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Understanding Possible Risk and Protective Factors For  
High School Students Who Experience Chronic Childhood Trauma

Albert Johnson Jr.

Submitted to

A dissertation submitted to the faculty of Bethel University in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education

St. Paul, Minnesota

2022

Approved by:

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Reader, Dr. Erica Hering

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## Abstract

Students enter their respective school buildings with unknown past physical, emotional, or mental traumas due to dynamics within their family, community, or school (Izard & National, 2016). Experiencing trauma in childhood can lead to a myriad of educational challenges, such as lower grades, more suspensions and expulsions, increased use of mental health services, and increased involvement with child welfare and juvenile justice systems (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2016). The prevalence of childhood traumas, neighborhood problems, discrimination, chronic strains, adverse life events, and daily hassles are also associated with severe mental illness (Adams et al., 2015). The purpose of this study was to identify which risk and protective factors in students' homes, communities, and school environments influence students' academic achievement and social behaviors in a high school setting. This study's data collection included interviewing 10 high school seniors attending an alternative high school setting. The intent was to understand which perceived risk factors were barriers to academic success and which protective factors supported students' academic and social success in high school. The findings of the study identified factors experienced within the home, community, and school environment that directly impacted students' academic and social success. These factors are on a continuum of risk to protective and included: family relationships, verbal messages from the home that impacted students' self-efficacy, norms and support from the community to do well in school, school cultures that elicit relationships and belonging, and culturally relevant curriculum and engaging instruction.

## Acknowledgments

On January 6<sup>th</sup>, 2002, I completely surrendered my life to Christ. My prayer was to be the husband, father, son, brother, uncle, cousin, and man that God had called me to be. I also prayed that I would go back to school and earn my bachelor's degree. What I heard the Lord say back was, "if you get your bachelor's degree in ministries, I will allow you to get whatever degree you want." As I write my acknowledgments, I want to begin by acknowledging and thanking God, who has blessed me and allowed me to have made it this far in my education and life.

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## **Chapter One: Introduction**

### **Introduction to the Problem**

Across the United States, traumatic childhood experiences in students' homes, schools, and communities are significant factors that contribute to students' academic underperformance (Communities that Care, 2020). Given the critical role of traumatic experiences in students' academic success, it is essential that educators recognize the different levels and forms of trauma that students experience and how trauma can manifest socially with peers and academically in the classroom (Bell et al., 2013). Prolonged exposure to trauma during childhood results in changes to the chemical and physical structures of the brain, which can affect students' behavior and academic achievement (National Public Radio, 2014). Events such as shootings, food insecurity, sirens, and fights in the home are risk factors that may cause stress on the young brain (National Public Radio, 2014). Children who have experienced trauma are likely to experience significant classroom struggles or even a resistance to learning (Brunzell et al., 2018). When considering the educational programs, protocols, and systems schools put in place, it is imperative for educators to understand that trauma can have a widespread and long-lasting effect on children's development (Bell et al., 2013).

Traumatic events have not only immediate effects on students' academic outcomes—they also have long-term effects on students' outcomes. To further understand the long-term effects of traumatic events experienced at a young age, the Center for Disease Control formed the adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) study to identify the threshold at which any combination of the 10 defined ACEs could lead to negative life outcomes (Anda et al., 2007). The findings of the study showed that chronic trauma, or ongoing exposure to risk factors or stressors, can affect individuals' quality of life well into adulthood (Anda et al., 2007).

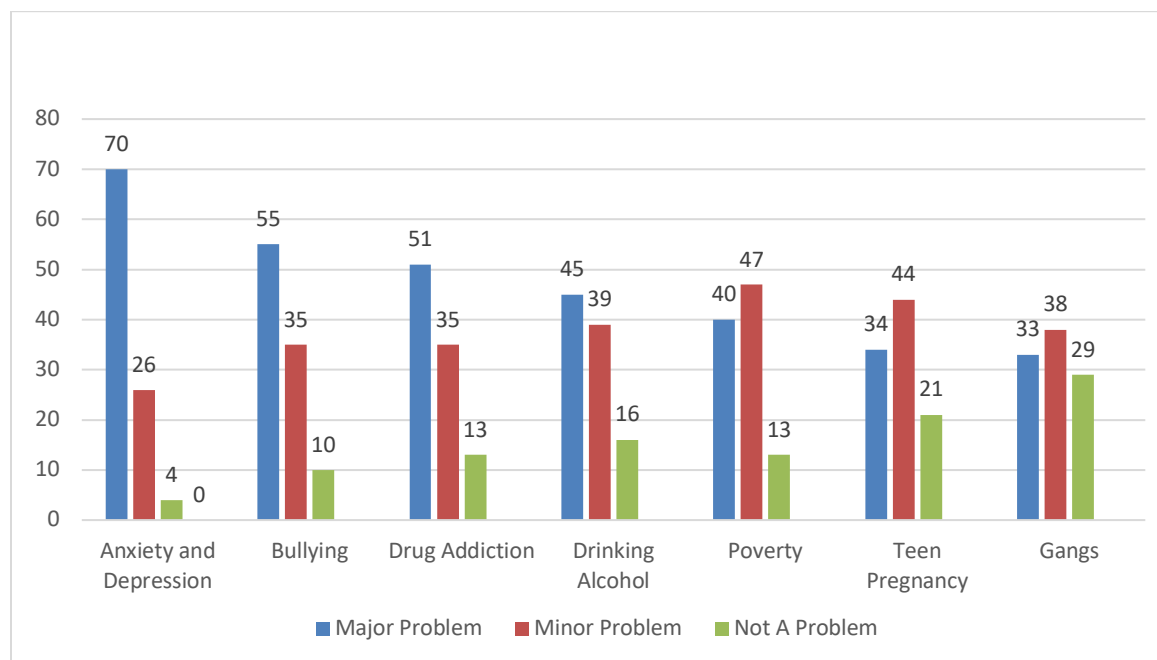
The Center for Communities that Care (2020) focused on risk factors that increase individuals' likelihood of becoming involved in drug use, delinquency, school dropout, and violence (Briney et al., 2012). The authors also examined protective factors—the conditions that buffer children and youth from exposure to risk—by reducing the impact of risks or changing the way that young people respond to risk (Briney et al., 2012). Prolonged exposure to risk factors can lead to adverse outcomes while intentional exposure to protective factors can counterbalance the effects of risk factors (Briney et al., 2012). These findings highlighted the imperative for educators to understand which risk factors and protective factors are present for their students to better meet the needs of the students they serve.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Childhood trauma can lead to a myriad of educational challenges, such as lower grades, more suspensions and expulsions, increased use of mental health services, and increased involvement with the child welfare and juvenile justice systems (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2016). The prevalence of childhood traumas, neighborhood problems, discrimination, chronic strains, adverse life events, and daily hassles are connected to severe mental illness (Adams et al., 2015). Youth who are exposed to terrorism, violence, and war are at a greater risk of developing posttraumatic stress symptoms, depression, and aggression in addition to other adverse life outcomes (Kletter et al., 2013). The mental health concerns among youth are escalating: 17% of youth reported they have seriously thought about attempting suicide, 7% reported attempting suicide, and 2.4% required medical attention after a suicide attempt (Department of Health and Human Services, 2018). As shown in Figure 1, up to 70% of teens report that anxiety and depression are significant problems with their peer group (Pew Research Center, 2018).

Figure 1

*The Mental State of Teens as it Relates to Anxiety and Depression (%)*



*Note.* Source: Pew Research Center (2018).

Students enter their respective school buildings with unknown past physical, emotional, or mental traumas that interfere with their learning (Izard & National, 2016). One of the most significant challenges educators face is identifying which possible risk factors are present in the learning environment and understanding what life circumstances or school conditions contribute to creating unsafe emotional and physical experiences for students (McGee & Pearman, 2014). Regardless of where the varied risk factors are experienced, the effects of these risk factors can prevent students from taking full advantage of the instruction provided by teachers (Briney et al., 2012). Educators must counterbalance risk factors with protective factors that support students and improve the likelihood of students' success in school (McGee & Pearman, 2014).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceived risk and protective factors that

influence the academic achievement and social behaviors of high school students who experience chronic childhood trauma. While research has been conducted to analyze the educational and social outcomes of students who experience childhood trauma, there is an additional need to gain a deeper understanding through the lens of students' voices (Jackson, 2011). This study gathered the perceptions and educational experiences of students who attend an area learning center to understand better how to address the challenges that traumatized high school students face in the classroom. The study's findings provided insights that may guide educators in creating proactive interventions to support students who experience chronic childhood trauma.

### **Research Questions**

The research question that guided this study was, "What do high school students who experience chronic childhood trauma perceive to be factors influencing their academic achievement and social behavior?" The secondary questions included the following:

1. What do high school students who experience chronic childhood trauma perceive as family and community risk factors influencing their academic achievement and social behavior?
2. What do high school students who experience chronic childhood trauma perceive as family and community protective factors influencing their academic achievement and social behavior?
3. What do high school students who experience chronic childhood trauma perceive as the school risk factors influencing their academic achievement and social behavior?
4. What do high school students who experience chronic childhood trauma perceive as school protective factors influencing their academic achievement and social behavior?

## **Significance of the Study**

The United States educational system focuses significant attention on graduation rates and high stakes testing results. More attention should be directed to understanding the causes of students' suspensions or academic failures (Gregory et al., 2011). With the purpose of better understanding why students are not successful in a traditional school environment, researchers have documented the significant impact childhood trauma can have on students' school experiences (Morsy et al., 2019). Risk factors inhibit students' learning ability while protective factors can be implemented to counterbalance the effects (Trenz et al., 2015).

Additional research is needed to gather concrete examples of risk factors and protective factors influencing students' academic achievement and social behaviors among high school students who experience chronic childhood trauma (Trenz et al., 2015). Students who attend area learning centers and alternative high schools do so for many different reasons, including attendance, poor behavior, or chemical use. The voices and perspectives of students who have experienced childhood trauma should be used to understand how students perceive factors that can lead to their academic success or failure (Jackson, 2011; West et al., 2014).

This study's findings will be a helpful resource for educators seeking to analyze which risk factors are present in their schools and classroom environments that may inhibit students' academic and social success in high school. The findings may guide educators' implementation of protective factors to develop a school culture that supports students who experience childhood trauma. Finally, the study may reveal structural inequities or barriers for students who have experienced trauma, guiding the restructuring of systems and protocols in a school community to increase students' engagement and academic achievement, including graduation rates and positive social behaviors.



## **Definitions of Terms**

**Complex Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (CPTSD):** Complex post-traumatic stress disorder is defined as ongoing traumatic events that do not allow individuals to return to a non-stressed state (Knefel et al., 2019).

**Meaningful Work:** Meaningful work is a term used to define how a teacher finds purpose and joy when working with students (Brunzell et al., 2019). **Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD):** Post-traumatic stress disorder is caused by a non-repeating traumatic event that individuals work to overcome (Hyland et al., 2020).

**Population-Wide Trauma:** Population-wide trauma occurs when a traumatic event affects an entire community, such as an earthquake, tornado, or flood (Bender & Sims, 2007).

**Protective Factors:** Protective factors are conditions that buffer children and youth from exposure to risk by either reducing the impact of the risks or changing how young people respond to threats (Trenz et al., 2015).

**Risk Factors:** Risk factors are conditions that increase the likelihood of a young person becoming involved in drug use, delinquency, school dropout, or violence (Ballard et al., 2015).

## **Organization of the Remainder of the Study**

Chapter Two reviews literature about the causes and outcomes of childhood trauma, including risk factors and protective factors experienced by students in the family, community, and school environments and school-wide interventions designed to improve students' engagement, academic success, and social behaviors. The chapter concludes with a summary of trauma theory, which was used to frame the study. Chapter Three describes the research design, procedures, and methods for this study, Chapter Four discusses the research results, and Chapter Five explores the implications of the findings and provides suggestions for additional research.

## **Chapter Two: Literature Review**

This literature review examines the varied forms of traumas that children can experience along with how risk factors and protective factors in the family, community, and school settings are linked to academic success and social behavior. The literature review examines how childhood trauma can manifest in classrooms and how school structures, practices, and policies can be solutions or barriers for students who experience childhood trauma. The literature review concludes with a summary of the research on school-wide interventions to increase academic achievement and prosocial behavior for students who experience childhood trauma.

### **Population Wide Trauma**

According to Adams et al. (2009), gang involvement and delinquency, which include minor crimes juveniles commit, are two risk factors that can traumatize children and lead them to poor academic achievement. The experience of trauma during adolescence (10-19) can also be linked to children's psychiatric and behavioral outcomes (Ballard et al., 2015). These outcomes can extend into young adulthood, including sexual and non-sexual violence (Ballard et al., 2015). It is therefore important to identify and understand additional risk factors, including childhood trauma, that can lead to youth's involvement in the criminal justice system (Fox et al., 2015).

Tragic events like those that occurred on September 11, 2001 and during Hurricane Katrina constitute population-wide trauma: they are traumatic events that affect large populations of individuals at the same time (Bender & Sims, 2007). Such events affect children's academic achievement; for instance, Gershenson and Tekin (2018) studied the effects of the Beltway Sniper Attacks on students' achievement and discovered that third and fifth-grade students who lived within five miles of the shooting saw 2-5% decreases in their academic achievement. Beland and Kim (2016) studied the effects of school shootings and found the overall academic

achievement of ninth-grade students who remain at an impacted school significantly decreased in test scores. Beland and Kim connected school shootings to medium-term trauma that can have negative effects on students' academic achievement for several years after the traumatic event. Beland and Kim found the long-term consequences related to school shootings include lower test scores up to three years after a deadly shooting.

In another example of population-wide trauma, many countries worldwide experienced the coronavirus (COVID-19). According to the World Health Organization (2022), there have been over 380 million confirmed cases and 5.7 million deaths from COVID-19 worldwide. This virus required schools nationwide to create extended distance learning plans and adhere to state-mandated stay-at-home orders. Significant traumatic events can cause population-wide trauma and should be considered when re-engaging students academically (Bender & Sims, 2007). While schools may have emergency plans in place for rare violence, very few schools are prepared for large-scale traumatic events (Bender & Sims, 2007).

### **Adverse Childhood Experiences**

To understand the effects that traumatic events experienced at a young age, researchers sought to identify the threshold at which the effects of adverse childhood experiences led to negative outcomes (Anda et al., 2007). The authors concluded that the higher the number of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) participants experienced, the higher the chance of adverse life outcomes (Anda et al., 2007). ACEs are a critical public health issue that can have adverse, lasting effects on the health and well-being of children (Murphey & Sacks, 2019). Prolonged exposure to ACEs can result in toxic stress levels, which can interfere with the healthy development of children (Murphey & Sacks, 2019).

Hertel and Johnson (2013) found that trauma affects individuals over different lengths of time in their life and also that the greater the number of ACEs, the greater the chances of adverse health outcomes for individuals in adulthood. Hertel and Johnson also discovered that exposed to three or more ACEs showed a greater risk of failing a grade level, having lower scores on standardized tests, and being suspended or expelled at higher rates. Jimenez et al. (2016) followed 1,007 early childhood students into kindergarten and found that children exposed to three or more ACEs had below-average skills in both language and literacy. Students with three or more ACEs displayed attention problems, social problems, and aggression, all of which can lead to school discipline and adverse academic outcomes (Jimenez et al., 2016). Ristuccia (2013) also connected negative childhood experiences and students' academic success by showing that a child's brain development is impacted by trauma experienced during the early years.

### **Family and Community Factors Related to Trauma**

Home and community environments can be risk or protective factors based on the life outcomes of those exposed to them (Rawles, 2010). Home and community risk factors for students could include unsafe neighborhoods, poverty, and the poor mental health of a caregiver (Porche et al., 2016). In communities where sexual assault, violence exposure, and parental psychopathology are reported at high rates, low academic achievement and higher suspension rates could be predicted for children and young adults (Rawles, 2010).

One of the coping mechanisms some students use to overcome risk factors include the expectations placed on them from their community or home environments (Jones, 2007). Community and home expectations can appear as unwritten rules and social norms, including violent social behaviors (Jones, 2007). Students' behavior could be directly connected to expectations placed on the students by their outside-of-school environment (Johnson et al.,

2011). In cases where children have increased exposure to violence in the home or the community environment, youth have an increased likelihood of becoming aggressive or violent in school settings (Rawles, 2010). In communities where known risk factors are documented, children can be at a higher risk of substance abuse and delinquency (Briney et al., 2012).

Adams et al. (2009) investigated the link between gang involvement and periods of traumatic experiences. They found that the students with PTSD were more likely to have emotional numbing, making them more susceptible to gang-involved delinquency. In a study conducted by Koenen, individuals diagnosed with PTSD, due to being exposed to life-threatening events, were at greater risk of major depression and substance abuse (2010). In communities where students live in poverty and are frequently exposed to violence, there is an increased chance students will engage in aggressive and violent behaviors in their schools (Rawles, 2010).

Seeking to identify a connection between home/community risk factors and students' academic outcomes, Porche et al. (2016) studied 65,680 school-aged children. They concluded that children's home and community environment could directly negatively impact children's engagement and learning. When neighborhood attachment is low and laws and norms are favorable to drug use and firearms and violence, students are at increased risk of poor academic outcomes (Warde, 2020). School administrators and teachers agree that home and community environments in which students reside can profoundly influence students' academic success and social behavior in the school environment (Laurson, 2014).

Students may bring community social norms into the school environment. As Richardson et al. (2013) concluded, "the code of the street" includes informal rules or mechanisms that govern violence among poor inner-city Black male youth and are used to navigate the school

environment. Hemphill et al. (2013) studied additional home and community risk factors and found risk factors such as alcohol and tobacco use, low-income family management, antisocial friends, and a low commitment to school can be predictors of non-violent antisocial behavior. Jones (2007) analyzed community violence and the effect on students' social and emotional development, concluding that complex post-traumatic stress disorder is created when children are exposed to chronic community violence, which traumatizes children at each occurrence.

### **Family and Community Protective Factors**

Schumm et al. (2006) found that continued positive community support can buffer children's and adults' interpersonal traumas. It is important to identify which specific risk factors influence youth's behavior in different environments such as a home with family, in the community with peers, and at school (Briney et al., 2012). Educators need to understand the levels of trauma their students live with every day resulting from risk factors that have occurred outside of school (Schumm et al., 2006). In addition, once students enter a school building, any traumas they have experienced comes with them and can manifest itself in different ways (Schumm et al., 2006). Brokenleg (2012) studied trauma that spans multiple generations, such as trauma experienced by children from some Native American tribes. Helping children and families restore their cultural heritage supports the development of resilience, which can counterbalance past traumas (Brokenleg, 2012).

### **School Factors Related to Trauma**

Educational leaders must understand that a school's climate and culture can positively or negatively impact students' academic and social success (Laursen, 2014). Harmful school practices such as zero-tolerance policies can affect a school's climate and culture and increase students' negative behavior in out-of-school suspension or expulsion (Laursen, 2014).

Institutionalized racism results in disparities in students' treatment; for instance, darker-skinned Black students receive suspensions at a higher rate than lighter-skinned Black students (Hannon et al., 2013). There are additional disparities in students' academic achievement and discipline referrals based on culture and race (Weeks, 2021). Policies that began as positive interventions to correct negative student behaviors might transform into zero-tolerance policies that can harm students' academic and social success (Hoffman, 2014). School discipline policies create unintended risk factors for different student groups, and in some cases, the school's policies surrounding suspension worsen students' behavior (Shirley & Cornell, 2012).

Discipline practices emerge as a significant risk factor for creating healthy learning environments that support students' academic and social-emotional needs (Skiba et al., 2011). Frequent discipline referrals and suspensions do not appear to result in improved behaviors (Shirley & Cornell, 2012). In school climates where staff and school policies lack the structures to be warm, attuned, and nurturing towards each student, the risk of being suspended is increased (Gregory et al., 2011). The effects of suspension policies on students emphasizing suspension for non-violent offenses might not decrease the negative behaviors but contributed to students missing valuable instruction from teachers (Losen, 2011). Students are at a higher risk of being negatively affected by school discipline policies in schools where students do not have a voice, are not allowed autonomy or independence, are not reasoned with, instruction demands blind obedience, and are not consistently enforced (Gregory et al., 2011).

In another study, Johnson et al. (2011) defined poor school environments as those where the school management policies are not clearly defined, classrooms do not create a sense of belonging for the students, students feel no support from their teachers, and rules to govern students are not fair. In schools where teachers are perceived as unfair and untrustworthy in their

use of authority, students were more defiant and less cooperative (Nishioka, 2013). Students' sociodemographic characteristics may also place some students at risk for suspension (Sullivan et al., 2013). School environments have the potential to be an additional risk factor for students when positive interventions or factors are not in place (Johnson et al., 2011)

When violence happens in a school environment, student responses range from carrying personal protection to not coming to school, creating gaps in the instruction, leading to additional poor academic achievement (Johnson et al., 2011). Classroom management and teacher instructional practices can create a risk factor for students in the classroom environment (Kelly, 2010). High school dropout and adverse life outcomes could be linked to several risk factors, including family socioeconomic status and peer relationships (Lansford et al., 2016).

According to Muhammad (2012), there are four quadrants leaders can place a teacher who is becoming an influence on their students and the school environment. Muhammad concluded that when teachers do not have the skill to teach or develop into a more skilled instructors, a negative learning environment can be created for students. In addition, teachers who lack the skill and the will to help all students will overlook a student's trauma and miss their potential (Michael-Chadwell, 2010). Without professional development, the risk factors of poor classroom management and unwarranted discipline referrals can persist (Nishioka, 2013).

When risk factors and ACEs continue over an extended period, a student can be identified as having complex post-traumatic stress disorder (Knefel et al., 2019). Academic outcomes can also be a concern for students enrolled in advanced classes who experience stress caused by school risk factors (Shaunessy-Dedrick et al., 2015). Most teens, regardless of an academic curriculum, experience stress associated with hormonal changes, developmental tasks, and navigating social and intrapersonal experiences (Shaunessy-Dedrick et al., 2015). In



addition, the stress, in this case, was categorized as either perceived stress or environmental stress (Shaunessy-Dedrick et al., 2015). Complex post-traumatic stress disorder includes traumatic events that are ongoing throughout a period and do not allow individuals to return to a non-stressed state (O'Neil et al., 2010). When school environments are not intentional in creating safe spaces for students, risk factors will continue to affect student's social-emotional development and academic achievement (O'Neill et al., 2010).

### **School Protective Factors**

It is essential for school administrators, teachers, and educators to avoid creating systems that can inadvertently retraumatize students, which can be accomplished by creating trauma-informed schools that practice trauma-informed care (Carello & Butler, 2015). Caballero (2014) studied the relationship between childhood trauma and academic success and found that schools play a vital role in creating protective factors for their students. Schools can develop interventions that support students' prosocial behavior as a protective factor for students who have suffered from childhood trauma (Caballero, 2014). Many schools mistakenly place a great deal of focus on preventing bullying and truancy when these actions are only a symptom of a more significant problem (Cole, 2014). Schools should be focusing on creating trauma-sensitive learning environments, which researchers have shown can increase academic and social outcomes (Cole, 2014). When creating a trauma-informed learning environment, educators must address students' social and emotional needs, especially for those who have experienced trauma (Dombo & Sabatino, 2019).

Many teachers have shared their emotional connection to their students who seem unmotivated to succeed in school and search for methods to motivate and empower them (Kafele, 2012). Creating protective factors such as student affinity groups in schools is an

effective method to give students a voice and sense of self-empowerment, which has proven to motivate students toward high academic achievement (Kafele, 2012). To create protective factors and counterbalances to risk factors in school environments, teachers can engage in professional development that focuses on building resiliency in students (Koenen, 2010). Teachers can counterbalance students' trauma by using strategies that allow their students to re-engage in the classroom and reestablish positive relationships (Lelli, 2014). In schools that provide adequate rules, along with guidance, boundaries for students, and frequent and effective actions by adults to create trust, higher grades can be predicted (Peters & Woolley, 2015).

School policies can play a critical role in creating a culture of safety and support that promotes high academic achievement and low negative social behavior. In schools where the climate and culture are positive, Jones (2007) found that discipline policies support low out-of-school suspensions and increased academic and social success. In school environments where students' academic achievement is poor and poor social behavior is raised, the school's climate can play a vital role in reducing and preventing school violence, which can impact the educational achievement of all students (Jones, 2007). In addition, in schools where students feel their teachers are caring, listened, and could be trusted, they are less likely to receive in-school suspension (Shirley & Cornell, 2012). It is therefore important to understand how school environments can influence students' behavior and subsequent academic success (Johnson et al., 2011). Developing teachers to the level of having both skills and the will to improve requires an investment in the professional learning of the teaching staff (Nishioka, 2013).

King and Vidourek (2012) suggested that educators are ideally positioned to create a safe and supportive environment for students. Schools are also in a great position to support the creation of coping mechanisms and positive protective factors for students who are experiencing

ongoing trauma (Jones, 2007). Studies have shown that students across the United States are at risk of self-harm and teachers must be trained to see the warning signs of suicide, as it is vital to the well-being of fragile students who experience depression and multiple risk factors (King & Vidourek, 2012). Teachers and other staff may incorrectly diagnose students' trauma, thus understanding a wide variety of warning signs and triggers of students and then creating trauma-informed interventions in a school setting would increase needed supports for at-risk students (West et al., 2014).

McGee and Pearman (2015) followed 13 high achieving Black male students in an urban school setting. They found that some of the students in the study cited using their "street smarts" as a way to navigate their school environment safely. Similarly, Jones (2007) found that students would use an unwritten community code to stay safe in school and achieve academic success. (2007). McGee and Pearman (2015) concluded that students possess many different passions and need outlets to develop their ability to be self-motivated and self-driven. To help students who have experienced trauma find academic success, educators must be willing to take into consideration everything students bring into the classroom including, what students have seen, smelled, touched, acted on, and been subject to as well as their complete cultural histories (Medley, 2012). Students who have experienced trauma must also be taught in a manner that brings about healing (Medley, 2012). Medley described that learners will be frustrated if they do not experience some measure of healing from trauma, teaching approaches that are sensitive to the needs of the trauma-affected comprise good instructional practice for all learners, and artful acts of instruction in themselves can be therapeutic and build resilience in all language learners.

Blodgett and Lanigan (2018) found that school staff members can play a positive role by identifying risk factors students may have experienced and creating interventions to support at-

risk students and increase their academic outcomes. Bonk (2016) concluded that providing teachers with the skills to identify but not treat childhood trauma provides teachers a clearer perspective on supporting students who have experienced trauma.

Teachers who work with students who have been identified with emotional or behavioral disorder diagnosis and experience childhood trauma must also be willing to see beyond each students' disability and work to build trust and meaningful relationships with the students (Snevers & Struyf, 2016). Teachers play a critical role in supporting students who experience trauma by implementing a classroom-based intervention that builds supportive and caring school climates (Ball & Anderson-Butcher, 2014). Bethell et al. (2008) further emphasized the importance of creating interventions that foster resilience in students to counterbalance the effects of trauma to improve academic outcomes. Bhui et al. (2008) found that using religious practices supports the building of resilience to counter-balance mental distress (2008). Positive teacher-student relationships can serve as a protective factor for students and a protective factor for teachers against teacher burnout (Split et al., 2011). Teachers work with students affected by trauma because it gives their work meaning (Brunzell et al., 2018).

Teachers building solid relationships with their students and understanding which outside forces affect students' success can also increase their efficacy (Delale-O'Connor et al., 2017). Teachers engaged in professional learning about how to support the social-emotional needs of students who experience trauma were more effective in the classroom and felt less stress about their work (Collie et al., 2012). Crosby et al. (2015) concluded that teachers and other school staff need resources to effectively support students experiencing chronic childhood trauma and require professional development and time to implement interventions (2015).

## **School-Wide Interventions**

Throughout the United States and Canada, school leaders search for interventions and programs to transform their entire school into positive and academically substantial learning spaces. School-wide interventions and programs by nature should be designed to provide multiple levels of support to reach a diverse range of students. Diakiw (2012) found it was not what teachers were teaching that led to student success but how students were presented with the curriculum that led to students' academic success. Increasing learning opportunities and programming for all students, or creating school-wide interventions, has proven to increase the academic achievement for all students (Diakiw, 2012).

### ***Building Assets Reducing Risks***

School-wide interventions such as the Building Assets Reducing Risks (BARR) program are being implemented to increase the overall achievement of all students who may have experienced different forms of trauma (Corsello et al., 2015). The BAAR program shows students who earn at least five credits in ninth grade and earn no more than one-semester failing grade in core courses are 3.5 times more likely to graduate on time (Mathewson, 2019). The school-wide protective factors the BARR program implements are listed as eight strategies: focus on the whole student; prioritize social and emotional learning; provide professional development for teachers, counselors, and administrators; create teams of students; give teachers time to talk about the students on their respective teams; engage families; engage administrators; and meet to discuss the highest-risk students (Mathewson, 2019). The main focus of the BARR program and what makes it a positive intervention for students is that the program prioritizes strong relationships and focuses on students' strengths (Mathewson, 2019).

### ***Literacy, English, and Academic Development***

Another school-wide program focusing on supporting students who experience loss, grief, and trauma is Literacy, English, and Academic Development (LEAD; Miles & Bailey-McKenna, 2016). The LEAD program's strategies are English language development, trauma-informed practices, and cultural responsiveness (Miles & Bailey-McKenna, 2016). Schools must do what they can to soothe the survival mode by installing a sense of safety, hope, compassion, and resilience for all students, especially those impacted by trauma (Ristuccia, 2013). Schools should support students who have experienced trauma by encouraging physical activity and developing routines at home to ensure adequate sleep and rest (Ristuccia, 2013).

### ***Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports***

The Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) program is designed to help educators increase positive school culture by using researched interventions proven effective as school-wide interventions (Bilias et al., 2017). PBIS takes a data-driven, proactive approach to grow a positive school culture to improve each student's prosocial behaviors while increasing academic achievement for each student school-wide (Bilias et al., 2017). Using the PBIS framework, educators strive to identify the three distinct tiers of behaviors present in their educational environment and implement the recommended interventions at each of the three tiers (Farkas et al., 2012). Researchers show a decrease in office discipline referrals and an increase in academic achievement when teachers are trained in SWPBIS and the implementation is done with fidelity (Georgia Department of Education, 2020). School-wide PBIS (SWPBIS) has also proven to increase school climate by reducing disruptive behaviors and suspensions, improving perceived safety in the school setting (Scheuermann & Nelson, 2019). The Georgia Department

of Education analyzed PBIS and concluded that school leaders must add culturally responsive practices to all SWPBIS interventions.

### ***Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID)***

AVID is an initiative that can be implemented at a single grade level or school-wide and intended to increase historically underrepresented students' academic achievement (Black et al., 2008). AVID is a college preparatory program aimed at closing the achievement gap by preparing all students for college (Woodridge, 2017). Creating systems and supports to meet all students' academic, social, and emotional needs, particularly students of color and underserved students, is a foundational aspect of the AVID program (Woodridge, 2017).

### **Trauma Theory**

The lived experiences of children who experience childhood trauma can vary from child to child and from environment to environment. Researchers have approached understanding trauma by applying different variations of trauma theory (Smyth, 2013). Using trauma theory, researchers seek to understand how the varied forms of trauma can be identified and supported (Smyth, 2013). Lang concluded, fearful experiences can be tied to Type I traumas which are sudden and unexpected, or Type II traumas that are longstanding or repeated (2016). Trauma theory will be applied to classify the type of trauma the students within the study group have experienced and gain a deeper understanding of the outcomes for students who experience childhood trauma.

## **Chapter Three: Methodology**

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceived risk and protective factors that influence the academic achievement and social behaviors of high school students who experience chronic childhood trauma. While researchers have analyzed the educational and social outcomes of students who experience childhood trauma, there is an additional need to gain a deeper understanding through the lens of students' voice (Jackson, 2011). This study gathered the perceptions and educational experiences of youth who attend an area learning center to understand better how to address the challenges that traumatized high school students face in the classroom. The study's findings provided insights that may guide educators in creating proactive interventions to support students who experience chronic childhood trauma.

### **Research Design**

When exploring the perceived risk factors and protective factors influencing high school students' academic achievement and social behavior, a qualitative, single-site case study approach was selected to collect a rich narrative and comprehensively understand the students' experiences. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), qualitative researchers are interested in knowing how people understand and experience their world at a particular point in time and in a specific context. A qualitative case study allows researchers to focus on a single location, single subject, single collection of subjects, or a single event (Bogdan & Bilken, 2007). A single site case study allows the researcher to understand the participants' experiences, including the effects of practices and environment on the participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

This study sought to understand high school students' risk factors and protective factors who self-report some form of childhood trauma. Utilizing a qualitative research approach



allowed the researcher to build trust through conversations with participants in their natural learning environment. In the case of this study, participants interacted with the researcher via the Zoom online platform. Ten individual in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted using a secured online platform (Zoom) to create a safe, private location for the participants. Through individual interviews, the researcher obtained verifiable evidence in the setting most relevant to the participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Individual interviews elicited multiple perspectives on the same topic giving the researcher a deeper understanding of the given problem (Singleton & Linton, 2006).

The researcher recognized the potential of unforeseen emotions of the participants during the interviews caused by the research questions. The researcher employed a modified version of the Courageous Conversations About Race (CCAR) protocol to support these emotions, which educators have used to facilitate emotionally charged and difficult conversations (Singleton & Linton, 2006). By utilizing the CCAR protocol, the researcher set group norms to facilitate the individual interviews and create a safe meeting space for the participants (Singleton & Linton, 2006). The CCAR protocol consists of three components, 1. Four Agreements, 2. Six Conditions, and 3. The Compass (Singleton, & Linton, 2006).

### **Research Questions**

The research question that guided this study was, “What do high school students who experience chronic childhood trauma perceive to be factors influencing their academic achievement and social behavior?” The secondary questions included the following:

1. What do high school students who experience chronic childhood trauma perceive as family and community risk factors influencing their academic achievement and social behavior?

2. What do high school students who experience chronic childhood trauma perceive as family and community protective factors influencing their academic achievement and social behavior?
3. What do high school students who experience chronic childhood trauma perceive as the school risk factors influencing their academic achievement and social behavior?
4. What do high school students who experience chronic childhood trauma perceive to be school protective?

### **Protocols**

This study utilized a semi-structured individual interview format. Semi-structured protocols allow freedom to ask additional questions to gain meaningful understandings of the problem (Patten & Newhart, 2018). Individual interview questions were selected based upon research uncovered in the literature review regarding risk factors and protective factors, school academic achievement and social behavior, students' demographics, childhood trauma, and best practices for school-wide interventions that may support students' on-time graduation. The individual interview protocol followed the format recommended by Merriam and Tisdell (2016), which suggested the researcher begin by communicating the purpose of the study, sharing information about confidentiality, reminding the participants that they can voluntarily stop answering questions at any time, and requesting permission to record the interview. The individual interviews began with the general demographic question, "Would each of you please share how long you have attended the Area Learning Center" to build rapport with the participants and continued with open-ended questions related to experiences, opinions, feelings, knowledge, or sensory data. When appropriate, probing questions were asked to clarify and explore a participant's comment or background.

Table 1

*Interview Protocol*

Research Question	Interview Question	Literature Review
Opening	All references to your school experiences can include your whole educational experiences starting in 1 <sup>st</sup> grade.	
	1. Please tell us how long you have attended The Area Learning Center?	
RQ1: What do high school students who experience chronic childhood trauma perceive to be the family and community risk factors influencing their academic achievement and social behavior?	2. Tell me about any events or people in your home and community that interfered with you being successful in school? 3. Tell me about any attitudes or expectations in your home and community that interfered with you being successful in school?	Rawles concluded, in communities where sexual assault, violence exposure, and parental psychopathology are reported at high rates, low academic achievement and higher suspension rates could be predicted for children and young adults (2010). Jones found, community and home expectations can appear as unwritten rules and social norms, which may include violent social behaviors. (Jones, 2007). Johnson et al., concluded a student's behavior can be directly connected to expectations placed on the students by their outside of school environment (2011). "Children and parents must have a language that supports the child to think and behave differently to compete with negative thoughts" (Prather & Golden, p.56, 2009).
RQ2: What do high school students who experience chronic childhood trauma	4. Tell me about any events or people in your home and	Schumm et al. found, continued positive community support can serve as a buffer to child and

perceive to be the family and community protective factors influencing their academic achievement and social behavior?

community that supported your success in school?  
5. Tell me about any attitudes or expectations in your home and community that supported your success in school?

adult interpersonal traumas (2006).

RQ3: What do high school students who experience chronic childhood trauma perceive to be the school risk factors influencing their academic achievement and social behavior?

6. Tell me about any school events or school people that interfered with you being successful in school?  
7. Tell me about any attitudes or expectations at school that interfered with you being successful in school?

Hoffman concluded, policies which began as positive interventions to correct negative student behaviors, may transform into zero tolerance policies which can have a negative effect on a student's academic and social success (2014).

RQ4: What do high school students who experience chronic childhood trauma perceive to be school protective

8. Tell me about any school events or people that have supported your success in school?  
9. Tell me about any attitudes or expectations at school that supported your success in school?

Lelli concluded, teachers have a unique opportunity to counterbalance student's trauma by using strategies that allow their students to reengage in the classroom and reestablish positive relationships (2014).

School-wide interventions such as the Building Assets Reducing Risks (BARR) program, are being implemented to increase the overall achievement of all students who may have experienced different forms of trauma (Corsello, et al., 2015).

Open Ended

10. If you could design a school that would meet your needs and your friends' needs, what would it be like?

Prompts

Tell me more...

You mentioned...

An example would be...

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## Setting

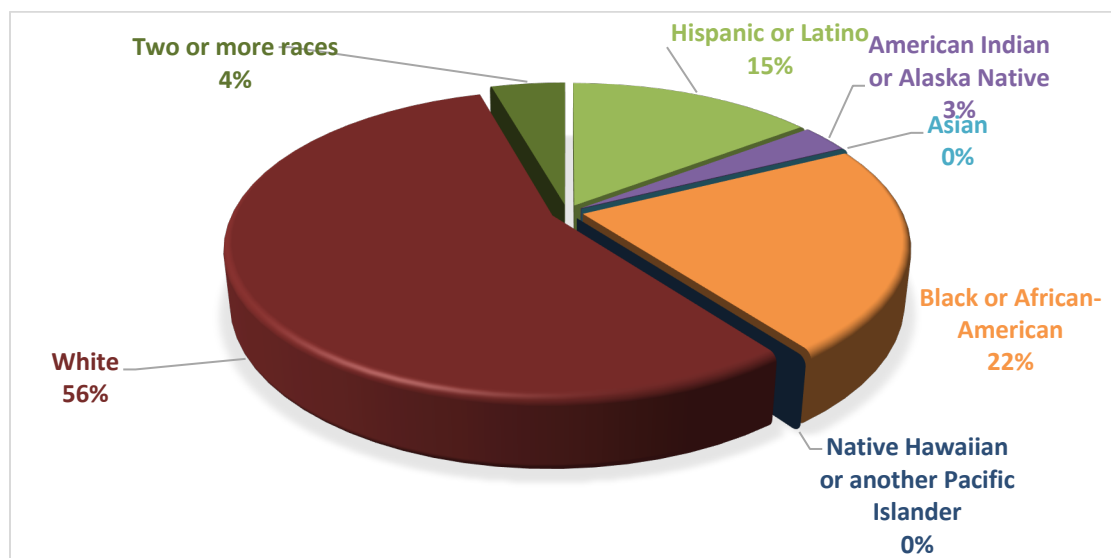
This case study was focused on an area learning center located outside of a large metropolitan area. According to the Minnesota Department of Education's website, alternative education is designed for students who were not successful in a traditional educational setting and are at risk of academic failure (2020). To better meet the needs of these learners, there are approximately 263 area learning centers and 61 alternative learning programs and high schools in the state of Minnesota (Minnesota Department of Education, 2020).

Students may be referred to an alternative high school for a variety of reasons including, but not limited to, academic and behavioral support, students at risk of dropping out, poor attendance, and family request for a smaller academic setting (Encyclopedia of Children's Health, 2022). The Minnesota Department of Education (MDE, 2021) defined area learning centers as educational environments that focus on supporting student's unique learning styles and social emotional needs. According to MDE, teachers at area learning centers build connections with students and focus on vocational and career skills, including independent study options.

The area learning center of study services students in grades 9-12. The Minnesota Department of Education Report Card (2021) reported that 90 students were enrolled at the area learning center and 32 students comprised the senior class. The demographic composition of the study site was American Indian or Alaska Native 3%, Black or African American 22%, Hispanic or Latino 15%, two or more races 4%, and White 56% (Figure 2). Within the composition of the study site demographics, 5% of students were homeless, 30% of students received special education services, and 65 % of students qualified for free or reduced lunch.

Figure 2

*Area Learning Center Enrollment Demographics by Race (Minnesota Department of Education, 2021)*



### Sampling Design

Purposive criterion sampling was employed for collecting data. According to Patten and Newhart (2017), researchers use purposive sampling when they believe specific individuals will be good information sources. When selecting a sample, purposive criterion sampling requires criteria salient to the research questions (Patten & Newhart, 2018). The criteria in this study included selecting senior students at least 18 years of age attending an area learning center.

A list of potential participants was secured from the high school administrator. Written letters of invitation to participate in an individual interview were sent to the school's administration for distribution to 10 potential participants. The invitation to participate informed participants of the measures taken to assure confidentiality, including removing all identifiable information and how information was stored. Invitations were hand-delivered to each student by the school administrator, signed, and returned to the researcher prior to each interview. The

school administrator identified the first round of interviews, which took place at the end of one school year. The first round of interviews only yielded six individual interviews, which required identifying additional students to complete the second round of interviews. The second round of interviews took place the first week of the following school year. Ten participants were secured, and invitations and responses were carefully tracked and documented.

### **Discussion of the Sample**

All of the students in the study were 18 years or older and preparing to graduate from the area learning center.

Table 2

#### *Interview Participant Demographics*

Participant Numbers	Age	Gender	Race
P1	18	Female	White
P2	18	Male	White
P3	18	Female	Black
P4	18	Female	Black
P5	18	Male	Black
P6	18	Male	White
P7	18	Male	Black
P8	18	Male	White
P9	18	Male	Black
P10	19	Female	White

### **Data Collection Procedures**

Permission to conduct the individual interviews was granted by the school district's building administrator and director of research. The school administrator coordinated and monitored each individual interview to assure school district policies related to student confidentiality was maintained. The school representative signed a letter of confidentiality.

Due to the COVID-19 orders in Minnesota, individual interviews were held virtually using a password-protected Zoom meeting. Individual interview questions and a link to the

Zoom meeting were sent electronically to the participants one week before the individual interviews and again the morning of the individual interviews. Individual interviews were conducted during the school day, with the informed consent document being sent to the participants the morning of the individual interview. The individual interviews were audio-recorded. Notes were written to record initial thoughts and reactions to the discussion and any emerging relationships, themes, or patterns concerning the research questions. Data collected from the interviews reflected rich descriptive responses to each research question.

### **Data Analysis**

The individual interviews were audio-recorded and sent audio transcription to a professional transcriber. A request to sign a confidentiality statement was given to the outside party who transcribed the individual interviews. After all transcripts were reviewed for accuracy, the researcher removed all personally identifiable information related to the participant. Furthermore, the researcher altered any specific details that could have identified the participants' families.

The researcher read through the transcripts twice to gain a broad foundational understanding of the responses. These readings were designed to orient the researcher to the data and confirm alignment between the data and the research questions. Next, the researcher read the transcripts to identify meaning units related to the research questions. This type of coding process is sometimes referred to as open coding. The researcher made margin notes to document thought processes and provide support to answer research questions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The researcher followed this by reading through all transcripts two more times and using initial codes to capture the ideas that repeatedly appeared in the transcripts.



The researcher's next step involved comparing and contrasting codes referred to as analytical coding. While open coding is descriptive, analytical coding requires more reflection and interpretation. Analytical coding required multiple analyses of each transcript to narrow the initial list of codes, refine the code names to reflect the content of each category accurately, and arrive at codes that occurred across multiple transcripts (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Once all data was coded, the researcher analyzed codes across interviews to identify themes. A theme emerged as a finding if it occurred in five or more individual interviews. Rigorous, iterative data analysis identified emerging themes corresponding to each research question. A codebook was used to journal ideas and make decisions. A qualitative methodologist reviewed coding procedures throughout open coding and analytical coding.

### **Limitations and Assumptions**

This study sought to explore the role of risk factors and protective factors for students who have experienced childhood trauma through qualitative research. In selecting qualitative research, the findings cannot be widely generalized as the findings from quantitative research (Patten & Newhart, 2018). This study was conducted in a single area learning center outside a large metropolitan area in Minnesota and may not be applicable in other high school settings. Compounding the limitation is that the information collected during the individual interviews will reflect the view of students who have attended primarily in-person classes until the pandemic forced alternate delivery models. This data may be skewed when considering different instructional delivery models, such as distance learning, online classes, and students having little access to school staff and resources. Information gathered from another school, delivery models, settings, or city might yield different results—context and setting influence the transferability of findings.

A limitation of this study is that only senior students will be interviewed. Interviewing students from all high school grade levels may yield a broader understanding of risk factors and protective factors at different stages of students' high school careers. In addition, the sample size was small, which allows for a deep understanding of the subgroup's experiences, but limits findings to the specific cell.

Meeting with students in the school would have been ideal and would likely have uncovered valuable information. Conducting individual interviews in person would allow the researcher to document body language and other non-verbal communication.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Researchers need to consider many ethical issues when creating a research project. This is especially important when working with human subjects. Due to the qualitative research method chosen for this study, ethical considerations when working with students must be discussed (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The researcher took many precautions to protect participants' confidentiality and rights during this study. Permission from the school leader and district research department to conduct individual interviews was obtained. Willingness to consent to participate in a semi-structured individual interview form was provided and collected from all participants. The researcher will explain that participation is voluntary with no monetary benefit or penalty for withdrawing from the study. This information was noted in the invitation letter and the informed consent form. Before the researcher recorded participants, they were made aware of the recording and were advised they may stop recordings at any time and for any reason.

The individual interviews were conducted through password-protected Google meets. Confidentiality was obtained by using pseudonyms and removing identifying information in

transcripts. The researcher took extra precautions to store audio recordings in a safe and secure location properly. Participants' transcripts do not contain identifiable information to protect the participant's identity.

One of the benefits of using qualitative research was it allowed the researcher to work directly with the participants through individual interviews. It was critical to acknowledge the potential for the participants to have emotional responses during individual interviews. The researcher protected the participants from being retraumatized by carefully positioning each question and pausing when there was a need to gain balance during the individual interviews. When emotions were too high or too low, the researcher carefully considered the validity and reliability of the feedback being shared (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The Belmont Report discussed important ethical principles that all researchers should follow (Stellefson et al., 2015). This report described protection for participants and their well-being and the importance of obtaining consent among participants (Stellefson et al., 2015). According to the 1979 Belmont Report, researchers working with people must adhere to three components, namely: respect for persons, beneficence, and justice. Respect for participants, beneficence, and justice extends beyond avoiding harm to seeking the participants' well-being (Belmont report, 1979). The researcher applied the CCAR protocol during the interviews to protect the study participant's well-being and to create a safe space by monitoring the agreed norms (Singleton, & Linton, 2006).

Ethical issues can arise when conducting educational research. The researcher completed the CITI program in social science research ethics. This training helped identify potential ethical problems and the steps to prevent or resolve any issue within the research project. Finally, IRB approval was obtained through Bethel University for the study's completion.

## Chapter Four: Results

### Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceived risk and protective factors that influence the academic achievement and social behaviors of high school students who experience chronic childhood trauma. While research has been conducted to analyze the educational and social outcomes of students who experience childhood trauma, there is an additional need to gain a deeper understanding through the lens of students' voice (Jackson, 2011). This study gathered the perceptions and educational experiences of students who attend an area learning center to understand better how to address the challenges that traumatized high school students face in the classroom. The study's findings provided insights that may guide educators in creating proactive interventions to support students who experience chronic childhood trauma.

### Findings

The research question that guided this study was, "What do high school students who experience chronic childhood trauma perceive to be factors influencing their academic achievement and social behavior?" It was determined that to understand the influence of any factor (positive or negative) on students' academic and social behavior, specific secondary questions needed to be answered. These questions were related to influencing factors in the student's community and home, which included the student's peer group, and the influencing school factors.

#### *Secondary Research Question One*

Two themes emerged from the first secondary research question, "What do high school students who experience chronic childhood trauma perceive as family and community risk factors influencing their academic achievement and social behavior?"

**Theme 1: Negative family dynamics adversely influence students' academic and social behaviors.** This theme is comprised of students navigating a broken home or parent divorce, parents with limited or negative educational experiences, and a lack of family connection. The theme encompasses poor communication at home regarding needs, a lack of resources at home such as reliable transportation to school, poor attendance, and transiency. In addition, the theme includes students experiencing pressure and overwhelming responsibilities from home. For instance, seven out of the 10 participants within the study indicated that varying negative family dynamics significantly contributed to their poor success in high school. A participant shared, "I am the only girl in my house, and with that comes a lot of responsibilities, responsibilities such as taking care of my younger siblings [and] working on top of me doing well in school." Two participants expressed their experiences with divorce's adverse effects on a family and students' ability to manage stress in the home and academics.

Two other participants shared that their parents' low education achievement adversely impacted their educational experience because they did not effectively communicate with teachers and other school staff. One participant shared, "My parents didn't go very far in high school, so there was no expectation for me to go very far or encouragement for me even to finish high school." Another participant shared the desire for her parents to check in on them to make sure that they got to school and were doing well in school. One participant stated, "My mother didn't push me to do well academically; she never called the school or checked up on me and just let me do what I wanted to do. This kind of reinforced my idea that school was not important."

Three participants contended that they created their barrier to success and attributed their lack of motivation to do well in school to having no sense of support from home. Two participants of the study shared concerns about the lack of resources in their homes. The sentiment was described, “The lack of resources at homes such as reliable transportation and financial stability also led to my poor attendance and lack of success in school.

**Theme 2: Destructive community social norms led to a lack of students’ self-efficacy.** This theme is comprised of the participant’s responses to negative messages from adults in the community and at home, the influence of the student’s peer group, and past negative behaviors. This theme also includes the participants’ perception of self-motivation, academic confidence, and lack of self-identity. Lastly, included in this theme are the connections the participants made between their academic achievement and their own physical/mental health.

Nine out of 10 participants indicated that negative messages from adults in the community and negative peer influences led to barriers to being academically and socially successful in school. One participant stated, “There are people in my home and community who did not want me to succeed and would make comments such as, ‘You won’t make it just like your brother.’” Five participants shared stories of how they were once on a successful academic track and doing well in school, but once they began, “hanging out with the wrong crowd...doing well in school was no longer important.” In addition, seven participants indicated that negative peer influences played a significant role in their decision-making. These decisions included criminal behaviors which lead to delinquency, harmful physical health actions, and unsafe mental health choices.

One participant connected his negative social behaviors with peers to his poor academic performance by stating,

I just started hanging out with the wrong crowd and made a lot of bad choices. Some of them [bad choices] placed me in the criminal justice system, which impacted my academic achievement because, after that, I had no motivation to do well in school.

Four participants shared occasions when their peer group influenced them to not be successful in school. A participant stated, “We would just hang out and play our games and not do any schoolwork. Sometimes we would just leave school and go to one of my friend’s houses and hang.” The participant continued, “This made being academically and socially successful in school almost impossible because we were not about school.”

Additional social-emotional and financial resource support were also mentioned as a need within the communities where the participants live, however, detail on what those services could be was not provided. One participant shared her experience with trying to locate services specific to her need by stating, “It is not that there were not many resources in my community; it was more the resources that were available did not meet my needs.”

### ***Secondary Research Question Two***

Three themes emerged for the second secondary research question, “What do high school students who experience chronic childhood trauma perceive as family and community protective factors influencing their academic achievement and social behavior?”

**Theme 1: Positive community social norms support educational achievement.** This theme was comprised of two protective factors, support from home and community and positive relationships with adults in the community which included the participant’s church and peers. Five of the 10 participants were able to identify at least one community or family member that supported them and encouraged them to do well in school. One participant shared how her place of employment encouraged her to graduate by making a schedule that gave the participant the

ability to work and complete high school. Another participant shared the impact of positive messages she received while growing up and attending a daycare. The participant went on to share how this daycare stressed the importance and expectation for all their children to do well academically. The participant stated that other students also returned to the daycare once they were old enough to work there. The participant shared, “Many others who attended the daycare went back because of the positive messages that were instilled in them by the employees at the daycare.” The participant explained that it was not what the daycare worker said to them once but continued support for the participant over three to five years.

**Theme 2: Healthy inner-family, relational communication supports students' academic and social behaviors.** This theme was comprised of four protective factors which included, the positive expectations from adults at home, the participant’s motivation to do well academically to please an adult in the home, and the participant’s strong connection with their mother. Also included within this theme was the importance of positive messages from adults at home and their connection to academic success.

Nine of the 10 participants expressed the importance of hearing positive messages from their family members related to doing well in school. Four participants identified their mother as the one adult in their lives who encouraged them to do well academically. One participant stated, “She is my number one and the main reason I wanted to do well in school and graduate.” Another participant shared, “My mother had high expectations for me to do well in school, and I wanted to meet them because I wanted to make her proud.” A third participant shared how her mother would encourage her to go to school every day, and when asked, the participant’s mother would stay at school all day. The participant stated, “I did better in school because my mom understood how hard school was for me, and I knew she would be there if I needed her.”



In addition, five participants identified at least one person in their home the participant was hoping to please by being successful in school. The five participants pointed to a family member who instilled intrinsic motivation as the key to success in school. A participant expressed the importance of positive motivation from a family member as a key to his success in high school. When asked to provide an example of positive motivation, the participant stated, “Hearing, ‘You are so close to graduating you might as well just finish,’ So, I am pushing to graduate.”

**Theme 3: Students are provided opportunities to create and maintain self-efficacy.**

This theme is comprised of protective factors where the participants expressed their need for time to self-reflect, and self-motivation. This theme also encompassed the participant’s need for supports that matched their requested needs, including mental health support. Five of the 10 participants stressed the importance of having time and space to self-reflect and build self-confidence. One participant shared, “I have so many things going on in my life; sometimes I don’t even have time for me.” The participant went on to say, “If I could just have some time during the week to work on my issues and get mentally strong, I would feel better about myself and would be able to do so much better in school.” Another participant shared, “When I have time to get things done, I am motivated to work harder and get even more schoolwork done.” This participant continued, “This is the best way my family can help me stay motivated to do good in school.”

***Secondary Research Question Three***

Two themes emerged for the third secondary research question, “What do high school students who experience chronic childhood trauma perceive as the school risk factors influencing their academic achievement and social behavior?”

**Theme 1: Poor curriculum and instruction do not engage students in learning.** This theme was comprised of risk factors connected to student learning and the participants' desire to be more engaged in the classroom. Among these factors were, disengaging instruction/internal processes, instruction during distance learning was perceived as a risk factor, low or poor curriculum and rigor, and school rules or policies not implemented with fidelity, consistency, or relevance.

Nine participants in this study credited their school's curriculum and instructional practices as a deterrent to doing well in school. Six students gave examples of sitting in class and being bored because the curriculum had no meaning to their lives. One participant stated, "That class was so boring. What does this have to do with me? I was like, I'm gonna just keep playing the game on my phone." Another participant shared his experience with low curriculum rigor specific to an assignment to read a news article. The participant stated, "It only took us five minutes to read the article, and then he [teacher] gave us free time the rest of the period. What a waste of my time."

One participant shared his experience returning to in-person learning from distance learning and stated, "I thought it was going to get better once we got back into the school, but the teacher continued teaching like we were still at home." In addition, one participant shared, "They got a policy here where everybody gotta put their phones up. I understand that policy, but if we're not doing nothing in class and everybody got to put their phone up, that's going to make kids like they're going to be bored."

**Theme 2: School culture does not elicit meaningful relationships or a sense of belonging.** This theme encompasses the participants desire to feel a sense of belonging in their school environment. The six risk factors that comprise this theme were lack of belonging, lack of

relationship with teachers and other staff members, poor attendance and negative past behaviors that lead to in school and out of school suspension.

Six of the 10 participants shared how difficult it was for them to be engaged during distance learning and being “stuck” at home. One participant stated, “It was easier for me to sleep in every day and log in every once in a while, just to see what was going on in class. For me, I hated it.” Another participant shared her frustration during distance learning was related to seemingly unrealistic teacher academic achievement expectations. The participant stated, “It is too much pressure, and I think it is unfair that they expected me to score the same on tests during distance learning as I did when we were in person.”

Six participants shared that they did not do well in school because they never felt welcome. The participants articulated the importance of being seen by the staff in the school and being able to “show up” as their authentic selves. One of the participants stated, “I had to pretend to be someone else when I went to school to fit in and feel accepted.” There were never opportunities for people to get to know the real me.” Participants reported not having a positive relationship with an adult in the school. This was exemplified in one participant's response, “They don't even care about me. To them, I am just another kid they have to teach.” One participant became upset when he stated, “The teacher told me that they were still going to get paid if I learn this stuff or not. Why would I want to be in that class?”

Four of the participants shared disenfranchised sentiments such as, “There was never any time for the teacher to get to know us to build the kind of solid relationships we needed.” One participant talked about his past behaviors, which led him to be kicked out of class and even suspended from school. The participant shared a need for teachers to understand the whole student and what he had experienced by stating, “I know they don't like me, and I know that I

am being judged for some of the things I did in the past, but if they only know what my life was like.”

#### ***Secondary Research Question Four***

Two themes emerged for the fourth secondary research question, “What do high school students who experience chronic childhood trauma perceive as school protective factors influencing their academic achievement and social behavior?”

**Theme 1: High-quality curriculum and instruction engage students in learning.** This theme was comprised of the expressed needs of students in the classroom, including supports and conditions that could increase students’ engagement. These stated protective factors were, clear engaging curriculum and instruction, opportunities to collaborate with peers in class, and time for students to self-reflect during the school day. In addition, the participants expressed the importance of flexible learning opportunities for students which include in-person learning and for some students, opportunities to learn remotely. Also included within this theme is the desire for flexible learning spaces academic support for students who are struggling and behind academically.

Nine participants affirmed that the most effective classrooms were those where the curriculum and instruction used real-world examples and connected to the lives of each student. Furthermore, classrooms where relevant cultural history was taught and common language that represented the participants' home culture elicited increased students’ engagement and academic success. One participant shared the moments when she enjoyed classes and was more engaged. The participant stated, “The teacher would get straight to the point of the lesson and spend less time on stories that had no meaning.” Another participant shared his issues with ADHD and his

need to move constantly. This participant stated, “If I am entertained, I’m going to like that class a lot.”

**Theme 2: School culture fosters relationships and a sense of belonging.** This theme received the most responses and agreement among the participants as a significant protective factor for students. Within this theme, educators can find actionable steps they can take to increase a student’s sense of belonging, engagement, academic and social success. This theme’s protective factors include a welcoming environment that allows all students to be their authentic selves when they enter the school. In addition, the participants sought to have positive-authentic relationships with teachers and peers, respect from teachers and peers, positive role models in the school, and honest communication from school staff. Also, this theme encompasses the social and emotional needs of the participants and the importance of having support in place for students who experience childhood trauma. The participants identified an emotionally safe school culture, staff members who care about the whole student, follow-up from a trusted adult, and time to reflect in school as four additional protective factors for students who experience childhood trauma.

Seven participants shared their visions of the ideal high school culture where thrive as students. One participant shared, “If I could design a school, there would be lots of additional tutors and academic support.” Another participant stated, “We would want a school where we have more time to work on projects with our friends.” The participants shared the importance of having flexible learning spaces that were comfortable and other places in the school to gather with friends.

All 10 participants shared the importance of having authentic relationships with their teachers and other staff members at school. Eight of the 10 participants could name a staff

member in their current school setting who provided academic and emotional support when they were struggling with an issue. One participant shared, “I was struggling at my other school when my current principal who was at that school told me to come here.” The participant went on to state, “If it had not been for him, I know I would’ve dropped out. He is the best.” Five participants shared stories of feeling like they belonged in their current school. One participant replied, “I can show up as my authentic self and just be me with no one judging me for what I look like or telling me I need to be someone else.”

Another participant stated, “My teachers must respect me, so then I can respect them because that makes me feel like they want me here.” Six of the 10 participants shared instances when some of their peers and a number of their teachers gave them positive messages which motivated them to work harder. Six participants shared the importance of being emotionally safe in school. One participant stated, “I have had some mental health issues in the past, and it was great to know that I had someone that I trusted at school that I could talk to when I was having a bad day.” When asked how the staff member was supportive, the participant replied, “Well, when I needed time to talk, they would just listen, and then later, they would find me in school and ask me how things are going. That meant a lot to me.”

One participant shared, “When we returned from distance-learning, we went right back into the classroom, and they tried to teach us as they did before without even asking us how we’re doing.” The participants expressed a need for schools to create multiple support layers for students where they can offload social-emotional traumas with a trusted adult. Six of the participants described an ideal school environment as one where positive, honest communication is received from their teacher and teachers have a growth mindset approach. Teachers are seen as

role models, show respect to the students, and have a peer group where each member speaks positively and respectfully.

One strategy for creating a safe social-emotional space for students, which the participants appreciated was the use of affinity groups. Six participants spoke of positive student experiences from the student affinity group they participated in before moving to distance learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The participants felt that student affinity groups were places where they had a voice and could gain encouragement and motivation from their peers. Kafele (2012) suggested that by creating student affinity groups, schools would also make protective factors an effective method to give students a voice and sense of self-empowerment, which has proven to motivate students toward high academic achievement.

Table 3

*Secondary Questions with Themes and Factors*

<b>Research Question:</b> What are the factors influencing the academic achievement and social behavior of high school students who experience chronic childhood trauma?		
<b>Secondary Research Question</b>	<b>Theme</b>	<b>Factors</b>
What are the family and community risk factors influencing the academic achievement and social behavior of high school students who experience chronic childhood trauma?	Negative family dynamics adversely influence student's academic and social behavior	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Broken/divorced Families</li> <li>● Poor/lack of parental education experience</li> <li>● Pressure from home</li> <li>● Lack of family connection</li> <li>● Poor communication at home regarding needs</li> <li>● Overwhelming responsibilities placed on child (Home)</li> <li>● Lack of reliable transportation to school</li> <li>● Lack of resources at home</li> <li>● Transiency</li> <li>● Poor attendance</li> </ul>
	Destructive community social norms lead to a lack of student self - efficacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Negative messages from adults in the community</li> <li>● Influence of peer group</li> <li>● Self-motivation</li> <li>● Academic confidence</li> <li>● Lack of self-identity</li> <li>● Physical/mental health</li> <li>● Negative past behaviors</li> </ul>

<p>What are the family and community protective factors influencing the academic achievement and social behavior of high school students who experience chronic childhood trauma?</p>	<p>Positive community social norms support educational achievement</p> <p>Healthy inner-family, relational communication supports students' academic and social behaviors</p> <p>Students are provided opportunities to create and maintain self-efficacy</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Support from home and community</li> <li>● Positive relationships with adults in the community (Church, Peers)</li>   <li>● Positive high expectations from home</li> <li>● Motivation to do well academically/Please adult</li> <li>● Strong connection with mother</li> <li>● Positive messages from adults at home/support</li>   <li>● Time to self-reflect</li> <li>● Providing space for personal growth</li> <li>● Self-motivation</li> <li>● Support matching the requested need</li> <li>● Support mental health needs</li> </ul>
<p>What are the school risk factors influencing the academic achievement and social behavior of high school students who experience chronic childhood trauma?</p>	<p>Poor curriculum and instruction does not engage students in the learning</p> <p>School culture does not elicit meaningful relationships or a sense of belonging</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Disengaging instruction/ Internal processes</li> <li>● Distance learning</li> <li>● Low rigor</li> <li>● Poor curriculum - non- relevant</li> <li>● Instructional practices during distance learning</li> <li>● Lack of academic support from school</li> <li>● Negative school practices</li> <li>● Lack of structure</li> <li>● large class sizes</li> <li>● Uncomfortable classroom furniture</li> <li>● School rules without purpose</li> <li>● Clear expectation of academic achievement (9th Grade)</li> <li>● Lack of academic identity</li> <li>● Overwhelming pressure teachers to be academically successful</li> <li>● Lack of belonging</li> <li>● Lack of relationship with Staff</li> <li>● Lack of relationship with teachers</li> <li>● Negative past behaviors that led to suspensions</li> <li>● Poor attendance</li> <li>● Negative influence from peer - academics</li> <li>● Clear/ engaging curriculum</li> <li>● Flexible learning spaces (rurniture)</li> <li>● In-person learning</li> <li>● Opportunities to learn remotely</li> <li>● School structure that supports AA</li> <li>● Collaborations in class with peers</li> <li>● Time to reflect in school</li> </ul>
<p>What are the school protective factors influencing the academic achievement and social behavior of high school students</p>	<p>High quality curriculum and instruction engages students in learning</p>	



who experience  
chronic childhood  
trauma?

School culture  
fosters relationships  
and sense of  
belonging

- Being able to be authentic self
  - Feeling of belonging
  - Having a positive peer group
  - Respect from peers/teachers
  - Welcoming school environment
  - Creating authentic relationships/staff
  - Honest communication from school staff
  - Positive motivation from school staff
  - Positive role models in school
  - Self-motivation to please an adult (promise keeping)
  - Emotionally safe school culture
  - Caring about the whole student
  - Follow up from trusted adults
-

## **Chapter Five: Discussion, Implications, and Recommendations**

### **Overview of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceived risk and protective factors that influence the academic achievement and social behaviors of ten high school students who experience chronic childhood trauma. This study utilized semi-structured individual interviews using an online conferencing tool. Participants were on-site at the area learning center where students were enrolled for the online interviews. Interview transcriptions were analyzed to identify codes matched to each research question. A thorough analysis of the codes resulted in themes that corresponded with the four research questions.

### **Conclusion**

Today's educational landscape is ever-changing and meeting the needs of students can be challenging when seeking to accommodate past childhood traumas. Childhood trauma can lead to adverse mental and physical outcomes in adulthood (Hertel & Johnson, 2013). This study added to the existing literature regarding traumas experienced and the different systems of support that counterbalance the impact of childhood trauma.

### ***Family and Community Risk Factors***

Participants shared the events and people in their homes and community that negatively influenced their success in high school. Participants were clear in stating that their families were not supportive of them in high school, to the point of saying that some family members discouraged them from being successful academically. The participants shared stories of divorce, broken families, and absent parents, all of which seemed to linger in the participants' minds as traumatic events. In addition, parents' lack of education had negative repercussions for their children. The participants identified other events in the home that negatively impacted their

success in high school, which affirms Porche et al.'s (2016) conclusion that home and community risk factors for students include unsafe neighborhoods, poverty, and poor mental health of a caregiver.

Hemphill et al. (2013) concluded that low-income family background and antisocial friends are two risk factors that can predict non-violent, antisocial behavior. Therefore, creating opportunities for families to obtain the skills needed to manage the stressors of raising school-aged children must be established within the community. These skills would include giving families a common language that promotes healthy communication within the home. Influences from the home and community environments can be determined as a risk or protective factor based on the life outcomes of those exposed to them (Rawles, 2010). Seven participants referenced unspoken community rules that contradicted academic and social success in school. When the participants were asked to share any attitudes from their peer group or community that seemed to interfere with their success in school, the participant's response was, "We just don't do school out here." The social norm within their peer group and community was not to finish school, and finishing school was not as important as fitting into the community's social norms. This confirmed Johnson et al.'s conclusion: "A student's behavior can be directly connected to expectations placed on the students by their outside of school environment" (2011, p. 340, 2011).

### ***Family and Community Protective Factors***

Prather and Golden (2009) discussed the importance of families understanding the language used in the home and its power to change social behaviors. Eight of the participants stressed the importance of hearing healthy messages from their family and the positive influence these messages have had on their motivation to do well in school. When family or community members attempt to motivate children, the family or community member must be intentional

with the words they use. Certain words or phrases can encourage or discourage students, depending on how they are delivered. One participant mentioned how the communication style of her parent was received in two different ways, first as a risk factor and then as a protective factor. While the communication style of any parent or communication from an adult in the community may differ, the impact on the student remains the same, students can be negatively or positively impacted by the communication in the home environment. Five participants stressed the importance of personal growth and the desire to be healthy socially and emotionally. The participants in this study understood how they could navigate away from the influences from the community to become stronger individuals and find success in school, which confirms Laurson's (2014) assertion that the home and community environment in which the student resides can profoundly influence a student's academic and social success in school.

This understanding is similar to Richardson et al.'s (2013) study, in which participants recognized a specific code they were expected to follow that came from their community. Participants expressed a desire to grow beyond what was expected from their community to become their own person. In contrast to Brokenleg's (2012) study, where Native American children who returned to their cultural heritage developed resiliency to counterbalance past traumas, the five participants in the study expressed a desire to distance themselves from their home cultures.

### ***School Risk Factors***

Mohammed (2012) concluded that teachers who lack the skill to teach in a culturally appropriate way and lack the will to improve their practice could create adverse learning environments for students. Nine students in the study concurred with Mohammed and shared experiences where teacher communication was unclear and expectations for student learning

were not set appropriately. When the participants felt the curriculum was non-relevant to their lives or the rigor was too low, they expressed their belief that the teacher didn't care about their academic success. Poor classroom management and poor instructional practices are teacher-created risk factors for students in the classroom (Kelly, 2010).

The participants shared that poor instructional practices occurred during distance learning and in-person learning once students returned to school. Five participants expressed the need to change school policies from being less punitive and more supportive of struggling students. The participants shared the importance of having meaningful policies and processes that support students' engagement without taking away privileges such as cellular phones in the classroom. This finding aligns with research finding a poor school environment results when policies are not clearly defined or consistently implemented with purpose (Johnson et al., 2011).

A school's climate and culture can positively or negatively impact students' academic and social success (Laursen, 2014). The Communities that Care Youth Survey (CTCYS) highlighted creating prosocial opportunities for students to engage, because when students do not have opportunities to create meaningful relationships, they do not have a sense of belonging to the school, placing them at risk of not being successful academically or behaviorally. Six participants confirmed this idea by identifying the lack of relationships with staff as a major cause of them not being successful academically. One participant stated, "I didn't know anyone when I came to this school, so I felt lonely and just wanted to stay home." Another participant said, "In my old school, we would have events that would get all the students together so we could know each other." Therefore, teachers must be allowed space within the school day to create opportunities for students to find positive and supportive peer groups.

Poor classroom management can be a barrier to student success as it inhibits their sense

of belonging, and the students are left with feeling no support from their teachers (Johnson et al., 2011). A participant stated, “One reason I skipped school was I made some mistakes in the past that follow me to this new school, and the school policies and teachers won’t let me forget it.”

Teachers and administrators must recognize that students may come into their respective schools with past traumas. When policies are created without regard for student trauma, students can be unintentionally retraumatized (O’Neill et al., 2010).

### ***School Protective Factors***

Nine out of 10 of the participants in the study stressed the importance of curriculum and instruction. Five of the participants shared examples of when teachers made the learning engaging and covered critical content. The participants recognized that regardless of the different modes of content delivery (in-person or distance learning), having academic support in place made the most significant impact on their academic achievement. Teachers are in the best position to counterbalance traumas for their students by creating academic support that reengages students in the classroom (Lelli, 2014). Classroom arrangement was cited as important to students’ school experience. King and Vidourek (2012) concluded that with the sheer number of hours students spend in schools each day, educators are in the best position to create trauma-informed educational spaces.

All 10 participants agreed that their ability to be successful in school was directly connected to the level of belonging within the learning environment. To create this sense of belonging, schools must encourage a growth mindset for teachers and create school protocols that allow each student to show up as their authentic self. Eight participants shared their desire for authentic relationships with teachers and other staff members. Spilt et al. (2011) found that positive teacher-student relationships can serve as a protective factor for students and a

protective factor for teachers against teachers' burnout. One participant shared about a time when they were attending a different school and not doing well, and a staff member who was to become the principal at a new school told her, "You should come to the new school with me. I know this place is too big for you, and you'll do great there." The participant shared how she trusted the relationship with this staff member and believed this relationship was a key factor to her success at the new school.

Another participant explained how important it was for the staff at his school to understand the different aspects of the student's lives. The participant spoke of the traumas he had experienced and how he went to a trusted staff member when he was struggling. It is important to see beyond students' disability and creating an environment that fosters trust and meaningful relationships to support students' academic achievement (Snevers & Struyf, 2016). Students receiving social emotional support in the school setting aligns with Dombo and Sabatien's (2019) contention that while schools are creating trauma-informed learning environments, educators must also address the social and emotional needs of students who have experienced trauma. Six participants candidly spoke about their need for social and emotional support. The participants in this study desired authentic relationships with trusted adults who were willing to follow up with them after the initial contact. Schools should focus on creating a trauma-sensitive learning environment to increase academic and social outcomes (Cole, 2014).

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

School leaders, teachers, and other school staff must recognize and support students who experience chronic trauma. It is important to note that the list of student supports goes beyond the classroom teacher. The participants within the study identified other staff members who became their trusted adults. Teachers and staff members do not need to treat the trauma but

recognize it and lead the students to the appropriate support. Therefore, teachers must be allowed space within the school day to create opportunities for students to find positive and supportive peer groups.

School leaders must view all decisions through a trauma-sensitive, student-focused lens. Building teams must reevaluate their definition of a welcoming school environment. It is imperative that school leaders understand the importance of every student who enters the building in an authentic and culturally relevant manner.

Blodgett and Lanigan (2018) studied elementary students and found that school staff members can play a positive role by identifying risk factors students may have experienced and creating interventions to support at-risk students and increase their academic outcomes. Teachers instructing students who have experienced different levels of trauma play a critical role in the students' lives. Opportunities must be created for students to have a voice their educational process. Having voice and choice in instructional time and independent work time will further engage students in the curriculum. Ensuring that the curriculum is culturally relevant and current will increase engagement as students see themselves in the learning. Brunzell et al. (2018) concluded that it is essential to understand that teachers who work with students affected by trauma do so because it gives their work meaning.

Communities must create new systems of support to identify events that can retraumatize children. These systems can serve as a buffer or counterbalance to the traumas children experience by providing additional resources and support for students and families.

### **Recommendations for Additional Research**

The study analyzed a small sampling of students who experience childhood trauma. Additional research is needed to further understand the long-term effects of risk factors and



protective factors related to students' academic and social success in high school. By increasing the scope of the sample size and including multiple locations, educational leaders and policymakers could be better informed on how to support students who experience chronic childhood trauma.

The researcher did not gather as many significant responses to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic as anticipated based on the literature review. The participants shared their emotions of isolation and distance-learning related to the COVID-19 pandemic, the death of George Floyd where a police officer was later convicted of murder. The participants also stated they were negatively impacted by the political unrest on January 6, 2021, which was a result of the United States capital riots.

Research must be conducted to gain a deeper understanding on how adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) impact student's academic and social behaviors. Using the ACE's research, a new study could identify at what point the number of affirmed ACEs correlate with negative academic and social behavior. In addition, further research could provide a clearer understanding on how ACEs could be considered risk factors and what protective factors could be implemented in schools to support students.

Additional research must be conducted to understand the long-term impact of these population-wide trauma events and their adverse effects on students. Similar to the ACE's study and studies focused on students who experienced 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina, a longitudinal study that analyzes the effect of population-wide trauma would provide insight into how students who have experienced this convergence of events. A longitudinal study would also provide insight on how childhood trauma affects students in different high school settings. These settings would include traditional, urban, suburban, and rural high schools. Additional research could

also inform school leaders and policy makers on how students were affected by the population-wide trauma events and what interventions could be implemented to counterbalance any risk factors that were created by the population-wide trauma events.

### **Concluding Comments**

The study was completed through the lens of a Christian educator. An educator who believes that we are all called to help those who are unable to help themselves in the spaces where we have influence. We are all given different gifts from God to make a difference in this world. Matthew 25:20,21 provides guidance on how we should use our gifts. Beginning with verse 20 where the passage reads, “The servant to whom he had entrusted the five bags of silver came forward with five more and said, ‘Master, you gave me five bags of silver to invest, and I have earned five more.’” Then on to verse 21, “The master was full of praise. ‘Well done, my good and faithful servant. You have been faithful in handling this small amount, so now I will give you many more responsibilities. Let’s celebrate together!’” We are called to use our gifts as a form of worship, which allows them to manifest into gifts that grow and blesses others.

Well before the COVID-19 pandemic and the economic crisis, there were families who received free and reduced school lunch. There were students who were homeless, showing up in the same clothes every day, and students who would hurt themselves. None of the life situation can be overcome easily without the support of others.

Matthew 25:35-40

<sup>35</sup> For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, <sup>36</sup> I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me

<sup>40</sup> “The King will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.

When Christians are called to be educational leaders, we are called to walking as Christ did by seeing those who are without food, shelter, friends, hope, and create systems that meet those shortfalls. These are the least of them whom Christ spoke about. We are called to be the hands and feet of Christ in our Schools so that our children may see there is hope for a better future.

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## Appendix A: Letter of Invitation

My name is Albert Johnson, and I am a doctoral student at Bethel University in St. Paul, Minnesota. In addition, I am in my 14<sup>th</sup> school year in education where I have served as an Equity/ Integration specialist, Assistant Principal, Principal, and Director of Equity Services.

You

are invited to participate in a study on risk factors and protective factors influencing your school experience. Risk factors are conditions that increase the likelihood of a young person becoming involved in drug use, delinquency, school dropout, and violence. Protective factors are conditions that buffer children and youth from exposure to risk by either reducing the impact of the risks or changing the way that young people respond to risks.

You were selected as a possible participant in this study because you attend \_\_\_\_\_, you are a senior in high school, and you are 18 years old.

If you decide to participate, you will be part of an individual interview. I will ask you ten open-ended questions. The individual interviews will last between 30 and 45 minutes. There are no right or wrong answers and the information you provide will be strictly confidential. Your interview will be conducted using Zoom, recorded, and transcribed. Because confidentiality is important to this study, many steps will be taken to protect privacy. Your name, school name, and the name of your community will never be used in this study. All video, audio files, and transcripts will be stored in a secure location. Files will be destroyed once this study has been completed. For future reference I will retain the transcript of your interview in a secure file on my personal computer.

Your participation in this study is voluntary and you may choose not to participate without negatively impacting your relationship with me or Bethel University. If you decide to participate, you may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. If you withdraw from the study before the interview is completed, your information will be destroyed. There are no risks for participating in this study.

If you are willing to participate in this study, please return the signed informed consent form in the return envelope provided with this letter.

If you have any question about this study or its procedures, you may contact the researcher, Albert Johnson \_\_\_\_\_ or email \_\_\_\_\_

Sincerely,

Albert Johnson



## Appendix B: Participant Informed Consent

You are invited to participate in a study on risk factors and protective factors influencing your school experience. Risk factors are conditions that increase the likelihood of a young person becoming involved in drug use, delinquency, school dropout and/or violence. Protective factors are conditions that buffer children and youth from exposure to risk by either reducing the impact of the risks or changing the way that young people respond to risks.

You were selected as a possible participant in this study because you attend \_\_\_\_\_, you are a senior in high school, and you are 18 years old. This research is part of a dissertation study at Bethel University.

If you decide to participate, I will ask you 10 open-ended questions. The individual interviews are anticipated to last between 30 and 45 minutes and will be digitally recorded and then transcribed. Your participation in this study is strictly voluntary and you may choose not to participate without affecting your future relationship with me or Bethel University. If you withdraw from the study before the interview is completed, your information will be destroyed. There is potential risk that questions may generate discomfort and distress. You may skip questions, end the interview, or visit the school counselor, if you desire.

Any information obtained in connection with this study that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission. None of this study's participants will be identified in any written reports or publications. However, by state law, the researcher is a mandated reporter and must report any instances of physical abuse, neglect, or sexual abuse that he becomes aware of during the course of the study.

This research project has been reviewed and approved in accordance with Bethel University's Levels of Review for Research with Humans. If you have any questions about the research and/or research participants' rights or wish to report a research related injury, please call

You will be offered a copy of this form to keep. You are making a decision whether or not to participate. Your signature indicates that you have read the information provided above and have decided to participate. You may withdraw at any time without prejudice after signing this form should you choose to discontinue participating in this study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Student Name Printed

\_\_\_\_\_  
Student Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Investigator Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

### Appendix C: Confidentiality Agreement for Use with Research Team

#### Understanding Possible Risk and Protective Factors for High School Students Who Experience Chronic Childhood Trauma

- 1) I, \_\_\_\_\_, agree to maintain full confidentiality of all research data received from the research team related to this research study.
- 2) I will hold in strictest confidence the identity of any individual that may be revealed during the transcription of interviews or in any associated documents.
- 3) I will not make copies of any audio-recordings, video-recordings, or other research data, unless specifically requested to do so by the researcher.
- 4) I will not provide the research data to any third parties without the client's consent.
- 5) I will store all study-related data in a safe, secure location as long as they are in my possession. All video and audio recordings will be stored in an encrypted format.
- 6) All data provided or created for purposes of this agreement, including any back-up records, will be returned to the research team or permanently deleted. When I have received confirmation that the transcription work performed has been satisfactorily completed, any of the research data that remains with me will be returned to the research team or destroyed, pursuant to the instructions of the research team.
- 7) I understand that Bethel University has the right to take legal action against any breach of confidentiality that occurs in my handling of the research data.

---

Researcher Name Printed

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Researcher Signature

Date \_\_\_\_\_

### **Appendix D: Confidentiality Agreement for Use with Transcription Services**

#### Understanding Possible Risk and Protective Factors for High School Students Who Experience Chronic Childhood Trauma

- 1) I, \_\_\_\_\_ transcriptionist, agree to maintain full confidentiality of all research data received from the research team related to this research study.
- 2) I will hold in strictest confidence the identity of any individual that may be revealed during the transcription of interviews or in any associated documents.
- 3) I will not make copies of any audio-recordings, video-recordings, or other research data, unless specifically requested to do so by the researcher.
- 4) I will not provide the research data to any third parties without the client's consent.
- 5) I will store all study-related data in a safe, secure location as long as they are in my possession. All video and audio recordings will be stored in an encrypted format.
- 6) All data provided or created for purposes of this agreement, including any back-up records, will be returned to the research team or permanently deleted. When I have received confirmation that the transcription work performed has been satisfactorily completed, any of the research data that remains with me will be returned to the research team or destroyed, pursuant to the instructions of the research team.
- 7) I understand that Bethel University has the right to take legal action against any breach of confidentiality that occurs in my handling of the research data.

---

Transcriber Name Printed

---

Transcriber Signature

Date \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix E: Interview Questions

1. Would each of you share how long you have been at the area learning center?
2. Tell me about any events or people in your home and community that interfered with you being successful in school?
3. Tell me about any attitudes or expectations in your home and community that interfered with you being successful in school?
4. Tell me about any events or people in your home and community that supported your success in school?
5. Tell me about any attitudes or expectations in your home and community that supported your success in school?
6. Tell me about any school events or people that interfered with you being successful in school?
7. Tell me about any attitudes or expectations at school that interfered with you being successful in school?
8. Tell me about any school events or people that have supported your success in school?
9. Tell me about any attitudes or expectations at school that supported your success in school?
10. If you could design a school that would meet your needs and your friends' needs, what would it be like?

### Appendix F: Adverse Childhood Experiences Study Questions

- Did a parent or other adult in the household often or very often... Swear at you, insult you, put you down, or humiliate you? or Act in a way that made you afraid that you might be physically hurt?
- Did a parent or other adult in the household often or very often... Push, grab, slap, or throw something at you? or Ever hit you so hard that you had marks or were injured?
- Did an adult or person at least 5 years older than you ever... Touch or fondle you or have you touch their body in a sexual way? or Attempt or actually have oral, anal, or vaginal intercourse with you?
- Did you often or very often feel that ... No one in your family loved you or thought you were important or special? or Your family didn't look out for each other, feel close to each other, or support each other?
- Did you often or very often feel that ... You didn't have enough to eat, had to wear dirty clothes, and had no one to protect you? or Your parents were too drunk or high to take care of you or take you to the doctor if you needed it?
- Were your parents ever separated or divorced?
- Was your mother or stepmother:  
Often or very often pushed, grabbed, slapped, or had something thrown at her? or sometimes, often, or very often kicked, bitten, hit with a fist, or hit with something hard? or ever repeatedly hit over at least a few minutes or threatened with a gun or knife?
- Did you live with anyone who was a problem drinker or alcoholic, or who used street drugs?
- Was a household member depressed or mentally ill, or did a household member attempt suicide?     Did a household member go to prison?

## **Appendix G: Courageous Conversation About Race Protocol**

Below are the courageous conversations about Race protocol. It was originally developed Singleton (M.Ed., Stanford) to support adults in having the conversations necessary to make progress on difficult subjects such as race, racism, ethnicity, and privilege. The main components include: Four agreements; Six Conditions; the mindset compass; and the operational definitions. By using these components, the facilitator supports participants in pushing to sustain difficult dialogue while upholding the agreements; leveraging the compass for check-ins; and adhering to the six conditions. The end result is a robust, experience driven dialogue that deepens the group's collective understanding while broadening each individual's perspective. Normal sequence is as follows:

### Four Agreements

1. Stay engaged:
2. Experience discomfort:
3. Speak your truth:
4. Expect and accept non-closure

### Six Conditions

1. Focus on personal, local and immediate
2. Isolate race
3. Normalize social construction & multiple perspectives
4. Monitor agreements, conditions and establish parameters
5. Use a "working definition" for race
6. Examine the presence and role of "Whiteness"

### The Compass

The compass was created to help us understand how we each process and engage with information about race. It is a way to understand one another's opinions and beliefs. According to the compass, there are 4 ways that people deal with race: Emotional, Intellectual, Moral, and Social.

Adapted from Glenn E. Singleton & Curtis Linton, *Courageous Conversations about Race: A Field Guide for Achieving Equity in Schools*. 2006. pp.5865. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

## Appendix H: Sample Interview Excerpt Transcript

- Interviewer: Find those things that we love, man, those passions, man, and lean into them, all right? Cool, man. So I just want to have a conversation with you. It probably won't last, you know, more than, you know, 10, 15 minutes at the most, you know. But I just want to learn a little bit about you.
- What I'm trying to do, again, is I'm putting all these-these-these interviews together, and I'm looking for themes because I believe I have an idea of what's getting into kids' way, and so by listening to you all you're, kind of, help confirming what-what I feel like I-I understand and know, okay? Great, great. So my-my first question for you is, um, tell-tell me how long you've been at the Area Learning Center?
- P7: I'd say probably, like, three, four, five years. Because I like used to go to—I moved out in 8th grade but then I moved back. And then, I went to school in 9th Grade down there, came back, like, ending 9th Grade or beginning of 10th.
- Interviewer: Yeah.
- P7: Came to this school at the ending of 10th, and then 11th. Then I moved to another state. That's when I start falling out of school in, like, ending of 10th Grade. But then, came back, probably like, yeah, four or five years.
- Interviewer: Okay. So-so thinking about that, you know, um, just as it relates to something in the home or-or in the community, what was some of the things that was getting in the way of you being successful in school?
- P7: Um, in school like?
- Interviewer: Yeah. So something that was outside that affected you being successful in school.
- P7: All right. Um, like, when I was outside—one-one big one was like—especially in the morning like—where I used to live at, like, going to this school, they didn't send me a bus because I was, like, too close. And my sister and my mom used to always being in another town, so was like—I would have to either find a ride or walk to school but, like, that's a far walk, but it isn't—it isn't—it isn't that far where you couldn't walk. Then it got cold so then I was like, 'Man, I need something. I can't do this.'
- Interviewer: Yeah, right. [laughter]
- P7: And then, other than that, like, I was in like a situation where I was stuck because, like—it's like, you know, once you get to that age it's like—it's more of yourself, you feel me? Even though it's been like that since I was young, but it's like you get older and it's like more—it's more

consequences that come with stuff. So like, as you're getting older, I'm thinking, you know, I'm going to be [inaudible 02:34].

Like, you get older, it's more stuff. Like, you got to be like—you got to be aware all the time. You got to stay up to date with stuff. You got to do all types of stuff. Then you get a car. You got to do as, like—I got to understanding that and I just wanted to come back, finish. I want to get my high school—I really want to get my high school diploma for my mom. That's the most thing. Other than that, I'll go get my GED. But I want to get that for her and I want to become a barber.

Interviewer: Okay. That's awesome. I love that, man. So-so you talked a little bit about it. Were there just some attitudes, um, from home or community that didn't support or help you be successful in school?

P7: I mean, no. I mean, like, I had like—really my support is my mom. That's—that's my—that's my number one support. That's my life. That's my mother. Like, I had to like—when I used to live in the Cities, I had to move away from my family to like stay-stay focus. Like, if I was in the cities, I probably wouldn't be having this conversation with you.

Interviewer: Okay. Wow.

P7: So I thought like—people was like—a lot of friends was like, 'You might as well moved back.' Now, I see out there, it's a different opportunity when you in this town. This town doesn't feel like—to be like joking around. This town is a—so you're going to school or you're handling business—one or the other. That's why kids be like, 'It's nothing to do with in this town because this town is not something you're supposed to do. It's either you're supposed go to school or handle your business.'

Interviewer: Uh-hum.

P7: So I'm just trying to get my start—my life started—

Interviewer: Yeah.

P7: —and stuff, yeah.

Interviewer: That's awesome. You talked about your mom, man. So-so you said, she's your support. Tell me a little bit about how she supports you and-and what's her attitudes about, you know, about school and getting you where you need to be.

P7: Like, when it got—it got to that point where I was like, 'Alright, I'm obviously a grown man.' So it got to that point where like, she couldn't like—she would tell me like, well, clearly I can't tell you what to do but—you feel me. But I know all my life, since I was in kindergarten, her dream



was, like, for me and my sister to get our diploma. So even when I was like—thought about, like, not coming to school and getting my diploma—my GED—she was like, but—‘You’re so close, you might as well—you feel me. You going—you going wish you got your G—you’re going to wish you got your high school diploma in the long run.’

I was like, yeah. So then I just took some time and thought it about over the summer, and I was like—it got to head and I said, ‘You know what mama, sign me up for school, I think I’ll do it.’ Because now I’ve got a car, you now, I don’t have to worry about everybody. Usually, I was worry about, um—usually I was on other people time. So now I’m on my time. So when I get off school—I’m in a phase of like finding a job so that can give me more credits too. That’s it.

Interviewer: That’s excellent, man. That’s excellent. Okay. So-so let me—I’m going to ask you a couple questions specifically to some of the schools you’ve been at, okay. If you could think about some schools where you may not have been as successful as you wanted to be, tell me about any events or people in school that got in your way of being successful?

P7: Um, 9th Grade year. This-this—I talk to a lot young people I know about the 9th Grade year. Ninth Grade year, I tell you it’s not—it’s not one of those. It’s not sweet. That is the worst year, 9th Grade year, because you’re getting out of 8th Grade—where middle school, you can do—you don’t have to worry about middle school.

Ninth Grade—. Nobody told me about—when I went into 9th Grade, nobody told me about credits at all that. School was trying to tell me, but it’s over a year, so I mostly forgot. But I was like, you know, half-learning. I thought I was like high school dream, high fun, you feel. I didn’t go to—I went to class but, like, beginning like—beginning of the school, you’re sitting there and—like, I knew a lot of people that went to school. So like—so I hang with the wrong crowd. We used to skip school, do all types of other stuff. It got to a point where I stopped going to school, end up getting expelled.

Then I had to go to another school. It was like an alternative school, but it was like three hours in the day and then after your [inaudible 06:50] you can go back to the regular high school. So I got to noticing like, all right, this—I can—I can do this. I was doing the work. Moved down here, but when I moved down here, there was like—the credit in the my other school it was a different system. So, like, most of the credits I wouldn’t have had so I didn’t get most of the credits. So I was kind of confused. But then, I got to doing the same thing, meeting friends, crowds, you know—teenage life.

Interviewer: I get it. I-I get, man. And-and that’s in those some of those attitudes—

- P7: Yeah.
- Interviewer: —uh, that were getting in your way. I get it, man. And so, but now you—you're in a place now. You're in a good place, getting ready to graduate, man. So who are the people around you right now that are supporting your success?
- P7: My mama.
- Interviewer: Your mama. I hear you.
- P7: Like-like, when I first moved down here, I used to hang out with, like, a lot of people. And now, I'm really—I learn to party by myself.
- Interviewer: Um-hum.
- P7: I'm more of a—I'd rather—now, I'd rather stay home or go, like, around my family members, like my cousins or my uncles. I'd rather either stay home—because I got like—I bought the new game system and it's a new game system out, so, you know, it gave me a little something, you know do. Because like when I come here—when I come here, I don't worry about nothing else that's going on outside of school. I'm here, make sure I do all my work so I don't have to work when I get home. I go home. After I leave the doors from Central, my time is what I want to do. Go home, might take a nap, might go and play a game, do that because, you know, I don't have nothing else to do.
- Interviewer: All right. Love it. Love it, man. Um, two more last questions. Um, what are the attitudes and expectations at school that's support you now?
- P7: Um, I mean, even like—even like bad timings or anything, like—because I used to be on probation and all types of stuff, like, based on bad stuff. It's like—I'm a person, like, you'll rarely catch me walking, like, with my head down or frowning. I'm always happy. Like, you'll always catch me with a smile. We could be talking about like—well, no. We could be talking about, like, something but then, like, I'll be the person to cheer everybody up because I—I wouldn't just sit. I can't sit there and be like, like I'm always positive.
- Interviewer: Right. I love it, man.
- P7: That's another thing. When I'm not happy, my teacher notice something wrong. That's how—that's how it is.
- Interviewer: Loving it, man. And so I'm going to make you the principal real quick, all right? Okay, and-and so if you could design a school that can meet all your needs, your friends' needs, um, what's it going to look like, man? What's-what's it feel like when you walk in? What's going on in there?

P7: That's what I was talking about to the principal here with; they need to make me student counsellor. One, I feel like Mondays should be exactly like Friday because teenagers, definitely like the younger kids, like coming off the weekend where you have—when it's all your time—like, you know, they mix up their sleep schedule so now come to a Monday—well, you know, Mondays is long and exhausting. So now they're like, 'Oh, I don't think I'm good.'

But now it feels like a Friday where the classes are shorter and we got that hour lunch, you feel me, it's going to wake—you feel me. Everybody is going to be like woke. They're not going—they're going to be moving more active than just sitting around for 45 minutes and hour ready to go to sleep. Because you know—like, I'm a kid like, if I'm not—if I'm not entertained and I'm just sitting here for like 30 days, I'm going to start nodding off. I'm going to go to sleep, because I'm—that's just how it is.

Interviewer: Yeah.

P7: But if I'm entertained and, like, I'm going to be—I'm going to like that class a lot. Then another thing is, like, these chairs I'm in—

Interviewer: Yeah.

P7: —these chairs, we need these chairs because—

Interviewer: [laughter]

P7: —them-them other chairs don't be doing it with these sitting below your backs so they be giving you cramps and you want to move around.

Interviewer: Man, what you said that is so key. You got to be comfortable.

P7: You know what I'm saying. If we had those two things, like—because I like, I got ADHD, so like if I'm not like—when I'm doing the work, I got to do something. So my fingers got to be moving, I got to be spinning, I got to be something. I got to be rocking. I got to do something.

Interviewer: Yeah.

P7: Other than that, I'm not going—I'm not going to be able to focus on my work or I don't know. It's like—because I got—my attention span—I got ADHD, so like I'll zone out quick and I'll start daydreaming quick. So if not—if I'm not daydreaming, I'll be like in a deep—like, I'll be like just lost in my thoughts. I'm just thinking.

Interviewer: Yeah.

P7: So that's why I try to stay productive in school.

Interviewer: I love it, man. I-I love it man. See that's what I'm talking about. See those are the things that people that are designing school programs they need to know.

P7: Yeah.

Interviewer: And it's great—it's great for the youths.

P7: I'll be telling the teachers like—like, some of my teacher like-like one of my teachers she is trying to get to that point that's why I like her class. I'd be like, the best teacher, like, you got like—if kids are just sitting here, you feel me they're going to be bored.

They got a policy here where everybody got put their phone up. I understand that policy but if we're not doing nothing in class and everybody got to put their phone up, that's going to make kids like-like they're going to be bored. So now we got Chromebooks. So they're either going to be sitting behind that Chromebook playing games, or they're going to sneak their phone, one or the other, because they're not—they're not—you feel me. Some people don't even—you know, you got to give a reason that.

## Appendix I: Sample Coding Excerpt

What do high school students who suffer from chronic childhood trauma perceive to be school protective factors influencing their academic achievement and social behavior?	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	P9	P10	Percent of students who affirm this factor
Being able to be authentic self	1			1	1			1			40%
Caring about the whole student	1			1							20%
Clear/ engaging curriculum							1				10%
Collaborations in class with peers	1							1			20%
Creating authentic relationships/staff	1	1	1	1		1	1		1	1	80%
Emotionally safe school culture			1								10%
Feeling of belonging	1		1					1	1	1	50%
Flexible learning spaces (Furniture)	1						1	1			30%
Follow up from trusted adults	1				1					1	30%
Having a positive peer group	1										10%
Honest communication from school staff		1			1						20%
In-person learning						1	1				20%
Opportunities to learn remotely					1						10%
Positive motivation from school staff		1			1				1		30%
Positive role models in school				1				1			20%
Respect from peers/teachers			1	1				1		1	40%
School structure that support AA		1	1	1			1			1	50%
Self motivation to please an adult (promise kept)	1										10%
Time to reflect in school		1									10%
Welcoming school environment	1							1	1		30%
Clear/ engaging curriculum							1				10%
Collaborations in class with peers	1							1			20%
Flexible learning spaces (Furniture)	1						1	1			30%
In-person learning						1	1				20%
Opportunities to learn remotely					1						10%
School structure that support AA		1	1	1			1			1	50%
	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	9 of 10
Being able to be authentic self	1			1	1			1			40%
Creating authentic relationships/staff	1	1	1	1		1	1		1	1	80%
Feeling of belonging	1		1					1	1	1	50%
Having a positive peer group	1										10%
Honest communication from school staff		1			1						20%
Positive motivation from school staff		1			1				1		30%
Positive role models in school				1				1			20%
Respect from peers/teachers			1	1				1		1	40%
Welcoming school environment	1							1	1		30%
	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	10 of 10
Caring about the whole student	1			1							20%
Emotionally safe school culture			1								10%
Follow up from trusted adults	1				1					1	30%
Time to reflect in school		1									10%
	1	1	1	1	1					1	

High quality curriculum and instruction engages students in learning

10.00% Clear/ engaging curriculum 9 out of 10

20.00% Flexible learning spaces (Furniture)

20.00% In-person learning

10.00% Opportunities to learn remotely

50.00% School structure that support AA

20.00% Collaborations in class with peers

10.00% Time to reflect in school