THESIS

IMPACTS OF TRAUMA IN SCHOOL ENVIRONMENTS ON ELA TEACHERS: AN INTERPRETATIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

IMPACTS OF TRAUMA IN SCHOOL ENVIRONMENTS ON ELA TEACHERS: AN INTERPRETATIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

This study was conducted as an interpretative phenomenological analysis of five secondary English Language Arts Development teachers in Colorado. The study aimed to understand the impacts on ELA teachers, specifically their perceptions of their instruction and ability to remain in the classroom, following traumatic experiences or exposure at work. By using an interpretative phenomenological analysis we can see the spectrum of perceptions and insights ELA teachers have into navigating through trauma as professionals charged with supporting the academic and social development of our students. Data was collected in the form of one-on-one interviews with the participants. The interviews were guided by questions designed to investigate the forms of trauma exposure or experience in school environments they had as teachers, the impacts these events had on their instruction and desire to remain in the field as a classroom teacher, and overall observations and perceptions into what supports were provided or desired. Interviews were recorded and transcribed and the data was coded inductively. This study was then organized as a narrative to examine the intersections and revelations found in teachers' various perceptions of shared traumatic events. While not generalizable, this study aims to elevate these insights to further conversations on trauma in school environments and how we comprehensively support those in charge of supporting the students.

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Introduction

By 2021, there were over 300 school shootings reported nationwide. That was less than a decade since twenty young children died in the Sandy Hook Elementary School Shooting in December 2012 (NCES, 2022). Trauma in school environments is a broad term for a variety of events and situations faced by all those involved and engaged with those specific schools. These are not exclusively violent events, nor do they exist in a vacuum. For example, as a novice educator entering the field immediately after graduating in 2019, my teaching career has been intimately shaped by the COVID-19 global pandemic, school shootings, and student deaths. While extreme, these examples of trauma in school environments are increasingly more visible and present. There is an urgent need to critically consider the full impacts trauma in school environments has on all stakeholders of the organization, especially students, teachers, and school leadership as they are most directly at risk in these events.

In this thesis, I will first review the relevant literature discussing the various elements and factors contributing to and resulting from trauma in school environments. Additionally, the impacts of trauma on school environments, including student learning and teacher retention, will be considered. In doing so, I will outline the prevalence of traumas like the pandemic and physical altercations in school environments and the perceived expectations of English Language Arts and Development (ELA/D) teachers to provide trauma-informed practices (TIP) and social-emotional learning (SEL) through their content instruction. The purpose of this qualitative study is to answer the following question: *How does trauma in school environments impact secondary ELA teachers' perceptions of their instruction and ability to remain in the classroom?*

The focus of this thesis is to express the need for research into the impacts of trauma on secondary ELA/D teachers' perceptions of their instruction and desire to remain in the classroom. The five participants in this qualitative study all taught English Language Arts or English Language Development at the same high school between 20 and 2022 and shared multiple traumatic exposures and experiences in the school environment. I worked alongside these educators and have insights and perspectives of these same traumas that have a lasting impact on my comfort in the classroom as an educator and my confidence in providing effective instruction in the wake of these events. While the results from this study are not broadly generalizable, it is more likely than ever that teachers and the field of education will be victims of violence and trauma in the school environment (Carinigi et al, 2015; Berger & Lever, 2020). It's important to have constant discussions on the spectrum of trauma experienced by teachers that go beyond simply acknowledging the lived experiences of these public servants. It must include research and application of strategies that serve most beneficial to protect ourselves as professionals and continue serving today's youth.

Positionality

It's all I have to give,
and all anyone needs to live,
and to go on living inside,
when the world outside
no longer cares if you live or die;
remember,
I love you.
"I Am Offering This Poem," Jimmy Santiago Baca[1]

I spent my life running to the classroom. To music and language arts. To the people who let me hang out for thirty minutes because I was way too early for school. To the people who asked, "How are you sleeping? Do you want my snack for lunch?" giving only what they had, and I craved. The people who let me sit in their office and let me tidy up a bit because I needed to have control over something. Anything.

I spent my life running to other worlds in other times in other possibilities. I shared Rumpelstiltskin's deeply frustrated confusion as he re-tells the story about how the whole thing with the Queen and her baby was, genuinely, just a huge misunderstanding[2]. I laid next to Ella as it dawned on her that the man she married only a few weeks earlier was actually really selfish and, honestly, an absolute idiot[3]. I followed Dante's footsteps through the Inferno, trying to pinpoint those foolish lost souls trapped in the mud that were not here in his time. And as I climbed the stairs away from Lucifer himself, I think about poor Isabella and the spaces she was forced into by the absolute moral authority of the Catholic Church[4]. I wonder if Lord Angelo would be there, too, and what one villainous deed would surpass any other evil indiscretion and lead to his eternal suffering? Maybe he could concede to the righteous God; pay his alms and recite his 'Hail Mary's.' When I was in my language arts classrooms, I could run anywhere and feel anything at any time.

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[1] I read this poem to my students, each class, on the first and last day of the school year. I build my classroom community and relationship with students by telling them I love them before I know them and love them still through the whole school year and beyond.
[2] In reference to a selection from *The Rumplestiltskin Problem*, by Vivian Vande Velde
[3] In reference to *Ella Ever After*, by Gail Carson Levine

Those same figures and spaces I ran to pave the path for me to run to college, to education, to teaching. And after spending my entire life running to the classroom, in 2022, I walked away, not knowing if this well-trodden but cracked road would ever lead back to that space, those moments, that love.

Leaving teaching language arts, possibly indefinitely, made me so angry and ashamed. I love the kids; shouldn't I be able to stick it out? What if the school leadership was right when they implied asking for more support and community *was* selfish, and not for the students at all? When I stood in front of my students and told them I'm here *for them*, *because* of them, I also knew I couldn't be everything they needed with everything I had, without giving up my life. Everything I couldn't do, use, or feel, for the sake of what's best for the children.

Experiential and Professional Reflections

Over my teaching career up to now, I have taught at two high schools: one on the rural plains of eastern Colorado, and another on the eastern side of the Denver Metro area. My first year as a teacher was interrupted by the "extended spring break" necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic. I lost two students to the pandemic, and I never saw any of my students there again.

Before the 2022-2023 school year, my husband and I moved, and I began teaching at the significantly more urbanized and populace school. My first year here was completely virtual–

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[4] In reference to *Measure by Measure*, by William Shakespeare. The following sentence continues this reference.

except that I had to make the 45-minute commute to the school in order to sit in my classroom, alone, and hope more than four of the twenty-eight students on the roster would show up. Building relationships was incredibly hard, and I remember distinctly rebuffing the planned lessons just for the sake of getting to know my students better, doing anything just to encourage them to talk so I knew they were there. It felt like every week I received another email informing me of my students' hospitalizations, removal from the school for mental health reasons, and deaths of community members, all when I was behind my computer screen, alone in my classroom.

My third year of teaching was the first year back in-person for most Colorado secondary schools. By the end of the first semester, we had already experienced three shootings: two in the neighborhood and one at the park on school grounds. By that time, the school had lost four students that I knew of, two students were removed from school for recovery from near-fatal gunshot wounds, and students were being suspended and expelled daily for fighting and harassment. All of this would more than double by the end of the school year.

As I process my experiences, I have observed polarities in responses, both from those who shared my experiences and those who are hearing of the experiences second hand; *Being a teacher is so hard, I don't blame you for leaving,* and *Wow, kids just suck. I could never do that!* I wonder if it's a failure on my part, why these people seem to be missing the point so much. I reflect on my experiences and the stories I hold and wonder what it would take for our society to stop blaming our children for the violence in schools. To stop assuming that, based on skin color, it is expected for some kids to be crazy and uncontrollable, justifying their deaths to an apathetic, blinded Lady Justice. I wonder at the immense agency and authority we, as a society, have given students who have been told by us that they are nothing and have nothing. I wonder at the ease with which the social narrative erased the complex and compounded traumas from a global pandemic, gaslighting an entire generation of students and teachers about the severity of watching the world around them quake and crumble. And I wonder why school administration and leadership, dominantly male and mostly white with virtually no teaching experience, get to walk away at the end and say they did their best when nothing changes. And kids and their teachers are still the ones left behind.

At the time of my writing this, the United States has reported 409 actualized school shootings[5], which does not include any other incident of school violence such as student fighting or community tragedy. While the state of Colorado does not share a disproportionate amount of school shootings (approximately 29 reported school shootings between 1970 and 2023, the majority of which occurred after the infamous Columbine High School shooting in 1997), a brief Google search shows that the most prominent and visible reports are from those schools in highly urbanized, racially segregated, and underfunded institutions (e.g. Denver East High School, Aurora Central High School). In my currently limited experience as a career educator, the loss and trauma I experienced seemed insurmountable and hopeless. *Is this just what being a teacher is like?* Talking to family and friends, I felt constant hesitation and resistance to engage in conversations addressing violence and inequities in school districts. I grew tired of the constant suggestions to find a new school or, better yet, a new career! Teaching is hard; no one would blame me for quitting.

But I didn't want to quit. I loved my students and my colleagues, and I so desperately wanted to love my job. I so desperately wanted my students to be heard by school leadership, and for the white neighbors to stop yelling slurs at my kids as they walked home after school. I so desperately wanted the local news to stop showing up every time there was a fight or a gunshot, cornering my kids outside the main entrance, asking them to expound on the hardships of having to attend a school so impacted by violence. I so desperately wanted the world to see the full cost of trauma to those who have dedicated their lives to other people's children within public education.

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[5] Not every reported threat is legitimate. For example, there has been a rise in "swatting calls" in which individuals will maliciously call law enforcement on others, often incurring excessive and often violent police force taken against innocent people.

My experiences with trauma in the school environment are far from unique or exceptional, regardless of regionality and the community demographics. There has been extensive research into trauma-informed practices for schools and teachers to enact; best practices for responding to trauma, developing, and engaging community, and fostering student success and accountability. Resources abound for teachers on how to discuss difficult and sensitive topics, how to rely on structure and routine to mitigate stress responses, engaging students in self-regulation practices, encourage a sense of normalcy, and how to maintain consistent support to students and families in and outside of the classroom. Nonetheless, there is a haunting void of resources for how teachers can do the same for themselves. *How are we supporting those who are supposed to be supporting our children?*

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On November 8th, a Monday, my student teacher returned after attending their grandmother's funeral in Washington. They had said they would wait until Wednesday to return to work, but then decided getting back to work would be better for them. We had all eight periods that day, and sixth period had just begun. All twenty-eight honors students were there that day. I thought I heard something, but I didn't connect it to reality until I looked at my phone, a text from a colleague: *Lockdown*. Then the crackling intercom, barely audible across the expanse between the back entrance and the mobile's courtyard—our only link to the current events inside the building.

I wonder what we were doing right then. We were already so quiet. Otherwise, I don't think I would have been able to make out the garbles from the speaker above the back door of the school across the expansive courtyard. *Door and windows locked, help me turn off the lamps and close the blinds. I gotta turn off the projector and everyone gather.* My mobile classroom was half of a giant wood fiber, pre-manufactured box, bifurcated by an equally uninsulated wall to create two rooms. I couldn't hear anything from the room next door, was anyone there?

There were three mobiles total, organized in a horseshoe on the southeast side of school. The wall holding up the whiteboard was parallel to the street on the east side of the building; the wall separating the classrooms was fully visible from the door and the windows lining the other two walls. Even with the blinds closed and all entrances, intended or potential, locked up, there was nowhere in my classroom to keep my students safe. *Where were we supposed to hide? Why hadn't I thought of this before?*

The best option was the one corner adjoining the windowed walls, maybe a space of 4x4. The same corner that I had been storing the water dispenser I bought and maintained with my own money because the doors to the building remained locked so students couldn't get water or go to the bathroom during my class. Quickly shoving the water and desks towards the door allowed everyone to have a seat, carpet, or friend's lap. They were so nervous. I was, too. I remember only half-heartedly reminding for silence as students' trauma responses manifested as aggressive humor or inconsolable crying. It all seems like flashes of disjointed scenes.

I was sitting facing my students; I was in the crosshairs of two windows, but it's the only place I could see all 29 of them. 28 fifteen-year-olds and one 24-year-old. I knew it was not safe, I knew this was not a detail to be shared if I made it home. I looked behind me towards the whiteboard as if trying to see through it to the cars and trucks, sirens screaming. Then immediately the distinct sound of keys and cuffs clanging as officers run by, *maybe the SROs?*

I look to my left, my student teacher's face next to me. *I wasn't supposed to be here today.* I don't remember seeing them say it, but I remember hearing it. I look to my right, and a student's shaking hand passes me her phone; she had just joined my class a couple weeks ago. It was a tweet from a French newspaper. A picture of the school sign, the glass-façade of the main entrance, and my classroom just visible in the background. *Struggling School Experiences Another Fatal Incident. Fatalities confirmed, unknown amount. Suspects and victims unidentified.*

Everyone was in class that day, all twenty-eight sophomores and one student teacher. I wish I was relieved. I wish I remembered looking them all in the eye and telling them how much it means that they *were here with me now*. I wish I had said everyone's name, one at a time, to validate and affirm that *they were here with me now*, even if just for my own comfort. I wish, if not for the intrusive thoughts about the relative bullet-resistance of various building materials.

I thought about reading them a book. *Should I? Did I?* I look down at my phone. One message from my father-in-law in our family group chat, "Family Meme Chat." The message was in painful contrast to the group name: *Kit, where are you?!* And an attached Denver 9 breaking news alert.

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I don't think I actually remember it all. Or maybe at all. We stayed in lockdown for almost two hours. The final bell had rung, but we had to wait for a law officer to unlock the classroom door and excuse us from the premises. It didn't seem to concern school leadership that the mobiles had no access to the intercoms, nor that at least six classrooms were structurally unsafe in an emergency such as this, and so I wondered if they would care enough to remember to send an officer to release us.

Most students had already texted family and friends, and so they ran straight out of the recently unlocked door, down the ramp, and across the street to a waiting ride. I counted as I saw each head dip inside the cars.

The shooting was at the park on school grounds, next to the tennis courts. The students went there for lunch. It was far enough from school to gain peace from the dominant authorities, but close enough that they could still get to class and only be about ten minutes late. And now it was the park where a couple of teenagers shot and injured six classmates, killing one and causing near fatal injuries to others. Three of those students would never return to the school.

School administration and leadership only told us what they said they could. They said it was gang related. They said it was a fight over a girl. They said three kids got shot and one of them died. They said they had gotten student reports of potential threats posted to social media. They said they had such little time to act and needed to be as strict as possible with the lockdown, but ultimately it was the best decision. They said we would come back to school, back to normal, the next day. They said not to discuss the events with students; if students needed to talk, we should send them to the counselors instead of letting the whole class get off track.

School administration and leadership didn't tell us what we needed to know, what *we* thought *they* should tell us. They didn't say that the reports of threats from students had started the week before. They didn't say six students were shot, the three mentioned were the ones hospitalized. They didn't say who the victims were; every empty seat was another deceased student for the community to mourn. They didn't say a sophomore was sitting next to the student who was killed and sprinted to the front door of the school building; he was drenched in the blood of a young man who was like a brother to him. They didn't say that they refused to let him in as he screamed and begged for help before turning and running all the way home, still blood splattered. They didn't say that when his mother asked the school for professional mental health support, they sent a counselor and an SRO, more than likely at least one of whom was present when he was turned away from the school.

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It is incredibly dispiriting as an educator. I do not feel that staff and faculty perspectives and experiences were valued. As far as I know, we collectively begged the administration for support in a transparent and unifying environment for the community to process grief and heal together. We were encouraged to avoid acknowledging the park shooting with students, with the hope of "going back to normal" after the fact—even after a shut-down due to another shooting at a high school up the road the very next day.

We were directed to contact the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) for resources, without considering the load this placed on the counselors for the EAP. The nearby elementary school was forced into lockdown too, and teachers across the district at all grade levels had a connection to every student. The EAP simply did not have the capacity for so many employees to be seeking professional help, leaving us with repeated encouragement from school administration and leadership to "take care of yourselves;" a refrain that quickly felt like more of an admonishment for processing trauma than a sentiment of concern. School administration and leadership were consistently implying that the teachers who chose to leave the profession throughout the school year on the grounds of their mental health were selfish, and *never really fit into the school culture* to begin with.

I must acknowledge the incredible constraints placed on all school administrators and leadership, especially in situations requiring them to navigate crisis and change as a bureaucratic organization. The park shooting remained an active investigation for quite some time, and administration was not permitted to share many details. The frustration staff felt about the lack of transparency and communication from the school leadership was most likely a direct result of their inability to interfere or somehow compromise the investigation. Especially when considering everyone directly involved in the incident was a student at the school, sharing so much intimate information about teenagers can be incredibly compromising to them and their families. I can imagine by the time evidentiary insight was made public, it was so far removed from the incident it may have been easier not to bring up the whole event all over again. By the time all the information could be shared, our school community had suffered multiple other student deaths, a mass exodus of staff at the end of the semester and severe staffing shortages, and an increase in school and community violence. As mad as I remain at the organizational response to collective trauma, I often forget that each principal and dean lost students, too. They, too, were trying to "take care of themselves" without institutional support.

The school year had started on unsteady footing as it marked the return to in-person school with the mask mandate[6] after being virtual for almost a year and a half, students sitting in isolation in their rooms. This tension was compounded by the fact that the school was only a couple of years out from being identified as turnaround[7], and the district wasn't necessarily inclined to financially support extensive trauma support, especially for an administration and staff that became increasingly expendable as this neighborhood school transitioned into a magnet school for performing arts[8]. It is unimaginable to me all the intersections and contradictions these influences placed on the administration in navigating organizational and community trauma recovery. Considering the school leadership was in transition at the time, the uncertainty only emphasized the reality that there is no definitively moral or correct approach to instances of extreme trauma in school environments.

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[6] After the full remote school year (Fall 2021 to Spring 2022), students were welcomed back to the classroom before the Centers for Disease Control declared it safe for them to do so. That year, we were differentially instructed that mandatory masks were now just encouraged or optional, or that optional masks were now mandatory. Sadly, the latter often came after a student or faculty member became incredibly ill, or after entire departments were forced to quarantine for weeks on end.

[7] Now referred to as the Transformation Program, turnaround schools are deemed as underperforming and undeserving students' needs based on the state's evaluation for efficacy. This is based on standardized testing results, graduation rates, and student retention through all four years of high school.

Motivation and Intent for Study

Fill my lungs up, pour my heart out, peel my bones away
Crack my window, shed my shadow, excavate my pain
And I found peace

"Excavate," *Gemini*; Macklemore, ft. St. Claire[9]

My last year of teaching high school language arts before continuing my education destroyed me. The intersection of so many of my identities and passions became a place of deep fear and insecurity. I drew as much energy and passion as I could from my surrounding colleagues, but none of us had anything significant to give to anyone or for anything. I watched as the educators I worked with every day, who I revered and idolized, left the field of teaching completely because it is *too damn hard*. These educators had worked with their entire being to show each and every teacher and student their value and belonging and were defeated. Exhausted. Burnt out.

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[8] Magnet schools and programs offer specialized curriculum based on students' professional interest, meant to attract students from outside the school district. In this case, the specialization for the magnet is Performing Arts. Students are accepted based on application and audition, in the hopes of having all core content taught through the lens of their artistic pursuits.

[9] This is a song that became almost a mantra for me when I struggled not just with my desire to remain a teacher but also my declining mental health.

Emerging educators, especially those entering public school teaching, are not ignorant to the violence that has come to be expected in school settings. Sprinkled throughout my own teacher preparation programming were a rotation of professional developments of the most effective response when confronted with an active shooter, or a wild animal, or a bank robber fleeing the police. I got my first aid and CPR certification, knowing it might serve a very real and dire role at some point in my career. Truthfully, I did feel prepared to navigate crisis situations in a classroom setting. I knew everything I needed to know to keep my kids safe. What I lacked was the support and resources to sustain me as a professional.

Teaching in any content area is an incredibly emotionally fraught life path. Just from my perspective as a language arts teacher, I know the amount of love, care, and concern that is poured into the day-to-day safety and support of students. We manage classrooms, emotions, and materials. We manage communications with parents, school administrators, and community stakeholders. We invite students into our rooms for lunch because we know they may not have anywhere else to eat. We stay up late planning the most relevant and engaging lessons, and then remake them ten minutes before the bell rings just to make sure we are giving our students everything we can. This over exhaustion was only compounded when I came face to face with all those crises I thought I was ready to handle. The cost of it all being not just my ability to remain in the classroom, but my desire to keep living. I know all that teachers pour into each student and how little is poured back into them.

My fear and grief felt like it was expanding beyond the space I had to be an educator. I always knew I was going to be an educator, and now the only place I could locate in that field was the utter defeat I felt mentally and emotionally. I still cannot truly imagine myself being anything other than a high school language arts teacher, but the fear of loving too hard and having it all ripped away again eclipses my desire to recover from the trauma. I felt my trauma was invalidated by my supervisors. I felt that the needs of myself, my colleagues, and my students were not genuinely considered nor catered to. I felt robbed. And angry.

This thesis is not meant to be an indictment on education or a journey of overcoming. This thesis is meant to speak back to the lack of conversation regarding how teachers are supported to support our students. The profession of teaching is arguably the most crucial role in society for maintaining equity and democracy. It is also, arguably, one of the most difficult, complex, emotionally, and mentally draining careers to pursue, as evidenced by the increasing attrition rate within the field.

While subjective and ungeneralizable, critically engaging with my perspectives as an educator and scholar will fill in the foundation for others needing support. This thesis targets the power dynamics and organizational structures that contribute to school violence. I also seek to open a dedicated conversation into navigating the potential for how to best support teachers as they navigate the trauma for themselves and continue to serve our students. My experiences reflect an under-represented and unacknowledged reality of navigating school violence and trauma as a high school teacher. I hope to validate the pain, fear, loss, and anger suffered by so many educators, and encourage us in the field to come together to navigate what support we need to continue supporting our students.

Literature Review

Mass violence and shootings, the most known forms of trauma in schools, are on the rise, even if they remain statistically rare threats to schools and students (Elbedour et al., 2020; Jennings et al., 2020). In reporting on a school shooting in Iowa on March 27, 2023, MSNBC news anchor Rachel Maddow, referring to a colleague who had covered a mass shooting the prior week and whose child was in this school during the incident, observed, “Mass gun murders are so common in this country that it’s entirely possible that you might survive a mass shooting only to endure another one.” According to the Indicators of School Crime and Safety report through the American Institutes for Research (AIR), the 2020-21 academic school year saw the highest number of school shootings on school grounds with reported fatalities over two decades, at 93 incidents with at least one person other than the perpetrator injured (Zhang, 2022). This same report showed just over 40% of these incidents resulted in fatality, and any incident that did not result in injury or a weapon was not discharged was not included in these results (2022).

Responding to mass tragedy and trauma in school environments necessitates school leadership, teachers, and surrounding communities to face the challenge of doing what is best for students and their educational well-being. It is well-known that students at any age crave routine and consistency, so when a life-altering event occurs in these learning environments, it is imperative to re-establish consistency and re-engage classroom community and safety (Thomas et al., 2019; Berger et al., 2020; Pazur, 2021). As an educator entrusted with this immense task in my own secondary English Language Arts (ELA) classrooms, I am overwhelmed by the paucity of my preparation in being resilient in the face of trauma on behalf of my students. As the sources referenced throughout this study reflect, a significant amount of research into traumatic experiences and exposures in school environments and the impacts on and perceptions of teachers occurs in connection to major social disruptions (i.e., 9/11, COVID-19, and large mass shootings inside school buildings). What this research lacks are the perspectives of teachers,' and other childcare providers,' needs as professionals following traumatic experiences and exposure in their place of work.

Educators are expected and tasked to comply with the state Teacher Quality Standards (TQS) to assess the efficacy of their instruction and professional conduct (CDE, 2021). However, with the ever-increasing presence and threat of trauma and violence in schools, teachers across grade levels and content areas are called upon to manage and navigate post-trauma environments within the school and their classroom settings as part of their professional responsibilities (Isaac, 2023; Dunn, 2021; Garcia, 2021; Thomas et al., 2019). This calls for consideration of how teachers are supported and prepared to handle violent and disruptive events in the school environment to better comprehend their professionalism and longevity in the classroom. By doing so, teacher preparation programs can work to adequately equip our educators for dealing with the trauma they and their students experience in school environments.

Trauma in Schools

Trauma is defined by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) as one or more events or culminating circumstances experienced by an individual that cause physical or emotional harm, including putting their safety at risk, which leads to lasting adverse harm (2022). The harm caused by traumatic exposure and experience can be detrimental to mental, physical, and emotional health, well-being, and safety (SAMHSA, 2022). On an individual level, trauma impacts cognitive and physical functioning. This manifests as impediments to memory and information processing and retention, as well as physiological symptoms of gastrointestinal distress, distortion of time and a sense of reality, social isolation, and other self-destructive behaviors; this is what Scaer (2005) refers to as “inappropriate and ineffective survival behaviors” (p.29). Within an organization such as schools, trauma can impede students’ ability to succeed academically and socially, as well as create distrust and social fracturing amongst staff and leadership and damage the collective trust and buy-in from staff and community. These issues can contribute to lower overall graduation and higher drop-out rates in secondary schools, increased reports of behavioral issues, and high teacher attrition (Jennings et al., 2013; Elbedour et al., 2020).

Students are exposed to and experience many different forms of trauma in and outside of the school environment. Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) such as financial instability, abuse (substance, physical, neglect, etc.), witnessing a violent crime, or surviving a major natural disaster are frequent realities for school-aged children (Brunzell et al., 2018; Poland & Ferguson 2021a). Furthermore, trauma is compounding, meaning that the more trauma exposure an individual experiences, the more susceptible they are to engage in reckless behavior, such as acting against their own safety and self-interest which places them at increasingly greater risk of experiencing further trauma (Poland & Ferguson, 2021b; Thomas et al., 2019; Kyle & Thompson, 2008; Nigoff, 2008). With trauma becoming more relevant and pervading in classrooms and school environments, all students are at risk for experiencing or being exposed to trauma and suffer lasting stress from compounded trauma.

Students’ affective and trauma responses in schools can easily be interpreted as aggressive and violent behavior. When in a heightened state of arousal, in response to a triggering instance or event, individuals go into “fight/flight/freeze/fawn” mode as an unconscious protective mechanism, diverting the body's energy and resources towards survival;

students are often unaware when they're operating within their trauma responses, and additional stimuli through intervention or discipline can negatively escalate the tension and create unsafe spaces for trauma-impacted individuals (Brunzell et al., 2018).

There is an observable correlation between trauma experience or exposure in school environments and schools serving marginalized populations (i.e., students of color, financially insecure, ect.). According to Campbell and Tan (2023), communities of color are disproportionately impacted by the aforementioned traumas, manifesting in higher risk and concern for youth violence and social disruptions. These communities are also more likely to lack adequate funding and educational resources to appropriately and responsibly teach these students who have been conditioned at a social disadvantage (e.g. Love, 2020). Especially in connection to violence in schools and the social disruption of the COVID-19 Pandemic, the students, families, and educators of these communities saw higher rates of social frustration and self-isolation or lashing out at peers in addition to the poor medical care access and resources provided (Whiteman et al., 2023). Schools that serve predominantly students of color or populations at equally high risk for trauma exposure and experience are the most likely to witness trauma inside the school building. These are also the communities that are often disregarded as lost causes because of the perceived inevitability of violence and social disruptions.

Violence in Schools

Violence is defined as "an overt or subtle act of aggression, physical harm, intimidation, or coercion resulting in emotional or physical suffering of another," (Scherz, 2006). Violence in schools takes on many forms and can be perpetrated by anyone inside or outside of the physical building, or anyone with or without any association to that school. There are three general categories of violence in schools: youth violence, retaliatory violence, and dramatic violence (Scherz, 2006).

Youth violence is a more inclusive lens towards violence in schools because it refers to youth acting out with behaviors that appear aggressive and physical (CPI, 2023). While youth violence is, by necessity, violence enacted by students, it does not operate solely among youth. Most commonly, though, youth violence in schools takes the form of verbal and physical bullying (Poland & Ferguson, 2021b). This broad understanding of violence in schools requires a community-oriented approach, especially since most of the acts of violence in these situations are enacted within, from, or towards the community surrounding the school (Lickel, 2012 et al.; Thomas et al., 2019). Furthermore, there is a direct correlation between youth violence and students who are living without their needs for shelter, safety, and sustenance being properly met; most of the time this manifests in students' lives as experiencing homelessness, living in poverty and potentially having to financially support their families, and/or living in an abusive household (Poland & Ferguson, 2021a; Kyle & Thompson, 2008). Students who seem to “succumb” to the “contagion of violence” have been socialized to understand that the only way they might be able to survive is to fight (Foreman & Bates, 2022; Overstreet & Chafouleas, 2016). This can be instigated by any number of factors, including ACE triggers and harassment like bullying and cyberbullying.

Rather than stemming from a lack of basic needs being met, retaliatory violence stems from the sense of belonging within the school environment or community (Scherz, 2006). This form of violence is typically instigated by students, though sometimes it can come from outside actors, within the school building itself. This form is a response by an individual to a sense of having little or poor “affiliation and belonging” (Scherz, 2006, p. 6). Schools with high instances of retaliatory violence often have difficulty mitigating these events, because students who enact this form of violence tend to have a low tolerance for frustration and often struggle with emotional resiliency (Veltkamp & Lawson, 2008; Foreman & Bates, 2022). By the time emotionally de-regulated and distressed students are in a state of perpetrating violence, teachers and school staff are no longer qualified to provide the necessary psychiatric intervention (Thomas et al., 2019; Poland & Ferguson, 2021b). Within the state of Colorado, most violence in schools and mass shootings have been retaliatory in nature, notably the student shooters who opened fire on their classmates at Columbine High School in 1999 (Callahan, 2008). When retaliatory violence reaches this fatal extreme, it is then referred to as dramatic violence.

Scherz (2006) defines dramatic violence as the perceived rise of severity and randomness of school violence, exacerbated by the access to information and speculation regarding traumatic events in school environments, through mainstream and social media (p. 8). This correlates to a greater awareness of the accessibility children and young adults have to firearms in the discussions following school massacres and mass gun violence. Gun violence is a major player when discussing trauma in schools, but it is important to not reduce the issue at large for the sake of a clearly defined source or problem.

Social Disruptions: COVID-19 Pandemic

With the deadly arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic in late 2019, the immense loss and subsequent grieving across the world was exacerbated by the mandated social distancing. The closing of school buildings and the transition to widespread online schooling interrupted many students' pivotal transitions into secondary schools and stunted the social-emotional development of students and children of all ages (Johns Hopkins, 2020; CDE, 2020). Novice and pre-service teachers were being prepared to teach during and following widespread disease and death using pre-pandemic research and best practices (Johns Hopkins, 2020; Everett & Dunn, 2021). The world was not prepared for this kind of natural disaster, as was demonstrated through the ways schools had to adapt and transform with minimal resources and support.

In the United States, the pandemic made transparent the intrinsic inequity of education, specifically regarding access. When most Colorado schools closed for in-person instruction and transitioned to online schooling for the next year and a half, educators and support staff needed to navigate providing a substantial and relevant education to students who had varying access to sufficient internet connection (Pazur, 2021). Families were unable to obtain personal computers for their children, especially if the students were at lower- or higher-class levels. For example, I had a high school senior student who had to share a laptop with four siblings; two in middle school and two in elementary school. In these cases, many older students sacrificed their learning opportunities for their younger siblings and looked for more productive ways to use that time. Concurrently, the detriment to the job market during this time devastated many students' households, leading to many older students, such as the one previously mentioned, having to take on additional jobs and work to support their families financially, interfering with their ability to consistently attend classes (Krause et al., 2022)

For students and educators already living in and through traumatic environments and events, teaching and learning through the pandemic compounded the impacts on these individuals. Many developed a sense of learned helplessness and dissociation, both characteristic of the freeze trauma response (NASP, 2023; Scaer, 2005). Uninterrupted exposure to the same trauma source conditions the mind to become ambivalent to environmental stimuli, leading to a notion that trauma is a determined and unavoidable reality (Scaer, 2005).

When students and educators re-entered school buildings as in-person schooling began again in the 2021-2022 school year, youth violence and mass shootings in and around school environments were reported at an unprecedented rate compared to pre-pandemic (Wang et al., 2020; Irwin et al., 2023). Teacher attrition and turnover reached a high, with many citing concerns for emotional and physical safety (Harbatkin & Nguyen, 2023). Perceived lack of control over circumstances and environments leads to miscommunication and distrust across power hierarchies, with teachers and students feeling kept in the dark on most significant community decisions (Scherz, 2006). If teachers are already navigating recovery from the trauma of the pandemic, and continue to feel unsafe and unvalued, this can compound trauma and cause severe damage to the school culture and resiliency towards future trauma response and recovery.

ELA Instruction and Trauma-Informed Practices

Integral to literacy and language arts (ELA) class is the engagement with the lives and lived experiences of others across time and space. ELA curriculum is already laden with texts addressing and depicting powerfully emotional human experiences; death, famine, war, abuse, and poverty are just a few common throughlines of secondary-level novels and texts (Wolfsdorf et al., 2022). Of the acknowledged canon most prominently utilized in secondary ELA curriculum, students spend a significant portion of their literacy education witnessing the trauma and testimony of characters, real and imagined, present and long gone. Observing comparable traumatic experiences and exposures to their own serves as a double-edged blade; there is equally higher potential for engagement and potential to trigger students' traumatic affective responses (Dutro & Caasi, 2022; Medley, 2012).

These responses are triggered by high stress, emotion, or negative-valence arousal that signal to the brain to release a high dose of cortisol and norepinephrine (John Hopkins,2020).

The hormones interacting cause the brain to avert resources and energy to the most necessary, base-level functioning of the brain, over-activating the “lizard brain,” or the amygdala, operating as the chief risk assessment manager for the body (Scaer, 2005). These affective responses are known best by the way they manifest in our external interactions; fight, flight, freeze, and fawn (excessive pleasing and accommodation to authority figures).

This intrinsic link of trauma from literacy and language arts instruction creates an imperative for ELA educators to have preparation and support in trauma-informed practices (TIP)[10] and social-emotional learning (SEL)[11] to truly meet students where they are at as they engage with the content (Dunn, 2022; Medley, 2012; Dutro & Caasi, 2022; Dutro, 2011). In a typical classroom environment, these pedagogical practices would be enacted through the development of a respectful and inclusive class community, strengthening the trust bond between students with one another and a trusted adult figure. This is especially important when considering the trauma that follows students from outside the classroom. Continued exposure and experience of trauma increases a student’s susceptibility to having a lower frustration tolerance, an inability to manage and subvert violent outbursts, and dissociation from their actions and consequences henceforth (Foreman & Bates, 2022; Brunzell et al., 2018; CPI, 2023).TIP and SEL are necessary to appropriately instruct students on their literacy and language while discussing and utilizing potentially triggering material (Dunn, 2022; Wolfsdorf et al., 2022). However, these are responsive approaches rather than pre-emptive, meaning teachers are prepared to deliver instruction through these frameworks to be respectful of past traumatic experiences and exposure but not as it may arise in real-time. Trauma exposure and experience in school environments disrupt every element of a functioning school. From students up through school leadership, trauma and violence in schools instill severe emotional turmoil, grief, and symptoms associated with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), interfering with students' ability to engage in knowledge creation and teachers to instruct effectively and appropriately (Frearson & Duncan, 2024; Luthar & Mendes, 2020).

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[10] Trauma-Informed Practices are the ways teachers can incorporate and transform their instruction to honor and respect students’ lived experiences, and mitigate trauma exposure, experience, and perpetuation (SAMHSA, 2014).

[11] Social-emotional learning, or socioemotional learning, is the intentional development, through curriculum integration, of social and emotional skills (CASEL, 2024)

Emotional deregulation can appear in adults remarkably like adolescents, manifesting in ways such as lack of interest and motivation, erratic or out-of-character behavior, loss of memory and information retention, confusion, social isolation and feeling a loss of self and community (Kim et al., 2021; Borntrager et al., 2012; Reynolds et al., 2020). These significant disruptions to the functioning of schools on staff and students call for a return to routine and consistency while maintaining an appreciation and critical awareness of what it means to move forward through trauma rather than simply moving on, invalidating, and minimizing lived experience. ELA teachers already have experience navigating reflective and critical conversations of trauma with their students through the lens of literacy and literature; the applications of TIP and SEL practices on self requires a significant amount of professional support to meet teachers where they are at as they move out of affective responses and find resiliency and strength through trauma (Brunzell et al., 2021; Caringi et al., 2015; Dunn, 2022). ELA teachers are expected to provide this level of support, if not greater, when we work with students. Due to this, our working conditions are a driving factor in situating the students' learning environments (Irby, 2018).

Relational Work and Navigating Trauma

Relational work is “work teachers do to form relationships with students and colleagues, including building trust, showing care, developing mutual interests, and providing support for learning” (Dunn, 2022, p. 217). Relational teaching is necessary in implementing TIP and SEL, with teacher-student relationships being developed through reciprocal witnessing of one another through reading and writing (Haberl Foster, 2022; Dunn, 2022; Zembylas 2020; Dutro & Caasi, 2022; Dutro 2011). In creating safe ELA classrooms, teachers rely on their preparation and training to inform how they approach students' lived experiences and communities responsibly and respectfully. A consequence of this meaningful work is the high potential for literacy and language teachers to incur vicarious or secondary traumatic stress (STS) (Sprang & Garcia, 2022; Frearson & Duncan 2024; Caringi, et al 2015; Borntrager, et al 2012). The emotional load that is invested in empathy-based community building and whole-student instruction can be internalized by teachers underprepared to understand and navigate trauma-informed care as well as those under supported in completing the emotional labor necessary to “discharge” the stress incurred (Scaer, 2005).

However, the culture and community within the school organization is outside the control of individual teachers and departments, and rests largely with school leadership’s “collective awareness of the factors that influence both the internal and external environments” and their willingness to adapt to the perceptions and needs of all school faculty in serving their students (Scherz, 2006). The teacher’s working environment is the student’s learning environment, and as Scherz states, “When students feel unsafe, they may experience social, emotional, and learning difficulties. When teachers feel unsafe, they may become unwilling to extend themselves in a way necessary to fully reach their students,” (p. 20).

Trauma experience and exposure in school environments influence the relationship students and faculty have with physical space. Teachers already impacted by unprocessed STS experiencing trauma in their place of work create a school culture of learned helplessness (Sprang & Garcia, 2022; Frearson & Duncan 2024; Caringi, et al 2015; Reynolds, et al 2020). Faculty and students can become resistant to community engagement, distrusting of authority and leadership, and ambivalent to the organization's overall health or success (Caringi et al., 2015; Garcia et al., 2023).

School culture, as guided by leadership, is directly correlated to teachers' ability to navigate, and develop resilience in the aftermath of trauma exposure and experience (Luthar & Mendes, 2020; Jennings et al., 2020; Overstreet & Chafouleas, 2016). When school leadership is unable to be fully aware of or adaptive to the concerns and experiences of staff and students, the climate of the organization will begin to deteriorate, contributing to high teacher turnover and attrition, which is reflected by an approximate 10% increase of teachers exiting the profession during the height of the COVID-19 Pandemic (Taie & Lewis, 2023).

Despite the established preparation and enactment of TIP in ELA instruction and the ways educators can facilitate and support students through introspection and meaning-making, there is a relative paucity in understanding the ways teachers' perceptions of their own instruction and ability to continue teaching are impacted by trauma in schools (Cole et al., 2013; Kim et al., 2021). It is well understood the ways trauma impacts individual and organizational health, especially in educational contexts (Muhammad, 2023). There is an identifiable connection between educators' sense of empowerment and self-efficacy as a valuable, contributing community member and school staff retention (Reynolds et al., 2018; Thomas et al., 2019). Remaining to be explored is the confluence of TIP and trauma recovery on ELA educators, specifically in how teachers perceive and determine their self-efficacy and desire to continue their careers as educators after trauma in school environments.

Methods

Methodology

I will be using an interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach, which allows me to explore and understand how teachers make meaning of traumatic experiences and exposures within the profession of education and in school environments. IPA is a qualitative research approach to “understanding the lived experiences of individuals in their terms rather than through existing theoretical frameworks" (Frearson & Duncan 2024). This approach elevates the perspectives and perceptions of individuals as it relates to understanding a shared experience. For this study, the goal of the IPA approach is to gain deeper insights into a collection of perspectives from teachers with shared traumatic experiences and exposures. This is particularly important in this study considering the impacts of trauma on various aspects of teachers’ professionalism and work because trauma is such a unique and subjective physiological response (e.g., Alase 2017). The organizational health of schools relies on individuals to develop a healthy and productive culture, so exploring the spectrum of responses provides clearer insight into why addressing the impacts of trauma on educators is necessary to sustain education for children through and beyond trauma.

IPA allows me to focus less on the generalizations of trauma-informed practices and the known effects it has on students and more on individual teachers and the contexts surrounding how they make sense of traumatic events and exposures in their work environments (Alase 2017; Frearson & Duncan 2024). This also contributes to a more authentic analysis of their own perceptions of their instruction, their desire and ability to remain in the classroom, and their opinions and insights into navigating and mitigating future trauma in schools. Getting these individualized insights can provide clarity into preparing teachers to maintain sustainable teaching practices and resilience to trauma (Bernhardt, et al 2022; Wolfsdorf, et 2022). ￼

Concerns over teacher well-being and retention are exacerbated by trauma in schools. Particularly concerning mass gun violence, often referred to as a uniquely American issue, exposure to trauma in school environments is almost inevitable for the nation’s educators and students (Miller & Kraus, 2008; Lickel et al., 2012). With the increasing potential of violence or trauma in schools and the emotional burden carried by teachers, it is valuable to focus research on individuals in similar contexts to better understand the complexities of navigating and healing from shared life-altering events. IPA allows me to specifically consider the impacts of trauma on the perceptions ELA teachers have of their instruction of historically and potentially triggering material and their ability to remain in the classroom.

Study Participants

For this study, five participants were interviewed about their experiences with trauma in school environments, perceptions of their own instruction, support for teachers, and desire to remain in the classroom. All five teachers worked at the same school between fall 2020 through spring 2022 in the English Department, teaching either English Language Arts (ELA) or English Language Development (ELD).

Jessica (all names are pseudonyms) is a biracial Asian/White woman. She is a parent in her forties. She has taught at this school for her entire career, approaching twelve years, and is the English department instructional coach, the new educator program facilitator, as well as the student-teacher placement coordinator. In addition to these administrative responsibilities, she is also responsible for English department professional learning communities (PLC) and professional developments (PD), coaching on instructional practices and content, and teaching two sections of ninth-grade English Language Arts. She lives with her youngest son about twenty minutes east of the school.

Ken is a White man from a Colorado mountain town. He began his career in hospitality management before returning to college for an alternative teaching license. He is also a parent in his thirties. He student taught at an affluent school before coming to the school at which we all worked together. He is entering his sixth year of teaching high school English. He lives about an hour south of the school.

Erica is a white woman from the Midwest in her twenties. She is married to a first-generation immigrant and is bilingual. She moved to Colorado and began working at the school immediately after graduating from college. Her student teaching was completely virtual, as was her first year of teaching. She taught at the school for two years before choosing to leave the profession. She has returned to college for a master's degree. She and I began teaching at this school at the same time. She taught English Language Development, and she and I shared many students, including the students who passed away during the school year.

Margaret is a Latina woman who grew up in the school's community and graduated from the school herself. She first worked in technology sales before returning to college for an alternative teaching license. She is fluent in Spanish and has taught English Language Development at the school since her student teaching there approximately five years ago. She is in her thirties and married to a White man, and they own a home near the school.

Maryanne is a White woman from the Midwest in her thirties. She is married to a Latino man and is a parent. She owns a home in a different city and district about an hour east of the school. She moved with her family after teaching in the Midwest for six years. Her husband also works in the district. She had been the English department chair for five years before deciding to leave to teach at a school closer to her home but in the same district to maintain her pay level. She had just begun her thirteenth year of teaching high school English at the time of the study.

School Context

The school in question, hereafter referred to as Central Atlas High School (CAHS), is a large school in a densely populated city in the Mountain West. Located in a highly urban locale, the school serves a population of approximately 2,000 students, more than 80% of whom identify as students of color; students of Latinx descent make up almost 70% of the student body. About 80% of students have access to free and reduced lunch. The systemic and institutional oppression faced by many other metropolitan schools with a high population of students of color also greatly impacts CAHS's students and community. Between high poverty rates in the community and active gentrification spreading across the city, this school lacks many funds and resources, such as not having enough desks and chairs for every student in the classes.

CAHS is staffed by approximately 150 employees and follows suit with national trends by being predominantly White women (NCES, 2023). Notably, in the time frame of this study, the school had only just returned from online schooling due to the COVID-19 pandemic at the start of the 2021-2022 school year. Before and throughout the school year, staff attrition was incredibly high, with an estimated 30% of teachers leaving before the second semester began. Most of the teachers who left at this time cited concerns for their safety and well-being. Of the ones I remained in contact with, a few left the teaching field entirely.

The school was also significantly impacted by the school's leadership and strategic planning. By the time the 2021-2022 school year began, the school did not have a principal, with an acting leader instated after students returned. This acting principal retired approximately twenty-five years earlier and was only in the school building twenty hours a week due to work regulations, causing confusion and miscommunication around the organization's direction and functioning. Compounding the stress this transitional leadership placed on the school, specifically staff and faculty, was the fact that the district was transitioning this school to a performing arts magnet school. While not an immediate upheaval, the development of this auditions-based program took most of the funds and commitment from the rest of the school[12]. Without a strong emphasis on performing arts to begin with, most of the students attending CAHS at this time were not allowed to participate in this new learning experience.

Data Collection

To collect the data, I first conducted one-on-one interviews with each participant, all of which I conducted virtually except one in-person interview at the participant's home. The interviews focused on experiences and exposures to trauma in school environments, perceptions of their own instruction in the aftermath of traumatic events, as well as their ability and desire to remain in the classroom. Below is a sample of questions asked in the interview:

1. What have been your experiences with trauma in your work environment?
2. What do you remember from your instruction before, during, and after those traumatic experiences?
3. What impact did the experience have on your classroom environment?
4. When reflecting on this experience, what are your opinions and insights about school leadership's response to and support following those traumatic experiences?

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[12] This program was designed to transition this public school into a public magnet school housed within the public school district.

5. What are your opinions and insights about the responsibilities and expectations placed on teachers during and following traumatic events in the school and educational environment?

Once the interviews were completed with each participant, I transcribed the recording and removed any personal details or potential identifiers of the participants. This process received IRB approval prior to data collection.

Data Analysis

After transcribing and anonymizing the five interviews, the qualitative data was manually coded for open themes that were organized into categories to interpret the responses, reactions, and reflections of the study participants.

I read each interview multiple times to identify initial codes of the types of experiences with trauma, approaches and perceptions to instruction, and ability to remain in the classroom as an educator. I then grouped those codes into categories that represented prevailing attitudes, perceptions, or topics. These categories were then organized into themes that aligned with the research question.

For example, a piece of raw data from my interview with Erika incited this comment: “I was really, really angry and upset about that, about how I felt it was being brushed off not only by my coworkers but also by the administration.” The initial code for this was resentment and distrust between the staff. After an additional read through the interviews, these codes were then categorized as “perceptions of staff and leadership.” Finally, the last round of data analysis placed this into the overarching theme of “school culture.” Through my coding, I generated 27 categories that were organized into four overarching themes: emotional responses to trauma, the importance of instruction after traumatic events, school culture, and organizational health.

Findings

This study's purpose is to identify the ways secondary ELA teachers are impacted by traumatic events and exposure in school environments. Specifically, the study aims to analyze teachers' experiences, how they perceive their instruction, and the influence on career longevity, or ability to remain in the classroom and profession after traumatic experiences and exposures in school environments. The thematic categories identified through the coding process are the participants' emotional responses to traumatic exposure or experience in their place of work; their perceptions of the purpose and needs for their instruction; the impact of school culture and organizational health on them as professionals, and; considerations for remaining or returning to the classroom.

Emotional Responses to Trauma

The data demonstrated that all five participants had been present during or exposed to a range of traumatic experiences in school environments, leading to significant and lasting emotional responses. The most common experiences shared were secondary trauma from engaging with past students' traumas, student and colleague death or debilitation, and mass gun violence. Other traumas noted were student fighting and toxic work culture. All traumatic events and exposures in the school environment elicited deep emotions of fear for life during the event, concern for health and safety, heightened anxiety, and discomfort in their place of work, and distrust for school leadership and among staff and faculty.

Secondary Trauma and Direct Grief

Participants related emotional responses of deep concern and astonishment when discussing secondary post-traumatic stress (SPTS), or a passive trauma experienced by caring or working closely with an individual who is or has experienced severe trauma. Specifically, Maryanne described the immediate response of “What the hell is going on? How are they so strong? And I'm a 30- some year-old woman about to freak out and have a mental breakdown for them.” She later described the guilt of feeling inadequate and ineffective in supporting students who are trauma survivors. She had associated this guilt with being responsible for maintaining data-driven, standards-based instruction and meeting the individualized needs of students' social and emotional regulation. Similarly, Margaret expressed the constant sensation of shock in learning specifics about her students, remembering when a student shared being raped while crossing the US-Mexico border:

> …What the heck is going on? Like, this is a child. And hearing that, I was like, “oh man, like this is where I work, and these are the kids that I serve.” And they’ve been through some, like, horrible, horrible things.

Having this insight and connections to students, Margaret later explained, allows her to understand that “school is not always their priority” and that this adds a responsibility for teachers to be more aware of how to make learning meaningful for students, especially given the context of their lived experiences. Participants pointed to similar experiences, identifying emotions of immense empathy and a dedication to expanding their understanding of student and community perspectives.

Maryanne also shared secondary trauma experienced from supporting a work friend whose husband had a heart attack and passed away during the school day. She reflected, “how do you, one, process it if you like, that's your life. But then I had no idea what to do. I also felt like I was so young. I didn't ever have any of that experience before.” Notably, this occurred early in her career, and it had a lasting impact on the way she viewed relationships with her colleagues being a necessary element in her work as an educator.

The participants all shared memories of students who died. Ken mentioned experiencing "a few suicides, we've dealt with drive-by shootings…. we had to deal with a student who was struck by a car and killed." Erika immediately recalled, "In March [2022], actually, I had a student who was shot and killed at a hotel." Additionally, all five participants recalled the shooting at the park on CAHS school grounds in the Fall of 2021, which resulted in a student death and multiple students hospitalized and withdrawn from school. The trauma of grieving students was shared among the participants and was also the most varying in terms of initiating events.

Violence in Schools

The traumatic experiences and exposures of the participants regarding mass gun violence was directly connected to gang violence in the surrounding community. Significantly, the responses reflecting on these experiences focused on concern for personal safety and survival and returning home. Margaret and Jessica both noted this when remembering lockdowns from two separate shootings at the park on school grounds stating, respectively, "And I'm just sitting there and I'm, like, terrified….I'm gonna die here with my coworkers" and, "I just had a little panic because we went on lockdown and so I was just like, I just need to get home to my children." These statements show a clear fear for life and personal well-being in their work environment, something they likely did not consider part of their job expectations and responsibilities. This personal sacrifice in the line of duty is typical for high-risk jobs such as law enforcement and security. However, those professionals are trained and provided proper protection to minimize their risk. This same training and preparation are not considered essential when educators are completing coursework to become a teacher.

Erika noted feeling a traumatic response related to student fighting. In connection with her student who had been shot at the hotel, which was confirmed by the municipal law enforcement to be gang-related, she recalled:

> I think there was definitely a part of me that was on edge. Like, always kind of wondering like do you have a gun in your backpack? You know, are you gonna get in a fight in the hallway and use it?

This is an example of compounded trauma which, considering the vast range of traumatic events each educator relayed, is relevant to all participants in the study. Compounded trauma is created when an individual is exposed to or experiences trauma without properly processing and navigating each event individually, leading to a heightened sense of fear, helplessness and apathy towards work and society (Scaer, 2005).

Emotional Toll on Teachers

While Erika was the only participant to specifically identify student fights in connection to trauma, other participants recalled an uptick in fighting and an overall lowering of academic and behavioral expectations for students' school wide. This was associated with a desire for more consistent support from school leadership in holding the students, and by extension their educators, accountable for the school culture.

Jessica specifically identified “most of my trauma related to my job is just kind of the toxic relationship that I have with my job and like education in the way that like people make you feel like being in this job.” Maryanne shared Jessica’s experience as a teacher leader and discussed the ways distrust of leadership and school-wide communication led to departmental and social group fracturing across the school staff. This created a competitive and combative working environment. For example, Jessica and Maryanne recounted the pressure to ‘go above and beyond’ and exacerbated the burnout and anxiety common in the profession.

All participants acknowledged the emotional exertion and toll of being a teacher and doing meaningful, relational work. Their traumatic experiences and exposures in school environments intensified the emotional investments and associations shared across the organization and community.

Other participants described a poor work culture, specifically a sense of community being fragmented and misaligned among faculty and across departments (Margaret) and poor communication and lack of transparency from school leadership exacerbating the negative impacts of traumatic experiences on the overall organizational health and recovery (Maryanne and Erika). The traumatic experiences and exposures of the study participants in their work environments have a lasting and significant emotional toll on educators, especially when it comes to declining perceptions of school-wide culture and organizational health and the deep-rooted fear for life exacerbated by the present-day rise in mass gun and youth violence in schools (Maryanne, Jessica, and Erika).

Perceptions of Instruction

Most participants could not recall specific content instruction associated with the timing of traumatic experiences and exposures in school environments. They all noted that, in terms of changes to their lesson preparation and instruction delivery, emotional well-being and safety took higher priority than before. Multiple participants identified a tendency for academic expectations to fall school-wide and personal responses of feeling unable to perform to their highest ability.

Reprioritization of Socioemotional Learning

Erika explained her focus when planning and delivering her instruction was “just trying to make sure that students felt valued when they were there…And trying to also hold some sense of normalcy and expectations.” The focus on students’ social-emotional well-being was repeated by Maryanne and Margaret, both of whom specifically emphasized teachers and students reciprocating “giving grace” as they mutually navigate educational spaces after experiencing shared and collective traumas. Margaret also revealed that she began collecting student suggestions and incorporating their ideas and input into her lesson planning and delivery. These ELA/D (English Language Arts and Development) teachers shared a general sentiment that there needed to be a clearer and more sustainable balance between adhering to rigorous academic standards and excellence with accommodating “the whole student” both as a learner and a developing human. Pulling on her insights as a teacher leader, Jessica reflected, “When we get too focused in on, like, data or whatever, we forget that it’s real because we’re in service of children. Like, real emotions go into our jobs.”

The participants revealed that they all viewed their connections and relationships with students and responded to traumatic events by giving higher prioritization than before to socioemotional learning through their instruction. Reflecting on the emphasis on the development of students' literacy and communication, Margaret, Erika, and Ken described their efforts to be more intentional in providing more representative, engaging, and relevant texts and writing assignments. For example, Margaret explained, “we ask for, like, their input sometimes, too. What they want to learn, so it’s very much about them.” All participants emphasized the re-prioritization of supporting their students in all ways, including giving them opportunities to engage, consider, and process their lived experiences in a productive way for their academic success.

Routine, Consistency and Giving Grace

Ken, Jessica, and Erika all discussed how the inconsistency in academic and behavioral expectations school-wide directly impacted their approach to instruction. Ken and Erika both shared their observations of other teachers' instruction, recalling that many focused a lot of time and energy on communication circles and discussing the shared traumatic experiences (Ken) or "scrambling to adjust, which is a reasonable response. They're figuring that one adjustment isn't working, so they're adjusting a second way" (Erika). This led participants to concentrate on re-establishing norms and routines in the classroom and reviewing the academic expectations set by the course syllabus.

Jessica also noted a general decline in academic and behavioral expectations for students as an overcompensation of "giving grace," explaining:

> …at the end of the day, our kids are human beings. Treating them in that way [holding them accountable] is the best way to do that. I do think part of that respect is like high expectations for our students. And a lot of that does come from watching leaders in our building…. Yes, we love them, but you're not showing them love by just enabling their issues on the outside.

Maryanne and Margaret acknowledged their perceptions of their own instructional planning and delivery not meeting their past standard of performance. For example, Maryanne specifically remembered relying on movies, interactive quizzes, and make-up workdays to compensate for feeling emotionally and interpersonally overwhelmed in her place of work. She explained,

> …it became less about like we have to get through this thing and then this thing, and then we'll move on to the CFA (Common Formative Assessment). And it became more of like, you know what? I need them to watch this 20-minute video today because if I don't have them watch this, I'm going to lose my damn mind.

Maryanne's insight reveals how much emotional energy teachers put into their instructional planning and delivery, and the impacts of trauma can deplete that energy to a point where academic rigor is not always prioritized. Margaret reflected that, after having participated in a group of faculty members working to provide training and development to other staff on trauma-informed practices, "It's made me realize more about how to take care of myself and to put myself first, too. Because if I don't, then I won't be able to help my kids or support them in any way." Erika and Jessica also expressed that emotional self-regulation became a priority for them to maintain expectations and establish normalcy for students following trauma in school environments. The participants shared a belief that the ability to maintain a positive and accessible classroom environment directly correlated to their perceptions of delivering instruction to their highest performance ability.

Support from School Leadership

Additionally, most participants described how the school administration's responses to trauma in the school environment contributed to the ability to deliver quality instruction to their students in the immediate aftermath. Specifically, Margaret and Maryanne indicated a desire for more material resources for facilitating difficult conversations, such as effectively validating lived experiences and shared trauma across the school community. Comparatively, Jessica and Ken expressed their frustration over the desire to provide time for students, teachers, and the community to process and begin to heal from trauma without interrupting and disrupting students' educational acquisition and success. The participants share the belief that these experiences are consequential, and the administration’s responses directly contributed to the overall standard of accountability for students and subsequently, the instructional support for teachers.

Impact of School Culture and Organizational Health

All but one participant shared a negative impact and response to the overall school culture, specifically a lack of communication and transparency from leadership. Participants specifically identified social fracturing amongst faculty and staff being a consequence of distrust of leadership. Of the participants who noticed the decline of organizational health and school culture, three directly identified leadership as holding the most responsibility for creating and maintaining a healthy school culture. A few participants posited solutions or potential approaches to combatting re-traumatization and improving future response to traumas.

Specifically related to the shooting at the school park, participants had a shared feeling of anger towards leadership's poor communication in addressing teachers' concerns in terms of supporting and maintaining student success (Erika, Jessica, Margaret, and Maryanne). Ken acknowledged,

> During that time, they [school leadership] responded well, as well as you can in that kind of situation… I think school leadership has a really tough job because they can't tell you everything because they don't know everything. But there's an expectation that they should know more.

The participants acknowledged that the school leadership’s response and inadequately validating employees’ experiences directly correlated to the perception of value misalignment and a breakdown in organizational health.

Social fragmentation among staff was another refrain across interviews, with participants specifically noting concerns about how faculty responds to and treats one another, the diverse student population, and the community at large. Early in the interview, Erika remembered, “I was really, really angry and upset about…how I felt it [the park shooting] was being brushed off not only by my coworkers but also by the administration.” In comparison, Ken maintained that after traumatic experiences and exposures in school environments,

> You have to keep moving on. Like, you can’t just stop your life, you know when something horrible happens. Of course, it’s OK for a little bit, but it is really important to learn from that to make sure it never happens again.

A healthy school culture thrives on an improvement-oriented approach to recover from trauma (Bernhardt et al, 2022). This approach is necessary to open conversations to identify and take actions toward the prevention of future school violence and trauma exposure or experience.

Jessica illustrated the paradox weighing on a school’s overall health and culture when she asked and answered, “I also don't know the answer because at the end of the day, like, can we cancel school every time something bad happens? No, we can't do that.” Ken furthered this notion, connecting teachers’ ability to self-regulate by saying, “I see that as being, like, one of the biggest challenges is the expectations to come back to work the next day and try to be constant when you feel like you may not be constant yourself.” Jessica and Ken illustrate the tension and complexity of school culture and organizational health, including school leadership, in making the best decision possible to maintain support for students and create safe working and learning environments. There is evidence that returning to routine and consistency, a hallmark of education and language and literature instruction, is necessary to foster the effective processing and healing of trauma (Thomas et al., 2019; Berger et al., 2020; Pazur, 2021). However, when the trauma occurs in the school building, “returning to normal” does contribute to feelings of invalidation and disrespect of lived experiences and social-emotional needs for recovery.

The participants all acknowledged feeling like an effective and additive member of the school’s community was necessary for them to be confident in maintaining their professionalism and quality of work in the face of trauma recovery. Providing planning time, personal time, and dedicated time for community building among staff was noted by Maryanne, Erika, Jessica, and Margaret. Jessica also expressed that a major struggle in being able to move through their trauma in their work environment was having to “return to normal” the day following the park shooting. Margaret further considered the equity of the school leadership’s response to the school community at large, specifically suggesting,

> I wish we could have sent a letter home in every language to our kids and explain to parents what happened and given parents tools to help their kids at home. And then I wish they would have given us the day off and been more empathetic and, like, to understand how traumatic it is for us as students and teachers. I wish we had more, like, mental health support at school present daily. I don't know, even if that next day they made us go to school, maybe we did, like, an assembly or something and it was like available in multiple languages or things like that.

The feeling of unmet needs of safety and well-being of teachers and students contributes to a school culture of distrust and social fracturing. This interferes with the participants ability to have confidence in the school and community because of the value misalignment between major stakeholders. Specifically, these teachers express a lack of time for planning and delivering instruction, trust in leadership, and transparent and reliable communication and information. These were all perceived by the educators as a lack of empathy and care for staff and students.

Considerations for Remaining in the Classroom

Of the five participants, one had already left the classroom after their second year and expressed disinterest in returning to the classroom. Two expressed a decline in their desire to remain in the classroom, specifically in connection with getting relief from the mental and emotional toll inflicted on educators, as well as a need for respect and validation of lived experiences. Four of the participants reflected on the burden of expectations placed on teachers and the influence this has on their desire to remain in the profession. The participants shared a belief that outlandish expectations were placed on teachers in supporting students, especially when the community and school experienced trauma.

When asked about the desire to continue to teach and remain in the classroom, Erika said, “I don't know that I will ever go back to teaching at a high school level, largely because I think my opinions are so jaded.” She continued with an anecdote from when she was completing training to substitute teach for a different district after she left the classroom to pursue an advanced degree outside of the field of education. She explained the immediate resentment she felt towards this new school leadership was based solely on her experiences from the year previously at CAHS, such as invalidation and disrespect of teachers’ personal and emotional needs in the workplace and untransparent school-wide communication. Jessica and Maryanne both lamented their declining desire to continue being a teacher in the classroom, with Jessica confessing, “I don’t love it anymore where I’m like, oh, I can do this forever.” She also acknowledged a sentiment repeated across multiple interviews: *the kids can only keep you around for so long*. The participants show a clear emotional connection to their work with students and express a deep emotional toll in caring consistently for students’ learning, well-being, and safety when recovering from community trauma.

Similarly, Maryanne reflected the emotional burden and pressure placed on teachers in navigating trauma in school environments: “It’s so crushing, to be honest. It makes me think I can’t do this and that’s too much pressure. Do I need to find another profession where I’m not going to be asked to be every single thing to a family and a student and a parent? Other than *just* a teacher,” (emphasis to notate inflection). Negative school culture was a major factor for Erika, Jessica, and Maryanne in considering leaving the classroom or changing professions completely.

The responsibility of leadership in keeping a healthy school culture was also identified as a factor in the teachers losing the desire to remain in the classroom. Margaret explained, “If leadership isn’t aware of that [referring to a decline in behavior expectations] and they’re only focusing on the consequences, then it doesn’t do anything for us.” As Maryanne phrased it, “the empathy that needs to come from everyone [adults in the school community] involved,” when absent or insufficient, can hinder the ability for teachers to feel valued as a contributing member to the culture and community and worsen existing conflicts and tensions. This created a work environment that fostered mistrust and misalignment of values between groups or individuals and the school community and leadership.

Jessica contextualized the pressures teachers face in the profession, “when trauma is just compounded and compounded and then masses of people leave the industry, and then pandemic happens, and then we have to process trauma in a whole different way, our past trauma isn’t ever actually processed.” Maryanne reflected on what these pressures implied for her as a career educator and affecting her instruction and embraced giving “myself grace because there may be a day where I’m like, we’re going to watch this movie and we’re going to do this analysis and it doesn’t happen because I just have no more to give.” The teachers have the knowledge to decide when a reprioritization of social-emotional well-being over academic standards is appropriate for their ability to self-regulate and effectively maintain a productive classroom environment.

The participants indicated their career longevity was highly influenced by the expectations placed on teachers as they play an unequivocal role in raising future generations. There was intense pressure being placed on teachers to “fix” difficult situations or have all the information and solutions desired by students, supervisors, and families, which was a detriment to the sustainability of being an educator (Jessica and Maryanne). For Maryanne, she described feeling the “guilt of we have to do everything, and we have to solve all of society’s problems” and the great emotional burden often attributed to professional burnout. Ken addressed the typical personality qualities of teachers and people drawn to the classroom (being caring, responsible, curious, etc.) as contributing to their resiliency and ability to remain in the classroom. He explains, “that can be really hard on teachers because sometimes they want to take a step back, but then they also know they have to be there for their kids.” The participants represent the embodied paradox of wanting to remain in the classroom and feeling commitment and dedication to their students with a growing need to feel validated and fulfilled in the profession as a classroom teacher.

Discussion

Findings Analysis

These participants engage in deeply relational work and use their emotional connection and passion for their work to provide quality education and serve their students to the best of their abilities. When schools navigate trauma, the organization's health and sustainability is established on the ability of individual teachers to distinguish personal and professional boundaries. These educators navigated the expectations of their profession with the emotional burden of caring and grieving for students.

It is a common motivator of educators to be deeply passionate about the work they do in developing and engaging with their students, and they are fulfilled in their work with students (Wolfsdorf et al., 2022; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2009). The emotional investment put into the education of their students can become an emotional drain on these ELA teachers in their efforts to navigate trauma in school environments for themselves and students as human beings.

Emotional Responses to Trauma

Traumatic experiences and exposures in work environments have a deep and lasting impact on all stakeholders involved. Critically, the relational work and need for trauma-informed ELA instruction can become more of an emotional burden, leading to burnout. When faced with responsibilities of the job that go beyond content and instruction, the teachers in this study shared a sense of frustration over a lack of preparation. There is not a way to “prepare” for trauma in school environments, but teachers desire trauma-informed professional development, training and workshopping for coping strategies and emotional regulation as well as support in the form of pre-made materials or resources and time for planning and application. These teachers’ responses demonstrate that a perceived lack of training, preparation, and support creates distrust and apathy between school leadership and the educators serving the students. This will contribute to an unhealthy school organization, a key component of professional burnout and high teacher attrition.

Teachers also shared that the expectations placed on them outside of content and instruction were extreme and unreasonable. Specifically, teachers grappled with whether they should be expected to, at some point in their career, put their life on the line. Furthermore, it is concerning what is communicated to teachers, current and perspective, when they are underpaid, under-supported, and overwhelmed.

The teachers' emotional responses to trauma also instigate a greater need for leadership to provide for the safety and well-being of their employees. If the teachers are responsible for the students' learning and well-being, school leadership should be responsible for their employees' well-being, safety, and success in the workplace. As multiple participants mentioned in our interviews, teachers want leadership to be proactive in providing instructional and mental health resources in the face of trauma to alleviate this high burden. Additionally, teachers would feel more validated and respected as additive members of the organization if they had more opportunity to have a voice at the table. This includes knowing that school-wide communication from leadership and fellow staff will be transparent and collaborative, major decisions impacting the school culture and community will involve input from across stakeholders, and direct validation and respect for the personal toll on teachers working with students, regardless of whether they are actively processing trauma. Beyond the acknowledgment of the emotional burden, leadership should be responsible for ensuring a trauma-informed culture across the school by providing resources of trauma recovery, trauma-informed instruction, and seeking community partnerships[13].

Perceptions of Instruction

Overall, these secondary language and literacy teachers showed a developing reprioritization away from solely academics and standards. A key tenet of these classes is the development of strong academic communication and working to communicate and relate on the most basic level requires the basic needs of *everyone* to be met. The Colorado Department of Education does mandate the use of the Common Core State Standards in public schools. For literature and language educators, this framework triangulates the academic measurement for success into reading, writing, and speaking and listening. This expectation is mostly content-based, focusing on a one-size-fits-all education to prepare students to be successful.

The standardization and westernization in education, with language and literature educators facing increased public scrutiny and policy over-reach, is already problematic from an equity standpoint. There is no consideration or integration of the traumas and needs students bring with them into the classroom. Unsurprisingly, homogenous academic standards also show no regard for the traumas and disruptions in educational environments teachers and students are expected to navigate more and more frequently.

All teachers are also held professionally accountable to the Teacher Quality Standards, outlining the elements of an effective educator in Colorado. These elements include expert content knowledge, instructional and pedagogical practices, extra-curricular involvement (e.g., displaying leadership by being a sports coach or club sponsor), development of and contribution to an inclusive and equitable learning environment, and inter-personal professional conduct.

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[13] For example, Resilient Futures is a Denver non-profit that provides “trauma-informed, equity-centered programming” for schools and workplaces to effectively navigate traumas as an organization.

Teachers are assessed on these expectations through observations from leadership, many of whom are not content or pedagogical experts, nor do they regularly interact with the students' learning in any substantive way. The language and literacy teachers in this study acknowledged the performative nature of the observations for professional assessment. Teachers enact the script of these standards, creating a false sense that teachers need to go “above and beyond” to be “highly effective.” The observations become less about the development and accountability of teachers and more so about placing the full onus of students' emotional, mental, and physical well-being on the teachers.

After traumatic experiences and exposures in school environments, ELA teachers are concerned with building socioemotional instruction, reprioritizing instructional objectives, and observably performing their professional expectations. The teachers in this study all commented that school and learning are not always (or often) the students' top priority. And because of the relational work and their natural implementation of trauma-informed practices based on their own common sense, these ELA teachers' top priority was not always the content or academic assessment. They emphasized the significance of the consistency and routine that public schools provide, a consequential element in social and academic development (e.g., Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs). ELA teachers have practiced using social-emotional learning strategies and trauma-informed practices to balance acknowledging and respecting trauma with facilitating opportunities and environments for students to heal and learn. The participants in this study affirmed that their re-alignment of instruction towards social-emotional development and well-being was a beneficial coping strategy in processing their own traumatic experiences and exposures in their working environments.

Reprioritizing SEL instruction in secondary ELA instruction is also a way to benefit educators by establishing healthy professional and personal boundaries. By regularly instructing with trauma-informed practices and a whole-student approach, secondary ELA teachers are regularly modeling and therefore practicing emotional regulation and developing their frustration tolerance.

The participants of this study shared the language of “giving grace” and “taking care of myself before I can help others.” They also noted responses (from self and others) to trauma in school environments as a detriment and likely drain on their desire to remain teaching language and literature, at the secondary level or in general, for the near future. It is irresponsible and unsustainable to make a job “their whole life” and to underpay teachers and expect them to perform social miracles. Supporting teachers in establishing trauma-informed teaching practices will foster sustainable teaching practices, ultimately improving teacher retention and satisfaction.

Impact of School Culture and Organizational Health

School leadership should be responsible for the school culture, and the perceived neglect or decline of organizational health is fueled by negative perceptions of school leadership. School culture is the (mis)alignment of values and the way the social contract of professional accountability is upheld and enforced. This involves the schools’ behavior expectations and discipline procedures, grading policies, cleanliness, communication etiquette, and much more. As contracted employees, public school teachers are beholden to their district's employee manual as individuals. But as a member and active participant of an organization, the mission and vision serve as the root for establishing values and the practices necessary to uphold and enact those values. However, school leadership is responsible for and to their employees to ensure the values are clear, relevant, and equitable in the mission and vision statements that are transferable and applicable to educators' professional success. When this is not the case, the organization's health declines due to this misalignment and fracturing of the staff community.

Language and literature teachers are often deferred to as additional mental health support, largely in correlation to the strong connection between the content and need for trauma-informed approaches (Dutro, 2011; Dunn, 2022). The participants and I have previously received requests from deans, counselors, and other core-content teachers requesting us to assign self-reflections for "struggling" groups of students or to work in behavior interventions into regular instruction in addition to the content.

These extra-professional expectations place an undue and unfair burden on ELA educators. It pushes the narrative that "teaching the whole student" in the ELA classroom includes so much more than content to a level that goes beyond what is reasonable of a career professional in their workplace and may require training and expertise in providing mental health care. Furthermore, when the values and procedures stated by the mission and vision statements are not fully upheld by school leadership, staff will grow distrustful of that leadership and, by extension, others that they do not directly and often interact with professionally. As Jessica and Maryanne noted from their experiences as teacher leaders, the decline of organizational health creates a competitive, almost combative, working environment and contributes significantly to the on-set of burn-out and high teacher attrition (Kim, 2021).

Considerations for Remaining in the Classroom

Experiences and exposure to trauma in school environments has a clear impact on these participants' desire to remain in the classroom. Erika directly discussed her disappointment in leaderships' response to these events and feelings of receiving inadequate support to process and navigate these traumas alongside her students has made her hesitant to return to the classroom as an English Language Arts/Development teacher. Both Maryanne and Jessica admitted feeling guilty that they had considered leaving because they felt their dedication to their students should compensate for being emotionally exhausted and burnt-out. While they did not explicitly mention considering leaving the field, both Ken and Margaret reflected on emotional exhaustion having an observable toll on feeling motivated in their work as educators, and that they were having to work on regaining their joy for teaching (e.g., Muhammad, 2023).

Contribution to Field

This study set out to answer the question: how does trauma in the school environment impact secondary Colorado English Language Arts teachers' perception of their instruction and ability to remain in the classroom? Most research into traumatic experiences and exposures in school environments has focused solely on the impacts on students learning and development, but there has been less substantive research into the impacts and needs of care providers such as teachers. Since the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted schooling and education, more research has been conducted into the need to accommodate and improve educators mental and physical health, especially on sustainable teaching to combat high teacher attrition. My study contributes its specific focus on individual interpretations on the phenomenon of trauma in school environments and the impact those experiences and exposures have on secondary ELA teachers.

Overall, findings from an interpretive phenomenological analysis revealed that participants had common insights about navigating trauma in their instruction and classroom management. Further analysis is needed to fully understand the contributions of school leadership in supporting those supporting the students. This extends to the effective establishment of trauma-informed schools and districts, specifically the implications for combatting the high teacher attrition rate and a global teacher shortage. The treatment and support of educators is crucial in the age of rising violence and social disruptions interfering in the function and operation of schools.

Implications and Future Research

Through my research and discussion on trauma in school environments and the impacts on teachers and students, a clear trend of when research such as this gets conducted arose. The research I followed yielded sources from three general time periods; the early- to mid-2000s, the 2010s, and the 2020s. In context of the topic of trauma in school environments, these periods line up with studies and discussions regarding, respectively: the Columbine High School Shooting and the September 11th terrorist attacks; The massacres at Sandy Hook Elementary School and Parkland High School; the COVID-19 pandemic.

We cannot keep waiting until the next major act of violence, social disruption, or other major traumatic incidents affecting school environments to discuss this issue. If we are to operate in a society that is increasingly apathetic and ambivalent to youth violence and mass gun violence, especially in and around schools, then we need to be constantly and proactively discussing trauma, building resilience in the face of trauma, establishing healthy coping strategies and routines, and enriching curriculum through SEL and TIP to further mitigate and protect students from harm and violence.

Traumatic exposure and experience in school environments is occurring more often and to a more severe degree, with trends of physical violence, bullying (mostly through online platforms and social medias) and mass gun violence increasing. The COVID-19 pandemic worsened social tensions and inequities, and the lasting impacts on all teachers', not exclusively English Language Arts and Development, working conditions and students' learning environments should be addressed more comprehensively. Despite the extensive research in the fields of psychology and education on the detriment trauma has on students' academic and social development, there is a significant dearth of research on the experiences, interpretations, and needs of the educators serving those students. Especially in the age when youth violence is more visible and volatile than ever, it is important for educators' personal needs to be met and that responsibility should fall on the school leadership.

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