



MIDDLE LEVEL TEACHERS’ PERCEPTIONS OF EDUCATING AND SUPPORTING STUDENTS WHO HAVE EXPERIENCED TRAUMA: AN EXPLORATORY CASE STUDY



Sheri Wenzel Prendergast

Assistant Principal, Broadview Middle School, Danbury Public Schools

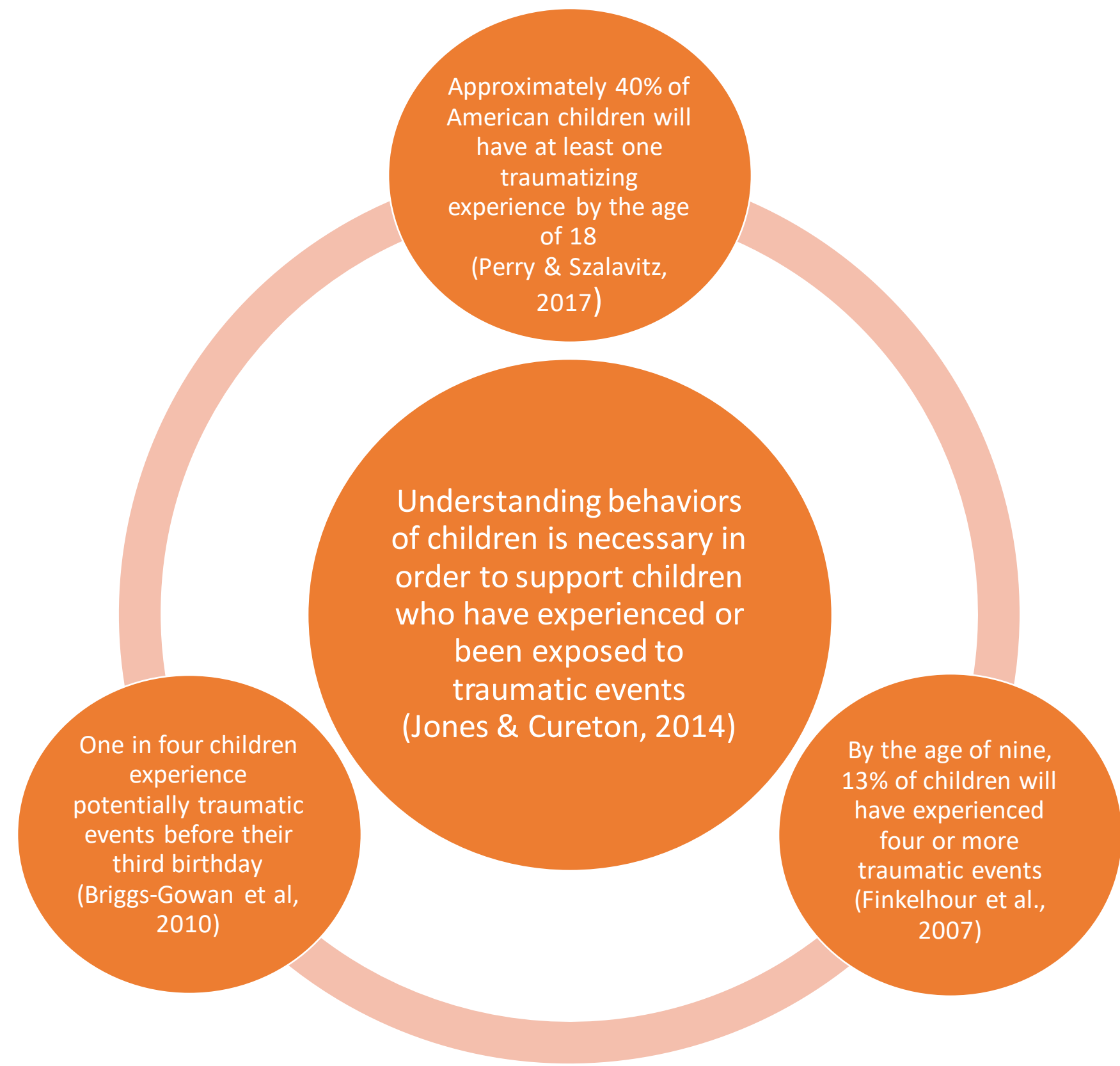
Dissertation Chair: Tricia J. Stewart, Ph.D.

Dissertation Committee Members: Jody S. Piro, Ed.D., Aimee Cordero-Davis, Ed.D.

Abstract & Introduction

This exploratory case study seeks to explore middle level teachers’ perceptions of their ability to educate and support students who have experienced trauma. More than ever, children are experiencing events in their life that can potentially cause traumatic responses. Little research has been explored regarding teachers’ perceptions of their ability to educate and support students who have endured traumatic stress, in the middle level, grades 6-8. This study is in progress, beginning in fall 2020, and participants are located in an urban middle school in Connecticut. The researcher utilized a criterion sample of 11 middle level teachers of all core content areas (English, Mathematics, Science, and Social Studies) and conducted semi-structured interviews and teacher open-ended reflective prompts to better understand teachers’ perceptions. Additionally, the researcher collected demographic data through a brief questionnaire. Data will be analyzed in and across cases for emerging patterns and themes using the constant comparative method.

Rationale



Statement of the Problem

- Students who have experienced trauma are becoming more prevalent and is common across sociodemographic characteristics and educational settings (Merrick et al., 2018).
- While many children are experiencing a stressful situation with COVID-19, those who have been exposed to other adverse events in childhood are at an increased risk of struggling during and after this crisis (Steinberg, 2020).

Theoretical Framework

A theory used to understand this work, first studied by Felitti, is the concept of a Trauma-Informed Approach. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA, 2014) focuses on the three “E’s” of Trauma: Event(s), Experience of the Event(s) and the Effect.

- The **events** or circumstances of the trauma may include the threat of physical or psychological harm and can be either a single event or an occurrence of many events over time.
- The individual’s **experience** of these events determines whether it is a traumatic event and this can differ depending on the individual impacted, based on factors such as cultural experience, social support and developmental stage.
- The **effects** of the event are the lasting impact of the trauma and can occur immediately or develop over time, where an individual may not recognize the connection between the traumatic events and the effects.

The Three “E’s” of Trauma		
Event(s)	Experience	Effects(s)

Additionally, SAMHSA created a framework that addresses a trauma-informed approach using the Four “Rs” of Trauma.

- A program, organization, or system that is trauma-informed **realizes** the widespread impact of trauma and understands potential paths for recovery; **recognizes** the signs and symptoms of trauma in individuals; and **responds** by fully integrating knowledge about trauma into policies, procedures, and practices, and seeks to actively **resist re-traumatization** (SAMHSA, 2014, p. 9).
- A Trauma informed approach is the theoretical lens that will be utilized throughout this study. In addition to the concept of Trauma-Informed Approach, teacher training through Trauma informed Schools and formal implementation models for Trauma-Informed schools will also be explored in this study.

The Four “R’s” of Trauma			
Realize	Recognize	Respond	Resist Re-traumatization

Benefits of Research

Understanding middle school teacher perceptions on how to educate and support students who have experienced trauma could be a step towards improving student and teacher relationships, thus positively impacting overall student achievement.

Methodology

- The purpose is not to evaluate or test a hypothesis, but rather to convey the “lived” experience of individuals (Patton, 2002).
- For the purpose of this study, each teacher will represent its own case and criterion-based case selection will be implemented (Patton, 2015).
- Each case is a grade 6, 7 or 8th grade core content area teacher.

Grade 6, 7, or 8th Grade Core Area Teacher (Math, Science, Social Studies, English, English as a Second Language and World Language)

Teaching minimum of one year

N = 10-18 participants

Research Questions

Overarching: What are middle level teachers’ perceptions of educating and supporting students who have experienced trauma?

- In what ways do middle level teachers understand childhood trauma?
- How are middle level teachers supporting students who have experienced trauma?
- In what ways are middle level teachers receiving educationally based supports/trainings to work with students who have experienced trauma?
- How do middle level teachers understand relationship building with students who have experienced trauma?

Research Design

The exploratory case study will include a criterion-based sample (Patton, 2015) of grade six to grade eight teachers from a middle school in an urban district in Connecticut. The research design is that of an exploratory case study as there is no pre-determined outcome and the research is based on the desire to gain an extensive and in-depth description of a social phenomenon (Yin, 2014).

Data Collection

- Teacher Demographic Questionnaire (~5 mins)
- Researcher Generated Semi-Structured Interview Protocol (~60-90 mins)
- Open-Ended Reflective Prompts (~20 mins)
- Existing Documents
- Researcher Journal

Limitations

- This study is limited in that only a single school site is selected for this exploratory study.
- Additionally, the site is an urban district in the Northeast that has a high population of students who receive free and reduced lunch and are English language learners.
- This study is being conducted during the 2020-2021 school year, which is in the middle of a global pandemic which could impact the number of teachers who are willing to participate and share their experiences.

Key Terms

Key Term	Definition
Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)	The potentially traumatic events that occur in childhood (0-17 years) such as experiencing violence, abuse, or neglect; witnessing violence in the home; and having a family member attempt or die by suicide (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2019).
Trauma	According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA, 2014a, p. 7), trauma “results from an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual’s functioning and physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being.”
Trauma-informed schools	Schools that prepare teachers, educators and school mental health providers to realize the prevalence and impact of trauma, recognize signs and symptoms of trauma and implement universal, targeted and intensive programing to promote healing and avoid the re-traumatization of students who have experience trauma (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014).

Dissertation Timeline

Date	Action
Fall 2020	Defend Proposal and apply to IRB for permission to conduct study.
Fall 2020	Write Chapters 1, 2 and 3 of dissertation
November 2020 - January 2021	Identify and confirm participants in study
Spring 2021	Data collection
Spring 2021 - Summer 2021	Data Analysis
Summer 2021	Write Chapters 4 and 5
Fall 2021	Defend Dissertation