were also intended to strengthen conversation and listening skills. Additionally, educators shared plans to improve the emotional check-ins and morning reflection activities. Their ideas for adjustments included making QR codes more accessible, finding and setting aside time to review student responses and write personalized notes, and using journals to compare students' morning and afternoon reflections.

Teachers hoped to implement their strategies into classroom routines from the beginning of the next school year to clarify participation expectations and strengthen student trust, but one educator recognized she will not have another year to grow the positive relationships she was building. Although she remains committed to caring for her student even through his challenging behaviors, she acknowledged that her opportunity is limited as he will be transitioning to a different school for the next school year.

Connections to Literature

The findings from this research connect closely with several areas of the literature review. Across the findings, educators described practices that correspond with the literature review's discussion of the five principles of trauma-informed care identified by Harris and Fallot (2001) which are safety, trustworthiness, choice, collaboration, and empowerment.

The first finding is that relationships are foundational. This finding strongly supports the literature because it identifies positive, empathetic, and consistent teacher-student relationships

as foundational to learning and essential for establishing safety and trust among students who have experienced trauma. Pianta et al. (2012) described relationships as foundational to school success, particularly for students facing challenges, while Souers and Hall (2019) added that children don't learn when they don't feel safe. The literature review also explained that students affected by trauma may experience relationships as dangerous or unpredictable, making attunement, consistency, and patience important for building trust (van der Kolk, 2014). Empathy is also identified as an important part of relationship building, and the connections between the literature and the finding demonstrate that relationships are reflected in educators' descriptions of intentionally knowing students, listening when they are upset, and making time to understand individual students (Jennings & Siegel, 2019; Perry & Winfrey, 2021; Souers & Hall, 2019).

The second finding is that educators provide intentional care. This finding supports and extends the literature on empathy and attunement by demonstrating how educators' intentional efforts to care for students translate trauma-informed principles into classroom practice. Educators' descriptions of taking extra time to listen to students, understanding their frustrations, and responding to emotional needs connect with the literature review's discussion of attunement, without which empathy cannot occur. Perry and Salavitz (2011) described empathy as understanding another person's experience and caring about improving it when it hurts. Warren (2015) connected teacher empathy with productive teacher-student relationships, while Perry (2020) described the "Regulate, Relate, Reason" sequence of engagement which emphasizes safety and connection before learning and correction. The literature review also described genuine efforts to understand students' perspectives and experiences because these efforts communicate that the student's inner world matters. The connections between the literature and

the finding of intentional care closely support educators' accounts of pausing instruction, listening, and trying to understand what was behind a student's behavior or frustration.

The third finding is that relational climate is communicated through promoting acceptance. This finding supports and extends the literature on unconditional positive regard and empowerment by illustrating how educators' use of positive language, recognition of strengths, and acceptance of differences and mistakes can affirm students' worth and foster belonging. Venet (2021) explained that unconditional positive regard is based on an ethic of care where a central task of the classroom is learning how to care and how to be cared for. Educators demonstrated their understanding of their responsibility to teach their students how to show care when they focused on carefully choosing their own words and guided their students' conversations. They taught and modeled examples of what to say and what not to say to ensure everyone felt valued and accepted. Several examples from the literature supported Sunflower's philosophy of acceptance which communicates that there is a place for students in this school even if they are not who "other people" think they should be. Finding students' strengths and acknowledging them with specific praise were strategies the educators used to support their students' growth mindset and empowerment. Brunzell et al. (2016) described practices including explicitly naming student strengths, providing opportunities for success and mastery, and supporting students in recognizing their growth and capabilities. Van der Kolk (2014) emphasized the importance of building on students' strengths to support their empowerment because children who have experienced trauma often believe themselves to be fundamentally bad or unworthy. Perry and Winfrey (2021) noted that children hurt in relationships can only heal in relationships, requiring adults to demonstrate consistent worth-affirming messages regardless of behavior. As Souers and Hall (2016) emphasized, students need to know they are valued

especially on their worst days, when they seem most unlovable. Woven throughout the educators' responses to the interview questions was an unequivocal commitment to showing students they were valued and they belonged regardless of how others viewed them. Led by Sunflower's dedication to unconditional acceptance, building an environment of acceptance, empathy, and kindness was not only modeled by these educators but explicitly taught. Therefore, the connection between the literature and the finding that relational climate is communicated by promoting acceptance clearly shows the importance of educators' efforts to help students grow in confidence, show them they are valued unconditionally, and support them to maximize their own growth and capabilities.

The fourth finding is that structured environments strengthen trustworthiness. This finding supports the literature by emphasizing predictable routines, consistent expectations, and preparation for change as practices that promote students' physical and psychological safety and strengthen trustworthiness (SAMHSA, 2014). The literature review identified predictable environments as part of both physical and psychological safety, and predictable environments require students to be able to trust that adults will respond predictably and supportively (Perry, 2017). Souers and Hall (2016) specifically connected safety with consistent routines, transparent expectations, and adult regulation. Since trustworthiness requires established and consistent routines, adults doing what they say they will do, and consistent applications of rules and consequences, these examples from the literature support the actions of the educators in this school when they design a predictable classroom environment with clearly posted schedules, demonstrate consistent expectations for behaviors, and prepare students in advance when changes must happen.

The fifth finding is that safety empowers student self-advocacy. This finding supports the literature on choice, collaboration, and empowerment by demonstrating how educators' encouragement of student voice, expression of needs, decision-making, and goal setting provides opportunities for students to develop agency and recognize themselves as capable participants in their learning. Bath (2008) noted that opportunities for choice can help individuals reclaim agency and control, while Perry and Daniels (2016) explained that even small choices can help students experience themselves as capable agents rather than passive recipients. The literature further confirms that collaboration requires educators to genuinely listen to and incorporate student perspectives. Craig (2016) described seeking student input, co-creating behavioral plans and academic goals, and positioning students as experts on their own experiences and needs. Finally, empowerment includes developing students' self-advocacy skills and helping them experience themselves as competent and capable. The literature connections and the finding of safety empower student self-advocacy support educators' accounts of encouraging students to communicate their needs, make choices, set goals, and use their voices when they need help.

Findings and Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework provided a lens for reviewing and making meaning of the findings by connecting educators' perceptions and practices to the five principles of trauma-informed care established by Harris and Fallot (2001): safety, trustworthiness, choice, collaboration, and empowerment. Although relationships are not one of the five principles, the theme of relationships was strongly represented in the data, so as one of the research questions, it was studied alongside the principles to identify the prominent themes. The educators' perceptions of relationships are woven throughout the following section as they provided an

important foundation for understanding how they created safe, predictable, accepting, and empowering classroom environments.

Safety

In the educators' relationships with their students, safety was evident in educators' attention to students' needs, intentional care, predictable structures, acceptance, and opportunities for students to express themselves. Educators demonstrated care by noticing signs of distress, listening to students, adjusting their tone and body language, and conducting daily check-ins through verbal conversations and written prompts. They also attended to physical safety by addressing classroom concerns, such as closing outside doors that had been left propped open. Predictable routines, posted schedules, and preparation for schedule changes further supported safety. Promoting acceptance reinforced students' understanding that mistakes and differences would be met with kindness rather than criticism or shame. As students experienced these supportive environments, they became more willing to advocate for their needs, including requesting help, expressing preferences, and communicating when they felt overwhelmed

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was demonstrated through consistency, dependable interactions, and an intentional focus on relationship building. Educators emphasized the importance of showing up for students and establishing routines that students could rely on. Teaching procedures, maintaining schedules, and preparing students for necessary changes reduced surprises and contributed to a sense of predictability. Acceptance also supported trustworthiness when educators demonstrated authenticity, maintained clear expectations, and accepted students as people. Students' self-advocacy reflected their growing understanding that educators would

listen to their voices and welcome their input. These findings suggest that trust was developed through repeated experiences in which educators demonstrated reliability, care, and respect.

Choice

Choice was evident in opportunities for students to make decisions within supportive relationships and established classroom structures. Although educators were initially unsure about how they provided choice, they identified practices that allowed students to exercise agency while maintaining appropriate expectations. An example of this was when they explained that the consequences their students needed to experience were directly connected to their care for their students and to the integrity of their relationships with them. Teachers offered limited options for choices, incorporated choice into classroom routines, and provided alternatives such as a hug or time with a calm-down box. They also used conversations and role-play activities to help students consider others' perspectives and understand the relationship between choices and consequences. Promoting acceptance sometimes involved reframing student behavior rather than restricting it. These practices demonstrated that choice could be provided without allowing unrestricted freedom and could be supported through structured opportunities for students to express preferences and make decisions.

Collaboration

Collaboration was demonstrated through relationships in which educators worked alongside students rather than simply directing them, emphasizing a commitment to a relationship in which challenge and support occurred together. Teachers sought student input about classroom changes, involved students in setting and pursuing goals, and guided them in solving problems and navigating conflicts. They modeled appropriate language and collaboratively reframed unkind or inappropriate statements to support respectful interactions.

Students also had opportunities to demonstrate leadership and receive positive recognition from peers. Collaboration was particularly evident in efforts to develop self-advocacy. For example, an educator supported an English language learner in expressing her lunch choice until she could communicate her preference independently in English. Rather than dictating solutions to conflicts, educators helped students work through disagreements and develop problem-solving skills.

Empowerment

Relationships provided an important context for empowerment because they fostered a connection in which educators could encourage high expectations with genuine support. Empowerment was demonstrated through intentional recognition, positive reinforcement, leadership opportunities, acceptance, and student self-advocacy. Educators recognized students' strengths and efforts through specific praise of their choices, words, and actions. Peer encouragement further reinforced students' accomplishments and contributions to the school community. Structured practices, including reward systems, certificates, and a student ambassador team, provided opportunities for students to recognize their capabilities and assume responsibility. Promoting acceptance also supported empowerment by communicating that every student had value and belonged, regardless of differences. Through opportunities to express needs, make choices, contribute to classroom decisions, and take on leadership roles, students were encouraged to recognize their own capacity to participate and succeed.

The theoretical framework provides a way to interpret the findings as integrated aspects of trauma-responsive practice. Relationships, intentional care, structure, acceptance, and self-advocacy were not isolated strategies. They reflected overlapping commitments to safety, trustworthiness, choice, collaboration, and empowerment. The alignment of the findings with the

theoretical framework demonstrates how educators' daily practices supported the principles of trauma-informed care (Harris & Fallot, 2001) and how the principles of trauma-informed care guided the educators' beliefs and practices in their ongoing relationships with their students.

Limitations

The study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting findings. First, the small sample size and geographically bounded nature of the participant group limit the generalizability of the results. While a case study is inherently characterized by depth rather than breadth, a smaller number of participants naturally restricts the range of experiences represented (Creswell & Poth, 2025). Additionally, the study was conducted in only one elementary school which may narrow the transferability of the findings to other settings.

The time-bound nature of the study presents an additional limitation. The participant interviews were conducted in a period of approximately five weeks. The timing of the professional development, strategy selection and implementation, and the interviews that preceded and followed the educators' experiences occurred in the middle of the second semester during arguably one of the most stressful time periods of the school year. In addition, educators added a new procedure to their routines amid preparation for state assessments and other already scheduled events. The data collection captured a particular moment in the educators' professional experiences and may not reflect their long-term beliefs or professional practices.

A third limitation is my own positionality, professional background, and personal experiences with children who have been affected by trauma and with various educators' approaches to trauma. While my empathy and advocacy for trauma-informed care serve as valuable lenses for understanding participants' experiences, they may have also influenced data collection and interpretation. To mitigate potential bias, I employed strategies such as reflexive

notetaking, debriefing with both participants and peers, and the use of rich, thick descriptions when presenting findings (Creswell & Poth, 2025; Stake, 1995). While these steps enhanced trustworthiness, they cannot fully eliminate the influence of researcher subjectivity.

Implications for Practice

Together, the literature review and findings present trauma-informed education, not as a single strategy or intervention, but as an approach to relationships, classroom environments, and school systems. The literature emphasized safety, consistency, supportive relationships, meaningful choice, collaboration, and opportunities for students to develop competence and control. The findings closely reflect these ideas and point to four implications for teachers and three implications for school leaders. For classroom teachers, implications include: 1) make relationships and intentional care part of everyday teaching practice; 2) create predictable structure while responding with flexibility to individual students; 3) increase meaningful opportunities for student choice, collaboration, and self-advocacy; and 4) accept differences, focus on strengths, and give specific praise and encouragement to build students' confidence. For school leaders, the implications are to: 1) build a school culture in which trauma-informed relationships are modeled by adults at every level; 2) provide sustained professional development, coaching, and opportunities for educators to reflect and learn together; and 3) protect and support educators so they are able to sustain trauma-responsive practices.

Implications for Teachers

The first implication for teachers is to make relationships and intentional care as part of their everyday teaching practice. The literature confirmed that stable and nurturing relationships serve as buffers against toxic stress and emphasize connection, empathy, and intentional care as supports for healthy emotional and social development. The findings showed that the

intentionality of the educators to build relationships and safety with their students aligned with the recommendations from the literature as they communicated intentional care through consistent supportive interactions such as listening, reassurance, encouragement, positive conversations, check-ins, and focused time with individual students.

Creating dependable structures in their classrooms while responding with flexibility to individual students is the second implication for teachers. The literature explained that the unpredictable nature of trauma can disrupt a child's sense of safety and make the world seem unstable and threatening. Educators repeatedly credited reliable routines, consistent expectations, and trustworthy adult behavior as foundational for trauma-informed care and compassionate and predictable responses as essential for building trust. At the same time, trauma affects children differently, requiring educators to understand individual responses rather than interpreting misbehaviors as defiance or disengagement. Rather than describing structure as rigidly responding to every situation in the same way, teachers should adjust their responses to individual students and circumstances, showing that consistency and responsiveness can operate together.

The third implication for teachers is to increase meaningful opportunities for student choice, collaboration, and self-advocacy, a practice which provides essential support for children who have not been allowed to experience personal agency. The literature described choice as a way for students to gain autonomy and emphasized that choices should be authentic rather than simply creating the appearance of control. Collaboration involves treating students as partners whose perspectives matter and involving them in decisions, problem solving, behavioral plans, and academic goals, privileges they may not have experienced previously. Empowerment builds on that collaboration helping students recognize their capabilities and develop skills for self-

advocacy and self-regulation. The findings showed that educators supported the concept of granting more of these opportunities to their students, however, they struggled with balancing student voice with their control of their classroom. Teachers expressed uncertainty about providing choice and acknowledged that they often controlled students' goals and decisions. Study participants were most comfortable with offering two acceptable options and giving students opportunities to choose goals, participate in goal-setting conversations, reflect on progress, and contribute to decisions. Despite their discomfort, the educators also recognized that encouraging student self-advocacy by allowing them to use their voices to express needs, establish boundaries, and navigate conflicts was needed to help their students develop the confidence and independence that were necessary to grow past their trauma.

Accepting differences, focusing on strengths, and giving specific praise and encouragement to build students' confidence is the fourth implication. The literature identified unconditional positive regard, strengths-based practices, and encouragement as important elements of empowerment and indicated that educators can maintain boundaries and consequences while at the same time, communicating that students have worth. Strengths-based practices include identifying and naming student strengths, providing opportunities for success and mastery, and communicating belief in students' capabilities. The findings reinforced these ideas, connecting praise, encouragement, acceptance, and recognition of effort with students' confidence and self-efficacy. Educators emphasized seeing students as individuals, normalizing differences, recognizing strengths, and communicating that every student belonged. They connected acceptance with a growth mindset by treating mistakes as part of learning, and they used encouragement and recognition of strengths, such as specific verbal praise and written notes, to foster connection and intentionally build confidence.

Together, these practices helped students feel known, accepted, safe, and supported while providing opportunities to make choices, participate in decisions, solve problems, and advocate for themselves. For teachers, this suggests looking beyond whether a student perfectly met an expectation to noticing what the student is learning, attempting, doing well, or beginning to understand, a perspective that benefits all students including those who have experienced trauma.

Implications for School Leaders

The first implication for school leaders is to build school culture in which trauma-informed relationships are modeled by adults at every level. The literature stated that trauma-informed care requires systemic change rather than simply modifying individual teacher behavior. Leadership commitment and alignment of the principles across classroom and school levels are necessary for sustained implementation. Therefore, the principles of trauma-informed care need to be evident across classrooms, offices, and adult relationships rather than depending on individual teachers who happen to be particularly relational. The findings showed how effective leadership can influence school culture. Leaders can model the relational practices they expect teachers to use with students by demonstrating consistency, listening to staff, providing support, maintaining relationships, and communicating that mistakes can be addressed without abandoning the person who made them. In this study, the principal's beliefs about empathy, acceptance, relationships, and student belonging were reflected in the practices described by other educators, and her actions communicated that students belonged and had value, while her relationships with teachers modeled support and dependability.

The second implication is to provide sustained professional development, coaching, and opportunities for educators to reflect and learn together. The literature identified comprehensive professional development, ongoing coaching, leadership commitment, adequate resources, and

sustained attention as important to implementation. It also emphasized collective teacher efficacy and coordinated practices across classrooms. The findings demonstrated that professional development could prompt educators to adopt new practices. Several teachers selected strategies from the *Becoming Trauma Responsive* (Lane et al., 2025) feature documentary and e-book and implemented them in their classrooms. Educators reflected honestly on areas they wanted to improve, including student goal setting and opportunities for choice. Professional development should therefore not be treated as a one-time event. Educators need opportunities to discuss how ideas fit their classrooms, try strategies, reflect on what happened, and consider what they want to change. Leaders can support this process by creating time for educators to share practices, examine challenges, reflect on student responses, and develop a common understanding of trauma-responsive principles.

The final implication for school leaders is to protect and support educators so they can sustain trauma-responsive practices. This is particularly important because the findings place substantial emphasis on educators' emotional availability to students. Teachers are expected to notice, listen, respond empathetically, provide individualized attention, remain supportive, and regulate themselves when students struggle, all practices which require adults to also have adequate support. The literature identified secondary traumatic stress, compassion fatigue, and burnout as significant concerns for educators working closely with children affected by trauma, and individual self-care strategies are not sufficient when organizational stress becomes overwhelming. Leaders can support their teachers' work to implement trauma-responsive practices by maintaining sustainable workload expectations, supporting healthy boundaries, encouraging collaboration and relational support, and normalizing access to counseling or other

support resources as needed. Supporting educators helps create the conditions in which they can remain the calm, consistent, and relational adults that students in the findings needed.

The literature and findings together show trauma-informed practice not as a collection of isolated strategies but as a connected system based on the recognition that students experience trauma-informed care through relationships and through the ways adults structure their daily experiences at school. The findings demonstrated that safety and trustworthiness provide the essential foundation, while choice, collaboration, and empowerment become increasingly visible when students are given opportunities to participate, make decisions, express their needs, and develop confidence in their own abilities. Teachers and school leaders desiring to provide trauma-informed care must understand that their unified day-to-day actions and attitudes determine how students experience that care and how effective it ultimately will be.

Recommendations for Further Research

The following recommendations for further research emerged from the findings of this study. They identify opportunities to expand understanding of trauma-responsive practices as an overall approach to relationships, classroom environments, and systems in elementary (K-5) schools. Additional research could examine 1) the effectiveness of a longer period of implementation of the professional development tool, 2) the effectiveness of a broader geographic implementation of the professional development tool, 3) the effects of school culture variables that best support changes in teacher perspectives and practices when implementing trauma-informed principles, 4) educators' perceptions of the juxtaposition of unconditional positive regard and appropriate consequences for misbehavior, 5) educators' perceptions of the impact of implementing trauma-informed strategies with their students on their own mental and emotional health and well-being, and 6) trauma-informed practices as support for educators

experiencing secondary trauma, compassion fatigue, or burnout. How can educators be cared for with the same ethic of care we apply to students? Although the literature in the field of trauma-informed care is vast, many considerations remain largely unexplored. These recommendations provide direction for future research to strengthen understanding of how trauma-responsive principles can be effectively implemented and sustained in ways that support both students and educators.

Recommendation 1: Explore the effectiveness of a longer period of implementation of the professional development tool.

Further research is indicated to determine whether the changes in educators' perceptions and practices observed in this study are sustained over time. The study's limitations specifically acknowledged that this time-bound design may not reflect educators' long-term beliefs or professional practices. The study captured educators' experiences during a relatively short period with minimal time to observe and document changes. The findings provided several indications that longer-term study with additional time for data collection, monitoring, and ongoing feedback and input could yield important additional information. Research that begins implementation at the beginning of the school year and follows educators throughout the year could examine whether strategies become established classroom practices and whether changes in educators' perceptions continue, strengthen, or diminish.

Recommendation 2: Explore the effectiveness of a broader geographic implementation of the professional development tool.

Further research is indicated to examine the effectiveness of the professional development tool across multiple elementary school sites with varying sizes and demographic makeups. A limitation of this study was that it was conducted in only one elementary school,

which may limit the range of experiences represented in the findings. Including additional schools with different student populations, school sizes, and demographic characteristics could provide a broader range of educator experiences and perspectives. Research across multiple sites could examine how educators in different school contexts perceive and implement the trauma-responsive strategies and provide additional data regarding the effectiveness of the professional development tool. This expanded research could also identify similarities and differences in implementation across settings and provide a more comprehensive understanding of the tool's potential to support trauma-responsive practices in elementary schools.

Recommendation 3: Examine the effects of school culture variables that best support changes in teacher perspectives and practices when implementing trauma-informed principles.

The literature emphasized that trauma-informed practice must extend beyond individual teacher behavior to policies, procedures, and disciplinary practices. It identified rigid control, limited student voice, punitive consequences, and deficit-focused approaches as practices that can conflict with the principles of trauma-informed care (Harris & Fallot, 2001). The findings provided a framework for examining school systems. Safety and trustworthiness are strengthened through consistency and predictability, while choice, collaboration, and empowerment are strengthened when students have opportunities to participate and exercise their voices. It is important for school leaders to be trauma-responsive. They should model a trauma-responsive approach and affirm the value of every staff member and student in all encounters, including when they are providing discipline.

To support this research, school leaders could use a needs assessment or annual evaluation to determine whether or not existing school structures support the principles educators

are trying to enact in their classrooms and to prioritize areas that may need improvement. Possible questions include:

- How do school routines provide students with predictability?
- How consistently are expectations applied?
- How are students given appropriate opportunities to express their needs and perspectives?
- How are students given meaningful choices within appropriate boundaries?
- How do disciplinary responses preserve student dignity and relationships?
- How are students given opportunities to solve problems and participate in decisions?
- How do school systems communicate that students are capable of growth?

School leaders could use these questions to strengthen their focus on a trauma-informed school culture by creating opportunities throughout each school year for staff to review and reflect on how their responses align with the principles of trauma-informed care. This process could be particularly helpful in the context of behavioral expectations, discipline, and other components of classroom management.

Recommendation 4: Examine educators' perceptions of the juxtaposition of unconditional positive regard and appropriate consequences for misbehavior.

Further research is indicated to better understand how educators reconcile unconditional positive regard with the need to maintain expectations and consequences for student behavior. The literature review makes an important distinction: unconditional positive regard does not mean accepting all behaviors without limits. Rather, the literature specifically connects structure and limits with care when they are delivered within a relationship characterized by unconditional positive regard. Therefore, teachers can maintain appropriate boundaries and consequences while preserving a student's sense of worth.

The findings provide a specific example of this tension in Prairie Rose's response to her students' behavior while they were with a substitute. She communicated that she was not angry with the students and that she remained on their side, while also telling them that they had made a choice and that she would administer consequences for that choice. Her response demonstrated an effort to maintain the relationship while holding students accountable for their behavior. A question for further research based on this example could be: How do educators understand and experience the balance between communicating that students are valued regardless of their behavior and communicating that their choices have consequences? Studying this question could provide greater understanding of how acceptance, growth, boundaries, and accountability operate together within trauma-informed practice.

Recommendation 5: Examine educators' perceptions of the impact of implementing trauma-informed strategies with their students on their own mental and emotional health and well-being.

Further research is indicated to better understand how educators are affected when they implement trauma-informed principles in their classrooms. The literature review noted that empathy and sustained exposure to students' trauma can place educators at risk for secondary traumatic stress, compassion fatigue, and burnout, identifying sufficient recovery time as an essential component to enable them to process what they encounter. The findings of this study, however, while noting the potential for risks, also indicated that trauma-informed practices may have positive effects on educators who implement them.

Indigo's experience provides one example. After using her daily check-in to learn more about where her students were emotionally and writing individual notes in response, she observed students' positive reactions, including smiles, hugs, and requests to keep the notes

which caused her to describe the experience a “good feeling exchange” for herself as well as for her students. Considering this educator’s experience in light of the literature review suggests that implementing trauma-informed strategies may involve both emotional demands and potentially meaningful positive experiences for educators. Research specifically examining educators’ perceptions of how these practices affect their own emotional health and well-being could provide a more complete understanding of the effects of trauma-responsive practice and of the conditions educators need to sustain it.

Recommendation 6: Examine trauma-informed practices as support for educators experiencing secondary trauma, compassion fatigue, or burnout. How can educators be cared for with the same ethic of care we apply to students?

Further research is indicated to better understand how the findings of this study can be applied to educators as well as to students. While the literature review identified secondary trauma, compassion fatigue, and burnout as significant risks for educators who work closely with students affected by trauma, it also explained that educators must remain regulated while supporting students, even though their close emotional involvement with students’ experiences can threaten their own regulation. Individual self-care strategies may not be sufficient when organizational stress becomes overwhelming. The participants in this study designed their own strategies and planned their implementation and response procedures which included their self-imposed expectations to notice students, listen, respond empathetically, provide individualized attention, remain supportive, and regulate themselves when students struggle. The findings of this study, therefore, indicated that substantial emotional availability was required of the educators, yet no provisions were made for protecting and supporting them through sustainable workloads, healthy boundaries, collaboration, relational support, and access to counseling or

other resources. Future research could examine educators' perceptions before and after implementing trauma responsive practices, or participants could be recruited who already identify as experiencing secondary trauma, compassion fatigue, or burnout. In addition to measuring educators' perceptions of being recipients of a trauma-informed ethic of care, research could also identify supports needed to make trauma-informed practice sustainable for educators.

Conclusion

The five findings are connected in meaningful ways with the five principles of trauma-informed care, the theoretical framework for this study. The evidence clearly showed how safety, trustworthiness, choice, collaboration, and empowerment reinforce relationships, intentional care, acceptance, structured environments, and student self-advocacy.

Ultimately, this study demonstrates that a trauma-responsive school is not defined by isolated strategies but by a deliberate and unified commitment to ensuring that every child in every classroom learns to believe they are safe, cherished, and capable. As the educators in this study connected through relationships, responded with intentional care, communicated acceptance, provided a structured environment, and created opportunities for student voice and agency, they empowered students with the trust, skills, and confidence they needed to freely experience and further their capabilities and potential.

The educators' engagement with the *Becoming Trauma Responsive* (Lane et al., 2025) professional development and their experiences implementing their strategies affirmed and validated their prior knowledge, refined their skills, deepened their intentionality, and increased their commitment. The most meaningful discovery for this group of educators was that their intentional attempts to connect with their students and their willingness to be open to their students' responses could be truly life-changing--for both their students and themselves.

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Appendix A - Letter of Invitation and Consent for Participants

Letter of Invitation to Participate in a Research Study January 2026
Title of Study: "Educator Perceptions and Practices After Trauma-Responsive Implementation: A Case Study in a Rural Midwestern Elementary School"

Principal Investigators: Donna Augustine-Shaw, Ed. D., Professor, Department of Education Leadership, Jessica Lane, Ph.D. Associate Professor, Department of Counseling Student Principal Investigator: Chelle Leininger, Doctoral Student, College of Education, Kansas State University

To Participants:

I, Chelle Leininger, from the Department of the College of Education, Kansas State University, invite you to participate in a research project entitled, "Educator Perceptions and Practices After Trauma-Responsive Implementation: A Case Study in a Rural Midwestern Elementary School." The purpose of this qualitative single case study is to explore how elementary (K-5) educators in a rural Midwestern school district perceive the impact of trauma-informed professional development and how their beliefs and practices evolve while implementing selected trauma-informed interventions in their classrooms. Building on the five principles of trauma-informed care and utilizing the *Becoming Trauma Responsive* (Lane et al., 2025) professional development program, the study seeks to understand how educators in a rural Midwestern elementary school internalize and apply trauma-informed principles in daily practice. The study aims to identify patterns in educator understanding, perceived effectiveness of strategies, and the sustainability of trauma-responsive practices.

The expected duration: One day of professional development training followed by the implementation of one selected school wide strategy and one individually selected strategy over a period of three weeks. Three 30-45-minute face-to-face interviews with each participant, one 30-minute group reflection with all participants will be conducted in the elementary school workroom or other identified space. The times and dates of the interviews and professional development will be determined by the principal. This research should benefit district/school leadership to improve, adjust, and support trauma responsive practices.
If you have any pertinent questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the Kansas State University of Research Compliance Office at 203 Fairchild Hall Manhattan KS, 66502; at 785-532-3224; 785-532-3278 fax; or comply@k-state.edu. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me (see below for contact information).

Thank you,
Chelle Leininger
Doctoral Student, College of Education, Kansas State University
620-544-6775, cleininger@ksu.edu

PROJECT TITLE:

Educator Perceptions and Practices After Trauma-Responsive Implementation: A case study in a rural midwestern elementary school

PROJECT APPROVAL DATE:		PROJECT EXPIRATION DATE:		LENGTH OF STUDY:	1 year

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR:	Dr. Donna Augustine Shaw Dr. Jessica Lane
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PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH:

The purpose of this qualitative single case study is to explore how elementary (K-5) educators in a rural Midwestern school district perceive the impact of trauma-informed professional development and how their beliefs and practices evolve while implementing selected trauma-informed interventions in their classrooms. Building on the five principles of trauma-informed care identified by Harris and Fallot (2001) and utilizing the *Becoming Trauma Responsive* (Lane et al., 2025) professional development program, the study seeks to understand how educators in a rural Midwestern elementary school internalize and apply trauma-informed principles in daily practice. The study aims to identify patterns in educator understanding, perceived effectiveness of strategies, and the sustainability of trauma-responsive practices over time.

PROCEDURES OR METHODS TO BE USED:

This study will apply a single case qualitative study of elementary school educators regarding trauma-responsive perceptions and practices in a Midwestern rural school district using the semi-structured method with an interview guide. The participants will include seven K-5 teachers and one principal. Each educator will be interviewed individually and participate in a group reflection with all study participants.

RISKS OR DISCOMFORTS ANTICIPATED:

There is minimal anticipated physical or psychological risk for the student participants. Each participant is encouraged to share honestly and openly.

BENEFITS ANTICPATED:

This study will serve as social reality for trauma-responsive perceptions and practices. It will provide a real-life experience for stakeholders to engage in conversation around trauma-responsive practices and their implementation in the elementary (K-5) classrooms of a school district in a rural Midwestern state. Finally, it will provide feedback and support to

future challenges in trauma-responsive practices at the elementary level and how a focus on trauma-responsive practice can lead to changes in educators' perspectives and practices.

EXTENT OF CONFIDENTIALITY:

While confidentiality will be observed and participants will be given pseudonyms, I cannot guarantee anonymity during the group reflection.

Terms of participation: I understand this project is research, and that my participation is voluntary. I also understand that if I decide to participate in this study, I may withdraw my consent at any time, and stop participating at any time without explanation, penalty, or loss of benefits, or academic standing to which I may otherwise be entitled.

I verify that my signature below indicates that I have read and understand this consent form and willingly agree to participate in this study under the terms described, and that my signature acknowledges that I have received a signed and dated copy of this consent form.

PARTICIPANT NAME:

PARTICIPANT SIGNATURE: DATE:

Appendix B - Pre-Professional Development Individual Interview Protocol

Introduction to be shared with the interviewee:
"Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. I am interested in learning about your perceptions of trauma-informed care as an educator in a rural elementary (K-5) school setting. I want to understand your beliefs, any previous experiences you have had with trauma-informed or trauma-responsive care, and strategies you have heard of or implemented. Our time is meant to feel like a conversation. Please remember that I will keep what you share with me confidential. I encourage you to share your perceptions openly and honestly. There are no consequences or penalties for what you choose to share. I will record our session."

Participants will be asked the following questions:
Can you describe your beliefs about what educators' relationships with their students should look like and how they are created and developed in the classroom?
Probes: Describe your relationships with the individual students in your classroom.
Describe your relationship with your class as a whole.
How do you create an environment in your classroom where students feel both physically and emotionally safe for learning?
Probes: Can you describe specific routines, expectations, or strategies you use?
How do students respond to these practices?
How do you build and maintain trusting relationships with students, particularly those who may have experienced trauma or struggle to feel safe with adults?
Probes: What strategies do you use to help students feel secure and connected?
Can you share an example of a time this made a difference?
What specific routines, communication strategies or expectations do you use in your classroom to help students see you as consistent and trustworthy?
Probes: How do you communicate expectations or handle mistakes? How do you show fairness or predictability?
How do you repair trust if it's broken?
How do you show respect and follow through on your commitments?
How do you provide students with opportunities to make meaningful choices in their learning or daily routines in the classroom?
Probe: How do you balance structure with flexibility?
How do you offer students a sense of control or agency in your interactions with them, especially when addressing behavior, conflict, or emotional needs?
Probes: How do you use language or options to promote student ownership?
Can you describe a time this approach was effective?
How do you encourage collaboration and shared decision-making with your students in the classroom setting?
Probes: What kinds of classroom activities or discussions foster collaboration?
How do you involve students in setting norms or goals?
How do you work alongside students to set goals, solve problems, or make decisions, rather than making choices for them?

Probes: Can you share an example of co-creating a plan or solution with a student?
What was the outcome?
How do you help students recognize and build on their strengths and successes within the classroom environment?
Probes: What strategies do you use to celebrate progress?
How do you help students see their own growth?
How do you encourage students to develop self-efficacy and confidence, particularly those who have experienced challenges or adversity?
Probes: How do you respond when a student doubts their ability?
Can you share an example of helping a student believe in their own capacity?

Debriefing Statement:
"Thank you for your time today. I'd like to remind you that you may withdraw from the study at any given time. A pseudonym will be used to help protect your confidentiality. I will invite you to review the report once it is completed to check for accuracy. If you have any questions, comments, or concerns, please don't hesitate to contact me through email, cleininger@ksu.edu, or by phone."

Appendix C - Post-Professional Development Group Consensus Protocol

Introduction statement for the group consensus:

“Thank you for joining us today. Our goal is to collectively share our thoughts about the professional learning we just experienced including what impacted you the most, what strategies you believe would be feasible in your school environment, and which strategy you can support as a school-wide strategy to implement over the next 3-4 weeks.
Stakeholders include the principal and the grade level teachers at this elementary school. Please remember that I will keep what you share with me confidential, though I cannot promise anonymity. I encourage you to share your perceptions openly and honestly. Please feel free to expand on each other’s thoughts. Observations of interactions will be added to research notes. I will record our session.”

Participants will be asked the following questions:

1. What did you learn from the professional development modules about safety, trustworthiness, choice, collaboration, and empowerment and why these are important for people who have experienced trauma?
2. Which strategies that you learned about do you see as most beneficial for your students? Why?
3. Can you describe one strategy you believe you can implement throughout your school over a three-week period?
4. How do you see yourselves carrying out the implementation of the strategy?

Debriefing Statement:
"Thank you for your time today. I'd like to remind you that you may withdraw from the study at any given time. A pseudonym will be used to help protect your confidentiality, but total confidentiality cannot be guaranteed due to the nature of a group interview. I will invite you to review the report once it is completed for accuracy. If you have any questions, comments, or concerns, please don't hesitate to contact me through email, cleininger@ksu.edu, or by phone."

Appendix D - Post-Professional Development Individual Interviews Protocol

Introduction to be shared with the interviewee:
“Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. I am interested in learning about your perceptions of the professional learning we just experienced including what impacted you the most, what strategies you believe would be feasible in your classroom environment, and which strategy you can support to implement in your classroom over the next 3-4 weeks. Our time is meant to feel like a conversation. Please remember that I will keep what you share with me confidential. I encourage you to share your perceptions openly and honestly. There are no consequences or penalties for what you choose to share. I will record our session.”

Participants will be asked the following questions:

1. How did the content in this training confirm, challenge, or expand what you already believed about teaching and trauma?
2. Which strategies that you learned about do you see as most beneficial for your students? Why?
3. Can you describe one strategy you believe you can implement in your classroom over a three-week period?
4. How do you see yourself carrying out the implementation of the strategy?

Debriefing Statement:
"Thank you for your time today. I'd like to remind you that you may withdraw from the study at any given time. A pseudonym will be used to help protect your confidentiality. I will invite you to review the report once it is completed for accuracy. If you have any questions, comments, or concerns, please don't hesitate to contact me through email, cleininger@ksu.edu, or by phone."

Appendix E - Post Intervention Individual Interviews Protocol

Introduction to be shared with the interviewee:
"Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. I am interested in learning about your perceptions of what it was like to implement the strategy you selected to implement in your classroom over the past three weeks, any challenges or positive impacts you observed, particularly in the areas of safety, trustworthiness, choice, collaboration, and empowerment, and how you see yourself implementing this strategy into the future. Our time is meant to feel like a conversation. Please remember that I will keep what you share with me confidential. I encourage you to share your perceptions openly and honestly. There are no consequences or penalties for what you choose to share. I will record our session."

Participants will be asked the following questions:

What was it like to implement your selected strategies with your students?
Probes: With what level of fidelity would you say you implemented them?
What was the quality of your implementation?
How were the strategies received by your students?
After three weeks of using your selected strategies in your classroom and based on your observations and notes, what effects did the strategies you implemented have on your perception of each of the principles and how they were available to students in your classroom:
Safety-
Trustworthiness-
Choice-
Collaboration-
Empowerment-
Based on your observations and notes, what effects did the strategies you implemented have on your students' attitudes and behaviors?
Considering what you learned in the professional development training and the strategies you implemented, describe your beliefs about what educators' relationships with their students should look like and how they are created and developed in the classroom?
Probes: Describe your relationships with the individual students in your classroom.
Describe your relationship with your class as a whole.
How did you create an environment in your classroom where students felt both physically and emotionally safe to express themselves?
Probes: Can you describe specific routines, expectations, or strategies you used?
How did students respond to those practices?
What specific routines, communication strategies or expectations did you use in your classroom to help students see you as consistent and trustworthy?
Probes: How did you communicate expectations or handle mistakes? How did you show fairness or predictability?
How did you repair trust when it was broken?
How did you show respect and follow through on your commitments?
How did you provide students with opportunities to make meaningful choices in their learning or daily routines in the classroom?
Probe: How did you balance structure with flexibility?

How did you offer students a sense of control or agency in your interactions with them, especially when addressing behavior, conflict, or emotional needs?
Probes: How did you use language or options to promote student ownership?
Can you describe a time this approach was effective?
How did you encourage collaboration and shared decision-making with your students in the classroom setting?
Probes: What kinds of classroom activities or discussions foster collaboration?
How did you involve students in setting norms or goals?
How did you work alongside students to set goals, solve problems, or make decisions, rather than making choices for them?
Probes: Can you share an example of co-creating a plan or solution with a student? What was the outcome?
How did you help students recognize and build on their strengths and successes within the classroom environment?
Probes: What strategies do you use to celebrate progress?
How did you help students see their own growth?
How did you encourage students to develop self-efficacy and confidence, particularly those who have experienced challenges or adversity?
Probes: How did you respond when a student doubts their ability?
Can you share an example of helping a student believe in their own capacity?

Debriefing Statement:
"Thank you for your time today. I'd like to remind you that you may withdraw from the study at any given time. A pseudonym will be used to help protect your confidentiality. I will invite you to review the report once it is completed for accuracy. If you have any questions, comments, or concerns, please don't hesitate to contact me through email, cleininger@ksu.edu, or by phone.