"I TRY TO MEET THEM WHERE THEY ARE.":
EDUCATING TRAUMATIZED YOUTH
IN AN ALTERNATIVE HIGH SCHOOL

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ABSTRACT

This study examined school staff's trauma-informed practices and experiences in an urban alternative high school that serves former high school dropouts, many of whom have experienced trauma. In light of the growing concern about trauma among students and the interest in trauma-informed education, this study offers a significant contribution by analyzing educators' meaning-making, highlighting both what their practices look like "on the ground," and identifying the consequences. Framed by Contemporary Trauma Theory as well as the concept of educational trauma (Sullivan, 2004), this study used ethnographic methods to examine the practices school staff used to create a schooling environment that was responsive to the needs of students with trauma histories. Observations and interviews were conducted with a total of 8 staff and 27 students over the course of one school year.

The findings indicate that staff members' trauma-informed practices centered on building relationships and using those relationships as a knowledge base in order to decipher and respond to negative student behavior. Together, these practices overlap with defining features of trauma-informed schools outlined in the literature. Staff practices had both positive and negative impacts on the school community.

This dissertation is dedicated to my grandmother, Margaret L. Kokkeler.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

In recent years, schools have become increasingly attuned to the role of trauma in students' lives. Of particular concern is the impact of traumatic stress—the severe psychological and physiological stress responses to a traumatic event—on learning. Recent research has established that traumatic stress negatively impacts adolescent brain development (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2014). Since traumatic stress overwhelms an individual's ability to cope, there are also behavioral implications. Decreased self-regulatory skills are associated with childhood trauma and manifest as externalized behaviors that include hypervigilance, impulsivity, and aggression (Hamoudi, Murray, Sorensen, & Fontaine, 2015). These externalized symptoms of traumatic stress present a number of challenges to schools and teachers. Limited knowledge about trauma may lead teachers to interpret traumatic stress symptoms as intentionally disruptive or disrespectful behavior that should be dealt with punitively rather than therapeutically.

Trauma presents schools with what Ko *et al.* (2008) call a "serious dilemma": schools must grapple with how to balance their primary mission of education with the reality that a growing number of students have trauma-related needs that must be addressed if they are to be successful. The emergence of trauma-informed schools represents a nationwide effort to create schools that can meet the needs of trauma-exposed youth (Chafouleas, Johnson, Overstreet, & Santos, 2016; Cole, Eisner, Gregory, & Ristuccia, 2013). Trauma-informed care (discussed in greater detail in Chapter 2), the guiding

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philosophy of trauma-informed schools, represents an alternative approach to addressing students' traumatic stress symptoms like negative behavior. Trauma-informed care is not a prescribed set of practices or procedures, but an organizational framework (Harris & Fallot, 2001; Bloom & Sreedhar, 2008). According to SAMHSA (2014a), a trauma-informed school:

1. Realizes the widespread impact of trauma and understands potential treatment options.
2. Recognizes the signs and symptoms of trauma in students, families, staff, and others involved with the school.
3. Responds by fully integrating knowledge about trauma into school policies, procedures, and practices.
4. Seeks to actively resist re-traumatization.

Within a school setting, trauma-informed care equips teachers with the knowledge they need to draw important distinctions between intentional student misbehavior and symptoms of traumatic stress, so as to avoid re-traumatization.

The routine, consistency, and predictability that are characteristic of a typical school day make schools an ideal context for trauma-informed care (SAMHSA, 2014a); however, research on trauma-informed schools is lacking. The majority of studies focus on trauma-based interventions *within* a school (Chafouleas *et al.*, 2016). These interventions are isolated trauma-informed approaches to schooling that are limited to programs, rather than consistent, schoolwide efforts. The few studies that do examine trauma interventions on a schoolwide level are confined to settings in which trauma services are primarily delivered by mental health professionals, not teachers or other school staff (Dorado, Martinez, McArthur, & Leibovitz, 2016). This study addresses that gap in the literature by examining the daily practices of staff at an alternative high school that strives to create a schooling environment that is responsive to the needs of traumatized youth.

The literature on educators' experiences with trauma-informed approaches within schools is limited. Many studies focus on student outcomes, not teachers' experiences. Specifically, research has emphasized the effectiveness of school-based trauma interventions in reducing traumatic stress reactions in youth (Rolfsnes & Idsoe, 2011). Other studies examine the effectiveness of trauma-related professional development. However, the true efficacy of professional development in trauma-informed schooling is largely unknown, since studies are limited to teachers' self-reported assessments of increased knowledge (McIntyre, Baker, & Overstreet, 2019) and do not establish how professional development influences classroom practices (Chafouleas *et al.*, 2016). This qualitative study pairs classroom observation with interview data to address this limitation by investigating how teacher knowledge and attitudes translate to actual practices in the classroom.

Furthermore, scarce attention has been devoted to how teachers implement trauma-informed practices. Those studies focusing on teachers' perspectives and self-reported actions related to trauma-informed approaches examine teachers' opinions and attitudes only, and do not include any observations or conclusions about their actual behaviors (Brunzell, Stokes, & Waters, 2019; Alisic, 2012). Accordingly, little is known about the daily decisions and actions of schoolteachers in trauma-informed contexts. The present study expands on the existing scholarship by exploring the connections between teachers' attitudes about and understanding of trauma, and their daily decision-making and interpretation of student behavior.

Theoretical Framework

This study is framed by Contemporary Trauma Theory (CTT). Rooted in psychoanalysis, CTT is a "scientifically informed and complex biopsychosocial understanding of what goes wrong for human beings under conditions of overwhelming stress" (Bloom & Farragher, 2013, p. 5). CTT provides a micro-level framework for understanding the impact of trauma on an individual (Goodman, 2017). Given the research site's student population (former high school dropouts), this study draws upon two additional theoretical constructs: toxicity and educational trauma. Whereas trauma research focuses largely on sources of trauma that are external to school, toxicity and educational trauma can provide additional explanatory power to address the role of institutions with respect to student trauma. Altogether, this theoretical framework offers a helpful lens to examine how teachers understand and perform their work with traumatized students who did not experience success in traditional school environments.

Below, I begin with a problematization of traditional theoretical approaches to understanding educational failure. Next, I contrast those approaches with Contemporary Trauma Theory and describe the explanatory value that CTT provides in this study. Then, I explore the concepts of toxicity and educational trauma and how they influence this study.

Understanding Educational Failure

While there are many reasons why students drop out, most existing explanations have little to offer a study of staff members' work with dropouts who return to school. Following decades of research, the general consensus is that dropout is a gradual process of disengagement (Rumberger, 2004) and the result of a cluster of both individual and

institutional factors (Center for Promise, 2014; Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morison, 2006). However, the educational experiences of dropouts who return to school remain largely undertheorized.

Historically, explanations for academic failure have characterized individuals as having personal or cultural deficits (the genetic argument or the culture argument), (e.g., Herrnstein & Murray, 1996; Bereiter & Engelmann, 1966), and/or viewed individuals' fates as largely a predetermined product of economic and political systems (the structure argument) (e.g., Willis, 1977). The genetic argument encompasses those theories that seek to explain academic failure as a function of the intellectual inferiority of non-white students. These individuals are seen to have fundamental deficits. The culture argument takes the blame off the individual and places it on the culture. According to this view, students of color have cultural experiences and norms that fail to meet the expectations of schools and are incompatible with academic success. Lastly, the structure argument understands variation in school achievement as a product of social reproduction. Here, schools are viewed as sorting mechanisms that reproduce pre-existing social and economic inequality.

Embedded within this discussion is an underlying discourse on the individualism of academic failure. Despite studies suggesting that high school dropout is a confluence of both individual and structural factors (Center for Promise, 2014; Bridgeland *et al.*, 2006), a uniquely American ideology of individualism persists which frames high school dropout (and academic failure more broadly) as an individual problem and ignores structural issues such as poverty and school quality. Fine's (1991) seminal work *Framing Dropouts* and the widely accepted notions of high school "push out" and "dropout factories" have indeed

shifted the scholarly conversation on high school dropout to consider more seriously the role of the institution in this phenomenon. However, this more critical orientation does not help us understand the growing population of young people who do eventually return to school.

While previous theoretical approaches may offer insights that help explain academic failure, such analyses are incomplete without greater attention to the role of social context and its impact on individuals' mental health and functioning. In contrast, the work drawn upon in this study (Contemporary Trauma Theory, and the concepts of toxicity and educational trauma) provide important lenses through which to understand educators' efforts to create a school environment that is responsive to the needs of a particular population.

Contemporary Trauma Theory

In order to explore how school staff create a schooling environment that is responsive to traumatized students' needs, this study draws upon Contemporary Trauma Theory (CTT). CTT considers both how trauma negatively impacts an individual's bio-psychosocial functioning and how service providers understand those impacts. Rooted in psychoanalysis, CTT argues that maladaptive functioning is a manifestation of unresolved trauma and impaired self-regulatory skills (Goodman, 2017). Consequently, the goal of treatment is to increase an individual's awareness of the trauma's influence and to strengthen the individual's coping skills so as to decrease the likelihood of issues related to the trauma later on.

Contemporary Trauma Theory makes an important distinction between the symptoms of trauma (e.g., aggression, defiance) and the causes of trauma, a key insight for this study. CTT presupposes a cause for a traumatized individual's symptoms, but contends that "the cause is not an individual character flaw, a moral weakness, or innate malevolence, but a result of injury" (Bloom & Farragher, 2013, p. 5). Within CTT, this distinction has implications for service providers; it changes the question from "What's wrong with you?" to "What happened to you?". Such a paradigm shift offers an analogous benefit to examining teachers' work with the student participants in this study: former high school dropouts. CTT provides a theoretical lens that can circumvent the historical individualization of educational failure, and instead seeks a more contextualized understanding of the behaviors (i.e., academic difficulty in general, and high school dropout in particular) of trauma survivors. In this way, CTT can lend additional explanatory power to help understand staff's interpretations of and responses to students' trauma-related behaviors.

The CTT framework foregrounds the role of an individual's experience in its conception of trauma:

> Individual trauma results from an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual's functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being. (SAMHSA, 2014a, p. 7)

According to CTT, an event in itself does not determine whether something qualifies as trauma. A traumatic event can elicit a diverse range of responses, as a particular event may be experienced as traumatic for one person and not for another (e.g., a child's removal from an abusive home, divorce). Instead, it is "how the individual labels, assigns meaning to,

and is disrupted physically and psychologically by an event that will contribute to whether or not it is experienced as traumatic" (SAMHSA, 2014a, p. 8). The centrality of meaning-making within CTT is especially relevant to the school setting, where classroom management requires staff to regularly interpret and respond to student behavior. In this study, CTT shapes how I understand the decision-making that underlies staff's responses and why these responses are effective.

As I discuss in Chapter 2, scholarship on educators' trauma-responsive practices has generally lacked a focus on the individual meaning-making process that is a hallmark of Contemporary Trauma Theory. Methodologically, studies are mostly limited to teacher surveys, interviews, and focus groups. Consequently, this scholarship has largely ignored the lived experiences of educators performing this work, and in doing so has failed to capture how meaning is made in that process. This is particularly problematic from a CTT perspective because an understanding of trauma is inseparable from the subjective meaning an individual attaches to it. For that reason, this study uses ethnographic methods in order to develop a highly contextualized understanding of how school staff create a schooling environment that is responsive to the needs of traumatized students. Indeed, according to CTT, to decontextualize a traumatized individual's behavior from its underlying meaning risks re-traumatization. CTT provides a unique theoretical lens through which to view the work of school staff tasked with educating traumatized students. Specifically, staff members' responses to student behavior reflect an effort to uncover the unique meaning that students have ascribed to their individual trauma. CTT allows me to frame staff members' experiences with trauma-responsive practices as an intersubjective product of both staff's and students' negotiated meaning-making. Moreover, ethnographic methods

enable me to foreground the importance of the aforementioned meaning-making and to understand that process from school staff's perspective.

Educational Trauma

On its own, Contemporary Trauma Theory is an insufficient theoretical tool for this study because it does not provide enough of a lens to help me understand trauma that happens *within* schools. My analysis of how staff respond to students is also shaped by work that has identified schools as sites of trauma. Some of this work has focused on the toxicity that exists in certain schools where students feel physically and emotionally unsafe (Paulle, 2013). Other work, such as by Sullivan (2004), has identified the cumulative impact that inadequate schooling has on students' mental health.

In addition to the insights derived from CTT, I also draw on recent work identifying toxicity as an educational phenomenon that has the potential to help educators understand negative student behavior. I turn to Paulle's (2013) exploration of what he calls "toxic schools." Unlike other scholars who underscore race, class, or gender in their explanations of academic failure, Paulle questions the primacy of these elements in the daily experiences of urban students. He asserts that some schools are "toxic" environments filled with stressors that wear on students and may largely explain (or at least justify) their behaviors. He argues that a more robust understanding of academic failure in "toxic schools" is found in an examination of the immediate, viscerally felt chronic stress that characterizes these institutions.

Paulle argues that the somatic experiences within toxic schools appear complementary to stress responses indicative of trauma. He focuses his attention on the

physical and emotional stresses that students within toxic schools face on a moment-to-moment basis. Indeed, he states that within these schools, students' attention and thoughts are continually "hijacked" by a need to be on guard and "always ready" to protect themselves (Paulle, 2013, p. 103). Paulle portrays toxicity as an environmental stressor and sees students' attitudes and behaviors—whether academic failure, absenteeism, dropping out, or participation in violence—as logical and justified responses. Paulle urges educators to interpret student behavior in light of these stressors: "We need to ease away from overly mentalist approaches and toward understandings of real-life coping processes based on destructive emotional metamorphoses and the frenzied energetics of precariously embodied minds" (Paulle, 2013, p. 103). Paulle's analytic focus challenges overly simplistic perceptions of academic failure and advocates for a more nuanced understanding of student behavior.

Paulle is not alone in his attention on "toxic" environments. The topic of toxicity has also recently emerged within research specific to high school dropout. A 2014 report indicates that a significant reason for premature departure from school is rooted in what the authors term "toxic environments," which include "school climates and policies that are unsafe, unsupportive, or disrespectful (Center for Promise, 2014, p. 17). Like Paulle, this research suggests that institutions such as schools play a role in educational failure, and therefore their role should be reflected in an analysis of student behaviors like high school dropout. For this study, the concept of toxicity provides a helpful lens through which to examine how school staff interpret and respond to student behavior, because it suggests that the toxicity of these schools creates a kind of trauma for the students who attend.

Finally, whereas most understandings of trauma and education focus on trauma/stress that is external to school, I draw from Sullivan's (2004) concept of educational trauma. By recasting school failure from a matter of individual failings to a consequence of educational trauma, Sullivan puts the focus on students' experiences, how schools fail students, and what supports students need. Sullivan defines educational trauma as "a general sense of incapacity caused by years of poor educational experiences and failures" (Sullivan, 2004, p. 390). When a young person who has been deemed a failure is instead regarded as educationally traumatized, they can be viewed more holistically and supported rather than condemned.

Sullivan's theoretical construct is ripe for further development. To date, the concept is only a product of one scholar's practical experience working with "at-risk" students abroad. My study represents a practical application of the concept as well as an exploration of how its application to empirical data might refine its details and make it more theoretically robust. The study's research site offers a rich context for examining the role that educational trauma plays in staff members' efforts to create a trauma-responsive schooling environment for high school dropouts who have returned to school. I use the concept of educational trauma to examine how school staff's work with students within this specific schooling context was influenced by their understandings of students' past educational experiences. Specifically, this study can provide information on how students experience educational trauma in urban public high schools, as well as how a deliberately different schooling environment impacts the way in which students' educational trauma symptoms manifest. Ultimately, by combining Contemporary Trauma Theory with

Sullivan's notion of educational trauma, this study's findings can extend the theoretical formulation of the role that institutions play in trauma exposure among school-aged youth.

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to explore how educators at an alternative high school that exclusively serves former high school dropouts, create[1] a schooling environment that is responsive to the needs of its traumatized students. In my ethnographic study of Delta[2], an alternative school for students who have dropped out of school, I focus on the Bridge program, which is mandated for all new students and designed to prepare them for future success at the school. Framed by Contemporary Trauma Theory as well as the lesser-known theoretical construct of educational trauma, this study seeks to understand how staff members' understanding of and attitudes toward trauma guided their daily decision-making. By bringing the lens of CTT to an exploratory study of staff who serve a unique population for whom a traditional schooling context did not work, I hope to offer an understanding of the potential for trauma-informed approaches to act as a resource for educators who work with students who have experienced academic failure. In this dissertation, I argue that staff's practices were reflective of a positive feedback loop: relationships acted as an asset that staff used to interpret and reframe negative student behavior as real-time coping practices, and this interpretive work in turn reinforced student-staff relationships. A key finding of this study is that, taken as a whole, staff practices mirrored what the literature has documented as best practices for trauma-informed schools.

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[1] I use the word "create" in order to capture the ongoing work of creating a trauma-informed school, and not to refer to a school that was not previously trauma-informed. The research site is a school that is over a decade old.
[2] Pseudonym.

However, in Chapter 5, I further show that staff practices created a trade-off between students' socio-emotional growth and academic rigor.

Research Questions

This study was guided by two main research questions:

1. How do staff at an alternative high school create a schooling environment that is responsive to the needs of traumatized youth?

    a. To what extent do school staff's practices resonate with existing models for trauma-informed schools?

2. What are the consequences of these practices on students, staff, and the school?

Significance of Study

The main significance of this study is its contribution to the limited empirical research examining how staff create schooling environments that are responsive to the needs of traumatized youth. While principles of trauma-informed care and assumptions in CTT have led to trauma-informed educational models, we know little about teachers' actual classroom practices. Given the growing concern about trauma among students and the interest in trauma-informed education, this study makes an important contribution by analyzing educators' meaning-making, showing both what their practices look like "on the ground," and documenting the consequences. While findings from qualitative research cannot be generalized, this study's use of observational data paired with interviews can add to our limited knowledge about how teachers' attitudes and knowledge about trauma

translate into what they do in the classroom. Additionally, the findings provide insight into educators' experiences that could aid in the establishment of best practices. Moreover, such insight could improve existing trauma-based professional development by addressing areas of concern or challenges for educators. The study's findings also have important implications for schools and educators aiming to improve the services they provide to traumatized youth.

Dissertation Structure

In this chapter, I have defined trauma and the concept of a trauma-informed school, outlined the guiding theoretical framework for this study, and situated this research project within the broader academic literature on the application of trauma-informed care within schools. In Chapter 2, Review of the Literature, I review the research on the impacts of childhood trauma on learning, trauma-informed teaching practices, trauma-informed schools, as well as the literature on high school dropout interventions. In Chapter 3, Methods, I describe the design of this study and how I collected and analyzed my data.

In Chapter 4, Creating a Trauma-Responsive Schooling Environment, and Chapter 5, Consequences, I attempt to answer my two research questions. In Chapter 4, I illustrate the positive feedback loop that characterized Delta staff's work with students in the Bridge program. I first explore how school staff participated in four intentional relationship-building activities with students. Second, I describe how staff used these relationships to facilitate the decoding work that was central to their attempts to create a trauma-responsive schooling environment, and I explain how decoding in turn reinforced staff's relationships with students.

In Chapter 5, I outline the consequences of staff's efforts to create a trauma-informed school. I examine four main consequences: 1) the creation of a "second chance" for students; 2) the weakening of Delta's mission of "real-world learning;" 3) the complication of staff's assessment of student performance; and 4) students' self-reported socio-emotional growth at higher rates than academic growth.

In Chapter 6, Conclusion, I present a summary of my overall findings and the implications of this study. I explain that staff's trauma-informed practices are a product of their meaning-making about students' trauma, and the effectiveness of that meaning-making is intimately connected to the strength of staff members' relationships with students. Moreover, I illustrate that relationships are an invaluable commodity within a trauma-responsive schooling context. Next, I describe how the findings from this study represent an initial attempt to theorize about how educators engage in trauma-informed approaches on a daily basis and on a school-wide level. Finally, I discuss the serious trade-offs that arose as a result of staff's trauma-informed practices, and explore the larger implications this has for trauma-informed education.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The purpose of this study is to explore how educators at an alternative high school that serves former high school dropouts, create a schooling environment that is responsive to the needs of its traumatized students. This study of educators' practices is situated in a larger conversation on trauma-informed approaches to education. Hence, this literature review spans four sets of scholarship: research on the impacts of childhood trauma on schools; studies on trauma-informed teaching practices; a smaller, recent body of literature on trauma-informed schools; and research on high school dropout interventions.

In the first section I discuss how trauma impacts learning readiness. I concentrate my discussion on the socio-emotional impacts of trauma and the central problem addressed in the literature—how educators are to respond to disruptive student behavior in a way that does not exacerbate students' traumatic stress symptoms. Then, I identify an overlooked source of trauma within this body of research: educational trauma and its relevance to this study.

In the second section, I examine the literature on trauma-informed teaching practices. Two themes emerge in regard to educators' work: enhancing students' self-regulatory abilities, and repairing students' attachment capacities by nurturing strong student-teacher relationships. I highlight the need for more research on how educators manage the tension between traditional academic tasks and those socio-emotional tasks required by trauma-informed practices. I then emphasize how the dominant methodological approach (interviews, surveys, and focus groups) has limited our

knowledge of trauma-informed practices to self-reported knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors. As such, little is known about the actual behaviors of educators who use trauma-informed practices.

In the third section, I provide an overview of Trauma-informed Care (TIC), the guiding philosophy of trauma-informed schools. The research reveals a general enthusiasm for the approach among practitioners; however, other studies underscore the need for greater clarity on how the philosophy of care translates into everyday practices. Again, I identify a limitation of the research in that the methodological approaches prevent conclusions from being drawn about educators' practices.

This study explores educators' experiences at a school in which the student population consists of youth who have previously dropped out of high school. Thus, in the final section, I discuss the scope and nature of high school dropout as well as the minimal yet growing attention that has been given to the role of trauma in students' leaving school. I then review the research on alternative education, the dominant dropout intervention in the United States. This section reveals that despite a small set of key characteristics associated with school programs, little empirical knowledge exists about the effectiveness of alternative education interventions.

Childhood Trauma and Schools

The prevalence of trauma among youth is well established in trauma research. In fact, contemporary trauma research is largely an outgrowth of the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) study, which documented for the first time empirical evidence of the high prevalence of childhood trauma in the U.S. In this study, more than 13,000 adult

members of a large HMO were sent questionnaires about ACEs (another term for childhood trauma)[3]. The results showed that almost two-thirds of study participants reported having experienced at least one form of childhood trauma, and more than one in five participants reported three or more forms of childhood trauma (Felitti *et al.*, 1998).

Subsequent studies have confirmed the high prevalence of trauma among youth, with a common estimate that two-thirds of children have experienced a traumatic event by age 16 (American Psychological Association, 2008a). Additional studies have sought to expand the ACE study findings since the original population was primarily white (74.8%), aged 50 years or older (66.3%), had completed some post-secondary education (75.2%), and resided exclusively in southern California (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, n.d.). Subsequent studies found that rates of childhood trauma are even higher among low-income children and children of color (Slopen *et al.*, 2016; Child and Adolescent Health Measurement Initiative, 2017; Himle, Baser, Taylor, Campbell, & Jackson, 2009; Roberts, Gilman, Breslau, & Koenen, 2011; Ko *et al.*, 2008). Additionally, rates of trauma are consistently higher than the national average among particular vulnerable populations such as youth in foster care, youth who are homeless, and youth who spend time in the juvenile justice system (Salazar, Keller, Gowen, & Courtney, 2013; McManus & Thompson, 2008; Abram, Teplin, Charles, Longworth, McClelland, & Dulcan, 2004).

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[3] While the ACE study does not explicitly treat ACEs and trauma as synonymous, they are indeed related. According to the study, ACEs are defined as "exposure to childhood emotional, physical, or sexual abuse and household dysfunction during childhood" (p. 245). Other studies also refer to these incidences as childhood trauma. For the scope of this study, ACEs or childhood trauma are viewed as the same trauma sub-type.

Trauma Impacts on Academic Performance and Cognitive Functioning

There is a consensus within trauma scholarship that childhood trauma negatively impacts students' learning readiness (Porche, Costello, & Rosen-Reynoso, 2016; Streeck-Fischer & Van der Kolk, 2000; Van der Kolk, 2005; Lubit, Rovine, Defrancisci, & Eth, 2003; Goodman, Miller, & West-Olatunji, 2012). In a meta-analysis of research spanning from 1990 to 2015 on the impact of trauma on pre-K-12 students, Perfect, Turley, Carlson, Yohanna, and Saint Gilles (2016) found that the literature on traumatic stress symptoms in students categorizes the impacts into three general categories: academic performance, cognitive functioning, and socio-emotional behavior. Generally, studies suggest that youth with trauma histories exhibit more academic performance problems than their peers (Shonk & Cicchetti, 2001; Perfect *et al.*, 2016). Specifically, trauma-affected youth are more likely to have below-grade-level standardized test scores, receive special education services, be rated by teachers as possessing poor work ethic, and be held back a grade; they are also 2.5 times more likely to fail a grade (Porche *et al.*, 2016; Leiter & Johnsen, 1994; Egeland, Sroufe, & Erickson, 1983; Vondra, Barnett, & Cicchetti, 1989; Eckenrode*,* Laird, & Doris, 1993).

The impact of traumatic stress on children's cognitive functioning is documented in neurobiological research, which has established a relationship between traumatic stress and adolescent brain development (NSCDC, 2014; De Bellis, 2005; Mezzacappa, Kindlon, & Earls, 2001; Beers & De Bellis, 2002). This line of research uses the term "toxic stress" to describe the "extensive, scientific knowledge about the effects of excessive activation of stress response systems on a child's developing brain" as well as on the immune, metabolic, and cardiovascular systems (National Child Traumatic Stress Network, 2005).

Impacts of toxic stress on cognitive functioning include impaired memory, impaired concentration, and low verbal/language ability (Streeck-Fischer & Van der Kolk, 2000; Nelson, & Carver, 1998).

Trauma Impacts on Socio-emotional Behavior

Discussions regarding the impacts of childhood trauma on socio-emotional behavior have dominated research in recent years (Cloitre *et al.*, 2009; Cole *et al.*, 2013). The central problem discussed in the literature is how educators can interpret externalized trauma symptoms associated with socio-emotional behavior—which are commonly displayed in school as disruptive behaviors—and respond in a way that does not exacerbate the issue and risk re-traumatizing students (Cole *et al.*, 2013; Hertel & Johnson, 2013). Specifically, research has demonstrated a link between childhood trauma and children's difficulty with self-regulation, which can manifest as hyperactivity, impulsivity, aggression, and hypervigilance (Hamoudi *et al.*, 2015; Amir, Taylor, Bomyea, & Badour, 2009; Cicchetti, 1998; Carlson, Furby, Armstrong, & Shales, 1997). However, little research has been conducted to show how educators engage in this process. This is significant given that prior research has extensively explored how contemporary disciplinary policies—most notably zero tolerance—decontextualize a student's behavior and mandate punishment regardless of the circumstances. Such policies, which rely heavily on suspension and expulsion, have not been shown to improve student behavior and have been linked to an overrepresentation of students of color among those receiving the harshest punishments (American Psychological Association, 2008b).

In addition to compromised self-regulation, childhood trauma also decreases a child's capacity for attachment, or the ability to relate to others and form relationships (Coster & Cicchetti, 1993; Goodman, 2017). Attachment issues can manifest as distrust, defiance, or withdrawal. Previous studies on childhood trauma have demonstrated that attachment capacity is vital to enhancing children's coping skills (Arvidson *et al.*, 2011; Hesse & Main, 2000). While coping with adversity is a normal part of healthy child development, a child's tolerance to stress responses is contingent upon the time-limited nature of the stressor and the presence of protective adult relationships that help the child to adapt and cope with the stressor. Some studies suggest that supportive adult relationships can have a buffering effect on children's stress responses and reduce long-term impacts (NSCDC, 2014; Shonkoff *et al.*, 2012). The protective effect of the adult relationship helps the child's stress response system return to its baseline status. In contrast, toxic or chronic stress is often attributed to a lack of adult assistance with coping (NSCDC, 2014). However, investigations of this protective effect have been limited to work with children in clinical settings and within the child welfare system, and the nature of this buffering effect in the schooling context is unknown.

Schools as Sites of Trauma

While the childhood trauma literature has extensively explored the impacts of trauma on schools, the research does not address trauma that occurs *within* schools. As discussed in Chapter 1, two scholars in particular—Paulle (2013) and Sullivan (2004)— examine schools as sites of trauma. In this study, I purposely expand my conception of trauma to include trauma sources that may have originated in schools. This approach is an

intentional recognition of the Delta student population (former high school dropouts) as well as the school's explicit goal of creating a schooling environment that is deliberately different from students' previous schools.

Summary and Implications

The manifestations of childhood trauma are well-documented in the literature. Several studies have examined how trauma symptoms impact a child's learning readiness and the particular challenges these symptoms create for educators. This knowledge on childhood trauma symptoms informs my data collection focus. I know which common behaviors to look for and where to focus my attention during teacher-student interactions. Furthermore, my study addresses the issue of how educators interpret and respond to students' disruptive behaviors. In Chapter 4 I explore this very decision-making process. Lastly, I seek to consider the role that students' potential experiences with educational trauma might play in Delta staff's creation of a schooling environment that is responsive to the needs of its trauma-affected student population.

Trauma-informed Teaching Practices

Two Major Themes

The literature on trauma-informed teaching practices has conceptualized educators' work as comprising two domains: 1) repairing and increasing self-regulatory abilities, and 2) repairing disrupted attachment capacities by nurturing strong student-teacher relationships (Brunzell, Stokes & Waters, 2016b, 2019; Kliethermes, Schacht, & Drewry,

2014). While there is a body of literature on school-based trauma-informed treatments and interventions, these services are delivered by school psychologists, not teachers or other school staff. The interventions are of a clinical nature and involve trauma screenings as well as specific therapeutic approaches. Some research suggests that these mental health-oriented interventions have been effective in reducing trauma-stress symptoms in youth (Rolfsnes & Idsoe, 2011).

Assessments

The majority of studies on trauma-informed teaching practices involve assessments of the impact that specific trauma awareness training or trauma-informed teaching models have on teachers. However, these studies are limited to self-reported knowledge gains and changes in attitudes and/or behaviors, and thus do not examine teachers' actual practices. McIntyre *et al*. (2019) also report that many of these studies include assessments of teachers' self-reported knowledge gains only after receiving training, which does not account for prior knowledge. Overall, these studies do not provide evidence on the degree to which professional development increases teachers' knowledge about trauma, fosters positive attitudes toward trauma-informed approaches, or translates into trauma-informed classroom practices (Chafouleas *et al.*, 2016). Additionally, the existing studies do not contain follow-up data to document the extent to which self-reported changes prompted by training were maintained.

One exception is a qualitative study that examined teachers' implementation of skills related to increasing students' regulatory capacities after receiving training in a specific trauma-informed approach: the trauma-informed positive education model (TIPE)

(Brunzell, Stokes, & Waters, 2016a). This action-research study spanned 13 weeks and examined how nine teachers went about implementing what they learned about increasing regulatory abilities among students aged 12-17 years old with histories of low academic performance. Teachers documented their individual practices and the study found four themes: rhythm strategies, explicit teaching of self-regulation skills, mindfulness, and de-escalation. Teachers' rhythm strategies included "brainbreaks," as a form of triage to limit the occurrence of potentially disruptive behavior, along with exercises in which teachers asked students to calculate and focus on their heart rate as a form of body regulation. The explicit teaching of self-regulation skills included having students identify their own stress responses as well as strategies to address those responses. Additionally, teachers introduced self-regulation tools into the classroom in order to help students identify their capacity to self-regulate and readiness for learning. Teachers also incorporated mindfulness techniques such as breathing exercises. Lastly, de-escalation techniques began with teaching students about de-escalation, creating and using de-escalation maps, and designing individual safety plans. While this study provides insight into teachers' specific behaviors to address self-regulation skills that have been impaired by trauma, it failed to include information about teachers' perspectives on this work or their experiences (e.g., challenges, unanswered questions, how they made decisions).

Teachers' Perspectives

More research on educators' experiences with trauma-informed practices is needed. Little is known about the daily decisions and actions of teachers and staff in these contexts. There is a call for more research on ways to identify when students' academic problems

might be trauma-related (Cole *et al.*, 2013; Cole, O'Brien, Gadd, Ristuccia, Wallace, & Gregory, 2005). Those studies that have focused on teachers' experiences with trauma-informed approaches are limited to self-reporting: they did not include any observations, nor could they make conclusions about teachers' actual behaviors (Brunzell *et al.*, 2019; Alisic, 2012). Alisic (2012) interviewed 17 elementary school teachers from 13 schools in the Netherlands who reported that they had interacted with one or more children with trauma histories, in order to examine their perspectives on supporting children who had experienced trauma. Teachers within this study expressed uncertainty about their role definition, questioning where to put the boundary between their tasks and wondering "at what point their tasks as a teacher ended and at what point those of a social worker or psychologist started" (p. 54). Research suggests that not all teachers view psychosocial support as part of their role, as required by trauma-informed approaches. The extent to which teachers broaden their role to include psychosocial support as an in-role task (as compared to an extra-role or voluntary task) has been shown to have a significant impact on student behavior (e.g., suspensions, expulsions) and school outcomes such as decreased school violence (Somech & Oplatka, 2009).

Some scholars suggest that the challenge of trauma-informed teaching practices is that they require teachers to play a role in the implementation of school-based mental health interventions. Yet, studies have shown that teachers do not believe it is their role to address students' mental health needs, and instead defer the primary responsibility to school psychologists (Reinke, Stormont, Herman, Puri, & Goel, 2011).

Some research suggests that "teachers' attitudes toward taking up psychosocial tasks are mediated by their feelings of competency" (Kos, Richdale, & Hay, 2006).

However, teachers' participation in mental health services has been reported as contingent upon their sense of support from administrators and perception of the approaches as flexible and adaptable (Han & Weiss, 2005; Cole *et al*., 2013). Overall, these findings are problematic since few universities include trauma-informed practices as part of pre-service teacher training (Wong, 2008). Therefore, such training is primarily limited to professional development that teachers may receive on the job. However, as previously discussed, the efficacy of trauma-related training is largely unknown.

Summary and Implications

We know little about educators' experiences with trauma-informed practices and thoughts about their work. Overall, studies on trauma-informed teaching are limited to assessments of increased knowledge and changed attitudes and behaviors following professional development. However, a methodological gap exists in this body of literature: research is almost exclusively limited to self-reporting (interviews, focus groups, surveys). In the absence of observations, these studies have drawn no conclusions about teachers' actual behaviors. Those studies that do include teachers' perspectives suggest that more research is needed to identify how teachers navigate the boundary between academic tasks and the socio-emotional tasks required by trauma-informed practices. My study seeks to build on findings such as Alisic's (2012) study on teachers' uncertainty about role definition as it relates to balancing socio-emotional and academic tasks. Additionally, I seek to address the methodological gap in the literature by using an ethnographic approach to gather data on educators' actual practices, as opposed to their self-reported behaviors.

Trauma-informed Care: The Guiding Philosophy

Scholars have called for schooling approaches that can address the prevalent and extensive impacts that trauma has on students' ability to learn (Bloom, 1997; Ko *et al.*, 2008). While some studies on trauma-informed approaches in schools, particularly in urban environments, have advanced the empirical connection between the emotional well-being of students and academic outcomes (Overstreet & Chafouleas, 2016), the majority of these studies focus on trauma-based interventions within a school; that is, isolated programs rather than trauma-informed schools in which efforts are made throughout an entire institution (Chafouleas *et al.*, 2016).

Trauma-informed Care (TIC) is the guiding philosophy of trauma-informed schools, the dominant organizational model for delivering trauma-informed educational practices. The emergence of Trauma-informed Care stemmed from a growing awareness of trauma prevalence and the magnitude of its impacts on people served by public mental health and substance abuse systems (Jennings, 2004).[4] In 1994, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) convened the Dare to Vision conference, which was designed to examine the alarming rates of physical and sexual abuse of women who used public mental health services. The conference served as a forum for survivors to share their stories, and consequently illustrated how practices like seclusion and restraint—which were common in treatment—contributed to feelings of re-

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[4] Also sometimes referred to as "trauma-informed approach" (SAMHSA, 2014a). Trauma-informed care is distinct from terms like trauma-informed services or practices: these are discrete, often isolated efforts within an organization, whereas trauma-informed care defines an entire organizational context.

victimization (Wilson, Pence, & Conradi, 2013). Professionals within less clinical settings such as child welfare and schools followed suit, generating awareness and knowledge regarding the importance of a trauma-informed context. Indeed, foundational to TIC is the belief that the outcomes for trauma survivors are influenced by the context in which care occurs (SAMHSA, 2014b; Bloom, 1997; Harris & Fallot, 2001; Ko *et al.*, 2008).

The defining quality of TIC is that it is an organizational framework in which all staff, policies, and services are delivered in a way that demonstrates trauma awareness. TIC is rooted in four central assumptions: realize, recognize, respond, and resist re-traumatization. Within the TIC framework, a school that is trauma-informed:

1) Realizes the widespread impact of trauma and understands potential paths for recovery;

2) Recognizes the signs and symptoms of trauma in students, families, staff, and others involved with the school;

3) Responds by fully integrating knowledge about trauma into policies, procedures, and practices; and

4) Seeks to actively resist re-traumatization. (SAMHSA, 2014a, p. 3)

As previously stated, TIC is an organizational framework for schools, not a prescribed set of practices or procedures (Bloom & Farragher, 2013; SAMHSA, 2014a). Trauma-informed schools are founded on six key principles (SAMHSA, 2014a):

1. Safety
2. Trustworthiness and transparency
3. Peer support
4. Collaboration and mutuality
5. Empowerment, voice, and choice
6. Cultural, historical, and gender issues

These principles are fundamental to a trauma-informed approach to caring for trauma survivors. First, physical and psychological safety is to be promoted throughout the school,

with a particular emphasis on understanding how this sense of safety is defined by those individuals being served. The second principle is aimed at generating and maintaining trust between school staff and students. The third principle, peer support, positions fellow trauma survivors as central to other individuals' recovery. Fourth, collaborating and mutuality refers to an emphasis on partnerships in which staff and students share power and decision-making responsibilities. The fifth principle represents an acknowledgement of the ways in which some students have historically been disempowered and had no voice or choice in their recovery. Instead, TIC seeks to eliminate power differentials and involve students in goal-setting and self-advocacy in their recovery. The sixth and final principle is that TIC requires a school to reject stereotypes and biases (based on race, sexual orientation, gender, etc.) and provide culturally responsive policies, protocols, and processes to best meet students' needs.

Effectiveness

While the emergence of trauma-informed schools represents a nationwide interest in the creation of schools that can meet the needs of trauma-affected youth (Chafouleas *et al.*, 2016; Cole *et al.*, 2013), the research base is light (Berliner & Kolko, 2016). Recent scholarship has critiqued the proliferation of Trauma-informed Care (TIC), the guiding philosophy of trauma-informed organizations and systems including, but not limited to, schools (Berliner & Kolko, 2016). Berliner and Kolko (2016) call for a "clearer operationalization and empirical measurement of the overarching concept" (p. 169). According to Berliner and Kolko (2016), research suggests that while practitioners within trauma-informed organizations agree on the conceptual importance of TIC, they are left to

translate "the big idea to everyday practice" (p. 169). They question, "What defines TIC beyond good practice principles and trauma awareness?...*How would institutions, organizations, or individual providers know if they were delivering TIC?"* (p. 169, emphasis in original).

Studies on the experiences of practitioners within trauma-informed organizations illustrate the aforementioned need for clearer operationalization of the overarching TIC concept. For example, Donisch, Bray, and Gewirtz (2016) conducted a qualitative study (interviews and focus groups) on 126 professionals—including teachers—in child-serving trauma-informed organizations. They found that service providers embraced the importance of trauma-informed practices, but expressed uncertainty regarding the specific practices they should perform to best respond to traumatized youth. Additionally, study participants questioned the extent to which they had been taught the specific skills and strategies needed to know how to best respond. Another study surveyed 282 social workers to assess their attitudes about trauma-informed care within community agencies, including 40 participants who worked in schools (Kusmaul, Wilson, & Nochajski, 2015). The findings revealed that participants expressed a need for clarity on the overall construct of TIC as well as how it is implemented at the organizational level.

The majority of studies, like those referenced above, are limited almost exclusively to self-reported behaviors as a means to gauge the impact of trauma-informed care on practitioners within organizations such as schools. These findings are problematic because by definition, the implementation of trauma-informed care represents "a transformational organizational change, incorporating all levels of staff" and fundamentally changing the nature of the organization (Kusmaul *et al.*, 2015; Bloom & Sreedhar, 2008). Therefore,

since TIC is designed to produce changes in practice, a lack of knowledge about how educators' practices change within the trauma-informed school context is troubling.

Ko *et al.* (2008) explain that trauma presents schools with a "serious dilemma": schools must grapple with how to balance their primary mission of education with the reality that a growing number of students have traumatic stress-related needs that must be addressed in order for them to attend school regularly and successfully engage in the learning process. As the literature on trauma-informed teaching practices indicates, some teachers report encountering this "dilemma" on an individual level (e.g., balancing academic vs. socio-emotional tasks). However, more research is needed to explore how teachers navigate the tension between these two competing domains, particularly within the context of a trauma-informed school where socio-emotional tasks are a job requirement, not optional.

Implementation

Scholars problematize the lack of a blueprint for trauma-informed schools that can inform accurate and consistent implementation, professional development, and evaluation (Chafouleas *et al.*, 2016.) Consequently, the effectiveness of trauma-informed schools is inconclusive due to uneven implementation (Chafouleas *et al.*, 2016; Reinbergs & Fefer, 2018). In a recent meta-analysis on the effectiveness of trauma-informed schools, Chafouleas *et al.* (2016) call for trauma-informed schools to adopt multi-tiered service delivery frameworks in order to ensure accurate and sustainable implementation. Such frameworks, according to Chafouleas *et al.* (2016), address the "critical need to...build a

strong evidence base regarding trauma-informed service delivery in schools." These multi-tiered frameworks have six defining features:

1. The use of evidence-based practice when providing support to students
2. Tiered organization of supports with increasing intensity
3. Use of data-based problem-solving framework for support decisions
4. Decision rules for evaluating student response to support and subsequent modifications
5. Measuring and maintaining treatment fidelity
6. Identifying students who need support early

In addition to the six features listed above, multi-tiered frameworks generally organize trauma services into three tiers of increasing intensity (1=universal, 2=selective, 3=indicated). Navigation between tiers is achieved through data-based decision-making to determine the specific services/resources needed. Research currently does not address staff supports at each tier (Reinbergs & Fefer, 2018). More evidence is needed to examine the barriers that exist in terms of the implementation of school-based trauma services (Reinbergs & Fefer, 2018). It has been shown that isolated trauma interventions are difficult to sustain, may lack sufficient buy-in, and can create tensions when integrating mental health services into a school environment (Cole *et al.*, 2013; Evans, Stephan, & Sugai, 2014)

Summary and Implications

While principles do exist that define trauma-informed care in schools, some scholars problematize to extent to which these principles have been translated into what practitioners do as daily practices (Berliner & Kolko, 2016). Those studies that have investigated practitioners' behaviors within trauma-informed settings are limited to methodological approaches that prevent conclusions from being made as to whether or not

participants changed their practices and how effective such changes were (Bartlett, Barto, Griffin, Fraser, Hodgdon, & Bodian, 2016; Lang, Campbell, Shanley, Crusto, & Connell, 2016; Kerns *et al.*, 2016; Sullivan, Murray, & Ake, 2016). My study can address the need for empirical evidence with respect to educators' everyday trauma-informed practices and, more importantly, how they translate their philosophies of trauma-informed care into those everyday practices.

High School Dropout

The Scale and Nature of High School Dropout

High school dropout continues to be of national concern with the United States. As of 2016, approximately 17% of Americans aged 18-24 (amounting to 5.2 million) had not completed high school within four years or at all (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2017). It is estimated that each year, nearly 1 million young people do not graduate from high school (Balfanz *et al.*, 2014). White and Asian students consistently graduate at rates exceeding the national 80% graduation rate, while non-Asian students of color graduate at rates 10 to 20% below the national average (Balfanz, Bridgeland, Fox, DePaoli, Ingram, & Maushard, 2014; Swanson, 2004). In addition to racial/ethnic disparities in national graduation rates, students educated in highly segregated, low-income, and urban schools graduate at rates closer to 50% (Balfanz *et al.*, 2014; Swanson, 2004).

There is a consensus within research on high school dropout that leaving school involves a confluence of in-school and out-of-school factors including status risk factors (e.g., race, gender, socio-economic status, parental education), alterable risk factors (e.g.,

attendance, academic failure, grade retention, misbehavior) and school risk factors (e.g., school climate, supportive student-teacher relationships, poverty concentration, school size) (Jia, Konold, & Cornell, 2016; Barile, Donohue, Anthony, Baker, Weaver, & Henrich, 2012; Center for Promise, 2014; Bridgeland *et al.*, 2006; Suh & Suh, 2007). Therefore, leaving school is not a young person's spontaneous decision, but rather it is the end product of a process of gradual disengagement, which is fueled by the interplay between individual and structural factors (Rumberger, 2004).

Trauma and Dropout

Less attention has been given to examining the role of childhood trauma in school completion (Gailer, Addis, & Dunlap, 2018; Iachini, Petiwala, & DeHart, 2016). This is despite scholars identifying that symptoms of traumatic stress are closely related to those factors commonly identified with dropout (Rumsey & Milsom, 2017; Hammond, Linton, Smink, & Drew, 2007), specifically school disengagement (Porche *et al.*, 2016). One study used nationally representative data and found that youth with trauma histories drop out of school at higher rates than those who have not experienced trauma (Porche, Fortuna, Lin, & Alegria, 2011).

Dropout Interventions and Effectiveness

Dropout Prevention

Alternative education represents the dominant approach to dropout prevention (Kim, 2011). However, a knowledge gap exists between what practitioners consider best practices in alternative education and rigorous empirical data on effective dropout

prevention and intervention programs (Prevatt & Kelly, 2003; Freeman & Simonsen, 2015; Bloom, Thompson, & Ivry, 2010; Dynarski, 2004). Moreover, the great variation in alternative education program types (e.g., GED vs. high school diploma, compulsory vs. voluntary, school size) presents additional issues when attempting to compare the effectiveness of multiple settings. Nonetheless, research on the effectiveness of alternative education programs has concentrated on two related to student outcomes: students' sense of belonging, satisfaction, and changes in self-esteem; and academic achievement (Lange & Sletten, 2002). Student satisfaction has been associated with school size, flexibility, and caring, supportive student-teacher relationships (Griffin, 1993; Smith, Gregory, & Pugh, 1981).

Studies documenting academic outcomes among alternative education students have been inconclusive. Among those studies that examined academic outcomes, there was little to no change, or a decline in standardized test scores (Tenenbaum, 2000). For those students who returned to a traditional school setting after attending an alternative school, they experienced an academic decline (Carruthers & Baenen, 1997). Dynarski and Gleason (1998) reported similar inconsistencies in academic gains among students enrolled in more than 20 high school alternative education programs. They found when compared to similar students not admitted into the alternative program (the control group), students in alternative programs were less likely to drop out of school and were more regularly promoted to the next grade. However, enrollment in these alternative programs did not have a noticeable impact on students' attendance, course grades, or standardized test scores.

Lange and Sletten (2002) identified three key characteristics associated with alternative schools that are aimed to address the needs of students at risk of dropping out: small school size, emphasis on caring relationships, and clear rules and expectations. Yet while researchers have identified elements of alternative education that have shown to improve selected student outcomes, these "best practices" do not represent an empirically based program model for dropout prevention. The only consensus within the research community appears to be the idea of "personalization," or the strategy of focusing on why an individual student experiences difficulty in school and then proactively providing resources and supports to address the students' needs (Dynarski, 2004).

Dropout Recovery

A subcategory of alternative educational programs is termed dropout recovery, which describes programs that serve out-of-school youth (Aron, 2006). Specifically, out-of-school youth who return to the education system commonly do so through accelerated high school "second-chance" programs. A study by the National Center for Education Statistics (2006) tracked a cohort of 1,988 eighth graders and revealed that 63% of individuals who did not complete high school earned a diploma or GED within eight years. Thus, high school "drop out" does not necessarily signal the end of a student's education. Although literature on high school dropout is extensive, much less is known about the number and characteristics of youth who leave school and then return via second chance alternative education programs (Labounty, 2012). Moreover, even fewer studies focus on the environments that are most conducive to such students' success (Royal, 2012; Berliner, Barrat, Fong, & Shirk, 2009). Indeed, few rigorous studies exist on the effectiveness of

second-chance programs (Bloom, Thompson, & Ivry, 2010; Aron 2006; Dynarski, 2004). There is, however, some evidence of positive short-term employment outcomes in those programs that include vocational training and/or concurrent employment as part of their program objectives (Hair, Ling, & Cochran, 2003).

Gasiewski (2009) studied the motivations of high school dropouts who enrolled in an alternative education program to obtain a GED. The findings revealed that students seek from alternative education programs those elements that they felt were lacking in their home and school experiences, "namely an ethos of care and caring, supportive relationships" (p. 93). Ultimately, more research is needed in order to understand how well alternative schools achieve their stated goals of "dropout prevention" and/or "dropout recovery" (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009).

Summary and Implications

The high rates of high school dropout have positioned alternative education programs as a permanent fixture in the educational system. Although research on the causes of high school dropout is extensive, less attention has been devoted to the role trauma may play in a student's decision to leave school. Many of the symptoms associated with trauma bear a striking resemblance to those risk factors commonly attributed to dropout. The efficacy of high school dropout interventions is questionable. There is a gap between commonly regarded best practices and rigorous evaluations. One obstacle in examining the effectiveness of alternative education programs is the great variation among them. Even less is known about the effectiveness of dropout recovery programs—those serving out-of-school youth who have returned to school. Across the various types of alternative education

programs, there is a common theme of the importance of small school size as well as supportive student-teacher relationships.

Conclusion

Although there is extensive research on the impact of trauma on students, too little attention is paid to how educators understand and respond to the needs of these students. Within the literature on trauma-informed practices, most of the studies are limited to self-reported knowledge and behaviors, which has created a gap in our understanding of how educators' perspectives on trauma inform their actual practices. There is a similar gap within the small but growing scholarship on trauma-informed schools; however, the issue is less a matter of research methodology and more a need for operationalization of the concept of trauma-informed care and how to best evaluate it. Finally, the research on high school dropout interventions indicates a need for more rigorous evaluations of the effectiveness of alternative education programs in order to identify those elements that are most conducive to student success. This study contributes to these four areas of research by exploring how staff at an alternative high school for former dropouts create a schooling environment that is responsive to traumatized students' needs. Furthermore, this study extends the knowledge base in these four areas by including observational data with a focus on the meaning educators make in this alternative high school context, and examining the consequences of educators' practices as well.

CHAPTER 3

METHODS

The purpose of this study is to explore how staff at an alternative school serving former high school dropouts create a schooling environment that is responsive to the needs of traumatized youth. A review of the literature revealed that while many claims have been made about educators' views on and self-reported behaviors concerning trauma-informed approaches, few empirical studies have examined how educators' perspectives inform their trauma-informed practices. Among these, existing studies have largely failed to investigate teachers' lived experiences within the context of a school that employs trauma-informed practices throughout the organization. Identifying the impact of trauma on academic achievement calls for further examination of classroom evidence in order to better understand trauma-informed approaches in schools (Brunzell *et al.*, 2016b). In this study, I answer that call: framed by Contemporary Trauma Theory and the concepts of toxicity and educational trauma, I explore how teachers (as well as administrators and school counselors) engaged in daily meaning-making within their work to create a schooling environment that is responsive to the needs of traumatized students. The research questions, repeated from Chapter 1, that guided this study were:

1. How do staff at an alternative high school create a schooling environment that is responsive to the needs of traumatized youth?

   a. To what extent do school staff's practices resonate with existing models for trauma-informed care?

2. What are the consequences of these practices on students, staff, and the school?

Epistemological Approach

This study was approached from an interpretivist research paradigm. The interpretivist paradigm is concerned with identifying and understanding the meaning that individuals assign to their actions in a social setting (Horvat, Heron, Agbenyega, & Bergey, 2013). In the interpretivist tradition, these meanings amount to multiple and sometimes conflicting social realities (Guba & Lincoln, 1994) that are negotiated socially and historically (Creswell, 2009). Within this paradigm there is an assumption that there is no objective truth, but that reality is subjective and relational, produced through interaction with others (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006; Creswell, 2009). Reality, then, is constructed by and inseparable from the people who participate in it. Moreover, this study is predicated on the admission that any knowledge created is an interactional product of negotiated meanings between participants and the researcher. That is to say that knowledge represents participants' meaning-making, and the researcher's knowledge in turn is an interpretation of those meanings.

The purpose of this study was to understand how school staff go about creating a trauma-responsive schooling environment, and an interpretivist lens focuses that exploration on the meanings which staff attached to their work in the particular context of the research site, Delta High School. The findings from this study are a result of these situated meanings and, as such, are contextually bound. I acknowledge that staff members' understandings of their efforts to create a trauma-responsive schooling environment cannot

be separated from the school context in which they were constructed, nor from the other individuals around whom they were formed. I do not intend to generalize any findings to other populations or contexts, but I instead hope to provide insight into trauma-informed processes present throughout an alternative high school (both within and beyond the classroom) that can inform the use of trauma-informed approaches in other educational settings.

Strategy of Inquiry

Guba and Lincoln (1994) explain that a paradigm is a "basic belief syste[m] based on ontological, epistemological, and methodological assumptions" (p. 107). As is the case with the ontological and epistemological assumptions discussed above, the interpretivist paradigm also has implications on this study's methodology. This study used a qualitative approach to answer the research questions. A qualitative approach is a strategy of inquiry that lies within the interpretivist paradigm (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Accordingly, "qualitative research is a means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem" (Creswell, 2009, p. 4). This study used ethnographic methods, a qualitative research strategy, to explore the meanings that school staff attributed to their efforts to create a trauma-responsive school.

A qualitative research method like ethnography allows the researcher to provide a detailed account of the everyday practices of a community (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006). This methodological approach is particularly advantageous to this study in which little is known about the daily actions and behaviors of staff within a trauma-responsive school. Indeed, qualitative methods are regarded as well-suited to understanding processes (e.g.,

how educators create a schooling environment that is responsive to the needs of traumatized students), and especially useful when there is a lack of knowledge about a topic (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006; Horvat *et al.*, 2013).

Specifically, I used the qualitative strategy of ethnography to answer the study's research questions. Ethnography involves the use of participant observation and in-depth interviews with key informants to study a community in its natural context for an extended period of time (Creswell, 2009). Central to ethnography is its effort to understand the view of the participants (Lareau & Shultz, 1996). A qualitative strategy like ethnography, in which "research occurs in the lived context and is framed from the perspective of those in the context," demonstrates its strength in its ability to yield "the emic perspective," or the insider's perspective of reality (Horvat *et al.*, 2013, p. 9). Through the collection and examination of rich, participant-informed data, I sought to develop an authentic, highly contextualized understanding of educators' daily experiences and decision-making related to creating a trauma-responsive school, as well as the consequences of these actions.

Research Site

This study took place at Delta High School, a public alternative high school serving former high school dropouts in the northeastern United States. At the time of this study there were seven alternative high schools in the Urban Northeast School District.[5] The School District, through its Re-Engagement Center, referred to these institutions as accelerated alternative high schools. These high schools served a variety of student populations and varied in the terminal degree offered. Of these seven schools, only four

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[5] Pseudonym.

offered a high school diploma (the others offered a GED) and exclusively served students who were not enrolled in high school[6] (rather than youth at risk of dropping out). Of these four schools, only two had elements of trauma-informed education (e.g., restorative justice practices, emphasis on relationships, personalized learning plans). One was a charter school and the other, Delta, was a public school. I selected Delta as a research site for multiple reasons. First, in my preliminary discussions with administration, there was a more explicit focus on trauma at Delta. Secondly, Delta accepts new students to its Bridge program three times during the academic year, each trimester. I felt that this trimester schedule would give me the most data, because it would allow me to observe the process of teachers creating a trauma-responsive school environment for three different sets of students over a one-year period.

Delta is a small school, with approximately 200 students enrolled at the time of the study[7]. About 100[8] of those students were a part of Bridge, a mandatory program for every newly admitted student. Delta hosted a new cohort of Bridge students during each of the three, 10-week-long trimesters of the academic year. Delta is an accelerated alternative high school. Students who completed the Bridge program were eligible to earn up to 3.5 credits toward a high school diploma. Students in Bridge were assigned to an advisory (akin to homeroom) and an Advisor (Delta's name for a teacher). Approximately 25

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[6] Some students had chosen to leave, more closely resembling the common term "dropout," while others reported receiving implicit messages from teachers and/or administrators that they were no longer welcome at their school, that they were not a good fit for their current school, or that their probability of graduating high school in general or their grade in particular was unlikely.

[7] Despite the enrollment number, only a small percentage of students consistently attend. A report from the School District indicates that 88% of enrolled students attended less than 80% of school days in the 16-17 AY.

[8] See above. On average, my field notes indicate that the maximum Bridge attendance was around 35-40, but most days there were 3-7 students in each one of the four Bridge classrooms.

students were assigned to each of the four advisories; however, average daily attendance was closer to 3-7 students. Within the already small school setting of Delta, Bridge was an even smaller, more intimate setting; the only classrooms on the first floor were assigned exclusively to Bridge. Bridge program staff consisted of a Director, four Advisors, and one Resilience Specialist (Delta's name for a counselor). The Principal, Assistant Principals, and other staff members were also active within the Bridge community.

Delta served students ranging in age from 15-21. The student population was majority African American or Latino/a, and low-income. Other District-provided data (see Table 1) are indicative of potential trauma.

Table 1. Delta Student Demographics

African American or Latino/a[9]	Low-Income	Has an IEP*[10]	Pregnant or Parenting*	Justice-Involved*	Homeless*
78%	91%	7%	18%	5%	4%

Source: 2016-2017 Alternative Educational Progress Report, School District.

Participants

In this section I describe the school staff and students who participated in the study. I first discuss how my approach to study participants changed over the course of this study, followed by an explanation of how I recruited participants. I received IRB approval for this study.

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[9] Data from the school district does not provide data on disaggregated racial/ethnic percentages.

[10] * Indicates self-reported data.

A Shift in Focus

My research questions changed over time as I developed a better understanding of the dynamics of the Bridge program at Delta. Initially, I intended to study students' experiences in the Bridge program, rather than the experiences of the staff. For this reason, I had recruited students to participate in interviews and planned to spend equal time conducting classroom observations in each of the four Bridge classrooms. From early on in the study, however, inconsistent student attendance presented challenges for me. I struggled to build rapport with students, since a particular student I might interact with on one day could be (and oftentimes was) absent for several school days after that. Additionally, given the nature of the Bridge program, incoming students were skeptical, on guard, and reserved for the first few weeks of the trimester. Much of my data during that time centered on how staff were handling the absence of student participation, and how they attempted to increase student comfort and engagement. Thus, six weeks into the first 10-week-long trimester, I realized that the bulk of my field notes contained observations of what the staff were doing and saying, rather than observations about students.

Nonetheless, I still chose to interview students during the first trimester (and the remaining two trimesters) because my second research question required information from students in order to report the consequences of staff's efforts to create a schooling environment that is responsive to students' trauma-related needs. These interviews with students also gave me insight into student-teacher interactions that I used to refine my focus during classroom observations. Student interviews additionally provided me with data that I sometimes used in my interactions with staff (informal communication and formal interviews) to pursue a topic of interest (e.g., staff's perceptions of common struggles,

motivations, or experiences of students in the Bridge program). As a participant-observer, my interactions with students included engaging in informal conversations during the school day, helping them proofread an assignment or spell a word, and participating in classroom discussions. It should be noted that while I conducted 27 interviews with students, my richest data were from my interviews and conversations with staff members. This was another reason for my shift in focus.

Student Participants

I interviewed a total of 27 students over the course of the 2016-2017 school year: 12 during the first trimester, 6 during the second trimester,[11] and 9 during the third trimester (see Tables 3-5 for demographic information about student interviewees).

Student recruitment occurred during the welcome session on the first day of each trimester. Part of students' admission to Delta was contingent upon parents'/guardians' attendance at this session. This allowed me to obtain consent from the parents of any students who were minors. The Principal introduced me at the end of the session, when I explained the study and stated that if they consented, their child would be requested to participate in a 30-minute recorded interview. I asked for any questions and distributed and collected the consent forms. When it came time to interview students, I tried to create a sample that was representative of the general student population (e.g., in terms of gender, age, parenting status, time out of school, and employment status).

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[11] Bridge enrollment is generally much lower for the second trimester of the school year.

My Key Informant

Of the four Bridge Advisors, Carly became a key informant. Around the same time that I shifted my observational focus away from students and onto staff, I also decided that I would concentrate my classroom observations on Carly. I made this methodological choice for a few strategic reasons (see "Data Collection").

Staff Participants

I asked all staff associated with Bridge if they would participate in a study on the Bridge program. Participation required that Advisors allow classroom observations and agree to take part in one formal interview about their work with Bridge students and their general experience at Delta. I interviewed eight staff members: three of the four Bridge Advisors,[12] the Director of Bridge, the school counselor assigned to Bridge, as well as the Principal and both Assistant Principals of Delta (see Table 2 for demographic information on staff interviewees).

Data Collection

According to the tradition of ethnography, the data collection for this study included participant observations, interviews, and artifact collection (Creswell, 2009). Although I collected several artifacts from the site (assignment handouts, lesson plans, monthly calendars, and the student and staff handbooks), the primary data analyzed for this study was collected through observations and interviews. In this section I describe the ways in which I collected the two main sources of data in this study: field notes from participant

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[12] One of the Advisors was on medical leave for more than half of the school year. There was a substitute teacher for the majority of that time, but Delta administrators would also teach that class on several occasions.

observations and interviews (see Table 6). I also discuss the specific purpose that each of these data sources served in this study.

Observations

As with all ethnographic research, my goal was to understand the perspectives of participants by observing them in a natural setting over a prolonged period of time. I was embedded at the research site during the 2016-2017 school year. Over the course of the study, I conducted observations for approximately 5 hours per week for a total of approximately 150 hours of observation at Delta. Every trimester I observed two Bridge-wide activities: the four-day orientation that included all new students, and students' end-of-the-trimester final Exhibition presentations.

The primary focus of these observations was on staff interacting with Bridge students. Although I concentrated my time in my key informant, Carly's, classroom, I did not limit my observations to that space. Some days Carly was out, so I observed another Advisor's class; other days, students were encouraged to do independent work in another Advisor's class that they needed to catch up on. If there was an event or commotion associated with another Advisor or class project, I went where the data took me. Additionally, many school days had rich communal experiences that were not limited to a classroom. Bridge-wide activities such as Town Hall, graduation, field trips, guest speakers, and a mock interview day provided opportunities to observe the Bridge program on a more collective level.

I intentionally varied the times when I conducted observations so as to capture different class periods (i.e., different groups of students) and the various school day

routines (e.g., morning greeting, end-of-day circle). This variation enabled me to spend additional time with Carly as well as other staff members during prep periods, before/after school, and during lunch. These out-of-classroom observations allowed me to hear conversations between staff members.

I used observations as a tool to learn how school staff experienced the daily work of creating a trauma-responsive schooling environment. My observations focused on staff's actions and, in particular, interactions between staff and students. My observations were not limited to interactions between Advisors and students; Administrators, the Director of Bridge, and the Bridge counselor regularly participated in Bridge activities. These staff members would frequently attend student presentations and ask questions during the Q&A portion, participate in circles, and just drop in to say hello and make small talk with students. During student-staff interactions, I paid careful attention to both the language and body language of staff. I used a small tablet to take detailed field notes about what staff did, with a specific focus on capturing staff members' and students' exact words. A tablet allowed me to record large portions of staff-student dialogue and easily move around the room (or shut off the screen in order to remain an active participant-observer).

Within 24 hours of each observation, I took the notes that I had jotted down during my observations and typed them up into more comprehensive field notes. I highlighted things that stood out to me as well as general themes I was noticing. I also flagged items that required follow-up (e.g., "ask Principal about field trip date," or "get a copy of the assignment requirements"). I used my field notes to develop both the student and staff interview protocols. Field notes also served as a form of triangulation for data collected during interviews.

Key Informant: Carly

The methodological choice to make Carly the focus of my classroom observations was strategic. In many ways, Carly was representative of the typical Bridge Advisor: she was female, new to Delta, and early on in her teaching career. During the academic year in which the study was conducted, two of the Bridge Advisors were new and two were returners (though one of the returning Advisors was gone for the majority of the year on medical leave). In my interview with the Principal prior to the start of the school year, he mentioned that learning about the new Advisors could yield insight for Delta leadership since Bridge Advisors are typically new to the school. Delta generally gets one to two new Advisors each year due to teacher turnover and the fact that many Bridge Advisors choose to move up to teach veteran-level students after teaching Bridge.

Basing myself in Carly's classroom was a means to overcome the challenges associated with spotty student attendance. Early on in the study, I began following a group of students as they moved from Advisor to Advisor. I thought that would provide the most coherent narrative of the Bridge experience; however, many Advisors changed their lesson plans in response to low student attendance. This made it difficult for me to get a true sense of what the Advisors had planned. I found that staying in one classroom and seeing all three cohorts of students cycle through the same class/Advisor, made for a less disjointed experience.

My consistent presence in Carly's classroom provided me with a strategic position to obtain real-time, inside information. Carly would regularly volunteer information to me between class periods as well. At times it seemed cathartic to her, and at other times, I seized the opportunity to learn more about her experience after a particularly interesting

student encounter. She was open to sharing her inner thoughts, admitting when she was making things up as she went, and voicing her frustration with both students and staff. I was with Carly before and after school, during her prep period, and between classes. This downtime, when Carly wasn't "on," provided unique opportunities for me to pick her brain. Many times she would voluntarily debrief with me following a class. She might let out a sigh and say that she knew that lesson was going to be challenging. Other times she would make her mental notes out loud about how she would tweak something for the next class period. My favorite moments were when I was able to ask her my questions (Why did you do that? How did you decide this?) right after class. Her mind was fresh and I could check my assumptions with her intentions.

There were also distinct advantages to spending time in Carly's room. Her class topic, Social Studies, created unique opportunities to gain insight into the personal lives of students. Carly's project-based learning assignments, such as a documentary, a speech, and a grant-funding proposal from an entrepreneur, all elicited student-selected topics. Many of these projects proved to be very personal to students. Topics like drug use, homelessness, prostitution, and domestic violence deeply resonated with them, as many had experienced these issues directly themselves or indirectly through a friend or family member. I found Carly to engage on a more personal level with students in terms of the actual curriculum compared to what I saw in the Engineering class or English class.

Additionally, Carly had a unique position, as she was the only Bridge Advisor assigned to a group of "repeaters." These students had previously failed Bridge but were permitted by school leadership to repeat the program. This assignment was a great source of frustration for Carly. She drew many contrasts between her repeaters and non-repeaters.

This position also afforded her a unique vantage point to speak to what she perceived as the strengths and weaknesses of the Bridge program.

Informal Communication

As the study progressed, I found that my field notes consistently included time dedicated to debriefing with school staff. I regularly questioned staff members, not just Carly, on the reasoning behind particular actions (e.g., why did you choose to address that student's cursing, but ignore this student's cursing?) and asked them what they were thinking or feeling during a particular moment of the school day. Moments in between classes, before/after school, and even quiet time when students were working independently became rich sites for exploring staff's actions and the meanings attached to them. These informal "interviews" included six of the eight staff and were a prominent part of my data analysis, particularly in the early stages of data collection. On average, I estimate that I spent 15 minutes per week on informal communication. That would account for approximately 10% (7.5 hours) of my total 150 hours of observation. In Chapters 4 and 5, any data gathered in this way is cited as follows: (Informal communication, date).

Interviews

The second data collection method of this study was interviews. Within the context of ethnography, interviews provide an opportunity to expand on data gathered during observations and to explore emerging themes. I used semi-structured interviews to learn about how Delta staff and students experienced trauma-responsive schooling. I interviewed a total of 8 staff members and 27 students. For the semi-structured interviews, I used an

interview protocol of predetermined questions while also allowing for impromptu questions and topics of discussion. This strategy provided me with enough consistency to be able to draw comparisons among participants, while still giving me the freedom to delve deeper into topics that were particularly relevant to a participant. I audio recorded and transcribed each of the 35 interviews.

Staff Interviews

I interviewed eight staff members using a semi-structured interview protocol. These interviews were strategically held toward the end of the school year. Leading up to that point, I was intentional in my interactions with staff and would offer to help them clean up after a science experiment or carry supplies from the parking lot before school. I asked them about their plans for the weekend, freely answered their questions about graduate school and exchanged details about my personal life as well. Prior to the interviews, I wanted to have an established rapport so that they might speak as openly and honestly as possible about their experiences at Delta. I conducted the staff interviews at a local coffee shop so that we would not be overheard by other colleagues or students.

In my interviews with Delta staff, I used an interview protocol that touched on various aspects of their work at Delta. I asked questions to explore staff's understandings about trauma and the common background experiences they observed among incoming students. I also asked them to describe the general Bridge trajectory that they witnessed among students. I posed questions that would elicit information about how staff experienced the school culture. I asked them how they would describe Delta and its mission, and had them explain and give their opinion on school policies and procedures.

In an effort to learn about their daily experiences, I asked them to describe a typical day for them at Delta and the challenges they encountered there. I additionally presented scenarios in order to explore staff's decision-making. I based these scenarios on things that had taken place during observations (e.g., a student being disrespectful) and asked them about their feelings and actions. These interviews generally lasted one hour.

Table 2: Delta Staff Interviewees Demographic Information

Staff Pseudonym	Role at Delta	Years at Delta	Age	Race/ Ethnicity	Gender (F/M)
Carly	Teacher	0	23	White	F
Linda	Teacher	6	41	African American	F
Wendy	Teacher	0	26	White	F
Sharon	Director of Bridge	2	57	White	F
Andrea	Counselor for Bridge	6	28	Latina	F
Michelle	Assistant Principal	1	35	Asian American	F
Victor	Assistant Principal	5	31	Latino	F
Jordan	Principal	6	29	Bi-racial	F

Student Interviews

I interviewed 27 students, also using a semi-structured interview protocol. As with the staff, I strategically interviewed students toward the end of each trimester. I learned students' names, spent time in common areas before and after school, and participated in

group discussions. I also commuted via the same public transportation as several students, so I capitalized on the opportunity to say hello and engage in small talk while we waited for the train. I conducted student interviews in an office that was being used for storage, as I did not want students to feel like staff could overhear them. These interviews averaged 30 minutes in duration.

In my interviews with Delta students, I wanted to gather information that would allow me to draw comparisons between their previous school(s) and Delta. I asked them to describe their experience at their previous school, how long they were out of school, and what led them to enroll at Delta. I used an interview protocol that touched on various aspects of student life at Delta. I asked them about their opinions on school policies and staff, as well as particular class assignments and peer dynamics. I asked them questions about how they felt walking into the building and what they thought were the reasons behind any personal or academic changes.

In an effort to answer the second research question (consequences of staff's trauma-informed practices), I counted the frequency of students' responses to questions about how, if at all, they had changed since starting at Delta (e.g., two students reported improved reading skills). I used this method only to get a sense of how common certain views were within my sample of student interviewees. I do not claim that these findings are representative of Bridge students as a whole.

I ended each interview by asking the student to fill out some basic demographic data (e.g., age, race/ethnicity) so as to analyze how the interview sample compared to the larger school population. I also included questions that could indicate trauma exposure or childhood adversity (e.g., living situation, parenting status, whether or not they had a job,

and their parents' educational backgrounds and occupations). See Tables 3-5 below for demographic information about student interviewees.

Table 3: Student Interviewees Demographic Information, First Trimester

Student Pseudonym	Time out of school before Delta	Age	Gender (F/M)	Race/ Ethnicity	Pregnant/ Parenting (Y/N)	Employed (Y/N)
Ariana	6-7 months	17	F	Latina	N	N
Ernesto	1 year	20	M	Latino	N	N
Jackie	9 months	19	F	Latina	Y	N
Rachel	3 years	19	F	African American	N	Y
Damian	6 months	17	M	African American	N	N
Jorge	1 year	19	M	Latino	N	Y
Kiki	1 month	17	F	Latina	N	N
Mary	6 months	19	F	Latina	N	Y
Natifah	3 months	16	F	African American	Y	N
Muhammad	5 months	16	M	African American	N	Y
Rodrigo	0 months[13]	17	M	Bi-racial	N	Y
Aabir	2 months	18	M	Bi-racial	N	N

[13] "0 months" indicates that the student finished the school year at their previous school but decided to enroll in Delta at the start of the following academic year.

Table 4: Student Interviewees Demographic Information, Second Trimester

Student Pseudonym	Time out of school before Delta	Age	Gender (F/M)	Race/ Ethnicity	Pregnant/ Parenting (Y/N)	Employed (Y/N)
Lilliana	4 years	20	F	Latina	Y	N
Adam	2 weeks	17	M	Latino	N	N
David	1 week	16	M	Latino	N	N
Nadia	2 months	15	F	African American	N	N
Jessica	0 months	18	F	African American	N	N
Veronica	1.5 years	15	F	Latina	N	Y

Table 5: Student Interviewees Demographic Information, Third Trimester

Student Pseudonym	Time out of school before Delta	Age	Gender (F/M)	Race/ Ethnicity	Pregnant/ Parenting (Y/N)	Employed (Y/N)
Tamara	2 years	21	F	African American	Y	Y
Tamika	3 months	15	F	African American	N	N
Edgar	9 months	18	M	Latino	N	Y
Selena	4 months	17	F	Latina	N	N
Hector	0 months	17	M	Latino	N	N
Lourdes	4 months	16	F	Latina	N	Y
Lyana	1 month	16	F	African American	N	Y
Flaca	3 weeks	16	F	Latina	N	Y
Alejandra	2 months	16	F	Latina	N	N

See Table 6 below for an overview of the data collection methods used in this study.

Table 6: Data Collection Methods

Data Source	Description
Participant observations: Approximately 150 hours	- Classroom instruction - Bridge events (e.g., field trips, Town Hall, mock interview day) - School events (e.g., school basketball tournament, school play, graduation) ~7.5 hours of informal observations
Informal communication: Approximately 7.5 hours of 150 total	- Before & after school - Prep period - Lunch
Semi-structured interviews: Total: 35	8 staff: 3 teachers 1 director 1 counselor 2 assistant principals 1 principal 27 students: 1st trimester: 12 2nd trimester: 6 3rd trimester: 9

Data Analysis

Given the qualitative, exploratory nature of this study, data collection and data analysis followed an iterative process. That is to say, the focus of observations, the specific interview questions asked, and the topic of analytic memos continually developed and changed in response to new data collected. The data analysis in this study occurred in two phases. The first phase took place during data collection through the use of my field notes and analytic memos, which I used to engage in the iterative and inductive processes of data collection and analysis. I transcribed my field notes within 24 hours of each observation. In my field notes, I used observer comments to pose questions and note things that I wanted to know more about. This was a reflexive process, as these comments would inform how I would approach subsequent observations (e.g., by sitting in a different part of the room, taking more detailed notes on teacher dialogue). I would typically write an analytic memo on a bi-weekly basis. In these memos I would explore any patterns that were emerging from my observations. I would also make note of particular topics that I might want to explore during interviews. Analytic memos were additionally a place to track methodological decisions.

The second phase of data analysis began after I had finished collecting data. I uploaded all field notes and interview data into Dedoose, a cloud-based qualitative data analysis software program. I reread all of the aforementioned pieces of data three times, taking notes on patterns that emerged during the first phase of analysis, as well as noting new patterns. I then began the process of creating a coding scheme. I developed key words and ideas out of the data patterns and continued to examine these codes, paying careful attention to repetition and relevance to the research questions.

I used this preliminary coding scheme to code a small set of data. This step allowed me to fine-tune my codes. I eliminated (or combined) repetitive codes and developed new codes for data that did not seem to be captured by the original coding scheme. Next, I developed a code book where I defined each of the approximately 30 codes, gave an example, and made any necessary notes that would assist me in my consistent application of each code. Codes captured specific tasks that comprised staff's practices (e.g., *questions, feedback, discipline, encouragement, relationship building*), staff's enactment of school policies or procedures (e.g., *attendance, grading*), as well as staff's responses to their work (e.g., *emotions*). Other codes captured students' attitudes about and reactions to staff practices (e.g., *emotions, growth, non-verbal communication*). Some codes were in-vivo codes to capture information described with common language used by Delta staff and/or students (e.g., *real-world learning*). I drew connections between categories, explored and validated those relationships, and sought out negative cases. Using my code book as a reference, I coded all field notes and interview transcripts. Through this process of analysis I was able to answer my two research questions, uncovering staff members' experience and meaning-making within their work to create a schooling environment that is responsive to traumatized students, as well as its consequences, which I explore in detail in Chapters 4 and 5.

Validity

In contrast to quantitative research, validity in qualitative research is not about a researcher's claims being correct, but rather about these being credible (Creswell, 2009). In the interpretivist paradigm (as discussed in "Epistemological Approach"), the credibility

of claims is based on whether or not they are accurate from the perspective of the participant(s). This study employed a few strategies outlined by Guba and Lincoln's (1985) criteria for trustworthiness in an effort to check the accuracy of findings.

I used multiple sources of data, or triangulation, to "build a coherent justification for themes" (Creswell, 2009, p. 191). I drew upon field notes, informal communication with staff, and interviews to identify and develop themes from the data. The use of these different data collection methods enabled me to view staff members' creation of a trauma-responsive schooling environment from several angles. Furthermore, these varied data sources served to corroborate the study's findings.

In addition to data triangulation, this study also used member checking. This strategy involved sharing emerging themes with study participants in order to determine whether participants found them to be accurate. I held formal interviews and engaged in informal communication with participants to allow them to confirm, challenge, or expand upon my preliminary conclusions. My decision to include participants in the data analysis process in this way was an attempt to achieve an authentic, participant-informed understanding of staff's trauma-responsive practices.

Role of the Researcher

This study is situated within the interpretivist paradigm. A central assumption of interpretivism is that any knowledge created is an interactional product of negotiated meanings between participants and the researcher. This requires me, as the researcher, to consider the possible ways in which my identity and personal experiences influenced data collection and data analysis.

In the context of a research site that consisted primarily of low-income, young people of color, my position as a white doctoral student likely labeled me as an outsider. In an effort to minimize the potential consequences associated with my positionality, I tried to make strategic introductions with students. I had staff introduce me in informal settings such as circles, where I was seated in a circle with the rest of the group. I also asked students if they had any questions about my research. They generally did not ask about my research, but they did take the opportunity to ask me about college or my home state. I freely answered their questions and offered personal information about myself. I also participated in circles so as to create a feeling that I was not simply listening to them share personal things, but that I participated in vulnerable conversations as well (e.g., a circle about what it's like to lose a family member). I wore casual clothing and frequently sat at the same tables as students during lunch. I also made small talk with those students I passed on the train platform during my commute.

However, my status as an outsider may have prevented me from gaining access to "insider" data within interactions or conversations. My goal was to make students feel comfortable around me. As much as possible, I did not want my presence to affect how they behaved at school. I took any opportunity I could to position myself as different from an Advisor or a special guest, but still part of the school community. I did not want students to associate me with discipline or rules. Sometimes students would apologize for cursing or getting loud when they spoke passionately about a topic. I tried to respond by saying something like, "Hey, that's ok. That's real. You don't have to speak differently in front of me."

In contrast, my role as a researcher and/or graduate student may have afforded me social power. Staff members as well as students may have agreed to be interviewed if they perceived that my role provided me with authority. This perceived power differential may have impacted who agreed to participate and the extent to which they provided authentic data. There were times in student and staff interviews when participants seemed to hesitate to share critical thoughts about Delta. I asked both students and staff what, if anything, they would change or improve about Delta/Bridge. Several students were quick to say "nothing." For some students, I understood their answer to be authentic: they were very satisfied with their experience at Delta. For other students, who provided brief and vague answers throughout the interview, I was not sure if they were withholding their real feelings for fear of repercussion. There could have been a similar dynamic among staff. I also found one staff member in particular to be less critical of Delta during the interview, despite having observed this individual express frustration about particular school policies and co-workers. While this was the exception, it is important to acknowledge that this could have impacted data collection as well as analysis. However, the fact that my data collection involved both interviews and observations is what allows me to draw such contrasts between what participants told me during interviews versus their patterns of behavior that I observed.

CHAPTER 4

CREATING A TRAUMA-RESPONSIVE SCHOOLING ENVIRONMENT

In this chapter I seek to answer the primary question that guides this study: How do staff at an alternative high school create a schooling environment that is responsive to the needs of traumatized youth? I contend that staff used their relationships with students as a mechanism to understand student behavior. Specifically, staff used relationships to interpret, or decode, negative student behaviors through a trauma-informed lens. Relationships facilitated decoding and appeared to allow staff to reframe negative student behavior as real-time coping practices, and to respond accordingly. This decoding on the part of staff reinforced the relationships they had with students. Together, relationships and decoding formed a positive feedback loop. I further show that staff practices mirror what the literature has documented as best practices for trauma-informed schools.

The chapter begins with a description of Delta and an overview of its Bridge program within the school, the focus of this study. Next, I discuss how Delta staff understand trauma and how that understanding informs their practices. Then, I introduce the concept of decoding student behavior, a key finding from my study, and describe the school's efforts to cultivate meaningful relationships between students and adults. I conclude by showing the overlap between staff practices and models of trauma-informed schooling outlined in the literature.

The Bridge Program

Delta is a small school. Its official enrollment number was somewhere around 200 students at the time of the study, but average daily attendance was closer to 100 students. About half of the student population is enrolled in Bridge, a mandatory 10-week program for newly admitted students. Whereas other alternative high schools in the district serve students who are at risk of dropping out as well as those who have chosen to obtain a GED, Delta serves a unique student population: youth aged 15-21 who have already left school but decided to return and pursue their high school diploma.

The school building is old and stands much higher than the neighboring homes and the local corner store in a neighborhood miles from downtown. It sits a few blocks away from a busy intersection. This street is lined with multiple check-cashing businesses and pawn shops. Both sides of the school building feature large windows. On days when the weather isn't too cold or too hot, some staff push open these windows and the sounds of the surrounding city filter in. Car radios whiz by, groups of people can be heard on the street corner talking (sometimes yelling), roosters kept by neighbors crow, and there is the steady sound of the loud air-compressed tires of city buses. Inside Delta, there is a different energy. The Bridge environment, much like the rest of Delta, is laid back. It is a fluid setting, free of the bells typically used at schools to signal the end of a class period and the start of the next. This is due in large part to Delta's emphasis on individualized instruction. Most class time is dedicated to independent work; there is very little direct instruction. Throughout the class period, students often call out for their Advisor ("Miss! Miss!"), who will then make her way over to them to meet their specific needs on whatever step/phase of a project they are completing. Some students might be working on a slow-running

desktop computer, while others may have scissors and supplies spread out on one of the long tables as they assemble a poster for a presentation. Students wearing earbuds and writing silently at a table are a common sight, while someone is inevitably up at the front selecting the next song to play as the self-elected classroom DJ.

The Bridge curriculum consists of four core courses: English, Social Studies, Math/Engineering, and Science. Students also take skill-building classes which focus on technology and preparation (interview, resume writing, etc.) for the internship that is a mandatory requirement for every trimester after completion of Bridge. In order for students to satisfy the Bridge requirements, they must have at least 75% attendance and complete a final exhibition. This portfolio-style assessment consists of a 30-minute PowerPoint presentation in which students reflect on their experience in Bridge, including achievements and challenges across all of their classes. Upon successfully passing Bridge, students move upstairs and are assigned to a new "veteran" advisory.

This study focused on the Bridge program and, as noted in Chapter 3, much of my data was collected in one classroom and with one Advisor, whom I call Carly.

How Staff Think about Trauma

Before I examine staff's practices, it is important to look at staff members' understanding of trauma in general and how that factored into their work with students. Overall, participants expressed that there was value to a trauma-informed approach in working with this particular student population. All incoming students at Delta share the common experience of not having achieved academic success within a traditional school,

and many experienced traumatic life events. Staff articulated a collective understanding that student success is contingent upon their meeting students' previously unmet needs.

I first provide an overview of the traumas that staff report as most common among incoming students. Next, I describe how trauma manifests itself in the classroom and I explore a specific type of trauma relevant to this student subpopulation. I then give a brief note on trauma differentiation, specifically educational trauma versus those traumas that occur outside of school. This is followed by an explanation of re-traumatization and how this idea influences staff members' actions.

Staff viewed trauma as a central feature of their unique schooling context. Delta's student population consists exclusively of former high school pushouts/dropouts who were not successful in a traditional school setting. Some students reported that they left their previous school for personal reasons (e.g., needing to work to support their family, becoming incarcerated), while others cited more school-related factors (e.g., not feeling safe, learning pace/styles not being conducive to their success). Based on formal interview data as well as informal conversations, staff reported the following experiences as common among Delta students:

- poverty-related issues (food insecurity, home insecurity, lack of clean clothes and/or access to shower facilities)
- incarcerated parents/relatives
- bullying at school
- witnessing domestic violence
- homelessness
- being a teen parent
- death of a loved one
- acting as primary caretaker for a sick relative
- exposure to community violence
- mental health issues (depression, bipolar disorder)
- suicidal ideation/attempts
- currently on probation, formerly incarcerated
- foster care

- selling drugs and the risks, fears, and shame that accompany this

Sharon, the Bridge Director, offered a potent example of the prevalence of trauma among Delta students. She described an incident that took place a few months earlier when there was a shooting outside of the school that involved a former Delta student. She described frantically trying to get students away from the windows so that they would stop looking at the bloody scene on the school steps. Sharon's voice quieted as she recalled how one petite female student, who was the girlfriend of the victim lying outside, turned around to shake Sharon's hand off of her shoulder, and said: "Miss, I've been to more funerals than birthday parties" (Interview, May 2, 2017). Sharon emphasized how disorienting it was to witness this young woman be annoyed and even confused by Sharon's attempt to protect her from seeing something that had simply become a fact of life.

Staff echoed Sharon's sentiment about the widespread nature of trauma histories among Delta students, particularly normalization of violence, witnessing violence such as domestic violence or death by gun violence, and substance abuse. In fact, staff members reported that many of their students were still regularly exposed to these things. In other words, staff understood that students' experiences with trauma were not exclusively a thing of the past.

In addition to their recognition of the presence of trauma among Delta students, staff expressed a familiarity with the symptoms of trauma. They collectively categorized the manifestations of trauma as instances of internalization (social withdrawal, depression, truancy) and externalization (aggression, substance abuse, distracting other students in class). As I will discuss later, when staff sought to interpret the deeper meaning underlying

student behavior, they drew upon this distinction of internalized versus externalized behavior.

A quick note on differentiating trauma: it is beyond the scope of this study to differentiate (or diagnose) students' trauma as educational versus something that is more personal and out-of-school in nature. In fact, based on students' self-reports in interviews and disclosures in class, along with information shared by staff, the majority of incoming students were understood to have complex trauma: in other words, having experienced or been exposed to multiple traumatic events. So, although a specific trauma (e.g., current abuse at home or a negative past educational experience) might appear most salient in a particular episode, it was safe to assume that the individual's coping practices may have been spurred by additional traumas. While this made staff members' decoding work understandably more challenging, it nevertheless underscored the necessity of trauma-informed practices when serving this particular population of students. In my descriptions of decoding work, I do not attempt to isolate whether the nature of the trauma is exclusively educational or personal.

How Staff Think about Their Responsibility to Respond to Students' Trauma

Delta staff have an instrumental view of trauma and how it influences their work. Staff universally reported that incoming students have experienced what they call "educational trauma" (discussed below) and, as a result, that they must be sensitive to that. The staff's understanding of educational trauma is consistent with Sullivan's (2004) description: the cumulative effect of being consumed by the traumas of life's adversities and when "those injuries have been exacerbated by an unsympathetic education system"

(p. 390). During each of my formal interviews, staff readily described in detail the kinds of educational experiences reported by the vast majority of incoming students. These experiences, like the ones described by Michelle, an Assistant Principal, communicated students' sense of feeling unknown and overlooked:

> What they say is that when they would ask for help, they would be ignored. When they would try and explain what they didn't understand, they would be ignored. When they would leave, no one would call. When they would not come in for days, [the school] would only call when it would be a truancy level. There are many, *many* kids who would say they would spend the whole day in *school*—they were rarely *not* in school, but they were never in class. They were just wandering the halls and nobody stopped them. (Interview, June 2, 2017)

Michelle's statement provides a summary of students' prior educational experiences that closely matches those summaries offered by other staff. There is a strong sense of being overlooked: even when they were physically present, students often went unseen. Care or pursuit is described as being only for the sake of a policy (e.g., the legal requirement to contact a guardian when absences reach a dramatic point). This paints a picture of schools' reactive stance towards students, who expressed a general pattern of not having their needs met.

Delta staff offered an alternative identity of sorts: they saw Delta and their work as educators as being intentionally different from the experiences and environments that students came from. The staff's goal to meet students' previously unmet needs appeared to be the driving force behind their efforts to decode student behavior as an attempt to cope with trauma. Staff members voiced a common belief that much of the educational trauma experienced by incoming students was the result of an accumulation of unmet needs. Linda, a Bridge Advisor who has taught at Delta since the school was established, described it like this: "No one was addressing their educational needs…These kids are just trying to find an

educational home" (Interview, May 2, 2017). Staff described the culture of Bridge (and Delta at large) as a one-student-at-a-time approach, designed to meet the unique needs of each student. This individualized way of serving students appeared to be aimed at creating a learning environment that was uniquely equipped to provide each student with the opportunity for educational success.

Staff expressed the belief that it was their responsibility to demonstrate an interest in and willingness to meet students' needs. In a conversation following the end of orientation, Carly reflected on what she described as a critical responsibility she must fulfill during students' initial few weeks of school. Carly described this goal in detail as she reflected on the first week of Bridge. Her internal narration takes the form of a question-and-answer exchange between herself and the students:

> Students are on guard and generally distrusting. They're still trying to figure me out. I think that process for them is like, *Can I trust you? Will you respect me?* There's these kind of core questions that they're asking like, *Do you listen to me? Do you hear what I say? Do you care about my needs? Do you hear my needs?* There's this set of questions that they're asking and I'm trying to answer those questions as quickly and consistently as possible. Like, *Yes, I see you. Yes, I hear you. I care about you. I hear what your needs are. I'm going to do my best to meet them.* And then as soon as they start to hear that and experience that, they open up a little bit and they start to show themselves and reveal their personalities. (Informal communication, September 17, 2016)

Carly's comment that she sought to answer students' need-related questions "as quickly and consistently as possible" communicates a sense of urgency and importance in this interaction with students early on in their Bridge experience. Carly's thought process was representative of that of other Delta staff who accepted the task of meeting students' previously unmet needs. They described this as a non-negotiable part of their work that was fundamental to students' success.

All staff members characterized Delta students as exhibiting some scars of the past educational trauma they had experienced at prior schools. In an interview with Sharon, the Bridge Director, she explained that a distinct characteristic of traumatized students was shame:

> The most debilitating thing that they come with is shame. This enormous well of shame…shame because they've been identified as *uniquely worthless* by the school system. (Interview, May 2, 2017)

Staff perceived students as entering Delta with emotional baggage from their prior schooling experiences. They expressed a desire to practice sensitivity to many students who had been incapacitated by the stigma of not succeeding in a traditional school setting.

Staff members identified the far-reaching consequences of educational trauma on how students viewed themselves, and felt a responsibility to challenge students' self-perceptions. Sharon's commentary on the cumulative effect of various adversities that essentially incapacitated students and made school feel insurmountable parallels other staff members' descriptions of incoming students. "Uniquely worthless," as Sharon said (quoted above), is not some abstract belief about students who drop out of high school; it is instead a message that has been implicitly and explicitly communicated to students in their previous schools. The consequence here lies in how students may internalize that message. As an example, Jill, a Bridge Advisor, expressed how educational trauma caused students to internalize narratives about themselves, their academic abilities and their identity:

> Some of the suffocating things that they live with are the fact that they've failed in school for so long or were ignored in school for long or felt uncared for in school for long, that they no longer believe in their ability to learn. They no longer believe that they are capable of change. They have been told that so many times and that's a painful way to live. (Field note, October 13, 2016)

The cumulative burden of a history of failing in school has incapacitated students, specifically harming their self-perceived ability to succeed in general and, arguably more damaging, their self-perceived ability to change. Jill characterized this as an unbearable existence: an excruciating daily life in which students are overwhelmed by an internalized notion that they cannot be any different as a student than they have been in the past. Jill's depiction reveals her view that students' experiences have eroded their beliefs in self-efficacy. While Bridge is designed to facilitate change, Jill's comments highlight a potential obstacle to the success of students who might not believe in their capacity to transform.

Other staff members like Andrea, the Bridge counselor, affirmed Jill's analysis of students' thought patterns and emphasized the need for staff to actively seek out opportunities to rewrite the script: "It's about making education attractive to people who have been disempowered by education, who've been told you're *not* smart by our standards" (Interview, June 1, 2017). Like Andrea, Delta staff understood students as having been excluded from traditional schooling and told they did not measure up. Staff did not attribute failure to the students, however, but instead problematized the predominantly universal approach to education. Andrea continued by citing an example of how she identified a student's strengths so as to intentionally offer encouragement and support, as opposed to criticism and disappointment:

> We have a student who could do extreme sports. I'm like, "You move to LA, you could be making millions off endorsements. You have the heart to do extreme sports because you're always jumping off someplace, you're good with your hands, you're a thrill seeker." And giving them that perspective, like seeing *that* in them and then building them up to where they can believe in themselves, because realistically, that's not what they're used to being fed…I think it's because of our individualized approach, as it should be. One student at a time, that's our slogan. (Interview, June 1, 2017)

Andrea highlighted Delta's customized approach, which does not sacrifice methods for individual student success in the name of rigidity. Like others, Andrea believed that part of her job was to identify mistruths that students had come to believe about themselves, and then to interrupt those thought patterns and challenge those misperceptions.

Avoiding Re-traumatization

In light of these educational traumas that students had experienced, Delta staff strove not to inflict similar types of injuries upon students. They expressed an understanding that misinterpreting symptoms of trauma would risk exacerbating trauma by re-traumatizing the individual. Jordan, the Principal, expressed that although implementing the trauma-informed approach is challenging, the failure to do so constitutes grave negligence and is unethical, especially given the school's mission and the specific population it serves:

> It's easy to forget…we can kind of hold this standard for students in place
> for how we think students should act…and then consequence them heavily
> because they're not acting in ways that we expect, but it's like, no, they're
> coming to us for a reason. (Interview, October 13, 2016)

Beyond staff interactions with students, Delta staff also interpreted school policies as playing a critical role in avoiding re-traumatizing students. For example, Delta's policy of no metal detectors or security guards is notable, given the presence of such measures in the majority of inner-city public high schools. However, staff explained that the policy is designed to create an environment that is intentionally different from the schools from which students came, sending the message to students that staff trust them. More importantly, staff stated that they wanted to avoid triggering encounters such as being

patted down or frisked by a security guard, which many students reported experiencing at their former schools. Additionally, the fact that some students had previously been incarcerated was cited by staff as another reason they intentionally created a school environment that would not make students feel like prisoners. Central to staff's efforts is a commitment to preventing students from being re-traumatized.

Decoding

Trauma and Staff Members' Meaning-making

Delta staff perceived incoming students to have experienced trauma and saw it as their responsibility to address students' traumatic stress responses and needs. Decoding is the term I use to describe how staff worked to identify students' unmet needs through engaging in a meaning-making process surrounding negative student behavior**.** In this process, staff regularly sought to decipher and understand the deeper meaning underlying a range of student behavior, from withdrawal to aggression. Decoding seems to be an appropriate term to describe this process given how Contemporary Trauma Theory conceptualizes trauma. Within CTT, an individual's experience, or how an individual "labels, assigns meaning to" an event is the defining feature of whether or not an event is experienced as traumatic (SAMHSA, 2014a, p. 8). Said differently, trauma is an experience that is uniquely *encoded* and then expressed as traumatic stress symptoms. Therefore, an individual's behavior (trauma symptoms) must be *decoded* in order to understand their experience (defined by the unique meanings associated with the traumatic event).

Oftentimes, decoding took place on a micro-interaction level, moment by moment. Staff approached decoding in several ways, such as by holding spontaneous debrief sessions, asking students questions, or choosing not to respond to or engage with a student. Some decoding was collaborative (e.g., discussions), while other times staff's decoding work was not public at all and involved picking up on body language or something that they considered a cue to give a student space and not engage any further.

Decoding removed the distraction of personal offense, allowing staff members to thoroughly engage in the meaning-making process of understanding student behavior. Following a particularly intense verbal altercation between a male student and a female student, I asked Victor, an Assistant Principal, how he thought staff managed to endure episodes like this weekly. He said, "You know, these kids are broken, and if Advisors can realize that that's not their fault, then they don't have to take it personally. We're here to help [students]" (Informal communication, October 6, 2016). This mentality enabled staff to approach student behavior from an objective standpoint.

More specifically, school staff pushed beyond punitive measures (which students frequently experienced at their former schools) and the potential distraction of personal offense, to uncover the underlying factors driving student behavior. After a challenging class in which multiple students cursed at Carly and expressed frustration at the difficulty of a project, I asked her how she decides to navigate such a situation. Carly's response encapsulated the sentiment of staff as a whole:

> I just make the broad, wide-sweeping assumption that you are doing your best, right? You are doing your best right now. And I don't think I've let go of that, I still believe that every student is doing their best...and I don't take it personally. (Informal communication, March 9, 2017)

Carly's comment, "I don't take it personally," revealed her belief that trauma had compromised students' self-awareness and ability to self-regulate. The implication of her assessment was that these socio-emotional skills had eroded, or perhaps never even developed, as a result of trauma. This impersonal, objective conclusion created a space in which staff could choose not to demonize or punish a student for their behavior, but instead to examine it through a trauma-sensitive lens. In turn, staff were able to explore student behavior on a deeper, more compassionate level.

Externalized symptoms of trauma, such as aggressive behavior, were not uncommon among incoming students. Examples of this kind of behavior ranged in severity. It was not uncommon for students to make passive-aggressive comments about their frustration with their perceived difficulty of an assignment. For example, at the end of the class period in which he was tasked with writing a speech, a student named Carlos cried out in frustration: "I've been working on this speech all fucking day. I don't know about this stupid shit. I've never seen or heard of a speech. What do they expect me to do?" (Field note, February 24, 2017). Other times, aggressive student behavior was explicitly directed at staff. In one case, a female student grew angry after a staff member asked her a series of questions about her negative progress report: "Why is she asking me about Bridge? That's not her business! We all got our things and I'm going through something right now—my own thing. Bitch, you on my dick today" (Field note, May 30, 2017). After witnessing several instances of students displaying combative verbal and/or physical behavior, I wanted to know how Advisors processed those experiences: "Tell me what you're thinking," I said to Carly. Her response illustrates a trauma-informed approach to interpreting student aggression:

Here's a really typical example: you push them a little for something that you need and they snap at you. They sort of explode and they might cuss, they might storm out, they get disrespectful, and the way I process that is like, *Oh, I just pushed you. I just hit a limit with you.* It's like, *there's something there for you that has to do with you and I would love to know what that is*, but I generally don't take it personally. (Informal conversation, November 8, 2016)

Despite a student snapping at *her*, Carly actively chose not to interpret the aggressive act as something personal. This trauma-informed perspective redirected her to instead consider what may lie beneath externalized behavior like aggression.

There's a Need to Decode: Structuring Bridge in Anticipation of Students' Adjustments

Staff articulated the notion that incoming students exhibit a general behavioral progression during the Bridge program. Accordingly, staff structured the Bridge program so as to account for students' need for an adjustment period. It is as though the staff anticipated the need to decode students' behavior in the beginning, thus initiating the decoding process before much of a relationship was in place. Carly described the typical demeanor of incoming students and how she interpreted it:

Usually when they come in, they're pretty skeptical of school, they're skeptical of you. They're just quiet and observant, trying to figure out what you're about. They're often very guarded, whether that looks like them retreating or them biting at you every time you interact with them. They're trying to keep space between them and you...just really on guard. (Interview, April 20, 2017)

The idea of this progression (e.g., from suspicious to trusting) seemed to be an anchoring concept for staff in their decoding work. First, it enabled staff to anticipate particular student behaviors and, consequently, whenever staff members were on the receiving end of inappropriate or self-destructive behavior, they could temper their responses. As a result, behaviors such as skepticism or aggression were not viewed as exceptional (nor were they

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prohibited, punished, or deemed offensive), but were instead normalized by staff as part of the Bridge process.

Similarly, the Program Director's description of students' journey in Bridge reveals an understanding of students' need for an adjustment period:

> In the beginning there are kids who are like, "Nope!" They don't sit in circle, they won't try, they'll leave the room, they come back...It usually takes a couple weeks for the learning to start—I mean they're always learning, but the actual instructional learning starts the second week. It allows them to grow into learning. (Interview, June 2, 2017)

Staff explained that Bridge was structured in a way that could meet incoming students' need for safety, before asking them to perform academically. Carly explained how and why staff structure Bridge in this way:

> All of the things that they do to survive are secrets and are deemed as not okay by the rest of the world, and that put together with the shame they experience feeling unseen at school, like being invisible…So they come untrusting and so our job in the very beginning, which is why the [Bridge] program takes the whole first week *just* to build community—we're not doing instructional skills so much as let's get to know each other. (Interview, April 20, 2017)

Delta staff expressed an overall belief that first and foremost, students need to feel safe. Staff acknowledged that, true to what the trauma literature describes as a characteristic of traumatized individuals, incoming students largely lack this feeling of safety. Victor, an Assistant Principal, explained that feeling safe is something that is foreign for some students and, in fact, must be learned:

> I think it starts with the external interactions they have in a community that's peaceful and safe. I think that they come in and, in some ways, [Bridge] is not safe initially because they don't know how to feel safe. So even though the environment is safe, the kids are bringing in a sense of wariness and a sense of mistrust and I think very quickly, very quickly, they don't need that and they can take that off. And being safe, emotionally safe, is a rare and beautiful thing for them. (Field note, May 24, 2017)

In accordance with the trauma literature emphasizing the primacy of feeling safe, Delta staff prioritized making students feel safe before asking them to perform academically.

In some ways, the entire 10 weeks of Bridge can be viewed as an adjustment period. As the following example shows, there were instances when traces of students' past ways of "doing school" emerged. At the end of a class one day, I asked Carly for her thoughts on why the students had been particularly rowdy and non-compliant during a group discussion. Carly explained to me that if she had responded to some of the students' profane and off-task comments, then the class would have only grown more out of control (Informal communication, February 17, 2017). "They're so used to working on their teachers to get their goat," Carly explained. "I see the situation for what it is: they're self-protecting." Her comments implied that, to her, oftentimes students' disruptive behavior served as a way to avoid an uncomfortable learning situation that they perceived as threatening.

Hypervigilance

Some staff decoding work took into account the larger forces that influenced student behavior. Hypervigilance was a particularly salient trauma attribute, as Delta staff members identified a tendency among their students to have an in-the-moment kind of mentality. However, as Sharon, the Bridge Director explained, that perspective can undermine a student's educational success:

> When they come here, they don't really believe that they have a future to plan for. It's just not something that they think about. They live a hypervigilant lifestyle where every moment is what matters. And the next moment will determine what their next behavior is or what their next reaction is. So one of the things we work really hard on is teaching them to shoot for the long-term. To understand that if this is where you want to go, every single step that you take along the way will either get you there or not. So if you don't stop and think at every single step about where you

want to go, then you might step in the wrong direction and then it will take
a longer time to get there. (Interview, June 2, 2017)

Similarly, Jill, a Bridge Advisor, reflected on the impact that hypervigilance has on

students' educational experience:

> These kids have been out of school for a very long time, having prioritized
> forces that were beyond their control and have gotten used to
> hypervigilance, to dealing with things very quickly and then moving onto
> the next thing—sort of a survival mode. That's a really different thing than
> what you have to do at school, so generally speaking, they no longer have
> the skills which, just like riding a bicycle, need to be practiced...having
> sustained attention for example...or thinking before they make a
> judgment… So we can't ask them to do what they had yet to learn again. So
> I love the idea of [Bridge]...like a bridge to getting from where they are to
> a place where they have those skills. (Interview, May 2, 2017)

Carly shared how her knowledge of students' lives outside of school shaped her general

response to on-edge behavior typical of hypervigilance:

> The world that they live in outside of the school is extremely—I mean they
> *survive*. They have to survive and the ways you survive are like, you stay
> tough, you keep space, you have a mouth, you have fists...they have to be
> tough in order to survive outside of the school. So when they come in and
> they bring us a little bit of it with them, it doesn't bother me. My goal is for
> them to feel safe enough in this space so they don't have to resort to those
> tools and I'm not going to make it a safer space if I snap back at them or
> punitively kick them out or respond at all, really. I just have to let them do
> them and show them that there's nothing really they can do that will change
> things—that I'm still going to care about them, see them, and serve them.

For Carly, her decision to accommodate the "little bit" of survival-oriented aggression that

students bring to school was rooted in her recognition of aggression as a tool that students

may rely upon in their lives outside of school. She acknowledged that penalizing students

for aggressive behavior was counterproductive to creating a safe space. Such recognition

of larger forces and influences on student behavior appeared to give staff a clearer

perspective and greater understanding regarding negative student behavior.

Other staff members noted that in order to feel safe outside of school, some students needed behaviors that protected them or at least gave them the perception of protection, but that those things could be checked at the door when coming to Delta. Sharon, the Bridge Director, explained it in this way:

> Eventually [students] learn to come into the building as whoever it is that they are on the outside, because of course in the best of all possible worlds, you would change all of their environments and then they would really be able to go—but we can't. So they come in as whoever they are and right at the door, most of them unzip and leave their little outside selves over here and come in and be the transgendered or Black or Hispanic or small or scared kid that they are and learn how to deal with all these things, and when they go home, they zip back up. (Interview, May 2, 2017)

Sharon's emphasis on students' lives outside of school echoes Carly's compassion. She allows space for ways of being that serve an important role in students' lives, even if only outside of the school walls.

Safety Plans

Sometimes decoding was a collaborative process among staff and students. One such example was an orientation activity in which students were asked to develop safety plans. Here, staff and students collaborated to generate trauma awareness, and relationship building and decoding happened simultaneously. On the first day of orientation, Ricardo, the orientation counselor, explained the premise of safety plans to the students: "When coming up with a safety plan, the first thing to do is to ask: what's a trigger for you? Write one thing that might set you off and make you irritated" (Field note, September 6, 2016). Ricardo offered a personal example, "when someone interrupts someone while they're talking," and showed the students with hunched shoulders and cramped hands, how he

started to get irritated. Students shared dozens of examples, including "disrespect," "fronting," and "talking about my dead father and shit."

Then, Ricardo explained that students should develop their safety plan by listing four things that would relax them, saying, "One of them can involve leaving the room, but the other three have to take place in the classroom." Ricardo later asked the students to share their plans. Some plans included taking a walk, speaking with a counselor, calling a parent, and saying a prayer. These plans enhanced staff-student relationships, as staff members increased their trauma awareness by way of learning about students' coping practices and recognizing some typical externalized behaviors. The development of safety plans also placed ownership on the students to examine their behavior and make a plan for what they would do if that behavior should occur.

This orientation activity equipped students with additional coping practices that were safe and appropriate for school. In a heated moment, a student would not be required to explain themselves before needing to leave the room, for example. Instead, that student could immediately act on their self-awareness and practice self-regulation via their safety plan. Ricardo also highlighted the community aspect embedded within the safety plan: "If you know that person's safety plan, you can help them calm down…other people should know your safety plan so they can help you out. You're not alone." The safety plan represents another example of how staff took a proactive rather than reactive approach when responding to students' potential triggers.

Collaborative decoding happened more informally as well. Staff routinely asked students questions to illuminate their coping practices. Michelle, an Assistant Principal,

recounted her efforts to explore a troubling behavioral tendency she observed in a student who had a history of being severely bullied:

> I asked him, "Why do you feel the need to be so tough when you're in front of all your friends, but when you and I are one on one you're like a totally different person?" And he was like, "Because I have to be like that because I can't ever let people think I'm a punk." And I'm like, "Ok, can you remind me next time that I don't want to talk to you when you're around those other people because you forget that I'm an adult and you and I are cool, and you just say any crazy thing that you want to me?" And he was like (remorseful tone), "I'm sorry Miss. I don't mean to be like that." I'm like, "But I get it! I understand why you do what you do." He's small, he wears glasses, he has, you know, to be that person, and in that moment I was just helping him understand that I see him in a different light. It's that one student at a time thing, right, where we are trying to be conscious of what they face every day, you know? And it's a tough city, you know? Especially for our students. (Interview, May 22, 2017)

Michelle's anecdote emphasized the need for an in-the-moment, customized approach to figure out how to best accommodate students described as having "severe emotional and behavioral needs" as well as those with "instances of aggression in their past and in their current lives, because that is very much how they live their life" (Interview, June 2, 2017). Something else to note is how the student apologizes. Michelle later commented that part of staff's daily work is to "keep plugging away, keep reminding everybody that we're on the same team." Michelle's use of the word team is quite fitting. Just like an actual team in which everyone shares responsibility for reaching the common goal, staff and students worked together to decode behavior.

Relationship Building

Delta staff as a whole placed great value on the role that relationships played in their efforts to create a schooling environment that is responsive to the needs of traumatized youth. From the very beginning, staff stressed that relationships were valued at Delta. At

each orientation session the Principal made a similar comment: "At Delta we're all about building relationships...making connections...because the real world runs on relationships" (Field note, September 6, 2016). He explained that the staff's ability to help students achieve success at Delta was contingent upon strong relationships, saying, "We can only do that if we know you well." Advisors, counselors, and administrators strategically engaged in actions that established strong relationships between themselves and incoming students.

Indeed, relationships served as the primary resource for staff to understand student behavior. Staff used these relationships to decode negative student behaviors through a trauma-sensitive lens. Relationships facilitated decoding and appeared to allow staff to reframe negative student behavior as real-time coping practices, and to respond accordingly. In this section I discuss relationship building separately from decoding for ease of analysis, but as indicated in my argument, the two are actually intertwined. Relationships between students and staff facilitate decoding, which in turn reinforces these relationships.

My observations revealed that staff consistently participated in intentional relationship building with Bridge students in four distinct activities: intake interviews, the "Who Am I?" project, morning greeting, and opening and closing circles. The latter two activities – morning greeting and opening/closing circles – were daily routines at Delta. Conversely, intake interviews and the "Who Am I?" project occurred only once at the start of each trimester.

One-off Instances of Relationship Building

Intake Interviews

Intake interviews represented a deliberate attempt by staff to generate trauma awareness by gathering information. Staff conducted an intake interview with every prospective Bridge student. These interviews, which occurred on the last day of a four-day orientation, were students' first one-on-one interaction with Delta staff. Staff were upfront with students about the goal of intake interviews: the interviews were designed to help staff collect strategic information about what did and did not work for students in their past schooling experiences. These interviews were less about the students demonstrating their worthiness of attending Delta, and more about staff obtaining as much information about students as possible in order to ensure that they received the resources necessary for their success. My observations reveal that staff felt an onus to gain the insight needed to take a proactive rather than reactive approach to serving new students.

Keisha and Mateo. The following two examples of intake interviews with incoming Bridge students, Keisha and Mateo, are representative of staff's efforts to gather specific information aimed at generating trauma awareness. Typically, staff would ask students questions to address those needs that went unmet at students' previous schools.

Keisha, a stocky, 15-year-old Latina, sat across the table from a tall, slender, White male administrator named Luke. Keisha sat with her shoulders hunched, a black backpack in her lap, and chunky aqua Doc Martens-style boots crossed at the ankle beneath her chair. As the interview progressed, she made more eye contact and seemed to grow less nervous as indicated by a decrease in her fidgeting with her lip piercing. Much of Keisha's intake

interview focused on her previous schooling experiences and how Delta could best address her specific needs.

Luke's interview with Keisha revealed academic needs that were unmet at her previous school. He asked Keisha, "Can you talk a little bit about how you learn best?" (Field note, September 9, 2016). Keisha described how the teachers at her previous high school didn't explain things the way she needed them to be explained. She stated that she needs "one-on-one" instructional time with her teachers and that she does best when teachers are "not going so fast." Luke responded to Keisha's disclosure of her unmet academic needs by outlining specific features of Delta that could serve those particular needs, namely the small class sizes and the school's commitment to individualized instruction.

In contrast, when Jordan, Delta's Principal, asked Mateo about his needs during their intake interview, Mateo's answer appeared more socio-emotional than academic in nature: "What do you need as a learner? As a student, what are the things that you need from teachers to be successful in school?" (Field note, September 9, 2016). Mateo, a muscular 17-year-old Latino male, leaned back in the plastic school chair, stroked the dark facial hair on his chin and said, "I'm not gonna lie, I'm big on respect. You respect me, I'm gonna respect you. You disrespect me…" Mateo trailed and gestured with his fist as if to imply an unfavorable outcome. Jordan did not redirect Mateo and prompt him to provide a more academic answer. Instead, Jordan's response began a carefully guided dialogue that ultimately revealed Mateo's tendency to exhibit aggressive behavior. Jordan asked Mateo, "What does disrespect look like to you from other students and teachers?" Mateo thought for a moment and then answered: "I used to be like, [through clenched teeth] 'Oh, if you

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look at me or my school jawn'...I used to be in fights like every day. But man, after I went

to placement…" As soon as Mateo said the word "placement," he paused and looked down

for a moment, then continued, "The second time I was like, [shrugs] you don't touch me,

we're cool. You touch me and we're gonna have problems."

What followed was not unique to Mateo's intake interview. Without exception,

intake interviews included questions about why students left their previous schools as well

as how that could affect their Delta experience. Mateo's disclosure about his time in

"placement" (a juvenile detention center) caused by his history to exhibit aggressive

behavior, was the trauma awareness Jordan sought. Jordan normalized Mateo's experience

and explained to him how Mateo's past fits into the larger context of Delta:

> There are kids here who are gonna be locked up for things or are going
> through that stuff, and we've noticed that students who have hit that turning
> point and decided like "that's not for me," well, they're ultimately the
> students that do really well here. But it's one of those things where students
> who are still wrapped up in that kinda stuff, it doesn't work out. (Field note,
> September 9, 2016)

Luke similarly sought out Keisha's reason for departing from her previous school,

asking, "So was there *one thing* that happened that you're like, 'That's the last straw. I'm

outta here?'" Keisha replied, "Oh yeah, there was a lot of drama." By "drama," Keisha

meant that she frequently fought with other students and had consequently been suspended

numerous times. Luke delved further into what he would later describe to me as Keisha's

"coping mechanism" by asking about her "strategies" for handling the "drama" at her

previous school. Initially, Keisha responded with a tone of indifference and said, "I just

ignore it." However, Luke did not share Keisha's apathy about her habitual fighting at

school. Instead, he replied, "That's tough. That's a *small* school...you probably see those

people a couple times a week." Keisha replied, "No, every day," but reported that if she saw the girl she fought, she wouldn't do anything.

> The interview culminated with a recap of Delta's zero tolerance policy on fighting:

> Alright, well just for your reference, we work with students on pretty much everything but we don't tolerate violence, so I don't know how much of a struggle that is for you, but if you ever feel that *here*, that stressor that's going to cause conflict, there's a lot of people you can talk to and things you can do that *don't* involve violence. (Field note, September 9, 2016)

In my field notes, I describe how Luke appeared to establish some rapport with Keisha as he normalized her history of aggressive behavior and refrained from judgment:

> Then Luke leaned in toward Keisha, his voice got a little quieter and he said: "I have conversations every day with students like, 'I just wanna punch him.'" The last part was said with his jaw clenched. Keisha chuckled. Then Luke said, "And the fact that they're *saying* it and not doing it means they're moving in the right direction." (Field note, September 9, 2016)

Here, as with other intake interviews, Delta staff sought to gather information about students and their previous schooling with the intention of gaining insight into potential behavior that would negatively impact their success. In the case of Keisha's intake interview, Luke used his newfound awareness about her history of fighting to not only set expectations for her behavior, but also to proactively equip her with supports (e.g., someone to talk to) to ensure her success. As for Mateo, Jordan even went so far as to communicate the value of Mateo's trauma of incarceration (and history of fighting) to influence the wider Delta community: "So it would be great if that's behind you and you're like, 'Nah, that's not for me anymore.' That's a great message to send to other people here too."

Delta staff expressed a commitment to a proactive approach where they focused on trauma awareness rather than reactive disciplinary actions. As with the majority of other

intake interviews I observed, shortly after introducing himself, Luke explicitly stated the purpose of the intake interview to Keisha:

> So we want to try to get a jump on things. If you know anything about yourself or your situation that will help us help you, short-term or long-term, then we want to see if we can get that out in the open and get structures and supports in place if you need any. (Field note, September 9, 2016)

Luke's statements of "try to get a jump on things" and "get that out in the open" communicate an urgency and initiative to proactively address student needs and trauma. Jordan echoed this sentiment after his interview with Mateo when he told me, "The more we know about students, the better. We don't want to wait for an incident and be reactive" (Informal communication, March 11, 2016). This proactive approach to gathering information about a student's past, including traumas, is emblematic of trauma-informed practices. Jordan remarked to me, "He [Mateo] probably will be a knucklehead, but at least we know this."

The "Who Am I?" Project

In addition to relationship building via intake interviews, staff members engaged in relationship building through the "Who Am I?" project. As the first major graded assignment in the Bridge program, the "Who Am I?" project required each student to give a PowerPoint presentation in front of their advisory. The presentation featured a series of personal topics such as: family, timeline of significant events, old school (educational background), what motivates you?, and where do you want to be in 5, 10, and 20 years? This assignment served as an onramp for a more vulnerable kind of information gathering than what occurred during intake interviews. Sharon, the Director of Bridge, explained its significance like this: "it's an opportunity for [staff] to get to know students, as they have

to talk about potentially difficult topics like family" (Field note, September 6, 2016). The relationship building primarily occurred during the Q&A portion that followed each presentation. Students knew that they would be asked questions after their presentations, and advisors communicated the expectation that students in the audience were to ask questions of their classmates.

The slide topics were consistently strong catalysts for eliciting potentially sensitive information from students. Within the context of this project, things ranging from a passing comment about adversities to a trauma disclosure, were perhaps less threatening because they were prompted by an assignment. For example, Julio, a stocky, formerly incarcerated student, clicked onto a slide titled "Family," which featured a photo with a person clearly cropped out. Julio read the few bullet points on his slide and, without hesitation or a change in tone, mentioned that the photo was of his family minus his brother, "because he was never in my life" (Field notes, October 13, 2016). At the conclusion of Julio's presentation, his Advisor Linda asked, "Why did you feel the need to remove your brother from the picture?" Julio replied, "Because he's not in my life. He was never around." The "Who Am I?" project seemed to serve as a way of normalizing the act of sharing personal information.

Staff appeared to use the "Who Am I?" project as a means to communicate to students that they valued learning about students' past. An exchange between a slender and timid student, D'Andre, and the Assistant Principal highlighted this beautifully. During D'Andre's discussion of his "Old School" slide, he quickly mentioned a series of events as though he was rattling off a list:

> When my mom died I was in 9th grade. I don't talk to family on my mom's side since she passed in 2013. I was at City High School up to 10th grade. Then I got kicked out and went to Washington High and then King Community High School… (Field notes, October 13, 2016)

Following D'Andre's presentation, Victor, the Assistant Principal[14], asked a series of questions that led to a significant realization for D'Andre:

> Victor: Why don't you talk to your mom's side of the family?
>
> D'Andre: Because nobody talks to me or reached out to me, so I'm not gonna.
>
> Victor: (pauses) Do you mind sharing why you got kicked out of school?
>
> D'Andre: City High, that was my first relationship. I was too focused on her. Washington, I was just doing stupid stuff...smoking in school, doing stuff that I shouldn't be doing. And King Community? I left there. I didn't get kicked out. There were too many people…
>
> Victor: I don't mean to put you on the spot, man, but your academic decline started to happen when…?
>
> D'Andre: (long pause) After my mom.

As indicated in Contemporary Trauma Theory, trauma survivors are not always able to identify the connection between their actions (stress responses) and the traumatic experience. This phenomenon is referred to as disassociation. This exchange demonstrates how Victor used the "Who Am I?" project to help D'Andre connect the dots between his personal trauma (the death of his mother) and his academic issues. This example captures the kind of actions staff took to demonstrate the value they placed on knowing students, particularly with respect to their lives outside of school. The relationship building represented by staff's actions during the "Who Am I?" project indicates a kind of reordering of values in which socio-emotional experiences are relevant within an academic space.

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[14] In addition to a student's advisor, it was not uncommon for administrators and counselors to also attend these presentations.

Routine Sites of Relationship Building

Unlike intake interviews and the "Who Am I?" project, which happened only once during the Bridge program, circle and morning greeting occurred daily at Delta. Both of these were important sites of relationship building within Bridge. The routine of daily circles and morning greeting introduced predictability into the schooling environment in an effort to meet students' need to feel physically and psychologically safe. As indicated in the trauma-informed literature, an environment characterized by predictability is a prerequisite for a traumatized individual to move from a place of suspicion and hypervigilance to a place of feeling unthreatened and therefore safe. The findings reveal that staff's creation of a trauma-responsive schooling practice was an iterative process that required predetermined opportunities for dialogue between students and staff. This collaborative process between students and staff occurred on a routine daily basis and served to reinforce students' feeling of safety. Routines, notably the morning and afternoon circles and the ritual of morning greetings (discussed in the next section), provided students with an element of predictability in the school day. This predictability is connected to and informs the school's goal of creating an emotionally and psychologically safe environment.

Staff described the purpose of these daily routines as "check-ins" that enabled them to take students' emotional and mental "temperatures," and then use that information to respond accordingly. Morning greetings and circle (both morning and closing) offered staff a minimum of three touch points per school day to assess how students were doing and to provide the necessary supports that they felt were required in that moment.

Circle

Circle is a group activity that takes place in advisory (homeroom) at the start and end of each school day. Participation in "morning" and "closing" circles is mandatory. As the name indicates, the Advisor and students sit in a circle during this daily activity. During students' first-ever circle at Delta on the first day of orientation, staff explained this phenomenon by "drawing attention to the fact that everyone is sitting down in the circle, no one is higher or lower" (Field notes, March 8, 2017). Indeed, in my classroom observations I regularly noted instances in which staff would not start a circle until each student was visible in the circle, asking students to move their chairs in order to include everyone in the room. A circle would begin with an opening question or prompt, such as, "How was your weekend?" or, "What did you have for breakfast?" or, "Describe a time when someone lied to you" (Field notes, May, 30, 2017; February 10, 2017; September 7, 2016). At times students eagerly volunteered their answers, and other times the Advisor would go around the circle in order and have each student provide their response. Some circles would end in about 10 minutes, which was just enough time for students to answer the questions. Other circles lasted much longer and evolved into more of a discussion rather than a Q&A.

The purpose of circle. Circles created opportunities with a relational touchpoint for Delta staff to routinely check in with students. Jordan, Delta's Principal, explained that the purpose of circles was central to staff's relationship-building efforts with students. Jordan attributed extreme importance to the school routine and went so far as to describe circles to me as "the foundation of our praxis" (Interview, October 13, 2016). Like other staff,

Jordan explained that "circles are most importantly designed for check-ins...to allow staff to check in with students, to see if someone needs support, and to build community together." Jordan's perspective on circles is consistent with that of other staff members like Linda, an Advisor in Bridge, who explained that the check-in culture surrounding circles enabled staff to "get a temperature check...to see how students are doing, make sure they're ok...and to build rapport with the students" (Informal communication, November 15, 2016). The Bridge Director explained that circle is one of the things that makes Delta different from students' previous schools: "Their teachers greet them first thing with circle. [Students] don't walk in and sit down and begin working. Instead, it's like, 'Let's talk a little. What's going on?'" (Interview, May 2, 2017). With a minimum of two circles every day (and additional circles on an as-needed basis), circles proved to be an important ongoing site for relationship building among students and staff.

Indeed, it was the routine nature of circles that provided the greatest value for staff. Victor, an Assistant Principal, likened the content of circles to the kinds of exchanges that might occur around a family dinner table: "[Circles are] like a family gathering-type of situation similar to a family meal where all [students] get asked questions like, 'What's your plan for the day? Is everything ok?,' and are told, 'Let's check in later,' and 'We need to talk'" (Informal communication, September 28, 2016). The routine of circles established a dynamic in which staff could engage in an ongoing conversation with students throughout the day. Ultimately, this continuous dialogue gave staff the feeling that they were monitoring students. Sharon, the Director of Bridge, explained that, particularly early on in the Bridge experience, circles equipped staff with information to best meet students' needs:

> With circles, the teachers are able to identify [students] who are gonna take a different kind of reaching and then [staff] will go to the staff meeting or speak with an administrator and say, "These are kids who need something more in order to become part of the group and experience success at Delta." (Informal communication, September 20, 2016)

The schoolwide practice of circles guaranteed that staff would have opportunities to focus exclusively on building relationships with students. More importantly, these routine circles allowed staff to remain high-touch with students, specifically with regard to any academic or personal needs that could arise.

In addition to serving as a useful check-in/monitoring tool, staff expressed that there was also an explicit trauma-centered purpose for daily circles. Embedded within these check-in practices was a shared belief that students' socio-emotional and psychological needs should (or must, by necessity) take precedence over academic demands. This staff philosophy of viewing students more holistically was greatly divergent from what many students had experienced at their past schools. In contrast, Delta staff explicitly acknowledged that students' lives outside of school undoubtedly impacted their academic performance, and therefore what happened outside of school can and should be addressed within school. Carly, an Advisor, captured this sentiment when she explained the purpose of circles at Delta:

> The message of the circle is you're human and we acknowledge you as a fully functioning person *before* we ask you to be a student. Before we ask you to put that hat on, to learn…That addresses a really deep and basic need that we all have to connect, and when our needs are met we're much more likely to learn and grow, but when those needs aren't met, it's like an uphill battle trying to learn new things and overcome obstacles. (Interview, April 20, 2017)

Victor, an Assistant Principal, echoed this whole-student approach when he described the intent behind the school practice of daily circles as "trying to spur that humanness, the

recognition that yes, everyone has a life outside of this building" (Interview, June 1, 2017).

Jordan, the Principal, used similar language when he explained that the circles provide

students with the opportunity "to begin your day in advisory and acknowledge the humans

around you" (Interview, October 13, 2016). Staff discussed circles in a way that

communicated the primacy of acknowledging students' humanity as well as the humanity

of others. Simply put, this meant that staff viewed students' outside experiences and needs

– even if these were not explicitly linked to the Delta school day – as pertinent to their

schooling experience. In fact, the content of circles reinforced the relevance of students'

lives outside of school. Common circle topics included "What did you do this weekend?"

and "How was your morning? How did you sleep?" Although students could and did offer

superficial answers (e.g., "My weekend was chillin'."), other students used the circle as a

chance to express themselves and voice particular needs they had.

Re-engaging as part of relationship-building. Like other staff members, Linda, a

Bridge Advisor, described circles as "a therapeutic way for students to communicate how

they're feeling" (Interview, May 2, 2017); however, staff readily acknowledged that it took

time and intentional effort to get students to actually do so. Jordan, the Principal, captured

this sentiment held by staff when he explained the unique challenge of eliciting student

engagement in circles at Delta:

> So it starts from the fact that disengaged youth are gonna come from a place
> by and large, with their guard up. They don't want to share about their lives
> with people sitting around in a classroom. They don't want to talk about
> what's going on, why they're feeling the way they're feeling...so we create
> a structure in which you gradually break that down by saying, 'This is a
> norm.' Like, 'We're in a community together here and this is how a
> community acts.' (Interview, October 13, 2016)

Like other staff members, Jordan viewed circles as a way to introduce school culture, such as relationship building, and to normalize the behaviors associated with it. Jordan's comment, "this is how a community acts," speaks to the intentional and explicit nature of staff's message to students about particular elements of Delta school culture, such as membership in the school community. Routine activities like circles were conducted with the intent to "gradually break down" students' reluctance to participate in relationship-building exercises.

In a parallel to Jordan's description, the Director of Bridge, Sharon, expressed how circles can lead students to a gradual acceptance of relationship-building activities and school culture more broadly. She highlighted how circles enabled staff to meet students exactly where they were, particularly at the beginning of their Bridge experience:

> Circles, especially the first ones, are not intrusive. They're so low stakes, so even if [students] don't want to speak, they still see and hear their teacher talking to other kids. They're witnessing ways of learning and playing and relaxing together so that eventually the playing can be replaced by words. (Informal communication, September 8, 2016)

Sharon stated that new students experience circles as a gentle introduction to Delta culture, and "not intrusive." For those students who may be hesitant or completely unwilling to engage in circles, Sharon explained that they can benefit from simply observing other students interact with the Advisor. She suggested that, eventually, a student who begins as a bystander will become more vocal and may more readily embrace the relationship-building activity of circles.

A place to voice needs. Staff consistently communicated to students that circles were a place to voice their feelings and needs. Early on in a circle during Spring orientation,

one Advisor instructed students that "circle is not a strict place with rules" and encouraged students to "be ready to be heard if you need to get something off your chest" (Field notes, March 28, 2016). Linda, a Bridge Advisor, took that message further and suggested to her students that the value of a student's voice can extend to the larger school community. During the first week of school, Linda told her students, "Give yourself the opportunity to be open, to really be a part of the circle: to be vulnerable to speak your mind because from that we *all* learn" (Field notes, March 28, 2016). Another Bridge Advisor, Jill, explained that circle "is a method of communication that helps students to express themselves...to get to know themselves better" (Interview, May 3, 2017). Staff tried to create spaces for students to advocate for themselves, specifically in terms of needs that had gone unmet at their previous schools. Sharon, the Director of Bridge, shared how this staff-wide conception of circles led to relationships that dramatically increased staff's ability to decode students' needs. She explained that circles create "the opportunity for kids to say, 'I need this,' and that's when they come to [a staff member] and they do that because they are in a community where they feel safe" (Informal communication, September 7, 2016). As a result, Sharon noted, "I would say that many, many, many more kids than enter [Delta] as Special Ed are identified as special needs." Like Sharon's example illustrates, circles provided a space for staff to hear and attend to students' needs within the context of strong student-teacher relationships and a safe community.

Morning Greeting

Every morning, several staff members were assigned to the school entrance and lobby to greet students before the school day began. These morning greetings were

students' first contact with staff. Staff members explained that this routine enabled them to get an initial gauge of how students were doing. Andrea, the Bridge counselor, described this interaction as follows:

> [This routine] is significant because that's when we greet the students and can assess if there's a situation, can pull them to the side and begin conversations if they're visibly upset or, *often* by the time they get to know us a little bit they're like, "Miss, this is what happened to me: I almost got in a fight on the train." And we're able to get them to a place where they're able to be in the classroom and learn, or communicate with advisors like, "Heads up, this is what we know about this student right now. Just be mindful of how you interact." (Field note, February 7, 2017)

This practice of assessing students as they enter the building had benefits that extended throughout the school day. As an example, there was an instance in which staff spotted a dress code violation upon a student's arrival to school:

> Michelle, the Assistant Principal, immediately addresses the student: "What's that? A dress? A shirt?" From where I'm seated across the lobby, the student's entire back of her thigh is exposed. I can see that it's a pinstriped t-shirt dress and it looks as if it's being pulled up by the student's backpack. "Make it longer, make it longer," Michelle calls out to the student. (Field note, September 20, 2017)

During the first class period, Michelle shared information when Carly, an Advisor, started to mention the student in question: "If you see Malika—" Carly began to say to Michelle, but Michelle interrupted and said, "I know, she's having a wardrobe malfunction right now. So if you see her, read the situation. It might be a hands-off situation because of volatility" (Field note, June 1, 2017). Carly agreed, nodded and almost finished Michelle's sentence as well. Here we see that both staff members had knowledge of the situation because they were looking for this kind of information, and they then readily shared it with one another so as to facilitate a widespread approach with their trauma-informed practices.

Staff described this routine as intentional. In fact, they said it is part of who they are. According to Carly, it is also part of the culture: "We're like, 'Good morning! How are you? How's it going?' You know, it's a daily check-in...we see you're here, we see what time you came in, and just that face to face" (Field note, February 7, 2017).

More specifically, those personalized interactions with students contributed to what the Principal described as an essential need for the school's population of disengaged, disconnected former high school dropouts: to feel connected.

Informal check-in practices. The spirit behind routines such as circles and morning greeting was ingrained in staff culture. Even outside mandatory routines, staff demonstrated an initiative to check in with students. When describing what a "typical day" looks like for her, one Advisor named Linda said:

> I think a typical day for me would be to come in, kind of observe the students to see where they are and try to meet them where they are at that moment, because we have, you know, we have a large population of traumatized kids, so for me it's important that I just check in with students individually just to see how they're feeling because I feel like that will kind of help them make it through the day. (Interview, May 2, 2017)

When I asked what she meant by "meet them where they are," she explained what that looked like in practice:

> Normally just seeing if they are consistent with their routine, you know. I can normally tell when students come in if they've had a bad day, so if they're looking like they're spaced out or dazed or just kind of fidgety or, you know, just not with it...and so I just start off by saying, "Hey." You know, just speaking. "How are you?" And you can normally generate a little conversation in passing by that.

This was commonplace in classes because tardiness was a regular occurrence. In other words, even if a student "missed" one of these formalized routines, staff regularly

supplemented with their own checking-in practices. With the constant awareness of students' lives outside of school (e.g., parenting, working, housing insecurity), tardy students were rarely chastised upon entering the classroom. Instead, they were greeted warmly and asked assessment or check-in questions by staff.

As an example, when Carly saw Anne, a tardy student, enter her classroom, Carly gleefully exclaimed, "Is that Anne? Where have you been? We've missed you!" (Field note, November 29, 2016). Anne mentioned something about being sick at home. "Oh, what's happening? Update me," Carly responded. After another exchange, Carly asked Anne what was going on in her other project blocks. She complained about a struggle with another Advisor, Ms. Wendy, who "says she's gonna come to me, but she never does." Next, Anne mentioned that she was confused about the schedule, "A" Day and "B" Day. She said she didn't have a copy of the schedule, although she had been enrolled for a few weeks. Carly asked in a neutral tone if she would like one, Anne said yes, and Carly printed one off.

Staff Practices and Trauma-informed Schools

There was great overlap between staff practices at Delta and the Trauma-informed Care (TIC) model for schools. The core philosophy of the TIC model for trauma-informed schools is that the outcomes for trauma survivors are influenced by the context in which care occurs (Bloom, 1997; Harris & Fallot, 2001; Ko *et al.*, 2008). The TIC model is an organizational framework in which all school staff, policies, and services are delivered in a way that demonstrates trauma awareness. Four central assumptions – realize, recognize,

respond, and resist re-traumatization – form the TIC model. As defined by SAMHSA (2014a), a trauma-informed school is a school that:

1) Realizes the widespread impact of trauma and understands potential paths for recovery;

2) Recognizes the signs and symptoms of trauma in students, families, staff, and others involved within the school;

3) Responds by fully integrating knowledge about trauma into policies, procedures, and practices; and

4) Seeks to actively resist re-traumatization.

The practices that Delta staff used to create a schooling environment that was responsive to the needs of traumatized youth closely resembled the core elements of the TIC model for trauma-informed schools. Staff practices demonstrated that staff *realized* the prevalence and impact of trauma among Delta students. Staff's practices reflected that staff *recognized* trauma symptoms among students (but not explicitly other stakeholders, as indicated in the model). Staff behaviors demonstrated how they *responded* with trauma-informed policies, procedures, and practices to best interpret and react to negative student behavior. Finally, staff practices collectively represented an intentional effort to *resist re-traumatization*.

Realize

Delta staff expressed that they not only understood what trauma was, but that they viewed it as a central feature of Delta. In my interviews with staff, they readily identified forms of trauma that were common to Bridge students and demonstrated an understanding of the prevalence of trauma among students at Delta. Staff articulated the impacts of trauma through their descriptions of the general trajectory that Bridge students experience. They

described how students entered off-guard, hesitant to participate, distrustful, and generally not ready to learn. Staff's practices in the first weeks of Bridge illustrate their understanding about potential paths for recovery. Staff explained that they focused on building community in order to establish trust, and that they provided students with opportunities to adjust to the schooling environment and to repair their self-regulation skills. This sequence was done intentionally so that students could prepare for academic instruction, which would require skills such as focused concentration and compliance.

Recognize

In my interviews with staff, they expressed a familiarity with trauma symptoms. They collectively categorized manifestations of trauma as internalized behaviors (e.g., withdrawal, depression, truancy) and externalized behaviors (e.g., aggression, substance abuse). Staff were intentional about building relationships with students so that they could draw upon that knowledge in order to go beyond recognizing trauma, to responding to students' symptoms with trauma-informed approaches. Examples of this include intake interviews and the "Who Am I?" project, in which staff members methodologically collected information about students in anticipation of needing that information in order to best meet their needs (e.g., knowing about students' history of fighting, disclosing a learning disability).

Staff practices may have diverged from the TIC model as it relates to recognition of trauma in other stakeholders. My data collection did not focus on students' families or the surrounding community, but even so, I did not observe any focus on recognizing or addressing trauma within students' families. Although the trauma literature does discuss

the issue of secondary trauma (trauma experienced by practitioners serving traumatized individuals), this topic did not come up during my observations or interviews with staff.

Respond

Staff's decoding practice embodies the idea of response on a comprehensive level. This process revealed how staff's understanding about trauma, when coupled with their relational knowledge of students, informed how they interpreted and responded to negative student behavior. More specifically, staff could articulate the underlying purpose behind Delta procedures such as circle. Staff explained that the daily routine of circles was rooted in the understanding that traumatized youth should be recognized as a person first and have a place to express their needs before they were asked to perform as a student. The practice of developing safety plans is another example of how staff integrated their knowledge about trauma into school practices. Staff used safety plans to generate trauma awareness among students and to help them identify potential triggers. Lastly, staff members' non-punitive attendance policy reflected a prioritization of values: celebrating students' engagement in school (however late they were or infrequently they attended) was more important than punishing them (e.g., preventing them from participating in a group activity).

Resist Re-traumatization

Staff's practices were consistently characterized by an underlying motivation to resist re-traumatizing students. In my interviews with staff, they treated the topic of re-traumatization as an ethical issue. Since they knew that many students had experienced

educational trauma at their previous schools, Delta staff expressed a sense of responsibility to avoid inflicting similar types of injuries upon students. In general, staff acknowledged that misinterpreting trauma symptoms could exacerbate the very issues that first brought them to enroll at Delta. The effort to resist re-traumatization was not only a matter of staff attitudes, it was also reflected in school policies. A clear example of this was Delta's policy of no metal detectors or security guards, an anomaly among urban public high schools. The Principal explained that the policy was designed to communicate to students that staff trusted them and to avoid potential triggers (e.g., being patted down or frisked). These experiences were common at students' previous schools. For those students who had previously been incarcerated, this Delta policy was intended to avoid the risk of making students feel like prisoners.

Conclusion

Staff members' understanding of trauma informed how they approached their daily work. As a whole, staff identified trauma-informed approaches as a non-negotiable part of their role at Delta. Staff's efforts to create a schooling environment that was responsive to the needs of traumatized youth were embodied by two interconnected actions: relationship building and decoding. Relationship building occurred in four primary sites and staff drew upon their relationships with students in order to better understand student behavior. In this chapter I illustrated how relationships acted as an asset that staff used to decode negative student behaviors through a trauma-sensitive lens in which they reframed negative student behavior as real-time coping practices. The nature of decoding varied between public interactions with students and more private, internal decisions by staff members. This

decoding work reinforced student-staff relationships, and together formed a positive feedback loop. Lastly, I offered an overview on how staff practices bared a striking resemblance to the core elements of the Trauma-informed Care (TIC) model for trauma-informed schools.

In the next chapter I discuss the consequences of Delta staff's trauma-informed actions for students, staff, and the school.

CHAPTER 5

CONSEQUENCES OF TRAUMA-INFORMED PRACTICES

In this chapter I seek to answer my second research question: What are the consequences of trauma-informed practices on students, staff, and the school? I will identify four consequences associated with a staff members' efforts to create a schooling environment that is responsive to the needs of traumatized students—some positive and others negative: Delta staff's use of trauma-informed practices: 1) created a "second chance" for students to succeed as well as a school culture that contrasted with the uncompromising nature of students' former schools; 2) compromised Delta's mission of "real-world learning;" 3) complicated staff's assessment of student competency; and 4) concentrated staff's efforts on promoting students' socio-emotional growth over academics. While it is difficult to prove causality or a direct relationship, I observed several patterns that appear to be rooted in the trauma-informed practices used by Delta staff.

The First Consequence: Creating a "Second Chance" for Students

The staff's use of trauma-informed practices created the belief among students that they had a "second chance" to be successful. As discussed in the previous chapter, Delta staff prioritized providing an environment that made students feel safe. My interviews with students revealed that part of what made them feel safe was the fact that staff did not judge them. Students also described how the school culture at Delta was less "high stakes" than at their previous schools.

A "Second Chance"

Students with a history of trauma found it particularly meaningful to attend a school that did not view their pasts negatively. One student, Flaca, painfully recalled her experience returning to her former school for the start of the academic year after an abusive relationship had caused her grades to decline and culminated in her absence for the last two months of 9th grade:

> Some of the teachers knew my history, so it was like they were biased towards me. I wanted a fresh slate and I started to get mad at them, like they're treating me like I'm one of those bad students. Y'all know me! I do my work, just give me some time. I need time to adjust. I needed to get back in the rhythm. It was just too much at once. So they told me either I get kicked out of the school or they send me to this other [credit recovery] school. (Interview, June 5, 2017)

Flaca felt that her prior teachers had treated her as though her past was not compatible with a successful academic future. Some students, like Marvin, preferred to not talk about their past altogether. During his "Who Am I?" presentation, Marvin skipped over several portions of his personal history timeline and said, "I don't like talking about the past because that's something that's supposed to be left in the dirt" (Field note, March 23, 2017). Students voiced their gratitude that Delta staff honored wishes like Marvin's, to leave their pasts behind them.

As part of this commonly held view of Delta as their "second chance," students were confident that unlike their previous teachers, Delta staff would not use students' pasts to disqualify them from being academically successful. One student, Veronica, spoke of the unique opportunity Delta staff provided her:

> It's literally a second chance for everything that you've been through and everything you messed up, they don't care. They don't judge you by your background. They judge you for the person you are and the person you show you are. And not everyone does that. (Interview, March 23, 2017)

Another student, Tabitha, echoed Veronica's sentiments in her speech she delivered at the graduation ceremony in June:

> I am so grateful for this school because it offers a second chance—a school that doesn't judge you by your past, but lets you prove what your future can be. Without [Delta] I wouldn't have had the chance to redeem myself and prove my worth. (Field note, June 16, 2017)

Tabitha's assurance that staff did not hold her past against her allowed her a "second chance" to correct her prior mistakes and create a very different future for herself.

Tabitha was not the only student to use the word "redeem." Aabir explained why he left his previous high school at the start of the 11th grade: "[Delta] is a better chance for me—a better shot for me to redeem my situation" (Interview, November 29, 2016). His "situation" included a history of fighting in school, juvenile incarceration, and earning poor grades. Aabir, like other students, expressed how Delta provided him with an opportunity to be liberated from his past track record.

In fact, students' language about their new opportunity for success at Delta was rather consistent. For example, during a class activity, an entire classroom of students voiced their desire for Delta to have a reputation of redemption as well as freedom from judgement. Early in the trimester, Jill, an Advisor, split her class into three groups and asked students to respond to the following question: "How do we want this school to be known in our city?" (Field note, September 20, 2016). Jill then asked the class to vote for the three answers they felt were best. The top three responses were as follows: 1) "We want this school to be known as a second chance, a place where you can redeem yourself"; 2) "A place that welcomes all people regardless of your background or past"; and 3) "We want this school to be known as a place that kids come to get their life back on track."

These statements send a message of acceptance: the ability to come as you are, and to become who you want to be.

Like the third response above, some students alluded to a second chance that extended beyond education to include their lives in general. For example, Lourdes told me, "[Delta] is the second chance for you to get back on your feet" (Interview, June 5, 2017). Additionally, in his "elevator speech" required for a mock job interview activity, Freddie described Delta as "a second chance school that helps you get your life back on track" (Field note, October 6, 2016). For these students, their second chance had far-reaching implications. A judgement-free fresh start at school provided them an opportunity to completely reorient their lives, allowing Lourdes to "get back on [her] feet" and Freddie to "get [his] life back on track."

Experiencing a New School Culture

Students also described a school culture that gave them a sense of freedom to make mistakes without jeopardizing their "second chance" at success. One student named Selena described her interactions with teachers at her previous schools as rather high stakes:

> You gotta be consistent and every day doing the right thing. You can't make mistakes, and it was like the second you did one little thing wrong, you became a whole different student to them. It was like you were just like a regular student, any other student, and I didn't like that. (Interview, June 5, 2017)

For Selena, the fear of being viewed as "just a regular student" was an ever-present threat. She explained how she did not want her teachers to discount her as perhaps they had done to others: "I don't want them to think that I'm just this bitch or a ghetto student that doesn't care about nothing, that doesn't wanna do nothing with their life. Like I want them to know

I want to do something with my life" (Interview, June 5, 2017). Selena's prior experience of there being no room for mistakes made her feel profoundly vulnerable: one misstep carried the threat of widening the gap between the student she was trying to be and the kind of student her teachers perceived her to be.

In contrast, Selena's experience at Delta illuminates how trauma-informed practices allowed staff to view a student's behavior as separate from that student's character. Selena alluded to this connection between behavior and character when she described how she felt walking into the doors of Delta compared to her previous schools: "I know for a fact that I'm not gonna walk into [Delta] and they're gonna be like 'Oh, you were absent this day so now you're a regular student.' They know who you *are*" (Interview, June 5, 2017). In this example, Selena explained how Delta staff did not and would not view her truant behavior as a prognosis for her potential as a student. Instead, the staff's conduct reflected a steadfast knowledge of Selena and her potential, and how that remained constant even when Selena temporarily acted in a way that was contrary to that image of a good, capable student. Lyana, another student, expressed a similar perspective when she shared what she appreciated most about Delta: "I like that [staff] give you a lot of chances...and that they're not really mean about situations when you mess up" (Interview, June 5, 2017). Both Lyana and Selena indicated that they valued the leniency Delta staff showed by not taking a zero-tolerance approach to students' mistakes. For example, Selena reported that despite her tendency to not always complete her work on time, staff didn't treat her like a "regular student": "They've just been telling me, 'I know you could do it...you're not dumb'...and it's just been motivating me to push harder because they're reminding me of who I really have the potential to be" (Interview, June 5, 2017). Unlike at

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Selena's previous schools, there was "room" for mistakes at Delta. The fact that staff allowed students to deviate from a perfect school performance decreased Selena's perceived threat of being labeled as a failure.

Students also reported a sense of flexibility within Delta school culture, in that it could accommodate student behavior that conflicted with school policy. Veronica recalled how even when she broke the school rule of "no fighting," Delta staff "still called me to that standard that they know I'm capable of" (Interview, March 23, 2017). Despite Veronica's actions, the staff at Delta communicated that their expectations of her remained the same and, more importantly, that they believed she was capable of meeting those expectations. According to Veronica, this response from staff "makes me feel good because it doesn't make me feel like damn, now they have a totally different mindset about me." Indeed, Veronica continued to draw the connection between how staff saw past her troublesome behavior when she said, "I really like the way they treat me here. They know I'm better than that." For Veronica, breaking the rules did not break Delta staff's belief in her potential.

Students commonly described the Delta school culture in familial terms. One student, Damian, told me that he "loved" Delta because "it's like a family. They give you chances. They don't try to kick you out. They just work with you. If you need help with something, they help you ...They care about you here" (Interview, November 29, 2016). The way Damian likens his relationships with Delta staff to those of a familial nature speaks to a deep sense of security. Just like a family member has no choice but to give another family member another chance, so too does Damian report that Delta staff do not

look for a way out of a relationship with him, but instead work with him to help him. That, according to Damian, is how they express their care for him.

Summary of the First Consequence

Overall, students drew distinct differences between their experiences at Delta compared to their previous schools. They described Delta as a "second chance," made possible by staff members' flexibility in how they addressed students' mistakes. Students expressed how staff's practice of treating students' behavior as separate from students' potential created a sense of relief. Students reported that they no longer saw mistakes as high-stakes risks to their future academic success, or as obstacles to retaining support from school staff.

The Second Consequence: Compromising Delta's Mission of "Real-world Learning"

There were times when trauma-informed practices compromised Delta's mission to provide students with a "real-world learning" environment in order to "creat[e] responsible, independent, capable high school graduates" (Delta Staff Handbook, p. 3). One expression of Delta staff's trauma-informed practices was their value of giving students a clean slate every day. One way that staff accomplished this was by having an absence policy that was not punitive to students who missed any portion of class. Students were permitted and encouraged to jump into any activity at any time, regardless of whether they had received any of the previous instructions surrounding that activity. Another one of the values at Delta was to offer instruction that was "real-world" oriented and applicable to skills that students would be expected to demonstrate later in life. Some staff expressed

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a conflict between these two values, because they understood that radical acceptance of absences was not compatible with real-world expectations. In this section I describe what the non-punitive approach towards absences looked like in practice as well as the challenges it presented. Then, I conclude with a discussion on how staff coped with the recognition that their trauma-informed approach to student absences achieved a mere imitation of the "real-world" context they sought to create. I draw similarities between staff's coping strategy and the literary concept of a willing suspension of disbelief.

Non-punitive Absence Policy

Staff members' trauma-informed approaches in the classroom conveyed a kind of "every day is a brand-new day" philosophy. This attitude acted as a guiding principle in the classroom. Andrea, the counselor, explained staff's approach to students' past behaviors with a specific example:

> You might look at a kid's suspension records and maybe say, "I can't imagine this student excelling at school," but in a place like [Delta], where we have a blank-slate mentality...by the time they're here, we know about their past. We can just check their file and see that, but that's not what we emphasize. (Interview, June 1, 2017)

As discussed in the previous section, students reported that Delta staff did not focus on their past (or present) negative behaviors. Instead, staff gave students "a lot of chances" and allowed them to "make mistakes" and "mess up," all the while reminding them of their potential to do better.

While the trauma-informed approach of decoding negative student behavior as a coping strategy made students feel accepted and free to make mistakes, this generous doling out of second chances had specific implications on the project-based learning-laden

curriculum at Delta. These consequences were rooted in staff's reactions to student absences. Upon seeing a student come to class late and/or seeing a student for the first time after an excessive period of absence, staff's responses would generally follow this outline. First, the staff member would ask a playful question. For example, Michelle opened her arms to hug a student and smiled and said, "Oh my goodness! What's your name again?" (Field note, June 2, 2017). In another instance, upon seeing a student enter the front doors, an administrator formed her hands to imitate binoculars and called out, "Is that who I think it is?" (Field note, February 24, 2017). After the playful question, staff would generally follow up with a "welcome back" type of phrase that communicated that the student was missed and that her absence did not go unnoticed. In the case of Michelle, she told the student, "It's so good to see you again. I'm so excited you're here!" Similarly, the administrator said, "I missed that beautiful smile of yours. It's even brighter than I remember!" This was in contrast to what students reported about their previous schools, where they were often met with anger, disappointment, or – most commonly – complete indifference. Although the Delta "welcome back" ritual varied in its exact details, it never included words of judgement or disappointment. Students were consistently welcomed with a warm and celebratory greeting regardless of how late they arrived or how long they had been away.

The staff members' practices seemed to demonstrate an understanding that for some students, showing up at all (however late or infrequently) was an accomplishment in itself. Based on staff's reactions, it seemed like the staff did not want to minimize this accomplishment in their interactions with students. It was common practice for Wendy, the English Advisor in Bridge, to begin most of her classes by praising students for showing

up to school with a statement that typically went like this: "Way to be here today!" (Field note, June 1, 2017). Carly used this approach on a more individual level. For example, before she began to list off the work a student missed, she paused and said, "Well, first of all, I'm glad you're here" (Field note, February 10, 2017). Carly prioritized acknowledging that the student was at school, and that this fact was perhaps more important to recognize than anything else she could say. On another occasion, after helping a student catch up who had been out of school for a week, but before sending him along to get started on his make-up work, Carly gave him a high-five and said, "Way to be here today!" Here, Carly appears to allude to the new opportunity and fresh start that the student has: while he may not have been at school yesterday or for the past week, he was here *today* and that was the most important first step to being successful and getting back on track.

This approach had complications in the classroom, however, particularly with regard to challenges with group work. As discussed earlier, students appreciated the non-punitive welcome. Like Damian said, "Delta is like a family. They give you chances. They don't try to kick you out. They just work with you" (Interview, November 29, 2016). But even if staff did not punish individual students for being absent (or in some cases violating the absence policy), there were nevertheless consequences: given the project-based learning nature of the Bridge curriculum, one absence oftentimes meant that a student missed critical instructional time and the opportunity to complete group work.

The accelerated nature of the school added another layer of complication resulting from absences. Alejandra reflected on her early experiences with being absent:

> When I first came here, I was still in that type of mode where I didn't want to be in school. Sometimes I missed a day here, a day there...but when I came back it was just like, damn! I didn't know that if I missed a day, it's

like missing a week of school….It was so much work! (Interview, June 8, 2017)

Alejandra later described her Bridge experience as a time when "everything was piled up on me."

However, Advisors' responses to returning students did not reflect this reality. Advisors routinely encouraged students to "jump right in" and "get to work" following their extended absences. A significant portion of class time was spent debriefing students and bringing them up to speed on what had happened in class while they were gone. Furthermore, Advisors also spent a great deal of time helping students catch up on what had happened within their specific group—who did what, where they left off, etc. This debriefing was necessary in order for students to be able to "jump in" after being absent.

A "Willing Suspension of Disbelief"

Avoiding one contradiction led to another contradiction. In Delta staff's attempts to avoid punitive actions that contradicted their trauma-informed approach to learning, those very practices contradicted the "real-world learning" orientation the school espoused. Advisors routinely referenced the real-world connections that drove their practices. Staff's tendency to celebrate students for doing the difficult work of showing up to school was in alignment with a trauma-informed approach to education; however, it also complicated their efforts to prepare students for real-world expectations. Whereas in the "real world," the consequences of yesterday impact today, in a Delta classroom, every day was a "fresh slate" and a "second chance."

There were instances in which the "real world" outside of Delta did not align with the reality inside the classroom. In the final week of the semester, an Advisor, Carly, was

presented with the issue of her student, Kiki, being late to her final exhibition. This was a mandatory assignment to pass Bridge and also worth 20% of Kiki's grade:

> "C'mon Kiki. C'mon girl," Carly pleaded while pacing near the door.
>
> Muhammad asked, "Do you lose points if you're late?"
>
> "Mm-hmm," Carly said, nodding. After a pause she asked calmly, "Would you get the job if you're late?" (Field note, June 13, 2017)

Carly answered Muhammad's question: yes, lateness would result in a loss of points. However, she went a step further when she posed what appeared to be a rhetorical question. Carly was not attempting to elicit a response from Muhammad, but instead sought to prompt him to consider the real-world consequences of being late.

> Kiki eventually texted Carly. Carly looked at her phone, tossed it on the table and said in exasperation, "'On my way'? It's 9:20." Kiki's presentation was scheduled for 9:00. Kiki arrived at 9:33, dressed in a black pencil skirt and crisp white blouse. Carly greeted Kiki warmly:

> Carly: "You look great. How are you feeling?"
>
> Kiki: (looking at the ground) "Not good."
>
> Carly: (smiling) "Well you didn't get the job, but you can still present."

Grammatically speaking, the conjunction "but" notes the supremacy of the second clause over the first one. So in this case, "you can still present," carries more weight than the reality of "you didn't get the job." Carly's statement illuminates the tension between what would have happened in a real-world workplace, and what did happen in the classroom. Just as the word "but" serves to counter the first clause of a sentence, Carly's use of "but" signaled a moment in which she suspended her knowledge of the real-world consequences

of lateness in favor of a trauma-informed environment in which Kiki could carry on with her presentation without penalty.

This disconnect between the real world that staff were tasked with creating at Delta and the actual real world, goes beyond a mere problematization of what Delta means by "real-world learning." I contend that this Delta phenomenon can be likened to a *willing suspension of disbelief.* This term has been utilized in literary and philosophical contexts to mean a conscious suspension of one's critical faculties in order to believe something surreal. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who is attributed with the coining of the phrase, used it to suggest that if a semblance of truth can be introduced into a fantastic tale, the reader can more willingly disregard the implausible. In the same way, the staff authored (or introduced) a semblance of a real-world environment, complete with expectations and consequences. They then intentionally suspended their awareness that there was an absence of strict adherence to those expectations and consequences in order to believe that former high school dropouts were experiencing academic success at a level that would translate in a real-world setting.

The tension between Delta staff's "real-world learning" focus and the reality of the classroom was not always as implicit as in the example with Kiki's late presentation. One day during her prep period, Carly trudged into her classroom looking particularly dejected. She explained to me that she had just spoken with a fellow Advisor about a group of students from last trimester who did not fulfill the requirements to pass Bridge. In this conversation Carly learned that Delta administrators had made exceptions for several students, and that despite their failure to meet performance expectations, these students were scheduled to attend veteran classes: "Oh, Bridge," Carly sighed. "It's so fake. We try,

we try so hard to make it real and about real life, but real life is *so* different," she said as she flopped face down onto a large table with her arms hanging off the sides and groaned as if asking to be put out of her misery (Informal communication, March 10, 2017). Carly's comment, coupled with her distressed body language, suggests that she knew Delta classrooms did not reflect the real world that staff were asked to prepare students for. She characterizes the Bridge experience as counterfeit: a fraudulent imitation of what students would experience beyond Delta.

Jordan also struggled with his participation in creating Delta's imitation of the real world. As the Principal, Jordan's authorship of Delta as a real-world learning space was routinely a very public act, yet in private, he wrestled with the long-term implications of his willing suspension of disbelief. For example, on the first day of orientation, Jordan acknowledged that many of the students likely had problems with attendance at their former schools. He assured students as well as their parents, "If you missed 30, 40, or 50 days at your old school, that's ok, we'll work with you" (Field note, September 6, 2016). However, he also explained that those past attendance patterns would "not bode well" for their success at Delta, and used a real-world example to illustrate the importance of consistent attendance: "If I don't show up every day to work, then I shouldn't expect my full paycheck, right?" Jordan's question seemed to imply that just like the consequences that would occur in the workplace, there are consequences for excessive absences at Delta.

However, in a private interview with Jordan, he expressed doubt in the very world that he publicly worked to create. I asked him to name some challenges that were common among Bridge students. He was quick to say that students didn't seem to understand how critical attendance was to their success. The formal attendance policy for Bridge is that

students must be present for 75% of the trimester to earn the full 3.5 credits. Any additional absences (or poor performance in a particular core subject) would result in fewer credits earned. Immediately after Jordan's answer about attendance, he said something that hinted at an inner conflict: "But I still want [students] to understand that it's hard to give less than 70% and be able to get a job, so you need to show up every day…[sighs and shakes head] it's not gonna transfer" (Interview, October 13, 2016). This statement reflects Jordan's concerns that although students' attendance may technically qualify them to earn credits (whether the full 75% or less), even that performance might not equip them to "get a job." Ultimately, it is Jordan's last phrase, "it's not gonna transfer," that reveals his inner conflict. Despite his intentions to create a real-world learning environment, Jordan appears to fear that student success at Delta will not "transfer" to real-world success outside of Delta.

A Reality Check from Staff

Overall, staff did not fully mimic the real world within classrooms and school policies. There were, however, instances in which staff took steps to alleviate the misalignment between Delta and the real world. For example, it was not uncommon for excessive absences to make group projects a frustrating and challenging endeavor. During a feedback session with one such group, Carly asked each group member to share the most valuable thing they had learned during the project process. One student, Muhammad, responded rather matter-of-factly: "Don't put yourself in a group that you don't trust" (Field note, May 10, 2017). Carly challenged the viability of Muhammad's approach to future group work with this question: "Is that like the real world—choosing who you work

with?" The entire group responded with a collective "no" and Carly offered her revised version: "So it's about learning how to work with difficult people." Carly's response illustrates her attempt to create a learning experience that was more of an authentic reflection of intergroup dynamics that Muhammad, and others, would likely encounter in the future.

Summary of the Second Consequence

Staff's trauma-informed practices appeared counterproductive to the school's goal of a "real-world learning" environment. While these practices may have afforded students opportunities to participate in school when they otherwise would have been denied such chances (e.g., presenting a final project despite being 20 minutes late), the approach also created a dilemma for staff. Advisors and administrators knowingly removed consequences from students' behavior even though it created a risk that students' success at Delta would not transfer outside of the school to the "real world."

The Third Consequence: Complicating Staff's Assessment of Student Performance

The modification of real-world standards as it related to the grading system troubled some staff. Like other Advisors, Carly explained that a trauma-informed approach to grading was designed to sensitize students who had become desensitized to failure, "because students who come to Delta are generally accustomed to failing. If you give them an 'F,' it doesn't faze them" (Informal communication, December 2, 2016). Consequently, Bridge staff created multiple opportunities for success. Carly explained:

> We don't build up to something big and then you either pass or fail. We
> work in baby steps and celebrate every baby step. That allows students to

experience the feeling of success in small doses so that eventually they can build up to something big and actually achieve it. (Interview, April 20, 2017)

In Bridge, the exhibition represented the "big" thing that all Bridge assignments and activities were building up to. This 30-minute PowerPoint presentation required students to speak to their personal learning, challenges, and growth that took place throughout their Bridge experience.

Although I never heard staff critique the purpose of Delta's trauma-informed approach to assessment, some Advisors were troubled by its implications on their responsibility to assess students' competency and mastery. During "Exhibition Week," the final week of the trimester, I overheard the following exchange between two Advisors in the hallway:

Wendy: If [a student] can pass the final, that's an actual test of knowledge so I think that's fine. But exhibitions are "just make up a bunch of crap and talk about it for 30 minutes."

Jill: (nodding) You need some sort of tests because otherwise you don't know what [students] are getting. (Field note, June 5, 2017)

Wendy and Jill's conversation demonstrates how a trauma-informed approach to grading presented complications for Delta Advisors. Wendy problematized the rigor of an exhibition: for her, a final exam served as an objective instrument to test students' knowledge, but she did not view an exhibition in the same way. Conversely, she characterized the portfolio-style exhibition presentation as entirely subjective. Jill seemed to share a similar perspective on the inadequacy of the trauma-informed approach of using exhibitions as students' end-of-trimester assignment. Jill expressed a concern that the exhibition compromised her professional responsibility to assess students' learning, or what they're "getting."

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Summary of the Third Consequence

Staff's trauma-informed practices extended to how they evaluated students. Some staff embraced the grading system because of its intention to promote the improvement of students who had generally become accustomed to failing. Others, however, struggled with the implications this approach had on their professional responsibility. These staff questioned whether portfolio-style evaluations could objectively measure student success in the same manner as a traditional test.

The Fourth Consequence: Promoting Students' Socio-emotional Growth over Academics

Staff's trauma-informed efforts appeared to promote the growth of students' socio-emotional skills over academics. It seems that Jill and Wendy's concerns were valid: in my interviews with students about how they had grown during Bridge, students reported socio-emotional growth nearly twice as often as academic growth. In each student interview I asked them to describe how, if at all, they had changed since enrolling in Bridge. I was intentionally vague about the type of change I was asking about. If a student's response included only personal changes, I would follow up with a question about what, if any, academic changes they had experienced. I used the reverse approach if students initially reported only academic changes. Of the 27 students I interviewed, only one individual reported that they had experienced no changes.

Socio-emotional Changes

Overall, 13 of the 27 student participants reported socio-emotional-related growth. The two most frequently cited changes were associated with improved self-regulation

(n=9)[15] and improved interpersonal skills (n=9). Other students mentioned increased self-confidence and maturity.

Self-regulation was a common topic in my interviews with students. Students mentioned a general sense of improved control over their emotions. Tamika, an outspoken 15-year-old, recalled how she initially exhibited unpredictable anger responses: "When I first got here, I was just a firecracker [laughs]. Like anything just made me mad. I'd just throw things and I just acted crazy" (Interview, June 6, 2017). She admitted that even she herself did not understand the reason behind her actions: "I don't know why, but now it's like, why did I use to do that? I've definitely matured a lot. I matured a whole lot." Several students reported improving their ability to regulate their anger. For example, Ariana changed "the way I react to certain situations" (Interview, November 29, 2016). She explained how she had experienced a decreased tendency toward explosive anger:

> I have like a really, really bad temper. I kinda like burst in certain situations, but I learned how to not do that. I learned how to have patience with people and how to control myself little by little. (Interview, June 5, 2017)

Another student, Jorge, similarly described himself as less impulsive and shared that his historically angry temperament had changed: "My attitude has definitely settled a lot more. I learned how to control my temper" (Interview, November 29, 2016). Jorge attributed his increased self-regulation to a newfound coping strategy: learning "how to walk away."

For other students such as Lilliana, their socio-emotional growth had implications for their academic performance as well. Lilliana initially responded to my question about growth since enrolling in Bridge by saying, "I didn't get into like no altercations, no fights

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[15]This and all subsequent n= citations in this section refer to the number of instances a particular topic was mentioned, not the number of students who mentioned the topic. For example, one student could report growth in multiple areas of socio-emotional skills.

or nothing. That's something I'm proud of" (Interview, March 23, 2017). When prompted to share about any academic changes, Lilliana appeared to realize that her specific changes in self-regulation (no fights) had broader implications for how she approached her schoolwork:

> My eyes opened up a little bit more. Like I see now before I make a move I think, like, let me not do that or let me do that. Let me get this out the way...I gotta do this to get this grade. I think more and I plan—like I sort things out, like how I'm gonna do it. That's what changed...because before I just went with the clock… (Interview, March 23, 2017)

For Lilliana, her increased self-regulation generated a sense of ownership. Whereas she used to be a passive participant in her education ("I just went with the clock") now, she is active ("before I make a move I think"). This change in mindset influenced her approach to her academics, causing her to now plan what she had to do "to get this grade."

Students reported improved interpersonal skills with the same frequency as improved self-regulation. When discussing how specifically they had changed, students' comments centered on vulnerability and trust. Some students readily admitted that they lacked social skills prior to attending Delta. Flaca put it simply: "I used to be anti-social" (Interview, June 5, 2017). Students like Jorge used words like "open" to describe a willingness to be more vulnerable with people at school: "I'm definitely more open to meeting new people now...like I'll just walk up and say 'Hi'" (Interview, November 29, 2016). For several students, increased interpersonal skills were inextricably linked with trust. Muhammad offered a blunt explanation for his interpersonal growth: "How I changed? *Now* I open up to people. Because a lotta stuff at [my previous school] was fishy, so I wasn't opening up to people but when I got here, people showed me different" (Interview, November 29, 2016). Muhammad attributed his lack of vulnerability at his

former school to his perception of things being "fishy." Another student, Rachel, expressed a similar feeling of suspicion that characterized her interactions at her previous school. For Rachel, this mistrust fueled her tendency to respond aggressively: "At my old school I always felt like students were talking about me so I was like, *Imma have to fight them*" (Interview, November 29, 2016). She drew a contrast between her past and present behavior, which appeared to be rooted in a trust in the motivations of her peers at Delta: "But it's not like that here. They *are* talking about you, but it's because they're getting to know you. Like they're not...they don't look for problems in this school (Interview, November 29, 2016). In the absence of suspicion, Rachel described her social persona as dramatically different: "I'm really nice to people now. I never used to be like that. I literally come in here and I say good morning to everyone [laughs]. I *never* used to be like that!" For many students, Delta's emphasis on relationships appeared to facilitate opportunities where students could address their difficulties with trust and vulnerability.

Academic Changes

In total, 12 of the 27 student participants reported academic growth. Among those students interviewed, the most commonly referenced change was better grades (n=7). The other kinds of academic growth included adopting professional language (n=3), reading more frequently/better (n=2), writing better (n=2), and increased computer literacy (n=1).

On a few occasions, students reported "better grades" as a change that they experienced since enrolling at Delta; however, it was another question that prompted students to reveal their experience of having improved grades. In each interview I asked students to recall a time during Bridge when they felt really proud of themselves. The

majority of students responded by sharing about their first report card at Delta. A general theme emerged among students' stories: they went from failing everything at their previous school to passing everything at Delta. For example, Ernesto recalled how proud he felt when he saw his grades for the first time at Delta:

> My old high school grades [sigh]...like they were the worst. I used to be failing class after class after class. But oh, when I saw my grades in Bridge—I'm passing everything that I'm doing now! I'm on track. (Interview, November 29, 2016)

Natifah shared a similar experience of academic improvement when she enrolled in Bridge: "All my grades came up. I have all As, but I had all Fs when I came here" (Interview, November 29, 2016). According to Natifah, it was the kind of classroom instruction, distinctly different from her previous schools, that helped her academic performance at Delta:

> When I came here, everything just changed. They don't put so much pressure on you like at other schools. Like, at other schools they give you a paper and say, "Do it," and you gotta do it. Here they'll really teach it to you. They'll focus on you individually and I like that. (Interview November 29, 2016)

Several students expressed a sense of disbelief upon noticing the dramatic difference in their grades. I asked one such student, Jackie, how she felt when she saw her grades that qualified her for Delta Honor Roll: "So proud. So happy [laughs]. So, so, so excited. Like As? Bs? Me?! Ok!" (Interview, November 29, 2016). Jackie was not the only student to share their surprise at the grades they received. Muhammad explained:

> Well, when I left my old school my grades were like all Fs and my first marking period here, I had As and Bs. When I saw that I was like, damn! I didn't know I could do it. I used to doubt myself for real. (Interview, November 29, 2016)

Other students similarly spoke about how getting good grades at Delta made them feel differently about themselves. Natifah shared, "I feel so motivated now and I know I can get somewhere in life being here" (Interview November 29, 2016). Nadia, a 15-year-old, also reported feeling motivated by receiving higher grades than ever before:

> I never seen straight As on my report card. Like never. But here, I actually do cuz' it's easy...and it's just like seeing all my awards, it just makes me proud of myself cuz' I didn't know I could make it here, but I did. It just gives me motivation. So if I could make it *here*, I could make it wherever I want to make it. (Interview, March 23, 2017)

Nadia's "but here" comment underscores the connection she drew between her good grades at Delta now and her ability to "make it wherever I want to make it" in the future. While good grades appeared to redefine some students' self-image, it also seemed to shape the perceptions of those who knew them best. For instance, David shared this story about his first Delta report card:

> David: When I got my report card, I was just proud. Like, I changed a lot! Only in one trimester, I changed a lot. I got all Bs I think. I had a C in advisory, but I don't count advisory as a class. But I got Honor Roll. My dad was real proud of me. He put it on the fridge and everything. [chuckling] That's how proud he was.
>
> Me: How did that feel seeing your report card on the fridge?
>
> David: It just used to be my little brother and my sister on the fridge when they were doing good in school. I was never bringing home nothing but trouble stuff. I see myself way different now. (Interview, March 23, 2017)

For David and other students like him, the impact of receiving good grades was not limited to their 10-week experience in Bridge. Students consistently reported that their boost in GPA had boosted their confidence in their ability to experience success outside of Delta as well.

There are troubling deeper implications associated with a grading culture that is perhaps artificially inflated. As discussed in the sections on the second and third consequences, the academic rigor of Delta is questionable. These aforementioned sections provided examples of instances when staff knowingly participated in the creation of an academic context in which success would not transfer to another setting. Is it truly possible for a student (or in this case, several students) to go from all Fs at a traditional school to straight As at Delta? Given staff members' concentration on socio-emotional skills (and their proven success at promoting students' socio-emotional growth), it begs the question: are Bridge students receiving As for their mastery of concepts in the core curriculum – Math, Social Studies, English, and Science – or are students awarded high grades for proficiency in things like self-regulation, sociability, and resilience?

There were indeed students who completed most of their work and the "good grades" they received were a representation of a new dedication to schoolwork. However, it was more common for students who were failing for the majority of the trimester to somehow pass, and oftentimes with an A or B, at the end. In preparation for weekly Bridge staff meetings, Carly would print off a color-coded spreadsheet showing students' academic standing. Green represented students who were passing and red indicated failing students. Sometimes we discussed particular students on the sheet, and in other instances the primarily red spreadsheet was visible to me from across the room and required no explanation. I routinely observed students who were given the opportunity (by Carly as well as other Bridge Advisors) to present a project or submit an assignment after the deadline had passed.

Determining whether or not staff's practice of awarding high grades to Bridge students was setting young people up for failure outside of Delta is beyond the scope of this study. However, some staff members indicated that the academic performance trends for Bridge students were problematic. Toward the end of my time at Delta I overheard a conversation between Michelle, the Assistant Principal, Carly, and another Advisor in which Michelle said the phrase, "the [Bridge] slide" (Field note, June 1, 2017). As I was scheduled to interview Michelle the following day, I made sure to ask her about the phrase; she likened it to the educational phenomenon known as "summer slide," which is the tendency for students to lose academic gains made during the previous year while they are on summer vacation (Interview, June 2, 2017). Michelle described "the [Bridge] slide" as a "slow, steady decline" in students' academic performance following Bridge, but she was unable to explain exactly why this occurred:

> I can't quite put my finger on it. Is it because they are more gently coddled down there? Are the expectations higher in the veteran advisories? Maybe there's less hand holding in the vet classrooms. The vet Advisors are less inclined to say, "You have this paper to do. You have this paper to do," and tell you six times. Nope, they're like, "I handed it out last week when you were you gone. You could have gone and talked to one of your friends, right?" Or, "They're in the folder, they're right there. Go ahead and get it." A lot less hand holding. (Interview, June 2, 2017)

Michelle's series of questions suggests that there is a difference between the rigors of Bridge and subsequent veteran Delta courses. Carly, a Bridge Advisor, echoed Michelle's concerns when she shared this startling observation about students' performance in veteran classes following the completion of Bridge:

> Look at the numbers, (sigh) or don't. It's one of the frustrations I've had this year—watching my students make that transition and checking their grades and seeing like half of them or more like fall off. So that's a transition that as a school we're really trying to figure out. (Informal communication, June 5, 2017)

Whatever its cause, "the Bridge slide" calls into question the legitimacy of the grading scale used within the Bridge program as well as its long-term implications for students' self-perceptions and future success.

Summary of the Fourth Consequence

Students in Bridge reported meaningful types of socio-emotional growth as a result of their experience at Delta. Others expressed immense pride in their historically high grades and described how it made them feel differently about themselves. However, the prevalence of awarding students high grades inflated students' self-confidence and seemed to warp their perception of their ability to succeed in "the real world" outside of Delta's walls. Beyond these long-term implications, staff's grading practices also had immediate consequences on their success at Delta, as demonstrated in "the Bridge slide."

Conclusion

Whether intentionally or unintentionally, Delta staff's implementation of trauma-informed practices appeared to prioritize students' socio-emotional growth over their academic growth. Indeed, as cited in Chapter 4, during the first few weeks of Bridge, staff deliberately focused exclusively on community building and teaching students basic skills, like how to pay attention or not interrupt. It was not until at least the third week that staff began formal academic instruction. Perhaps the majority of Bridge is an extension of that initial mindset: for many incoming students, a successful day at school has less to do with academics and more to do with showing up, not fighting, and practicing self-control. While students did report an appreciation for the flexibility that the trauma-informed approaches

created, their "second chance" at academic success has troublesome implications for the rigor and relevance of the education they received in Bridge.

In Chapter 6, Conclusion, I summarize the goals of the study, my methodology, key findings and implications for future research.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

While the need for trauma awareness in schools is well-established within the literature on childhood trauma, few studies have examined the specific role that educators play in these efforts (Cole *et al*., 2013; Hertel & Johnson, 2013; Brunzell *et al.*, 2019). Additionally, numerous scholars maintain that organizations such as schools, which serve trauma survivors, must go beyond trauma sensitivity to deliver trauma-informed care: an organizational framework in which all staff, policies, and services are delivered in a way that demonstrates trauma awareness (Bloom & Farragher, 2013; Overstreet & Chafouleas, 2016; Ko *et al.*, 2008). However, these organizations known as trauma-informed schools are understudied. Framed by Contemporary Trauma Theory as well as the lesser-known theoretical construct of educational trauma, the purpose of this study was to understand how staff members' understanding of and attitudes toward trauma guided their daily decision-making as they tried to create a schooling environment that is responsive to the needs of traumatized youth. The secondary aim was to examine the impacts staff's practices had on the students, staff, and school.

To explore these two areas, I conducted an ethnographic study at an alternative high school that exclusively serves former high school dropouts, many of whom have experienced trauma. The participants in this study were the Advisors, counselors, administrators and a group of students associated with Bridge, the school's mandatory program for newly admitted students. Analysis of data derived from classroom observations and staff and student interviews indicate that staff members' trauma-informed

efforts centered on building relationships and using those relationships as a knowledge base in order to carefully decode negative student behavior. Together, these practices overlap with defining features of trauma-informed schooling outlined in the literature. Ultimately, these trauma-informed efforts had both positive and negative impacts on the school community. This study is original in that it goes beyond the prevailing use of teachers' perspectives and self-reported behaviors in the research on trauma-informed schooling practices. In contrast, this study included observations and classroom evidence to more fully understand the daily decision-making and lived experiences of school staff in the creation of a trauma-responsive schooling environment.

Summary of Findings

In Chapter 4, I examined the two primary, interconnected actions that characterized Delta staff members' trauma-informed efforts: decoding and relationship building. The driving force behind the decoding process was the staff's self-imposed responsibility to meet students' previously unmet needs. As a result, staff regularly sought to decipher and understand the deeper meaning underlying negative student behavior. In doing so, staff reframed negative student behavior as real-time coping practices for traumatic stress. In this way, staff created a space to engage in a meaning-making process that was centered on understanding students' needs, rather than taking personal offense to, demonizing, or punishing their behaviors. This approach enabled staff to meet their ultimate goal of avoiding the re-traumatization of students.

There were four main sites of relationship building at Delta: intake interviews, the "Who Am I?" project, morning greeting, and opening/closing circles. The first two

activities represented strategic information-gathering by staff in order to generate unique trauma awareness about each student. The latter two activities were intentional routines that staff used to introduce the element of predictability into students' schooling experience, which was designed to engender trust by meeting students' need to feel physically and psychologically safe. Staff used relationships as an asset that helped to facilitate decoding, and this decoding work reinforced student-staff relationships. Together, the two actions formed a positive feedback loop. Lastly, I showed that staff practices reflect what the literature has identified as central elements of trauma-informed schools.

In Chapter 5, I discussed four consequences associated with Delta staff's trauma-informed practices. First I explained how, by not using details about students' pasts to disqualify them from academic success, Delta staff generated a shared belief among students in a "second chance" at education. Additionally, students described a school culture that differed from the uncompromising nature of their previous schools; they reported a sense of freedom to make mistakes without fear of jeopardizing their "second chance" at success. Secondly, I demonstrated how a common expression of staff's trauma-informed practices—giving students a clean slate every day—compromised Delta's mission of "real-world learning." Despite their intentions to create a real-world learning environment, staff members' routine responses to certain student behaviors (e.g., absences) within Delta did not reflect real-world consequences. Some staff participated in a "willing suspension of disbelief" in which they confessed that in some ways, student success within Delta would likely not transfer to real-world success outside of Delta.

Third, I outlined how a trauma-informed grading system complicated staff's assessment of student performance. Although staff generally agreed on its purpose (namely, to address the fact that most of the students had grown accustomed to failing), they wrestled with its implications for their professional responsibility to assess students' learning. The practice of portfolio-style evaluations in particular was perceived by some staff as too subjective and as an inadequate tool to measure students' competency and mastery. Finally, I detailed how staff's prioritization of socio-emotional needs and related skill-building created a schooling environment that nurtured students' socio-emotional growth over their academic growth. I problematized the general trend of students who earned high grades (often the highest in their lives) during Bridge, but then declined in academic performance shortly thereafter. In doing so, I questioned whether Bridge students' grades reflected more of a proficiency in socio-emotional skills, such as self-regulation, rather than a mastery of the core curriculum (Math, Social Studies, English, and Science).

Implications and Significance

The Role of Relationships in Trauma-informed Schooling

This study provides insight into the largely undertheorized process of trauma-informed schooling. This study contributes to the need for research on how teachers interpret and respond to students' trauma symptoms that can often be mistaken for defiant, disruptive behavior (Cole *et al.*, 2013; Hertel & Johnson, 2013). This study revealed the central role that relationships played in staff members' efforts to interpret or decode student

behavior. In fact, relationships were the mechanism through which staff understood student behavior and, together with decoding, constituted a defining aspect of their trauma-informed practices.

This study builds on previous research about the significance of supportive adult relationships in fostering children's coping skills (Arvidson *et al.*, 2011; Hesse & Main, 2000), by examining the protective effect of adult relationships within the context of trauma-informed schools. Through the use of Contemporary Trauma Theory, this study provides a more nuanced understanding of the role that supportive student-teacher relationships play in enhancing young people's ability to cope with traumatic stress. Whereas previous clinical studies have argued that adult relationships can buffer the effects of traumatic stress by helping a child adapt to and cope with a stressor (NSCDC, 2014; Shonkoff *et al.*, 2012), the findings of this study illuminate how within a schooling context, the protective effect is a product of shared meaning-making. Staff regularly gave students feedback about their behavior and asked questions in order to work with students to not only identify the current coping practices, but to also explore the underlying stressor motivating those behaviors.

While the necessity of things like safety and trust has been well-established within the scholarly literature on trauma-informed care (SAMHSA, 2014a), few studies have examined how these values are achieved within a school context. An understanding of this aspect of trauma-informed schooling seems significant given the research on childhood trauma and attachment, as childhood trauma impairs an individual's ability to form healthy interpersonal relationships and establish trust (Goodman, 2017). This study confirms the critical importance of elements like students' sense of physical and psychological safety as

well as trust, and sheds light on the specific relationship-oriented actions that school staff took to generate those feelings, such as the creation of safety plans and the daily routines of morning/closing circle.

Educational Trauma

By using the concept of educational trauma, this study extends previous theoretical approaches to understanding academic failure that have largely ignored the role of context (school policies, practices, student-teacher relationships). By recasting school failure from an individual's failing to a product of educational trauma (Sullivan, 2004) it is possible to expand the analytic focus to examine how schools may fail students and in fact traumatize them. This study revealed that staff's practices were greatly influenced by their recognition of the educational trauma many of the students (former high school dropouts) had experienced. Indeed, a defining feature of staff's work was to create a schooling environment that was deliberately different from students' previous schools in order to avoid re-traumatization. This study contributes to our understanding of how the outcomes for trauma survivors are influenced by the context in which care occurs (Bloom, 1997; Harris & Fallot, 2001; Ko *et al.*, 2008), particularly when the care context (i.e., another school) by its very nature has some semblance of the context in which the original trauma occurred.

Consequences of Trauma-informed Schooling

The findings of this study bolster the recent call for a clearer operationalization of the concept of Trauma-informed Care (Berliner & Kolko, 2016). Studies on the

experiences of practitioners within trauma-informed organizations have documented that while practitioners within child-serving trauma-informed organizations agree on the conceptual importance of TIC, they express uncertainty about: 1) what specific practices they should perform to best respond to traumatized youth, and 2) the extent to which they have been taught the specific skills and strategies needed to know how to best respond (Donisch, Bray, & Gewirtz, 2016; Kusmaul, Wilson, & Nochajski, 2015). While the findings of this study did not explicitly capture educators' uncertainty about which tasks to perform, they did indicate potential consequences of what happens when practitioners are left to translate "the big idea to everyday practice" (Berliner & Kolko, 2016, p. 169).

Valuing Socio-emotional Growth over Academic Rigor

This study builds on research that suggests that there is an inherent tension between the dual missions of trauma-informed schooling (Ko *et al.*, 2008) by providing a richer understanding of how educators navigate this tension. The findings of this study reveal that Delta staff struggled with the balance between fulfilling the school's academic mission of "real-world learning" and addressing students' socio-emotional needs that impacted their learning readiness. In the classroom, a trauma-informed approach required educators to triage students' needs in a way that prioritized socio-emotional needs in order to avoid the risk of re-traumatization. Oftentimes, prioritizing students' socio-emotional needs diverted Advisors' focus away from academic learning and came at the expense of instructional time. In this study, staff sought to establish a long-term equilibrium between Delta's dual goals of academic growth and socio-emotional growth; however, on a *daily* basis, staff did not aspire to strike an even balance between these two aims. For example, it was not

uncommon for Advisors to abruptly stop a lesson and call for a circle. This action reflected the Advisor's conviction that stopping to address students' socio-emotional needs (e.g., processing a student's outburst) was of greater value than continuing to pursue academic progress. This dynamic reordering of priorities is representative of how staff tried to balance these competing needs in order to establish a long-term equilibrium over the course of an entire trimester. However, Delta Advisors' approach to managing their instructional focus may come at the expense of academic rigor. I am left wondering if this is a necessary compromise of trauma-informed schooling, at least in the initial weeks (such as Bridge) of a student's schooling experience. Could a brief, introductory curriculum (i.e., 4-6 weeks) that is solely focused on socio-emotional growth, followed by a more integrated curriculum mitigate the academic decline that Bridge students experience after their first 10 weeks at Delta? If so, what does that imply about the overall approach to trauma-informed schooling?

Navigating the Tensions of Role Definition

Additionally, while staff universally accepted that meeting students' socio-emotional needs was a critical part of their work at Delta, the practical reality of this created a value dilemma for staff. The findings of this study show that in certain instances, staff wrestled with the reality that performing one type of task undermined the other. Delta staff's attempts to avoid punitive behavior (believing that this compromised their trauma-informed approach to learning) sometimes contradicted their academic goal of creating a "real-world learning" environment.

I likened these types of staff behaviors to a willing suspension of disbelief so as to illuminate the tension between what would have happened in a real-world setting, and what did happen in the classroom. This phenomenon is not entirely unique to participants in my study. As previous research has demonstrated, educators can struggle with uncertainty regarding how to navigate this tension, wondering at what point their academic tasks as a teacher end and socio-emotional tasks begin (Alisic, 2012). The implications of the pattern of behavior among Delta staff are significant. I argue that if teachers choose to take on socio-emotional tasks, as required by trauma-informed schooling, they must consider in advance the long-term consequences of prioritizing those tasks over academics. At Delta, it appeared that the habitual favoring of socio-emotional learning over academics comprised the school's academic rigor and created a somewhat fraudulent imitation of what students would experience beyond Delta.

Limitations and Areas for Future Research

In this section I will discuss two key limitations of this study and how future research could address each. Additionally, I conclude with a brief suggestion for future research on trauma among educators. First, my observations in this study were largely focused on one Advisor, Carly. As I discussed in Chapter 3, this was a strategic methodological decision that seemed appropriate for this particular research site. However, this decision limited my exposure to other teachers' trauma-informed classroom practices. Future research could expand on the present study by exploring different teachers' actions within the same schooling context. This could reveal new strategies used by other teachers as well as unique challenges they may face in implementing trauma-informed approaches.

Second, this study examined staff's actions within a short-term setting: the 10-week-long trimester of Bridge. In addition, the observations focused exclusively on three successive cohorts of Bridge students. It is possible that the study's findings could have been partly influenced by the intense, concentrated nature of the Bridge program. For instance, if I had followed one group of Bridge students throughout their first year at Delta, would I have found staff members to employ different trauma-informed approaches? Could the balance between socio-emotional support and academic learning have perhaps changed over time? It would be advisable to conduct a similar study following one group of students over a longer time frame in an effort to understand how staff members' trauma-informed approaches develop over the course of an academic year.

At the end of Chapter 4, I highlighted how Delta staff's practices closely mirrored the central elements of trauma-informed schooling as outlined in the literature. However, a distinct difference was the absence of an explicit focus on recognizing the symptoms of trauma among school *staff*, not just students. Secondary Traumatic Stress, as defined by the National Child Trauma Stress Network (NCTSN), is "the emotional duress that results when an individual hears about the firsthand trauma experiences of another" (NCTSN, n.d.). Research indicates that the development of Secondary Traumatic Stress (STS) is a common occupational hazard for helping professionals who serve traumatized individuals (NCTSN, n.d.; Figley, 1995). Recent scholarship has urged for "parallel planning" and a "dual agenda" within the development of trauma-informed education, where there is a focus on serving the needs of traumatized youth as well as those of the educators and support staff who serve them (Lawson, Caringi, Gottfried, Bride, & Hydon, 2019). Although STS was outside the scope of this study, there is an urgent need for more research

on this phenomenon. Some scholars even suggest that STS may be a hidden source of educator turnover among principals and teachers (Rangel, 2018; Holme, Jabar, Germain & Dinning, 2018).

<div align="center">Recommendations for Educators</div>

<div align="center">*Manage the Socio-emotional / Academic Tension*</div>

It is essential for educators to manage the tension between socio-emotional and academic learning that is inherent in trauma-informed schooling. Otherwise, as the findings indicate, there is a tendency to prioritize socio-emotional tasks over academic ones. Therefore, educators should regularly take inventory of their task performance in order to approach an equilibrium between these two competing learning goals.

<div align="center">*Collaborate with Colleagues*</div>

It seems that the more information a school staff member has about a student, the better positioned they are to accurately decode the student's behavior and use trauma-informed approaches to meet the student's needs. In this study, sharing information among colleagues was an intentional, strategic way of serving students. I additionally recommend that educators seek opportunities to collaborate with their colleagues as a way to troubleshoot particularly challenging situations. Doing so might provide new insight into students' behaviors, additional trauma-informed strategies to try, and ways in which other educators balance their socio-emotional and academic tasks.

Seek Student Feedback

My findings suggest it will be important for educators to create opportunities for students to share their feedback on trauma-informed practices. Students in this study reported that specific assignments, classroom practices, and school policies promoted their personal and academic growth. However, this may not be the case in another school setting. It is advisable for staff members to regularly assess the degree to which their efforts are addressing students' traumatic stress responses as well as avoiding re-traumatization.

Closing Remarks

Over the course of an academic year I saw students experience noticeable changes that they explicitly attributed to how staff supported them, believed in them, and made them feel about themselves. I celebrated many students' firsts, like making Honor Roll, receiving academic awards, visiting a museum, and being the first in their family to get a high school diploma. While these are momentous victories, I am left with unanswered questions regarding the long-term implications that trauma-informed education has for students' future success. If there is an inherent tension between socio-emotional growth and academic growth within trauma-informed schools, how do we decide where to compromise? What is of more value: the life change spurred by trauma-informed practices that students experienced at Delta, or a more academics-focused education they might have received at a traditional school? I am convinced that Delta met students' previously unmet needs for experiencing academic success, I just don't know at what cost. Nevertheless, I have great respect for the staff at Delta High School. The ever-changing needs of their trauma-affected students made the staff's work dynamic and required them to constantly

shift their priorities, rearrange their lesson plans, and change their pace, all in order to do their best to "try to meet them where they are."

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APPENDIX A

STAFF INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Background

1. What brought you to Delta?

2. Can you describe your specific role at Delta?

3. How would you describe a "typical" day for you at Delta?

4. What is your favorite aspect of your job?

    a. What do you find is your biggest challenge?

5. What experiences, if any, would you say prepared you for working at Delta?

School

6. What is the mission of Delta and how does it seek to accomplish that mission?

    a. Can you share about a particular student that embodies Delta's mission accomplished?

7. For the school as a whole, what is the greatest area in need of improvement?

8. What kind of training, if any, do teachers receive before teaching at Delta?

    a. Is there a "Delta" way of teaching? What is it?

    b. How does (or doesn't) that align with your personal teaching philosophy?

9. I've sat in on several circles. What's the thought behind circles?

    a. Tell me about a time when a particular circle really captured that essence of why you do them at Delta.

10. As far as I can tell, there are no metal detectors or security guards at Delta. This is different from most public high schools within this school district. Can you explain this to me?

11. I've heard references to restorative justice as a practice at Delta. Can you explain to me what that is and how it is used at Delta?

    a. How was this practice explained to you? What kind of training, if any, did you receive?

Students

12. Understanding that every student is different, what would you say are some common experiences and characteristics of incoming students?

    a. *If trauma is not addressed*, *ask*: What are the dominant forms of trauma that incoming Delta students have experienced?

    b. How does trauma impact students' schooling?

13. What brings students to Delta?

    a. What kind of schools do students come from?

    b. What things have students encountered at those schools?

    c. Do students talk about their previous schools?

        i. What do they say?

        ii. What about Delta have students said is different from their previous schools?

14. From your perspective, what are the main motivators of Bridge students?

    a. How do you motivate students?

15. What do students say they like most about Delta?

   a. What do they dislike?

16. When you think about those first weeks or even months of school, what are the
   biggest challenges for teachers and staff?

   a. Biggest initial challenges from students?

17. What would you say is the purpose of orientation? What are the main things that
   you want to communicate to students?

18. In the time that I have observed classes, I've witnessed instances of students
   cursing and occasionally being what some might perceive as rude. How do you
   choose to handle those situations?

   a. Why?

19. When you think about the Bridge experience, what kind of transition do you see
   students experience?

   a. What experiences (e.g., classes, projects, social activities) would you say
      produce the biggest change or growth in Bridge students?

      i. Why?

   b. Can you recall an example of a student who transformed during their time
      in Bridge?

20. Many school days begin with only two to four students in a classroom. Why do
   you think that is?

   a. What impact does this have on you?

21. On multiple occasions I've heard students refer to staff members in familial terms
   (e.g. "You're like my mom," or "Mr. X is like our uncle.").

a. What do you think they mean by that?

b. How does this make you feel?

22. What's that one thing that you wish students would just "get"?

Miscellaneous

23. If someone made a large donation to the school right now, how would you put that money to use?

24. Is there anything that I can be paying attention to that would be of help to you?

25. Is there anything that you would like me to know that we haven't talked about?

26. Are there any particular students you would suggest I interview?

APPENDIX B

STUDENT INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

<u>Personal Background</u>

1. Age?

2. In what city were you born?

   a. How long have you lived here?

3. Do you have siblings?

   a. If yes, how many?

   b. What are their ages?

4. How do you usually get to school? (e.g., walk, bus)

   a. On most days, how long does it take to get to school?

5. Who do you live with?

6. What is your mother's occupation?

   a. Did she graduate high school?

7. What is your father's occupation?

   a. Did he graduate high school?

8. Are your parents married?

9. Do you have any children?

   a. If yes, how many?

   b. What are their ages?

10. Do you work?

    a. If yes, where?

    b. How many hours per week?

Educational Background

11. What schools did you attend prior to Delta?

12. Where were you last enrolled right before you came to Delta?

    a. How would you describe that school to someone who had never been there before?

    b. What were your classes like?

        i. Teachers?

        ii. The building?

        iii. The students?

    c. How often, if at all, did fights take place at that school?

13. On most mornings when you thought about what would happen at school that day, how did you feel?

    a. Happy?

    b. Worried?

    c. Angry?

    d. Nervous?

    e. Excited?

    f. Tell me a little more about why you felt that way?

14. What brought you to Delta?

    a. How did you hear about the school?

Experience at Delta

15. Try to think back to your first few days in Bridge. What was your first impression of Delta?

    a. Your advisor?

    b. Your classes?

    c. The building?

16. Here are a couple of words that I hear a lot at Delta. What do these things mean?

    a. Advisory

    b. Circle

    c. Journal

    d. Project-based learning

    e. Exhibition

17. What do you like about Delta?

    a. What don't you like?

18. If you were talking to one of your friends who doesn't go here, how would you describe Delta?

19. What is your relationship like with your Advisor?

20. Have you ever talked with the Resilience Specialist?

    a. What was your experience like?

    b. How about the Principal?

    c. Are there any other staff that you would say that you're close to? Why or why not?

21. Are there any students at Delta that you would consider your friends?

a. Who do you hang out with?

b. How do these friendships compare to those you had at your previous school?

22. Has there been a time when you felt misunderstood at Delta? Why?

23. I've noticed that there are no metal detectors or security guards at Delta. Why do you think this is the case?

a. How do you feel about this?

24. Every school has its own set of rules. What is your opinion on the rules here?

a. Are there any rules that you particularly like?

b. Dislike or find unfair?

c. Rules that are challenging for you to follow?

25. Overall, how does your previous school compare to Delta?

a. In what ways are they similar?

b. In what ways are they different?

26. On most days, how would you describe how you feel when you walk through the front doors of Delta?

Reflection and the Future

27. When you think back on your first day in Bridge, what's some advice that you would give yourself?

28. Imagine that you're walking across the stage at graduation. What's next for you?

29. In 5 years, where do you see yourself?

a. Where are you living?

      b.   What are you doing?

30. Would you recommend Delta to a friend? Why or why not?

31. Can you think of a moment at Delta when you felt proud of yourself?

      a.   Can you describe that moment and why you felt proud?

32. What are some things you can do now (or you can do better) that you couldn't do

    prior to attending Delta?

      a.   In what ways have you personally changed or grown?

Final Thoughts

33. In your opinion, is there anything that would make Delta a better school?

34. Imagine this—someone donates a lot of money to the school and *you* are in

    charge of how the money is spent. How would you spend it?

35. Is there anything else you think I should know?

APPENDIX C

CODE BOOK

1. **Delta**

   a. **General** – comments about the school, its culture, staff, or student population.

   b. **Staff** – any mention about a particular staff member.

   c. **The Delta Way** - messages to students by staff about "how we do things around here."

   d. **Improvement** - specific comments from students or staff re: anything about the school that needs to change, improve.

2. **Norms -** emic code, related to formally communicated school culture (e.g., morning and afternoon circle, daily journal, one mic rule, cell phone use); any reference to the existence of norms, staff enforcing and reinforcing norms.

3. **Policies & Practices**

   a. **Exception** – any instance of an exception being made.

   b. **Contradiction** – any instance in which staff attitudes or behaviors are contradictory to school policies.

   c. **Practices** – routine practices such as morning greetings, Town Hall meetings, awards/celebrations, calling students by their name, that occur on a regular basis.

4. **Discipline** – the language used and actions taken to correct disciplinary issues as well as students' reactions to those actions. Disciplinary issues can range from a

minor correction (e.g., a teacher telling a student to "pay attention" or even a physical pat on the shoulder to refocus a distracted student) to a formal restorative justice event after a fight has occurred.

5. **Drugs & Fighting** – any reference to drugs or fighting.

6. **Attendance** – any references to student attendance, absences, tardiness as well as attendance-related issues (e.g., impact on grades, groupwork when group members were missing).

7. **Real-world Learning** – emic code that describes a real-world application for what students are learning.

    a. **The Why Behind the What** - any explanation for the purpose behind an activity, policy, or a staff member's actions (e.g., "The reason why we're doing this is because if you were at a job interview you'd have to know how to…").

    b. **Future Talk** – any reference to the future whether it be later on in students' time at Delta or future career plans.

    c. **Employment Preparation** – any reference to tips or insight specifically about getting/keeping a job, internships.

8. **Skill Acquisition** – any reference to a skill gained (whether social, emotional, or academic) because of an experience at Delta. This could be a hard skill or the adoption of a new habit, attitude, or mentality.

9. **Educational Background** – references to a student's previous school, including comparisons of Delta to previous schools, a student's reason for dropping out of

high school and their reason for attending Delta, and any description of themselves as a student prior to Delta.

10. **Fear/Discomfort with Risk-taking in the Classroom** – directly from the definition of educational trauma, instances in which students seem fearful to work on their own, ask questions at every step along the way, express frustration when they ask their teachers how to do something and are told to read the instructions or to think about it.

11. **Motivation** – any reference to what motivates students, their passions, future career aspirations, why they are enrolled at Delta, why they want their high school diploma.

12. **Challenges** – what students or staff may identify as a challenge faced at Delta, or any instance in which a student encounters a challenge.

13. **Growth** –any instance of student growth, change, or improvement whether demonstrated by performance (e.g., grade, presentation, award) or mentioned by a teacher or reflected on by a student her/himself.

14. **Trauma** - any instance in which a student discloses a personal trauma (or a staff member references it) and, when applicable, the accompanying response from staff or other students.

15. **Student Self-talk** – this will likely get captured by educational background and growth, but this code will capture any instance in which a student talks about themselves, their identity that may not fall under the two aforementioned codes (e.g., "I'm not a math person"; "I have a bad temper"; "I'm really passionate").

16. **Life Outside of School** – any reference to a student's life outside of school including responsibilities, family life, influences, societal factors.

17. **Resiliency** – bouncing back, overcoming challenges.

18. **Non-verbal Communication** –any mention of student or staff members' facial expressions and body language as well as physical contact such as high fives, hugs, etc.

19. **Emotions** – any instance of a student or staff member expressing an emotion, positive or negative, whether noted in field notes or narrated by the individual (e.g., "I'm so mad right now!").

20. **"Hand-holding"** – an ill-named code to capture one-on-one interactions in which teachers are "doing" students' work (e.g., writing or typing for them, taking notes on what they're saying in order to help student complete an assignment).

21. **Last-minute** – any instance of a last-minute change of plans as well as instances in which students are finishing work at the last minute.

22. **Teacher Talk** – this gets partially captured by other codes, especially Questions & Answers, but there are additional things to capture that include: compliments, apologies, affirmative comments, suggestions, empathy/understanding, communicating expectations, and reflective statements about their own pedagogical choices.

23. **Accommodations** – any instance in which a staff member provides a modification or adjustment to best serve a student. These instances provide students with choices, being flexible with the manner of how learning objectives

are met, ignoring or rewording instances of profanity, asking for permission to give a student feedback, and negotiating assignment deadlines.

24. **Questions & Answers** – student-staff interactions. When a question is asked, the answer (if available) is also coded. Question types include:

    a. **Interrupting Question**

    b. **Off-Topic Question**

    c. **Repetitive Question** – one that has been asked and answered very recently.

    d. **Commentary** – any general comments on questions (e.g., "That's a great question!").

25. **Feedback** – any kind of analysis, suggestion, correction, or question/answer between teacher and student or student and student. This can occur in a formalized setting (e.g., a feedback session following a presentation) as well as more informal interactions that have a simple "food for thought" like tone. Feedback can be aimed toward an individual or an entire group.

26. **Student-student Interactions** – interactions between students that may not fall under other code categories.

27. **Thick Description** – any detailed descriptions of a person, the school facility, or the surrounding community.

28. **Miscellaneous** – for those few things that seem important but are an aberration and are not captured by any of the above codes.