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# Strategies For Educators: Teaching Recently Arrived English Learners Who Have Experienced Trauma

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STRATEGIES FOR EDUCATORS: TEACHING RECENTLY ARRIVED ENGLISH  
LEARNERS WHO HAVE EXPERIENCED TRAUMA

by

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A capstone project submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
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## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

#### **The Importance of Needs**

Given the current state of immigration and its impact on politics, especially after the 2016 presidential election, there is a growing need to examine and respond to the social emotional needs of recently arrived elementary-aged Latino and Somali English language learners who have experienced trauma. Students from Somalia, Mexico, Central America, and South America comprise the majority of the English learners (ELs) in my school and many schools in the surrounding area (Minnesota Department of Education, 2017). The school where I work has an increasing number of students with trauma, and this capstone will provide much needed information for the educators of these students. Recently arrived English learners (RAELs) have needs that are significantly different from those of other students with trauma, and even other ELs. Educators need to know what strategies to use so they can meet these learners' unique social emotional needs. It is only when these needs are met that students can be successful in and out of school (Birman & Tran, 2017).

Since I began working with students in school settings, I have discovered that one of the most important jobs of a teacher is meeting the students' needs. When I viewed students' behavior as acting out not because they wanted to, but because their needs are not being met, it helped me gain a deeper understanding of students' behaviors and motivation. During my graduate school classes, I learned how to meet my students' academic and linguistic needs, and I was introduced to the role that trauma can play in

students' development. Now, I want to know more about precisely how influential trauma can be, particularly with elementary-aged Somali and Latino RAELs. All RAELs have to learn an additional language in a new country and culture. Some of these students have the additional challenge of managing trauma. This could be the trauma they faced in their home country, in their travels to the United States, and even in their new homes (Perez Foster, 2001).

I have been very fortunate to work with compassionate and collaborative teachers who are always eager to learn more effective ways to teach their students. As an English as a second language (ESL) teacher, part of my job is to help other teachers become better teachers of ELs. Due to their language and academic needs alone, RAELs require a lot of one-on-one attention and instruction (Birman & Tran, 2017). I want to share effective strategies with my fellow educators so that everyone in my school not only understands the importance of meeting RAEL's needs, but also has the tools to help these students learn.

### **Needs and Learning**

It was in my high school psychology class that I first saw an image of a pyramid divided horizontally into five different sections. I learned that this pyramid is called Maslow's hierarchy of needs, and it depicts the source of human behaviors. The two bottom sections of the pyramid, thus the largest, are physiological and safety needs such as food, water, and security (Woolfolk, 2014). The next section up is needs regarding healthy relationships. The section second from the top lists needs about self-esteem. Finally, at the top of the pyramid are the needs having to do with fulfilling an individual's potential (Woolfolk, 2014). According to this well-known pyramid, if an individual's

basic needs are not being met, such as having sufficient food and water, then it is impossible for the individual to meet needs higher up on the pyramid, such as realizing his/her potential or having high esteem. I also learned about self-determination theory, which is based on Maslow's hierarchy of needs. It states people need a sense of control, social connections, confidence to succeed, and autonomy in order to be successful (Woolfolk, 2014). Given RAELs' trauma and frequent lack of basic needs being met, it is no surprise that school can be especially challenging for them (Birman & Tran, 2017).

I have no first-hand knowledge or experience with how the needs listed on this pyramid can influence a person's choices and behaviors. It was when I worked in a preschool that I first began to understand the role that needs play in an individual's, particularly in a child's, life. After an especially challenging day with a particular child, a mentor teacher told me that this child, a 4-year-old, was not acting out to be mean to me and the other children. The child was refusing to follow a teacher's directions and taking toys from other children for the same reasons that a tired child has a tantrum. When a child's or student's needs are not met, they will act in ways to rectify this dissonance, even if the behavior is not actually productive or consciously done (Phipps & Degges-White, 2014; Souers & Hall, 2016). But she reminded me, they are children. It is not their job to meet their own needs yet. It is our job as teachers to help them with this.

I learned that instead of analyzing *what* a student is doing and how annoying or disruptive it is, I need to challenge myself think about *why* students are acting the way they are. This is not easy. I am amazed by the extent to which physical, emotional, and social needs play a role in students' lives and their development, especially in school. Instead of viewing myself as a teacher, I like to think of myself as a "meeter" of needs.



All students want to feel safe, to trust others, to be cared for, and to learn. Some students, like RAELs, have additional needs that must be addressed. I decided to be an English as a Second Language teacher in part because of my fascination with language learning, but more due to my passion to help meet students' needs.

When I began taking my ESL coursework, my professors made a point of helping my fellow students and me understand the scope and uniqueness of the challenges ESL teachers face. Not only do ESL teachers have a mandate to teach English, there is also a range of other duties we are expected to do. ESL teachers must be our students' mentors, nurses, social workers, psychologists, and cultural liaisons who build a bridge connecting students' home lives with their school lives. As my professors explained, and as I discovered for myself during my first two and a half years of teaching, ESL teachers have an exceptional and powerful relationship with our students. Due to the amount of time I spent with students in a small group setting rather than in a large group, I get to know my students in a unique and intimate way. My professors and other researchers explain that this is because an ESL teacher's job is to educate students in all areas of their lives (Woolfolk, 2016). When ESL teachers teach their students, they provide their students with vital knowledge regarding how to act in schools in the United States, and how to communicate with their classmates. As Birman and Tran (2017) found, this can be a humbling experience for ELs. It can only be possible with a strong relationship between the students and the ESL teacher. I have found that as this relationship strengthens, ELs trust their ESL teachers with information they might not tell their classroom teachers. As a result, ESL teachers have a demanding, but an especially rewarding job that goes far beyond the basic job description of teaching English.

As I have built relationships with my students during the last two years, I have been struck by how many of my students have experienced trauma. Despite communicating with the students' classroom teachers, social workers, and psychologists, I feel the need to know more about this topic. If a student tells me about something troubling that has happened to them at home or something traumatic in their past that has been worrying them, I am often not sure how to respond. For the past two and a half years, I have been fortunate to have the opportunity to work with passionate, empathetic teachers who recognize the impact of students' social and emotional lives on their learning. But as I began talking with these teachers, I found that they also are not sure how to appropriately support students through their traumatic experiences.

During the 2017-18 school year, my school's Continuous Improvement Coach hosted a book study with at least half of the teachers at my school. Over the course of the school year, we read and discussed the book *Fostering Resilient Learners* by Kristin Souers and Peter Hall. In both small and large groups, we learned about how trauma negatively impacts students' brains, and how this in turn negatively impacts students' learning (Souers & Hall, 2016). English learners and their particular challenges were often brought up, and we discussed these students to the extent we were able. I learned a considerable amount about trauma in general, but I would specifically like to investigate the social emotional needs of elementary-aged Latino and Somali RAELs who have experienced trauma. I want to find out how to effectively meet these learners' unique social emotional needs, and I want to pass on my findings to my colleagues. As I learned in *Fostering Resilient Learners*, if students' needs are not being met, they will not be able

or have the desire to learn. I want to provide my fellow educators with strategies they can use with these students so the students can be successful in and out of school.

There is an increasing number of ELs in the United States (Minnesota Department of Education, 2017), and teachers must know how to effectively teach them. These students have so much to learn and understand about living in the United States, in addition to managing the trauma they faced in their home country, on their journeys to their new homes, and the trauma they are still facing in their new homes. Traumatic events such as living in a war zone, fleeing a home country, losing a loved one, and rape are only some of the experiences these students have endured (Perez Foster, 2001). Students are often expected to manage these events while only being able to communicate with a handful of people in their new lives (Betancourt et al., 2015). As an ESL teacher, it is my job to help students process these events and become comfortable in their new homes.

This capstone examines strategies that teachers can use to meet the social emotional needs of recently arrived elementary-aged Latino and Somali English learners who have experienced trauma. By educating my colleagues about these strategies, teachers will be better prepared to help their RAELs through this challenging time. Students' trauma can influence them throughout their lives. However, when students' needs are met, they will start the healing process. This will help them be better able to learn and to become more successful linguistically, socially, emotionally, and academically (Souers & Hall, 2016).

### **Summary**

The importance of students' social emotional needs has intrigued me since the

beginning of my work with children. As children, many students have not yet learned how to meet their needs themselves, and so it is the job of the teacher to help students meet these needs. ESL teachers, like many other teachers, are expected to do far more than teaching academic curriculum. Elementary-aged Latino and Somali RAELs have a unique set of needs that must be met as a prerequisite to their success in and out of school. RAELs have the additional challenge of learning a new language and a new culture. For an unfortunate number of these students, they are also managing the severe trauma they experienced in their home country, in their travels to the United States, and/or in their new homes (Perez Foster, 2001). Thus, this capstone examines strategies that teachers can use to meet the social emotional needs of recently arrived elementary-aged Latino and Somali English learners who have experienced trauma.

### **Chapter Overviews**

In Chapter Two, I review the relevant literature regarding RAELs from Somalia, Mexico, Central, and South America; the types of trauma; social emotional needs, trauma-related challenges, and resulting behaviors; and strategies for teachers to use in helping students manage the effects of trauma and promote healing. In Chapter Three, I provide an overview of my project, including its theoretical bases and the format it took. In Chapter Four, I reflect on my project and potential future research topics I will pursue.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Literature Review

#### Introduction

This capstone examines strategies that teachers can use to meet the social emotional needs of recently arrived elementary-aged Latino and Somali English learners who have experienced trauma. Many schools have an increasing number of recently arrived English learners (RAELs) who have experienced trauma (Perez Foster, 2001; Souers & Hall, 2016). This capstone will provide much needed information for the educators of these students. This chapter reviews the literature regarding RAELs, the trauma they may have experienced, their social emotional needs, and strategies teachers can use to help RAELs be successful in and out of school.

In order to understand RAELs' needs, it is first necessary to learn more about them as individuals, their families, and their culture. There are a number of different types of trauma that RAELs can experience at various stages in their transition to the United States. Each stage presents new challenges. While every RAEL responds to trauma differently, it is important to be aware of common symptoms and behaviors resulting from trauma. Even though trauma has a major impact on RAELs' lives, there are a number of strategies that teachers can use when teaching RAELs, and strategies educators can teach to RAELs to help them be successful in school. Educators can also create connections with RAELs' families and communities. This literature review will consist of four major sections: (1) RAELs; (2) Trauma and RAELs; (3) Social emotional needs of RAELs and the Impact of trauma; (4) Strategies.

**RAELs**

This section will first define the terms relevant to this capstone and this literature review. Next, there will be an overview of immigration trends. Cultural considerations complete this first major section.

**Definitions.**

***ELs and RAELs.*** An English learner, or EL, is a student who uses any language other than English, and has been determined to need additional supports in order to be successful in an academic setting. Minnesota uses the WIDA Consortium English proficiency standards which provide standards and assessments teachers can use to better support their students with social and academic English. English learners work to improve their listening, speaking, reading, and writing proficiencies (Minnesota Department of Education, 2017).

An EL who has been enrolled in school in the United States for less than a year has the label of a recently arrived English learner, or RAEL (Minnesota Department of Education, 2017). All RAELs are immigrants. (See next paragraph.) While some RAELs arrive in the United States already having some proficiency in English or having studied English in their home country, this capstone will only examine those students who are at a WIDA proficiency level of 1.0-1.9; that is no English proficiency or single-word responses (Minnesota Department of Education, 2017). Students in the district where I work are exited from ESL services at an overall WIDA proficiency level of 4.5 or higher.

***Immigrants.*** An immigrant student is a student who was born in a place that is not within the United States or a U.S. territory and has been enrolled in a school within the United States for less than three academic years (Minnesota Department of Education,

2017). According to Passel and Cohn (2009), an immigrant who is living in the United States but does not have permission to work or reside here is called an undocumented immigrant (as cited in Cobb, Meca, Xie, Schwartz, & Moise, 2017, p. 167). Another term for an undocumented immigrant is an illegal immigrant. According to Baker and Rytina (2013), almost two-thirds of immigrants without legal status are Latino, and immigrants from Mexico make up the majority of that group (as cited in Cobb et al., 2017, p. 167). Salas, Ayón, and Gurrola (2013) note how difficult it is to obtain a working visa in the United States, and how limited the quota system is. As a result, the most common way for individuals to enter the United States is as an undocumented immigrant. Even though the government does not encourage immigrants to enter this way, many companies are happy to hire undocumented immigrants (Salas et al., 2013). The next section will examine how culture plays a role in RAELs' lives.

***Culture.*** There are several definitions of culture. Sandoval (2013) defines culture as, “the shared language, ideas, beliefs, values, and behavioral norms of a group of individuals with a group identity” (p. 32). Culture is always changing, and many people are bicultural or even tricultural. For example, a person can be a Muslim Somali American or a Latino Roman Catholic. It is important for educators to recognize their own cultures, as well as the culture of their schools (Sandoval, 2013). Everyone has a culture, and it has a significant impact on how people view the world. The teachers' and RAELs' perceptions could help them begin the healing process, or could lead to further academic, social, and mental challenges (Birman & Tran, 2017).

In this capstone, the words *Latino* and *Somali* refer to groups of people. Somali RAELs include all tribes and peoples who identify as Somali, whether they were born in

Somalia or not. The term *Latino* includes all Spanish-speaking peoples from Mexico, Central, and South America. Phipps & Degges-White (2014) define Latino as including non-Spanish speaking people, as well (such as Brazilians who speak Portuguese). However, this capstone will only be referring to Spanish-speaking people. The next section defines social emotional needs.

***Social emotional needs.*** Woolfolk (2014) explains the theory of self-determination, which states that people need to feel like they are competent and have control in their lives. Students need to feel able to be successful, to have connections with others, and to have a sense of choice in their lives (Woolfolk, 2014). When students (particularly RAELs) have experienced trauma, they might not have any of these needs met. In this capstone, the term *social emotional needs* refers to both social needs and emotional needs as they relate to self-determination theory. The next section details trauma and adverse childhood experiences.

***Trauma and adverse childhood experiences.*** Souers and Hall (2016) define trauma as an event or experience that overwhelms and/or negatively impacts an individual's ability to cope or have healthy development. Another term for traumatic experiences are what Felitti, Anda, Nordenberg, Williamson, Spitz, Edwards, et al. (1998) call adverse childhood experiences, or ACEs (as cited in Souers & Hall, 2016, p. 11). (See next paragraph). The word *trauma* has not always had the same definition and connotations as it does today. Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) was first listed in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-III)* in 1980. It was a much narrower definition, only including traumatic events such as war, torture, rape, and natural disasters among others. However, the 2013 edition of the *DSM-5* now includes a



wider definition, including trauma that is caused from an individual's environment and social experiences (Souers & Hall, 2016).

Some ACEs include substance abuse in a child's home, separation of parents, divorce, mental illness of a loved one, witnessing violence in or out of the home, death of a loved one, incarceration of parents, or suicide of a loved one. Delgado, Jones, and Rohani (2005) also include family members who have disappeared, hunger, thirst, illness, homelessness, seeing dead bodies, physical threats or punishments, living in chronic fear of persecution or deportation, and having to violate their moral code or cultural norms (as cited in Fontes, 2010, p. 301). According to the National Survey of Children's Health (2011/2012), almost 35 million youth in the United States have experienced one of these ACEs. Egger and Angold (2006) found that 52 percent of children ages 2-5 had experienced at least one ACE (as cited in Souers & Hall, 2016, p. 19). According to Betancourt et al. (2015), RAELs have experienced more types of trauma and more traumatic experiences than youth born in the United States. People who have experienced trauma can begin to heal from trauma if provided with the appropriate and necessary supports. In this capstone, these supports are called strategies, and they are explained in the next section.

***Strategy.*** Souers and Hall (2016) define a strategy as a targeted action that an educator can do with an individual or a large group to help students regulate their behavior and focus their energies and emotions on a productive task. The strategies discussed in this capstone are for educators to use with students, to teach to students, and to use with RAELs' families. The next section provides an overview of current immigration trends.

**Overview of immigration trends.** According to the Office of Refugee Resettlement (2007), the civil war in Somalia has caused over one million Somalis to leave their home country, with over 82,000 refugees settling in the United States (as cited in Betancourt et al., 2017, p. 114). The United States Census Bureau (2011) reported that there are about 50.5 million Latino people in the United States, or about 16 percent of the population. The Minnesota Education Equity Partnership reports that the number of ELs in Minnesota has increased by 300 percent over the last twenty years (Minnesota Department of Education, 2017). English learners made up 8.4 percent of the total student population in public K-12 Minnesota schools in the 2016-2017 school year. That year, there were 252 different home languages in the public K-12 schools across Minnesota. The most common languages reported are Spanish, Somali, and Hmong (Minnesota Department of Education, 2017). The majority of ELs in Minnesota public schools are enrolled in kindergarten through fifth grade. The next part of this section explains how RAELs' culture can play a role in their transition to the United States.

**Cultural considerations.** In many cultures, there is a desire to transmit the cultural traditions, language, values, and practices to new generations (Moro, 2014). It is helpful for educators to be aware of cultural norms, such as values and practices, so that they may better understand their RAELs' backgrounds. Of course, it is equally important for educators to understand that these ethnic groups are not homogeneous. RAELs should be treated as individuals with unique values (Betancourt et al., 2017; Cobb et al., 2017). Some RAELs and their families identify not with where they are from, but with ethnic group they are a part of (Fontes, 2010). For example, RAELs from Ethiopia may identify as Somali because that is where their parents and relatives are from. RAELs may also

identify themselves based on their religious practices, such as being Muslim or Catholic. But no matter how an RAEL identifies, it is important for an educator to always ask questions before making assumptions. It is equally important to develop a close personal relationship with each RAEL (Fontes, 2010). The next section explores different forms of educating children, and how this might be different from how non-EL or non-RAEL children are raised.

In many cultures, children are taught at home, not in formal educational settings. When Somali parents teach their children, for example, they often encourage their children to observe them and participate with them in daily activities. As Rogoff, Paradise, Mejía-Arauz, Correa-Chavez, and Cathy Angelillo (2003) note, it can be a challenging transition for children to learn in school, which is a de-contextualized setting where students master abstract concepts (as cited in Birman & Tran, 2017, p. 134). RAELs may not be used to such a child-centered approach, and may often not like talking face-to-face with their teachers. Also, given the less formal education RAELs might have experienced in their home countries, they may have difficulty sitting still and focusing for long periods of time (Fontes, 2010). The following discussion includes various coping mechanisms that some RAELs' cultures may use.

There are a number of different coping mechanisms people from different cultures use to help them with trauma and transitions during the different stages of immigration. (See below for more on the stages of immigration). Some cultures deal with trauma by showing no emotion, and others by extreme emotion (Sandoval, 2013). RAELs and their families may feel uncomfortable talking about their experiences, feeling that family and cultural secrets cannot and should not be shared with educators or strangers (Fontes,

2010). Some parents may feel that talking about the past may bring bad luck. Or, they may not see the relationship between the past and the present. For example, parents may see no reason to connect trauma their children experienced with their children's present disruptive behaviors (Fontes, 2010). Some cultures do not value the opinions of women and children as much as men of high status (Fontes, 2010; Sandoval, 2013). Educators should be aware of how status plays a role in their RAELs' lives.

Latino RAELs and their families generally are very close to their extended family members and community, forming a support system that provides for them emotionally and socially (Phipps & Degges-White, 2014). It is common for those members who have settled in the United States to send money back to the family still in the home country. This may result in the immigrants falling into poverty, and some educators (and young RAELs) may have trouble comprehending why families do this. However, as Phipps and Degges-White (2014) explain, this simply highlights how important family ties are in these communities. When RAELs become bicultural, they have the opportunity to receive support from their families, their communities, and their American friends and educators.

Another aspect of culture that educators must be aware of is child rearing. For example, children from Mexico are sometimes more dependent on their parents later into childhood than children from the United States. Parents and caretakers may immediately console their children when they are upset, tie their shoes, and cut their food well into children's school years. As expectations and practices vary greatly between cultural groups, it is important for educators not to let their own biases get in the way, but instead recognize the strengths that children have within their own ethnic groups.

**Summary.** The preceding discussion has defined the key terms, provided an overview of immigration trends, and briefly discussed cultural differences educators may encounter. It is clear that to understand how trauma will influence RAELs' social emotional needs and learning, it is important to understand their cultural backgrounds. Since different cultures have different practices for childrearing, communication, and education, a student's cultural background should be considered when formally or informally teaching or assessing him or her (Perez Foster, 2001). Many cultures within and outside of the United States function very differently from the mainstream culture of the United States. Educators need to know how to interact with RAELs and their families in an informed and respectful way. The next section examines the type of trauma that RAELs and their families might face.

### **Trauma and RAELs**

A large portion of RAELs have experienced a traumatic event, and many of them have experienced multiple traumatic events (Perez Foster, 2001). Multiple ACEs or traumatic events constitute what Ellis, MacDonald, Lincoln, and Cabral (2008), Ehnholt and Yule (2006), and Lustig et al. (2004) call "cumulative trauma-exposure" (as cited in Betancourt et al., 2015, p. 210). This is similar to what Souers and Hall (2016) call complex trauma. Complex trauma is when traumatic events happen simultaneously or in quick succession, and may result in a set of symptoms that is different from the symptoms characteristic of a single traumatic event (Souers & Hall, 2016). Complex trauma may begin to compound at any stage of an RAEL's migration (Perez Foster, 2001). What follows is an overview of the different stages of an RAEL's migration.

**Stages of immigration.** There are three stages of immigration during which trauma can occur. Perez Foster (2001) labels these stages as the pre-immigration stage, transition to the host country, and host country trauma. Betancourt et al. (2015) names the stages of immigration as preflight, flight, and resettlement stressors. This capstone will use Perez Foster's (2001) names for the stages. Different types of trauma that Somali and Latino RAELs may experience in the three stages are explored below.

***Pre-immigration stage.*** RAELs, particularly Somali and Latino RAELs, may have endured political violence in their home countries. Traumatic events that can result from political violence include loss of loved ones, exposure to violence, and having to leave one's home (Betancourt et al., 2015). Drug violence is a particular challenge that many immigrants face every day. According to Salas et al. (2013), there is a positive correlation between high rates of crime and/or violence and immigration to the United States. Some Somali refugees have had to live in refugee camps for years at a time. There are often few opportunities for education in these camps, and many parents feel it is unnecessary to send their children to the schools in camps as they would soon be emigrating to the United States (Birman & Tran, 2017). RAELs often come to the United States to escape the trauma in their home countries. However, there are numerous traumatic events they may experience as they travel to their new homes.

***Transition to the host country.*** There are some traumatic experiences that only occur while RAELs are traveling to the United States. A number of immigrants travel by land to cross the United States-Mexico border (Yoon-Hendricks & Greenberg, 2018). These immigrants often face journeys with little food or shelter, and face danger from animals, anti-immigrant enforcement, and vigilante groups who shoot immigrants

(Phipps & Degges-White, 2014). Sometimes RAELs' families must pay coyotes (travel brokers who operate illegally) additional fees in the form of money, labor, or sexual favors for an unguaranteed safe passage to the U.S (Phipps & Degges-White, 2014; Salas et al., 2013). Some immigrants who go by land stuff themselves into small containers, such as tractor trailers or small compartments in vehicles, and are transported illegally across the border (Perez Foster, 2001; Phipps & Degges-White, 2014). According to Bragg (1999), other Latino immigrants cross the Caribbean Sea to reach their destination (as cited in Perez Foster, 2001, p. 155). These boats are often not safe for travel, and many people die in the crossing. The immigrants who survive have been at sea for long periods of time, and have possibly witnessed drowning along the way.

During President Trump's zero tolerance policy in spring and summer of 2018, over two thousand immigrant children were separated from their parents while their parents were being detained. While this policy has been revoked, as of this writing, many children have not been reunited with their family members (Yoon-Hendricks & Greenberg, 2018). The long-term trauma of these events is yet to be felt. Though the journey to get into the United States can be very traumatic, there are still more traumatic events that RAELs experience once they have settled in their new homes.

***Host country trauma.*** Some traumatic events and circumstances many refugees face in their new host country include poverty, poor housing, low English proficiency, racism, discrimination, social exclusion, and unemployment (Betancourt et al., 2015). Traumatic experiences related to social exclusion include loss of family ties, support systems they relied upon in their home country, and perceived loss of their culture. Many immigrants who held high status jobs must take on low-level jobs because their

credentials are not recognized in the United States. In addition, many immigrant families send money back to relatives in their home country. The decrease in income and the money sent home can result in poverty for many families. This change in lifestyle can be very traumatic for some RAELs. Betancourt et al. (2017) explain that these children are often forced to live in poor and dangerous neighborhoods because of their poverty. The location of their new homes may put them at risk for even more trauma, including community violence. Some parents, struggling to accept their new roles and status, may vent their frustration on their family members.

Immigrants' legal status can sometimes influence their experiences in the U.S (Salas et al., 2013). Some immigrants who do not have legal status avoid going out in public for fear of deportation. As a result, immigrants feel they have less social mobility, more feelings of isolation, and a crippling sense of powerlessness. Given the current political state, characterized by vocal protests, immigrants also feel that the host culture is rejecting them. However, it is important to note that not all immigrants report feeling this sense of loss (Cobb et al., 2017; Salas et al., 2013; Phipps & Degges-White, 2014). Some are very successful in their new homes.

According to Betancourt et al. (2015), some Somali parents feel they are in a worse environment in the United States than they were in Somalia. This is, in part, because some Somali parents feel that the American youth their children are interacting with are a "bad influence" on their children (p. 117). As immigrant children begin to adjust to their new culture in the United States, they are not as interested in continuing to practice their home culture. As a result, the communication between parents and children decreases (Betancourt et al., 2015). Betancourt et al. (2015) then go on to explain that



RAELs sometimes learn from their American peers that parents do not need to be respected as much as they are in their home countries. While many RAELs may find this new freedom from obligations to their parents liberating at first, these new social roles can be disorienting (Betancourt et al., 2015).

**Summary.** The above discussion indicates that RAELs and their families may experience a wide range of trauma. This trauma may occur in their home countries prior to emigrating, on their journeys to their destinations, or after their arrival. It is common for RAELs to experience multiple traumatic events, or complex trauma. It is important for educators to consider the different types of trauma, particularly trauma that RAELs may have experienced. Educators must understand students' histories if they are to teach them effectively.

It is vital for educators to understand that what is important is not the particular type of trauma that RAELs face, but the influence these events have on the students. All students react differently to trauma. But no matter the reaction, traumatic events and their resulting symptoms have a negative impact on RAELs' ability to learn. This will be discussed in the next section.

### **Social Emotional Needs of RAELs and the Impact of Trauma**

RAELs' unmet needs coupled with trauma's negative influences on the brain make it very difficult for them to be successful. RAELs who have experienced trauma have a unique set of needs that must be met. Their brains react negatively to trauma, and due to their anxiety and perceived lack of control, RAELs exhibit behaviors that are disruptive and even violent. In order for teachers to learn how to meet students' needs, they must first recognize what students' needs are and how these needs can manifest in

various behaviors. This section will begin with an overview of trauma's impact on the brain and learning and will then discuss how trauma can impact student behaviors.

**Impact of trauma on RAELs' brains and learning.** Some people may think that young children are better able to heal from trauma because of their youth and because they do not fully understand what actually happened. The exact opposite is true (Fontes, 2010). These students have many challenges facing them in addition to their trauma. Suárez-Orozco et al., (2012) explain that recently arrived English learners not only have the difficult tasks of learning a new language, a new culture, and the various expectations for school (including such tasks as holding a pencil correctly), they must also develop literacy skills and master all academic content areas (Birman & Tran, 2017). Even for an English-speaking student, this is an overwhelming amount of learning. RAELs who have experienced trauma have to do all of these things while living with the trauma of their past or current environment.

Educators may hope that students will learn quickly and catch up to their American, English-speaking peers within a year or two. This is often not possible. The Trauma Network lists three different ways that trauma negatively impacts the brain, making such gains highly unlikely (Brunzell, Waters, & Stokes, 2015). First, parts of the brain do not mature during the appropriate time period. Second, the brain does not respond to stimuli in a normal and appropriate way. Third, the brain is not able to process information, develop neural connections, or regulate emotions normally. These impacted brain functions make learning very difficult, as the students are not able to retain information, think critically, focus, develop linguistically, or create and maintain healthy relationships.

Yehuda, Engel, Brand, Seckl, Marcus, and Berkowitz (2005) found in their study that adults with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) have reduced levels of cortisol, a hormone in the brain that helps regulate the stress response (as cited in Phipps & Degges-White, 2014, p. 182). Siegel (2013) goes on to explain that when students are constantly stressed, they operate out of the limbic area of the brain instead of the prefrontal cortex (as cited in Souers & Hall, 2016, p. 31). The limbic area of the brain controls the fight, flight, or freeze response, while the prefrontal cortex houses the critical thinking in the brain. According to Shonkoff and Garner (2012), increased stress hormones can be toxic in the body, and can negatively influence students' ability to focus and build relationships (as cited in Souers & Hall, 2016, p. 22). Stress hormones can lead to the body's stress response being continually active which can negatively impact student's heart rate, temperature, and blood pressure (Brunzell et al., 2015; Souers & Hall, 2016). Changes in a person's brain chemistry will result in a range of atypical needs and behaviors. These needs and behaviors will be explored further in the next subsection.

**Impact of trauma on RAELs' social emotional needs and behaviors.** Even though trauma influences every RAEL's brain and learning, his or her response and reaction to trauma may be different. However, there are a number of behaviors that are characteristic of RAELs who have experienced trauma. Brunzell et al. (2015) found that common symptoms of trauma include "attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, conduct disorder, oppositional defiance disorder, reactive attachment, disinherited social engagement, and/or acute stress disorders" (p. 3). Students may also experience separation anxiety, phobias, bedwetting, mood disorders, nightmares, fear of loud noises, or chronic fear (Fontes, 2010). Birman and Tran (2017) explain that students who feel

anxious about their learning may become frustrated, unable to focus, disengaged, disappointed in their abilities, bored, restless, fidgety, and disruptive. Segalowitz (1976) found that conversing in a second language may cause students to feel less confident and intelligent (as cited in Perez Foster, 2001, p. 164).

Ellis et al. (2008) found that symptoms of PTSD negatively impacted students' ability to adapt to new environments, making adapting to American schools even more challenging. Some of RAELs' behaviors can even become aggressive. RAELs have been noticed to kick, bully, bite, fight, or throw things at other people, such as chairs and pencils. However, Bridges et al. (2010) found that Latinos born in the United States tend to express their reaction to trauma through external behaviors, while Latinos born outside the United States tend to express their anxiety internally (as cited in Phipps & Degges-White, 2014, p. 182). More research is needed to fully understand why this is.

Birman and Tran (2017) list other behaviors characteristic of RAELs, including getting up and walking around during a lesson, talking with classmates, and fidgeting. Some students in Birman and Tran's (2017) study did not know the procedure to ask to go to the bathroom, but once they knew, students asked to go constantly. Birman and Tran (2017) also found that when young RAELs are in distress, they may cry uncontrollably upon arrival at school or at the end of the day, run out of the room, or hide under furniture. While this may be a result of not being familiar with school and its routines, such behaviors can be aggravated by trauma. Students who do not know how to speak English may quietly refuse to do work, but once their English proficiencies increase, Birman and Tran (2017) report that students often begin to complain about doing work.

Fontes (2010) explains that some students who have experienced trauma are used to ignoring their needs of hunger, tiredness, thirst, or having to use the bathroom. Some students will not tell the teacher they feel these things. These unmet needs can impact a student's ability to focus. Porche, Fortuna, Lin, and Alegria et al. (2011) found that trauma can even have an impact on students' academic careers later in life. Students who experienced trauma have a higher high school dropout rate than students who have not experience trauma.

Additional behaviors connected to trauma are obsessing over pencils, food, and clothing. According to Birman and Tran (2017), students can become preoccupied with pencils. They may sharpen them often, hoard them, or throw them in the air or on the floor. This may be done in protest or to get a reaction out of the teacher or other students. Students may also become possessive of their clothing and refuse to remove hats. Food can also become a distraction. Birman and Tran (2017) found that students may refuse to eat in the appropriate spaces or time, hoard food, or feel unsure eating unfamiliar foods.

Suarez-Ocozco, Pimentel, and Martin (2009) explain a cycle of failure seen in many classrooms. Students' difficulty with understanding and learning causes them to disengage (as cited in Birman and Tran, 2017, p. 141). They may become afraid and become unable to comfort and calm themselves due to their brain's inability to return to a calm, unstressed state (Brunzell et al., 2015). As students get more and more frustrated, they may act out more and lose motivation. This could, in turn, make it more challenging for students to learn. This disengagement may lead educators to believe they are not interested in learning, and educators may even lower their expectations of students. Educators may get angry with students because these behaviors can be disruptive and do

not help students' learning. However, it is important for educators to remember that these behaviors are often a result of students' trauma.

It is important to note that in addition to all the needs and challenges that RAELs face in school, they have another set of needs from their home culture that must be met, as well. Sometimes what educators think their students need to be successful is different or goes against what parents think their children need (Moro, 2010).

**Summary.** The above discussion leads to the conclusion that RAELs who have experienced trauma often have different needs than other students who have not experienced trauma. If educators only look at RAELs' behaviors (and not the causes of those behaviors), they may never be able to help RAELs be successful. Trauma can cause chemical changes in the brain, impacting the critical functions necessary to learn. The symptoms of trauma that occur in the brain can manifest in behaviors. Once educators can understand why students are behaving the way they do, they can provide supports that will help meet RAEL's unique needs. These strategies will be discussed in the next section.

### **Strategies for Educators to Help RAELs Manage and Heal from Trauma**

This section examines what teachers can do to help their RAELs be successful learners. It overviews how teachers' worldviews can positively or negatively impact students' success; strategies teachers can use to create a productive learning environment; strategies teachers can implement to teach RAELs; and strategies that can be used school-wide and with the larger community. While teachers must work to meet the needs of their students, it is important to consult school psychologists and social workers when needed. The purpose of this capstone is not to diagnose students or to train teachers on how to be

a psychologist or social worker, but to provide teachers with strategies to use with and teach to their students.

**Impact of teachers' worldviews on student success.** Teachers' attitudes play an important role in RAELs' development and success. Birman and Tran (2017) found that teachers who believed that RAELs should learn and integrate into mainstream United States culture as quickly as possible and at the expense of their native culture sometimes refused to provide any additional supports (such as scaffolding, differentiation) for their RAELs. However, those teachers who respect RAELs' cultures and support multilingualism appeared to have more empathy for the students' challenges. As a result, these teachers provided RAELs with the appropriate supports (Birman & Tran, 2017). Souers and Hall (2016) explain that teachers must never give up on students or allow them to fail because they think that is a strategy that will motivate students. Teacher persistence will help RAELs heal from their trauma, meet their social emotional needs, and develop academically.

Teachers need to know how to recognize the needs of RAELs who have experienced trauma so they can use this information when working with them. However, it is not the goal of this capstone to train teachers on how to diagnose students. As Fontes (2010) notes, it is important for students to receive comprehensive clinical assessments from trained professionals. Such assessments require an understanding of the student as a whole, including their traumatic, personal, and cultural history. Perez Foster's conclusions (2001) are similar to those of Betancourt et al. (2017), which emphasize the importance of the assessments also being culturally relevant, i.e., different cultures often have different definitions as to what constitutes a mental illness. Trauma can be

transmitted from one generation to the next, so it is also important to understand the history not just of RAELs, but of their families, as well (Fontes, 2010). Betancourt et al. (2017) report in their study that not even thirty percent of the refugees in their study received treatment for trauma related to war. So, while teachers must feel confident identifying their RAELs' needs, it is also vital that the students also receive the assessment and services they require. The next two subsections detail strategies that teachers can use with their RAELs to help create a productive learning environment.

**Strategies for a productive learning environment.** The classroom is an ideal setting for promoting healing from the symptoms and effects of trauma. Teachers must seize this opportunity. Only when students' needs are met and they have begun the process of healing, which includes managing the symptoms of their trauma, will they be able to learn. Cole (2005) and Trueba (1988) explain that when teachers create positive social environments in their classrooms and across the whole school, it increases the potential for learning for all students (as cited in Birman & Tran, 2017, p. 134). Instead of using an assembly line style of education, Cole (2005) suggests Neo-Vygotskian concepts of scaffolding and guiding students as they participate in learning experiences. This teaching style includes breaking down complex tasks into manageable parts, advancing at an appropriate pace, and completing applicable tasks. This model might help students who come from societies where they learn by modeling tasks from their parents. This is just one way that educators can help RAELs comprehend abstract concepts through connecting with previous learning.



Birman and Tran (2017) found three effective strategies that teachers in their study used when teaching their RAELs. These strategies are common throughout the literature and are covered briefly in what follows.

The first strategy is building strong and trusting relationships that affirm students' successes. Students who have strong relationships feel connected to the other members of the classroom, both students and teachers. I have found that it can also be helpful for teachers to engage students on a personal level and let them do "special helper" jobs that empower them and encourage feelings of responsibility. For example, students can help pass out books or papers. While it can be challenging to engage students who have little to no English proficiency, it is especially important that these students feel connected and not socially isolated. Praise, when used appropriately, can also help reaffirm a child's confidence and acceptance in the academic world. Birman and Tran (2017) also suggest rewarding RAELs not only with words, but also by allowing them to work with a partner, giving them public appreciation, or awarding them special playtime.

Souers and Hall (2016) and Brunzell et al. (2015) also highlight the importance of positive relationships with students. This concept is part of positive psychology (Brunzell et al., 2015). Included in positive psychology, Brunzell et al. (2015) suggest developing positive emotions, character strengths, resilient mindsets, and gratitude. Building relationships, along with self-regulation, is vital to helping students heal from their trauma. Brunzell et al. (2015) also suggest teachers use empathy, warmth, and an unconditional, positive attitude with students. If teachers want students to know how to build healthy relationships, teachers must demonstrate this, even when they are frustrated or angry with a student.

The second strategy Birman and Tran (2017) found effective is providing RAELs with one-on-one attention. When teachers work with RAELs in a one-on-one setting, RAELs are less likely to fall behind or feel bored. This also gives teachers the ability to informally assess RAELs' abilities and capitalize on impromptu learning opportunities. One-on-one time also gives teachers the chance to build their relationships with the students.

The third strategy suggested by Birman and Tran (2017) is to use meaningful materials. Materials should be fun, or at least interesting to look at, and helpful in RAELs' learning. Students often enjoy seeing images from their home country (assuming it does not trigger a negative response), such as animals or people wearing clothing from their culture. RAELs especially need materials with supporting images that can help them make sense of their learning. These students are learning the basics of English, and so the resources must meet their linguistic needs.

Teachers should use mindful breathing to return to a calm state (Souers & Hall, 2016). Checking in with the student regularly shows the student that the teacher will always care for the student's learning and development. Souers and Hall (2016) suggest teachers react in the following steps when there is a student who is arguing or disagreeing: listen, reassure, validate, respond, repair, and resolve (Souers and Hall, 2016, p.79). These researchers also suggest that, in addition to these steps, teachers should learn more about themselves, such as their level of empathy and self-care strategies, so they do not become overwhelmed by students' needs. No matter what students do, teachers must always be in control of their own emotions and actions. Teachers must know how they themselves will react in every situation, and they must

also work to be proactive. Teachers can be proactive by helping students identify their triggers and belief systems. The next section explores different strategies teachers can teach to their students.

**Strategies teachers can teach their students.** Brunzell et al. (2015) explain the importance of teaching self-regulation strategies to students. RAELs who have experienced trauma may have abnormal stress responses (Brunzell et al., 2015). This means students are unable to calm themselves down when they are angry, sad, or overactive (Brunzell et al., 2015). Teachers can teach students coregulatory exercises that help them develop their physical and emotional regulation. When working on physical regulation, students are tapping into their sensory and nervous systems. Students should do brain breaks, such as rhythmic exercises, patterned activities, songs, circle games, quick and intensive physical activities, yoga, mindful breathing, and activities related to music (Brunzell et al., 2015). These exercises can help students mediate their response to stress by modulating their heart rate. The exercises also have the added bonus of building classroom community. Teachers should incorporate these brain breaks into their daily schedule.

Brunzell et al. (2015) suggest that for students to regulate their emotions, teachers should teach them how to acknowledge their feelings, connect their feelings to external situations, and use their own strategies to help them calm themselves down after becoming upset. Hess and Copeland (2001) suggest that teaching students coping strategies is another beneficial way to help them manage their trauma and symptoms of trauma as they grow older (as cited in Porche et al., 2011). This can take time, and some of these suggestions are more appropriate for older students. However, Brunzell et al.

(2015) recommend starting this type of thinking early to help develop the skills. One way to help younger students is to read and discuss stories using an emotional lens. Students can talk about how different characters are feeling at different points in the story and how to appropriately respond to the situations. All of these strategies can be used within the classroom. The next subsection identifies strategies that can be used in entire schools and with RAELs' families.

**School-wide and community-wide strategies.** Schools are an ideal place to help RAELs start managing their symptoms and healing from their trauma. However, school staff members cannot accomplish this goal on their own. Schools must share this responsibility with the students' communities. It is important for schools to communicate with a cultural liaison (Betancourt et al., 2015; Sandoval, 2013). These liaisons are often members of the RAELs' communities. They can help increase mutual understanding. They can also help both educators and families feel confident they are all working in RAELs' best interests. Stein et al. (2002) suggest utilizing a social worker who is bilingual and multicultural. Being bilingual and multicultural will help social workers be aware of their own biases, understand the worldview of the school and of RAELs' families, and know a number of strategies and interventions that are appropriate for RAELs. Reaching out to RAELs and their families' religious organizations is another way to help maintain communication with families (Sandoval, 2013). The more these groups of people feel settled and comfortable, the easier it will be for future refugees and immigrants to move in and reduce their host country trauma (Betancourt et al., 2015).

Another way to help communities feel successful is to make sure the children are successful. In a study done by Betancourt et al. (2015), one Somali man reported that "the

parenting knowledge, skills, strategies, whatever it was that we used back home is not going to work here” (p.121). Many immigrants parents learn how to raise their children in the United States by trial and error. However, schools can help parents understand what their children are going through as they grow up in the United States. This is not to say that Somali parents need to give up their traditional parenting methods. Instead, Betancourt et al. (2015) suggest that such training could help increase communication and involvement between parents and their children, resulting in children feeling more supported as they grow up in their new environments. Also, increasing the role parents play in their children’s lives can help them retain the traditional status that parents hold in their native countries (Betancourt et al., 2015). The importance of involving parents has been stressed by others as well (Souers & Hall, 2016). Parents want to know about their children’s successes and failures, and also what they can do to help their children grow and develop.

There are several small steps schools can take to help RAELs and their families feel valued and comfortable. For example, Birman and Tran (2017) suggests allowing older RAELs extra time to get to class in the morning so they can walk their younger siblings to their classrooms. This can prevent negative emotional responses, and it will help students understand that their school respects their values. Sandoval (2013) encourages educators to communicate with RAELs’ families using their home language as much as possible. Having an interpreter or cultural liaison will make this task much easier. Fontes (2010) discourages prominently displaying patriotic slogans or symbols in meeting places as these might cause some students and families to feel uneasy, especially given the current political climate. My own students have become alarmed or confused

when they see police officers visiting the school. I suggest introducing the officers to the students and informing the students that the police are not going to arrest anyone. Instead, the police are just saying “hi” and want to make sure everyone is safe.

Fontes (2010) offers a list of things that educators can do to help put RAELS and their families at ease when meeting with them. First, she emphasizes the importance of collecting data on the family, such as a home language survey, information about the family’s culture, and family history. She, along with Sandoval (2013), highlights the importance of utilizing interpreters with meeting with RAELS and their families. Even if an educator has some knowledge of the RAEL’s language, it is important to use an interpreter to help avoid miscommunication. Interpreters can help RAELS and their families understand any cultural miscommunications or questions that may arise. Also, when meeting with families, it is a good idea to provide snacks and quiet activities for the RAELs to do. Young students might be nervous talking directly to a teacher (or being talked about), so the food and activities will help them relax. Nonverbal behaviors are very important when meeting with families. Using a calm voice and smiling occasionally can be beneficial, but educators should do some research into common ways of showing respect in the RAEL’s culture. Teachers also need to know how to reflect on the meetings about what went well and what can be improved at the next meeting. They need to be able to adapt their behaviors accordingly. Souers and Hall (2016) also emphasize the importance of self-reflection in teaching.

Just as teachers must modify their teaching to meet students’ needs, so too must schools adapt their services to meet the needs of the communities they serve (given the limits of funding). Stein et al. (2002) have found that providing transportation to

treatment, doing home visits, providing information about services, and frequent contact with families not only increase the communication between families and educators, but also increase the likelihood that RAELs' receive the services they need. Educators must be willing to adapt to different communication preferences than they might be used to. For example, Latino and Somali RAELs and their families may talk in a more roundabout way than educators usually prefer. But once the lines of communication have been established, educators and families will begin to meet students' needs more effectively.

**Summary.** RAELs have a unique set of needs as a result of their trauma.

However, there are numerous strategies educators can use when they work with RAELs, strategies they can teach RAELs, and strategies to help build the relationship between schools and RAELs' families and communities. These strategies include building relationships, giving RAELs one-on-one attention and meaningful materials, providing breaks for physical movement, teaching self-regulation strategies, and making connections with RAELs' families and community members. The strategies provided in this capstone, which are grounded in the research and summarized in this chapter, could help educators more effectively teach the small, yet growing, groups of Somali or Latino RAELs.

### **Chapter Summary**

This capstone examines strategies that teachers can use to meet the social emotional needs of recently arrived elementary-aged Latino and Somali English learners who have experienced trauma. The goal is to create a professional development session for teachers where these strategies can be shared.

The literature review presented above suggests that recently arrived English

learners are a diverse group of students. They come from all over the world and from many different cultures. These students also may experience different forms of trauma during the stages of their immigration. This trauma can negatively impact their brains, making learning very difficult. Cultural differences, along with cognitive issues, need to be taken into consideration while working to meet students' needs.

The review also indicates that there are a number of things teachers can do to help meet these students' needs. With that goal in mind, the next chapter will explain how this information will be used to create a professional development session with teachers. Though educators may know teaching strategies to help meet the needs of non-ESL students who have experienced trauma, knowledge of specific strategies aimed at the needs of recently arrived Somali and Latino students is still lacking. The current capstone is intended to help cover this gap.



## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **Project Description**

#### **Introduction**

This capstone examines strategies that teachers can use to meet the social emotional needs of recently arrived elementary-aged Latino and Somali English learners (RAELs) who have experienced trauma. I created a professional development session where such strategies can be shared with other educators. This chapter examines the various components of this capstone project. It provides a description of the project, an explanation regarding its relevance to the current body of research, research frameworks, the setting and audience of the presentation, and a timeline for completion.

The project description will include the form the project will take, and why I chose to create this particular artifact. The next section on the research framework will detail the student and adult learning theories I drew from to help make my project as effective as possible for my audience. It will also explain how I measured its effectiveness and ensured validity and reliability for both teachers and students. The third section will describe the particular setting and audience for my project. The last section will identify the timeline for my project's completion.

#### **Project Format Description and Rationale**

For my project, I hosted a professional development session. My professional development included a Powerpoint presentation (with handouts outlining the key points from the Powerpoint), pre- and post-assessments for participants, a toolkit of strategies for teachers, and the opportunity to review and discuss the information presented. The

presentation was about 50 minutes long. I hosted both a morning session before school and an afternoon session after school so that my participants were able to attend the session that was most convenient for their schedules.

Tsouloupas, Carson, and Matthews (2014) found that teachers' perceptions of their effectiveness in managing student behavior increased when they were provided with relevant and appropriate professional development. This study also found that when teachers were provided with information specific to the populations they teach, they felt even more confident in their abilities to manage their classroom. With this research in mind, I decided that a professional development session featuring a Powerpoint was the ideal form for my project. Also, it is a logical continuation of a professional development opportunity hosted at my school in the 2017-2018 school year. That professional development experience was a discussion-based book club centered around the book *Fostering Resilient Learners: Strategies for Creating a Trauma-Sensitive Classroom* by Kristin Souers and Pete Hall (2016). It was hosted by my school's instructional coach. Although my fellow teachers and I did discuss RAELs during the book club, there was still a need for more information about this unique population. In particular, specific teaching strategies were sorely desired and needed.

The capstone presentation provided information about elementary-aged Latino and Somali RAELs. However, as I did my research, I realized the information in my presentation can be generalized to all RAELs, English learners (ELs) who have lived in the United States for many years, and non-ELs. It can also be applied to students who are older or younger than the elementary-aged students at my school. This professional development increased teachers' knowledge of trauma related to RAELs and helped them

understand the resulting needs of RAELs. At the end of the presentation, teachers had the knowledge and practical strategies to teach their RAELs more effectively. An overview of the presentation and the assessments I used to ensure teachers' learning are explained below.

I started the presentation with an icebreaker activity. Participants received a slip of paper with a paragraph-long description of a fictional RAEL's life story, detailing the traumatic events she/he has experienced. I asked participants to read the descriptions. It was then their job to try to imagine how the trauma would impact their perceptions of school and their daily lives. The teachers briefly discussed in small groups how they felt as a result of their "life stories" and predicted how this would impact their experiences in school. Teachers had an opportunity to share with the whole group, also.

After this introduction, I began the main sections of my presentation. It was divided into four sections. These four sections provided teachers with both background information necessary to understand RAELs' needs, and also applicable strategies they can use in their classrooms with their students. In the first section, I provided teachers with information about who RAELs are and statistics regarding demographic information in Minnesota. I also explained how RAELs' cultures play a role in their lives. In the second section, I explained the different stages of immigration and the types of trauma that may be experienced during those stages. The third section described how trauma influences RAEL's brains, their capacity to learn, and their behaviors. The last section provided strategies that educators can use with their students and their families, as well as strategies educators can teach their students.

I also provided teachers with paper copies of the slides and handouts that contained the main details provided on my slides, and space for them to take notes. I only included the major points on the slides. Relevant practical information was included in the handouts so teachers could be fully engaged and not distracted by needing to take notes. I included the text from the handouts in the Powerpoint presentation so that as participants were discussing they could all refer to the screen. Throughout the presentation, I gave teachers discussion prompts and questions that they could discuss with small groups and with the whole group.

Having discussed the form that my project took and why this format is appropriate, I will now delve into a discussion of the research frameworks and methodologies relied upon in this chapter, along with the methods I used to ensure validity, reliability, and effectiveness.

### **Research Framework**

**Mixed-method approach.** For this capstone project, I used a pragmatic worldview. As Creswell and Creswell (2018) explain, a pragmatic worldview is characterized by researchers working to understand a problem as best they can and then using actions to help fix or mitigate the problem. In pragmatic studies, which are mostly in the realm of action research, it is common to use mixed methods approach. According to Falk and Blumenreich (2005), action research can help teachers solve problems and develop solutions to challenges they face in their classrooms. By collecting new information and reflecting on past and present strategies and theories, teachers can take immediate action to make their classrooms more effective and efficient learning environments. Based on my own reflections and observations around the school in which

I work, I decided to use action research to help my own teaching. Given how often I teach alongside other educators in my school, I recognize the need to share my findings and actions with them.

The resources I have gathered for this capstone include both quantitative and qualitative data. I used a convergent mixed method approach when completing this capstone so I could triangulate both types of data simultaneously (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This type of approach helps me understand RAELs' challenges from different perspectives, both large-scale trends and individual experiences. For example, I researched immigration statistics, but I also utilized published results of focus-group interviews in which individuals shared their unique experiences. There are common trends in the kinds of trauma that RAELs experience, but not all RAELs face the same trauma or react to it in the same way (Fontes, 2010). Using a convergent mixed methods approach has allowed me to draw from many types of scales and perspectives.

**Self-determination theory.** Self-determination theory, according to Woolfolk (2014), states that people can only feel comfortable and successful when they feel they have choices, are in control of their lives, and can make connections with other people. Also, people have a need for autonomy, which is the desire to be driven by intrinsic motivators instead of extrinsic motivators. My project was guided by this theory because it emphasizes the social emotional needs of students in a world of high-pressure schooling. RAELs' traumatic experiences, the symptoms of their trauma, their lack of English proficiency, and the high-pressure environment of school make it very difficult for students to feel autonomous. Self-determination theory helps me understand the challenges RAELs face and what teachers can do to help them be successful. For

example, when teachers provide the appropriate supports and utilize the effective strategies, they are able to provide students with a safe learning environment. This safe place is the first step in helping students take control of their lives.

The next subsection explores the adult learning theory I used when creating my capstone project presentation.

**Agrological model of learning.** To engage my adult learners, I utilized what Knowles (1992) calls an agrological model of learning. According to Knowles (1992), participants must be active learners during a presentation. They cannot simply be passive listeners copying down the information presented to them. He emphasizes the need for adult learners to develop their ability to reflect and teach themselves in addition to learning the content of a presentation. Chen (2014) also notes the importance of reflection in learning. He concludes that learners are more successful when they take their learning into their own hands and are emotionally invested in and driven by the topic. As the presenter, it was my job to assess participants' needs, both in their learning and in their future goals as educators. Together, my participants and I worked to create an effective learning experience. I describe how I did this below.

Knowles (1992) encourages interaction among the participants during a presentation. In my presentation, I provided four different opportunities for discussion among the participants. The first opportunity was the icebreaker activity. The second was a jigsaw activity: participants read different parts of the Stages of Migration handout, and then provided a summary of what they read to a partner. The third opportunity was a Read/Head/Said activity, which is similar to a jigsaw. Participants read and took notes on the Impact of Trauma on RAELs' Social Emotional Needs and Behaviors handout, then

shared their notes with a partner. The last discussion opportunity was at the end to discuss which strategies they would use with their students. And as Knowles (1992) suggests, I provided participants with time to discuss their dreams for the RAELs in our school, and what must be done to achieve these goals. I chose these particular activities because it gave the participants a chance to process the information in different ways. They were able to read, write, talk, and listen.

**Validity, reliability, and effectiveness.** I used three different surveys and forms to assess and ensure the validity, reliability, and effectiveness of my capstone project. First, I gave my participants a survey prior to the presentation. In the survey, I asked them a couple of questions. First, I asked them if they would be interested in attending this professional development opportunity, and what their preferred dates and times were. Then, I asked them to rate their confidence in their ability to meet the social emotional needs of RAELs who have experienced trauma. Respondents rated themselves on a scale from one to five, with one indicating they did not feel confident at all, and five indicating they felt completely confident. Last, I asked respondents what strategies they already use to help meet the social emotional needs of RAELs. After the presentation, I gave them a similar survey/feedback form that asked three follow-up questions. For the first question, I asked them to rate their confidence level again to see if it went up. Next, I asked them to name some strategies that they would use in their classrooms in the next week to help meet the social emotional needs of their students. Last, I asked respondents if they would be interested in additional meetings or time to discuss the topics addressed in my professional development experience. I will also give a final survey later in the year to see how participants and their students are managing trauma and symptoms of trauma.

These surveys have allowed me to gauge the effectiveness, reliability, and validity of my presentation. I will discuss the results of these resources in Chapter Four.

**Conclusion.** In this section, I outlined the different theories I utilized in my capstone project and how I ensured validity, reliability, and effectiveness. I employed a convergent mixed methods approach using self-determination theory and an agrolological model of learning. I used three assessments to measure how much teachers learned and if they would like additional information about the topics covered in the initial presentation. In the next section, I will explain the setting and audience for my presentation.

### **Setting and Audience**

This presentation took place at the school where I teach. The school is an elementary school south of a major metropolitan area in the Midwest. Of the approximately 360 students in the school, about one quarter are English learners (ELs). According to school documents, 56.9 percent of students receive free or reduced lunch. There were four RAELs during the 2017-2018 school year. The ELs at my school are mostly Latino and Somali who were born in the United States. Even though there are presently only four RAELs at my school, this is a group of students that teachers are still working to understand. This number is likely to increase (as discussed in Chapter Two).

Two people attended my first presentation session, and eight attended the second. We met in the library which is centrally located in the school, and it is where most staff meetings are held. Participants sat around a round table facing a screen at the front of the room. Many of the participants were teachers who attended the book club during the 2017-2018 school year.

### **Timeline**



The research for the first three chapters was collected in the summer of 2018 and the project was completed during the fall of 2018. Chapter Four, the final chapter of this capstone, was also completed during the fall of 2018. I presented my project October 25th (in the morning) and 29th (in the afternoon). I selected dates for the presentation based off of the feedback I received in the first survey. I also kept the school calendar in mind so as not to overwhelm staff. Later this year, there may also be follow-up sessions in which I provide participants with additional resources or a space for discussion.

### **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I explained the form my project took, the reasoning for this particular form, my methods, my research framework, the setting and audience of the presentation, and a timeline for the completion of this project. My capstone uses a convergence mixed-method approach utilizing self-determination theory and an agrological model of learning. The presentation was held in my school's library, and everyone was invited to attend. The presentation took place late October, 2018. There may be additional sessions depending on the needs of the participants.

In the next chapter, I will reflect upon my project and future steps I will take as a researcher to help the educators in my school meet the needs of our RAELs.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **Conclusion**

#### **Introduction**

This capstone examines strategies that teachers can use to meet the social emotional needs of recently arrived elementary-aged Latino and Somali English learners (RAELs) who have experienced trauma. In this chapter, I will reflect on the research I conducted, the professional development project I created, and future research I hope to do. In the first section, I will discuss what parts of my research I found most important to my project and which researchers I found most useful when writing my literature review. It is important for me to reflect on these topics because it has helped me view my research from a big picture perspective instead of just a collection of facts. In the second section, I discuss what went well in my professional development and what limitations there are. While I feel the professional development was successful, there are still some things I would do differently. I need to reflect on the successes and limitations so that I can be a more effective researcher and presenter the next time I share information with my fellow educators. In the last section of this chapter, I discuss possible topics I would like to research in the future. Researching, designing, and presenting this capstone project has taught me the essential value of being a teacher researcher.

#### **Reflection on Research**

The most important part of my literature review was in the section on social emotional needs and symptoms of RAELs. I learned how trauma impacts the brain and behavior, and how this not only negatively impacts learning, but also teachers-student

relationships. The article that most influenced my project was Brunzell et al. (2015). Their work outlined how traumatic events can build upon themselves (causing complex trauma), the ways that behaviors can change as a result of trauma, and different strategies teachers can use to help meet the social emotional needs of these students. This article provided me with critical background knowledge, in addition to helping me understand how all the different aspects of RAELs' lives influence each other. It also stressed the need for teachers to provide unconditional support for students, no matter how a student is behaving. When teachers support students emotionally, students will begin to make growth academically.

As I researched, I learned about the interconnectedness of the different aspects and events of RAELs' lives. What happens to them in their home countries and their travels to the United States can have a major impact on them for the rest of their lives: social emotionally, developmentally, mentally, and academically. I was also surprised to learn the extent to which trauma can make learning nearly mentally impossible. Sometimes as educators, it can be easy to just focus on getting students to sit quietly and do their work. This misguided focus not only fails to meet many students' needs, but also disregards the difficulty of these seemingly simple school behaviors. These reflections help me view my research from a big-picture perspective. The problem extends beyond the classroom; the solutions will have to, as well. In the next section, I reflect on the successes and limitations of my professional development project.

### **Reflection on the Professional Development Project**

Doing a professional development session as my project taught me so much about being a teacher leader and what makes an effective staff development presentation. Based

on the feedback from my participants, teachers really do appreciate choice, active learning, and new information that is easily applicable to their classrooms. Staff development can make a difference in both teachers' and students' lives. It can help motivate teachers to try new things, or encourage them to view topics from a new perspective. I want to continue my work as a teacher leader while also finding new ways to be a better researcher so that I can continue to motivate my colleagues and advocate for my students.

After attending my professional development, my hope is that teachers and administrators will have a better understanding of why students are behaving the way they are, and what educators can do to effectively start the healing process for these students. Based on my conversations with my principal and fellow educators, progress is being made in this area. All of my participants reported learning something new, and they all reported that their confidence in meeting the social emotional needs of RAELs who have experienced trauma increased after going to my professional development. At least five of my colleagues who were unable to attend the presentation requested that I share my resources with them. Several teachers recommended professional development opportunities, books, and other resources to help me with my research. This demonstrates that one of my other goals of this presentation was successful: I wanted to continue and further the discussion about how to teach students who have experienced trauma among the educators at my school. Even though I am not a social worker, school psychologist, or an expert on trauma, my focus on viewing trauma through an EL's perspective provided a learning opportunity for new and experienced teachers alike.

One change I would make in my project is providing teachers with more time between sending out the interest and date preference survey and the actual presentations. I think that some of my colleagues who had expressed interest were unable to attend because they already had meetings planned during the two times I presented. However, I have shared the information with all of my colleagues in two different ways. First, I have provided them with paper copies of my Powerpoint presentation slides and the handouts. I have also shared the resources via Google Docs and Google Slides. For future presentations, I would make a recording of my presentation. That would allow people who are unable to attend to hear valuable insights from the discussions.

This is only the first of many research projects I will do. In the next section, I will reflect on the potential research I will do in the future.

### **Future Research**

I will use this capstone as a springboard to future research related to meeting the needs of RAELs' who have experienced trauma. I have only begun my research into this topic. Since I have been studying trauma for a little over a year, I have only just begun to break the surface of this complex field. I would like to continue to research more strategies for teachers with the goal of finding strategies that are more effective with students from particular ethnic groups. For example, I would like to research more about the schooling students from Latin American and African countries receive. Educators could use this information to better understand their students' histories. This information may also help educators identify support structures that were used in students' home country schools and apply them in students' new schools. I would also like to research if students from certain countries prefer oral supports to written supports. This may help

educators determine which strategies going forward would be the most effective for the students. Other topics that interest me are the cultures and histories of Somalia, Mexico, Central, and South America as they relate to students' educational needs. If educators can understand more about students' cultures, they will be better able to choose strategies that fit well with students' backgrounds.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, I reflected on three different aspects of my capstone research, creation, and presentation process. In the first section, I discussed the interconnectedness of the many factors in RAELs' lives. I also discussed the researchers I utilized most when collecting information for my project. In the second section, I discussed what I felt went well with my capstone and presentation, and what I can improve upon for the next one. In the last section, I reflected on future research projects.

This capstone examines strategies that teachers can use to meet the social emotional needs of recently arrived elementary-aged Latino and Somali English learners (RAELs) who have experienced trauma. It will help educators better understand the needs of their students and how to appropriately respond to students' behaviors. When educators are better able to meet students' needs, students will feel safe and will be able to learn. This project also functioned as an opportunity for me to reflect on and learn about these topics. It is my hope that my capstone project and its accompanying resources will inspire other educators to learn more about students and trauma, just as a past professional development opportunity inspired me to do this research.

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