Transmuting Childhood Trauma: A Case Study exploring the impact of childhood trauma on the career choice and teaching experiences of Special Education Teachers

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TRANSMUTING CHILDHOOD TRAUMA: A CASE STUDY EXPLORING THE IMPACT OF CHILDHOOD TRAUMA ON THE CAREER CHOICE AND TEACHING EXPERIENCES OF SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS

by

Monica Bester, MSW, M.Ed

A Dissertation

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Education

Major: Instruction & Curriculum Leadership

The University of Memphis

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Acknowledgements

Firstly, I express heartfelt gratitude to the Special Education Teachers who participated in my research. I value their trust as I delved into their personal experiences to gain understanding and inform my research.

Secondly, I am deeply grateful for and acknowledge the profound contributions of my ancestors, elders, and mentors who have paved the way for my doctoral journey. Their wisdom, guidance, and unwavering support have been invaluable pillars upon which I have built my academic pursuits. Their sacrifices and perseverance have afforded me the opportunities I cherish today, making me a first-generation doctor.

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Preface

This Doctoral Dissertation represents the culmination of my original research conducted at The University of Memphis. This dissertation's main objective is to be submitted for publication in a highly esteemed journal. Ethical clearance for this research study was granted by the Institutional Review Board on June 7, 2023.

While this marks the conclusion of my academic journey at The University of Memphis, it also signifies the commencement of a new phase in my scholarly pursuits. Through this research, I delved deeply into the realm of trauma, sparking a profound interest in exploring the intersection of trauma studies with education. The evolution of this work has been remarkable, and my aspiration is that it resonates with you on a personal level, prompting reflection on your own journey and those dear to you.

I dedicate this Dissertation to my nieces, nephews, former students, and other children in the world. May the paths we pave create space for them when needed most.

With love and a commitment to transformation,

Moe Nicole
Abstract

In recent years, there has been a growing body of research on childhood trauma and its potential effects on the development of a child into adulthood. The findings of this research indicate that those who have undergone traumatic experiences might demonstrate effects in their behavior, interactions with others, management of stressful situations, and even in their career decisions as they mature in age. As research on the impact of trauma on career choices continues to expand, this study looks at trauma’s impact on the experiences and decisions of Special Education Teachers. This qualitative case study uses Contemporary Trauma Theory as a conceptual framework to explore how childhood trauma has impacted the career choice and teaching experiences of five Special Education teachers who teach students who have also experienced trauma. The findings illustrate how Special Education teachers, administration, and teacher preparation programs can leverage teachers' personal experiences of trauma to incorporate co-regulation techniques, enhancing teacher-student relationships within a trauma-informed environment. The experiences of Special Education teachers demonstrate how adverse life situations can be transformed into positive influences on the next generation of change agents.

*Keywords*: Special Education, Childhood Trauma, Career Choices, Trauma Co-Regulation
Introduction

Trauma can be defined as an emotional response to an event of abuse, neglect, natural disaster, or other adverse experiences, causing unfavorable flashbacks, behavioral changes, strained relationships, and even negative interpersonal relationships into adulthood (Goodman, 2017; Gleeson et al., 2023). It is further believed that if an individual experiences a traumatic event, especially before turning 18, there is a great chance of them being retraumatized through triggers (Gorski, 2020). These triggers are events that initiate a reaction in relation to previous traumatic experiences (Gorski, 2020). Teachers who have experienced trauma run the risk of being retraumatized by students with cognitive and behavioral concerns, as it can act as a trigger (Gorski, 2020). The retriggering of childhood trauma in an adult can cause flashbacks, influence their mood, work performance, and focus (Herman, 1992; Misiak et al., 2022).

Researchers suggest that when an adult has experienced trauma, it is important not to assume that they will inevitably have negative outcomes as a result; the trauma may also contribute positively to their development (Bryce et al., 2023). Current research supports the notion of the realities of trauma and how it has shaped the lives of many adults in the modern world and encourages society to begin looking at others through a trauma-informed lens perspective (Saunders & Adams, 2014; Vale-Dias et al., 2019). This trauma-informed lens creates greater awareness of how the effects of trauma can manifest and affect someone, whether firsthand or secondarily (Saunders & Adams, 2014; Vale-Dias et al., 2019). This advances from the beginning of trauma research conducted under Sigmund Freud (Anderson, 2016; Goodman, 2017). Sigmund Freud and his theory of trauma and memory have served as the foundation of many scholars’ further research on trauma (Anderson, 2016; Goodman, 2017). That research has extended from not only the macro (Tirrell-Corbin, 2019) focus of childhood trauma but also micro, and how that trauma can influence the career choices of those in helping professions such
as education (Vale-Dias et al., 2019; Bryce et al., 2023). Over the years, the perception of trauma and triggers has evolved as researchers investigate trauma from the lens of various communities and societal groups outside of the traditional neo-colonialistic views of trauma (Polanco-Roman et al., 2016).

Due to the increasing interest in the exploration of trauma-informed care, especially in education, researchers have begun focusing more on person-first trauma awareness (Benner et al., 2023). This focus aims to increase proactive usage of trauma-informed co-regulation techniques between teachers, their students, and their families (Corr et al., 2019). Trauma-informed care is the understanding that anyone we encounter may have been exposed to a traumatic event, and the creation of intentional care with conscious support for others is beneficial (Cavanaugh, 2016; Offerman et al., 2022).

Being able to co-regulate their personal needs and the needs of their students simultaneously is imperative for teachers (Benner et al., 2023). In their study, Bryce et al. (2023) found that childhood trauma played a role not only in the career choice of adults in helping professions but also in their empathy when working with others. The participants were more aware of others and wanted to make a positive impact on the world. Their experience with trauma played a major role in their career choice, which shows how trauma can have a long-term impact on one’s development into adulthood and decision-making. This is a key piece of the conceptual framework of this study.

Trauma Theory is the conceptual framework used to explore how the personal experiences of childhood trauma influenced the career choice of Special Education Teachers (SETs) and their teaching experiences (Goodman, 2017). It guided the research questions addressed in this qualitative case study, which are:
1. How do Special Education teachers’ personal trauma influence their decision to teach in K-12 schools?
2. How do Special Education teachers’ history of trauma influence their interactions with students?
3. How do Special Education teachers manage their history of trauma while working with students?

**Literature Review**

As interest in childhood and secondary trauma has increased, literature on the influence of personal childhood trauma on SETs' career choice and co-regulation is limited, but research surrounding trauma and teachers has been emerging as interest in childhood and secondary trauma has increased (Miller & Flint-Stipp, 2019; Tirrell-Corbin et al., 2023). There has been a significant increase in learning about how the experience of childhood trauma influences the decision-making and teaching experiences of SETs, as current research suggests that childhood trauma has the potential to positively and/or negatively impact a person's development (Misiak et al., 2022; Chudzik et al., 2024). Currently, one in five children will experience at least one traumatic event before the age of sixteen, and those who develop reactions in response to trauma are at risk of it manifesting at school or any other place they frequent (Saunders & Adams, 2014; Winder, 2015). If that trauma goes unaddressed, there could be negative reactions (Herman, 1992; Misiak et al., 2022). They are more likely to have difficulty managing their responses to trauma, engage in dangerous behaviors, and experience mental health difficulties into adulthood, similar to Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (Herman, 1992; Mazzeo & Bendixen, 2023).

Secondary trauma for teachers is very common in K-12 educational systems (Tilos, 2019; Christian-Brandt et al., 2020; Oberg et al., 2023). This secondary trauma can be experienced
through disruptive student behaviors resulting from traumatic experiences (Christian-Brandt et al., 2020). These disruptive behaviors can trigger teachers, especially those prone to being triggered (Tilos, 2019; Adams, 2022). According to Benner et al. (2023), teachers with a history of childhood trauma reported feeling less resilient in the classroom and experiencing higher rates of burnout symptoms at work. This secondary trauma can be experienced at higher rates for SETs as they work with students who may present challenging behaviors (Oberg et al., 2023).

Although researchers have found that childhood trauma can have an everlasting effect on a person's development, it does not always signify a negative response (Misiak et al., 2022). The experience of childhood trauma can encourage a person to pursue a career in a helping profession – Teaching, Social Service, First Responders, Medical Professionals, etc. – as a way to positively influence society by redefining their lived experience (Vale-Dias et al., 2019; Bryce et al., 2023). This has been true for children who attend therapy or receive other individualized intervention support; they cope with their history of trauma and use it to their benefit at higher rates than children who do not (Manyam & Davis, 2020). Researchers have increasingly emphasized person-first trauma awareness in education, aiming to enhance the proactive utilization of trauma-informed co-regulation techniques among teachers, students, and families (Benner et al., 2023; Corr et al., 2019).

**Study Purpose and Significance**

The primary objective of this research is to build upon the research of Bryce et al. (2023) by examining the career decisions of SETs who have experienced childhood trauma and their experiences co-regulating their needs and those of their students. The study aims to explore the perspectives of K-12 SETs regarding student trauma and behaviors, from which qualitative data
was gathered to inform future research, educator training, and professional development practices for working with traumatized students.

**Conceptual Framework**

Contemporary Trauma Theory (CTT) provides the conceptual framework for this study. CTT is explored through the examination of the lived experiences of five SETs and the exploration of their personalized experiences and truths through a trauma-informed lens (Herman, 1992). Contemporary Trauma Theory provides a conceptual understanding of how trauma can impact children and adults (Goodman, 2016). In this study, CTT provides a framework and focus areas for reviewing the impact childhood trauma had on the participants’ development and actions. It provides the psychosocial impact of trauma on children and adults as a cross reference within the Case (Goodman, 2017).

**Contemporary Trauma Theory**

Contemporary Trauma Theory first emerged in the early 1900s as it branched off from the earlier works of Sigmund Freud and Sandor Ferenczi and their research on trauma (Goodman, 2017). Judith Herman’s published work, "Trauma and Recovery," built upon the works of Sandor Ferenczi to study how traumatic events overwhelm the ordinary person’s adaptation to life (Suleiman, 2008). Her work can be credited for transforming Trauma-Informed Care practice. There are five main components of Contemporary Trauma Theory: Dissociation, Attachment, Re-enactment, long-term effects on adulthood, and emotional capacity impairment (Suleiman, 2008; Goodman, 2017). Transitioning from the historical background of contemporary trauma theory, it is essential to delve into its key components, which elucidate the intricate manifestations of trauma and its enduring impacts on individuals' lives and relationships.
Dissociation in Contemporary Trauma Theory can be seen as one of the main defense mechanisms used by trauma victims to make sense of or negotiate a tolerance for the traumatic experience. It is used by the victim to define themselves through experience and determine their actions thereafter (Herman, 1992; Siegal, 1999; Suleiman, 2008; van der Kolk, 2014). As dissociation allows the victim to remove themselves from the incident, some trauma victims may find their attachment style being influenced by it (Herman, 1992).

It is believed that trauma, especially childhood trauma, has a long-term effect on the attachment styles they develop over time (Herman, 1992; Van der Kolk, 2014). It influences their ability to both develop and maintain healthy interpersonal relationships, built around trust, which can lead to a deterioration of said interpersonal relationships (Radstone, 2007; O’Connor & Elklit, 2008; Siegal, 2010; Tarren-Sweeney, 2013). The trauma victim can find themselves attaching to people who are the opposite of their experiences or choosing relationships that are a reenactment of their traumatic experience (Herman, 1992; Van der Kolk, 2014).

A phenomenon presents itself where the victim begins intentionally and unintentionally seeking relationships and behaviors that mirror the original traumatic event. This enables the victim to feel somewhat connected and in control as they synchronize with something that brings familiarity to the original traumatic event and releases anxiety or tension within their emotional state (Courtois & Ford, 2016). The reenactment of their traumatic experience through familiar relationships can have long-term effects on development into adulthood (Herman, 1992; Van der Kolk, 2014).

It was found that trauma experienced by children predisposes them to a potential negative recurrence later in life, which can include both physical and mental health problems. It is said to potentially diminish the sense of self as it destroys intrapersonal and interpersonal capacities.
This can also make the victim numb to various situations. They become numb over time as they make sense of the original traumatic event, and their adaptive functioning is altered in the process (Herman, 1992; Siegal, 1999; Van der Kolk, 2014).

**Methodology**

Case Study is the methodology used in this study. I chose Case Study because it provided a collaborative experience between the participants and me as they shared their experiences through explanations and anecdotes. Stake’s (2006) approach to case study was used as I employed a comprehensive approach to creating meaning and understanding through reflections on each participant’s lived experience. This methodology allowed me to keep Contemporary Trauma theory in focus by centering the participants’ selves in this study (Yalch & Burkman, 2023). My case study interrogates how the experience of childhood trauma has influenced the career choice and teaching experience of SETs who teach students affected by trauma.

**Participants**

Special Education Teachers (SETs) based in the mid-southern region of the USA were recruited through the Teach for America network, an alternative teacher preparation provider (Conn et al., 2022), and previous colleagues by sharing study details publicly with an interest link to gather their contact information. By utilizing a mixture of convenience and snowball sampling with my professional educational networks, I was able to reach other SETs who met the research criteria and were interested in sharing their experiences (Ellis, 2021). Six teachers were recruited, all of whom had experienced childhood trauma. One participant withdrew before their interview. All five teacher participants identified as female and indicated they had been teaching for longer than five years. When asked to self-describe their race and ethnicity, one identified as “White,” and four identified as “Black.” They all taught in K-12 schools in the mid-southern
region of the USA. Table 1 describes participant demographics and Special Education caseload at the time of data collection.

Table 1

**Participant Demographics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Pseudonym</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Education Level</th>
<th>Race/ Ethnicity</th>
<th>Grades Taught</th>
<th>Type of Classroom Setting</th>
<th>Years of Teaching</th>
<th>Caseload Size</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Coop</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Bachelor's Degree</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>K through 5th</td>
<td>Resource</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chanda</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Master's Degree</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>9th through 12th</td>
<td>Self-Contained &amp; Inclusion</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holly</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Bachelor's Degree</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>11th and 12th</td>
<td>Inclusion</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Endya</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Master's Degree</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>9th through 12th</td>
<td>Inclusion</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kesha</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Master's Degree</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>9th through 12th</td>
<td>Self-Contained Resource</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Data Collection Procedures**

Data were collected over a 1-month period for this case study using three triangulation methods: a 1-hour semi-structured interview, a researcher journal, and participant journal entries (Savin-Baden & Howell Major, 2013). The interview questions focused on gaining a better understanding of the participants’ journey to Special Education, their childhood traumatic experiences, trauma management, and teaching experiences. During the data collection process, I kept a researcher journal to document my thoughts, feelings, observations, analytical documentation of the process, reflection, and any indication of personal bias (Ortlipp, 2008). The third triangulation method utilized participant documents in the form of journal entries.
(Savin-Baden & Howell Major, 2013). Two of the participants wrote journal entries documenting the flow of their day, feelings, experiences, thoughts, interactions with students, triggers, and support received from their employers. Three participants opted out of the optional journal entry.

**Data Analysis Procedures**

Before each interview, every participant received an in-depth introduction to the study and was given the opportunity to choose a preferred pseudonym for identification. Once the participants approved the final transcripts, I began analyzing the data. I used structural coding to initially organize the data (Ravitch & Riggan, 2012; Saldaña, 2021), by reading and making key notes of the transcripts and journal prompts to familiarize myself with the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). The structural codes were: How they became a Special Education teacher, Lessons learned from childhood trauma, Triggers experienced while teaching, co-regulation while teaching, and creative teaching interventions. These codes are presented in Table 2.

### Table 2

*Structural Codes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How They Became Special Education Teacher</td>
<td>Descriptions of their personal professional path to becoming a Special Education teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lessons learned from childhood trauma</td>
<td>Descriptions of how their experience of trauma influenced how they view their role as a Special Education teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Triggers experienced while teaching</td>
<td>Descriptions of the trauma triggers they experienced while teaching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Co-regulation while teaching</td>
<td>Descriptions of how they manage their triggers while teaching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creative teaching interventions</td>
<td>Descriptions of teaching strategies used to build relationships with students who have experienced trauma</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
After clustering all subcodes related to each structural code, I developed themes for the data and subthemes that related to each (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Castleberry & Nolen, 2018; Saldaña, 2021). Lastly, I noted key statements, phrases, and experiences highlighted from each participant's interview and submitted journal entries (Savin-Baden & Howell Major, 2013).

**Researcher Positionality**

I identify as a trauma-informed Black woman, graduate student, and educator devoted to increasing awareness of childhood trauma and practicing informed conscious practices. I incorporated my expertise as a social worker and educator into this project. I used reflexivity in my research journal to examine personal biases that might have influenced data collection, especially since I knew some participants personally (Collective, 2023). The goal is to share how the traumatic experiences of teachers can positively impact the introduction of trauma-informed classroom interventions, school measures, and protocol systems that support both teachers and students who have experienced trauma for healthy co-regulation of post-traumatic stressors.

**Trustworthiness**

By using the process of thematic analysis, I focused on the importance of creating meaning from the data by pinpointing the commonalities found across all the participants’ experiences (Savin-Baden & Howell Major, 2013). Consequently, a variety of methods were used to enhance the trustworthiness and reliability of the analysis (Savin-Baden & Howell Major, 2013). For my analysis, I triangulated the data across multiple sources such as the researcher's journal, interview transcripts, and participant journal entries. Before data analysis began, member checking was incorporated by allowing participants to review interview transcripts once they were transcribed, for feedback. None of the participants requested any changes to the transcripts, outside of sharing extended information when requested. Inductive and deductive
coding procedures were used to ensure a comprehensive evaluation and interpretation of the participant data.

Findings

In this section, I address the study’s research questions and themes. The first theme, Desire to Give Back, explores how the teachers’ personal experiences impacted their decision to teach Special Education. The second theme, Personal Childhood Trauma Triggered by Student Experiences, shares the teachers’ trauma history management, triggers they have experienced while teaching, and the childhood trauma experienced by their students. The third theme, Trauma-Informed Teaching Interventions, looks at how the teachers view trauma-informed care and implemented classroom interventions to create a supportive learning community for them and their students.

Desire to Give Back

The dedication and sacrifices of teachers have shown teaching to be a profession driven by passion (Serin, 2023). This perception aligns with the insights shared by participants in the study. Special Education Teachers (SETs) expressed diverse motivations for choosing their profession. While they all expressed a desire to contribute to and shape the next generation, none of them initially chose Special Education as their career path, and their life experiences played a significant role in this change (Geoghegan, 2023). A narrative of how their experiences and passion led the SETs to the decision to teach Special Education is presented below, followed by a description of the participants’ journey into Special Education, which included new opportunities, the introduction of passion to Special Education, and alternative teaching programs.
How They Were Led to Teaching

While Special Education may not have been the initial career choice for any of the SETs, they all share a common passion for aiding others, particularly children facing various disadvantages. Their childhood and adult experiences played a role in how they viewed their responsibility to the youth (Bryce et al., 2023). Teaching to provide meaning is something that many teachers find both intrinsic and extrinsic value in (Whiteford et al., 2021). They each described having a passion for helping kids who needed extra support. When asked what made them choose teaching, it was common for them to have a passion for giving back, as Holly shared, “I could be that person for somebody else,” as she reminisced about her high school teacher who helped her through her most traumatic and difficult years of life while in school (Simmons & Antshel, 2021). Coop credited her brother’s behavioral and educational problems and her experience working in foster care for girls for her increased interest in understanding the psychology behind disabilities and educational performance, as it hurt her to see him get into trouble so often (Simmons & Antshel, 2021). “He always struggled in school...I started to realize...if behavior is communication and kids are exhibiting negative behaviors in the classroom, then they’re probably trying to communicate that something isn’t right,” she recalled.

Their personal experiences played a role in their decision to teach Special Education and another included being introduced to it after working in a different field (Veale et al., 2013; Geoghegan, 2023). Although all the SETs shared an interest in education, only Chanda earned her undergraduate degree in Education. Other life factors and prior professional experience in non-teaching fields played a key role in their teacher effectiveness (Henry et al., 2014). For example, Endya earned a Bachelor's in Recreational Therapy and a master's degree in business administration. She shared it was her experience of having a child diagnosed with attention
deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) that motivated her to make a career change into Special Education. “I was thinking of other parents...somebody needs to be there to tell [them] the whole truth...what I didn’t get,” she shared.

Experience led Kesha, Endya, and Chanda back to school to obtain certification in Special Education once they realized they wanted to switch careers into Special Education (Veale et al., 2013; Geoghegan, 2023). Both Coop and Holly took an alternative route into education, through Teach for America. They both preferred placement in Special Education, due to high demand, and that is what they were assigned when accepted into the program.

_Felt Like a Calling_

Each SET shared that the profession of teaching felt like something they were meant to do at this period of their life. Chanda shared how she felt “very distraught” when she learned her grades were not high enough to teach in [the school district she wanted], as she prepared to graduate with her undergraduate degree. It was a faculty member at the university who saw her crying and let her know about a new program that was introduced to attract more SETs in the mid-south. Although she desired to teach middle school, she completed her student teaching in Special Education and shared, “I loved it. I was fulfilled. I felt like I had a purpose.” Kesha shared it was an introductory Special Education course that she “stumbled upon” during her undergraduate degree that made her add a Special Education certificate to her degree program. Her voice excitedly conveyed, “I knew that was for me...I like helping people and... that just seemed like it was totally [for] me.”

Holly recalled the feeling that overcome her once she started teaching with joy in her voice, “once I got involved, it definitely got my heart going a lot more...seeing the impact that I could have on children kind of helped me.” She recalled how teachers helped her at challenging
times during childhood and how she felt when former students reached out to her to share her impact on them. She shared, “that just feels so good that I am making that difference that somebody did for me.” On the other hand, Coop had a great interest in understanding how the cognition of children operated from an individualized cognitive-behavioral standpoint. “I wanted to be a school psychologist...I wanted to be able to test kids...I figured if I did Special Education... it could give me better insight when I’m testing kids,” she disclosed.

**Personal Childhood Trauma Triggered by Student Experiences**

Managing childhood trauma had been a lifelong journey for each SET in this study. While sharing their history of trauma and management, it was evident that each SET understood the importance of addressing and healing from personal trauma for a higher quality of life (Misiak et al., 2022). The common management methods they shared were therapy, professional anger management support, journaling, and music. Every SET shared how their experiences of trauma management helped them understand and provide healthy co-regulation with their students who endured trauma, especially when they found themselves triggered while teaching (Corr et al., 2019).

**Trauma-management & triggers**

All SETs reported the importance of having healthy self-management and preventative methods while teaching, due to personal trauma triggers (Benner et al., 2023). Each teacher experienced being triggered while teaching, which brought on different issues. Those events would trigger their personal battles with depression, anxiety, and panic attacks linked to their childhood traumas. Four of the teachers shared their history of working with a mental health professional for their responses to trauma, with two of them still actively receiving professional treatment through therapy and/or medication management. Three of the participants shared that
they still experience moments of stress and distress while teaching, especially when triggered in their work environment. Trauma while teaching can be found among many teachers due to triggers with students and teacher expectations (Jackson & Stevens, 2023).

**Endya**

During her interview, Endya shared that her history of depression, severe anger, and anxiety often left her afraid to make mistakes in her work life. "I'm still like that... like if I'm late for work... if I do something wrong... I have a lot of anxiety behind it... I do not want to mess up... I want to do as I’m told," Endya shared as she reminisced on the trauma endured from her mom and how she still hates to mess up out of fear of being punished. To help her manage her trauma and anger, she uses music therapy for herself and incorporates it into the classroom with her students as well. Playing music in the classroom can help reduce stress and behavior problems (Ferrer et al., 2014).

Endya, like the others, gets triggered by student behaviors, such as displays of aggression. She recalled times when she would have to breathe through her anger to rebalance when triggered. She reflected on a time when a student tried to fight her, and she felt defenseless. "My hand would be shaking because I’m thinking I’m in survival mode," she reminisced as she shared a time when she was triggered by a student’s aggressive behavior. "There was an administrator there, and they egged them on," she recalled the incident.

**Keesha**

Keesha had a challenging time managing her trauma at the beginning of her teaching career, which led her to leave the profession to focus on her mental health and healing for a few years (Benner et al., 2023). Upon returning to the classroom, healthy coping skills and preventative measures became imperative for managing triggers while teaching. She currently
has a therapist whom she works with consistently, takes medication, ensures to take breaks to breathe during the workday, and reminds herself of how a student’s disabilities can influence their behavior to work through an emotional trigger. Keesha reported that the greatest trigger for her was when a student called her out of her name and used profanity, as she recalled her thoughts of ‘it triggers when my daddy used to curse at me or something.’

Coop

Coop reported moments of being triggered when she felt she could not guarantee the safety of all students. She recalled a time when a student was exhibiting hyperactive and behavioral concerns, trying to stab students with a pair of scissors. It was so triggering that she wanted to quit and stay in the comfort of her own home. When Coop first started teaching, she found herself being triggered by student behavior often. Now that she is in her 7th year of teaching, she is no longer triggered by student behavior unless it is a safety issue. As a personal coping mechanism, she places a big emphasis on giving attention to her mental health, self-care, and creating boundaries at work.

Holly

Holly, however, shared sentiments of being triggered when students shared traumatic life experiences with her. She recalled, “I’ve gone home and cried because...it brought up things that... I went through and whatnot.” As she recollected those experiences, she shared that she currently is in therapy to manage her trauma. Like Coop, student behaviors did not affect her when she first started teaching. She learned to become more familiar with the origins of student behavior. She also recalled how certain age groups were more challenging for her and how she prefers older students for this reason. To manage her trauma, while teaching, she attends therapy
and journals. During the workday, she utilizes breaks and has items in her classroom to use when she feels herself getting triggered.

**Chanda**

What was triggering for Chanda related to student work. She shared that she has dyslexia and when confronted with difficult math work, she gets triggered by what has been an academic deficit for her since childhood. As most of her students are also below grade level in both reading and math, when faced with a problem she does not understand, she 'automatically gets anxious.' Chanda explained that her mother did not want her to feel inferior or marginalized because of her dyslexia. Consequently, she received little attention or assistance in dealing with her disability and was pushed to develop personal coping mechanisms to manage without the support she believed she required when she was younger (Ooms-Evers et al., 2021).

**Analysis of Student trauma & behaviors**

Each Special Education Teacher (SET) provided insights into the traumas their students had faced both before and during their time teaching them. By understanding their students' traumatic backgrounds, they noticed similarities in the behaviors exhibited by those who had experienced trauma (Corr et al., 2019). When reflecting on the trauma experienced, three of the five SETs (Chanda, Holly, & Endya) explicitly expressed sharing similar traumatic childhood experiences as their students. Four of the five SETs shared instances of collective community trauma faced by the students in the school atmosphere, such as the death of a classmate (Chanda, Holly, & Endya) and local community violence (Keesha). Each SET conveyed how their understanding of the students' trauma influenced their perception of the child and guided their approach to working with them in response to their traumatic experiences.
There was great similarity between the SETs with the types of behaviors experienced by students. The most common behaviors reported from all SETs were student hyperactivity, the inability to focus on schoolwork, and not following all classroom rules. Endya, Keesha, & Chanda reported the usage of inappropriate language from students in the academic setting. Endya, Keesha, Chanda, and Holly reported aggressive behavior being present in at least one of their students. Coop, Endya, and Chanda shared students with increased insecurities and avoidant personalities. Chanda shared behavioral trends of one of her students who had witnessed his parents being murdered. She shared, 'he uses that to his advantage sometimes,' to garner attention from adults or does not want to do something. He received Special Education services to support him through his personal needs.

The feelings of understanding and empathy were present as each SET shared their experiences teaching. During her interview, Chanda recalled an interaction she had with a student that triggered thoughts about a similar experience she had as a child. Having experienced a comparable situation, she felt it prepared her to encourage the student who was going through bullying because of her weight and experiencing heartbreak from a crush who was not interested in her. Endya had similar sentiments as she recollected an experience with a student who went through abuse at home, that led to increased behavioral problems, and eventually landed him in juvenile detention. When he returned to school, his hyperactivity increased and Endya 'just started listening more, started encouraging more and started sharing with them more,' she shared as she thought about the interactions.

Holly was able to recall a few interactions she had with students who had shared instances of trauma with her. She shared many times how understanding her students’ trauma benefited her planning and classroom practices. She also expressed how she felt experiencing
traumatic experiences helped her understand them as well, as a positive as she shared, 'I feel like people who haven't gone through those kinds of experiences ... it's easy to be like, oh yeah that's awful {when hearing about a student’s trauma} ... But it is incredibly difficult to completely understand where somebody is coming from or how it is affecting them if it is something you have not experienced.'

Coop, on the other hand, did not express similar traumatic experiences with her students, but she did feel having knowledge of a student’s experience 'kind of helped me to recognize some behaviors, but I do not feel like it really impacted the way that I... loved on them or corrected them.' Keesha expressed similar feelings regarding working with students who have experienced trauma in a supportive setting. She shared, 'My instruction is more therapeutic... So that helps them out a lot and it not only helps them, but it helps me too because I'm being focused on aspects of things that really help you... So, I get to teach those things that help me too.'

**Trauma-Informed Care & Teaching Interventions**

A teacher's skill is not learned exclusively in a preparation program but through hands-on experience (An, 2021), as witnessed through the classroom interventions used by the SETs in the study. In this section of the results, I will be sharing how teaching strategies and interventions were developed in response to the co-regulation of their responses to trauma, triggers, and the needs of their students. Although none of the teachers reported participating in trauma-informed care professional development as a teacher, they all felt their experiences with trauma helped them be more aware of how they showed up for their students. It was a common perception among all participants that knowing their students’ trauma helped them better plan and provide support where needed. Coop shared that she had attended a trauma-informed care session a
couple of years prior to her entrance into teaching, making her the only teacher aware of the term “trauma-informed” when asked. She felt it was beneficial to her work as a teacher, as studies have found through research as well (Wiest-Stevenson & Lee, 2016).

**Chanda**

Chanda felt that managing her triggers while teaching was most important. One thing she does is utilize her classroom assistants to help, especially if she is having “a moment.” This is helpful for her because it allows her the opportunity to breathe and rebalance as needed. While teaching, she loves using music as she found that her students share a similar passion for it as well. Music is used a lot in her Functional Skills classroom, and she notices how different music affects her students’ behavior (Schmidt et al., 2020). As a teacher with experience working in Functional Skills and in Inclusion, Chanda felt she was most effective in Functional Skills as she had more power over implementing teaching strategies, consistency, and making last-minute changes when needed as the lead teacher. A few things she felt helped her students were consistency, familiarity, empathy, and flexibility. She also reported utilizing her co-workers when needed, as an intervention when students are working through a triggering episode. She shared, “I could give [the student] a break or I could offer [them] a cool-down period or send [them] to [their] coach,” when she felt one of her students was triggered.

**Coop**

To manage student behavior, which keeps her regulated, she uses manipulatives for the students who need other options and creative ways to learn their objectives (Hunter et al., 2021). She mentioned using rotating timed activities for her students to ensure a change in activity before they begin getting “bored.” She felt when they get bored there is a higher chance of them “acting out.” She also prioritizes processing their feelings with them, even when they act out.
She asks her students questions and guides them through graphic organizers to learn the real problem. One thing she prides herself on is emphasizing building relationships with her students and using the timed activities to work in smaller groups. She even has seat bands on the student chairs, for her students who need fidgets to focus on the lesson.

*Holly*

Holly keeps squishy balls, coloring books, and plants in her room for herself and to provide diverse options for students to use when triggered. “I’ve tried them all and I know different coping mechanisms work for different people,” she shared as she recalled her classroom culture. There are times when the students will ask to water the plants or use a squishy ball in her classroom. She emphasized using diverse options when it came to being proactive. There are times when she will let a student stand and work, if that is what they need to “get some of their energy out.”

*Keesha*

The classroom interventions Keesha uses depend on the daily needs of her students as she is a resource room. She takes feedback from parents, the students’ team, and teachers to create a curriculum and list of learning supports for the student accordingly (Corr et al., 2019). She expressed the importance of understanding their emotional, behavioral, and mental challenges due to their disability and trauma. That is one of her primary focuses when providing interventions. She prefers to remain patient and flexible when working with her students.

*Endya*

The thing Endya loved greatest about having her own classroom was having the flexibility to work with students as needed, even if it meant changing the class schedule for the day to accommodate them. Endya brings her personal coping mechanisms to the classroom by
implementing them into her classroom culture. She keeps snacks for students and incorporates music into the class schedule daily (Schmidt et al., 2020). She allows students to journal and process their feelings when viewed as beneficial. She even permits students to stand up and do their classwork if they are having a tough time sitting in one place. She found that being understanding and flexible was beneficial to creating a healthy culture in the classroom and ensures to ask questions before assuming why students behave in a particular way (Cavanaugh, 2016).

**Discussion**

The discussion highlights the pressing need for trauma management and interventions in K-12 educational institutions, where approximately 46 million students and over 4 million teachers face the potential impact of trauma annually (Bozinovic et al., 2021; Saunders & Adams, 2014; Winder, 2015; U.S. Department of Education, 2020; Gorski, 2020; Christian-Brandt et al., 2020). Through the candid accounts of five teachers, the study humanizes their experiences, emphasizing the importance of self-support strategies and a conducive work environment to address triggers and prioritize mental health (Corr et al., 2019; Benner et al., 2023; Christian-Brandt, 2020).

These teachers demonstrated empathy towards students' needs while setting boundaries to maintain emotional balance, drawing from their own traumatic experiences to positively shape their teaching approach (Benner et al., 2023; Bryce et al., 2023; Tilos, 2019; Pendola et al., 2023). They advocated for trauma-informed care training to mitigate triggers and foster supportive environments within schools, recognizing the challenges of unwanted behaviors and the risk of secondary trauma (Cavanaugh, 2016; Chudzik et al., 2024; Oberg, 2023).
The study underscores the consensus among participants regarding the necessity for trauma-informed practices to safeguard the emotional well-being of both teachers and students (Tirrell-Corbin et al., 2023; Corr et al., 2019). Given the rising attrition rates among teachers, creating safe environments becomes crucial to retain educators and prepare students adequately for adulthood (Pendola et al., 2023; Oberg et al., 2023; Tirrell-Corbin, 2019). In conclusion, prioritizing trauma-informed approaches ensures that schools evolve into safe havens, fostering resilience and well-being across educational stakeholders.

**Implications for Special Education Teachers**

Over the years, there has been increased interest in trauma-informed care in the school setting, particularly from the perspective of students and their needs (Cavanaugh, 2016; Hunter et al., 2021). Unfortunately, there has not been much attention given to the acknowledgment of SET experiences (Caringi et al., 2015). I would argue that it is mutually beneficial for school administration and the school community (teachers and students) if more research were conducted on the co-regulation of trauma triggers in schools among all individuals daily (Corr et al., 2019). This research study has given a voice to SETs who have experienced trauma. With such a delicate topic, this conversation may open the door for other teachers to be vulnerable in sharing their experiences. As teachers allow themselves to reflect, they can advocate for themselves and their students through their planning and execution (Benner et al., 2023). Classroom intervention toolkits can also be created to quickly identify interventions to implement in various classroom situations (Cavanaugh, 2016).

**Implications for School Leadership**

This study examines how teachers' experiences have impacted their decisions and personal approach to teaching. It provides substantial details and information beneficial for the
development of policies, procedures, and the implementation of staff engagement by school administrative leaders. There deserves to be more discussion around this topic, especially in both teacher and school leadership training. Research has shown that when an organization prioritizes the mental health of its community, the morale of the organization is positively affected (Bailey et al., 2023).

It would also be beneficial for staff to be trained in trauma management and co-regulation in a potentially triggering environment (Benner et al., 2023). By providing strategies for increased trauma awareness and management, there will be more trauma-informed school systems and teachers (Hunter et al., 2021). The word "trauma" does not have to carry a negative connotation. Administration can find ways to turn trauma into purpose by encouraging their teachers to transmute it into healing relationships and provide emotional/mental support/relief when needed (Gorski, 2020). They can use their experiences as a catalyst for understanding and reflection when teaching in a triggering environment (Gorski, 2020). My hope is that this research will provide a humanized view of SETs and encourage increased usage of trauma-informed care practices in educational and training institutions.

**Implications for Teacher Preparation & Research**

This study’s findings offer a new perspective on supporting both teachers and students in school, recognizing that trauma can impact how we engage with others (Williams, 2006). The results of this study can guide future research in trauma-informed care and SET preparation. By considering the perspective and lived experiences of teachers, it opens the door to discussions about the influence of self-awareness and co-regulatory tools that would be beneficial for a healthy educational setting (Benner et al., 2023). In preparation programs, initiating discussions about teachers reflecting on their own experiences can help establish context for proactively
creating routines and plans to regulate their reactions in challenging situations (Dewey, 1933). This study also prompts further research into the effects of childhood trauma and its impact on SETs working in K-12 settings. It would also be interesting to see if there is a difference in results with SETs who have not attended therapy, as all the participants of this study had.

**Limitations**

Although this study provided much insight into how childhood trauma can influence the career choice and teaching experience of a SET, there are some limitations within the study. Although the study’s results are not generalizable, there is transferability as the study can be applied to other concentrations. Other limitations include a small participant group which can be hard to attribute to the entire collective. Next, all the participants identified as women, lacking diversity of gender. Lastly, there was not a strong diversity in school culture, race, and cultural backgrounds among the participants. It would be interesting to see the results from a larger diverse participant pool.

**Conclusion**

This case study was instrumental in analyzing the influence of childhood trauma on the career choices of SETs and how the recollection of their experiences showed up while instructing students who have experienced trauma. The findings of this study found that the traumatic experiences of the SET lead them to their intrinsic motivation of becoming a teacher (Veale et al., 2013; Geoghegan, 2023). Their traumatic experiences played a significant role in them choosing to become educators as they each felt an innate calling to be a part of the collective who helped shape the future of children (Bryce et al., 2023). It motivated them to become a teacher and helped them be more understanding and trauma-informed when working with their students who have experienced trauma. In their journey of teaching in triggering settings, they
have learned how to co-regulate their responses to trauma with their students', decreasing mental health crises and difficult situations (Corr et al., 2019; Benner et al., 2023).

SETs are responsible for the socio-emotional management of their personal trauma. This trauma management can be difficult when a SET is faced with a triggering situation but must also teach a student how to regulate their emotions simultaneously. This is why it is important for administration and trauma-informed professional development programs to focus more on the co-regulation of trauma by providing support that benefits both the SET and student simultaneously so they can perform at their optimum capacity without burnout or triggers. Teacher support with planning, creative trauma-informed interventions, and breaks have all been instrumental to the success of the case study’s participants and could be beneficial within teacher training programs (Cavanaugh, 2016; Hunter et al., 2021; Benner et al., 2023).

Although none of the teachers had officially taken a trauma-informed professional development, their experience with managing trauma and utilizing empathy allowed them to employ creative interventions to support their students. Receiving support for their mental health was instrumental in their success as well. Trauma-informed classrooms can provide a toolkit for teachers to use inside and outside of the classroom, to help with working with others who have experienced trauma. By being informed, it can provide holistic healing while simultaneously creating a healthy and safe learning environment (Cavanaugh, 2016).
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