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Teaching Trauma-Informed Pedagogy and Critical Literacy in a Middle School Language Arts Classroom

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Teaching Trauma-Informed Pedagogy and Critical Literacy in a Middle School Language Arts
Classroom

by

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A capstone project submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Masters of Arts in Teaching Secondary Communication Arts and Literature.

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DEDICATION

To my warrior Ignatius, thank you for teaching me what it means to persevere through trauma, and how to overcome seemingly impossible obstacles. You've inspired me more than you'll ever know.

Abstract

Trauma is an innate human experience. People from every walk of life can experience trauma at any time, in a variety of ways. The awareness of trauma is seeping into the forefront of our society. In particular, education has seen trauma in varying ways. Many educators are tasked with navigating trauma's tricky waters. This capstone explores the possibility of *how trauma-informed pedagogy and critical literacy impact student engagement in a middle school language arts classroom?* Much of the literature reviewed in this capstone examines trauma's complexities, trauma's manifestation in schools and suggests several strategies that can be implemented to impact student engagement. Examples of these strategies are content selection, journaling, digital storytelling, critical witnessing, and mindfulness.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

A truth of the human experience is that there are stories we tell ourselves and each other where there is just as much said in the unsaid. Even before a pen touches paper, fingers dance across a keyboard or words are spoken, comes the bond of a relationship between speaker and audience. In this author and reader relationship, there are often as many absent narratives or perspectives that are intentionally or unintentionally written; in this relationship, there is also power. These absent stories and disproportionate narratives create a dichotomy. In this space, it is crucial that representation matters, and all narratives should be valued. Critical narrative analysis is a solution and becomes a powerful tool, especially in reclaiming a narrative. One interesting aspect of narrative is its use in overcoming trauma. Trauma, which is a nearly universal human experience, is present and persistent. One does not need to look much further than the news feed at their fingertips to find out that trauma is occurring daily, culturally, personally, and globally. Even ingesting these stories secondhand can be triggering or traumatizing.

What are our options: do we crumple under the weight of trauma or do we disengage from our environment? How do we heal and how do we grow? What story do we tell the world, and how does it differ from the story we tell ourselves? How does the relationship between narrative principles interact with power dynamics? What can be done? According to Dutro (2019), an advantageous environment to help understand, explore, and overcome trauma while understanding narratives and power dynamics is a

classroom, specifically a literature classroom. Although all age groups experience trauma to varying degrees, the content that is taught and the social emotional development of a middle school language arts classroom yields itself seamlessly into trauma-informed pedagogy and teaching with a critical literacy lens. However, there is a fine line between awareness, mindfulness and retraumatization. There are also many populations that experience systematic, cultural, and institutional trauma, even in the school setting. Trauma is innately present with both students and teachers and is experienced differently at different times. How are educators helping navigate these personal, interpersonal, everchanging, and ever present traumas while still educating students? Students often can not learn if they do not feel safe, connected, and valued. Students should be able to see themselves represented in narratives taught in classrooms. The goal of education is to create an environment where students are engaged, present, and above all educated. The question guiding this capstone explores: *how does trauma-informed pedagogy and critical literacy impact student engagement in a middle school language arts classroom?*

Rationale

Personally, I have interacted with both *lowercase t* and *capital T* trauma throughout my adolescence and adulthood. My parents divorced as I transferred schools, I changed friend groups, and lost loved ones. I saw a recession as I started college, and transitioned from in-person learning to remote learning during my graduate schooling due to the Covid-19 pandemic, a time in which I also started my first few years teaching. Even since I began writing this capstone I have had the most tumultuous time of my life. My son, born prematurely and with his liver outside his body, has spent 478 days and counting in the neonatal intensive care unit. I have been in active trauma trying to

navigate a medical world in which I am not literate, and it has only fueled my passion for learning about the impact of trauma in education.

I have seen the symptoms of trauma firsthand. Brain fog, lack of motivation, and dissociation have surrounded me these last few months. I can personally attest to the challenges of learning during such a trying personal time. However, I am also very fortunate; I grew up in an affluent community that valued education as a white cisgender female. I attended privileged schools with engaged teachers who not only educated me but took the time to honor my traumas as well. I had a network of support, mentors, and educators who were invested in my personal growth and success. I still find the school setting to be a comfortable environment to express, grieve, and grow, especially through learning and communication skills, such as journaling, articulating, discussion, and studying narratives. All of these experiences have helped guide me into a career in education as a middle school language arts teacher.

Trauma does not discriminate. Trauma can be experienced as a teacher, as a student, as a school, as a community. There are inequitable situations where trauma does not heal due to a lack of resources. Teaching throughout traumas personally and professionally is a challenge, yet it is also an opportunity for connection and growth. The challenges of teaching and learning during active trauma arise from the age old adage of *leaving your personal life at the door*. This is never really practical or possible. When one looks around a classroom one can see that almost every student, especially anyone who has been a student through the last several years, has experienced trauma. Certain populations were more susceptible to trauma, especially and disproportionality in communities of people of color. This capstone focuses on how trauma-informed

pedagogy will not only benefit students who are actively in or have previously experienced trauma but will benefit all students, especially in the setting of a middle school language arts classroom.

Throughout these last several years I have been comforted with the school setting yet again. Even online I have been able to find a community of like-minded individuals who are all striving for a similar goal, a more equitable future through education. I was fortunate enough to be able to study many different narratives, learn new perspectives, and discuss subjects such as the current traumas of adulthood and adolescence during the pandemic. All these conversations resulted in book recommendations, research, and the enduring question—what can I do to help?

As an English teacher, I love reading. The summer after my first year teaching I read book after book about trauma and was completely enlightened. I was inspired by Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and felt a new zeal for how to teach social justice in my classroom (1970). I read *The Body Keeps Score*, by Bessel van der Kolk and learned that trauma lives not only in mental spaces but physical ones as well (2014). I read countless articles about the power of storytelling, especially digital storytelling and the positive impact of reclaiming a narrative. I read many new young adult novels about students experiencing hardships I could only imagine, yet saw my own students live through. I found the work of Elizabeth Dutro (2012) and learned through her book *The Vulnerable Heart of Literacy* that I was in the right profession, at the right time, and I feel empowered to share what I have learned about trauma-informed pedagogy and critical literacy with a broader audience to help benefit every student and teacher.

Context

The middle school language arts classroom has the opportunity to be a thriving community that teaches students how to share ideas, feelings, and process emotions. It is in this environment that trauma-informed pedagogy and critical literacy can be introduced, developed, and used to foster student engagement. As part of my capstone project, I have created a professional development presentation and an online forum for anyone to access, however, the target audience is middle school teachers. This project details my professional development suggestions based on my research about utilizing trauma-informed pedagogy and critical literacy. These suggestions are about supplying teachers with resources, curriculum suggestions, and content lists to provide an easily accessible road map for both teachers and students. This capstone project honors and recognizes that no two people are alike, and no two people experience trauma the same way. This project yields mindfully through conversations about trauma so as to not trigger or cause harm. Even two people who experience the same trauma may react completely differently. My hope is that the capstone represents the unique reasons why the middle school language arts classroom is an ideal place to facilitate trauma-informed pedagogy and a critical literacy lens seamlessly through discussing narrative principals. I want to reiterate that trauma disproportionately affects groups of people who experience oppression. Oppression can be systematically felt within schools themselves and for many marginalized groups within society, especially LGBTQ+, and people of color.

Summary

In this capstone I discuss how trauma-informed pedagogy in conjunction with critical literacy impacts student engagement in a middle school language arts classroom.

Chapter two outlines the literature reviewed for this capstone. I aim to define and discuss trauma-informed pedagogy. Chapter two also includes information on trauma informed theory, narrative analysis, and the critical literacy lens. This chapter also discusses how these theories have been applied in classrooms and how they're used to help select apt content for classrooms. Chapter two explores journaling, digital storytelling, content selection, critical witnessing, and mindfulness. These strategies combine trauma-informed pedagogy and critical literacy in a practical accessible way. Chapter three discusses trauma-informed pedagogy and critical literacy, especially narrative analysis from the perspective of a teacher, and what professional development strategies can be implemented to impact, and ideally improve student engagement. Chapter three discusses structure, audience, content, and assessment of my capstone project—a presentation in conjunction with an online form that focuses on teaching middle school language arts classrooms how to be aware of trauma-informed pedagogy and critical literacy in their classrooms. In summary, this capstone project discusses the impact of trauma-informed pedagogy and critical literacy in a middle school language arts classroom. This is accomplished through reviewing research and creating a medium for educators to learn about and continue discussions about the impact of trauma-informed pedagogy and critical literacy in their daily classrooms. Chapter four is a reflection. This chapter provides context for this project, readdresses the literature review, and reflects on the importance of trauma-informed pedagogy. Chapter four discusses the implications and possibilities for future study of trauma-informed pedagogy and critical literacy. This capstone project comes at a critical time in education, where mass populations have been experiencing trauma collectively. Ideally, this capstone assists in mapping out a new

approach to trauma-informed teaching and critical literacy in the middle school language arts classroom. Overall, this capstone project aims at answering the question: *how does trauma-informed pedagogy and critical literacy impact student engagement in a middle school language arts classroom?*

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

Introduction

In this chapter, research on the multifaceted differences in trauma definitions is reviewed and their implications are discussed. Trauma varies; it has the potential to be incredibly personal and private, which makes it challenging to find a congruent definition. Regardless of this nuance, trauma-informed teaching and pedagogy can be implemented, much like solving for x in an algebraic equation. Programs, strategies, and examples of where trauma-informed pedagogy and critical literacy have been used and identified. These programs, strategies, and examples are discussed in a variety of settings, from elementary grades, after-school clubs, summer programs, high school populations, and even in broader society. Strategies, such as content selection, journaling, mindfulness, digital storytelling, and bearing critical witness all have the potential to utilize trauma-informed and critical literacy in middle school. This chapter aims to answer the following question: *how does trauma-informed pedagogy in conjunction with critical literacy impact student engagement in a middle school language arts classroom?*

Trauma's Complex Definitions

When it comes to trauma there could be an entire lexicon defining the massive complexities and idiosyncrasies, this chapter simplifies that. van der Kolk (2014) studied trauma and determined that trauma can be physical, physiological, or both. He discussed that trauma can happen to a group or an individual. It can be an isolated incident or a prolonged one. One thing that is almost universally agreed upon with trauma is that it is incredibly rare to go through life without experiencing it to some degree. Dutro (2017)

applied trauma-informed pedagogy to teaching, suggesting that even if someone has not experienced trauma to date, learning about coping strategies and ways of communicating about trauma will help any student regardless. Trauma is described by Dutton (2014) as “both the weightiest and flightiest of words—heavy with the certainty of hurt, loss, pain, despair, violence, yet afloat on the breeze of ambiguity of meaning and implications.” (p. 327). She cautioned about how the word trauma is used, especially in relation to schools and education. She urged the use of mindfulness when discussing trauma.

Trauma has been around for as long as humans have had consciousness. Yet, the literature on trauma is rapidly growing, adapting, and evolving, even what applied in 2019 may be completely different in 2023. It should be noted that many journal articles on trauma are written pre-pandemic. It may be a few years or decades before the repercussions of how the traumas of Covid-19 affected mass populations will be seen as well as the individual stories and their lasting effects. This is a crucial time period in history and work in trauma-informed pedagogy at the critical age of adolescence is important and necessary. This necessity comes in the form of interventions, how people lived, and how teachers taught before Covid is moot. Covid has certainly emphasized that trauma is all around and has lasting effects.

This is where teachers come into play—teachers are not social workers, therapists, or parental figures to students. However, according to Hillsberg and Spak (2006), that does not exclude teachers from filling such roles in minor or major ways with some frequency. The authors noted that teachers provide a sense of continuity needed when someone has experienced or is experiencing trauma. They stated that the routine of a classroom, the community created, and the content studied all add to why middle school

English classrooms are the optimal setting for teaching in a trauma-informed manner (Hillsberg and Spak, 2006). Teachers are under no obligation to understand the full spectrum of trauma definitions, only to maintain an understanding of what their students could be overtly and internally struggling with, and many teachers often already do (Dutro, 2017). The level of awareness teachers need about trauma does not need to be extensive. Even minimal awareness can impact student learning. Because schools aim to educate humans, and coping with trauma is a uniquely human experience, it lives in the classrooms in the hearts and minds of the students, teachers, and faculty (Dutro, 2014). Knowing that trauma can impact anyone at any time is crucial for teachers to understand. This knowledge can be applied to classrooms by allowing a space for students to create narratives and learn about individual or historical trauma, racial trauma, or colonization while aiming to discuss equity, and multiple perspectives, to reframe their worldview.

In order to discuss trauma-informed pedagogy one must have some congruent definition of trauma. Kappan (2017) noted that trauma is a multifaceted concept. Its fluidity can fit into many molds. Trauma can be psychological, biological, cultural, systemic, incredibly broad, and deeply unique (Kappan, 2017). According to the Psychology Today website (n.d.), “Trauma is a person’s emotional response to a distressing experience” (para. 1). The authors also go so far as to qualify sub-divisions of trauma such as acute, chronic, complex, and secondary, and discuss the adverse childhood experiences (ACE). These subdivisions of trauma show just how many people can be impacted as well as the mass differences in trauma itself. Definitions are important but trauma does not need to be categorized or proven because it is so often unspoken. As

educators, it is more crucial to have an awareness and acknowledge trauma without retriggering or traumatizing an individual (Dutro, 2017).

Irvin and Richardson (2002) discussed that there are traumas unique to the middle school experience. They stated that for many students it is the first time transitioning into a new school environment, puberty comes with its own challenges, and for many, it is a time when students experience deaths of grandparents or pets for the first time. It is also important to note from the research of Hillsberg and Spak (2006) that for some students the school system itself can be the source of the trauma. They discussed that in middle school there are evolutions of cliques and bullying running as rampant as the hormones surging through these preteens' bodies. The authors also noted that these traumas may seem minor as an adult on the other side of teenagehood. But, moments like these are the times when students have the unique opportunity to learn and grow from adversity.

Even if no two definitions of trauma are exactly the same, it is something teachers navigate through in their classrooms consciously or unconsciously. Trauma is not a uniquely student experience and can happen to anyone at any time (Dutro, 2017). The implications of trauma do not necessarily need to be at the forefront of a teacher's agenda, but the awareness and the strategies of trauma informed pedagogy can still be integrated in a way that is beneficial for all classroom participants.

Traumas Manifestation in School

In her research on trauma, Dutro (2017) suggested that knowing the possible traumas students may face in your classroom and how those traumas affect your students is crucial to understanding trauma-informed teaching. Hillsberg and Spak (2006) studied the impact of young adult literature in connection to one of the main traumas a middle

school student could face: bullying. They spoke to the traumas of bullying manifesting as isolation, identity crisis, and disengaging in school by being victimized by a bully. They suggested a possible solution to this bullying is narrative analysis of young adult literature. Narrative analysis of young adult literature is the cornerstone of many middle school language arts classrooms. They spoke to young adult literature being an accessible medium to open up conversations about power dynamics in school settings (Hillsburg and Spak, 2006). These power dynamics look like the predator-prey relationship between a bully and a victim. Norris et al. (2012) also discussed the uses of narrative analysis and power dynamics, suggesting that critical literacy can be used in response to oppression.

Beyond the troubles of bullying many middle school students have faced challenges in their personal and academic lives, what classifies these hardships as traumas is nuanced. Dutton (2017) recognized that trauma is highly personal and uniquely individual, yet can affect anyone at any time. According to Marshall (2014), there are unique traumas middle schoolers undergo, many students are creating their own identities using the stories they digest as road maps. She stated that within the middle school setting trauma can manifest itself in many different ways. Some examples she offered are that students may dissociate themselves from their peers, may fall behind in their work, and lose interest in things that used to excite them as they consciously or subconsciously grieve the transition away from childhood into the unknowns of adolescence. She notes there is a lot of ambiguity surrounding the middle school transition. In a new school, with new social expectations, new teachers, and new subject matter students can become stressed or overwhelmed Marshall (2014). Trauma-informed pedagogy can help navigate those feelings. Authors Irvin and Richardson (2002) advocated for emotional intelligence

in the transition to middle school. They addressed that students in middle school have to exercise unique emotional tasks such as self-control, coping, communication, cooperative work, and conflict resolution. All these tasks are markers of emotional intelligence. An element of overcoming trauma is emotional work and developing these emotional skills (van der Kolk, 2014)

Another important element of trauma discussed by Treleaven and Britton (2018) is that often trauma is collectively denied and oppressive. van der Kolk (2015) also suggested that there is an element of trauma that connects to power dynamics, often when someone is traumatized they feel powerless, beyond psychologically even biologically and that is where critical literacy can be impactful. These dynamics of trauma are essentially calling for the same awakening Fiere (1970) aimed for when discussing critical literacy. He sees that there are power struggles, social dynamics, historical, and cultural elements to teaching that affect students. He even goes as far as to comment on how even the teacher-student relationship has a power dynamic that can be very damaging. It is with this awareness that teachers should tread lightly when discussing trauma in their classrooms (Dutro, 2019).

Trauma-Informed Pedagogy and Critical Literacy

Dutro (2019) is a leading expert in the trauma-informed pedagogy field. She suggested that trauma-informed pedagogy is a system of facilitating curriculum through a uniquely informed lens. This lens is aware of the narratives and biases students, teachers, and staff bring into any classroom environment. There is a somber touch to this lens and crucial awareness, there is also great caution. Grief, trauma, grit, growth, and any

emotion are congruent with all subject matter, however, the humanities yield themselves to the tender core of the human experience (Dutro, 2017).

Throughout this chapter, the programs and strategies of trauma-informed pedagogy and critical literacy such as journaling, digital storytelling, critical witness, mindfulness, and content selection are discussed. Although these are just some of the ways trauma-informed pedagogy and critical literacy can be integrated into a classroom it is important to note that each classroom might benefit from some, all, or none of these programs. Trauma-informed pedagogy is more of an awareness that is up to teacher discretion but should be led by the unique needs of students.

Critical literacy is more of a lens to view a text that is culturally responsive and examines power dynamics in stories (Freire, 1970). According to Norris et al. (2012), critical literacy utilizes a very similar awareness to trauma-informed pedagogy. They stated that critical literacy allows for a social, culturally, and historically responsive mode that allows for open conversations and dialogue. These authors also thought that these open conversations impact students because it allows them to develop as global thinkers who are motivated to make positive social change (Norris et al, 2012).

Often humanities teachers use their classroom content to help students understand the world around them by recognizing inequities (Norris et al., 2014). Berson and Berson (1999) discussed atrocious inequities such as child abuse, neglect, and exploitation in the middle school social studies classroom. However, many of those topics are also taught in language arts classrooms and are themes in young adult literature (Irvin & Richardson, 2002). Both sets of authors conclude that the difficult classroom content about complicated subject matter can be used as a space to create an open

dialogue between teachers and students. Norris et al. (2014) believed this in this method of teaching as well. They found that teaching critical literacy impacts students by developing critical thinking skills, exposing them to an awareness of problems in their community, and creating an environment where difficult content and different opinions and cultures can be discussed. Beyond the content studied the use of a critical literacy lens can impact student engagement, when students are invested in what they are learning they feel empowered to make positive social change (Berson & Berson, 1999).

When using a trauma-informed method Duto (2011) discussed the awareness of students' attitudes toward literacy and learning itself as a reactive process. Taking in feedback while cutting through the noise of complaining is a fine line. Providing engaging, individualized opportunities for students to grow their skills while also developing autonomy in their own narrative is an empowering aspect of trauma-informed pedagogy.

Trauma-informed pedagogy and critical literacy in the middle school language arts classroom are multifaceted. These two approaches toward teaching when used in conjunction assist teachers in creating a new lens to see their content. In this capstone project the relationship of trauma-informed pedagogy and critical literacy with engagement in the middle school classroom is examined.

Programs & Strategies of Trauma-informed Pedagogy

Content Selection

Content selection relates to trauma-informed pedagogy like water flowing through a river. There is an element of guidance and reaction to obstacles, yet the content shapes the path. Miller (2009) discussed selecting content for a classroom and creating time

every day for students to choose their own texts. She urged that content selection should not be a random act. For her, it should flow with the students' specific interests and unique perspectives. Dutro (2017) understands students' unique experiences and perspectives as well. She discussed that teachers do not need to know the intricacies of each student's individual struggles and traumas to help select content that fits the themes students face in their middle school careers. Content selection is a starting point for critical literacy as well. Norris et al. (2012) outlined an easy introduction to reading a text with a critical literacy lens by asking students to remember their favorite books or stories from childhood. They suggested following those conversations with questions and a discussion about whose perspective was excluded from the story. They urged students to analyze the subtext and hidden agendas of the story as well. Author Dutro (2017) stated that educators should be aware that the content taught in class could have a triggering or healing effect depending on how said content is presented or received. Content being discussed could vary immensely as well as the content that is created. Norris et al. (2014) also urged students to look for the variety of missing narratives in content as well. According to Hillsburgh and Spak (2006), a middle schooler's whole world can be shaped by stories. They noted that students at this age are often looking for a correct path and the students can not relate to the characters or plot; they have a hard time engaging and paying attention.

Content selection is not as simple as choosing what novels should be read throughout the year. It is composed of not only novels, but poems, songs, videos shown in class, graphic novels, and any other media students interact with. There are many ways content selection can be utilized to help students combat issues in their worlds, such as

bullying. Hillsberg and Spak (2006) provided a suggested list of content that yields itself to conversations about bullying and bullying prevention all while using developmentally appropriate content and teaching reading strategies. The authors comment on how middle school students, in particular, are able to see narratives as elevated and allegorical (while also learning the terms such as allegory and metaphor) suggesting that instead of having students read essays or dryer texts these populations can benefit more from enticing young adult narratives.

With the recent shift in education to include multicultural stories in classrooms as well as critical race theory there is a call for more stories from unique diverse perspectives. Marshall (2014) discussed the option of using graphic life writing by Indigenous peoples and people of color to help counteract oppressive histories. Graphic life writing is terminology she used that applies to using pictures to illustrate autobiographical or biographical stories. These are far from children's books, they deal with more mature content that is developmentally appropriate for higher grades. She discussed using picture books such as *Separate Is Never Equal* by Duncan Tonatiuh (2014) to create an accessible bridge to a unique narrative. She also discussed *When I Was Eight* by Christy Jordan Fenton and Margaret Pokiak-Fenton (2005) and *My Heart Is on the Ground: The Diary of Nannie Little Rose, A Sioux Girl* (Rinaldi, 2001). These texts are digestible with minimal literary skills but the content is difficult calling for the need for a different type of learning, a more empathetic and emotional approach. These types of texts yield themselves to critical literacy seamlessly as they explore both the cultural and social impact of power dynamics with their stories (Fiere, 1970). Critical literacy here uses a lens of past societal traumas in narrative form. Understanding the

oppressive nature of a narrative is a crucial element of critical literacy (Norris et al., 2012).

As with any story, it is important to note that one story is not indicative of an entire culture or people, and teaching students to be wary of stereotypes or profiling is just as important as teaching the story itself. This is also true when it comes to trauma-informed teaching, even two people who have experienced the same trauma may react completely differently. Teaching students using the trauma-informed approach calls for accessible materials that illustrate examples of trauma and allow students to see themselves in the characters. Norris et. al (2012) commented that if students are unable to connect with the characters or plot critical literacy can help them process the inequity of an untold story. For Miller (2009), students' investment and autonomy in their own learning are critical, and creating a space for that during class time is essential. Her suggestion is that students are more engaged when they have a choice in what they are reading, students will opt for narratives they see themselves in and it is incredibly rare that one book fits all (Miller, 2009).

Journaling

Assigning a journal to students teaches many practices - self-reflection, writing, and habit forming - but it also does something key in trauma-informed pedagogy. Journaling offers a place and space for students to share their unique truths. Haq (2017) discussed journaling in a vulnerable and personal way with her own story about using journaling. She used a journal to connect with a singular student through their shared trauma. Both the teacher and student in the class lost the same meaningful person in their lives in a very tragic and traumatic way. After learning that this student would be placed

in Haq's class she resisted at first, but then welcomed and created space for the excess trauma in the room. This space looked like a shared journal on a windowsill. Both teacher and student wrote in that journal about a range of subjects and it was cathartic for both of them. The success of this journal sparked an idea: a shared journal with each student. Each student had an identical composition notebook that stayed in the classroom, these journals lifted a veil of formality and provided her access to the students' lives and everything they were willing to share. This afforded her the opportunity to integrate journaling into her teaching style (Haq, 2017). The individual aspect of these journals, the privacy, the vulnerability, and the reciprocal nature really speak to trauma-informed pedagogy, allowing space for every student.

In the setting of a journal, students are able to share their own perspectives on whatever subject they choose to discuss. Discussing multiple perspectives like this can also be a byproduct of using critical literacy in a classroom.(Norris, et al. 2012). There are also literary benefits of practicing writing like forming sentences, articulating meaning, and processing content. Journaling serves psychological purposes, and a shared journal maintains and develops relationships and helps shift the power dynamic between teachers and students (Haq, 2017). Journaling is a subgenre of literature and can be used within the school day, at home, or be completely optional, the option of choice is key here. For Haq (2014), journaling is multifaceted and a highly personal space to introduce trauma-informed pedagogy into a classroom.

Digital Storytelling

Students are surrounded by stories. From those assigned to them to the plots they follow on television shows, to the miniature narratives that appear on tik tok. Students are

becoming more and more inundated with the link between the digital world and how it shapes their reality. As teachers, it is a task to keep up with the ever changing trends and themes adolescent students gravitate towards. For Emert (2014), being able to connect with students in a meaningful way using a medium, like digital storytelling, impacted their engagement. Dutro (2019) stated that engaging students is a key practice when utilizing trauma-informed pedagogy because one symptom of a traumatic experience could be to disassociate and disengage.

Digital storytelling, for example, has been used in a myriad of ways to teach and demonstrate narrative in a middle school setting. Emert (2014) loosely defined digital storytelling as any multimedia mode of narrative often using pictures, audio, or video. Students in middle school now and in the future have grown up with media. According to a study by Goodman and Newman (2014), digital storytelling has similar effects as oral storytelling to help reduce stress, anxiety, and depression in adolescent females. Goodman and Newman believed that this information should be used by nursing staff in the school. This same information can be used by anyone at any time. Dutro (2017) states that knowing a possible outlet for stress relief or a space to cope from trauma is important. She also says that applying literary skills can be a practical application of trauma-informed pedagogy. For Norris et. al., (2012) reclaiming a narrative is also an element of critical literacy, especially when discussing trauma or oppression. They noted that students' ability to understand multiple perspectives allows them to develop empathy.

Emert (2014) discussed that digital storytelling can also provide a solution for helping refugee students, or English language learners to communicate their experiences while simultaneously learning literary skills. He outlined a summer literacy program he

created that showcases digital storytelling's impact. He noted that refugee children are often displaced in their academic careers and excel in certain aspects of education but may have gaps in their practical school skills. One skill that can be developed is generally digital literacy. He also said that adding the element of choice, and a personal touch recognizes that every student has a unique, valid, and important perspective on their world (Emert, 2014). Stairs and Burgos (2010) discussed that teenagers in particular often feel displaced between childhood and adulthood. Emert (2014) stated that being a teenager with the added element of being a refugee student compounds the displacement that could be traumatic. For him, digital narratives can showcase intelligence in a safe form with the correct instruction (Emert, 2014). This type of instruction utilizes trauma-informed pedagogy by allowing students to be themselves, come as they are, share their stories, and learn a new literary skill and in this case a computer one as well. Digital literacy is often used in American classrooms on a regular basis, especially in the era of remote learning. Goodman and Newman (2014) believed that allowing students to develop digital literacy skills while also working on personal narratives fosters academically and socially appropriate growth. Their suggestion is that providing students with autonomy and ownership of their own narratives is important. They believed that allowing a space for students to present their unique perspectives keeps students engaged (Goodman and Newman, 2014). Dutro (2019) again noted that engaging students is a key element of being aware of trauma while teaching. Norris et. al (2014) also noted that literacy is a way for students to bring their own lives into a classroom, which is important when using a critical literacy lens. Digital Storytelling as discussed by Emert (2014) and

Goodman and Neuman (2014) utilized the students' own life experiences, and even traumas by creating a digital space for their narratives.

Critical Witness

Critical witnessing is nearly an essential element of teaching trauma-informed pedagogy. Critical witnessing, according to Dutro (2017), is the responsibility of a teacher and is a method of listening to and being aware of the multifaceted manifestations of trauma in students' lives and how that trauma is represented in the classroom. For her, the aim of critical witnessing is to disrupt patterns of assumptions that teachers make about their students. She noted that when a teacher is able to set aside bias and prejudice to see students for their unique selves they are able to reactively teach and respond accordingly (Dutro, 2017). A prime example of this comes from Haertling, et al. (2017) and the book club in their case study. This book club is aptly named Strong Girls Read Strong Books. This book club offers a unique time and place for young girls to discuss topics in a small group setting with trusted adults and peers, outside of the school day and without the pressure of a grade. For them, breaking down content and individualizing it, especially in a safe space allowed students to be more vulnerable. They noted that vulnerability can yield fascinating and sometimes therapeutic discussions and growth of individuals and groups as a whole. Thein and Schmidt (2017) also addressed the complex topic of emotion work in relation to critical witness. In order to create an environment where students can be vulnerable the stereotypical power balance should dissolve. They understand that emotions have a place in critical witnessing, they are not the typical emotional rules of a school setting. Fiere (1970) also talked about the unwritten power dynamics of a school setting placing the teacher in power and viewing the student and

oppressed. For him, these power dynamics can be shifted through the use of critical literacy (Fiere, 1970).

Dutro (2011) also discussed that critical witnessing can be incorporated into every interaction between students and educators, especially in urban classrooms. She noted that students in urban classrooms often have unique traumas including communities of marginalized people, high-poverty rates, and transient students. For her, critical witnessing more often the teachers or educators keep their own assumptions in check (Dutro, 2011). Thein and Schmidt (2017) discussed this concept as well, and that being a critical witness to any story means consistently checking in with assumptions, and confronting biases, sitting with uncomfortable prejudices. For these authors, critical witnessing demands much from the listener.

Dutro (2019) discussed the daily necessity to give time for urban stories and the truths revealed by a critical approach to bearing witness to these narratives. Critical witnessing, according to Dutro (2011) can be a multipurpose tool used to support students and educators alike. For her, critical witness provides opportunities for educators to reevaluate their assumptions, especially negative assumptions and allows space for alternative perspectives and interpretations. She notes that critical witnessing does this all while finding ways to build a connection between families, students, the community, and the school. She believed that critical witnessing in action looks like a space to cut through academic learning and focus more on social-emotional learning. Witnessing also looks like a reaction, even if it is a pause, to students' testimony about their daily lives in and out of school, these can be seen in covert or overt ways. Dutro (2009) discussed that educators should realize that they do not know what a student's life outside of school

looks like. She thought teachers should recognize that students are not sponges or blank slates.

Mindfulness

Mindfulness and growth mindset are trending in education right now. These buzzwords carry a lot of weight to them. Often mindfulness is spoken in the same breath as trauma. Follette et al. (2006) discussed mindfulness in conjunction with trauma and explored the benefits of practicing mindfulness. The authors noted that trauma is nearly unavoidable and that mindfulness can be a productive strategy. They also discussed that mindfulness can be useful in overcoming avoidance and emotional dysregulation, common byproducts of trauma (Follette et al., 2006). Mindfulness in a classroom, according to Sherretz (2011), involves teachers developing positive relationships with students. She also stated that mindfulness in education looks like creating a space for students to have a community. This community should allow for opportunities for students to have an open dialogue and discussions that are open-ended rather than response-oriented. Sherretz (2011) also discussed how mindfulness also unlocks key factors of engagement, such as motivation. Motivation to learn and expand one's mind can often be disconnected after a traumatic experience van der Kolk, (2015) Mindfulness can be an incredibly helpful strategy for coping with trauma but it can also be incredibly damaging. Treleaven and Britton (2018). Dutro (2019) discussed trauma and warned about how mindfulness is a key component in navigating trauma and literature. Mindfulness and being mindful are elements of critical literacy as well. For Norris et al. (2012), critical literacy is a mindful awareness of the types of stories and narratives shared and unshared.

According to Trelaven and Britton (2018), if trauma has not been processed the practice of mindfulness can often feel like dissociation creating an adverse effect. The authors advocated for the awareness that mindfulness is not always the correct answer to overcoming trauma, and called for an increased understanding of the difficulties people face, or as they called it trauma-sensitive mindfulness.

Mindfulness in a classroom can look different depending on the classroom culture. Some students feel mindful when it's quiet and some feel relaxed when they're free to be loud. Norris et. al (2012) Mindfulness should be used with the cautious awareness of trauma and the possible triggering effects Rrelaven and Britton (2018)

Summary

To summarize the key points in this chapter, trauma-informed pedagogy is mainly a lens through which many different programs and strategies can be taught and content can be viewed. Even without a clear definition of trauma, an awareness of it and granting space for validation of trauma in a school setting can be healing. Every trauma journey is different and can show up in different ways, however, even in the uniqueness there is unity. Trauma-informed pedagogy can assist all students and impact a classroom in a beneficial way. The strategies and programs outlined above are a mere launching point as trauma-informed pedagogy is more of an awareness and an attitude toward education.

Literature classrooms are intrinsically based around narrative and acknowledging student autonomy in their own narrative is crucial when it comes to trauma-informed pedagogy especially when it is utilized with a critical literacy lens. A critical literacy lens allows for students to have complicated social, historical, and political conversations

while developing a community that aims at being respectful of different cultures and socially conscious.

Critical literacy and trauma-informed teaching can look like careful, thoughtful content selection. Educators can provide stories that allow students to create a map for themselves through traumatic incidents in the past or the future. Students can also note those who are voiceless in those narratives. The element of student choice in their own reading plays a key role here as well. Choice fosters autonomy in learning and with gentle suggestions in materials, curating a classroom library, and setting aside space for daily reading students can help build their own classroom content. Journaling also provides a space within school walls to connect with students in a meaningful way, without a grading system. Journaling can be a space for trauma to be honored in a classroom. Journaling can also be a space for students to share their different opinions and interests outside of classroom content. Finding intrinsic value in writing, reading, and sharing stories creates lifelong learners who are capable of growth, and journaling fosters that habit. Positive habit forming is an easy way to see the impact of trauma-informed pedagogy.

This research seems to suggest that utilizing trauma as a unifying theme helps connect all communities. There is a very uniquely diverse and personal aspect to trauma. The aim of both trauma-informed pedagogy and critical literacy is to give voices to anyone who feels voiceless. At any time anyone could feel voiceless and these strategies can be implemented by any teacher in a classroom. A lot of the research concentrated on certain populations, demographics, genders, or ages and focused on trauma-informed pedagogy. These strategies can help students learn skills that can help them process

social-emotional challenges while also learning literacy simultaneously. Many articles suggest using this type of pedagogy earlier than the middle school setting and outside of the regular school setting, but still in an academic environment. In trauma-informed pedagogy creating spaces for students and teachers alike to regain their humanity and unite is crucial especially due to the power dynamics of education. This research demonstrates that middle school language arts teachers are ideal candidates for teaching trauma-informed pedagogy in conjunction with critical literacy to see an impact on student engagement. The next chapter discusses how these concepts can be implemented in a professional development setting, creating a community united by the principles of trauma-aware pedagogy and critical literacy. This capstone project continues to explore the question: *how does trauma-informed pedagogy and critical literacy impact student engagement in a middle school language arts classroom?*

CHAPTER THREE

Project Description

Introduction

This chapter outlines a project that combines a professional development presentation and an online forum. Throughout this chapter, there is a discussion on the structure of the proposed project, the audience, an outline of the content, and an explanation of the assessment process. In my years as a teacher, I have found that with any change in a school system, an optimal place to start is before the beginning of the year. In addition to organizing classrooms, teachers are setting up seating charts, grade books, getting reacquainted with peers, meeting new staff members, and participating in professional development opportunities. The new school year has a fresh, hopeful buzz surrounding it. It is in this hum of opportunity that a discussion about teaching trauma-informed pedagogy and critical literacy in a middle school language arts classroom can impact student learning. Although it is important to note that teaching critical literacy and trauma-informed pedagogy may already be used in classrooms, a conversation can be refreshing.

A key element of critical literacy and trauma-informed pedagogy is a teacher's ability to facilitate content in a manner that is aware of and honors every student's unique perspective. My project honors that teachers have a variety of experiences, especially when it comes to trauma, in their lives or within the classroom. For teachers, it is important to discuss and evaluate what challenges, adversities, and difficulties students might be facing this particular school year, and equally important to not make any assumptions about students. It is important to create a space for discussing the challenges

and benefits of introducing a new framework for a middle school language arts classroom, a trauma-informed pedagogy with a critical literacy lens. Addressing challenges and naming them helps create awareness and merits continuing conversations about how to best serve students and the school community. Community is an essential element of both trauma-informed teaching and critical literacy. Another important element this capstone project explores is *how does trauma-informed pedagogy and critical literacy impact student engagement in a middle school language arts classroom?*

Structure

The project has two parts, a presentation and a website. The first part, the presentation, informs middle school teachers about the impact of trauma-informed pedagogy and critical literacy in their language arts classrooms. This presentation is accompanied by a power-point, ideally presented before the school year in a professional development setting. The power-point lays out current information about trauma-informed teaching while speaking to the importance of awareness of trauma in classroom settings. The presentation itself is broken into three parts. The first part is more of a lecture that outlines the definitions of trauma, trauma-informed pedagogy, and critical literacy. The second part overviews a few strategies and leads the teachers through a mock lesson taught through a trauma-informed lens utilizing a strategy. The third part of the presentation is a brainstorming activity. This activity also involves creating a lesson as a small group that could be taught in a middle school language arts classroom that uses both trauma-informed pedagogy and critical literacy.

The second part of my project is more collaborative and it is a continuation of the third part of the power-point presentation. This second half of the project is an online collection of ideas and strategies that can be accessed time and again after the original presentation. This part is a website for teachers focusing on trauma-informed pedagogy and critical literacy in the middle school language arts classroom. The aim of the website platform is to create a cohesive collaborative space where teachers can go to learn and share ideas. This platform can be accessed anytime by any teacher and reads like a blog with forums for discussion on specific topics. These topics might look like content suggestions, journal prompts, mindfulness groups, or anything that relates to trauma-informed teaching and critical literacy. The goal of the presentation and the website is to maintain a relevant accessible way for teachers to seamlessly integrate trauma-informed pedagogy and critical literacy into their classrooms while sharing their successes and struggles. This website will ideally create a community of educators who support and learn from each other, much like the goal of critical literacy.

Audience

As alluded to in the above paragraph the audience of this project is middle school language arts teachers. The reason I believe this is the ideal audience to discuss, implement, and measure the impact of trauma-informed pedagogy. According to her research, Dutro (2019) suggested that the humanities, language arts especially, yield seamlessly into discussions about the human experience. Trauma is almost synonymous with people's daily lives, especially in the post-pandemic era, so creating a space for an awareness of trauma in classrooms is crucial. As noted above by Treleaven and Britton (2018), sometimes activities where people are asked to sit with their traumas can be

triggering and ultimately damaging. Teachers should tread lightly through this as well. I want to be cautious of this as I present trauma-informed pedagogy and critical literacy in my power-point. I want to engage the teachers listening to the presentation and also honor that implementing trauma-informed pedagogy is difficult emotional work.

Although trauma-informed pedagogy can be incorporated into any classroom, the middle school language arts classroom structure and content make it an ideal place for trauma-informed pedagogy and critical literacy to be incorporated effectively. The age range of the students in middle school, their unique experiences, and their development of abstract thought sets up an excellent opportunity to teach about more difficult content, such as trauma. Middle school students are also actively becoming aware of social inequities in their personal lives, and their community too. Critical literacy, when facilitated by a middle school language arts teacher, can create a space for students to share their unique experiences with inequity and trauma in a healing way.

Content

This project provides a myriad of strategies and programs to assist middle school language arts teachers in implementing trauma-informed pedagogy and critical literacy in their classrooms. Beyond the materials provided initially (i.e. the presentation and any subsequent input from the teachers participating), there are suggestions for a reevaluation of attitudes. Teachers will be asked to reevaluate their opinions and biases towards students and the curriculum. This helps create an elevated awareness of trauma in the classroom setting. Teachers will be urged to use critical literacy to evaluate their own curriculum by asking themselves what narratives are missing. It would be preferred that this project would be presented during teacher development weeks before the start of the

school year. However, this project is set up in a way that it can be taught in any professional development setting at any point throughout the year. There is a list of strategies and programs to be collected and added to an online platform with space for teachers to comment on the success of their integration of trauma-informed pedagogy in their classrooms. I want to provide opportunities for growth and development in teachers.

Assessment

For this project, there are multiple assessments. There is an informal assessment before the presentation that asks teachers to describe their preexisting knowledge about trauma-informed pedagogy and critical literacy. That assessment will be used to help guide the presentation and create small groups for the third part of the presentation. During the presentation, there are checkpoints to ask for understanding questions. To conclude the presentation, small groups will be presenting their own sample lesson that uses trauma-informed pedagogy in a sample middle school language arts classroom. The presenter will use this as an informal assessment as well to see if the teachers mastered the concepts taught in the presentation. The final assessment will be up to the teachers, they will provide feedback on how implementing trauma-informed pedagogy and critical literacy in their own classrooms impacted student learning. The true testament of if the project was impactful would be if teachers continued to utilize the website to discuss how trauma-informed pedagogy and critical literacy have worked within their own classrooms.

Summary

In conclusion, this project will have the same starting point every time it is presented to teachers. It recognizes that every teacher has their own personal experiences

with teaching about trauma and critical literacy, and it will also honor that trauma can be an inhibitor of learning or teaching. This presentation aims to be a springboard for teachers to begin deeper conversations about difficult topics. These topics can be discussed and accessed at any time on the online platform. Teachers will be granted access to a website that allows and encourages them to share their own ideas, access other lesson plans, and promote a collaborative effort in the educational community. The presentation, coupled with the website allows for the project to only grow and develop. It is a place where anyone can post articles on trauma-informed teaching, share comments, and blog about their classrooms. I believe that creating a platform that can be added to and adapted allows accessibility for anyone interested in learning more about trauma-informed pedagogy and helps keep teaching that content relevant and applicable to current classrooms.

CHAPTER FOUR

Reflection

Introduction

The question this capstone project asks is: *how does trauma-informed pedagogy and critical literacy impact student engagement in a middle school language arts classroom?* This question suggests that there may be solutions that impact student engagement in a positive manner. Yet in the undertow of this question, trauma lurks. Trauma anchors many students in place, rendering them in a position that makes classroom engagement and learning difficult.

In this chapter, I overview the conjunction of teaching trauma-informed pedagogy and critical literacy in a middle school language arts classroom. I readdress my rationale for writing this paper. I review the complexity of defining trauma, the way trauma manifests in schools, and potential strategies that combine critical literacy and trauma-informed teaching. I also summarize the project in the hope of providing a jumping-off point for teachers during a professional development setting while continuing a conversation about trauma-informed pedagogy and critical literacy for future study.

Trauma-Informed Pedagogy and Critical Literacy

Complexity of Trauma

This capstone project paper discussed the complexity of trauma and how even without a concrete definition many teachers can teach with an awareness of trauma. Utilizing trauma-informed pedagogy and critical literacy in a middle school language arts classroom aids in this awareness. The complex aspect of trauma varies due to the unique

nature of trauma. Trauma can be highly personal and individual. Trauma can also affect mass groups of people, trauma does not discriminate. However, it is important to note that many cultures have experienced trauma in systematically oppressive ways, disproportionately affecting populations of people of color and members of the LGBTQA+ community. Trauma can be historical, generational, as well as individual. Trauma can be physical, emotional, and complex, and manifests differently in every person. Teaching in a trauma-informed manner has the potential to benefit every student, not just students in active trauma or ones who have experienced trauma. In order to even discuss trauma a safe space must be created. A classroom environment has the potential to be that space. Within the system of a classroom, a community can be created that utilizes already existing practices to aid in unpacking emotions and allowing students to learn. Learning in active or unresolved trauma is nearly impossible. Another aspect of teaching in a trauma-informed manner is narrative analysis, often stories have missing perspectives, leaving much said by what is unsaid. Critical literacy is a way to understand these perspectives and allow students to ask questions, participate in an open dialogue, and help break down power dynamics. Critical literacy is present not only in the classroom but the principles can be applied to a broader society as well.

Rationale

While readdressing my rationale for this paper I reflected on my own personal experience completing this graduate school program during active trauma. I am currently finishing this paper at 4am next to my son's hospital bed. Needless to say I have expanded my knowledge about trauma, both scholarly and personally. I have a better understanding about how important it is to teach critical literacy in conjunction with

trauma-informed pedagogy to enhance student engagement. I have found that engaging in material I am passionate about is both restorative and inspiring. Studying narratives and scholarly examples of how educators who have applied critical literacy and trauma-informed pedagogy to their classrooms motivated me. Unexpectedly, I discovered that many basic literary skills, taught in a middle school language arts classroom yield themselves seamlessly into trauma-informed teaching. In summary, although my own personal experiences with trauma rapidly shifted throughout this capstone I was still able to identify with my original rationale of the project.

Important Aspects of the Literature Review

Trauma's Manifestation in School

It is no surprise that the preteen and teenage years are fraught with trauma. From hormones to changing schools, perhaps experiencing loss for the first time, middle school students are combated with a unique transition from childhood to adolescence. Trauma and power dynamics run rampant in any middle school social or scholarly setting. Hillsburg and Spak, (2006) discuss how bullying in the middle school setting can be both traumatizing and speak to the complexity of student relationships. Even within the middle school setting, there is much ambiguity. Marshall (2014) looked at how students in middle school in particular tend to see narratives as potential guidelines for navigating challenges and trauma. This is where teaching in a trauma-informed manner with critical literacy helps break down power dynamics, address ambiguity, and help students learn.

Beyond the philosophy of teaching trauma-informed pedagogy and critical literacy, there are practical applications of certain strategies that impact student engagement. Examples of these strategies that I reviewed in my paper were content

selection, journaling, digital storytelling, critical witness, and mindfulness. These strategies are a key element of the final presentation and conversation prompts in google classroom.

Content Selection

The spine of every literature classroom is content selection. This backbone helps support student engagement and learning, especially when students are offered choices about the media they interact with (Miller, 2009.) Content selection offers a space for students and teachers alike to help create a trauma-sensitive classroom. Intentional content selection allows for difficult conversations and increased engagement.

Journaling

I will forever be inspired by how Haq (2004) created a space for restorative healing through a shared journal with her student who experiences the same loss. Throughout this paper I even found myself writing a blog about my traumatic experiences as a means to connect, heal and grow. I was pleasantly surprised by the positive impact teaching, learning, and writing in a trauma-informed way can yield powerful results by honoring the individual's unique experiences.

Digital Storytelling

Digital storytelling utilizes all the components of narrative. Digital storytelling can easily become part of trauma-informed pedagogy and critical literacy with any mindful teacher. Digital storytelling can be more accessible to students learning principles of literature while honoring their own unique voices (Emert, 2014). This accessibility comes from technology students already utilize daily.

Critical Witness

Bearing critical witness is an essential element of teaching trauma-informed pedagogy and critical literacy. In order to honor a student, or any individual unique experience to improve the learning community, critical witness is key. Haertling, et al. (2017) discussed the importance of vulnerability while being a critical witness. According to them, learning how to remove bias and assumptions and be vulnerable helps create a community where students, and teachers, can learn and grow.

Mindfulness

Mindfulness was the most heavy-handed part of the literature review due to its philosophical and meditative nature. Often mindfulness can feel like dissociation, a negative side effect of trauma, and may sometimes do more harm than good. (Treleaven & Britton, 2018.)

Strategy Summary

The above strategies mentioned are merely suggestions and examples of times when these strategies have worked in particular settings. The middle school language arts classroom provides ample opportunities within the material and structure of the classroom for teachers to use critical literacy and teaching with a trauma-informed approach.

Project Implications and Limitations:

Implications

The ideal implication of this project is that several basic strategies of trauma-informed pedagogy and critical literacy will be seamlessly implemented into middle school language arts classrooms. Dutro (2019) called for the simple adjustment of teaching literacy with an awareness of trauma and how every single student benefits,

despite their own experiences. Ideally, shifting to using trauma-informed pedagogy and critical literacy utilizes existing teaching strategies that work, while adjusting the awareness of trauma and inequity in the classroom. Teaching trauma-informed literacy and critical literacy benefits all students, not just students who have experienced trauma. When there are intentionally vulnerable, compassionate teachers they create communities where all students can thrive.

I believe that my Google classroom can be used as an incredible resource for teachers. Creating a succinct online space for teachers to access from anywhere, anytime, allows for endless innovation. Sharing between schools, across multiple states, and districts can also help teachers access community resources they would otherwise not have access to. As I've stated before trauma is a great equalizer, yet there are many inequitable ways trauma can be treated as an inconvenience. When a classroom yields itself to being trauma aware and utilizes critical literacy it allows for all students, and teachers to succeed. As students learn coping skills through trauma-informed pedagogy that may bring them success not only in a literacy classroom but future study as well.

Limitations

A potential limiting factor of this project is that teachers' time is a limited and valuable resource. Teaching trauma-informed pedagogy and critical literacy is a lens through which to view systems already in place, but teaching about the awareness of trauma can be triggering. Another limitation is that I was unable to find sufficient evidence that discusses implementing trauma-informed teaching and critical literacy during the Covid-19 pandemic. It would be interesting to see how the massive impact of trauma on entire populations presents itself in the classroom. Another trauma I was

personally uncomfortable addressing was the impact of school shootings.

Trauma-informed pedagogy and critical literacy approach trauma and inequity empathetically. Similar strategies and an awareness of trauma can be applied to varying content.

Future Research and Communicating Results

Future Research

As mentioned above, future research could include more specific details about how particular traumas could manifest. Other research could provide information on what strategies would be most beneficial. Exploration of how different cultures experience trauma or what power dynamics are able to be broken down by critical literacy could also yield interesting future studies. However, covering all traumas would be near impossible due to the vastly different nature of traumas unique and individual perspectives.

Narrowing a focus to specific traumas or events and developing strategies that work in those instances would have been a little limiting for this paper. Continuing discussion and education about trauma-informed teaching will ideally grow and change as conversations about mental health and awareness of trauma are no longer stigmatized.

Communication of Results

As seen in Appendix B, a google classroom has been created for all participants who have completed the presentation. Participants will be able to upload their own strategies, reflections, and suggestions for other teachers to utilize in their own classrooms. Prompting future discussion and creating a place for new information to be shared and discussed benefits the entire middle school language arts educators community. In turn, this will benefit students as well.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this capstone project looks at the question, *how does trauma-informed pedagogy and critical literacy impact student engagement in a middle school language arts classroom?* There are multiple factors to consider within this question. In order to understand the need for trauma-informed pedagogy, the conceptual framework of trauma must be discussed, as well as how trauma impacts learning. Trauma, although a great equalizer, can often showcase inequities, and combating inequities is essential to critical literacy. Both lenses of teaching can be utilized in conjunction within the middle school language arts classroom to impact student engagement. Trauma-informed pedagogy and critical literacy, are a shift in perspective and can work within a systemic framework of any middle school language arts classroom.

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APPENDIX A

Presentation

<https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1qkMHw597nuMFIpm0pdA7AWVYwigM4DNDYm679YoIG8/edit?usp=sharing>

Trauma-Informed Pedagogy & Critical Literacy

Kit Chambers
Hamline University
Spring 2023

Capstone Question:

How does trauma-informed pedagogy and critical literacy impact student engagement in a middle school language arts classroom?



Rationale



- Trauma does not discriminate
- Certain populations were more susceptible to trauma, especially and disproportionality in communities of people of color
- Trauma-informed pedagogy and critical literacy benefits students who are actively in or have previously experienced trauma, but will benefit *all* students, especially in the setting of a middle school language arts classroom

Trauma's Manifestation in School

- Acknowledgement of students world outside the classroom
- Trauma's impact on student learning
- Middle School unique trauma
 - Bullying
 - Power dynamics
 - Transitions
 - Identity



Trauma and Critical Literacy



- Trauma informed teaching
 - Facilitate curriculum with awareness
 - Asses personal biases
 - Evaluate unique emotional needs of students
- Critical Literacy
 - Historically responsive aware of power dynamics
 - Open conversations, question driven
 - Developing global thinkers
 - Combat inequity, engaging students in social change

Literature Review

- The Complexity of Trauma
- Trauma's Manifestation in Schools
- Trauma-informed teaching
- Critical Literacy

Trauma-informed pedagogy and Critical Literacy in a MS ELA Classroom strategies:

- Content Selection
- Journaling
- Digital Storytelling
- Critical Witness
- Mindfulness



Content Selection

- Element of choice
- Content: study of perspective
- Genre
- Narrative analysis
 - Character development
 - Conflict resolution
 - Allegory
 - Multicultural Stories
 - Representation



Journaling

- Haq (2017) shared journal
- Personal independent writing practice
- Privacy & vulnerability



Digital Storytelling

- Learning synonymous with technology
- Using a medium students feel comfortable with improves engagement
- Storytelling reduces stress
- Emert (2014)-refugee students
- Improving digital literacy
- Create space for personal narratives



Critical Witness

- Listening, awareness, responsiveness
- Set aside bias, view uniqueness
- Book Club (Haertling et. al) *Strong Girls Read Strong Books*
- Space for vulnerability
 - dissolve power dynamic
 - Address complex emotions
 - Inspire conversations
- Social-emotional learning



Mindfulness

- Growth mindset
- Mindfulness useful for emotional wellbeing
- Helpful or damaging
- Looks different for all students (calm or loud)



Reflection & Future Study

- Current culture traumas: Covid, School Shootings, Racism
- Using systems already in place
- Personal growth & trauma journey



APPENDIX B

Google Classroom

<https://classroom.google.com/c/NTYzNTc3ODY2NTYz?cjc=wklajdm>

☰ Trauma-Informed Pedagogy and Critical Literacy
Middle School

Stream **Classwork** People Grades

⊕ Create 📅 Google Calendar 📁 Class Drive folder

All topics

- Presentation
- Strategies
- Question Center
- References

Presentation

📄 Professional Development Presentation Edited Apr 6

Strategies

- 📄 Content Selection Edited Apr 6
- 📄 Journaling Edited Apr 6
- 📄 Digital Storytelling Posted Apr 6
- 📄 Critical Witnessing Posted Apr 6
- 📄 Mindfulness Posted Apr 6

Question Center

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