

Research Article

# Building a Foundation of Support: An Investigative Study on EPP Programs and In-Service Teacher Perceptions of Trauma-Informed Practices

Jasmine Johnson<sup>1,\*</sup> , Courtney Golden<sup>2</sup> , Melodie Cha<sup>1</sup> 

<sup>1</sup>Education Department, Southern Adventist University, Collegedale, The United States

<sup>2</sup>Education Department, Oakwood University, Huntsville, The United States

## Abstract

This study examined the effectiveness of Educator Preparation Programs (EPPs) in equipping in-service teachers to address cultural awareness, opportunities of empowerment, positive relationships, and safe learning environments (COPS) for students who have experienced trauma. Recognizing the significant impact of trauma on student learning and behavior, this research underscored the necessity of integrating trauma-informed practices into EPPs. The study used a mixed-methods approach to collect quantitative data via a 5-point Likert-scale survey and qualitative data through semi-structured interviews. Participants from various K-12 schools in a private district within the southeastern United States were recruited using convenience sampling, with data collection conducted online and via virtual Zoom interviews. A total of 62 subjects participated in the study, with 10 participants interviewed. The findings revealed no significant differences in teacher perceptions found in the comprehension and application of COPS for gender, race, age, grade level taught, years of experience, and where the teacher obtained certification. A significant main effect was found in teachers' perceptions of safety among professional characteristics, specifically with teaching positions. The study also highlighted that integrating cultural awareness in trauma-informed practices involves fostering awareness and sensitivity to students' diverse backgrounds, emphasizing empowerment through self-advocacy and confidence, and providing emotional and practical support. Positive teacher-student relationships are built through open communication, support, and personal connections, creating a safe environment for students. Additionally, positive peer relationships are encouraged through collaborative learning and positive social environments. Supportive structures and communication strategies are essential for helping students experiencing trauma stress, ensuring they receive comprehensive trauma support. The study's thematic analysis and descriptive statistics provided a comprehensive view of teachers' preparedness and experiences, offering valuable insights for enhancing EPPs supporting teachers with students affected by trauma. During interviews, 80% of teachers expressed dissatisfaction with their EPP's support and preparedness regarding trauma-informed practices. This underscores the critical need for comprehensive training through EPPs for teachers to implement trauma-informed practices effectively. This research contributes to the ongoing effort to improve educator preparation when addressing student trauma in educational settings.

## Keywords

Educator Preparation Program (EPP), Trauma-informed, Pre-service Teachers, In-service Teachers, Cultural Awareness, Empowerment, Positive Relationships, Safe Learning Environments

\*Corresponding author: [jnjohnson@southern.edu](mailto:jnjohnson@southern.edu) (Jasmine Johnson)

**Received:** 15 January 2025; **Accepted:** 20 February 2025; **Published:** 11 March 2025



Copyright: © The Author(s), 2025. Published by Science Publishing Group. This is an **Open Access** article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

## 1. Introduction

In recent years, there has been a growing recognition of the impact of trauma on a student's learning and behavior in educational settings [7]. In response to this understanding, integrating the teaching of trauma-informed practices as an integral component of educator preparation programs is critical [16]. This study aimed to investigate the preparedness of in-service teachers in applying trauma-informed skills and practices specific to cultural awareness, opportunities of empowerment, positive teacher-student and peer relationships, and safe classroom environments (COPS) in modern classrooms, with the theory and skills acquired during their educator preparation program (EPP).

## 2. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the preparation of in-service teachers on trauma-informed practices, intending to identify strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities for improvement in EPPs. Additionally, the study sought to ensure that students who have experienced trauma receive appropriate support and that teachers are equipped with the knowledge and skills necessary to create safe, nurturing, and responsive learning environments for students. The study's research question was: How have EPPs prepared in-service teachers on the concepts of cultural awareness, opportunities of empowerment, creating positive relationships, and cultivating safe learning environments in response to students who have experienced trauma? The results of this study contribute to the well-being and academic success of students who have experienced trauma, as well as the professional development of teachers.

## 3. Literature Review

### 3.1. Trauma

Trauma can result from various distressing events, affecting students' emotional and psychological well-being, leading to challenges in learning, behavior, and academic performance [2, 6]. Recognizing trauma's impact is crucial for creating effective learning environments across all educational levels [9, 10, 19]. Trauma-informed instruction addresses these challenges by creating safe, supportive classrooms that accommodate trauma's effects. Key principles include safety, trust, and empowerment [16]. Training educators in trauma-informed practices significantly enhance their empathy, strategies, and self-care, fostering better student outcomes [12].

### 3.2. Cultural Awareness

Integrating cultural awareness with trauma-informed prac-

tices enhances teachers' responsiveness to diverse student populations [1]. Cultural awareness involves understanding different groups' values, beliefs, and behaviors and how these influence students' experiences, particularly those affected by trauma [3, 12]. However, teachers often misinterpret trauma-related behaviors as defiance, highlighting a need for comprehensive educator training [12]. Developing cultural awareness through ongoing education and self-reflection is crucial for creating inclusive, empathetic classrooms. This approach requires overcoming systemic barriers and biases, emphasizing the importance of continual trauma-informed training [12].

### 3.3. Opportunities of Empowerment

Student empowerment involves giving students autonomy in their learning, allowing them to make informed choices and pursue educational goals. Bulanda and Johnson (2015) emphasize the importance of involving youth in program development to foster empowerment, particularly for those who have experienced trauma. Trauma often leaves children feeling powerless and emotionally vacant, leading to struggles with trust and self-esteem [15]. Empowering students enhances their motivation, self-regulation, and academic achievement by instilling a sense of competence, impact, and choice. Creating motivating, empowering classrooms is crucial for both academic success and life beyond school [14].

### 3.4. Positive Relationships

Childhood trauma and toxic relationships can have lasting negative effects on mental health, but stable, positive relationships with caring adults can mitigate these impacts [15, 20, 22]. Professionals should nurture healthy relationships, as they are crucial for recovery. Positive relationships between teachers, students, peers, staff, and families, characterized by trust and support, are essential for student success, especially those impacted by trauma [9, 18]. Research shows that strong peer relationships can reduce traumatic stress at specific developmental stages, underscoring the importance of trauma-informed, strengths-based educational approaches [2, 21].

### 3.5. Safety

The rise in K-12 student trauma highlights the need for safe, supportive school environments that prioritize physical, emotional, and relational safety [2]. Trauma-informed practices offer a framework to address students' sensitive needs by focusing on safety, connection, and emotional regulation [7]. Effective strategies include cultural awareness, clear expectations, and supportive routines, while unsafe teacher behaviors—like uneven rule enforcement—should be avoided. Despite the benefits, challenges like limited resources and

insufficient training hinder implementation. A holistic, systemwide approach is essential to promote recovery, resilience, and growth in trauma-affected students [16].

### 3.6. EPP Preparation on Trauma-Informed Practices

Educator Preparation Programs (EPPs) are crucial in preparing teachers for the complexities of the classroom, especially in adopting trauma-informed practices, a need heightened by the COVID-19 pandemic [12]. While some EPPs have integrated trauma-informed content, many pre-service teachers feel inadequately prepared to support trauma-affected students [1, 11]. Challenges include variability in curricula, limited resources, and resistance to change [13]. To address these gaps, EPPs must comprehensively integrate trauma-informed practices, ensuring teachers are equipped to support students' academic, emotional, and social needs [6, 16].

## 4. Research Methodology

### 4.1. Research Design

This study employed a mixed-methods design to assess in-service teachers' preparedness in implementing trauma-informed practices. Quantitative data from a 5-point Likert-scale survey explored teachers' experiences and perceptions of trauma-informed practices and their Educator Preparation Programs (EPPs) effectiveness. Qualitative data from semi-structured interviews provided deeper insights into teachers' experiences and suggestions for EPP improvements. Convenience sampling recruited participants from K-12 schools in a Southeast U.S. private district, with data collected online and via Zoom. Thematic analysis and descriptive statistics offered a comprehensive view of teacher preparedness, contributing to enhancing trauma-informed teacher training. Ethical considerations were prioritized throughout the data collection process.

### 4.2. Participants and Sampling

This study involved 62 teachers, with a notable gender disparity - 45 females (72.6%) and 17 males (27.4%). The age distribution was fairly even across middle to older age ranges: 12 participants (19.4%) aged 21-30, 11 (17.7%) aged 31-40, 11 (17.7%) aged 51-60, and 10 (16.1%) aged 61-70. The sample exhibited racial diversity, comprised of 25 Caucasians (40.3%), 24 Black or African-Americans (38.7%), 4 Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish Origin individuals (6.5%), 3 of Caribbean Origin (4.8%), and 1 Asian participant (1.6%). In terms of professional qualifications, 15 teachers (24.2%) held Master's level certifications, 12 (19.4%) completed Teacher Certification Courses, and 3 (4.8%) had other certifications. The par-

ticipants were almost evenly split between the current employment levels of elementary (34 teachers, 54.8%) and secondary (28 teachers, 45.2%). A significant majority (48 teachers, 77.4%) were general education teachers, while 11 (12.9%) were specialists in areas such as art, music, or physical education, and 6 (9.7%) held other teaching positions. The sample represented a wide range of teaching experience: 17 teachers (27.4%) had over 26 years of experience, forming the largest group. This was followed by 15 teachers (24.2%) with 6-10 years, 13 (21.0%) with 1-5 years, 7 (11.3%) with 21-25 years, and 5 teachers each (8.1%) in the 11-15- and 16-20-year ranges. This diverse sample comprehensively represents educators across various demographics, experience levels, and teaching contexts.

**Table 1.** Demographic of Participants.

Characteristics	N	%
Gender		
Female	45	72.6
Male		
Race		
Asian	1	1.6
Black or African-American	24	38.7
Caucasian	25	40.3
Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish Origin	4	6.5
Caribbean Origin	3	4.8
Age Range (years)		
21-30	12	19.4
31-40	11	17.7
51-60	11	17.7
61-70	10	16.1
Obtained Certificate		
Other	3	4.8
Teacher Certification Courses	12	19.4
Master's level certification	15	24.2
Current Employment		
Secondary	28	45.2
Elementary	34	54.8
Teaching Position		
Other	6	9.7
Specialist (art, music, physical education)	11	12.9
General education teacher	48	77.4
Years of Teaching		

Characteristics	N	%
Gender		
1-5 years	13	21.0
6-10 years	15	24.2
11-15 years	5	8.1
16-20 years	5	8.1
21-25 years	7	11.3
26+ years	17	27.4

Note. N = 62

### 4.3. Permission and Participant Protection

There were no harmful consequences to those involved in the study. Participants were recruited through invitations from their school district conference, who announced the opportunity to participate. Teachers could choose whether to participate or withdraw at any time. To facilitate their involvement, assistance was provided through digital communication via phone calls and email. Ethical guidelines were strictly followed, and participants were provided with informed consent forms. Ethical considerations were carefully addressed throughout the research process. The survey responses were kept confidential and accessible only to the investigators and the university's committee members, as required. All data were safeguarded per the committee and IRB's policies. The collected data were stored in a password-protected Excel database. They were retained for five years and configured through Google program settings to automatically and permanently delete from electronic systems after the five-year period. Additionally, the authors declare no conflicts of interest concerning this article's research, authorship, or publication.

### 4.4. Data Collection

Participants were sent a link to a Google survey. The survey gave background information and included the respondent's consent to continue. The participants answered questions that included demographics, EPP training experience, and their knowledge of COPS (Cultural Awareness, Opportunities of Empowerment, Positive Relationships, and Safety). The contact information of the primary researchers was listed on the survey for any questions. Participation was completely voluntary. Incentives such as gift cards were offered to participants upon survey completion and interview to encourage participation. Data was collected from various K-12 schools in a private district within the Southeast United States region. A total of 62 subjects participated in the study, with 10 participants interviewed. Sufficient participation was low within the two-week timeframe. Participants were given one additional

week to submit responses. Once all data was collected from the questionnaire and interviews were completed, the researchers analyzed the data and proceeded with the study.

## 5. Data Analysis

The survey was analyzed through SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) and JASP (Jeffrey's Amazing Statistics Program). A MANOVA analysis was done to evaluate if there were significance between the independent and dependent variables. The independent variables consisted of demographic factors (gender, race, and age), professional characteristics (the grade level they teach, teaching position, years of experience), and educational background (certification origin). These were analyzed against four dependent variables: (1) cultural awareness, (2) opportunities for empowerment, (3) positive teacher-student relationships, and (4) safe learning environments, collectively referred to as COPS. This analysis aimed to uncover significant associations between the sets of variables, providing insights into how teachers' backgrounds and characteristics might relate to their perceptions and practices in these key educational areas. The analysis of interview data was conducted using both QDA-Miner software and manual thematic analysis techniques. This ongoing process was done by creating, grouping, reviewing, revising, and finalizing the themes. This analysis helps us understand how EPPs affect trauma-informed education by examining teacher backgrounds and training factors. It demonstrates how effectively EPPs prepare teachers to promote students' well-being by focusing on cultural awareness, opportunities of empowerment, positive relationships, and safe learning environments.

## 6. Results

### 6.1. Quantitative Analysis

A one-way Manova was conducted to determine if there were significant differences in teacher perceptions of dependent variables: cultural awareness, opportunities of empowerment, positive relationships, and safety (COPS) by independent variables: demographic factors (gender, race, and age), professional characteristics (the grade level they teach, teaching position, years of experience), and educational background (certification). There were no significant differences in teacher perceptions found in the comprehension and application of COPS for gender (Wilks' Lambda = 0.856,  $F = 2.397$ ,  $p = 0.061$ ), race (Wilks' Lambda = 0.774,  $F = 1.918$ ,  $p = 0.064$ ), age (Wilks' Lambda = 0.788,  $F = 0.840$ ,  $p = 0.639$ ), the grade level they teach (Wilks' Lambda = 0.982,  $F = 0.266$ ,  $p = 0.899$ ), years of experience (Wilks' Lambda = 0.696,  $F = 1.021$ ,  $p = 0.440$ ), and where they obtained their certification (Wilks' Lambda = 0.867,  $F = 1.038$ ,  $p = 0.412$ ). Teachers' perceptions of safety were significantly influenced by their

professional characteristics, particularly their teaching positions (Wilks' Lambda = 0.749,  $F(2, 217) = 2.174$ ,  $p = 0.035$ ). Subsequent univariate ANOVAs confirmed significant differences in perceived safety based on teaching positions ( $F(1, 217) = 5.487$ ,  $p = 0.007$ ).

### 6.1.1. Cultural Awareness

The Cultural Awareness scale ( $M = 3.157$ ,  $SD = 1.022$ ) demonstrated a moderate level of trauma-informed practices among participants (Figure 1). The mean score slightly exceeds the scale's midpoint, ranging from 1 (Most Trauma-Informed) to 5 (Least Trauma-Informed). This variable had the highest standard deviation among all measures, indicating considerable response variability (see Figure 1).

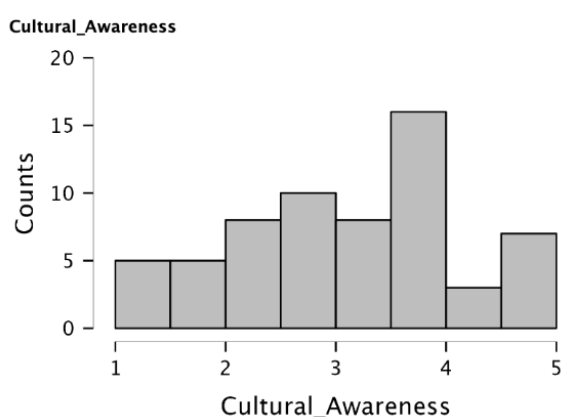


Figure 1. Descriptive Statistics: Cultural Awareness.

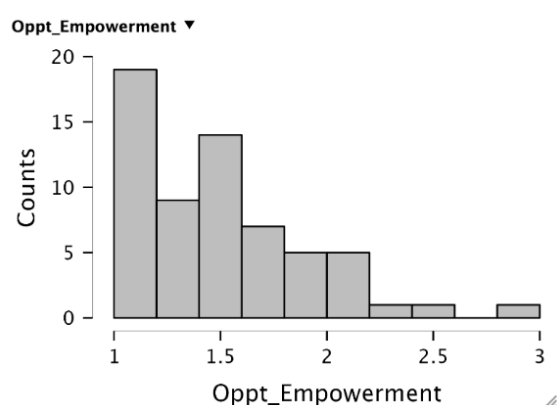


Figure 2. Descriptive Statistics: Opportunities of Empowerment.

### 6.1.2. Opportunities of Empowerment

The Opportunities of Empowerment scale ( $M = 1.493$ ,  $SD = 0.439$ ) reported high levels of trauma-informed practices among participants (Figure 2). The range was from 1 (Most Trauma-Informed) to 5 (Least Trauma-Informed). The low mean score exceeded the scale's midpoint; this revealed that respondents generally found it important to provide opportunities that empower students (see Figure 2).

### 6.1.3. Positive Relationships

The Positive Relationships scale ( $M = 1.622$ ,  $SD = 0.385$ ) revealed a strong tendency towards trauma-informed practices in building interpersonal connections (Figure 3). With a range from 1 (Most Trauma-Informed) to 5 (Least Trauma-Informed), the mean score exceeds the scale's midpoint, indicating that participants generally reported positive relationship dynamics. This variable had a low standard deviation (see Figure 3).

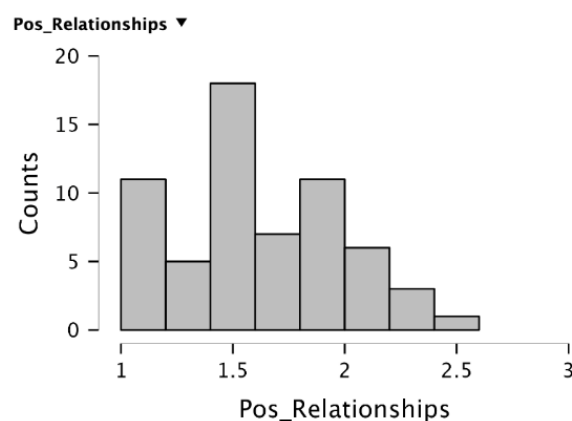


Figure 3. Descriptive Statistics: Positive Relationships.

### 6.1.4. Safety

Safety was found to be the strongest aspect of the respondents' understanding of trauma-informed practices ( $M = 1.355$ ,  $SD = 0.346$ ) (Figure 4). The low mean score exceeds the scale's midpoint with a range from 1 (Most Trauma-Informed) to 5 (Least Trauma-Informed). This variable was the lowest among all the variables, indicating that participants consistently reported high levels of perceived or implemented safety measures. The small standard deviation emphasizes the similarity of responses among the participants (see Figure 4).

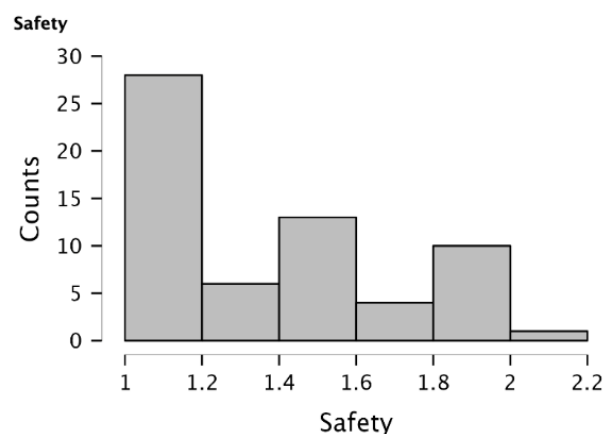


Figure 4. Descriptive Statistics: Safety.



### 6.1.5. EPP Preparation on Trauma-Informed Practices

#### (i). Trauma Training

“Trauma Training” refers to the survey question, “During your pre-service teacher training, how much training in childhood trauma did you receive?” The majority of participants reported receiving little to no training in trauma. Specifically, 48.4% ( $n = 30$ ) indicated they had received no trauma training, while 46.8% ( $n = 29$ ) reported receiving some training. Only a small fraction, 4.8% ( $n = 3$ ), stated they had received a great deal of trauma training (see Figure 5).

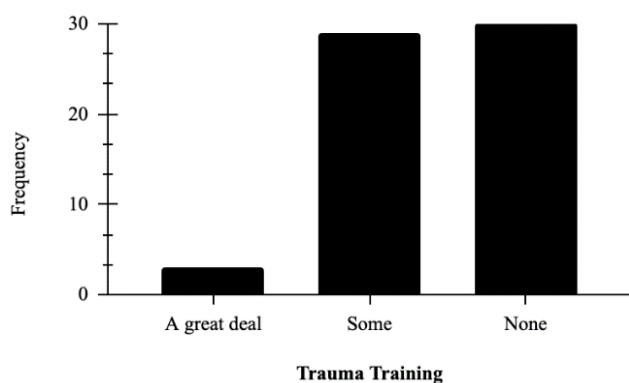


Figure 5. Trauma Training.

#### (ii). Stress Training

“Stress Training” refers to the survey question, “During your pre-service teacher training, how much training in supporting students experiencing child traumatic stress did you receive?” Most participants reported minimal training in supporting students experiencing child-traumatic stress. Half of the participants (50.0%,  $n = 31$ ) indicated they had received no stress training, while 46.8% ( $n = 29$ ) reported receiving some training. 3.2% ( $n = 2$ ) stated they had received a great deal of stress training (see Figure 6).



Figure 6. Stress Training.

#### (iii). Trauma Preparation

“Trauma Preparation” refers to the survey question, “How adequately or inadequately do you feel your pre-service training prepared you to support students with child traumatic stress?” Participants generally felt underprepared for dealing with trauma. The largest group, 46.8% ( $n = 29$ ), felt inadequately prepared, followed by 25.8% ( $n = 16$ ) who were neutral. Only 3.2% ( $n = 2$ ) felt very adequately prepared, with 11.3% ( $n = 7$ ) feeling adequately prepared. 12.9% ( $n = 8$ ) felt very inadequately prepared (see Figure 7).

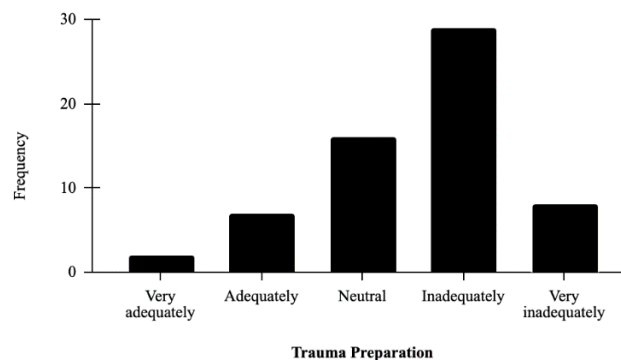


Figure 7. Trauma Preparation.

#### (iv). Training Satisfaction

“Training Satisfaction” refers to the survey question, “How satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the pre-service training you received on supporting students with child traumatic stress?” Overall satisfaction with pre-service trauma training was low. The largest group, 37.1% ( $n = 23$ ), reported feeling inadequately satisfied with their training. This was followed by 27.4% ( $n = 17$ ) who were neutral and 17.7% ( $n = 11$ ) who felt adequately satisfied. A significant portion, 16.1% ( $n = 10$ ), felt very inadequately satisfied, while only 1.6% ( $n = 1$ ) reported being very adequately satisfied with their training (see Figure 8).

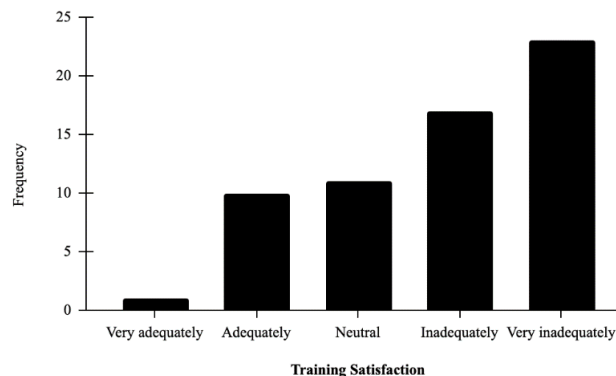


Figure 8. Training Satisfaction.

## 6.2. Qualitative Analysis

*Research Question and Corresponding Themes (See Table 2)*

**Table 2.** Research Question and Corresponding Themes.

Research Question	Themes from Interview Data
How have EPPs prepared in-service teachers on the concepts of cultural awareness, opportunities of empowerment, creating positive relationships, and cultivating safe learning environments in response to students who have experienced trauma?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) Awareness and Sensitivity</li> <li>2) Self-Advocacy and Confidence</li> <li>3) Emotional and Practical Support</li> <li>4) Open Communication and Support</li> <li>5) Building Personal Relationships</li> <li>6) Creating a Safe Environment</li> <li>7) Collaborative Learning</li> <li>8) Positive Social Environment</li> <li>9) Supportive Structures and Communication Strategies</li> <li>10) Comprehensive Trauma Support</li> <li>11) Preparation Challenges</li> <li>12) Supportive Approach</li> <li>13) Acknowledgement of Preparation</li> </ol>

### 6.2.1. Theme 1: Cultural Awareness

The Cultural Awareness in Trauma-informed Practices theme focused on the importance of cultural awareness in supporting students dealing with trauma in educational settings. It highlighted the need to understand and respect the diverse cultural backgrounds of students, recognizing that trauma experiences vary from person to person. One sub-theme reflected the responses that characterized these teachers' experiences of Cultural Awareness in Trauma-Informed Practices: (1) Awareness and Sensitivity.

#### *Awareness and Sensitivity*

An identified sub-theme was awareness and sensitivity, which focused on creating a safe environment where teachers support students in expressing needs, managing emotions, and forming peer relationships. Subject/Interview [1] and Subject/Interview [2] revealed the crucial role of educators in fostering self-advocacy and confidence by creating supportive environments and approaching challenges with empathy and understanding. This was the overall attitude of the educators towards cultural awareness and trauma-informed practices.

"Cultural awareness for me what that is, is just creating an environment that is safe enough for you to be able to communicate with your students on a regular basis, whereby you understand that child's needs within the classroom, and you create an environment whereby the child is safe enough to self-regulate, and is able to relate well with their peers. So, you give them the coping skills to be able to do that." - Subject/Interview [1]

"I would say that any kind of approach in any kind of trauma has to come from an area where you can be empathetic. You have to try as best you can to see that current situation through the eyes of the student who's going through it, not necessarily through the lens of how you were brought up." - Subject/Interview [2]

### 6.2.2. Theme 2: Student Empowerment

The theme of Student Empowerment emerged from the analysis, showing how teachers work to make students feel confident and safe while celebrating their cultures. The responses highlighted a key aspect that defined the teachers' experiences regarding Student Empowerment: (1) Self Advocacy and Confidence.

#### *Self-Advocacy and Confidence*

The emergent sub-theme for student empowerment was self-advocacy and confidence. Subject/Interview [3] highlighted the importance of empowering students to speak up for themselves when faced with challenges such as bullying. By acknowledging and praising the students for advocating for themselves, the teacher reinforces the importance of self-advocacy and encourages confidence. Similarly, Subject/Interview [2] emphasized the significance of helping students recognize their own agency and control over their circumstances. Educators can empower students to navigate obstacles with confidence and perseverance by fostering a sense of autonomy and resilience. Subject/Interview [4] reinforced this sub-theme by underscoring the power of education in instilling confidence and self-belief in students. Fos-

tering positive change, educators play a vital role in building students' confidence, enabling them to realize their potential and advocate for themselves effectively. This theme highlighted the educators' attitude towards fostering self-advocacy and confidence among students, empowering them to assert themselves and navigate challenges with resilience and determination.

“advocate for themselves.” - Subject/Interview [3]

“One of the big things that we try to do is help them to realize that they do have control over some things... they feel powerless. But.. they actually do have some type of autonomy over something” - Subject/Interview [2]

“build confidence they never thought they had, because God can give that to us.” - Subject/Interview [4]

### 6.2.3. Theme 3: Building Positive Teacher-Student Relationships

The Building Positive Teacher-Student Relationships theme revolved around teachers communicating openly, creating a safe atmosphere, and forming personal connections with students. Overall, the theme highlighted how nurturing positive teacher-student relationships can create supportive environments where students thrive emotionally and academically. The responses indicated two main areas that described the teachers' experiences with Student Empowerment: (1) Open Communication and Support and (2) Building Personal Relationships.

#### (i). Open Communication and Support

A key sub-theme was open communication and support, which involves educators being accessible and fostering open communication with students. Subject 6/Interviewee 6 commented that educators are now available through various channels like email or text messages, making it easier for students to reach out for help. Similarly, Subject/Interview [1] emphasized the importance of building relationships with students and creating a supportive atmosphere where they feel valued. This was the overall attitude of the educators towards open communication and support; fostering open communication can improve teacher-student relationships and enhance learning.

“...to communicate with the students, you can email me, you can text. Now we're available” - Subject/Interview [6]

“... it's not so much to get to know the student, and to get into building a rapport with the student, and to foster a more encouraging atmosphere that would allow the student to feel that they belong, no matter where they are on the spectrum of learning.” - Subject/Interview [1]

#### (ii). Building Personal Relationships

Another identified sub-theme for building Positive Teacher-Student Relationships was building personal relationships, which focused on teachers connecting with students personally. Subject/Interviewee [2] mentioned spending time with students outside of class, like going fishing. Subject/Interview [4] brought up being friendly and open with students so they feel comfortable talking and asking questions. This reflected

educators' general approach to cultivating personal relationships, highlighting the importance of teachers forming personal bonds with students to enhance learning experiences for all.

“There are more opportunities outside of the classroom that lend themselves to enable us to build those relationships with the students. And then as you know, you get to know them a little better. And you might find areas of shared interests, you know, maybe I'll take a student and we'll go out fishing. Just areas outside of the classroom where you can connect and now you get to impart life lessons on top of the academics.” - Subject/Interview [2]

“I just try to be very open with students. When they need guidance, I would suggest for them to maybe try this instead. But, I do not jump down their throat whenever they have an opinion on something or a question. I found that that builds a really good rapport with students.” - Subject/Interview [4]

### 6.2.4. Theme 4: Promoting Positive Peer Relationships

Promoting Positive Peer Relationships explored the dynamics of student interactions within the school environment. It explored how students collaborated in group settings and communicated effectively with one another. The teachers acknowledged the value of student-led initiatives in promoting a sense of ownership and community within the school. The interviewees also mentioned the importance of creating safe spaces where students feel empowered to express themselves and foster supportive relationships. Mental health awareness and support strategies are integrated into this theme, alongside the role of extracurricular activities in promoting social connections, personal development, and mentorship programs. Surveys are recognized as a valuable tool for understanding student needs, and collaborative efforts among educators are emphasized in providing support, particularly for students who have experienced trauma. The responses highlighted characterizing teachers' experiences with Promoting Positive Peer Relationships: (1) Collaborative Learning.

#### Collaborative Learning

The emerging sub-theme for promoting Positive Peer Relationships was collaborative learning. Subject/Interview [7] highlighted the importance of students working together to help each other grow. In the first quote, an interviewee spoke about how students of different grades are paired to work together. This helps struggling students learn from those who are doing better and builds friendships across different grades. Subject/Interview [4] encouraged putting students into groups where they can help each other. Even if some students struggle, they are next to someone who may be stronger in that subject. This creates a positive environment where students do not blame each other for making mistakes. Instead, they work together to understand why they got it wrong and find solutions. This reflected the educators' general attitude towards collaborative learning, demonstrating how students benefit from working together and supporting each other in their



learning.

“We do a lot of partner work. I like this more so for the struggling students”

- Subject/Interview [7]

“So, I use mathematics and confidence in building students up. I put them together in groups... they're figuring out why and figuring out solutions together.” - Subject/Interview [4]

### 6.2.5. Theme 5: Safety

The theme of Safety in education is focused on providing personalized support and fostering a sense of well-being for students, including creating a safe environment. The responses emphasized that two aspects stood out in describing teachers' experiences with Supporting Students Experiencing Trauma Stress: (1) Comprehensive Trauma Support and (2) Creating a Safe Environment.

#### (i). Comprehensive Trauma Support

An identified sub-theme was comprehensive trauma support, emphasizing the importance of providing holistic support to students during challenging times. Subject/Interview [4] encouraged being there for students, listening to them, and offering reassurance. It stresses the need for creating a safe space where students feel comfortable seeking help. Subject/Interview [6] emphasized that trauma can affect students differently and suggested offering small acts of support, like reading a favorite book together. Subject/Interview [5] suggested adjusting expectations and focusing on students' emotional well-being rather than academic success. This reflects educators' attitude towards supporting students through challenging times, emphasizing the need to understand and provide personalized assistance based on their needs.

“Something I am always saying in my classroom is positive vibes only” - Subject/Interview [3]

#### (ii). Creating A Safe Environment

Another sub-theme focused on creating a safe environment, with quotes emphasizing the importance of making the classroom a safe and welcoming place for students. Subject/Interview [4] talks about how students should feel safe to make mistakes and learn, even if the teacher needs to address behavioral issues. Subject/Interview [4] also shared that creating a safe environment ensures students feel comfortable and supported in their learning journey. This emphasizes that correction comes from a place of love and growth rather than judgment. It's about helping students understand that their actions don't define who they are as people but are opportunities for learning and improvement. The educators' overall attitude toward creating a safe environment was the importance of teachers creating a safe space where students feel accepted, valued, and free to learn and grow.

“Everything that they experience in the classroom should be of a safe nature to feel like they can come in and they're okay at making mistakes, even if I do have to address behavior.” - Subject/Interview [4]

“It all has to come from the love of God. It all has to have this concept of I'm correcting so that you can grow. And it's

not about who you are, it's about the choice you made and making that separation. Teaching the students how to separate their choice from who they are.” -Subject/Interview [4]

### 6.2.6. Theme 6: EPP Preparation

The theme of EPP Preparation revealed that eight out of the ten interviewees felt that their teacher training did not prepare them thoroughly. They expressed a need for more guidance and ongoing training, especially in dealing with trauma. Participants felt that their training emphasized lesson planning too much and did not adequately address understanding students' needs. One interviewee had neutral feelings about their training, while another believed it prepared them well. The educators each stressed the importance of being there for students and understanding that trauma affects everyone differently. Teachers shared a common understanding that it's acceptable not to know everything and essential to recognize when to seek assistance. Subject/Interviewee [1] suggested improvements, including integrating Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) into lesson plans and enhancing teacher preparedness for challenges following COVID-19. While few felt their training prepared them well, many felt there was room for improvement to better support teachers in the field. The responses highlighted an area that described teachers' experiences with EPP Preparation: (1) Preparation Challenges.

#### Preparation Challenges

The sub-theme, Preparation Challenges, focuses on the difficulty teachers encounter in meeting the evolving needs of students. Subject/Interview [4] shared how students today deal with different issues like mental health, which teachers need to be ready for. Subject 1/Interviewee 1 emphasizes the importance of teachers having the necessary skills to support students in navigating life's challenges, advocating for mandatory training in this area. Subject/Interview [7] talks about how they felt lost when dealing with students' behavioral problems because they were unprepared. This reflects educators' overall stance on preparation challenges, emphasizing the importance of ensuring teachers receive adequate training and support to manage classroom challenges effectively.

“We're teaching in a very different era than when I graduated in 2015. That was 10 years ago. Yeah, kids today are dealing with mental health and trauma in such a different way” - Subject/Interview [4]

“I feel we're not being effective stewards if we're not equipping our educators to reach our students, because one can have the education, but if they do not have the coping skills to deal with life stressors, then of course, you know, we find them just falling by the wayside. I feel that it is very important and especially for administrators to have that training and to recognize its importance. And for it to be mandated from the top down, you know, through professional development training and things like that. I feel it's not there, and it is definitely needed.” - Subject/Interview [1]

“When I got here, I didn't have an idea of what to do. And I was asking the previous teacher, like, what did you do when this student did this or when they're doing this? So, I would say no, which really would have helped me out a little bit because I had many behaviors in the class in which they came from different types of homes and I knew their situation, but I didn't really know how to help them. So, I was kinda lost for a while.” - Subject/Interview [7]

## 7. Discussion

This mixed-method study aimed to examine in-service teachers' preparation of trauma-informed practices, intending to identify strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities for improvement in Educator Preparation Programs (EPPs). Additionally, the aim was to ensure that students who have experienced trauma receive appropriate support and that teachers are equipped with the knowledge and skills necessary to create safe, nurturing, and responsive learning environments. The literature review explored cultural awareness, empowerment opportunities, positive relationships, safety, and how EPPs prepare teachers for trauma-informed practices. In understanding classroom teachers' perceptions, we can enhance, challenge, modify, or improve existing evidence-based strategies to continuously improve EPPs.

### 7.1. Cultural Awareness

The study's findings highlighted the importance of integrating cultural awareness with trauma-informed practices, aligning with Anderson et al. (2014) and Begum (2023). While no significant differences were found in teacher perceptions of cultural awareness across demographic or professional factors, the mean score ( $M = 3.157$ ,  $SD = 1.022$ ) suggests a need for improvement. The variability in awareness levels indicates inconsistent training or experience among teachers. Qualitative insights emphasized the importance of understanding students' diverse cultural backgrounds and creating safe, supportive environments that foster self-advocacy, confidence, and emotional management, reinforcing the value of cultural and trauma-informed integration in education.

### 7.2. Opportunities of Empowerment

The study's findings aligned with the existing literature on student empowerment, particularly fostering autonomy and resilience as highlighted by Perry and Winfrey (2021) and Bulanda and Johnson (2015). The low mean score ( $M = 1.493$ ,  $SD = 0.439$ ) in teacher perceptions of empowerment opportunities suggests a consistent commitment among educators to prioritize student empowerment, reflecting a strong implementation of trauma-informed practices. This corresponded with the idea that educators should create motivational classroom environments that promote self-driven motivation, as

advocated by Bulanda and Johnson (2015).

Interview responses further reinforced this, with teachers suggesting the importance of self-advocacy, autonomy, and resilience. By acknowledging and praising students who advocate for themselves, educators contribute to a positive learning environment where students are empowered to navigate challenges confidently. This approach, which combines practical support with emotional validation, underscores the interconnectedness of health and empowerment, demonstrating educators' commitment to nurturing students' development and fostering a supportive educational environment. The study suggested empowerment, as a key element of trauma-informed care, is effectively being incorporated into teaching practices, enabling students to thrive academically and personally.

### 7.3. Positive Relationships

The research also focused on the critical role of fostering positive relationships in trauma-informed education. Gutierrez and Gutierrez (2019) highlight that strong teacher-student and peer relationships, grounded in trust, respect, and mutual understanding, are essential for creating a supportive learning environment. This agreed with the findings from the study, which showed a general consensus among teachers on the importance of positive relationships, as indicated by a mean score of 1.622 and low standard deviation. This suggested that building rapport and fostering supportive interactions are well-integrated practices among participants.

Dombo and Sabatino (2018) advocate for creating a comfortable environment where students feel valued and accepted, even if their behavior may not always reflect their true values. The study's findings supported this by highlighting that teachers prioritize creating positive relationships and addressing issues as they arise. Interview responses reinforced the importance of teachers forming meaningful bonds with students, promoting positive peer relationships, and using supportive communication strategies. These practices are consistent with the trauma-informed framework's goals of developing safe, nurturing environments for students impacted by trauma.

Overall, the study's findings reflected a strong commitment among educators to implementing trauma-informed practices focused on positive relationships. This coincides with broader research goals, emphasizing the necessity of interpersonal connections in fostering student success and enhancing academic and personal growth. Prioritizing positive interactions, educators contribute to a supportive learning community that encourages trust, engagement, and student well-being.

### 7.4. Safety

The research underscored the importance of safe learning environments, as suggested by Dombo and Sabatino (2018). They argued that creating a trauma-informed, safe environ-

ment involves fostering physical, emotional, and psychological safety through compassion and understanding, recognizing that traumatic events disrupt a sense of safety. Their findings highlight the necessity for educators to be culturally aware, set clear expectations, and support student choices to create a nurturing atmosphere conducive to learning and well-being.

The study's findings also aligned with this framework, showing that teachers generally place a strong emphasis on safety, with a mean score of 1.355 and a low standard deviation, indicating a uniform understanding of the importance of safety in trauma-informed practices. The significant focus on safety among teachers, regardless of demographic factors, reflects the research's call for creating secure environments where students feel valued and supported.

Additionally, the interviews with teachers highlighted the importance of holistic support tailored to individual students' needs, reinforcing Dombo and Sabatino's (2018) recommendations for personalized assistance and maintaining a safe, welcoming classroom environment. Teachers' responses echoed the need for open communication and trust, aligning with the trauma-informed framework's goals of fostering a supportive atmosphere for students who have experienced trauma.

Essentially, the study's emphasis on safety and support within educational settings supports the broader research findings, which advocated for a comprehensive approach to trauma-informed care that ensures students receive the necessary emotional and practical support to thrive academically and personally.

### 7.5. EPP Preparation on Trauma-Informed Practices

Brunzell et al. (2015) highlighted the diverse origins of trauma—ranging from physical harm and abuse to emotional distress and natural disasters—and stressed the importance of trauma-informed instruction. This approach aims to create a safe and supportive learning environment, recognizing trauma's impact on students' learning and behavior and promoting strategies for healing and resilience [16]. Key principles of trauma-informed education include safety, trustworthiness, peer support, collaboration, and empowerment, all crucial for fostering an inclusive and nurturing educational setting [9].

The study's findings aligned with the principles but revealed a significant gap between the theoretical understanding of trauma-informed practices and their practical implementation in classrooms. Survey results showed that 48% of teachers had not received trauma training, 50% lacked stress training, and 47% felt unprepared to support trauma-affected students. Furthermore, 37% were dissatisfied with their training, with 16% feeling very dissatisfied. Interviews corroborated these findings, with 80% of teachers expressing a need for more comprehensive, ongoing training and guidance, particularly in understanding students' trauma-related needs.

The results revealed the urgent need for enhanced trauma-

informed education programs that not only provide theoretical knowledge but also offer practical strategies for addressing students' diverse trauma experiences. Henshaw (2022) extends this need to higher education, stressing the role of universities in preparing pre-service teachers to effectively implement trauma-informed approaches. Teachers' feedback emphasizes the necessity for training that goes beyond lesson planning to address trauma comprehensively, highlighting the importance of continuous professional development and support networks. This reflection reinforces the call for systematic improvements in teacher preparation programs to ensure educators are fully equipped to create supportive, trauma-sensitive learning environments.

## 8. Limitations

The study's primary limitation is its small sample size, restricted to K-12 schools in a private district in the Southeast U.S., which limited generalizability and statistical power. Another limitation is potential self-report biases, as participants may provide socially desirable responses rather than true reflections. Additionally, the lack of longitudinal data prevents tracking changes over time, limiting the ability to assess long-term impacts of Educator Preparation Programs (EPPs) on trauma-informed practices. To enhance validity, the researchers should have expanded the sample size, recruited from diverse locations, and used methods like triangulation and longitudinal studies to mitigate these limitations.

## 9. Future Research

Future research addressing the components of COPS should focus on evaluating the effectiveness of trauma-informed practices in being culturally responsive, empowering students, empathic and understanding relationships, and creating safe school environments. Moving forward, further research is needed to explore the intersectionality of trauma, culture, and identity to inform more inclusive and equitable practices to meet the needs of all diverse student backgrounds. Longitudinal studies examining the correlation between the elements of COPS and the long-term impact of trauma-informed interventions on academic success, mental health, and a student's overall well-being once a student has received focused training on building resilience and coping mechanisms to better handle trauma and stress [6]. Future research should explore data analytics identifying trends and early warning signs of trauma in students to enable proactive interventions. Fostering partnerships between higher educational institutions, mental health providers, and community organizations can facilitate the development and dissemination of culturally competent resources and trauma-informed support programs.

## 10. Conclusions

Childhood and adolescent trauma can result in behavioral issues, academic challenges, and mental health concerns, making trauma-informed practices essential in K-12 education [5, 6, 22]. This study examined how well in-service teachers were prepared in trauma-informed practices, identifying strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities for improvement in Educator Preparation Programs (EPPs). The goal is to ensure that students who have experienced trauma receive appropriate support, and teachers are equipped to create safe, nurturing, and responsive learning environments. The research emphasized the importance of cultural awareness, empowerment, positive teacher-student relationships, and safe classroom environments (COPS) in trauma-informed practices.

The mixed-methods study found no significant differences in teacher perceptions of COPS based on gender, race, age, grade level taught, experience, or certification. However, perceptions of safety varied significantly by teaching position. Integrating cultural awareness into trauma-informed practices involves sensitivity to diverse backgrounds, empowerment through self-advocacy, and strong teacher-student relationships. Despite the importance of these practices, 80% of interviewees expressed dissatisfaction with their EPP's preparation in this area. This study called attention to the need for EPPs to better prepare teachers in trauma-informed practices to improve support for students affected by trauma stress.

## Abbreviations

EPP	Educator Preparation Program
COPS	Cultural Awareness, Opportunities of Empowerment, Positive Relationships, and Safety
SPSS	Statistical Package for the Social Sciences
JASP	Jeffrey's Amazing Statistics Program
SEL	Social and Emotional Learning

## Definition of Terms

The following terms are used within this study;

- 1) *Cultural Awareness*: Cultural awareness involves recognizing, respecting, and valuing the diversity of cultures, backgrounds, and identities within a community [10].
- 2) *Educator Preparation Program*: An Educator Preparation Program (EPP) refers to a program provided by an institution or organization responsible for preparing individuals to become educators. In this study, an EPP will include programs provided by colleges, universities, alternative certification programs, and other entities offering teacher education and training programs [8].
- 3) *Empowerment*: In this study, empowerment refers to the process of enabling students to gain control over their learning, make informed decisions, and act to achieve their educational goals and aspirations [4].

- 4) *In-Service Teachers*: In-service teachers are currently employed in teaching positions and actively working in schools or educational institutions [17].
- 5) *Positive Relationships*: In an educational context, positive relationships between teachers and students, among peers, and between educators and families are characterized by trust, respect, support, and mutual understanding [9].
- 6) *Pre-Service Teachers*: Pre-service teachers are undergoing teacher education or training programs but have not yet started working as fully licensed or certified educators [17].
- 7) *Safe Learning Environments*: Safe learning environments are educational settings that promote physical, emotional, and psychological safety for all participants, including students, educators, and staff [7].
- 8) *Trauma*: Trauma refers to a deeply distressing or disturbing experience that overwhelms an individual's ability to cope. It can encompass a range of events, from physical harm or injury to emotional or psychological distress, often resulting from a single event or a series of events [2].
- 9) *Trauma-Informed*: In this study, a trauma-informed educator adopts a perspective that recognizes the widespread impact of trauma and how it affects individuals' behaviors and interactions while implementing practices that are sensitive to the needs of individuals who have experienced trauma and promoting cultural awareness, opportunities of empowerment, positive relationships, and safe learning environments [16].

## Author Contributions

**Jasmine Johnson**: Conceptualization, Funding Acquisition, Investigation, Project administration, Resources, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing

**Courtney Golden**: Conceptualization, Investigation, Methodology, Resources, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing

**Melodie Cha**: Data curation, Formal Analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Resources, Software, Validation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing

## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

## References

- [1] Anderson, E. M., Blitz, L. V., & Saastamoinen, M. (2014). Exploring a school-university model for professional development with classroom staff: Teaching trauma-informed approaches. ERIC Institute of Education Sciences. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1085667>



- [2] Brunzell, T., Stokes, H., & Waters, L. (2015). Trauma-informed positive education: Using positive psychology to strengthen vulnerable students contemporary school psychology. SpringerLink. <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s40688-015-0070-x>
- [3] Begum, S. (2023). A guide to cultural consciousness. Salford Safeguarding Children Partnership. <https://safeguardingchildren.salford.gov.uk/media/1893/sscp-cultural-consciousness-guidance-july-2023.pdf>
- [4] Bulanda, J., & Byro Johnson, T. (2015). A trauma-informed model for Empowerment Programs targeting vulnerable youth. Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal, 33(4), 303-312. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10560-015-0427-z>
- [5] Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2023, June 29). Adverse childhood experiences (aces). Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/aces/>
- [6] Chafouleas, S. M., Koriakin, T. A., Roundfield, K. D., & Overstreet, S. (2018). Addressing childhood trauma in school settings: A framework for evidence-based practice. School Mental Health, 11(1), 40-53. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12310-018-9256-5>
- [7] Dombo, E. A., & Sabatino, C. A. (2018). Trauma care in schools: Creating safe environments for students with adverse childhood experiences. ERIC Institute of Education Sciences. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1218781>
- [8] Feuer, M. J., Floden, R. E., Chudowsky, N., & Ahn, J. (2013). Evaluation of Teacher Preparation Programs. Education Resources Information Center. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED565694.pdf>
- [9] Gutierrez, D., & Gutierrez, A. (2019). Developing a trauma-informed lens in the college classroom and empowering students through Building positive relationships. Contemporary Issues in Education Research, 12(1), 11-18. <https://doi.org/10.19030/cier.v12i1.10258>
- [10] Henshaw, L. A. (2022). Building trauma-informed approaches in Higher Education. Behavioral Sciences, 12(10), 368. <https://doi.org/10.3390/bs12100368>
- [11] Hobbs, C., Paulsen, D., & Thomas, J. (2019). Trauma-Informed Practice for Pre-service Teachers. *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Education*. Retrieved 17 July. 2024, from <https://oxfordre.com/education/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190264093.001.0001/acrefore-9780190264093-e-1435>
- [12] Koslouski, J. B. (2022). Developing empathy and support for students with the “Most challenging behaviors:” mixed-methods outcomes of professional development in trauma-informed teaching practices. *Frontiers in Education*, 7. <https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2022.1005887>
- [13] Meister, M. (2019). Trauma-Informed Schools: Impacts for Students and Applications for Educators. NWCommons, 1-37. [https://nwcommons.nwciowa.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1187&context=education\\_masters](https://nwcommons.nwciowa.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1187&context=education_masters)
- [14] Nichols, J. D. (2006). Empowerment and relationships: A classroom model to enhance student motivation. *Learning Environments Research*, 9(2), 149-161. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10984-006-9006-8>
- [15] Perry, B. D., & Winfrey, O. (2021). What happened to you?: Conversations on trauma, resilience, and healing. Flatiron.
- [16] Phifer, L. W., & Hull, R. (2016). Helping students heal: Observations of trauma-informed practices in the schools. *School Mental Health*, 8(1), 201-205. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12310-016-9183-2>
- [17] Polly, D., Martin, F., & Byker, E. (2023). Examining Pre-Service and In-Service Teachers’ Perceptions of Their Readiness to Use Digital Technologies for Teaching and Learning. *Computers in the Schools*, 40(1), 22-55. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07380569.2022.2121107>
- [18] Puchner, L., & Markowitz, L. (2023). Elementary teachers’ experiences with trauma-informed practice. *International Electronic Journal of Elementary Education*. <https://www.iejee.com/index.php/IEJEE/article/view/2001>
- [19] Rosenbaum-Nordoft, C. (2018). Building teacher capacity for trauma-informed practice in the inclusive elementary school classroom. *Early Childhood Education*, 45(1), 3-10. <https://web.s.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=1&sid=5d4bd6ae-8758-439e-a90b-7c10ee6af19%40redis>
- [20] Sege, R., Swedo, E. A., Burstein, D., Aslam, M. V., Jones, J., Bethell, C., & Niolon, P. H. (2023). Prevalence of positive childhood experiences among adults — Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System, four states, 2015-2021. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.
- [21] Sokol, R. L., Zimmerman, M. A., Perron, B. E., Rosenblum, K. L., Muzik, M., & Miller, A. L. (2020). Developmental Differences in the Association of Peer Relationships with Traumatic Stress Symptoms. *Prevention Science: The official journal of the Society for Prevention Research*, 21(6), 841-849. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11121-020-01125-3>
- [22] U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services. (2024). SAMHSA Trauma and Violence. Retrieved from <https://www.samhsa.gov/trauma-violence>