UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

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Social Worker Perceptions of Trauma-Informed Schools:

A Multistudy, Mixed-Method Analysis of School Practices, Policies, and Climate

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction

of the requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in Social Welfare

by

Kate Rorer Watson

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## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

# Social Worker Perceptions of Trauma-Informed Schools:

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by

Kate Rorer Watson

Doctor of Philosophy in Social Welfare

University of California, Los Angeles, 2024

Professor Ron Avi Astor, Chair

This dissertation explored the concept of trauma-informed schools from the perspective of social workers, providing insights into the practices, policies, and climate of trauma-informed schools. Three studies address the limited empirical research on whole-school, trauma-informed approaches to date. While there is existing support for individual components of trauma-informed approaches, such as trauma training and clinical interventions, there is a lack of consensus and empirical study of what constitutes a whole-school, trauma-informed approach. In Studies 1 and 2 of this dissertation, survey data from 538 school social workers was analyzed to investigate policies, practices, and climate characteristics associated with schools being identified as trauma informed. Logistic regression was used to examine whether the presence of certain school practices, policies, or climate characteristics were associated with trauma-

informed identification by social workers. In Study 1, we found the presence of trauma training and resources for secondary traumatic stress (STS) were key predictors of social workers' identification of a school as trauma informed. There is now a need to move beyond training and STS resources toward adapting practices and policies at all organizational levels to support a trauma-informed environment. In Study 2, we found that social workers perceived clear differences in culture and climate between schools they identified as trauma informed and those they did not. Schools that were perceived as safer; with a strengths-based, equitable focus; and featuring trusting, empowering, collaborative relationships were more likely to be identified as trauma informed. For Study 3, we conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 20 school social workers who had previously completed the survey used in Studies 1 and 2. Study 3 revealed that social workers viewed trauma-informed schools as a holistic, systemic process that goes beyond trauma training or mental health services. They emphasized the importance of a trauma-informed lens permeating all aspects of a school's organization and activities. The findings from these studies have implications for social work practice and research, highlighting the need for social workers to play a role in driving institutional change, addressing systemic inequities, and leveraging their skills to implement and sustain trauma-informed approaches in schools.

The dissertation of Kate Rorer Watson is approved.

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2024

## Dedication

For my husband Brian, my favorite person and strongest supporter,

and for my mom, who encouraged me to further my education and

wanted me to become an educator like her. Congrats, Mom, you win!

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## CURRICULUM VITAE

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***Peer-Reviewed Publications***

1. Astor, R. A., Benbenishty, R., Capp, G. P. , **Watson, K. R**., Wu, C., McMahon, S. D., Worrell, F. C., Reddy, L. A., Martinez, A., Espelage, D. L., & Anderman, E. M. (2024). How school policies, strategies, and relational factors contribute to teacher victimization and school safety. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 52(1), 39-57.
2. **Watson, K. R**., Capp, G., Astor, R. A., Kelly, M. S., & Benbenishty, R. (2022). "We Need to Address the Trauma": School Social Workers′ Views About Student and Staff Mental Health During COVID-19. *School Mental Health*, 14(4), 902-917.
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1. **Watson, K. R**. & Astor, R. A. (under review). A call for conceptual, empirical, and practice integration of trauma-informed approaches in schools.
2. **Watson, K. R**., Camacho Torres, Y., Nunez, J. J., & Garcia, A. A. (under review). Trauma-informed climate in volunteer organizations that support foster youth: What is the need and how can it be measured?

***Congressional Policy Briefs and Supporting Technical Reports***

1. **Watson, K. R**. (Collaborator) in McMahon, S. D., Anderman, E. M., Astor, R. A., Espelage, D. L., Martinez, A., Reddy, L. A., & Worrell, F. (2022). Violence Against Educators and School Personnel: Crisis During COVID. Technical Report. American Psychological Association. https://www.apa.org/education-career/k12/violence-educators-technical-report.pdf.

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***Peer-Reviewed Chapters***

1. Reynolds, H.M., Astor, R.A., **Watson, K.R**., & Marachi, R. (2024). Current approaches to school safety: Integrating resources, capacity, and programs. In Harris, M.B., *The School Services Sourcebook: A Guide for School-Based Professionals* (3rd Ed.). Oxford University Press.

## Presentations

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**Watson, K. R**., Astor, R. A., Benbenishty, R., & Capp, G. (2024, January 10-14). Social workers' assessments of differences in practices and policies in trauma-informed and non-trauma-informed schools [Oral presentation]. Society for Social Work and Research. https://sswr.confex.com/sswr/2024/webprogram/Paper52436.html

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**Watson, K. R**., Astor, R. A., Benbenishty, R., & Capp, G. (2023, November 1-4). Social workers' assessments of differences in practices and policies in trauma-informed and non-trauma-informed schools [Flash talk]. International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies.

**Watson, K. R**., Capp, G., Astor, R. A., Kelly, M. S., & Benbenishty, R. (2022, April 21-26). *School social workers' views about trauma and mental health during COVID-19.* [Oral presentation converted to e-poster due to COVID]. American Educational Research Association. https://convention2.allacademic.com/one/aera/aera22/index.php?cmd=Online+Program+View+Paper&selected_paper_id=1890796&PHPSESSID=83l2preerp5ota075r4m5ujq1i

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Capp, G., Astor, R. A., **Watson, K.R**. (Presenter), Benbenishty, R. & Kelly, M. S. (2022, January 12-16). *School social workers' views and reports of the needs of students, families, and schools during the COVID-19 pandemic* [Oral presentation converted to e-presentation due to COVID]. Society for Social Work and Research. https://sswr.confex.com/sswr/2022/webprogram/Paper45534.html

Capp, G., Astor, R. A., **Watson, K.R**. (Presenter), Benbenishty, R. & Kelly, M. S. (2022, January 12-16). S*chool social workers during COVID-19 school closures: Meet basic needs and increase capacity* [Oral presentation withdrawn due to COVID]. Society for Social Work and Research. https://sswr.confex.com/sswr/2022/webprogram/Paper45528.html

# Chapter 1: Social Worker Perceptions of Trauma-Informed Schools: A Multistudy, Mixed-Method Analysis of School Practices, Policies, and Climate

## Introduction

In the past two decades, recognition of the prevalence of trauma in U.S. society has increased. Mental health practitioners and others have sought to enhance support for trauma survivors by incorporating several characteristics of clinical trauma interventions into an entire service system or setting (Harris & Fallot, 2001; Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2014b). That is, whole organizations and service systems have sought to educate all staff and service recipients about trauma and create environments that are physically and emotionally safe, empowering, and relationally healthy (Keeshin & Strawn, 2014; SAMHSA, 2014a). Schools are one such setting, in part because previous research has found that between two-thirds to 80% of young people report exposure to traumatic violence or victimization before age 18 (Perfect et al., 2016; Turner et al., 2010). Given that the U.S. K-12 public school system educates more than 90% of U.S. children (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022), it is seen as a particularly impactful setting for trauma response (National Child Traumatic Stress Network, 2017). More than one-third of young people who receive mental health services only access them at school, and this group disproportionately relies on public insurance and are from low-income families or minoritized backgrounds (Ali et al., 2019).

In the past decade, trauma-informed approaches have been widely employed across the U.S. K-12 public school system. In 2017, 29 state education agencies submitted plans to the U.S. Department of Education that included provisions for trauma-informed approaches in schools, and two years later, 45 state education agencies posted information about developing trauma-informed schools on their websites (Simon et al., 2020). Federal legislation has also supported

the rapid growth of trauma-informed approaches in schools. For example, the Every Student Succeeds Act (2015) mandated that school-based mental health services and training be rooted in evidence-based, trauma-informed practice, and the SUPPORT for Patients and Communities Act (2018) provided implementation funding.

Conceptually and historically, school social workers have approached student well-being from an ecological perspective. Social work was founded upon an appreciation for the reciprocal person-in-environment relationship, where it is understood that a person's environment affects their developmental trajectory and vice versa (Gitterman et al., 2018). As such, social workers are trained to keep context in mind and seek to intervene at multiple levels, from the individual to the organization and broader community (Gitterman et al., 2018; Teater, 2014). This awareness and training makes social workers uniquely suited to lead schools in adopting an organization-wide, contextualized approach to trauma (Dombo & Sabatino, 2019; Sedillo-Hamann, 2022).

Despite rapid expansion of trauma-informed approaches in schools, to date there is very little empirical support for whole-school, trauma-informed approaches (Avery et al., 2021; Gherardi et al., 2020; Maynard et al., 2019; Thomas et al., 2019; Watson & Astor, under review). The authors of a Campbell Collaboration review of trauma-informed approaches in schools called for a systematic inventory of what is being done under the guise of trauma response in schools, including qualitative analysis of what school administrators and staff perceive to be trauma-informed (Maynard et al., 2019). A recent systematic review of schoolwide trauma-informed approaches found only four applicable studies and again called urgently for additional research (Avery et al., 2021).

The aim of this dissertation is to respond to these calls for research about what trauma-informed schools look like in practice and to understand the extent to which school social workers recognize differences between schools they identify as trauma informed and those that are not, specifically any differences in schools' policies, practices, and climate. The dissertation also seeks to understand social workers' views of what components are essential to a trauma-informed approach in schools and any expected outcomes for school staff, students, and their families. This approach addresses several gaps in the trauma-informed schools literature, including: 1) a lack of data about whole-school, trauma-informed approaches overall; 2) uncertainty about what a trauma-informed school looks like in practice, given myriad available programs aimed at violence reduction, trauma response, and improved social-emotional skills in schools; and 3) a lack of clarity about whether the label "trauma-informed" results in meaningful differences in resource allocation and student and staff experiences or outcomes.

This multiple-manuscript dissertation is divided into three related but separate empirical studies and analyses that examine social workers' views about their experiences within schools and how their views align with existing conceptual frameworks for trauma-informed schools. These studies build upon prior published studies conducted by the author and research team that examined how school social workers were managing COVID-19 in their schools and responding to trauma (Watson et al., 2022a, 2022b). This work also has broader conceptual implications for organizations other than schools that attempt to create trauma-informed environments. This dissertation is part of the author's long-term research agenda dedicated to understanding how trauma-informed organizations and environments differ from typical organizations and environments, and the impact they have on staff and service recipients. The three studies in this

multiple manuscript dissertation are:

1. Study 1, which examines school social workers' reports of differences in U.S. school policies and practices between schools they identify as trauma informed and those they indicate are not, using quantitative survey methods. This study is based on a survey instrument created by the author as part of a broader research team. The team sought to explore social workers' understanding of trauma-informed schools, by surveying an original sample of school social workers regarding these specific questions.
2. Study 2, which assesses differences in school social workers' experiences of trauma-informed climate between schools they identify as trauma informed and those that are not, again using survey methods. This study is based on a new instrument created by the author in conjunction with trauma and survey research experts to explore social workers' experiences of trauma-informed climate in schools. It surveys the same sample of school social workers as above.
3. Study 3, which explores how school social workers describe a trauma-informed school, what benefits they expect to derive from such an environment, and the adaptations made to policies and practices in the name of becoming trauma-informed. The final manuscript also compares social workers' understanding of trauma-informed approaches to common conceptual components in the literature. The third research manuscript featured a separate data collection and research effort that followed up with school social workers who participated in the aforementioned survey and indicated they were willing to be interviewed. As

such, the third paper is distinct but built on experiences reported in Studies 1 and 2, with in-depth, semi-structured interviews.

## Literature Review

The following review outlines key areas underpinning this dissertation, specifically the impact of psychological trauma on school children and schools, why a trauma-informed approach in schools matters, how schools have approached trauma historically, a brief history of school social work, and why social workers are essential to a trauma-informed approach in schools.

### Psychological Trauma and its Effect on School Outcomes

The concept of psychological trauma originated in the fields of neurology and psychiatry (Lerner & Micale, 2001), and trauma interventions remain rooted in psychological theory and therapies (Herman, 1992). In the psychological sense, trauma refers to lingering negative effects on individuals' beliefs, behaviors, or functioning following events that threaten death or bodily integrity (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013). There is significant variation in children's possible reactions and symptomatology following traumatic experiences; however, the underlying neurobiological pathways are similar. Children may manifest fear and anxiety responses, anger and aggression, or dissociation. Some bounce back quickly while others develop a need for additional mental health support (Marans et al., 2012). One key characteristic of post-traumatic stress disorder and other trauma-related diagnoses is the presence of a precipitating external event (APA, 2013), indicating that any pathology is not rooted solely within the individual. Traumatic experiences recognized by the APA's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (2013) include exposure to war, including as a prisoner or hostage; threats or experiences of physical assault, sexual violence, or torture; kidnapping or hostage experiences;

natural or human-created disasters, and severe accidents. One criticism of the APA's conceptualization of trauma is its focus on direct or indirect experiences of interpersonal trauma to the exclusion of systemic and contextual factors, including racial discrimination and historical or generational traumas (Goodman, 2014; Williams et al., 2018). These latter-mentioned forms of violence and victimization, whether overt or covert, have been validated as traumatic experiences for many historically marginalized groups and must be included in any framework for trauma response (Goodman, 2014; Williams et al., 2018).

Understanding trauma-related effects is essential to meeting the needs of young people in schools. In a systematic review of 83 studies reporting on effects of trauma for school age children, youth with significant trauma exposure were more likely to show cognitive impairments, including difficulties with memory, decreased language ability, and attention deficits; decreased academic achievement; higher rates of discipline referrals, grade retention, and absences; and higher rates of teacher-reported internalizing symptoms (e.g., anxiety, depression, withdrawal, and lower self-esteem) and externalizing behaviors (e.g., aggression, defiance, and class disruption; Perfect et al., 2016).

### ***Issues Related to the Conceptualization of Trauma in Schools***

Schools often conflate psychological trauma with adverse childhood experiences (Gherardi et al., 2020). The term adverse childhood experience (ACE) is attributed to Felitti, Anda, and colleagues (1998), who identified among middle-aged patients in a weight loss study a history of difficult childhood experiences believed to contribute to their present-day risk behaviors and incidence of disease. The original ACE questionnaire included three types of abuse (i.e., psychological, physical, and sexual) and four types of household dysfunction (i.e., sharing a home with someone who misused substances, suffered mental illness or interpersonal

violence, or was sent to prison). Use of ACEs as a measure of childhood abuse or trauma is problematic for many reasons. First, it distills a complex idea into a single numerical score: a count of the number of adverse experiences a person has had (Felitti et al., 1998). Second, it addresses only violence within the family and home, and overlooks community and historical traumas, further contributing to concerns about the APA's (2013) trauma definition. Third, ACEs were based on an epidemiological study and are meant to inform the study of whole populations instead of being used to understand the needs of one individual. And fourth, because the efficacy of trauma screening tools is unclear, screening in schools is not universally recommended (Eklund et al., 2018). Finally, an additional concern recently came from one of the researchers in the originally ACEs study. They specifically advised against using the ACE questionnaire as a screening tool, stating, "the Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE) score is a relatively crude measure of cumulative childhood stress exposure" and was not meant for such purposes (Anda et al., 2020, p. 293).

Schools also typically view trauma as something that happens outside the school and that students bring into the school environment from their homes or communities (Chafouleas et al., 2021; Craig, 2016; Gherardi et al., 2020; Venet, 2021), a belief system the ACE questionnaire perpetuates. As a result, school responses to trauma are generally decontextualized (Chafouleas et al., 2021; Ginwright, 2018; Venet, 2021), which can result in blaming a child, their parents, or an entire community for their traumatic experiences and subsequent trauma reactions (Blitz et al., 2020; Craig, 2016; Goldin & Khasnabis, 2020). Researchers and practitioners are now calling for contextualized responses to trauma and awareness that trauma can happen both inside and outside the school environment (Chafouleas et al., 2021; Saleem et al., 2022; Venet, 2021).

Since schools began closing in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, youth mental health has worsened considerably, prompting several U.S. medical associations to declare a state of emergency in child and adolescent mental health (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2021; Jones et al., 2021). During school closures, many young people were disconnected from friends and loved ones, destabilized by disruptions to their daily routines, and dependent on connections solely through the Internet and social media (Jones et al., 2021). In a recent qualitative study, school social workers reported that the COVID-19 pandemic was a potentially traumatic event for students and families, one that would need to be addressed by schools in the coming academic years. For example, one stated, "Teachers and other education professionals need to know how trauma impacts learning and understand that the pandemic's impact on [students'] lives and that of their families is most likely traumatic" (Watson et al., 2022b, p. 908). As such, the need for trauma-informed schools has only heightened since 2020.

**A Brief History of Trauma-Informed Approaches in Schools**

The U.S. public education system has been quite responsive to trauma and the psychosocial emotional needs of students. First-generation responses to trauma focused on individual clinical interventions and second-generation responses introduced peer support and psychoeducation (i.e., explaining the effects of stress on physical and mental well-being). The latest third-generation responses promote healing through entire settings that address the safety needs of trauma survivors (SAMHSA, 2014b).

A substantial empirical literature outlines effective clinical interventions for childhood trauma, which are designed for one-on-one or small group treatment by a mental health practitioner (see Mavranezouli et al., 2020; Wilson, 2019). Clinical interventions for children with post-traumatic stress disorder typically include a focus on ensuring a child's safety;

educating the child and their family about trauma and its effects; teaching the child coping, self-regulation, or behavior management strategies; and working with a child's caregivers to promote positive relationships (Keeshin & Strawn, 2014). First- and second-generation trauma interventions in schools have similar components to therapy in mental health clinics.

Whole-school, trauma-informed approaches are grounded in the conceptual model for a trauma-informed setting, or the idea that any organization can adapt its practices and policies to better support individuals with trauma histories (Harris & Fallot, 2001; Marans et al., 2012; Maynard et al., 2019). Each element of a clinical intervention for trauma (e.g., an emphasis on safety, psychoeducation, and relationship building) connects to one or more proposed components for a schoolwide trauma-informed approach. However, a trauma-informed environment is more than a collection of individual support strategies or programs; it is a cultural shift throughout an entire organization to address the needs of trauma survivors and avoid perpetuating further trauma. As a result, all members of the organization as well as their interpersonal relationships and the organization's practices, policies, and sense of purpose is imbued with an understanding of and commitment to addressing trauma (Bloom & Yanosy Sreedhar, 2008; Harris & Fallot, 2001; Venet, 2021). These approaches go by many names, including trauma-sensitive, trauma-responsive, and healing school environments.

## Theories Relevant to Social Work and Schools

### *Ecological Frameworks and Schools*

Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model presents a framework for the study of child and adolescent development with a goal of identifying practices that can enhance development across the lifespan. The bioecological model is grounded in two propositions, first that development occurs over time through consistent and evolving interactions between a developing individual

and external people, objects, or symbols (proximal processes), and second, that both the developing individual and their environment work in concert to impact the structure, direction, and quality of such interactions. Relational transactions take place within an elaborate system of nested contexts, from interpersonal interactions with peers and family at the closest level (microsystems) to societal and cultural values and expectations (macrosystems) to environments with which the developing individual does not engage directly and instead encounters only in relation to other individuals (e.g., a parent's workplace, called exosystems). Bronfenbrenner's Person-Process-Context-Time (PPCT) model provides an analytical approach to understanding how people learn through proximal processes across time (both developmental and historical) in their particular contexts. Bronfenbrenner's model evolved over his lifespan, starting in the 1970s with a focus on ecological systems and developing in conversation with developmental scholars of the time to encompass a greater focus on individual biology later in life (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007). Although the proposed dissertation does not focus on individual human development, the concepts of people being nested in environments, and that people and their environments act on each other throughout the lifespan, are useful to our understanding of a multidimensional climate model for trauma-informed schools. The PPCT model also highlights important factors that should be considered in contextual ecological models, some of which (e.g., historical time and societal expectations across time) are rarely included.

Eccles and Roeser (2015) applied Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model to schools because of the central role schools play in child and adolescent development throughout the world. Schools influence students and staff members across multiple levels, from interpersonal and classroom levels (micro) to the national educational policy and enculturation of societal

values and history (macro). For this reason, the bioecological model is a fundamental underpinning of school climate research (Wang & Degol, 2016).

Astor and Benbenishty (2019) moved the school to the center of the ecological model for the study of school violence, safety, and climate. In their model, the school as a whole is nested within a series of contexts, including its students and their families, neighborhood, community, society, and broader sociopolitical trends; within the organizational hierarchy of schools, including the local district, school board, and policies at the local, state, and national levels; and in a particular point of time in the school year, the school's history, and the views and events of broader society. Each of these external contexts evolves over time, influencing the school environment and its safety and climate. Internal functions of the school, including its mission and values, characteristics of interpersonal relationships among staff and between staff and students, the disciplinary environment, and curricular decisions, act reciprocally to influence external factors (Astor & Benbenishty, 2019).

***Ecological Frameworks and Social Work***

Social workers are one of the only school professionals with advanced training in how to support the mental health and well-being of children exposed to trauma and other adversities from an ecological perspective. Social work is based upon an appreciation for the reciprocal person-in-environment relationship, where it is understood that a person's relationship to their environment affects their developmental trajectory and vice versa (Gitterman et al., 2018). This bioecological model assumes that, as people move through their life course, they seek to optimize their fit to the environment. Social workers assess person-environment fit and seek to intervene at multiple levels, sometimes working directly with the individual, other times within interpersonal relationships, and addressing environmental factors that impede function or require

additional resources (Teater, 2014). Because social workers are trained to keep context in mind, they are uniquely suited to lead schools in adopting an organization-wide, contextualized approach to trauma.

Despite advanced training in ecological frameworks and an overarching practice model spanning multiple intervention levels, throughout the past 40 years school social workers have primarily delivered clinical interventions to a steady caseload of young people identified to be in need of intensive academic or behavioral support (Kelly et al., 2010, 2015, 2021). A recent study found that school social workers spend more than 5 hours of a typical 8-hour day on targeted interventions with individual students and small groups, more than 2 hours on administrative responsibilities, and just over 1 hour on prevention or universal, schoolwide activities. School social workers' preferences for time spent would increase prevention time to just over 2 hours of their school day (Kelly et al., 2015). It is unclear why school social workers have consistently prioritized clinical interventions; study authors deemed it could be because they were the most qualified staff for such work or that they tailor their role accordingly (Kelly et al., 2015). Other possibilities include the expectation of social work responsibilities by supervisors and school administrators, or the high clinical caseloads in many schools (Capp et al., 2021).

There is recent evidence that school social workers are seeking to expand their traditional, clinically focused practice model. The popularity of multitiered systems of support in schools, whereby supportive services are designed to span three tiers from tier 1 universal prevention supports to tier 3 clinical interventions, has encouraged some school social workers to advocate for a broader range of responsibilities with more emphasis on primary prevention and schoolwide initiatives such as trauma-informed care and racial equity (Kelly et al., 2015, 2021; Stone, 2017). This role expansion is in line with the National School Social Work Practice

Model (Tan & SSWAA, 2024). In addition to encouraging school social workers to provide support across multiple levels, from direct practice to prevention to capacity-building initiatives, current practice standards emphasize promoting social justice to advance educational equity, claiming that social workers' ecological understanding is critical to this task.

As noted earlier, COVID-19 increased stress and exacerbated mental health issues for school children, families, and staff (Jones et al., 2021; Watson et al., 2022b), signaling a need for increased involvement of school social workers in schoolwide responses. National legislation and school social work practice models were advocating for a broader role for school social workers (Griffith & Berry, 2020; Griffith, 2021; Tan & SSWAA, 2024). However, workers reported feeling left out of school decision making regarding students' mental health needs during COVID-19 school closures (McMahon et al., 2022; Watson et al., 2022b). Greater involvement by school social workers in prevention efforts will require increased capacity, the will to engage in such efforts on the part of school-based workers, and support from the school, district, state, and national leadership.

**Rationale for a Multiple-Manuscript Design**

In response to prior research that called for a greater focus on empirical work outlining how school social workers are perceiving interventions surrounding trauma and their views of trauma-informed approaches in their schools (e.g., Maynard et al., 2019; Watson et al., 2022b), this dissertation utilized a three empirical study design to capture social workers' views of three unique characteristics of schools: 1) their policies and practices, 2) their environment and climate, and 3) school social workers' understanding of which of the above elements are essential to a trauma-informed approach and what outcomes should be expected. The dissertation explored perceptions surrounding what trauma-informed and typical schools are doing in

practice; to what extent school social workers are experiencing a trauma-informed culture and climate in their professional roles; and what programs, practices, and environmental characteristics are deemed necessary to a trauma-informed school. A multiple-manuscript design provided the opportunity to explore multiple dimensions of trauma-informed schools, first using established methods to understand organizational and school climate (i.e., surveys for articles 1 and 2) and then using qualitative interviews to develop a broader picture of what is deemed essential to a trauma-informed school in article 3.

**Paper 1: School Social Worker Reports of Differences in Policies and Practices in Trauma-Informed and Non-Trauma Schools**

The aim of paper 1 was to determine whether schools that social workers identified as trauma informed had different policies and practices than schools that were not identified as such. Due to a lack of consensus in school practice and the related academic literature regarding what practices and policies are trauma informed, we hypothesized that no differences would be found in the majority of policies in trauma-informed and other schools. Being “trauma-informed” could be a label claimed by some schools. It is also possible that trauma-informed schools implement a hodgepodge of practices (e.g., supportive practices like trauma training and psychoeducation alongside punitive disciplinary practices and hardening strategies that seek to promote physical safety); that is, they just have more of everything. The research questions guiding this paper were: To what extent do school social workers report differences in policies and practices between schools they identify as trauma informed vs. those that are not? Can the presence of certain policies or practices suggest whether a school is trauma informed? A survey instrument was designed for and deployed to school social workers across the United States through a variety of professional associations, including the National Association of Social Work

and School Social Work Association of America. School social worker respondents were asked to identify policies and practices present in their schools, and whether their school is considered trauma informed. Research questions were answered using chi square tests of independence and hierarchical logistic regression.

**Paper 2: Social Workers' Experiences of Trauma-Informed Culture and Climate in Schools**

The aim of paper 2 was to determine whether school social workers experienced a difference in climate between schools they identified as trauma informed and those they did not. Schools tend to adopt programs or training in response to new initiatives, e.g., social emotional programming to enhance students' interpersonal skills. We know that trauma training has been quite popular in schools over the past decade; however, it is still unclear whether training and related interventions connect with any changes in the school's culture or climate. The research questions for paper 2 were: To what extent did school social workers report a difference in culture and climate between schools they identified as trauma informed and those that were not identified as such? Can certain characteristics of trauma-informed culture and climate indicate whether a school will be identified as trauma informed by school social workers? For this work, a new trauma-informed climate instrument was developed based on a critical review of the literature that identified four discrete culture and climate expectations in a trauma-informed environment (Watson & Astor, under review). Research questions were answered through a quantitative analysis of school social workers' reports of school climate, using hierarchical logistic regression.

**Paper 3: Social Workers' Perceptions of Necessary Components and Expected Outcomes for Trauma-Informed Schools**

After initial findings from papers 1 and 2 indicated differences in policies, practices, and climate between schools social workers indicated were trauma-informed compared to those they did not, the research team designed a qualitative study to explore which differences in policies, practices, and environmental conditions were deemed essential to a trauma-informed approach and which were merely circumstantial differences. The research questions for study 3 were: How do school social workers think about trauma-informed schools? What do school social workers believe is required to call a school trauma informed? What outcomes do school social workers expect or report from a trauma-informed school? What do social workers believe is the role of educators and administrators in trauma-informed schools?

Research questions were answered through qualitative interviews with a subset of participants who completed the survey discussed in papers 1 and 2. The first two papers of this dissertation strove to uncover what differences, if any, existed between schools that social workers identified as trauma-informed and those they did not, but the survey could not determine whether identified differences were undertaken in the name of trauma awareness and response or if they were believed to be essential to a trauma-informed approach. Paper 3 allowed for a deeper understanding of what a trauma-informed school looks like in practice through the process of interviewing practicing school social workers who reported working in trauma-informed and non-trauma-informed schools and asking them what policies, practices, and climate characteristics they related to a trauma-informed approach.

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## Chapter 2: School Social Workers' Reports of Differences in Policies and Practices in Trauma-Informed and Non-Trauma-Informed Schools (Study 1)

Although the United States provides nationwide, free, universal, public K-12 education, very little direction is set for schools at the federal level. Policies that affect the day-to-day management of schools, their priorities, and curricula are set at the local or state level (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). As a result, schools in different districts, cities, or states can look very different in terms of their teaching and disciplinary practices, available programs, and schoolwide policies (Hornbeck, 2017). As just one example, only 27 U.S. states explicitly prohibit the use of corporal punishment as school discipline. Some remaining states outlaw its use for children with disabilities, but not all (U.S. Department of Education, 2023).

K-12 funding is also allocated by localities and states (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). Often these funds are earmarked for specific purposes or are time limited, which impacts schools' ability to create a holistic, long-term strategy to serve the educational and social-emotional needs of children and communities. As a result, schools tend to adopt short-term strategies or purchase programs in response to their priorities, e.g., implementing a social emotional learning (SEL) curriculum to enhance students' interpersonal skills or ALICE training (which stands for alert, lockdown, inform, counter, and evacuate) to promote staff and student safety during an active shooter event. Such choices create a fractured school system with duplication of services, inefficient spending, and confusion among staff, students, and families about what resources are available and how to access them (Adelman & Taylor, 2014).

For the past decade—due to growing recognition of the prevalence of trauma in our society and its impact on children's development and learning (Perfect et al., 2016)—schools have increasingly prioritized implementation of trauma-informed approaches (Simon et al.,

2020). Many organizations have proposed what a trauma-informed school would look like in practice (e.g., Cole et al., 2005, 2013; National Child Traumatic Stress Network [NCTSN], 2017; University of Maryland, n.d.; Wolpow et al., 2016), but to date, the primary changes implemented and measured have related to trauma training for staff and access to trauma-specific clinical treatments (Maynard et al., 2019). It is unclear what, if any, other changes schools are making to create a trauma-informed environment and if there are significant practice and policy differences between schools identified as trauma informed and those that are not. School social workers are ideal respondents to questions about trauma-informed approaches in schools because, across the United States, they often provide frontline mental health services to students and their families. They also have advanced training in trauma and behavioral health issues (Phillippo et al., 2017; Watson et al., 2022).

The aim of this study was to assess the extent to which school policies and practices differed between schools that social workers identified as trauma-informed (TI) and those they said were not trauma-informed (NTI or non-TI). Due to a lack of consensus in school practice and the related academic literature regarding what practices and policies are trauma informed, it was unclear whether any differences could be found between trauma-informed and typical schools. Being "trauma informed" may have solely been a label some schools claimed. It was also possible that, when school social workers identified a school as trauma-informed, schools had implemented supportive practices like trauma training and psychoeducation alongside target hardening strategies like metal detectors and school resource officers that seek to promote physical safety; that is, those schools just had more of everything. The research questions for this article were: To what extent do school social workers report differences in policies and practices

between schools they identify as trauma informed vs. those that are not? Can the presence of certain policies or practices indicate whether a school is trauma informed?

## Literature Review

### Brief Summary of the Evolution of Trauma-Informed Approaches in Schools

Over the past two decades, there has been increased recognition of the prevalence of trauma in society and how it can impact children's learning and development (Perfect et al., 2016). Federal legislation (e.g., Every Student Succeeds Act, SUPPORT for Patients and Communities Act, and Bipartisan Safer Communities Act) called for school-based mental health services and staff training rooted in evidence-based, trauma-informed practice and provided funding for such purposes. As a result, schools have increasingly prioritized implementation of trauma-informed approaches with all but a handful of U.S. state education agency websites referring to the impact of trauma on children and the need for trauma-informed schools by 2019 (Simon et al., 2020).

Since the concept of a whole organization becoming trauma informed was proposed by clinicians Maxine Harris and Roger Fallot in 2001, many other practitioners and agencies have suggested definitions and components for trauma-informed organizations and for schools in particular. One of the most prominent models was put forth by The U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA, 2014a), which defines a trauma-informed program, organization, or service as one that:

> Realizes the widespread impact of trauma and understands potential paths for recovery; recognizes the signs and symptoms of trauma in clients, families, staff, and others involved with the system; responds by fully integrating knowledge about trauma into policies, procedures, practices; and seeks to actively resist re-traumatization. (p. 9)

In an early review, Hanson and Lang (2016) identified three primary domains for operationalizing trauma-informed care in organizations: (a) implementation of trauma-informed trainings and workforce development, (b) the presence of trauma-specific services and treatments, and (c) adaptations to the organizational environment including an emphasis on safety, staff collaboration, and written policies related to trauma. Subsequently researchers have used these three domains to assess the state of trauma-informed approaches in schools. A 2019 Campbell Collaboration review determined that there was little to no empirical evidence for trauma-informed approaches in schools despite their popularity and that it was unclear whether the cost–benefit tradeoffs were justified (Maynard et al., 2019). Several other authors have explained that confusion remains about the essential components and best way to implement trauma-informed approaches in schools as well as what outcomes should be expected (Avery et al., 2021; Bargeman et al., 2021; Thomas et al., 2019). A more recent systematic review found only four studies that reported results for whole-school, trauma-informed approaches (Avery et al., 2021). Apart from one study (Dorado et al., 2016), interventions were employed at small schools with limited participants. Also, given that the review focused on interventions to create whole-school trauma awareness and response (Avery et al., 2021), it remains unclear to what extent TI and non-TI schools differ in practices and policies overall, not just those related to trauma.

**Common School Policies in the United States**

Several school policies and practices are common across the United States (e.g., multitiered systems of support, social emotional learning programs, and school climate initiatives). States and local communities are primarily responsible for choosing priorities, policies, and practices that guide the daily operations of schools (U.S. Department of Education,

2021). As a result, schools in different states, cities, or districts may have different teaching and disciplinary philosophies, curricula, and programming (Hornbeck, 2017). For example, whereas California's School Success and Opportunity Act (2013) requires that transgender students be allowed to participate in sex-segregated activities such as health class and team sports with students who reflect their gender identity, 22 states now have laws banning such participation (Markham-Cantor et al., 2023). Although there are common types of programs and practices in schools, the unique combination of these may vary school by school and district by district. Below is a summary of school policies, programs, and practices typically seen in U.S. schools.

***Creating Safe, Supportive Learning Environments in Schools***

One would hope that all schools have a commitment to creating a safe, supportive learning environment for all students. However, as can be seen by the passage of laws banning transgender students from participating in some activities (Markham-Cantor et al., 2023), this ideal could not be considered universally true.

***Multi-Tiered System of Support***

Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) is a standard framework for delivering academic and behavioral interventions in U.S. schools. Rooted in a public health intervention framework, MTSS provides three tiers of support: (1) universal, (2) supplemental support as needed, and (3) intensive support where indicated. An umbrella term, MTSS includes academic programs like Response to Intervention (RtI) and behavioral modification programs like Positive Behavioral Intervention and Support (PBIS; Sailor et al., 2021).

### *School Climate Programs*

Positive school climate has been linked to a variety of academic and behavioral benefits for students (Thapa et al., 2013; Wang & Degol, 2016). As such, school climate programs have become a common intervention to improve schools and enhance their safety (Cohen & Thapa, 2017). Commonly identified dimensions of school climate include the academic environment, physical and institutional structure, safety, and relationship quality within the school (Thapa et al., 2013; Wang & Degol, 2016).

### *Social Emotional Learning Programs*

Social emotional learning (SEL) programs help students gain awareness of and manage their emotions, understand interpersonal communication, build positive relationships, and make responsible decisions. As of 2022, 27 states had adopted SEL standards for K-12 education and all states had adopted them for pre-K (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2023). While popular, SEL programs are not without criticism. Some parents believe schools should focus on teaching academic skills (Tyner, 2021). Also, many SEL programs ignore systemic factors like racism, historical and intergenerational trauma, and socioeconomic inequalities that impact young people's socioemotional development, causing school staff to ignore important differences in children's experiences and perpetuate inequities (Gregory & Fergus, 2017; Mahfouz & Anthony-Stevens, 2020).

### *Teaching Materials that Reflect a School's Student Population*

In the last decade, the racial and ethnic composition of U.S. public schools has shifted. Whereas white students represented the majority of public-school enrollment in 2010, by 2021, the percentage of white students had decreased to 45 percent. At the same time, the percentage of students from Hispanic, Asian, and multiracial backgrounds grew and the percentage of students

from Black and Native American families stayed about the same (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2023). These shifting demographics call for increased attention and commitment toward culturally relevant pedagogy, an approach that requires critical reflection on the part of teachers and practice changes to ensure students from all backgrounds can succeed in the classroom (Howard, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 2021).

### *Security Measures to Promote Physical Safety*

Starting in the 1980s, in response to increasing public concern about school safety and crime in general, U.S. schools dramatically expanded the presence of security measures, including surveillance systems, metal detectors, and school resource officers (i.e., police officers who serve schools [SROs]; Bracy, 2010, 2011; Nance, 2016). It is estimated that there were fewer than 100 SROs in public schools during the 1970s. In contrast, the latest data suggests there are now more than 52,000 (Nance, 2016; NCES, 2016). In a recent survey of high school students ages 14-18, 87% of a nationally representative sample reported that their schools used surveillance technology such as video cameras or Internet monitoring software to track their behavior. More specifically, 62% reported the presence of video cameras, about half indicated they were aware of monitoring software, and one in five said their schools screened them with metal detectors (American Civil Liberties Union, 2023).

Contrary to the proliferation of security measures like those outlined above, in the wake of the Columbine school shooting, the U.S. Secret Service and Department of Education concluded that creating a safe school first and foremost required improving school climate and creating positive relationships among all members of the school community (Fein et al., 2004). Decades of research have also shown that security measures can threaten the development and sustainment of positive teacher–student relationships (Flannery et al., 2021; Theriot, 2016), and

contribute to harsh discipline and disciplinary inequities, particularly for students of color (Counts et al., 2018; Ksinan et al., 2019; Nance, 2017; Okilwa & Robert, 2017; Warnick & Kapa, 2019).

### ***Equitable Discipline in Schools***

Equitable discipline practices have been growing in schools as a response to mid-1990s to 2000s harsh, punitive, and exclusionary practices that created significant inequities between white students and students of color. Restorative justice is one such approach that is rooted in Indigenous beliefs and teaches students to repair harm after conflict instead of taking a punitive or shame-based approach (Lodi et al., 2021).

### ***Trauma-Informed and Supportive School Policies***

Several school policies are associated with trauma awareness and response. A school may provide trauma training for staff, trauma psychoeducation for students and their families, screening for trauma symptoms or adverse childhood experiences, the availability of trauma-specific treatments such as individual counseling or group therapy, and resources for secondary traumatic stress to support staff. These trauma-focused policies and practices are typically situated in a broader commitment to student mental health and well-being. Although not trauma specific, other policies that could be considered supportive of a trauma-informed approach include the presence of social emotional learning, equitable school discipline, restorative and de-escalation practices, adapting course content to reflect student diversity, and removing potentially triggering materials from curricula (NCTSN, 2017).

### ***School Policies and Practices During the COVID-19 Pandemic***

The COVID-19 pandemic led to several practice and policy changes as schools closed in person and began providing academic and behavioral health services online (Kelly et al., 2021).

Among the practice and policy changes associated with this period were pandemic-specific changes, including mandatory masking and vaccinations; changes to the availability of academic instruction, including online/hybrid class options and expanded teaching hours; and due to an influx of federal funding (Griffith, 2021), increases in staff headcount to support the basic needs and worsening mental health of children and families (Jones, 2021).

### The Role of Social Workers in Schools

The views of social workers are critical to any discussion about trauma-informed approaches in schools. In many states, school social workers serve as frontline mental health providers, and throughout the United States, their caseloads include children with a wide range of behavioral health issues, including trauma responses (Phillippo et al., 2017; Watson et al., 2022). As mental health professionals, social workers are among the few school staff trained in trauma, its effects, and prevention/intervention regardless of whether the school they work in is trauma informed or not. Thus, school social workers are among the best suited staff members to determine and report on whether or not a school is trauma informed.

## Methods

### Population and Study Samples

The sample (N=538) for study 1 was a convenience sample recruited from a population of school social workers across the United States through professional organizations, including the National Association of Social Workers, School Social Work Association of America, School Social Work Network, and other state-level associations. The research team partnered with the professional organizations who distributed a link to an anonymous online survey developed by researchers from UCLA, California State University, Fullerton, and Hebrew University in Jerusalem. Some survey participants had responded to a prior survey deployed by the same

research team in 2020 and were recruited directly to complete the current survey because they had provided their email addresses for follow up. This survey was administered between March and June 2022.

Participants were from 43 U.S. states and the District of Columbia, with the highest concentration from Illinois (18.3%), California (16.8%), Michigan (5.8%), and Connecticut (5.4%). Table 2-1 provides detailed demographics for the sample. Most participants (90.7%) self-identified as female, 7.2% as male, 0.4% as gender non-conforming, and others chose not to disclose. The sample primarily identified as White/Caucasian (72.7%), 11.7% as Hispanic/Latinx, 7.4% as Black/African American, 4.3% as Multiracial, 0.7% as Asian American, 0.2% as Hawaii Native/Pacific Islander, 0.2% as Native American/Alaska Native, and others chose not to disclose. Practicing school social workers were the primary respondents (89.2%); 1.5% identified as district social work supervisors, 0.9% were heads of social work services in a district, 0.6% were school-based social work contractors, and the remaining held other school-based positions or chose not to disclose. Participants' years of social work experience ranged from less than 1 (4.3%) to more than 20 (23.7%), with a mean of more than 10 years. Participants served in a variety of school types, including preschool (17.1%), elementary (57.6%), middle or junior high (48.3%), high school (44.8%), and alternative schools (12.8%). Many participants reported serving in multiple schools simultaneously.

School characteristics reported by participants are presented in Table 2-2. Participants worked in suburban (43.3%), urban (38.1%), and rural (18.2%) districts across the United States. The Midwest region had the largest representation (35.6%) with the West (25.0%), Northeast (20.5%), and South (18.9%) following. Participants reported working in high-need schools, where they estimated approximately 63.8% of students qualified for free/reduced lunch. On

average, participants estimated that approximately 55.7% of students were from historically marginalized populations, 19.5% of district students drop out, and 55.5% enter college.

### Instrument and Ethics

Survey questions were developed by the research team to understand the needs of school staff, students, and families during the 2021-2022 school year, and the relationship between those needs and extant models for trauma-informed care in schools. The instrument included both closed- and open-ended questions about schools' programs and policies, including those related to the then-ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, and solicited school social workers' views about the climate of their school environment. The research team received approval from the Institutional Review Board at the University of California, Los Angeles, and partner organizations completed their own internal ethics review processes.

### Measures

#### *Personal Characteristics*

Respondents were asked to report their professional role (i.e., school social worker, district supervisor, head of services in a district, school-based contractor, or other), the state or U.S. territory in which they practice, the community setting (i.e., urban, suburban, rural), types of schools they support (e.g., preschool, elementary, etc.), and the number of years they practiced as a school social worker. They were also asked to report gender and race/ethnicity.

#### *School Characteristics*

Participants were asked to report on characteristics of their school district, including their estimates of the percentage of students eligible for free/reduced lunch, from historically marginalized populations, who drop out, and who enter college.

***Report of Whether School is Trauma-Informed or Not***

Participants were asked to choose one school with which they work and to indicate whether that school was considered a trauma-informed setting.

***Practices and Policies Present in Selected School***

Participants were asked to identify practices or policies that existed in the school they chose during the 2021-22 academic year. There were two lists of practices and policies offering a total of 33 options, including “none of the above” and space for a brief written response to suggest additional policies. The first list comprised typical school policies and practices, including socioemotional (SEL) skills training, school climate programs, and a commitment to creating a safe, supportive learning environment for all students. Some options were related to increasing the physical safety of schools through metal detectors or school resource officers/police presence. Other options were specific to trauma, including adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) or posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) screenings, trauma training for staff, or trauma psychoeducation for students/parents. Due to the time in which data was collected (spring 2022), a second list of policies and practices specific to COVID-19 such as mandatory vaccination and social distancing were also surveyed. See Table 2-3 for a complete list of policies/practices surveyed.

**Dependent variable**. A single dichotomous variable (i.e., participant reports of whether their school is trauma informed or not) was the dependent variable.

**Independent variables**. Participant reports of school policies present during the current school year, including those that were COVID specific, were independent variables. Participant demographics and school characteristics served as control variables.

## Analysis

In order to compare practices and policies of schools that social workers identified as trauma informed with schools they indicated were not trauma informed, we first conducted several chi-square tests of independence. The analyses were conducted on two groups differentiated by the dependent variable (i.e., schools that social workers identified as trauma informed vs. those that were not). Chi-square tests were appropriate for the preliminary analyses because they allowed for comparison of the relationship between two groups on nominal variables (in this case, whether a policy was present in a particular type of school). The chi-square test was also useful because the group sizes differed: 154 school social workers reported working at trauma-informed schools vs. 378 reported they did not (McHugh, 2013).

Crosstabulations and t-tests were also conducted to assess the relationships between policies/practices or holding a position within a trauma-informed school with gender and race/ethnicity of the respondent, and to school characteristics reported in Table 2-2. Through this analysis, we sought to identify differences that existed between TI and NTI schools that were specifically associated with policies and practices and not with socioeconomic or demographic characteristics of the schools or social workers. Due to small sample sizes of some racial/ethnic and gender groups (i.e., Asian, Hawaii Native, Native American, and Trans or Non-Binary individuals), comparisons were only possible between Black, Hispanic, White, and Other groups for race/ethnicity and between males and females for gender. Dummy codes were created for race/ethnicity, with "Other" serving as the reference group. Male served as the reference group for gender.

Exploratory factor analyses of policies and practices using Pearson and polychoric correlations were conducted to determine if individual policies and practices could be factored to

simplify regression models. No factor structure incorporated all policies and significantly reduced the variables; therefore, all policies and practices were entered independently into regression analyses.

To determine if the presence of certain policies and practices could predict whether a school social worker would identify a school as trauma informed, a series of logistic regressions was conducted. Due to the large number of independent variables, we conducted: (a) one regression to compare general school policies against social worker-reported school type (trauma-informed or not); and (b) a second regression to compare COVID-specific policies to school type. For each above regression, all variables of interest were entered in a single step. In a final, hierarchical regression, only significant policies and practices identified in the first two regression models (step 2) were included alongside personal and school characteristics, which served as controls (step 1). Logistic regression was appropriate for this analysis because it allowed comparison of multiple categorical variables (that is, a variety of school policies coupled with school and demographic characteristics) to a single dichotomous outcome variable (indicating the likelihood that a school was identified by social worker participants as trauma-informed; Peng et al., 2002).

## Results

### Relationships Between Social Worker Reports of a School's Trauma-Informed Status, Respondent Characteristics, and Socioeconomic and Academic Variables

As shown in Table 2-4, participants who reported working in TI schools were not statistically different in gender, ethnicity, or years of experience than participants working in non-TI schools. Table 2-4 also shows that schools social workers identified as trauma informed were neither more nor less likely than other schools to be in a particular setting (e.g., rural,

suburban, or urban) or to serve a particular grade level (i.e., preschool, elementary, middle, or high school). Some associations were found between reported school type (i.e., trauma-informed, or not) and school region (i.e., Northeast, South, Midwest, and West). Specifically, schools in the Northeast were less likely to be identified as trauma informed than schools in other regions and schools in the Midwest were more likely to be identified as trauma informed, $X^2(3, N = 532) = 9.33, p < .05$.

Associations were found between whether a school was identified as trauma informed and some school socioeconomic and academic characteristics (see Table 2-5). Social workers reported that students in schools they identified as trauma informed were more likely to receive free/reduced lunch ($M = 68.6\%$, $SD = 25.2$) than students in other schools ($M = 62.2\%$, $SD = 29.3$) ($t(521) = 2.39$, $p < .05$.) More students in schools identified as trauma informed were reported to be from historically marginalized populations ($M = 61.4\%$, $SD = 28.6$) than those in other schools ($M = 53.5\%$, $SD = 31.3$; $t(515) = 2.69$, $p < .01$.) There were no statistical differences in the average rate of students dropping out or entering college.

**Relationship Between School Policies/Practices and School Characteristics**

Certain policies and practices were weakly correlated with school socioeconomic and academic indicators (see Table 2-6). For example, the presence of metal detectors was positively associated with the percentage of students qualifying for free/reduced lunch ($r(1) = .17$, $p < 0.01$), of students from historically marginalized populations ($r(1) = .20$, $p < 0.01$), and of students reported to enter college ($r(1) = .10$, $p < 0.05$), and negatively correlated with the reported rate of students dropping out ($r(1) = -.10$, $p < 0.05$). The presence of school resource officers (school police) was negatively correlated with both the percentage of students from historically marginalized populations ($r(1) = -.157$, $p < 0.01$) and those who qualify for

free/reduced lunch ($r(1) = -.088$, $p < 0.05$). Classroom practices that help deescalate and refocus students ($r(1) = -.13$, $p < 0.01$) and a commitment to a safe, supportive learning environment for all students ($r(1) = -.18$, $p < 0.01$) were also negatively correlated with rates of students dropping out. The presence of teaching materials that reflect diverse students was positively correlated with schools that social workers indicated had higher rates of students from historically marginalized populations ($r(1) = .090$, $p < 0.05$) and college attendance ($r(1) = .128$, $p < 0.01$). Among COVID-related policies, support for struggling students was negatively correlated with the rate of students who drop out ($r(1) = .10$, $p < 0.05$) and positively correlated with the rate of students who attend college ($r(1) = .12$, $p < 0.01$).

**Relationship Between Policies/Practices and Social Worker-Reported School Type**

Chi-square tests of independence found several significant relationships between type of school (i.e., schools identified by social workers as trauma informed or not) and policies present (see Table 2-7). In fact, schools identified by social workers as trauma informed (TI) were *statistically* more likely to have 24 of the 33 policies/practices surveyed. For example, trauma training was present in 80.5% of TI schools and in 33.1% of non-TI schools, $X^2(1, N = 530) = 98.95$, $p < .001$. Resources for secondary traumatic stress and self-care, trauma psychoeducation for students/parents, screening for trauma symptoms, and trauma interventions/treatments (e.g., CBITS) were all more prevalent in TI schools. Unexpectedly, metal detectors were also more common in TI schools: 16.9% of TI schools had them vs. 5.3% of non-TI schools, $X^2(1, N = 530) = 18.62$, $p < .001$. Several COVID-related policies were more common in TI schools as well, including providing for students' and families' basic needs, $X^2(1, N = 530) = 17.30$, $p < .001$, and guidelines for appropriate parent communication/behaviors, $X^2(1, N = 530) = 14.45$, $p < .001$.

**Policies Associated with Social Workers' Identification of a School as Trauma Informed**

Multiple logistic regressions were performed to determine whether the presence of certain policies and practices in a school could point to whether a social worker would identify it as trauma informed. Due to the number of school policies surveyed, we separated general school policies from COVID-specific policies and ran a regression for each set. Regression analyses began with comparisons of policies and practices to school type (TI or non-TI). A cutoff value of .3 was used to reflect the likelihood of a positive outcome within the sample.

The first model, which compared each of 18 general school policies with school type, was significant ($X^2(18) = 159.17$, $p < .001$), with Nagelkerke R-squared of .37 (see Table 2-8). Trauma training was 6.3 times more likely in schools social workers identified as trauma informed ($p < .001$); resources for secondary traumatic stress and self-care were 1.8 times more likely in a TI school ($p < .05$); and metal detectors were 4.1 times more likely in a TI school ($p < .001$). A second regression comparing 14 COVID-related policies with school type was also significant ($X^2(14) = 44.36$, $p < .001$), with Nagelkerke R-squared of .11. In the second model (see Table 2-9), only providing for students' and families' basic needs was associated with whether or not a school was identified by social workers as trauma informed. The aforementioned policy was 2.1 times more likely in a TI school ($p < .01$).

The third model, a hierarchical logistic regression (see Table 2-10), included significant policies identified in prior regressions alongside respondent demographics (i.e., years of experience, gender, and race/ethnicity) and school characteristics (i.e., urbanicity, grade level, region, and percentage of students who qualify for free/reduced lunch, are from marginalized populations, drop out, and enter college) held constant. The final model was also significant ($X^2(26) = 138.70$, $p < .001$). This model correctly classified 85.3% of TI schools and 76.4% of

non-TI schools, for an average of 79.2% accuracy. A non-significant Hosmer-Lemeshow goodness-of-fit test and Nagelkerke R-squared of .51 indicated that the model was a good fit for the data and accounted for a reasonable percentage of variance (Ozili, 2023; Peng et al., 2002). Significant policies associated with schools social workers identified as trauma informed were the presence of trauma training for staff (OR = 21.17, $p < .001$) and resources for secondary traumatic stress and self-care (OR = 5.36, $p < .001$). No school characteristics were found to be significantly associated with whether or not a school was identified as trauma informed. However, the number of years a respondent had worked as a school social worker was associated with whether they reported working in a trauma-informed school, with all social workers who had more than one year of experience being found less likely to report working in a trauma-informed school.

## Discussion

This was the first study to evaluate whether there were current policy and practice differences between U.S. schools that social workers identified as trauma informed and those they did not. The study also highlights the views of school social workers—school personnel commonly tasked with responding to trauma and other mental health needs of students, families, and staff (Phillippo et al., 2017; Watson et al., 2022). Social worker views have often been excluded from evaluation of trauma-informed approaches in schools; thus, this article presents a critical and often overlooked perspective.

Findings illustrate clear differences in policies and practices between schools identified by school social workers as trauma informed and not. Many policy differences may be expected (e.g., the increased prevalence of trauma training and resources for secondary traumatic stress) in trauma-informed schools. However, other findings were more surprising: While uncommon in

schools overall, metal detectors were present in schools identified as trauma informed at more than three times the rate in non-TI schools. In fact, every policy and practice we surveyed was more common in schools identified as trauma informed. This finding raises a possibility that some differences between TI and non-TI schools relate more to the availability and allocation of resources rather than to strategic, mission-driven policy and practice decisions with respect to trauma awareness and response.

Survey respondents who reported working in TI and non-TI schools had no demographic differences; however, there were differences in school characteristics. Schools with higher concentrations of students who qualified for free and reduced lunch or who were from historically marginalized communities were more likely to be identified as trauma informed. This finding begs the question of whether trauma-informed approaches are being *intentionally* implemented in areas with lower income or higher percentages of minoritized populations. If that intention proved true, another consideration would be whether trauma-informed approaches are being used as a stand-in for adequate resources. If all schools had equal funding per student, or if schools in lower-income neighborhoods had greater funding than other schools to remedy longstanding inequities, would interest in trauma-informed approaches disappear? While this study is unable to form a conclusion on this issue, future research is suggested to assess whether differences in characteristics between schools identified as trauma informed and not are circumstantial or intentional. If the latter, additional consideration needs to be given as to whether trauma-informed approaches are currently being used as a Band-Aid for systemic inequalities in funding and other resources between low-income and high-income schools and districts.

There were also differences in the prevalence of certain practices and policies based on student characteristics. As other researchers have noted (e.g., Gastic & Johnson, 2015; Ksinan et al., 2019), we found that metal detectors were more common in schools with high populations of students qualifying for free and reduced lunch and from historically marginalized communities. Interestingly, we found that the presence of school resource officers was negatively correlated to both the percentage of students from historically marginalized populations and those who qualify for free/reduced lunch, which contradicts common understanding (Ksinan et al., 2019; Nance, 2017). Our findings may be due to SROs becoming increasingly common across the United States, with an estimated 58% of all public schools and 72% of high schools believed to have at least one (Paterson, 2022).

In initial regression models, four school policies were significantly associated with whether a school was identified by social workers as trauma informed. In order of impact (by odds ratios), trauma training, metal detectors, providing for students' and families' basic needs, and resources for secondary traumatic stress (STS) and self-care were all positively associated with schools being identified by social workers as trauma informed. Some of these make sense—a trauma-informed school should train staff in trauma, provide STS resources, and support students' and families' basic needs. From an academic perspective, metal detectors, which were four times more common in schools that social workers identified as trauma informed, are viewed as antithetical to a safe, supportive, and caring school environment. However, in practice, we know their juxtaposition with supportive interventions is common (Astor et al., 2023; Nance, 2016). Policies related to diversity, equity, and inclusion such as equitable school discipline, restorative justice practices, and teaching materials representative of diverse student populations were not associated with identification of a school as trauma informed, meaning many schools

may not be implementing these policies at all or, if they are, they may not be doing so with an intention to create a trauma-informed or healing school environment.

When we held constant personal demographics and school characteristics, only the presence of trauma training and resources for secondary traumatic stress were associated with schools identified as trauma informed. The relationships between metal detectors, providing for basic needs, and school type (TI or NTI) were accounted for by other factors. Our findings that the key policy and practice differences between schools social workers identified as trauma informed and not were trauma training and resources for secondary traumatic stress may initially seem obvious. However, this knowledge is critical because to date it has been unclear whether there were any differences between schools identified as trauma informed and those that were not, despite guidance from SAMHSA (2014b) and others regarding essential components of a trauma-informed approach. Current conceptual models for trauma-informed approaches in schools also identify many more essential components, including organizational policy changes and the availability of trauma-specific screening and treatments (Avery et al., 2021; Hanson & Lang, 2016; NCTSN, 2017; SAMHSA, 2014a).

Prior research has indicated that schools tend to limit their trauma-informed approaches to providing training and access to trauma-specific clinical treatments for students (Maynard et al., 2019; Watson & Astor, under review). Our findings suggest this may still be true. If it is true, we must consider whether the two components identified are sufficient to create a trauma-informed school, or if they are insufficient and will limit schools' ability to achieve the goals of a trauma-informed approach: creating a safer, more supportive school environment where children of all backgrounds can succeed. We also need to consider other potential explanations for our findings. Our survey instrument asked whether the school respondents reported on was

“considered a trauma-informed setting.” Because we asked if the site was “considered” trauma informed instead of “was” trauma informed or if respondents believed it to be trauma informed, social workers may have answered in the affirmative despite their own personal misgivings. Additional research will be needed to explore what components school social workers believe are essential to a trauma-informed school.

One personal characteristic of respondents was also significant in the final model: years of service as a school social worker. We found that school social workers with more experience were less likely to work in schools they identified as trauma informed. This finding could be the result of several factors. Less experienced social workers may seek out more supportive work environments as would be expected of trauma-informed schools. At the same time, it is possible that social workers with more experience were more discerning in identifying whether a school was trauma informed. It is conceivable that an experienced social worker who worked in a school that administrators claimed was trauma informed could, based on their own knowledge and experience, instead claim that the school was not trauma informed after all.

## Strengths and Limitations

The above findings should be considered in light of their strengths and limitations. This study was the first to compare policy and practice differences between U.S. schools identified by social workers as trauma informed and not trauma informed. The findings represent a national sample, but the sample was not randomly selected. Instead, the research team partnered with several national social work and school social work organizations to disseminate the survey; thus, the sample may not reflect the characteristics or beliefs of school social workers as a whole. Survey respondents practiced in all but seven states and their demographics generally matched what we know about the U.S. population of school social workers (Kelly et al., 2015; Salsberg et

al., 2017). However, not all states were represented by more than a handful of respondents. Also, certain groups were not adequately sampled. For example, some racial, ethnic, and gender identities had to be excluded from statistical analyses due to their small sample size.

Another limitation of all research of trauma-informed schools currently is the lack of a formal designation to identify schools or a standardization process by which schools can assess themselves. Given the nascency of this field, we expect many future developments in these areas.

## Future Research

As the first study to compare existing practice and policy differences between schools identified as trauma informed and not trauma informed, significant additional research is needed to understand the phenomenon of trauma-informed schools and their impact on school staff, students, and families. Future research should seek to understand to what extent policy or practice differences are intentional and whether they are believed to be an essential component of a TI approach. Qualitative interviews and observations would be supportive of this goal. Additional study of what a TI school looks like in practice is also needed. To that end, individual and comparative case studies are recommended. We also suggest analysis of the resource allocations between trauma-informed and non-trauma-informed schools to understand why TI schools were more likely to have every policy we surveyed as well as higher percentages of students from minoritized populations and who qualify for free/reduced lunch. To date, much of the research on trauma-informed schools has focused on the outcomes of a specific intervention (Avery et al., 2021; Thomas et al., 2019). However, nothing in the conceptual models for trauma-informed approaches indicates that a program or intervention is essential to create such an environment (e.g., NCTSN, 2017; SAMHSA, 2014; Watson & Astor, under review). Furthermore, the emphasis on school programming instead of a broader organizational focus

creates fragmented solutions that cannot address the needs of the whole school or community (Adelman & Taylor, 2014; Osher et al., 2021). We believe more holistic and comprehensive study is required.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this article was to determine the extent to which schools identified by social workers as trauma informed and not trauma informed differed in common school policies and practices as well as those specifically associated with trauma awareness and response. A secondary goal was to determine if the presence of individual policies or practices was associated with a school being identified as trauma informed. Both objectives were achieved. Our findings indicated that *all* practices and policies surveyed were more common in schools social workers identified as trauma informed, but that training and STS resources were most commonly associated with a school being identified as trauma informed after consideration of school type, setting, and student characteristics were included in the comparison.

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**Table 2-1**. *Participant Characteristics (N = 538)*

| Characteristic | *n* | % |
|---|---|---|
| Gender | | |
| Male | 39 | 7.2 |
| Female | 488 | 90.7 |
| Gender non-conforming | 2 | 0.4 |
| Other/prefer not to answer | 9 | 1.7 |
| Race/ethnicity | | |
| Asian American | 4 | 0.7 |
| Black/African American | 40 | 7.4 |
| Hawaiian Native/Pacific Islander | 1 | 0.2 |
| Hispanic/Latinx | 63 | 11.7 |
| Native American/Alaska Native | 1 | 0.2 |
| White/Caucasian | 391 | 72.7 |
| Multiracial | 23 | 4.3 |

| Characteristic | *n* | % |
|---|---|---|
| Other/no answer | 15 | 2.8 |
| Role | | |
| School social worker | 480 | 89.2 |
| District supervisor | 8 | 1.5 |
| Head of services | 5 | 0.9 |
| School-based contractor | 3 | 0.6 |
| Other/no answer | 42 | 7.8 |
| Years of experience | | |
| < 1 | 23 | 4.3 |
| 1-2 | 45 | 8.4 |
| 3-5 | 96 | 17.9 |
| 6-10 | 95 | 17.7 |
| 11-15 | 69 | 12.9 |
| 16-20 | 81 | 15.1 |

| Characteristic | *n* | % |
|---|---|---|
| > 20 | 127 | 23.7 |
| Schools served [a] | | |
| Preschool | 92 | 17.1 |
| Elementary | 310 | 57.6 |
| Middle/junior high | 260 | 48.3 |
| High | 241 | 44.8 |
| Alternative | 69 | 12.8 |
| Other | 7 | 1.3 |

*Note*. [a] Participants could select more than one.

**Table 2-2**. *School Characteristics Reported by Participants*

| Characteristic | *n* | % | *M* | *SD* |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Settings | | | | |
| Urban | 205 | 38.1 | | |
| Suburban | 231 | 43.3 | | |
| Rural | 97 | 18.2 | | |
| U.S. Region | | | | |
| Northeast | 110 | 20.5 | | |
| Midwest | 191 | 35.6 | | |
| South | 101 | 18.9 | | |
| West | 134 | 25.0 | | |
| Students (%) | | | | |
| Receiving free/reduced lunch | | | 63.8 | 28.4 |
| Historically marginalized populations | | | 55.7 | 30.7 |
| Drop out | | | 19.5 | 18.1 |
| Enter college | | | 55.5 | 22.1 |

| Characteristic | *n* | % | *M* | *SD* |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| School type reported on | | | | |
| Preschool | 6 | 1.5 | | |
| Elementary | 156 | 38.3 | | |
| Middle/junior high | 106 | 26.0 | | |
| High | 139 | 34.2 | | |

*Note*. Means and standard deviations in the table refer to the percentage of students reported by SSWs to reflect each characteristic.

**Table 2-3**. *Surveyed School Policies and Practices*

| General & Trauma-Related | COVID-Related |
|---|---|
| Classroom practices that help deescalate and refocus students | Consistent use of masks |
| Commitment to creating a safe, supportive learning environment for all students | Counseling for teachers |
| Equitable school discipline | Expanded teaching hours |
| Metal detectors | Guidelines for appropriate parent communication/behaviors |
| Modifying the curriculum to remove triggering content | Hiring new mental health professionals |
| Multi-Tiered System of Supports (including PBIS) | Hiring new teachers or support staff |
| Resources for secondary traumatic stress and self-care | Mandatory vaccination |
| Restorative justice practices | Online/hybrid school options |
| School climate programs | Opening/closing schools based on case rates |
| School resource officers | Providing for students' and families' basic needs |
| Screening for Adverse Childhood Experiences | Regular COVID testing |
| Screening for trauma symptoms/PTSD | Requiring students to quarantine after possible exposure |

| General & Trauma-Related | COVID-Related |
| --- | --- |
| Social-emotional skills training | Social distancing |
| Student searches | Support for struggling students |
| Teaching materials reflect diverse students | |
| Trauma interventions/treatments (e.g., CBITS) | |
| Trauma psychoeducation for students/parents | |
| Trauma training for staff | |
| None of the above | |

**Table 2-4**. *Differences in Participant and District Characteristics for Schools Identified by Social Workers as Trauma Informed (TI) and Not Trauma Informed (NTI)*

| | TI | NTI | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Characteristic | *n* (%) | *n* (%) | $X^2_{(df)}$ | *p* | φ |
| Participant Gender | | | 1.24 $_{(1)}$ | .266 | .049 |
| Female (n = 487) | 138 (90.8%) | 349 (93.6%) | | | |
| Male (n = 38) | 14 (9.2%) | 24 (6.43%) | | | |
| Participant Ethnicity | | | 9.78 $_{(6)}$ | .134 | .137 |
| Asian American (n = 4) | 3 (2.0%) | 1 (0.3%) | | | |
| Black/African American (n = 40) | 10 (6.7%) | 30 (8.1%) | | | |
| Hawaiian Native/Pacific Islander (n = 1) | 0 (0.0%) | 1 (0.3%) | | | |
| Hispanic/Latinx (n = 63) | 18 (11.9%) | 45 (12.2%) | | | |
| Native American/Alaska Native (n = 1) | 0 (0.0%) | 1 (0.3%) | | | |
| White/Caucasian (n = 390) | 118 (78.1%) | 272 (73.5%) | | | |
| Multiracial (n = 22) | 2 (1.3%) | 20 (5.4%) | | | |
| Participant Years of Experience | | | 11.98 $_{(6)}$ | .062 | .150 |
| < 1 (n = 21) | 11 (7.1%) | 10 (2.7%) | | | |

| | TI | NTI | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Characteristic | *n* (%) | *n* (%) | $X^2_{(df)}$ | *p* | φ |
| 1-2 (n = 45) | 12 (7.8%) | 33 (8.7%) | | | |
| 3-5 (n = 96) | 35 (22.7%) | 61 (16.2%) | | | |
| 6-10 (n = 94) | 28 (18.2%) | 66 (17.5%) | | | |
| 11-15 (n = 69) | 19 (12.3%) | 50 (24.2%) | | | |
| 16-20 (n = 80) | 22 (14.3%) | 58 (13.3%) | | | |
| > 20 (n = 126) | 27 (17.5%) | 99 (26.3%) | | | |
| School Setting (rural, suburban, urban) | | | $3.49_{(2)}$ | .175 | .081 |
| Rural | 30 (19.6%) | 67 (17.9%) | | | |
| Suburban | 37 (37.3%) | 172 (46.0%) | | | |
| Urban | 66 (43.1%) | 135 (36.1%) | | | |
| Grade level (preschool, elementary, middle, high) | | | $1.02_{(3)}$ | .797 | .050 |
| Preschool | 2 (1.7%) | 4 (1.4%) | | | |
| Elementary | 41 (34.7%) | 113 (39.8%) | | | |
| Middle | 34 (28.8%) | 72 (25.4%) | | | |
| High | 41 (34.7%) | 95 (33.5%) | | | |
| Region | | | $9.33_{(3)}$ | .025 | .133 |

| Characteristic | TI<br>*n* (%) | NTI<br>*n* (%) | $X^2$ (df) | *p* | φ |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Northeast | 22 (14.4%) | 88 (23.3%) | | | |
| Midwest | 68 (44.4%) | 121 (32.1%) | | | |
| South | 29 (19.0%) | 72 (19.1%) | | | |
| West | 34 (22.2%) | 96 (25.5%) | | | |

**Table 2-5.** *Means (%) and SDs of School Socioeconomic and Academic Indicators in Schools Identified by Social Workers as Trauma Informed (TI) and Not (NTI)*

| | TI | | NTI | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Characteristic | *M* | *SD* | *M* | *SD* | *t* | *p* |
| Receiving free/reduced lunch | 68.6% | 25.2 | 62.2% | 29.3 | 2.39 | .017 |
| From historically marginalized populations | 61.4% | 28.6 | 53.5% | 31.3 | 2.69 | .007 |
| Who drop out | 21.4% | 18.7 | 18.7% | 17.8 | 1.40 | .163 |
| Who enter college | 52.8% | 21.3 | 56.7% | 22.4 | -1.69 | .092 |

**Table 2-6.** *Correlations Between School Socioeconomic/Academic Indicators and School Policies/Practices*

| | Free/reduced lunch | Historically marginalized | Drop out | Enter college |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| General | | | | |
| Classroom practices that help deescalate and refocus students | .026 | -.008 | -.125** | .002 |
| Commitment to creating a safe, supportive learning environment for all students | -.072 | -.048 | -.179** | .037 |
| Equitable school discipline | -.058 | -.048 | -.116* | .075 |
| Metal detectors | .168** | .200** | .100* | -.098* |
| Modifying the curriculum to remove triggering content | -.003 | .049 | -.021 | -.019 |
| Multi-tiered systems of support, including PBIS | .030 | .021 | -.059 | -.044 |
| Resources for secondary traumatic stress (STS) and self-care | -.012 | .042 | -.066 | -.036 |
| Restorative justice practices | .017 | .093* | -.038 | .091 |
| School climate programs | .048 | .013 | -.096* | .009 |
| School resource officers | -.088* | -.157** | -.074 | .062 |
| Screening for adverse childhood experiences | .038 | .050 | .098* | -.053 |
| Screening for trauma symptoms/PTSD | .027 | .050 | .058 | -.045 |
| Social emotional skills training (SEL) | .017 | -.009 | .024 | -.019 |
| Teaching materials reflect diverse students | .041 | .090* | -.015 | .128** |

| | Free/reduced lunch | Historically marginalized | Drop out | Enter college |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Trauma interventions/treatments (e.g., CBITS) | .123* | .110* | .015 | -.086 |
| Trauma psychoeducation for students/parents | .027 | .063 | .038 | -.078 |
| Trauma training for staff | -.041 | -.072 | -.061 | -.045 |
| None of the above | .062 | .027 | .028 | -.036 |
| COVID-related | | | | |
| Consistent use of masks | .065 | .093* | .043 | -.001 |
| Counseling for teachers | .071 | .052 | -.031 | .017 |
| Expanded teaching hours | .025 | .111* | .061 | .050 |
| Guidelines for appropriate parent communication/behaviors | .057 | .022 | .033 | -.057 |
| Hiring new mental health professionals | .059 | .046 | -.027 | .026 |
| Hiring new teachers or support staff | .070 | .058 | .011 | .004 |
| Mandatory vaccination | .074 | .194** | .129** | .039 |
| Online/hybrid school options | .118** | .068 | .047 | -.056 |
| Opening/closing schools based on COVID case rates | .108* | .091* | .123** | -.131** |
| Providing for students' and families' basic needs (e.g., food, technology, etc.) | .071 | .046 | -.026 | -.028 |
| Regular COVID testing | .092* | .185** | .081 | -.008 |
| Requiring students to quarantine after possible COVID exposure | -.012 | -.015 | -.065 | .046 |

| | Free/reduced lunch | Historically marginalized | Drop out | Enter college |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Social distancing | -.012 | -.051 | .006 | -.023 |
| Support for struggling students | -.042 | -.042 | -.095* | .122** |

*Note*. * $p < 0.05$. ** $p < 0.01$.

**Table 2-7**. *Policies and Practices in Schools Identified by Social Workers as Trauma Informed (TI) and Not (NTI)*

| Policy/Practice | TI (n = 154) *n* (%) | NTI (n = 378) *n* (%) | $X^2_{(1)}$ | φ |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| General (α =.699) | | | | |
| Trauma training for staff | 124 (80.5) | 125 (33.1) | 98.95*** | .431 |
| Resources for secondary traumatic stress and self-care | 54 (35.1) | 43 (11.4) | 41.19*** | .278 |
| Trauma psychoeducation for students/parents | 38 (24.7) | 24 (6.3) | 35.79*** | .259 |
| Classroom practices that help deescalate and refocus students | 64 (61.0) | 132 (34.9) | 30.55*** | .240 |
| Screening for trauma symptoms/PTSD | 28 (18.2) | 18 (4.8) | 24.95*** | .217 |
| Trauma interventions/treatments (e.g., CBITS) | 47 (30.5) | 49 (13.0) | 22.81*** | .207 |
| Metal detectors | 26 (16.9) | 20 (5.3) | 18.62*** | .187 |

| Policy/Practice | TI (n = 154) $n$ (%) | NTI (n = 378) $n$ (%) | $X^2_{(1)}$ | φ |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Teaching materials reflect diverse students | 87 (56.5) | 137 (36.2) | 18.41*** | .186 |
| Screening for Adverse Childhood Experiences | 23 (14.9) | 21 (5.6) | 12.69*** | .154 |
| Restorative justice practices | 89 (57.8) | 157 (41.5) | 11.63*** | .148 |
| Equitable school discipline | 66 (42.9) | 105 (27.8) | 11.41*** | .146 |
| Commitment to creating a safe, supportive learning environment for all students | 136 (88.3) | 285 (75.4) | 11.05*** | .144 |
| School climate programs | 75 (48.7) | 127 (33.6) | 10.60** | .141 |
| Modifying the curriculum to remove triggering content | 21 (13.6) | 25 (6.6) | 6.83** | .113 |
| Social-emotional skills training | 131 (85.1) | 288 (76.2) | 5.15* | .098 |

| Policy/Practice | TI (n = 154) *n* (%) | NTI (n = 378) *n* (%) | $X^2_{(1)}$ | φ |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Multi-Tiered System of Supports (including PBIS) | 127 (82.5) | 287 (75.9) | 2.71 | .071 |
| Student searches | 29 (18.8) | 51 (13.5) | 2.44 | .068 |
| None of the above | 0 (0.0) | 4 (1.1) | 1.64 | .056 |
| School resource officers | 83 (53.9) | 197 (52.1) | .14 | .016 |
| COVID-related (α =.729 ) | | | | |
| Providing for students' and families' basic needs | 123 (79.9) | 231 (61.1) | 17.30*** | .180 |
| Guidelines for appropriate parent communication/behaviors | 50 (32.5) | 66 (17.5) | 14.45*** | .165 |
| Support for struggling students | 103 (66.9) | 198 (52.4) | 9.37** | .133 |
| Hiring new teachers or support staff | 50 (32.5) | 77 (20.4) | 8.81** | .129 |
| Online/hybrid school options | 70 (45.5) | 125 (33.1) | 7.23** | .117 |
| Regular COVID testing | 73 (47.4) | 132 (34.9) | 7.20** | .116 |

| Policy/Practice | TI<br>(n = 154)<br>*n* (%) | NTI<br>(n = 378)<br>*n* (%) | $X^2$ (1) | φ |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Opening/closing schools based on COVID case rates | 58 (37.7) | 101 (26.7) | 6.25* | .108 |
| Mandatory vaccination | 27 (17.5) | 37 (9.8) | 6.20* | .108 |
| Counseling for teachers | 23 (14.9) | 31 (8.2) | 5.44* | .101 |
| Consistent use of masks | 79 (51.3) | 168 (44.4) | 2.07 | .062 |
| Social distancing | 63 (40.9) | 136 (36.0) | 1.14 | .046 |
| Expanded teaching hours | 11 (7.1) | 19 (5.0) | .92 | .042 |
| Hiring new mental health professionals | 46 (29.9) | 106 (28.0) | .18 | .018 |
| Requiring students to quarantine after possible exposure | 103 (66.9) | 246 (65.1) | .16 | .017 |

*Notes.* * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$

**Table 2-8**. *General School Policies/Practices Associated with Social Worker Identification of a School as Trauma Informed*

| | | | | 95% CI | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Policy/Characteristic | *B* | *S.E.* | *Exp(B)* | *LL* | *UL* | *Wald* | *df* | *p* |
| Trauma training for staff* | 1.84 | .26 | 6.30 | 3.81 | 10.43 | 51.39 | 1 | <.001 |
| Metal detectors* | 1.41 | .41 | 4.10 | 1.83 | 9.18 | 11.75 | 1 | <.001 |
| Resources for secondary traumatic stress and self-care* | .61 | .29 | 1.85 | 1.04 | 3.28 | 4.44 | 1 | .035 |
| School climate programs | .44 | .24 | 1.55 | .96 | 2.50 | 3.21 | 1 | .073 |
| Classroom practices that help deescalate and refocus students | .45 | .25 | 1.57 | .95 | 2.57 | 3.13 | 1 | .077 |
| Trauma psychoeducation for students/parents | .56 | .34 | 1.75 | .90 | 3.40 | 2.71 | 1 | .100 |
| Teaching materials that reflect diverse students | .37 | .26 | 1.44 | .87 | 2.39 | 2.02 | 1 | .156 |
| Restorative justice practices | .32 | .24 | 1.37 | .86 | 2.18 | 1.76 | 1 | .184 |

| Policy/Characteristic | *B* | *S.E.* | *Exp(B)* | 95% CI *LL* | 95% CI *UL* | *Wald* | *df* | *p* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Screening for trauma symptoms/PTSD | .40 | .43 | 1.49 | .64 | 3.48 | .87 | 1 | .352 |
| Screening for adverse childhood experiences (ACES) | .40 | .43 | 1.49 | .64 | 3.43 | .86 | 1 | .354 |
| Equitable school discipline | -.19 | .27 | .83 | .50 | 1.340 | .49 | 1 | .486 |
| Commitment to creating a safe, supportive learning environment for all students | .24 | .34 | 1.26 | .65 | 2.46 | .48 | 1 | .490 |
| Student searches | -.23 | .34 | .79 | .41 | 1.55 | .46 | 1 | .499 |
| Multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS), including PBIS | -.19 | .30 | .83 | .46 | 1.50 | .39 | 1 | .534 |
| School resource officers | .13 | .24 | 1.14 | .71 | 1.81 | .29 | 1 | .589 |
| Social-emotional (SEL) skills training | -.14 | .33 | .87 | .46 | 1.64 | .20 | 1 | .657 |
| Modifying the curriculum to remove triggering content | .14 | .39 | 1.15 | .54 | 2.47 | .13 | 1 | .721 |

| | | | | 95% CI | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Policy/Characteristic | *B* | *S.E.* | *Exp(B)* | *LL* | *UL* | *Wald* | *df* | *p* |
| Trauma interventions/treatments (e.g., CBITS, SSET, TF-CBT) | -.06 | .30 | .95 | .52 | 1.72 | .03 | 1 | .857 |
| Constant* | -3.02 | .43 | .05 | | | 48.87 | 1 | <.001 |
| Model $X^2$ = | 159.17 | | | | | | | |
| Nagelkerke $R^2$ = | .37 | | | | | | | |
| n = | 532 | | | | | | | |

*Note.* Outcome variable was whether or not a school was identified by school social workers as being trauma informed.
* Significant predictor

**Table 2-9**. *COVID-Related Policies/Practices Associated with Social Worker Identification of a School as Trauma Informed*

| | | | | 95% CI | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Policy/Characteristic | B | S.E. | Exp(B) | *LL* | *UL* | Wald | df | p |
| Providing for students' and families' basic needs (e.g., food, technology)* | .75 | .25 | 2.12 | 1.29 | 3.47 | 8.83 | 1 | .003 |
| Guidelines for appropriate parent communication/behaviors | .46 | .25 | 1.59 | .97 | 2.60 | 3.34 | 1 | .068 |
| Hiring new mental health professionals | -.40 | .25 | .673 | .41 | 1.10 | 2.55 | 1 | .111 |
| Requiring students to quarantine after possible exposure | -.39 | .25 | .68 | .42 | 1.10 | 2.45 | 1 | .118 |
| Mandatory vaccination | .47 | .30 | 1.60 | .88 | 2.91 | 2.41 | 1 | .120 |
| Regular COVID testing | .35 | .23 | 1.42 | .91 | 2.23 | 2.34 | 1 | .126 |
| Hiring new teachers or support staff | .36 | .25 | 1.43 | .88 | 2.34 | 2.09 | 1 | .148 |
| Opening/closing schools based on COVID case rates | .28 | .23 | 1.33 | .85 | 2.07 | 1.57 | 1 | .211 |
| Online/hybrid school options | .26 | .22 | 1.30 | .84 | 2.01 | 1.36 | 1 | .243 |

| | | | | 95% CI | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Policy/Characteristic | B | S.E. | Exp(B) | *LL* | *UL* | Wald | df | p |
| Support for struggling students | .19 | .23 | 1.21 | .77 | 1.91 | .71 | 1 | .400 |
| Social distancing | -.15 | .27 | .86 | .51 | 1.46 | .30 | 1 | .583 |
| Counseling for teachers | .16 | .34 | 1.17 | .60 | 2.28 | .22 | 1 | .643 |
| Expanded teaching hours | .08 | .43 | 1.08 | .47 | 2.48 | .03 | 1 | .860 |
| Consistent use of masks | .03 | .27 | 1.03 | .61 | 1.74 | .02 | 1 | .904 |
| Constant* | -1.77 | .25 | .17 | | | 48.65 | 1 | <.001 |
| Model $\chi^2$ = | 44.36 | | | | | | | |
| Pseudo $R^2$ = | .11 | | | | | | | |
| n = | 532 | | | | | | | |

*Note.* Outcome variable was whether or not a school was identified by school social workers as being trauma informed.
* Significant predictor

**Table 2-10**. *Hierarchical Logistic Regression for Identifying Schools Social Workers Claim are Trauma Informed by Personal Demographics, School Characteristics, and Policies and Practices*

| | Step 1 | | | | Step 2 | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Policy/Characteristic | *b* | *SE* | *OR* | *95% CI* | *b* | *SE* | *OR* | *95% CI* |
| Constant | 1.018 | 1.663 | 2.767 | | -2.276 | 1.996 | .103 | |
| Gender (Male = Ref) | -.736 | .454 | .479 | .197, 1.167 | -.772 | .553 | .462 | .156, 1.366 |
| Race/Ethnicity (Other = Ref) | | | | | | | | |
| Black/African American | .225 | .820 | 1.253 | .251, 6.255 | .449 | .963 | 1.567 | .237, 10.346 |
| Hispanic | .348 | .680 | 1.417 | .374, 5.370 | .126 | .813 | 1.134 | .230, 5.587 |
| White | .369 | .596 | 1.447 | .450, 4.652 | .194 | .689 | 1.215 | .314, 4.692 |
| Participant years of experience (<1 = Ref) | | | | | | | | |
| 1-2 | -1.150 | .770 | .317 | .070, 1.432 | -2.105 | .891 | .122 | .021, .699 |
| 3-5 | -.368 | .673 | .692 | .185, 2.589 | -2.321 | .807 | .098* | .020, .478 |
| 6-10 | -1.093 | .692 | .335 | .086, 1.300 | -2.961 | .844 | .052** | .010, .271 |
| 11-15 | -1.452 | .736 | .234 | .055, .991 | -2.897 | .891 | .055* | .010, .316 |

| | Step 1 | | | | Step 2 | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Policy/Characteristic | *b* | *SE* | *OR* | *95% CI* | *b* | *SE* | *OR* | *95% CI* |
| 16-20 | -1.443 | .721 | .236 | .057, .971 | -3.972 | .896 | .019** | .003, .109 |
| 20+ | -1.452 | .683 | .234 | .061, .892 | -3.316 | .825 | .036** | .007, .183 |
| Students | | | | | | | | |
| Qualify for free/reduced lunch | -.007 | .008 | .993 | .978, 1.009 | .003 | .009 | 1.003 | .985, 1.021 |
| From historically marginalized populations | .011 | .007 | 1.011 | .996, 1.026 | .021 | .010 | 1.021 | 1.001, 1.041 |
| Drop out | .000 | .010 | 1.000 | .981, 1.019 | .005 | .013 | 1.005 | .979, 1.032 |
| Enter college | -.007 | .008 | .993 | .979, 1.008 | -.001 | .010 | .999 | .980, 1.019 |
| School setting (Urban = Ref) | | | | | | | | |
| Suburban | -.353 | .372 | .703 | .339, 1.456 | .375 | .489 | 1.456 | .558, 3.795 |
| Rural | .074 | .415 | 1.077 | .478, 2.428 | .556 | .542 | 1.744 | .603, 5.049 |
| Grade level (Preschool = Ref) | | | | | | | | |
| Elementary | -.479 | 1.009 | .619 | .086, 4.473 | .249 | 1.103 | 1.282 | .148, 11.137 |

| | Step 1 | | | | Step 2 | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Policy/Characteristic | *b* | *SE* | *OR* | *95% CI* | *b* | *SE* | *OR* | *95% CI* |
| Middle | .114 | 1.032 | 1.120 | .148, 8.469 | .684 | 1.137 | 1.982 | .223, 18.403 |
| High school | -.129 | 1.012 | .879 | .121, 6.393 | .373 | 1.115 | 1.452 | .163, 12.909 |
| U.S. region (Northeast = Ref) | | | | | | | | |
| Midwest | .605 | .375 | 1.831 | .878, 3.817 | .648 | .485 | 1.913 | .739, 4.952 |
| South | -.096 | .444 | .908 | .380, 2.168 | -.372 | .555 | .689 | .232, 2.047 |
| West | -.100 | .439 | .905 | .383, 2.141 | -.277 | .577 | .758 | .245, 2.384 |
| Trauma training for staff | | | | | 3.053 | .460 | 21.172** | 8.595, 52.151 |
| Resources for secondary traumatic stress and self-care | | | | | 1.678 | .441 | 5.357** | 2.258, 12.710 |
| Metal detectors | | | | | 1.105 | .610 | 3.018 | .914, 9.967 |
| Providing for students' and families' basic needs | | | | | .408 | .393 | 1.503 | .696, 3.245 |
| Model $\chi^2$ (*df*) | 29.752 (22) | | | | 138.696 (26)** | | | |

| | Step 1 | | | | Step 2 | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Policy/Characteristic | *b* | *SE* | *OR* | *95% CI* | *b* | *SE* | *OR* | *95% CI* |
| $\Delta\chi^2$ (*df*) | | | | | 108.944 (3)** | | | |
| Nagelkerke $R^2$ = | .13 | | | | .51 | | | |
| n = | 307 | | | | | | | |

*Note*. Other races/ethnicities include Asian, Hawaii Native and Pacific Islander, Native American, and Multiracial. Outcome variable was whether or not a school was identified by school social workers as being trauma informed.
* $p<.01$ ** $p<.001$

# Chapter 3: Social Workers' Experiences of Trauma-Informed Culture and Climate in Schools (Study 2)

The importance of school staff in creating a positive school climate has long been recognized in the practice and implementation literature (Thapa et al., 2013; Voight & Nation, 2016). However, few studies have examined how school social workers perceive or understand their school settings. In part, this is because school staff and their views have rarely been considered in empirical research of school climate (Berkowitz et al., 2017; Capp et al., 2020; Wang & Degol, 2016). With increasing recognition that school staff are missing from research literature (Capp et al., 2020), school climate is beginning to be empirically explored from the perspective of staff members. According to the latest practice models (Tan & SSWAA, 2024), support of a positive school climate has been identified as an essential part of the school social worker role. As such, social workers' views of the climate of schools they serve are essential.

Reports by school social workers are particularly salient to the study of trauma-informed climate because of their graduate-level training in behavioral and mental health and their role supporting the well-being of children and families in schools, including those who have experienced trauma (Kelly et al., 2015, 2021; Phillippo et al., 2017; Watson et al., 2022). The aim of this study was to determine if school social workers reported a difference in organizational culture and climate between schools they identified as trauma informed (TI) and other schools (non-TI or NTI schools). Although trauma training and trauma-focused evidence-based practices (EBPs) have become quite popular in schools over the past decade, it is unclear whether training or the availability of clinical trauma interventions relate to any changes in a school's climate. The research questions for this study were: To what extent did school social workers report a difference in culture and climate between schools they identified as trauma

informed and those that were not identified as such? Can certain characteristics of trauma-informed culture and climate indicate whether a school will be identified as trauma informed by school social workers?

## Literature Review

### The Role of Social Workers in Providing Trauma-Informed Care in Schools

School social work has existed for more than 100 years and is a well-established specialty practice of the social work discipline. In fact, some of the earliest social work practitioners were responsible for developing critical school–community linkages (Shaffer & Fisher, 2017). Currently, in many U.S. schools, social workers serve as frontline behavioral and mental health providers. They also continue to make school–community linkages and may implement social emotional learning programs (Kelly et al., 2015, 2021). Their therapeutic caseloads typically include children with trauma histories and a range of other behavioral and educational concerns (Phillippo et al., 2017; Watson et al., 2022).

In addition to providing direct services to students and their families, the latest practice model calls for school social workers to work across the spectrum, from micro-level, interpersonal interventions through mezzo-level school climate and organizational supports, to macro-level communitywide and global policy and advocacy efforts (Tan & SSWAA, 2024). Since climate is believed to be an essential component of the school social work role, social workers' views of the culture and climate of schools they serve are essential. They are also well-suited to drive change efforts to introduce and sustain trauma-informed culture and climate, given both current practice models and their trauma-related expertise (Dombo & Sabatino, 2019; Tan & SSWAA, 2024).

## A Brief History, Conceptual Model, and Measurement of School Climate

School climate was identified as a key factor in students' experiences and learning more than 100 years ago (Cohen et al., 2009). Empirical school climate research began in the 1950s, born out of industrial/organizational research and the recognition that differences between schools seemed to relate to differential student outcomes (Cohen et al., 2009; Thapa et al., 2013). Four dimensions are commonly associated with school climate: 1) physical and social-emotional safety; 2) the teaching and learning environment, including instructional quality, administration, and professional development opportunities; 3) relationship quality among school staff, between staff and students, and with the broader community; and 4) environmental and structural factors, including physical and operational characteristics of the school (e.g., school size and space adequacy, and curricular and extracurricular offerings; Cohen et al., 2009; Thapa et al., 2013; Wang & Degol, 2016). Benbenishty and Astor (2024) have reimagined school climate as three planes that intersect to create a cube: the social–relational plane, which includes the quality of school-based relationships; the academic plane, which encompasses the school's teaching and learning structures and environment; and the organizational plane, which captures school leadership and decision making, and practices and policies that affect school operations. Each plane of the cube interacts with the other planes in every aspect of staff members' and students' experiences and the school's operations.

### *Measurement of School Climate*

Wang and Degol (2016) found that ninety percent of school climate studies utilized self-report surveys. Surveys are useful because they allow multiple dimensions of climate to be captured simultaneously and they are inexpensive to administer (Wang & Degol, 2016). Multidimensional models like school climate require multifaceted assessment and the voices of

multiple constituents; however, this is rarely done in practice. Most school climate research to date has focused on student experiences to the exclusion of staff members' perceptions, and fewer than 1 in 5 studies solicited multiple perspectives (Berkowitz et al., 2017; Wang & Degol, 2016). Given that personal characteristics such as the race, gender, and role of a respondent are significant factors in school climate perceptions (Thapa et al., 2013), it is essential that multiple perspectives are solicited. Also, since staff members are tasked with creating a positive school climate for students, researchers are coming to agree that they too must experience the benefits of a positive climate (Bloom, 1995; Capp et al., 2020; Yoder et al., 2018). Where they do not, the school climate suffers overall.

**Trauma and Healing in Organizations, Including Schools**

Whereas school researchers and practitioners tend to view trauma as something that arises outside the school (Chafouleas et al., 2021; Craig, 2016; Gherardi et al., 2020; Venet, 2021), organizational researchers increasingly recognize that trauma results from experiences both inside and outside an organization. As a result, they call for organizational models to reflect this awareness (Mias deKlerk, 2007; Sisodia & Gelb, 2019). Any organization can be susceptible to trauma, but organizations that regularly serve trauma survivors have heightened susceptibility due to frequent engagement with and discussion of traumatic events. All human services organizations, including schools, fit this mold. As a result, such organizations are at heightened risk of becoming traumatized systems. In a traumatized system, internal functioning closes to outside influences; staff and other insiders focus primarily on internal relationships; stress and anxiety can become contagious; organizational identity may erode; and insiders may feel a collective sense of depression or despair (Vivian & Hormann, 2013).

Traditionally solutions to organizational trauma have taken an individual focus. For

example, organizations may offer training, coaching, or counseling to shift individual behaviors. An individual focus puts high expectations on staff members, but leaves systemic factors in the organization unexplored, including common behavioral expectations, reporting and wage structures, and workload norms (Vivian & Hormann, 2013). An individual focus also ignores societal factors that perpetuate trauma including racism and other forms of systematic marginalization (Gherardi et al., 2020). In contrast, an appropriate response to a traumatized system includes striving to create a sense of psychological safety for all involved followed by space for collective dialogue, problem identification, addressing emotions that arise from the situation, and brainstorming possible solutions (Edmondson, 2018; Mias deKlerk, 2007; Vivian & Hormann, 2013). Creating a healing environment, one that takes both a proactive and reactive approach to trauma, requires commitment, intentional leadership, and understanding that all members of the organization need to experience the environment's positive attributes starting with staff members (Sisodia & Gelb, 2019; Venet, 2021).

We can see examples of traumatized systems in schools that have experienced mass shooting events. In a series of interviews with survivors of the attack at Columbine High School, for example, a subsequent need for belonging and connection was highlighted by all but one respondent. Researchers found that informal social support from individuals that had experienced something similar was identified as one of the most helpful contributors to their recovery (Schildkraut et al., 2021), further illustrating the importance of a psychologically safe and supportive environment.

**Conceptual Models for Trauma-Informed Schools**

Several published models for trauma-informed organizations exist (e.g., Bloom & Yanosy Sreedhar, 2008; Harris & Fallot, 2001; U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health

Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2014a). Some models are school specific (e.g., Cole et al., 2013; NCTSN, 2017; Venet, 2021). Other models have been adapted to address particular concerns such as racial stress and trauma (e.g., Saleem et al., 2022). Model developers have used different nomenclature for their models, from trauma-informed and trauma-responsive to positive, compassionate, or healing schools. A prior critical review of eight published models identified four common components of a trauma-informed approach in schools: (a) a commitment to understanding the effects of trauma and adapting policies and procedures with trauma in mind; (b) ensuring physical, emotional, and psychological safety for all members of the school; (c) applying a strengths-based, whole-person, and equity lens toward school staff, students, and their families; and (d) cultivating and sustaining trust-based, collaborative, and empowering relationships among all members of the school, including students, their families, and the broader community (Watson & Astor, under review). Although there are many other models for trauma-informed schools in the gray literature, few of these have made it into the peer-reviewed literature and thus have been excluded from the conceptual model utilized for this study.

### ***Social Justice Considerations in Trauma-Informed Approaches for Schools***

Many theorists and researchers tie trauma-informed approaches to social justice, but a recent review found this was rarely true in practice (Gherardi et al., 2020). In fact, Gherardi and colleagues (2020) reported that three prominent trauma-informed school models (i.e., Cole et al., 2013; Craig, 2016; and Milwaukee Public Schools, 2020) were rooted in apolitical and color-blind language and viewpoints. Taking an apolitical or color-blind stance on trauma challenges a school's ability to understand and embrace the community and cultural context of its students and their families. It also maintains a focus on the individual instead of taking the opportunity to

address systemic factors that perpetuate trauma and can lead to the retraumatization of vulnerable populations (Gherardi et al., 2020; Saleem et al., 2022). As an example, one study found that teachers tended to approach students from a color-blind perspective while simultaneously blaming their poor behavior on cultural stereotypes or faults of students' caregivers (Blitz et al., 2020). Whereas many educators and other school staff report feeling ill-equipped to discuss racial issues, engaging directly with such discussions has been identified as one of the best ways to address racial discrimination in schools (Howard, 2020).

**A Need to Reintegrate Organizational Culture and Climate Theory in the Study of School Climate and Trauma-Informed Approaches**

As noted above, school climate research emerged from the study of industrial and organizational behavior, which remains home to the study of organizational culture and climate. Although school climate and organizational climate relate to similar issues and have shared goals, each literature is siloed and rarely cites the other. For the purpose of this dissertation, it was necessary to reground the study of trauma-informed culture and climate in its original arena to enable use of the field's current best practices.

Organizational culture and climate have distinct definitions in organizational behavior research. Organizational culture is the ethos of an organization, its values, rationale for being, and behavioral expectations. Organizational climate is the shared perceptions of policies, processes, and routines among all members of an organization, or the combined psychological impact of the organization (Glisson, 2015; Ostroff et al., 2013; Schneider et al., 2013). Each member of an organization has their own assessment of an organization's climate (also called its psychological climate); these individual assessments are then combined to understand the *collective* climate of an organization. Culture can be construed as the intangibles that contribute

to an organization’s worldview whereas climate focuses on tangible aspects of an organization that managers can use to influence employee actions and beliefs (Schneider et al., 2013).

Historically, organizational culture was studied using qualitative case studies and climate was studied using employee surveys. In recent years, however, there has been a shift toward studying both culture and climate with survey methods. Current best practice for culture/climate surveys is to focus questions on characteristics of the organization (e.g., “This organization is safe for all people”) rather than on individual experiences or perceptions (e.g., “I feel safe at this organization”). Doing the former improves consensus during data analysis and provides the opportunity to explore differences in overall perceptions according to gender, race, role, or other factors (Ostroff et al., 2013; Schneider et al., 2013). This is important because an organization could purport to be trauma informed and do many of the right things, but still have a hostile climate for some or all staff members and service recipients.

Organizational climate can be assessed generally or thematically to better understand specific outcomes or processes (e.g., a climate for safety or for diversity and inclusion; Ostroff et al., 2013; Schneider et al., 2013). Changes in organizational practices, policies, and procedures are theorized to lead to a changed organizational climate; however, little research has tested these mechanisms. Culture and climate are also mediators and moderators between leadership initiatives and employee or service recipient outcomes (Ostroff et al., 2013). Because a commitment to becoming trauma informed is intended to shift organizational culture (Bloom & Yanosy Sreedhar, 2008; Harris & Fallot, 2001) and result in changed climate perceptions among staff and service recipients, surveys designed to report on the organizational culture and climate experience are an appropriate tool for this study.

### *The Need for a Conceptually Integrated, Whole-School, Trauma-Informed Culture and Climate Survey*

While there are several systems-level measures to assess values, belief systems, and activities of a trauma-informed environment (see Champine et al., 2019), few published instruments assess trauma-informed climate. One example, the 30-item Trauma-Informed Climate Scale (TICS), was developed based on the five principles for a trauma-informed approach originally suggested by Harris and Fallot (2001): safety, trust, choice, collaboration, and empowerment (Hales et al., 2017, 2019). The TICS assesses employees' views about the presence of these principles within human services organizations using a 5-point Likert scale from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). Sample items include, "When I come to work here, I feel emotionally safe;" "I'm not sure who I can trust among my co-workers, supervisors, and admin;" and "I feel like I have a great deal of control over my job satisfaction." A majority of the instrument's questions are individually oriented instead of organizationally focused, which does not adhere to current best practices for climate survey design (Ostroff et al., 2013; Schneider et al., 2013). Furthermore, although the TICS explores several values related to a trauma-informed approach, particularly interpersonal/relational concepts, it excludes questions about equity and inclusion, and is thus not aligned with the latest conceptualizations of trauma-informed schools (e.g., University of Maryland, n.d.; Venet, 2021). The TICS focuses empowerment questions solely on the availability of training and supervisor support for trying new things, a limited approach. In addition, approximately half of the long- and short-form scales are reverse-coded items. Although some reverse-coded items can be helpful to assess whether respondents are paying attention, an abundance of reverse-coded survey items is problematic because it increases respondents' cognitive burden and can alter response patterns.

Given the limitations of extant trauma-informed climate surveys and organizational assessments, a new trauma-informed culture and climate instrument was developed for this study. This new instrument incorporates similar themes to the climate instrument mentioned above. For example, it includes elements of Harris and Fallot's (2001) values, including safety, trusting and collaborative relationships, and empowerment, including individual choice. A key difference is the addition of a specific focus on strengths-based, whole-person, and equitable approaches. This extension is critical because, without recognizing people as whole individuals in the context of their history and environment, an organization or setting will never be emotionally and psychologically safe for all its members. Inclusion and belonging are essential to any psychologically safe work environment (Edmondson, 2018). In addition, whereas prior trauma responses and related assessments focused on interpersonal relations, modern interpretations include recognition of historical political and collective traumas. To compensate for this, I integrated an equity focus in this new instrument.

Based on a prior review of common components of a trauma-informed approach (Watson & Astor, under review), the new instrument comprises four modules: (a) trauma commitment and training; (b) physical and psychological safety; (c) strengths-based, equitable focus; and (d) trust-based, collaborative, and empowering relationships. Survey items are presented in Table 1. Throughout instrument development, experts in both survey design and trauma-informed organizations were consulted. Subsequently, cognitive interviews were conducted to assess whether survey questions were clear and yielded responses across the Likert scale. The use of the survey as part of this dissertation research served as a pilot study for the instrument. A variation of the survey was also used in a study of volunteer organizations across California.

## Methods

### Population and Study Samples

The sample (N=538) was a convenience sample recruited from a population of school social workers across the United States through professional organizations, including the National Association of Social Workers, School Social Work Association of America, School Social Work Network, and other state-level associations. Researchers partnered with professional associations who shared a link to the anonymous online survey with their members. Participants represented 43 U.S. states and the District of Columbia (see Figure 1), with the highest concentration from Illinois (18.3%), California (16.8%), Michigan (5.8%), and Connecticut (5.4%). Detailed demographics of the sample are presented in Table 1 of Chapter 2 (Author, Study 1). The majority of participants self-identified as female (90.7%), 7.2% as male, 0.4% as gender non-conforming, and others chose not to disclose. The sample primarily identified as White/Caucasian (72.7%), 11.7% as Hispanic/Latinx, 7.4% as Black/African American, 4.3% as Multiracial, 0.7% as Asian American, 0.2% as Hawaii Native/Pacific Islander, and 0.2% as Native American/Alaska Native, and others chose not to disclose. Practicing school social workers were the primary respondents (89.2%), 1.5% identified as district social work supervisors, 0.9% were heads of social work services in a district, 0.6% were school-based social work contractors, and those remaining held other school-based positions or chose not to disclose. Participants' years of experience ranged from less than 1 (4.3%) to more than 20 (23.7%), with a mean of more than 10 years of social work experience. Participants served a variety of school types, including preschool (17.1%), elementary (57.6%), middle or junior high (48.3%), high school (44.8%), and alternative schools (12.8%). Many participants reported serving multiple schools simultaneously.

School characteristics reported by participants are presented in Table 2 of Chapter 2 (Author, Study 1). Participants worked in suburban (43.3%), urban (38.1%), and rural (18.2%) districts across the United States. Overall, participants reported working in high-need schools, where a mean of 63.8% of students received free/reduced lunch. On average, 55.7% of students were from historically marginalized populations; 19.5% of district students reportedly drop out, and 55.5% enter college.

## Instrument

Survey questions were developed by the research team to understand the needs of school staff, students, and families during the 2021-2022 school year, and the relationship between those needs and current models for trauma-informed care in schools. The instrument included both closed- and open-ended questions about schools' programs and policies and solicited school social workers' views about the trauma-informed culture and climate of their school environment.

## Measures

### *Personal Characteristics*

Respondents were asked to report on their role (i.e., school social worker, district supervisor, head of services in a district, school-based contractor, or other), their U.S. state of practice, the types of schools they support (e.g., preschool, elementary, etc.), and the number of years they practiced as a school social worker. They were also asked to report their gender identity and race/ethnicity.

### *School Characteristics*

Participants were asked to report on characteristics of their school district, including their estimates for the percentage of students eligible for free/reduced lunch, from historically

marginalized populations, who drop out, and who enter college. They also reported on the school's community setting (i.e., urban, suburban, rural).

***Report of Whether the School is Trauma-Informed or Not***

Participants were asked to choose one school with which they work and to indicate whether that school was considered a trauma-informed setting.

***Trauma-Informed Culture and Climate Survey***

Participants were asked five questions ($\alpha = .800$) about their school's commitment to becoming trauma-informed and providing staff with relevant training, which assesses a school's culture related to trauma-informed care. They were asked 11 questions about their experiences with the school's psychological and physical safety ($\alpha = .906$); 12 questions about their experience of a strengths-based, whole-person, and equitable focus at the school ($\alpha = .950$); and 13 questions about the qualities of their school-based relationships ($\alpha = .944$). See Table 1 for a complete list of questions. Answers were on a 5-point Likert scale where 1 = Not at all, 2 = To a small extent, 3 = To a moderate extent, 4 = To a large extent, and 5 = To a very large extent. A survey was an appropriate tool for this study because surveys are commonly used to measure organizational culture and climate, including in schools (Ostroff et al., 2013; Schneider et al., 2013; Wang & Degol, 2016).

**Independent variable**. Participant reports of school culture and climate, reported as indices, served as independent variables. As with study 1 of this dissertation (Author, Study 1), participant demographics and school characteristics served as control variables.

**Dependent variables**. A single dichotomous variable served as the dependent variable, that is participant reports of whether or not their chosen school was trauma informed.

## Analysis

Preliminary analyses consisted of independent samples t-tests to compare school social workers' experiences in schools they identified as trauma informed vs. other schools. An independent samples t-test was appropriate for this initial analysis because it allowed comparison of two groups on continuous variables (Gerald, 2018), in this case the means of survey responses using a Likert scale. Specifically, the test indicated if there was an association between type of school (i.e., trauma-informed or not) and the culture and climate scales.

The research question was answered using hierarchical logistic regression. Logistic regression was appropriate for this analysis because it allowed for comparison of multiple categorical variables (that is, the experiences of multiple characteristics of school culture and climate coupled with school and participant demographic characteristics) to a single dichotomous outcome variable (indicating the likelihood that social workers would report a school is trauma informed; Peng et al., 2002).

# Results

## Associations Between School Type and Climate Indices

Bivariate analyses showed positive associations between social worker-identified school type (i.e., TI and non-TI) and climate indices (e.g., commitment to trauma; psychological/physical safety; strengths-based, equitable focus; and positive school-based relationships). For example, participants who reported working in TI schools ($M = 3.57$, $SD = 0.85$) compared to the participants in non-TI schools ($M = 3.06$, $SD = 0.80$) indicated their schools were significantly more likely to demonstrate a strengths-based, equitable focus, $t(518) = 6.55$, $p < .001$. Participants in TI schools reported statistically significant culture and climate differences (wherein trauma-informed schools had a more positive culture/climate) on every

index and variable assessed. P-values ranged from <.001 to .025. Full results are presented in Table 3-1.

**Associations Between Climate Variables and Participant Demographics**

Some relationships existed between climate variables and participant demographics. See Table 3-2 for all significant associations. Male social workers ($M = 3.16$, $SD = 1.29$) were more likely than female respondents ($M = 2.74$, $SD = 1.16$) to report that school leadership addressed racism and discrimination appropriately, $t(520) = 2.11$, $p < .05$. Men ($M = 3.89$, $SD = 1.16$) also reported feeling less confident than women ($M = 4.29$, $SD = 0.80$) in their ability to recognize signs and symptoms of trauma in themselves and others, $t(521) = 2.81$, $p < .01$.

Black social workers reported experiencing a worse climate than other workers on 12 survey items. For example, they ($M = 2.90$, $SD = 1.13$) were less likely than others ($M = 3.36$, $SD = 0.96$) to report that school staff and administrators role model appropriate behavior, $t(529) = 2.87$, $p < .01$; that everyone is welcomed and supported, $t(530) = 2.65$, $p < .01$; or that staff interactions are consistently respectful, $t(530) = 2.61$, $p < .01$. Mean differences between the experiences of Black and non-Black social workers ranged from .35 to .47 indicating that Black social workers generally reported a small decrease in climate quality than non-Black social workers.

Hispanic social workers reported their schools were more likely than others to have universal trauma training for staff $t(531) = 2.35$, $p < .05$, but they reported it was less common for students to have trust-based relationships with staff, $t(528) = 2.38$, $p < .05$ or staff to feel a sense of belonging and connection to the school, $t(529) = 1.99$, $p < .05$.

White school social workers generally reported a more positive experience of trauma-informed culture and climate than non-white social workers, with statistically significant

relationships found on 14 items. For example, they reported a stronger sense of belonging and connection to the school, $t(529) = 3.65$, $p < .001$, and were more likely to report that staff and administrators role modeled appropriate behavior, $t(529) = 3.31$, $p < .001$, and that students had trust-based relationships with staff, $t(528) = 3.64$, $p < .001$. For all significant associations, see Table 3-2.

**Associations Between Climate Indices and School Characteristics**

Associations also existed between some climate indices and school characteristics (see Table 3-3). Safety was negatively correlated with the percentage of students receiving free/reduced lunch ($r = -.130$, $p < .001$), from historically marginalized backgrounds ($r = -.153$, $p < .001$), and who drop out, ($r = -.225$, $p < .001$), and positively correlated with students entering college ($r = .136$, $p < .001$). Having a strengths-based, equitable focus was positively associated with students entering college ($r = .124$, $p < .001$) and negatively associated with students dropping out ($r = -.164$, $p < .001$). Relationships that are trustworthy, collaborative, and empowering were positively associated with students entering college, ($r =.147$, $p < .001$), and negatively associated with receiving free/reduced lunch ($r = -.091$, $p < 0.05$), being from historically marginalized backgrounds ($r = -.119$, $p < .001$), and dropping out ($r = -.174$, $p < .001$).

**Climate Indices as Predictors of Whether a School Would be Identified as Trauma Informed**

Four hierarchical logistic regressions were performed with school social workers' reports of whether a school was TI as the dependent variable. Participant demographics (e.g., race, gender) and school characteristics (e.g., urbanicity, U.S. region, student demographics, and achievement levels) were controlled in step one. One climate scale was added in step two.

Climate indices were used in the regression analyses because each one featured an acceptable alpha (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011) and using indices instead of variables helped avoid issues of multicollinearity.

Each model that incorporated a single index of interest was statistically significant, suggesting that differences in school climate exist between schools social workers identified as trauma informed and those they did not. The first model, which compared a school's trauma commitment and training to school type (trauma-informed or not), was significant ($X^2(23) = 174.622$, $p < .001$). The model showed good fit to the data with a non-significant Hosmer-Lemeshow test result and Nagelkerke R-squared of .614 (see Table 3-4). Schools with a commitment to trauma response and training were 25 times more likely to be identified as trauma informed ($p < .001$). The first step in this hierarchical model, in which personal and school characteristics were input, was not significant ($X^2(22) = 30.031$, $p = .118$). In the second step, when the variable of interest was added, some personal characteristics also became significant. Specifically, school social workers with more years of experience were found to be less likely to work in trauma-informed schools than the reference group who had less than one year of experience. Model 1 correctly classified trauma-informed schools 84.2% of the time and non-TI schools 80.9% of the time, with an overall accuracy rate of 81.9%.

A second regression compared social workers' reports of school safety to whether they identified the school as trauma informed (Table 3-5). The first step in the model, incorporating personal and school characteristics, was not significant ($X^2(22) = 28.611$, $p = .156$). When the safety index was added, the model became significant ($X^2(23) = 74.080$, $p < .001$) with good model fit indicated by non-significant Hosmer-Lemeshow test result and Nagelkerke R-squared of .311. Schools perceived to be safer by social workers were 3.8 times more likely to be

identified as trauma informed ($p < .001$). In this model, social workers with 16 or more years of experience were also found less likely to work in a trauma-informed school. Model 2 correctly identified whether or not a school was trauma informed 70.8% of the time.

A third logistic regression assessed whether schools that social workers reported as valuing strengths and equity were more likely to be trauma informed (Table 3-6). We found that in step one, when only respondent and school characteristics were included, the model was not significant ($X^2(22) = 29.121$, $p = .141$). In step two, with the introduction of the index of interest, the model was significant ($X^2(23) = 84.247$, $p < .001$) with a good model fit and Nagelkerke R-squared of .340. Schools perceived by social workers to have a greater focus on strengths and equity were more than 4 times as likely to be identified as trauma informed ($p < .001$). This model matched earlier findings that social workers with more experience were less likely to report working in a trauma-informed school. Model 3 correctly identified whether or not a school was trauma informed 65.2% of the time.

A fourth regression evaluated whether high-quality relationships could indicate whether a school would be identified as trauma informed (Table 3-7). Step 1, which incorporated only school and respondent characteristics, was non-significant ($X^2(22) = 28.875$, $p = .148$). Step 2 incorporating the relationships index was significant ($X^2(23) = 77.389$, $p < .001$) with good model fit and Nagelkerke R-squared of .318. Schools in which social workers reported higher-quality relationships were 4.1 times more likely to be identified as trauma informed ($p < .001$). No other personal or school characteristics were significant. Model 4 correctly identified whether or not a school was identified as trauma informed 70.5% of the time.

A fifth and final logistic regression was performed, incorporating all climate scales simultaneously (see Table 3-8). The goal was to determine if any one index or combination of

indices was best able to suggest whether social workers would perceive a school as trauma informed. Step 1, with school and respondent demographics, was non-significant whereas Step 2, incorporating all culture and climate indices, was statistically significant ($X^2(26) = 165.69$, $p < .001$). This model had a non-significant Hosmer-Lemeshow test result and Nagelkerke R-squared of .613. The inclusive model correctly classified trauma-informed schools 85.6% of the time and correctly classified all schools 81.7% of the time. In this final model, the only variable found to be significant was the training and commitment index ($p < .001$). As with the first model, schools with a commitment to trauma and trauma training were 25 times more likely to be identified by school social workers as trauma informed. Although in earlier regressions all climate indices were found to identify whether a school would be called trauma informed by social workers, clearly the most important contributor to their assessment was the presence of a commitment to trauma and related training.

## Discussion

### Differences in the Culture and Climate of Schools Social Workers Identified as Trauma Informed and non-Trauma Informed

This paper sought to identify whether social workers experienced differences in organizational culture and climate between schools they reported to be trauma informed and those they did not. Across all four of our culture and climate indices, they did. Social workers' perceptions of a school's trauma commitment and training; physical and psychological safety; strengths-based, whole person, and equitable focus; and the presence of positive, empowering, and collaborative relationships were all associated with whether social workers identified a school as trauma informed. In a field where much uncertainty remains as to exactly what

characteristics are required to call a school trauma informed and what outcomes relate to TI schools, these are important findings.

### Relationships Between Personal Demographics and Climate Indices

As we expected, participant demographics related to changed perceptions of school culture and climate. Prior research has shown that social identity impacts individuals' experiences of an organization's policies, practices, culture, and climate, including in schools (Chung, 1997; Hogg & Terry, 2014; Thapa et al., 2013). People's identities, including race/ethnicity, gender, and membership in marginalized groups, including LGBTQ+, affect their experiences and perceptions of their environment. Their experiences are also shaped by intersectional identities that must be considered.

We found that Black social workers reported a less positive experience of culture and climate across several indicators. White school social workers generally reported a more positive experience of culture and climate. Hispanic and male social workers reported more mixed experiences in which some aspects were more positive whereas others were less positive. Differences between gender or racial/ethnic groups were small, but important to understand because they demonstrate the importance of adopting a whole-person and equity lens in the implementation of trauma-informed schools. No one should experience work situations that diminish their sense of belonging or safety (e.g., outright discrimination or microaggressions) and such experiences can limit school staff members' ability to create a safe environment where all students feel like they belong.

### Relationships Between School Characteristics and Climate Indices

Some connections were also found between school characteristics (e.g., percentage of students qualifying for free/reduced lunch, etc.) and climate indices. Schools social workers

reported had a higher percentage of students receiving free/reduced lunch or from historically marginalized groups were less likely to be identified as safe or an environment with trustworthy, collaborative, and empowering relationships. Schools and districts where a higher percentage of students dropped out were also less likely to be perceived as safe, as having a strengths-based, equitable focus; or positive relationships, whereas schools and districts with a higher percentage of students who enrolled in college were more likely to experience all of the above. It is important to note that these relationships are not causal and should not be interpreted as more influential in one direction than the other. It is unclear whether schools with higher dropout rates, for example, experience higher rates because of a lack of safety; strengths-based, equitable focus; and positive relationships in the school environment, vice versa, or if these items' concurrence relates to other, unstudied factors.

Given the differences identified above, it is essential that an understanding of structural inequities and an emphasis on repairing them is included not just in theories of trauma-informed schools but in actual practice. To effectively serve their communities, schools must not only understand their students' and families' cultural and socioeconomic contexts, but seek to redress systemic factors that perpetuate trauma and an unsupportive school climate (Gherardi et al., 2020; Saleem et al., 2022)

No relationships were found between school characteristics and whether the school had a commitment to trauma awareness and training, which supports our prior findings that differences in trauma commitment and training between schools identified by social workers as TI and non-TI were not solely due to differences in school characteristics (Author, Study 1). Prior research has shown that school staff and students relate school safety and climate to several factors, including their individual experiences of violence/victimization as well as organizational and

community factors, including in-school relationship quality, community socioeconomic status, and the prevalence of community violence (Astor et al., 2010; Khoury-Kassabri et al., 2004; Kutsyuruba et al., 2015; Loukas, 2007). Thus, it is important for schools to consider their community context and embrace its unique cultural characteristics and strengths in their climate development plans (Astor et al., 2021).

**Climate Differences Between Schools Identified as Trauma Informed and Not**

School social workers indicated that all four elements of trauma-informed culture and climate we assessed—trauma commitment and training; physical and psychological safety; strengths-based, equitable focus; and positive, empowering, and collaborative relationships—were individually associated with whether a school was identified as trauma informed. These associations went above and beyond any differences in respondent or school characteristics. Schools that social workers deemed safer were 3.8 times more likely to be identified as trauma informed. Schools with a strengths-based, equitable focus and trust-based, empowering, and collaborative relationships were each 4 times more likely to be identified by social workers as trauma informed. Schools with a commitment to trauma awareness and training were 25 times more likely to be identified as trauma informed. Our results suggest that real culture and climate differences exist between schools that social workers identify as TI and NTI.

Additionally, our survey instrument was able to correctly identify whether a school was TI or non-TI 8 out of 10 times, and was able to correctly identify schools reported to be TI at an even higher rate (85.6%). These findings suggest that the instrument may have value as a trauma-informed climate assessment by additional schools and districts. The training and commitment index was most successful at identifying schools social workers believed to be trauma informed, but all remaining indices correctly identified whether or not a school was

trauma informed 7 out of 10 times. Although the above indices' predictive power was better than chance, performance of individual indices may have been limited because a schoolwide emphasis on relationships, strengths, equity, and safety are not unique to a trauma-informed approach. For example, community schools emphasize a whole-child focus and deep connection to the surrounding community (Community Schools Forward, 2023). Physical/emotional safety and supportive relationships are commonly understood components of positive school climate (Cohen et al., 2009; Thapa et al., 2013; Wang & Degol, 2016). Although these indices were only moderately successful at identifying whether a school was trauma informed, they remain useful because of their ability to illustrate that climate differences exist between schools identified by social workers as trauma informed or not trauma informed.

**Practice, Policy, and Empirical Implications**

This paper has implications for social welfare practice, education policy, and future empirical study of trauma-informed schools. Given the rapid growth and popularity of trauma-informed schools in the past decade and the relative nascence of their empirical study (Avery et al., 2021; Maynard et al., 2019), this paper provides valuable information about measurable climate differences that exist between schools social workers identified as trauma informed and those they did not. As our analyses show, although a commitment to trauma and the availability of training were most able to properly categorize TI/NTI, social workers reported climate differences on all the indices surveyed. This finding points to a need to move practitioner and administrator focus beyond solely making a commitment to trauma and providing trauma training as the way to create trauma-informed schools. Instead, more consideration of global practice and policy changes at the district, school, and classroom levels are needed.

Given that school climate differences also related to a school's percentage of students

from low-income or historically marginalized groups, it is essential that considerations of race, poverty, and equity are included in future conceptualizations, implementations, and study of trauma-informed school climate. Prior research has shown that school staff often do not understand or prioritize race-related issues (Howard, 2020), leading to some researchers calling for the centering of racial and other systemic inequities in our understanding of trauma and implementation of trauma-informed approaches in schools (Alvarez, 2020; Saleem et al., 2022). Without understanding students' and families' contexts and cultural heritage, it is impossible to address systemic inequities and create an inclusive environment that promotes student belonging and psychological safety (Alvarez, 2020; Astor et al., 2021; Edmondson, 2018; Zimmerman & Astor, 2021). Future research must consider issues of equity and capacity as they relate to trauma-informed climate.

It is also important to note that climate differences found did not rely on the implementation of a set curriculum or program, as was also illustrated by study 1 of this dissertation (Author, Study 1). Climate differences related to a school's commitment to creating a physically, emotionally, and psychologically safe school environment for all staff and students; taking a strengths-based, whole-person lens to staff, students, and families; working to create equity-centered policies and practices; and promoting positive relationships between administrators and staff, among staff members, and between staff and students and their families through collaboration, empowerment, and transparency. These are commitments any school can make. With adequate time and influence, these are also changes that school social workers could support and encourage as part of their everyday efforts toward building and sustaining a positive school climate.

Although federal legislation called upon U.S. schools to implement trauma-informed,

evidence-based mental health practices (e.g., Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015), there are numerous challenges associated with scaling up evidence-based practices (EBPs) designed for 1:1 or small group engagement to a whole school. Also, most EBPs have not been adequately tested or proven effective across diverse contexts and populations. As a result, many EBPs are not sustained long-term (Fixsen et al., 2013). Previous research across more than 100 schools in Southern California found that the combination of implementing EBPs targeted to each schools' individually identified needs coupled with developing in-house solutions and expanding schools' internal capacity through funding and community partnerships significantly increased students' perceptions of school safety, and decreased victimization, substance use, and weapon carrying immediately and for many years post intervention. A robust data management plan enabled schools to monitor the effects of their actions and change tack as needed to reach their goals (Astor et al., 2021). Although EBPs seem like a deceptively simple way to introduce new strategies into schools, their cost, frequent lack of cultural and contextual relevance, the difficulty of implementing and sustaining them with fidelity, and the fragmented school programming that results from this approach is not the most effective use of school resources (Adelman & Taylor, 2018; Osher et al., 2021). Instead of mandating specific tools for practice, policymakers must advocate that schools meet certain guidelines for student support and learning outcomes, but allow for tailored, whole-school, or district-led approaches geared to their unique context and population.

This study also provided an opportunity to pilot a new trauma-informed culture and climate instrument developed in response to a lack of other adequate tools. Our findings indicate that differences in culture and climate between TI and NTI schools can be identified using this new instrument, which is valuable from both a practice and empirical perspective. Schools need

tools to monitor their change strategies and additional study of whole-school, trauma-informed approaches is critical as implementation has outpaced empirical support. Of course, additional work needs to be undertaken to validate this instrument.

## Limitations

There are limitations to this study that should be acknowledged. The study utilized a national sample of school social workers, but it was not a representative sample. Some states and demographics were represented by only a handful of individuals. As a result, comparisons were not possible by state and some racial and gender identities had to be combined in our analyses. In addition, only school social workers were surveyed, but best practices in school climate research require inclusion of all staff and students in the school environment to get a more complete climate picture. Due to the utilization of a national sample instead of undertaking this study in one or a few schools, it is unclear whether differences in experiences by gender and racial/ethnic identity found in preliminary analyses were due to staffing differences between trauma-informed and non-trauma-informed schools. Study of climate perceptions across multiple gender and racial/ethnic identities in one school would enable better assessment of how trauma-informed climate may differ by demographic. This study piloted a new trauma-informed culture and climate instrument because adequate alternatives did not exist. Although the instrument's indices had strong alphas (all greater than .80), additional assessment of this instrument is needed, including use of item response theory to determine which items discriminate most effectively and if a shortened instrument would be equally or more effective. Furthermore, the above instrument was developed based on previously published journal articles and did not include many practice-based solutions in the gray literature.

## Future Research and Conclusion

Trauma-informed approaches in schools have been readily implemented in the last couple of decades but empirical study of these approaches remains limited. Due to a lingering dearth of empirical support for whole-school, trauma-informed approaches (Avery et al., 2021; Gherardi et al., 2020; Maynard et al., 2019; Watson & Astor, under review), significant additional research is suggested.

Future research should include intentional assessment of differences in perceptions of trauma-informed culture and climate in one school or district based on respondent role (e.g., students, certificated and classified staff, etc.) and identity (e.g., race, gender, ethnicity, LGBTQ+ status). Although both organizational and school researchers tend to distribute surveys to only one constituent group (Berkowitz et al., 2017; Ostroff et al., 2013; Schneider et al., 2013), the viewpoints of multiple stakeholders enrich understanding of multidimensional constructs like trauma-informed culture and climate and should be the goal of organizational assessment.

Qualitative study is also required to understand what differences in schools are intentional and what is currently being done by schools in the name of being trauma informed. Very few school climate studies have utilized qualitative methods. This is an oversight because qualitative methods, including focus groups, interviews, and observations, can better explore processes and aspects of climate that are more neutral instead of purely positive or negative (Wang & Degol, 2016). Multiple case studies of trauma-informed schools that include participant observation, review of disciplinary and attendance data, and changed policies would be beneficial.

It is imperative that future research incorporates considerations of race, equity, diversity, and inclusion in all conceptualizations and assessments of trauma-informed or healing-centered schools. Without these additions, we will never be able to adequately understand or study these approaches. Such study also needs to consider how structural inequities in terms of funding, staffing, and other resources may be affecting school climate. Would equal funding across all schools and districts improve child-staff ratios to an extent that a focus on "trauma-informed" or "healing-centered" approaches is no longer necessary?

Over the longer term, researchers also need to explore staff and student outcomes related to trauma-informed culture and climate. It is important to understand whether differences in trauma-informed culture and climate result in improved academic and behavioral outcomes for students, higher staff retention, or other benefits.

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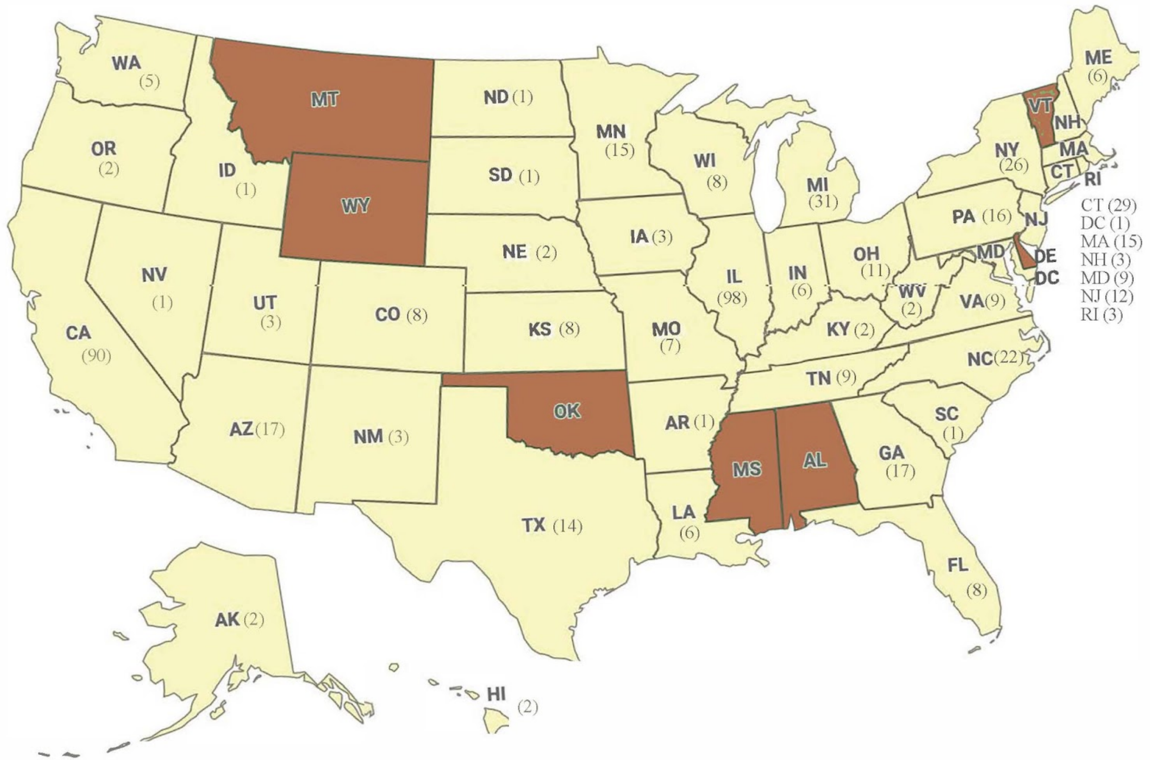
**Figure 3-1.** *States Where Participants Practice*




*Note*. States marked as yellow were represented among participants. The bracketed number indicates the number of participants from that state. Brown states had zero participants.

**Table 3-1**. *School Social Worker Experiences with TI Climate in Schools Identified as TI and NTI*

| | TI | | NTI | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Experience | *M* | *SD* | *M* | *SD* | $t_{(df)}$ | *p* |
| Staff training and commitment (α = .800) | | | | | | |
| All staff in this school receive trauma training. | 3.37 | 1.20 | 1.82 | 0.92 | $15.96_{(529)}$ | <.001 |
| Leadership are committed to being trauma informed. | 3.50 | 1.01 | 2.28 | 0.93 | $13.37_{(530)}$ | <.001 |
| Staff understand the importance of and prioritize self-care. | 3.29 | 0.92 | 2.59 | 0.76 | $9.03_{(526)}$ | <.001 |
| This school adapts policies and procedures to promote emotional, physical, and psychological well-being. | 3.34 | 1.03 | 2.57 | 0.90 | $8.59_{(530)}$ | <.001 |
| I feel confident recognizing the signs and symptoms of trauma in myself and others. | 4.49 | 0.67 | 4.17 | 0.87 | $4.10_{(527)}$ | <.001 |
| Training and commitment index | 3.60 | 0.70 | 2.68 | .61 | $14.99_{(523)}$ | <.001 |

| | TI | | NTI | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Experience | *M* | *SD* | *M* | *SD* | $t_{(df)}$ | *p* |
| Safety (α = .906) | | | | | | |
| It is safe to discuss difficult topics. | 3.38 | 1.14 | 2.77 | 1.09 | $5.75_{(528)}$ | <.001 |
| Staff feel a sense of belonging and connection to this school and staff. | 3.40 | 1.02 | 2.90 | 1.05 | $5.00_{(527)}$ | <.001 |
| When students feel overwhelmed, there is a safe space for them to calm down. | 3.92 | 1.08 | 3.41 | 1.12 | $4.86_{(529)}$ | <.001 |
| There is someone with whom staff can express difficult emotions. | 3.53 | 1.20 | 2.98 | 1.21 | $4.69_{(530)}$ | <.001 |
| The school environment is free from all types of discrimination. | 3.13 | 1.12 | 2.68 | 1.08 | $4.30_{(526)}$ | <.001 |
| It is safe to make suggestions, without fear of consequences. | 3.50 | 1.18 | 3.06 | 1.22 | $3.83_{(529)}$ | <.001 |

| | TI | | NTI | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Experience | *M* | *SD* | *M* | *SD* | $t_{(df)}$ | *p* |
| The school makes appropriate safety accommodations, when needed. | 3.74 | 0.96 | 3.38 | 1.03 | $3.73_{(530)}$ | <.001 |
| It is safe to take risks and make mistakes. | 3.24 | 1.13 | 2.85 | 1.14 | $3.63_{(528)}$ | <.001 |
| Students feel a sense of belonging and connection to this school and staff. | 3.40 | 0.88 | 3.13 | 0.88 | $3.21_{(530)}$ | .001 |
| The physical environment at my school feels safe. | 3.84 | 0.92 | 3.56 | 1.06 | $2.88_{(530)}$ | .004 |
| The school environment is free from verbal, physical, or sexual violence. | 3.41 | 1.29 | 3.13 | 1.24 | $2.25_{(529)}$ | .025 |
| Safety index | 3.49 | 0.78 | 3.08 | 0.78 | $5.43_{(517)}$ | <.001 |
| Strengths-based, equitable focus (α = .950) | | | | | | |

| | TI | | NTI | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Experience | *M* | *SD* | *M* | *SD* | $t_{(df)}$ | *p* |
| Staff are comfortable addressing racism and discrimination. | 3.10 | 1.16 | 2.41 | 1.03 | $6.72_{(528)}$ | <.001 |
| School leadership addresses racism and discrimination appropriately. | 3.27 | 1.23 | 2.56 | 1.09 | $6.55_{(526)}$ | <.001 |
| All races, ethnicities, religions, and cultural traditions and backgrounds are valued. | 3.78 | 1.08 | 3.19 | 1.07 | $5.77_{(529)}$ | <.001 |
| All genders are respected and affirmed. | 3.71 | 1.00 | 3.14 | 1.08 | $5.70_{(527)}$ | <.001 |
| Staff strengths are acknowledged and valued. | 3.39 | 1.03 | 2.86 | 0.99 | $5.52_{(529)}$ | <.001 |
| Everyone is welcomed and supported. | 3.58 | 1.13 | 3.09 | 1.02 | $4.89_{(528)}$ | <.001 |
| Students are treated fairly and equitably. | 3.55 | 1.00 | 3.11 | 1.00 | $4.64_{(528)}$ | <.001 |
| At this school, staff matter. | 3.63 | 1.03 | 3.18 | 1.04 | $4.54_{(529)}$ | <.001 |

| | TI | | NTI | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Experience | *M* | *SD* | *M* | *SD* | $t_{(df)}$ | *p* |
| Staff are treated fairly and equitably. | 3.43 | 1.14 | 2.95 | 1.06 | $4.65_{(528)}$ | <.001 |
| Student strengths are acknowledged and valued. | 3.66 | 0.92 | 3.27 | 0.95 | $4.39_{(529)}$ | <.001 |
| Staff interactions are consistently respectful. | 3.59 | 0.94 | 3.19 | 0.98 | $4.30_{(528)}$ | <.001 |
| At this school, students matter. | 4.14 | 0.87 | 3.78 | 0.92 | $4.16_{(529)}$ | <.001 |
| Strengths-based, equitable focus index | 3.57 | 0.85 | 3.06 | 0.80 | $6.55_{(518)}$ | <.001 |
| Trust-based, collaborative, and empowering relationships (α = .944) | | | | | | |
| Staff have a voice in school decision-making. | 3.02 | 0.99 | 2.42 | 1.00 | $6.29_{(523)}$ | <.001 |
| Staff feel empowered to make decisions related to their work and priorities. | 3.03 | 0.92 | 2.50 | 0.96 | $5.77_{(526)}$ | <.001 |

| | TI | | NTI | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Experience | *M* | *SD* | *M* | *SD* | $t_{(df)}$ | *p* |
| Students feel empowered to make decisions related to their work and priorities. | 2.95 | 0.91 | 2.44 | 0.91 | $5.83_{(524)}$ | <.001 |
| Students and families have a voice in school decision-making. | 2.92 | 0.99 | 2.43 | 0.90 | $5.82_{(526)}$ | <.001 |
| Staff have trust-based relationships with supervisors and colleagues. | 3.17 | 0.96 | 2.67 | 0.97 | $5.42_{(528)}$ | <.001 |
| Leadership encourages collaboration across roles. | 3.40 | 1.06 | 2.82 | 1.17 | $5.25_{(527)}$ | <.001 |
| Across the school organization, people collaborate effectively. | 3.21 | 1.00 | 2.72 | 0.98 | $5.19_{(525)}$ | <.001 |
| Leadership makes decisions transparently. | 2.93 | 1.12 | 2.45 | 1.09 | $4.58_{(525)}$ | <.001 |
| Staff communicate expectations clearly and consistently to students. | 3.46 | 0.94 | 3.07 | 0.96 | $4.34_{(526)}$ | <.001 |

| | TI | | NTI | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Experience | *M* | *SD* | *M* | *SD* | $t_{(df)}$ | *p* |
| Leadership communicates expectations clearly and consistently to staff. | 3.14 | 1.11 | 2.69 | 1.12 | $4.30_{(528)}$ | <.001 |
| Students have trust-based relationships with staff. | 3.64 | 0.80 | 3.30 | 0.90 | $4.08_{(526)}$ | <.001 |
| Staff and administrators role model appropriate behavior. | 3.58 | 0.92 | 3.22 | 0.99 | $3.89_{(527)}$ | <.001 |
| Staff manage their emotions appropriately. | 3.27 | 0.88 | 3.03 | 0.94 | $2.68_{(526)}$ | .008 |
| Relationships index | 3.20 | 0.76 | 2.75 | 0.75 | $6.26_{(515)}$ | <.001 |

**Table 3-2**. Significant Associations Between Climate Indicators and Participant Demographics

| Reference Group & Significant Indicators | Reference Group | | Other Groups | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *M* | *SD* | *M* | *SD* | $t_{(df)}$ | *p* |
| Male | | | | | | |
| School leadership addresses racism and discrimination appropriately. | 3.16 | 1.29 | 2.74 | 1.16 | $2.11_{(520)}$ | .035 |
| I feel confident recognizing the signs and symptoms of trauma in myself and others. | 3.89 | 1.16 | 4.29 | 0.80 | $2.81_{(521)}$ | .005 |
| Black | | | | | | |
| Staff and administrators role model appropriate behavior. | 2.90 | 1.13 | 3.36 | 0.96 | $2.87_{(529)}$ | .004 |

| Reference Group & Significant Indicators | Reference Group | | Other Groups | | $t_{(df)}$ | *p* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *M* | *SD* | *M* | *SD* | | |
| Everyone is welcomed and supported. | 2.80 | 1.14 | 3.27 | 1.06 | $2.65_{(530)}$ | .008 |
| Staff interactions are consistently respectful. | 2.93 | 1.02 | 3.34 | 0.97 | $2.61_{(530)}$ | .009 |
| Students are treated fairly and equitably. | 2.88 | 1.16 | 3.27 | 1.00 | $2.39_{(530)}$ | .017 |
| It is safe to take risks and make mistakes. | 2.58 | 1.20 | 2.99 | 1.14 | $2.22_{(530)}$ | .027 |
| The physical environment at my school feels safe. | 3.33 | 1.19 | 3.67 | 1.01 | $2.08_{(532)}$ | .038 |
| Staff are treated fairly and equitably. | 2.74 | 1.14 | 3.12 | 1.10 | $2.05_{(530)}$ | .041 |
| Leadership makes decisions transparently. | 2.25 | 1.13 | 2.63 | 1.12 | $2.05_{(527)}$ | .041 |

| Reference Group & Significant Indicators | Reference Group | | Other Groups | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *M* | *SD* | *M* | *SD* | $t_{(df)}$ | *p* |
| All races, ethnicities, religions, and cultural traditions and backgrounds are valued. | 3.03 | 1.25 | 3.39 | 1.09 | $2.02_{(531)}$ | .044 |
| It is safe to discuss difficult topics. | 2.60 | 1.17 | 2.98 | 1.13 | $2.01_{(530)}$ | .045 |
| Leadership are committed to being trauma-informed. | 2.30 | 1.11 | 2.66 | 1.10 | $2.01_{(532)}$ | .045 |
| Staff feel a sense of belonging and connection to this school and staff. | 2.72 | 1.05 | 3.07 | 1.06 | $1.99_{(529)}$ | .048 |
| Hispanic | | | | | | |
| Students have trust-based relationships with staff. | 3.15 | 0.93 | 3.43 | 0.88 | $2.38_{(528)}$ | .018 |

| Reference Group & Significant Indicators | Reference Group *M* | Reference Group *SD* | Other Groups *M* | Other Groups *SD* | $t_{(df)}$ | *p* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| All staff in this school receive training. | 2.62 | 1.29 | 2.23 | 1.22 | $2.35_{(531)}$ | .019 |
| Staff feel a sense of belonging and connection to this school and staff. | 2.79 | 1.03 | 3.08 | 1.07 | $1.99_{(529)}$ | .047 |
| White | | | | | | |
| Staff feel a sense of belonging and connection to this school and staff. | 3.14 | 1.06 | 2.77 | 1.03 | $3.65_{(529)}$ | <.001 |
| Students have trust-based relationships with staff. | 3.48 | 0.86 | 3.16 | 0.93 | $3.64_{(528)}$ | <.001 |
| Staff and administrators role model appropriate behavior. | 3.41 | 0.93 | 3.09 | 1.07 | $3.31_{(529)}$ | <.001 |

| Reference Group & Significant Indicators | Reference Group *M* | Reference Group *SD* | Other Groups *M* | Other Groups *SD* | $t_{(df)}$ | *p* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| At this school, students matter. | 3.96 | 0.89 | 3.68 | 0.98 | $3.14_{(531)}$ | .002 |
| Staff have trust-based relationships with supervisors and colleagues. | 2.88 | 1.01 | 2.63 | 0.94 | $2.58_{(530)}$ | .010 |
| At this school, staff matter. | 3.38 | 1.06 | 3.13 | 1.04 | $2.43_{(533)}$ | .015 |
| Everyone is welcomed and supported. | 3.30 | 1.04 | 3.05 | 1.15 | $2.38_{(530)}$ | .018 |
| It is safe to take risks and make mistakes. | 3.03 | 1.15 | 2.78 | 1.12 | $2.25_{(530)}$ | .025 |
| Student strengths are acknowledged and valued. | 3.44 | 0.94 | 3.24 | 0.97 | $2.16_{(531)}$ | .032 |
| The physical environment at my school feels safe. | 3.71 | 1.00 | 3.49 | 1.07 | $2.16_{(532)}$ | .031 |

| Reference Group & Significant Indicators | Reference Group | | Other Groups | | $t_{(df)}$ | $p$ |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *M* | *SD* | *M* | *SD* | | |
| Staff communicate expectations clearly and consistently to students. | 3.24 | 0.93 | 3.04 | 1.05 | $2.15_{(528)}$ | .032 |
| It is safe to discuss difficult topics. | 3.01 | 1.15 | 2.77 | 1.11 | $2.12_{(530)}$ | .035 |
| When students feel overwhelmed, there is a safe place for them to calm down. | 3.03 | 1.15 | 2.78 | 1.12 | $2.08_{(531)}$ | .038 |
| School leadership addresses racism and discrimination appropriately. | 2.83 | 1.19 | 2.61 | 1.13 | $1.98_{(528)}$ | .049 |

**Table 3-3**. *Correlations Between School Socioeconomic/Academic Indicators and Climate Indices*

| | Free/reduced lunch | Historically marginalized | Drop out | Enter college |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Training and commitment index | .019 | .021 | -.054 | -.025 |
| Safety index | -.130** | -.153** | -.225** | .136** |
| Strengths-based, equitable focus index | -.033 | -.042 | -.164** | .124** |
| Relationships index | -.091* | -.119** | -.174** | .147** |

*Note*. * $p < 0.05$. ** $p < 0.01$.

**Table 3-4**. *Hierarchical Logistic Regression for Predicting Trauma-Informed Schools by Personal Demographics and School Characteristics with Training and Commitment Index*

| | Step 1 | | | | Step 2 | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *b* | *SE* | *OR* | *95% CI* | *b* | *SE* | *OR* | *95% CI* |
| Constant | 1.027 | 1.663 | 2.793 | | -9.225 | 2.455 | .000 | |
| Gender (Male = Ref) | -.720 | .454 | .487 | .200, 1.185 | -.967 | .609 | .380 | .115, 1.255 |
| Race/Ethnicity (Other = Ref) | | | | | | | | |
| Black/African American | .210 | .821 | 1.233 | .247, 6.160 | 2.648 | 1.153 | 14.130 | 1.474, 135.410 |
| Hispanic | .416 | .682 | 1.516 | .399, 5.768 | 1.242 | .908 | 3.463 | .584, 20.530 |
| White | .367 | .597 | 1.444 | .448, 4.648 | 1.451 | .794 | 4.266 | .901, 20.205 |
| Participant years of experience (<1 = Ref) | | | | | | | | |

| | Step 1 | | | | Step 2 | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *b* | *SE* | *OR* | *95% CI* | *b* | *SE* | *OR* | *95% CI* |
| 1-2 | -1.140 | .770 | .320 | .071, 1.447 | -2.539 | 1.119 | .097 | .009, .707 |
| 3-5 | -.367 | .674 | .693 | .185, 2.597 | -2.467 | .953 | .085* | .013, .549 |
| 6-10 | -1.024 | .693 | .359 | .092, 1.397 | -3.745 | 1.029 | .024** | .003, .178 |
| 11-15 | -1.451 | .737 | .234 | .055, .994 | -2.695 | 1.014 | .068* | .009, .493 |
| 16-20 | -1.396 | .723 | .248 | .060, 1.021 | -3.771 | 1.010 | .023** | .003, .167 |
| 20+ | -1.450 | .683 | .235 | .061, .895 | -3.616 | .995 | .027** | .004, .189 |
| Students | | | | | | | | |
| Qualify for free/reduced lunch | -.006 | .008 | .994 | .978, 1.009 | -.010 | .011 | .990 | .970, 1.011 |

| | Step 1 | | | | Step 2 | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *b* | *SE* | *OR* | *95% CI* | *b* | *SE* | *OR* | *95% CI* |
| From historically marginalized populations | .010 | .008 | 1.010 | .995, 1.025 | .026 | .011 | 1.026 | 1.005, 1.047 |
| Drop out | .000 | .010 | 1.000 | .981, 1.019 | .015 | .013 | 1.015 | .989, 1.041 |
| Enter college | -.007 | .007 | .993 | .978, 1.007 | -.016 | .010 | .984 | .965, 1.005 |
| School setting (Urban = Ref) | | | | | | | | |
| Suburban | -.387 | .379 | .679 | .323, 1.427 | .069 | .538 | 1.071 | .373, 3.072 |
| Rural | .018 | .422 | 1.018 | .445, 2.330 | .547 | .583 | 1.728 | .551, 5.418 |
| Grade level (Preschool = Ref) | | | | | | | | |
| Elementary | -.444 | 1.008 | .641 | .089, 4.620 | -.030 | 1.168 | .970 | .098, 9.975 |

| | Step 1 | | | | Step 2 | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *b* | *SE* | *OR* | *95% CI* | *b* | *SE* | *OR* | *95% CI* |
| Middle | .176 | 1.032 | 1.193 | .158, 9.022 | .503 | 1.205 | 1.654 | .156, 17.651 |
| High school | -.091 | 1.011 | .913 | .126, 6.620 | .865 | 1.171 | 2.376 | .239, 23.578 |
| U.S. region (Northeast = Ref) | | | | | | | | |
| Midwest | .624 | .377 | 1.867 | .891, 3.911 | 1.008 | .534 | 2.740 | .962, 7.802 |
| South | -.111 | .444 | .895 | .375, 2.137 | -1.044 | .657 | .352 | .097, 1.277 |
| West | -.134 | .440 | .875 | .369, 2.073 | -.455 | .589 | .634 | .200, 2.015 |
| Training & Commitment Index | | | | | 3.223 | .401 | 25.108** | 11.447, 55.076 |
| Model $\chi^2$ (df) = | 30.031 (22) | | | | 174.622 (23)** | | | |

| | Step 1 | | | | Step 2 | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *b* | *SE* | *OR* | *95% CI* | *b* | *SE* | *OR* | *95% CI* |
| $\Delta\chi^2$ (*df*) = | | | | | 144.591 (1)** | | | |
| Nagelkerke $R^2$ = | .132 | | | | .614 | | | |
| n = | 304 | | | | | | | |

*Note*. Other races/ethnicities include Asian, Hawaii Native and Pacific Islander, Native American, and Multiracial.
* p<.01 ** p<.001

**Table 3-5**. *Hierarchical Logistic Regression for Predicting Trauma-Informed Schools by Personal Demographics and School Characteristics with Safety Index*

| | Step 1 | | | | Step 2 | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *b* | *SE* | *OR* | *95% CI* | *b* | *SE* | *OR* | *95% CI* |
| Constant | 1.026 | 1.691 | 2.789 | | -3.002 | 1.987 | .050 | |
| Gender (Male = Ref) | -.771 | .457 | .462 | .189, 1.132 | -.595 | .497 | .552 | .208, 1.462 |
| Race/Ethnicity (Other = Ref) | | | | | | | | |
| Black/African American | .576 | .860 | 1.778 | .330, 9.594 | .951 | .952 | 2.590 | .401, 16.738 |
| Hispanic | .593 | .716 | 1.809 | .445, 7.354 | .782 | .825 | 2.186 | .434, 11.019 |
| White | .528 | .637 | 1.695 | .487, 5.902 | .595 | .723 | 1.814 | .439, 7.488 |
| Participant years of experience (<1 = Ref) | | | | | | | | |

| | Step 1 | | | | Step 2 | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *b* | *SE* | *OR* | *95% CI* | *b* | *SE* | *OR* | *95% CI* |
| 1-2 | -1.218 | .804 | .296 | .061, 1.430 | -1.659 | .887 | .190 | .033, 1.083 |
| 3-5 | -.206 | .698 | .814 | .207, 3.196 | -.952 | .774 | .386 | .085, 1.758 |
| 6-10 | -.958 | .708 | .384 | .096, 1.537 | -1.905 | .800 | .149 | .031, .714 |
| 11-15 | -1.359 | .757 | .257 | .058, 1.133 | -2.003 | .843 | .135 | .026, .705 |
| 16-20 | -1.350 | .737 | .259 | .061, 1.100 | -2.314 | .823 | .099* | .020, .496 |
| 20+ | -1.363 | .707 | .256 | .064, 1.023 | -2.199 | .803 | .111* | .023, .535 |
| Students | | | | | | | | |
| Qualify for free/reduced lunch | -.007 | .008 | .993 | .977, 1.008 | -.005 | .009 | .995 | .978, 1.012 |

| | Step 1 | | | | Step 2 | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *b* | *SE* | *OR* | *95% CI* | *b* | *SE* | *OR* | *95% CI* |
| From historically marginalized populations | .010 | .007 | 1.010 | .995, 1.025 | .010 | .008 | 1.010 | .994, 1.027 |
| Drop out | -.003 | .010 | .997 | .978, 1.017 | .011 | .011 | 1.011 | .989, 1.034 |
| Enter college | -.008 | .008 | .992 | .977, 1.007 | -.014 | .009 | .986 | .970, 1.033 |
| School setting (Urban = Ref) | | | | | | | | |
| Suburban | -.403 | .382 | .668 | .316, 1.412 | -.401 | .419 | .670 | .295, 1.522 |
| Rural | .083 | .418 | 1.086 | .479, 2.465 | -.159 | .454 | .853 | .350, 2.078 |
| Grade level (Preschool = Ref) | | | | | | | | |
| Elementary | -.469 | 1.016 | .625 | .085, 4.582 | -.700 | 1.088 | .497 | .059, 4.190 |

| | Step 1 | | | | Step 2 | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *b* | *SE* | *OR* | *95% CI* | *b* | *SE* | *OR* | *95% CI* |
| Middle | .044 | 1.040 | 1.045 | .136, 8.019 | -.010 | 1.114 | .990 | .112, 8.781 |
| High school | -.088 | 1.019 | .915 | .124, 6.746 | .104 | 1.092 | 1.110 | .130, 9.438 |
| U.S. region (Northeast = Ref) | | | | | | | | |
| Midwest | .528 | .380 | 1.696 | .806, 3.569 | .717 | .417 | 2.049 | .905, 4.637 |
| South | -.219 | .455 | .803 | .329, 1.961 | -.251 | .498 | .778 | .293, 2.064 |
| West | -.087 | .441 | .917 | .387, 2.175 | -.031 | .477 | .969 | .381, 2.466 |
| Safety Index | | | | | 1.333 | .224 | 3.793** | 2.446, 5.882 |
| Model $\chi^2$ (df) = | 28.611 (22) | | | | 74.080** (23) | | | |

| | Step 1 | | | | Step 2 | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *b* | *SE* | *OR* | *95% CI* | *b* | *SE* | *OR* | *95% CI* |
| $\Delta\chi^2$ (*df*) = | | | | | 45.469** (1) | | | |
| Nagelkerke $R^2$ = | .129 | | | | .311 | | | |
| n = | 298 | | | | | | | |

*Note*. Other races/ethnicities include Asian, Hawaii Native and Pacific Islander, Native American, and Multiracial.
* p<.01 ** p<.001

**Table 3-6**. *Hierarchical Logistic Regression for Predicting Trauma-Informed Schools by Personal Demographics and School Characteristics with Strengths-Based, Equity-Focused Index*

| | Step 1 | | | | Step 2 | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *B* | *SE* | *OR* | *95% CI* | *b* | *SE* | *OR* | *95% CI* |
| Constant | 1.017 | 1.662 | 2.766 | | -3.673 | 2.004 | .025 | |
| Gender (Male = Ref) | -.730 | .454 | .482 | .198, 1.173 | -.615 | .501 | .540 | .202, 1.443 |
| Race/Ethnicity (Other = Ref) | | | | | | | | |
| Black/African American | .234 | .820 | 1.264 | .253, 6.305 | .864 | .926 | 2.372 | .386, 14.577 |
| Hispanic | .351 | .679 | 1.420 | .375, 5.379 | .398 | .795 | 1.489 | .314, 7.069 |
| White | .378 | .596 | 1.459 | .454, 4.691 | .620 | .687 | 1.859 | .484, 7.139 |

| | Step 1 | | | | Step 2 | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *B* | *SE* | *OR* | *95% CI* | *b* | *SE* | *OR* | *95% CI* |
| Participant years of experience (<1 = Ref) | | | | | | | | |
| 1-2 | -1.147 | .770 | .318 | .070, 1.436 | -1.536 | .874 | .215 | .039, 1.193 |
| 3-5 | -.369 | .674 | .692 | .185, 2.589 | -.934 | .768 | .393 | .087, 1.769 |
| 6-10 | -1.099 | .692 | .333 | .086, 1.293 | -2.053 | .805 | .128 | .027, .622 |
| 11-15 | -1.459 | .736 | .232 | .055, .984 | -1.926 | .836 | .146 | .028, .750 |
| 16-20 | -1.449 | .722 | .235 | .057, .966 | -2.367 | .820 | .094* | .019, .468 |
| 20+ | -1.425 | .683 | .241 | .063, .918 | -2.101 | .790 | .122* | .026, .575 |

| | Step 1 | | | | Step 2 | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *B* | *SE* | *OR* | *95% CI* | *b* | *SE* | *OR* | *95% CI* |
| Students | | | | | | | | |
| Qualify for free/reduced lunch | -.007 | .008 | .993 | .978, 1.008 | -.007 | .009 | .993 | .976, 1.010 |
| From historically marginalized populations | .011 | .007 | 1.011 | .996, 1.026 | .010 | .008 | 1.010 | .994, 1.027 |
| Drop out | -.001 | .010 | .999 | .981, 1.019 | .015 | .011 | 1.015 | .993, 1.038 |
| Enter college | -.007 | .007 | .993 | .979, 1.008 | -.012 | .009 | .988 | .972, 1.005 |
| School setting (Urban = Ref) | | | | | | | | |
| Suburban | -.347 | .371 | .707 | .342, 1.463 | -.282 | .416 | .754 | .333, 1.706 |
| Rural | .070 | .414 | 1.072 | .476, 2.415 | .108 | .458 | 1.114 | .454, 2.733 |

| | Step 1 | | | | Step 2 | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *B* | *SE* | *OR* | *95% CI* | *b* | *SE* | *OR* | *95% CI* |
| Grade level (Preschool = Ref) | | | | | | | | |
| Elementary | -.485 | 1.008 | .616 | .085, 4.439 | -.501 | 1.087 | .606 | .072, 5.103 |
| Middle | .103 | 1.031 | 1.109 | .147, 8.358 | .280 | 1.108 | 1.323 | .151, 11.612 |
| High school | -.122 | 1.011 | .885 | .122, 6.423 | .368 | 1.095 | 1.445 | .169, 12.362 |
| U.S. region (Northeast = Ref) | | | | | | | | |
| Midwest | .616 | .375 | 1.851 | .888, 3.859 | .715 | .417 | 2.044 | .902, 4.632 |
| South | -.094 | .444 | .910 | .381, 2.171 | -.215 | .500 | .806 | .302, 2.149 |
| West | -.083 | .440 | .921 | .389, 2.180 | .030 | .478 | 1.031 | .404, 2.631 |

| | Step 1 | | | | Step 2 | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *B* | *SE* | *OR* | *95% CI* | *b* | *SE* | *OR* | *95% CI* |
| Strengths and Equity Index | | | | | 1.400 | .220 | 4.056** | 2.636, 6.241 |
| Model $\chi^2$ (df) = | 29.121 (22) | | | | 84.247 (23)** | | | |
| $\Delta\chi^2$ (*df*) = | | | | | 55.126 (1)** | | | |
| Nagelkerke $R^2$ = | .128 | | | | .340 | | | |
| n = | 305 | | | | | | | |

*Note*. Other races/ethnicities include Asian, Hawaii Native and Pacific Islander, Native American, and Multiracial.
* p<.01 ** p<.001

**Table 3-7**. Hierarchical Logistic Regression for Predicting Trauma-Informed Schools by Personal Demographics and School Characteristics, with Relationship Index

| | Step 1 | | | | Step 2 | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *b* | *SE* | *OR* | *95% CI* | *b* | *SE* | *OR* | *95% CI* |
| Constant | .865 | 1.662 | 2.375 | | -3.142 | 1.938 | .043 | |
| Gender (Male = Ref) | -.738 | .455 | .478 | .196, 1.165 | -.690 | .502 | .502 | .188, 1.343 |
| Race/Ethnicity (Other = Ref) | | | | | | | | |
| Black/African American | .317 | .824 | 1.373 | .273, 6.906 | .699 | .897 | 2.013 | .347, 11.686 |
| Hispanic | .248 | .692 | 1.282 | .330, 4.977 | .579 | .777 | 1.785 | .389, 8.185 |
| White | .390 | .596 | 1.478 | .460, 4.750 | .703 | .660 | 2.020 | .554, 7.364 |
| Participant years of experience (<1 = Ref) | | | | | | | | |
| 1-2 | -1.150 | .770 | .317 | .070, 1.432 | -1.564 | .897 | .209 | .036, 1.215 |

| | Step 1 | | | | Step 2 | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *b* | *SE* | *OR* | *95% CI* | *b* | *SE* | *OR* | *95% CI* |
| 3-5 | -.352 | .673 | .703 | .188, 2.632 | -.718 | .785 | .488 | .105, 2.273 |
| 6-10 | -1.089 | .691 | .336 | .087, 1.304 | -1.809 | .819 | .164 | .033, .815 |
| 11-15 | -1.460 | .736 | .232 | .055, .982 | -1.818 | .863 | .162 | .030, .880 |
| 16-20 | -1.406 | .721 | .245 | .060, 1.008 | -2.064 | .836 | .127 | .025, .654 |
| 20+ | -1.452 | .686 | .234 | .061, .899 | -1.945 | .813 | .143 | .029, .703 |
| Students | | | | | | | | |
| Qualify for free/reduced lunch | -.007 | .008 | .993 | .978, 1.009 | -.008 | .009 | .992 | .975, 1.009 |
| From historically marginalized populations | .010 | .007 | 1.010 | .996, 1.025 | .014 | .008 | 1.014 | .998, 1.031 |

| | Step 1 | | | | Step 2 | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *b* | *SE* | *OR* | *95% CI* | *b* | *SE* | *OR* | *95% CI* |
| Drop out | .001 | .010 | 1.001 | .982, 1.020 | .016 | .011 | 1.016 | .994, 1.038 |
| Enter college | -.006 | .008 | .995 | .980, 1.009 | -.013 | .009 | .988 | .971, 1.004 |
| School setting (Urban = Ref) | | | | | | | | |
| Suburban | -.329 | .373 | .720 | .347, 1.494 | -.263 | .410 | .769 | .344, 1.716 |
| Rural | .094 | .417 | 1.099 | .485, 2.488 | -.025 | .454 | .975 | .400, 2.374 |
| Grade level (Preschool = Ref) | | | | | | | | |
| Elementary | -.451 | 1.005 | .637 | .089, 4.566 | -.735 | 1.059 | .479 | .060, 3.817 |
| Middle | .138 | 1.028 | 1.148 | .153, 8.605 | .099 | 1.082 | 1.014 | .133, 9.199 |

| | Step 1 | | | | Step 2 | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *b* | *SE* | *OR* | *95% CI* | *b* | *SE* | *OR* | *95% CI* |
| High school | -.114 | 1.009 | .892 | .124, 6.445 | .049 | 1.066 | 1.050 | .130, 8.489 |
| U.S. region (Northeast = Ref) | | | | | | | | |
| Midwest | .617 | .375 | 1.853 | .889, 3.863 | .636 | .409 | 1.888 | .847, 4.212 |
| South | -.139 | .450 | .871 | .361, 2.101 | -.292 | .497 | .747 | .282, 1.979 |
| West | -.034 | .439 | .967 | .409, 2.286 | -.220 | .465 | .802 | .322, 1.997 |
| Relationship Index | | | | | 1.414 | .232 | 4.112** | 2.609, 6.481 |
| Model $\chi^2$ (df) = | 28.875 (22) | | | | 77.389 (23)** | | | |
| $\Delta\chi^2$ (*df*) = | | | | | 48.514 (1)** | | | |

| | Step 1 | | | | Step 2 | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *b* | *SE* | *OR* | *95% CI* | *b* | *SE* | *OR* | *95% CI* |
| Nagelkerke $R^2$ = | .128 | | | | .318 | | | |
| n = | 302 | | | | | | | |

*Note*. Other races/ethnicities include Asian, Hawaii Native and Pacific Islander, Native American, and Multiracial.
* p<.01 ** p<.001

**Table 3-8.** *Hierarchical Logistic Regression for Predicting Trauma-Informed Schools by Personal Demographics, School Characteristics, and All Climate Indices*

| | Step 1 | | | | Step 2 | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *b* | *SE* | *OR* | *95% CI* | *b* | *SE* | *OR* | *95% CI* |
| Constant | .867 | 1.692 | 2.380 | | -10.131 | 2.625 | .000 | |
| Gender (Male = Ref) | -.753 | .458 | .471 | .192, 1.155 | -.976 | .616 | .377 | .113, 1.261 |
| Race/Ethnicity (Other = Ref) | | | | | | | | |
| Black/African American | .665 | .866 | 1.944 | .356, 10.612 | 3.212 | 1.205 | 24.817* | 2.337, 263.523 |
| Hispanic | .566 | .729 | 1.762 | .422, 7.358 | 1.779 | .981 | 5.923 | .866, 40.526 |
| White | .556 | .638 | 1.744 | .500, 6.085 | 2.014 | .851 | 7.495 | 1.414, 39.772 |
| Participant years of experience (<1 = Ref) | | | | | | | | |

| | Step 1 | | | | Step 2 | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *b* | *SE* | *OR* | *95% CI* | *b* | *SE* | *OR* | *95% CI* |
| 1-2 | -1.224 | .805 | .294 | .061, 1.425 | -2.676 | 1.148 | .069 | .007, .653 |
| 3-5 | -.196 | .698 | .822 | .209, 3.227 | -2.711 | .978 | .066 | .010, .452 |
| 6-10 | -.890 | .709 | .411 | .102, 1.648 | -3.812 | 1.043 | .022** | .003, .171 |
| 11-15 | -1.368 | .758 | .255 | .058, 1.124 | -2.744 | 1.026 | .064* | .009, .481 |
| 16-20 | -1.271 | .738 | .281 | .066, 1.192 | -3.851 | 1.027 | .021** | .003, .159 |
| 20+ | -1.363 | .712 | .256 | .063, 1.032 | -3.718 | 1.027 | .024** | .003, .182 |
| Students | | | | | | | | |
| Qualify for free/reduced lunch | -.006 | .008 | .994 | .978, 1.009 | -.008 | .011 | .992 | .971, 1.014 |

| | Step 1 | | | | Step 2 | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *b* | *SE* | *OR* | *95% CI* | *b* | *SE* | *OR* | *95% CI* |
| From historically marginalized populations | .009 | .008 | 1.009 | .994, 1.024 | .024 | .011 | 1.024 | 1.003, 1.046 |
| Drop out | -.002 | .010 | .998 | .979, 1.019 | .019 | .014 | 1.019 | .992, 1.047 |
| Enter college | -.008 | .008 | .992 | .997, 1.008 | -.016 | .011 | .984 | .963, 1.004 |
| School setting (Urban = Ref) | | | | | | | | |
| Suburban | -.415 | .391 | .660 | .307, 1.420 | .234 | .557 | 1.263 | .424, 3.762 |
| Rural | .045 | .429 | 1.046 | .451, 2.424 | .579 | .597 | 1.784 | .554, 5.744 |
| Grade level (Preschool = Ref) | | | | | | | | |
| Elementary | -.403 | 1.012 | .668 | .092, 4.855 | -.130 | 1.189 | .878 | .085, 9.036 |

| | Step 1 | | | | Step 2 | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *b* | *SE* | *OR* | *95% CI* | *b* | *SE* | *OR* | *95% CI* |
| Middle | .132 | 1.037 | 1.141 | .149, 8.707 | .322 | 1.225 | 1.380 | .125, 15.213 |
| High school | -.037 | 1.015 | .964 | .132, 7.040 | .744 | 1.189 | 2.104 | .205, 21.617 |
| U.S. region (Northeast = Ref) | | | | | | | | |
| Midwest | .546 | .382 | 1.726 | .817, 3.646 | .875 | .540 | 2.399 | .833, 6.908 |
| South | -.279 | .462 | .756 | .306, 1.871 | -1.096 | .681 | .334 | .088, 1.268 |
| West | -.041 | .443 | .960 | .402, 2.288 | -.390 | .604 | .677 | .207, 2.212 |
| Training Index | | | | | 3.235 | .465 | 25.398** | 10.219, 63.125 |
| Relationship Index | | | | | .086 | .552 | 1.089 | .369, 3.213 |

| | Step 1 | | | | Step 2 | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *b* | *SE* | *OR* | *95% CI* | *b* | *SE* | *OR* | *95% CI* |
| Safety Index | | | | | .221 | .490 | 1.248 | .477, 3.262 |
| Strengths Index | | | | | -.162 | .584 | .851 | .271, 2.670 |
| Model $\chi^2$ (df) = | 27.82 (22) | | | | 165.69 (26)** | | | |
| $\Delta\chi^2$ (*df*) = | | | | | 137.87 (4)** | | | |
| Nagelkerke $R^2$ = | .129 | | | | .613 | | | |
| n = | 290 | | | | | | | |

*Note*. Other races/ethnicities include Asian, Hawaii Native and Pacific Islander, Native American, and Multiracial.
* p<.01 ** p<.001

# Chapter 4: Social Workers' Perceptions of Necessary Components and Expected Outcomes for Trauma-Informed Schools (Study 3)

Social workers are school professionals tasked with providing trauma-related services to children and families from a school–community ecological perspective (Gitterman et al., 2018). Understanding social workers' views about trauma-informed (TI) approaches in schools is thus essential. Although TI approaches in schools have been popular in practice for the past decade, comprehensive reviews identify only a handful of studies that investigate an ecological whole-school approach to trauma (Avery et al., 2021; Maynard et al., 2019). As a result, there is a clear need to better understand what is being done in schools and what school social workers believe constitute best practices and components needed for comprehensive trauma-informed approaches (Maynard et al., 2019).

This study responds to gaps in the trauma-informed schools literature. It also builds on recent studies focusing on practices, policies, and climate in schools that social workers serve (Author, Study 1, Study 2 of this dissertation). The first two studies of this dissertation focus on what, if any, differences exist between schools social workers identify as trauma informed and non-TI schools. Due to the limited nature of checklists and Likert scales in quantitative surveys, interviewing social workers for their perspectives and in-depth understanding can supplement and further inform an empirical understanding of ecological components needed for TI schools. In this study, interviews with practicing school social workers allowed for a deeper exploration of differences between TI and non-TI schools. Social workers were asked to identify practices and policies they perceived as typical of TI schools and how such schools may differ from non-TI schools. Social workers are ideal respondents to this type of inquiry because of their roles related to mental and behavioral health in schools. Also, the latest practice model calls for school

social workers to work across the ecological spectrum, from micro-level, interpersonal interventions; through mezzo-level schoolwide interventions to create positive climate; to macro-level approaches targeting social justice issues (Tan & SSWAA, 2024). This study explores a) how school social workers described trauma-informed schools, b) recommended adaptations for trauma-informed policies and practices, c) perceived benefits that can be derived from a trauma-informed environment, and d) the role of social workers in relation to educators and administrators in trauma-informed schools.

From a theory building perspective, this manuscript also compares social workers' understanding of trauma-informed approaches with common components of trauma-informed schools found in the literature. An analysis of these gaps can inform research, practice, and theory development. The research questions guiding this study were: How do school social workers think about trauma-informed schools? What organizational or ecological components do school social workers believe are needed for a school to be considered trauma informed? What do school social workers describe as outcomes from trauma-informed schools? What do social workers believe is the role of educators and administrators in both creating and sustaining trauma-informed schools?

## Literature Review

### The Rise of Trauma-Informed Approaches in Schools

Significant numbers of children and youth report traumatic experiences before age 18 (Perfect et al., 2016; Turner et al., 2010). Trauma histories have consistently been associated with challenges to children's focus and achievement at school (Perfect et al., 2016). Public schools educate the vast majority of young people in the United States (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022) and thus can be expected to encounter many children with trauma

histories. In the past decade, bolstered in part by supportive federal legislation, schools have increasingly chosen to prioritize creating trauma-sensitive and responsive environments (Simon et al., 2020). Due to the nascency of the field and the challenges of studying whole-school approaches empirically, much is still unknown about what trauma-informed or trauma-responsive schools look like in practice. It also remains unclear what outcomes they enable (Avery et al., 2021; Maynard et al., 2019; Thomas et al., 2019; Watson & Astor, under review).

**Role of Social Workers in School-Based Trauma Response**

Social workers play a unique role in school-based trauma awareness and response. In addition to providing clinical behavioral and mental health interventions in many U.S. schools, they are trained to consider how people fit within their environment and address any barriers to person-environment fit from both an individual and contextual perspective (Gitterman et al., 2018; Teater, 2014). Current practice models also call for school social workers to work across the ecological spectrum, providing interpersonal support, working on school climate initiatives, and assisting in capacity building to advance educational equity (Tan & SSWAA, 2024). Unfortunately, many social workers report feeling excluded from district and school decision making regarding staff members', students', and families' mental health needs and well-being (Watson et al., 2022b). As professionals trained in a socioecological approach to supporting students, staff, and families, social workers' voices are essential to any discussion of trauma awareness or response in schools.

**Considerations for School-Based Approaches to Trauma and Social Emotional Learning**

Although school-based professionals generally believe schools have a dual purpose of developing young people from both an academic and social-emotional perspective (Hess & Noguera, 2021), there are numerous challenges related to the incorporation of social and

emotional learning (SEL) in schools (Gregory & Fergus, 2017; Gueldner et al., 2020; Jones & Kahn, 2018). Approaches used to enhance students' social emotional development often have serious critiques (Gregory & Fergus, 2017; O'Toole, 2022). One concern relates to the tendency of SEL programs to emphasize individual character development and resilience, and ignore systemic factors like racism, classism, and unequal access to resources. Because these programs are often color blind in implementation, their ability to address issues of privilege and power are limited (Gregory & Fergus, 2017; Mahfouz & Anthony-Stevens, 2020). Another concern of many SEL programs is their target of intervention, namely a focus on students and rare inclusion of school staff who direct and oversee students' daily experiences at school (Gherardi et al., 2020; Gregory & Fergus, 2017).

The COVID-19 pandemic escalated attention to trauma by schools, and many educators and other school professionals came to view SEL programs as a potential response to trauma, thereby conflating SEL programs and school-based trauma response (Duane & Winninghoff, 2023; Watson et al., 2022b). Trauma-informed approaches have also been critiqued for a color-blind perspective in practice, if not theory (Gherardi et al., 2020). This study addresses gaps in the literature by asking social workers directly how they view the relationship between trauma-informed approaches and anti-racism, diversity, equity, and inclusion (ADEI) initiatives.

## Methods

### Population and Study Samples

The purposefully selected sample (N = 20) was recruited from respondents to a 2022 survey of school social workers (Author, Study 1 and Study 2 of this dissertation). At the conclusion of the survey, respondents were asked if they were willing to provide an email address for follow up. One hundred and eight respondents provided consent for contact. All 108

respondents were sent an email asking about their interest in and availability for a 30-minute in-depth, semi-structured interview about trauma-informed schools. In the first round of interviews, which took place during June and July 2023, we requested to speak with individuals who reported working in a trauma-informed school or district. Individuals who did not work in trauma-informed schools were also interviewed in subsequent rounds. Second-round interviews took place between August and October 2023. Respondents first answered a brief demographic questionnaire about their gender, race/ethnicity, professional role, years of experience, and whether they worked in a trauma-informed school or district (see Appendix I). Our email solicitations requested diverse perspectives in terms of respondents' state of practice, race/ethnicity, and gender identity. All interviews were conducted by the lead investigator.

Interviewees were very experienced in school social work (see Table 1). Half had practiced for 20 or more years, 3 for 16-20 years, 1 for 11-15 years, 3 for 6-10 years, and 3 for 3-5 years. No interviewees had worked fewer than 3 years as a school social worker. Fifteen respondents currently served or had recently retired as school social workers, one as a district supervisor, and four as district heads of social work services. Due to their level of experience, interviewees had rich social work histories from which to draw during interviews. Respondents displayed an in-depth understanding of organizational hierarchies that impact implementation and sustainment of schoolwide approaches.

Several interviewees worked across multiple school sites, enabling them to compare experiences across schools. Thirteen served in elementary schools, 9 in middle schools, and 9 in high schools. Seventeen interviewees worked in traditional public schools or districts, 2 in public charters, and 1 in a private school. Interviewees represented a variety of U.S. locations: 4 reported practicing in the northeast (in Connecticut, New York, and Pennsylvania); 11 in the

midwest (across Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Minnesota, and Wisconsin), 3 in the south (between Florida and Texas), and 2 in the west (both in California). Twelve respondents worked in urban settings, 5 in suburban settings, and 3 in rural settings. Fifteen respondents reported they worked in trauma-informed schools or districts and five said they did not. In terms of personal demographics, 19 respondents identified as female and one as male. Respondents were able to select multiple racial/ethnic identities and 15 identified as White, 5 as Hispanic/Latinx, and one as Black/African American. See Table 1 for details.

**Instrument and Ethics**

A guide for in-depth, semi-structured interviews was developed and included questions about the school or schools respondents worked in, the characteristics they identified with a trauma-informed school, and benefits they expected to derive from trauma-informed schools and leadership (see Appendix I). Respondents practiced across the United States and were interviewed by Zoom. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were an appropriate data source for this study because they allowed for open-ended responses and for the researcher to retain some control over interview subject matter while also probing for more detail where needed. Semi-structured interviews are also believed to work well to explore existing concepts such as trauma-informed approaches in schools and to discuss prior findings (Ayres, 2008).

Approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board at the University of California, Los Angeles prior to conducting this study.

**Analysis**

Zoom interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim by Sonix.ai, an online transcription service powered by artificial intelligence that was used because we found it provided more accurate transcriptions than Zoom. Data were de-identified and each manuscript

was read through multiple times by the lead investigator. Thematic analysis involved hand coding of printed interview transcripts, using a deductive approach. Thematic analysis was useful to identify patterns across the entire data set in response to specific research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2012). Deductive coding was appropriate because this study was theory driven and we sought to connect respondents' understanding of trauma-informed schools to existing conceptual frameworks (Saldaña, 2021). Initial codes related to our research questions (e.g., required components, expected outcomes) and then subcodes were applied to distinguish among specified components or outcomes.

To enhance rigor, throughout analysis, the lead investigator debriefed with other members of the research team about the coding process and how her positionality could be influencing her perception of findings (Padgett, 2011). As a graduate student in social welfare who has worked in and led a variety of nonprofit and for-profit organizations, but who has not worked in schools, debriefing with social work professors with experience in U.S. K-12 schools assisted in understanding the perspectives of some respondents. Our prior findings provided a source of data triangulation (e.g., Author, Study 1, Study 2 of this dissertation; Watson et al., 2022b). To enhance transparency (Saldaña, 2011), this article shares identified themes as well as conflicting data to illustrate how findings may generalize.

## Findings

Key themes that emerged from the analysis included: 1) Social workers believed that trauma-informed schools require a holistic, systemic focus, not just the availability of trauma training or mental health services; 2) Social workers viewed positive interpersonal connections as key facilitators to the development and sustainment of trauma-informed approaches in schools; and 3) Most but not all social workers believed that being trauma informed requires a

commitment to anti-racism, diversity, equity, and inclusion. Subthemes of social workers' views on the systemic nature of trauma-informed approaches included key characteristics of a trauma-informed school, expected outcomes, and implementation barriers. A subtheme related to modeling trauma-informed interpersonal skills in the development and sustainment of a trauma-informed school included the importance of working with administrators and educators.

**Theme 1: Social Workers Viewed Being Trauma Informed as a Whole-School, Holistic Approach**

School social workers who participated in this study believed that trauma-informed schools required much more than the availability of clinical trauma treatments or mental health services (see Table 2). They viewed a trauma-informed school as a holistic approach that influenced all aspects of a school's organization and activities. For example, a social worker who reported working in a trauma-informed school said:

> I don't think that you can have one program where a kid goes and it's a trauma-informed school. You need to have the lens of trauma informed seep throughout the school, from administration all the way through to like lunch aides, school aides, security guards, and I think that is what we've done, really like invite everyone into the conversation about why people do what they do, why do they behave the way that they behave, and what are the things we can do in order to support people when they have reactions that may be caused by something in their own experience as opposed to what's happening at this moment.

Another social worker shared both why a trauma-informed approach is important as well as how it looks in practice:

> The practices, the policies, the teaching style…the focus is reaching those kids who are struggling, going through, or have gone through trauma… Because if we can reach them,

> we can reach everyone. It's both a top down and a down up [approach]. It comes from the admin and the way they do policies and procedures just on a staff level, on a community level, but it's also from the teachers and the way they interact with each other, with the students, with staff members that aren't teachers. The focus is across the board.

A school social worker with more than 25 years of experience explained the rationale for a whole-school approach, "You can't do individual work with 1,200 kids. So we've had to really look at systemically how do we provide the best support possible to the full [school] population, not just the students." The above perspectives were true across social workers who reported working in a trauma-informed school or district and those that did not, indicating that in general, school social workers seem to identify a trauma-informed approach as a holistic, systemic process.

***Social Workers Reported Numerous Characteristics They Expected to See in Trauma-Informed Schools***

School social workers identified climate characteristics such as a welcoming school environment where students, staff, and families felt physically and emotionally safe and supported, and where trusting and collaborative relationships were the norm. They also identified policy and programmatic elements, including the availability of trauma training, changes to discipline policies, and the presence of a whole-child focus. Contrary to the trauma informed literature, most social workers did not include access to clinical trauma treatments or mental health services as part of their definition of a trauma-informed school.

**The Necessity but Insufficiency of Trauma Training for Trauma-Informed Schools.** Social workers focused heavily on the importance of trauma training. In fact, trauma training was

present in every school or district identified as trauma informed by respondents. As a social worker based in New York explained:

> We have done multiple trainings as a whole school staff on trauma. The school sent me for a trauma certification so myself and the school psychologist were trained in a week-long course. We also have had a consultant at the school for the last, I believe, 4 years that has been supporting the school in trauma-informed pedagogy as well as sending out different staff members for training in restorative circles.

Although identified as a necessary component, training was not viewed as sufficient to the creation of a trauma-informed school. One social work supervisor in a district they indicated was trauma informed said:

> Knowing the effects of trauma is the first part. And the second is how do we interact with [students] in a sensitive manner that would allow for them to be able to heal and to persevere instead of pushing them further down by making them feel, you know, like there is something wrong with them.

Trauma training was often also reported in schools and districts that social workers believed were not trauma informed. The head of social work services in one such district said:

> We've done tons of trauma-informed trainings. We've done as much as we can. Our entire mental health staff is very trauma informed and doing their work in a trauma informed way…but there's never been anyone that's said, 'Oh, we're a trauma informed school system and we're going to implement these trauma-informed practices and understandings and trainings all the time at all levels and all ways.'

**A Focus on Building Community in Trauma-Informed Schools.** School social workers emphasized the importance of building a sense of community in schools and supporting

the development of positive relationships between teachers and students, among staff members, and between staff members and the broader community. As one district head of social work services explained:

> I think when a school is truly trauma informed, it's not just with the students, it's with the staff as well. And so when we're dealing with staff, being able to look past what's going on right now, and get a little curious and try to help them to see where [a belief or behavior] is coming from and to understand their own reaction. I also think if a school is truly trauma informed, it makes it a safe space for people to realize that there is a growth mindset wherever they are.

When asked what they would expect to see in a trauma-informed school or district, another head of district services said:

> I would expect to see a principal/an admin say 'every class, no matter what your content or your curriculum is, must have community building time… Your content is less important than making this school a community and a safe place and a place where people are seen and known and respected.' Even before that was done [with students], that would be done on a staff level amongst and between the staff regularly so that you don't get to a staff meeting and just go info-info-info… You actually build trusting relationships and …professional relational trust with the staff.

Building positive relationships among staff members and striving to create a positive school community also translated to a focus by social workers on encouraging positive teacher–student relationships. As one school social worker explained, "The students tell [teachers] things because they trust them. And, you know, they're the ones that are with them most of the day…so we want [teachers] to feel confident in how they can interact with the student."

**Social Workers' Expectations of Positive Discipline and Restorative Practices in Trauma-Informed Schools.** Social workers generally viewed positive discipline and the presence of restorative practices as essential components of a trauma-informed school. For example, when asked what they would expect to see or not see in a trauma-informed school, a school social worker said that, in a trauma-informed school, "I would expect suspension being the absolute last resort. I would expect there to be more of an emphasis on restorative practices, character building, in school strategies that both build community and [students'] sense of belonging rather than alienation and just labeling." One head of district services said, "[I would not expect to see] shame based, punishment based…exclusionary practices like sitting kids on benches, citations… Punishing behavior without understanding, you know, the root of it."

**Positive Climate as Both an Essential Characteristic and an Outcome of Trauma-Informed Schools**. Social workers viewed a positive climate as an essential component of being a trauma-informed school. Also, workers who had served in trauma-informed schools or districts reported improved school climate as a result of trauma-informed approaches. When asked what they expected to see in a trauma-informed school, one social worker said, "Definitely safety in the culture overall. And like when students or parents walk in, we want it to feel like home and clean and safe… The way that we have conversations is calm and really just a supportive mindset and framework to help." A social work district supervisor said, "We try really hard to have a very welcoming overall positive climate where everybody's important, everybody's valued, and try to spread that kind of sentiment across the entire district as much as possible."

Social workers with experience working long-term in trauma-informed schools also reported that improved climate resulted from a commitment to being trauma informed and related actions. One social work supervisor explained:

> I believe [school climate has] improved. Now, I'm not saying it's perfect. There's always room for improvement. What we just try to say is, you know, it's not about our own personal agendas when we're at this campus. We're here for the students and whatever the students need. Even if it's something that we've never tried before, we're going to try to work through it. We believe in working as a team, and as a unified team.

There was also an acknowledgment that not all trauma-informed schools look the same nor do they need to. As one social worker explained, "I think different communities have different traumas. And so I think that sometimes a school that's trauma informed looks different in one area than another."

### ***Social Workers Shared Anecdotes Instead of Metrics as Outcomes for Trauma-Informed Schools***

In general social workers reported that academic, attendance, and disciplinary metrics either were not something they were aware of or that these metrics were not being tracked and reported effectively. One social work supervisor said, "We're bad at tracking and evaluating things. If you did a survey of schools and how people felt in the campus, I think that we would have really improved [since we became trauma informed]. As far as other impacts, I don't know how well we've really monitored that."

Instead, social workers shared anecdotes about what they believed had changed as their school became more trauma informed. For example, one school social worker said, "From a staff perspective, [becoming trauma informed] definitely changed how they viewed their work. It changed how they set up their classrooms to be trauma sensitive. It changed their relationships with their families, with each other." All social workers who reported working in trauma-informed schools shared student stories to illustrate the value of trauma-informed approaches

(see Table 2 for examples). Benefits were reported across all grade levels. For example, a social worker in an elementary school shared:

> We had a student that brought in a toy gun. And so a toy gun is basically an automatic superintendent suspension. But what we did, we spoke to the student and we tried to understand what was the purpose? This student had been…kind of struggling to make connections and friends and this new toy was the thing he thought was going to get people's attention. So instead of doing an automatic suspension, we brought in the parent and we spoke to them about why it would be dangerous to bring even a toy gun to school. And then we had the student explain to us why it could be dangerous and then we created a structured play support for that student and [that] was helpful to the student in getting what he needed. If kids feel that they're not understood and the consequences are really punitive, then you have an increase in that behavior.

A social worker in an urban high school that was newly incorporating trauma-informed approaches shared:

> I spent all year with one particular teacher and her advisory group. If I were to use that as a cohort, we saw a decrease in some of their externalizing and internalizing behaviors, we saw an improvement in attendance, we saw an improvement in just the community and how they were able to communicate and connect with each other. It was really beautiful to see. So in these little pockets we're seeing it, but we need to see it from the whole school wide and get everybody on the same page.

### ***Social Workers Reported Numerous Barriers to the Implementation and Sustainment of Trauma-Informed Schools***

Although social workers identified positive outcomes resulting from trauma-informed approaches in schools, they also recognized many barriers that impacted both the implementation and sustainment of these approaches. See Table 2 for examples of barriers and critiques of trauma-informed approaches. Key barriers included a tendency in education to view actions as checkboxes; frequently shifting priorities; limited time and resources; and the complex hierarchy of educational leadership. Some social workers believed it was harder for middle and high schools to prioritize climate work and social emotional learning because of secondary schools' focus on academics and an increased tendency to blame older kids (instead of their parents or community) for their behavior. One social worker was particularly concerned about the impact of ineffective implementation on the long-term success of trauma-informed and related approaches:

> We have to be very careful in education with how much people really get into the check the box mentality. If we don't do things correctly, it's going to look like it didn't work. It's going to look like it failed. And really, it didn't fail because it's a bad intervention or a bad policy. It failed because we weren't doing it right.

Another summarized the challenges of implementing new initiatives:

> I feel like the trauma informed is kind of in the same ballpark [as prior initiatives such as restorative practices]. [Administrators] just talk about it without actually providing the resources, the support, even the understanding of what that means.

**Theme 2: Trauma-Informed Leadership (i.e., Interpersonal Skills) as a Key Facilitator in the Creation of Trauma-Informed Schools**

Although social workers viewed trauma-informed schools as a systemic intervention, they indicated that interpersonal skills were essential to their development and sustainment (see Table 2 for examples). One head of social work services said that a trauma-informed school was defined by:

> Leaders [that] are trauma informed. Leaders [that] have not only gone through [trauma] training, but can actually exhibit an understanding of trauma, of the results of trauma, but more than that, have a lens on looking at the practices, the programs, the way that we approach students…that is trauma informed, through a way that's looking towards that, but also approaching systems that are in place with an idea of how do we serve students that we know have trauma? How do we serve families that we know have experienced different types of trauma?

Further elaborating on qualities of trauma-informed leadership, another head of services said:

> In general to be a trauma informed leader, [you need to provide] empathetic listening to your staff, hearing their needs, providing that sense of safety, like emotional safety, and creating those brave spaces to have open, honest conversations both in a group setting and individual as well. I also think providing structures…to help staff feel that they could be successful… My mantra as a leader is, 'My role is to make sure…that you're successful in your role. My role is to be in service of the team, of the organization.'

School social workers used many descriptors when asked to explain characteristics of trauma-informed leadership, including self-awareness, empathy, genuine concern for others, humility, vulnerability, an emphasis on creating meaningful relationships with emotional safety,

and taking a growth-oriented mindset, including curiosity about what was going on for a staff member, student, or family, and being open minded and flexible in identifying appropriate solutions.

***The Importance of Building Relationships with Administrators and Educators to Implement and Sustain Trauma-Informed Approaches***

Social workers acknowledged that school leadership and educators played an important role in the development and sustainment of trauma-informed schools. In fact, they indicated that the buy-in of both groups was essential for a successful implementation (see Table 2). “A school culture, a building culture is not going to change if the principal is not on board,” one social worker explained. When asked how to get administrators and educators on board, a district head of social work services replied, “Slow, meaningful conversations, really leaning into, honestly, certain social work values.” They later elaborated, “I have invested and cultivated relationships with all the principals in this district so that they know what I stand for, but that I also kind of walk the walk and…show up and support them.”

Social workers indicated that having an administrator with prior experience in counseling, social work, or who thought in terms of the whole child was particularly valuable. One social worker explained that the person who spearheaded their transition to a trauma-informed school “the director of special ed…promoted into district leadership and then was able to move [trauma-informed care] forward because she was already there.” Although administrators were often cited as the instigators of trauma-informed approaches in the school, some social workers stated that they did not have to be. For example, one explained:

> The key has been learning to speak what matters to educators as opposed to what matters to me. I had a principal that pushed me to get some teacher training and I thought that

was really smart because then I started using teacher language which, as a social worker, I didn't know. And so when I can put things in teacher language, then people were able to better hear what I had to say. [It was really more me] entering their space than them entering my space. Me trying to drag them to my space wasn't working.

**Theme 3: Most But Not All Social Workers Indicated Trauma-Informed Approaches Required Attention to Race, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion**

When asked about the relationship between trauma-informed approaches and anti-racism, equity, diversity, and inclusion, the majority of interviewees (14 of 20) spoke to the importance of ADEI and how it relates to trauma-informed approaches in their responses. See Table 2 for examples. Of those who made clear connections between TI and ADEI approaches, there were no clear patterns in terms of social workers' race/ethnicity, gender, or years of experience although district heads of services and supervisors tended to be more focused on these issues. For example, one head of social work services who indicated they did not work in a trauma-informed district said:

> You need to have a trauma informed lens to really talk about equity, and you need to be looking at equity to really have a trauma informed lens because we know there is historical trauma, there's racial trauma, there are all sorts of different pieces of that. It's not just what's happened to an individual person.

A social worker with more than 20 years of experience working in both trauma-informed and non-trauma-informed schools said:

> In order to be trauma informed, you have to do that anti-racist work. And you also have to start with looking within… If we're really honest, our educational system is very much based in white supremacy. And so we have to be willing to have some of those

courageous conversations and not shy away from those courageous conversations. So that is also part of being trauma informed. You have to be able to know yourself and…you can't stop doing your own work.

Remaining interviewees (six of the 20) answered the question with references to the importance of treating everyone equally or used other color-blind terminology. All of these social workers were either from the Midwest or East Coast. One example of this type of response was, "When you look at what the actual goal is, it's to support the individual student. And so that's where their similarity lies, I think." Some interviewees, when probed about critiques of trauma-informed approaches as color blind, acknowledged that truth in their schools. For example, one said, "I would imagine that we are a little bit colorblind…"

## Discussion

### Key Components of Trauma-Informed Schools in Our Findings and the Literature

This study explored how school social workers thought about trauma-informed schools, their necessary components, and the role SSWs should play in their creation in relation to other school professionals. SSWs identified several key components of trauma-informed schools, including that they require a whole-school approach, trauma training, the creation of a safe environment with positive climate, and a focus on the whole person for both students and staff.

#### *The Importance of a Whole School Approach to Trauma*

The concept of setting-based approaches to trauma originated in clinical psychology and the development of therapeutic patient–practitioner relationships (Keeshin & Strawn, 2014). This study found that social workers had an expanded view of trauma-informed approaches as a whole-school initiative that required practice and policy changes beyond the mental health realm. This view is a good fit for many existing conceptual models for trauma-informed schools (e.g.,

Bloom & Yanosy Sreedhar, 2008; Cole et al., 2013; National Child Traumatic Stress Network [NCTSN], 2017; U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2014a; Venet, 2021). However, whole-school approaches to trauma are often not seen in practice or studied empirically (Avery et al., 2021; Maynard et al., 2019).

We also found that experienced social workers were more discerning when identifying a school as trauma informed. This finding corresponds to prior quantitative findings that more experienced social workers were less likely to work in trauma-informed schools (Author, Study 2 of this dissertation). Experienced social workers did not just accept the mere labeling of a school or district as trauma informed. During interviews, they utilized their professional expertise to explain how their school or district did or did not reflect a trauma-informed approach—regardless of whether the district or principal referred to their school as trauma informed or not.

This finding illustrates that social workers have a clear understanding of what is required to be a trauma-informed school and that their understanding matches existing conceptual models. The congruence between social workers' views and existing conceptual models supports current school social work practice recommendations that social workers become more involved in school climate initiatives (Tan & SSWAA, 2024). Additional work should be undertaken to explore which components of conceptual models best match social workers' perspectives and what they are seeing in practice.

***Whole-School Trauma Training as an Essential Component of Trauma-informed Approaches***

Trauma training, preferably for all staff members, was identified by interviewees as an essential component of a trauma-informed school. This finding is aligned with SAMHSA (2014b) guidelines for the implementation for trauma-informed approaches in organizations. It corresponds to prior findings that trauma training was the best predictor of whether a school

social worker would identify a school as trauma informed (Author, Study 1 of this dissertation). However, interviewees also indicated that solely implementing trauma training was insufficient to make a school trauma informed. They reported numerous schools and districts that, in their views, were not trauma informed but had some form of trauma training. These reports are similar to earlier findings that trauma training was present in about one-third of schools social workers did not believe were trauma informed (Author, Study 1 of this dissertation). Purtle (2020) found that trauma training was most effective when combined with other policy changes or environmental alterations, but research has shown that many schools stop at providing trauma training and clinical trauma interventions (Maynard et al., 2019; Watson & Astor, under review). Given prior findings that training should be combined with other components to create a trauma-informed school and our findings that social workers had clear views about necessary components, it appears that social workers could be a valuable resource as schools embark on a journey to becoming more trauma aware and responsive. Social workers' views may also be studied empirically through case studies of schools they identify as trauma informed and other qualitative methods.

Social workers also recognized that school-based professionals need additional support to implement trauma-informed approaches at the classroom level, including training in recommended practices and the time to incorporate them in classroom management and lesson planning. This finding is in line with prior calls for teacher education and support to implement culturally responsive practices in schools, including those that address societal inequities like racism and classism (Howard & del Rosario, 2000; Knox et al., 2023).

***The Importance of Safety, Community, and Positive Climate in Trauma-Informed Schools***

SSWs recommended that schools ensure physical and psychological safety for staff,

students, and families by enhancing feelings of community and positive school climate. These elements contribute to and mutually reinforce each other. School safety, including the use of fair, consistent discipline practices, is an established dimension of current conceptualizations of school climate (National School Climate Council, n.d.; Wang & Degol, 2016). Community is another commonly studied dimension of school climate, and includes a focus on positive relationships, the promotion of school belonging, respect for diversity, and school–community partnerships (Wang & Degol, 2016). Because safety, community, and climate are all studied as part of other academic literatures (Thapa et al., 2013; Voight & Nation, 2016), they cannot be considered unique components of trauma-informed schools. The rationale for their inclusion in whole-school, trauma-informed approaches is consistent, however, with a belief that climate influences students' experiences and achievement (Cohen et al., 2009; Thapa et al., 2013).

***Focusing an Ecological, Strengths-Based Lens on Staff Members, Students, and Families***

Seeking to understand people within their individual context is a fundamental principle of one of the earliest conceptualizations of trauma-informed environments (Harris & Fallot, 2001). Whereas this principle is not often specifically stated in general models for trauma-informed organizations (e.g., SAMHSA, 2014a), it is more common in school-focused conceptualizations (e.g., Cole et al., 2013; Wolpow et al., 2016). SSWs in this study endorsed school-focused conceptualizations by indicating that staff, students, and families should be viewed as whole people, approached with a strengths-based lens, and receive genuine care and support. This finding points to a need to include a strengths-based, whole-person focus in future conceptualizations of trauma-informed schools and other organizations.

***A Need for Clinical Trauma Treatments in Trauma-Informed Schools?***

Although some conceptual models (e.g., NCTSN, 2017) indicate that trauma screening,

assessment, and the availability of clinical trauma treatments is necessary for trauma-informed schools, our interviewees did not emphasize these points. Instead, interviewees focused on the bigger picture, changes to schoolwide policies and practices that they believed were needed to create whole-environment trauma awareness and response. In one anecdote, an interviewee mentioned that a student followed the cognitive behavioral therapy continuum after experiencing "Capital T trauma." Another social worker highlighted a need to move more into Tier 1 or universal supports instead of small group or individual supports as part of the process of becoming trauma informed (see Table 2). It is unclear whether most respondents' deemphasis on clinical trauma treatments was due to their presence being assumed or if SSWs did not believe they were essential in a TI school. Future studies should clarify whether social workers view clinical treatments as an essential component of trauma-informed schools.

***A Need for Secondary Traumatic Stress Resources in Schools?***

We asked interviewees about prior findings that the availability of secondary traumatic stress (STS) resources could predict whether school social workers identified a school as trauma informed (Author, Study 1 of this dissertation). Before being posed the question, none of the interviewees had mentioned a need for STS resources as part of a trauma-informed school. This is a noteworthy oversight because secondary trauma is common among the helping professions (SAMHSA, 2014b) and may be underestimated among staff in high-need schools (Thomas et al., 2019). In a prior study of school staff, 75% reported symptoms related to post-traumatic stress disorder that could be in the clinical range if given a standardized assessment (Borntrager et al., 2012). Educators have reported being strongly affected by students' trauma as well as organizational factors such as class size and lack of peer support (Caringi et al., 2015). Despite these identified needs, there is minimal research on secondary traumatic stress in educators and

other school staff. Given the relationship between STS resources and school identification as trauma informed, additional research is needed about the prevalence of STS and related concerns in schools (e.g., compassion fatigue) and effective responses (Borntrager et al., 2012; Caringi et al., 2015; Ormiston et al., 2022).

Research in the aftermath of the summer of 2020 found that school social workers not only recognized an increased need for STS resources but were also advocating for them. In the same study, SSWs reported that administrators and educators were less likely to see a need for STS resources, however (Watson et al., 2022b). SAMHSA (2014b) recommends that organizational leadership proactively promote policies to support staff in practicing self care and creating positive school climate. Providing STS resources is something schools that social workers identified as trauma informed seemed to already be doing. However, it also appears that STS support could be expanded to professionals schoolwide and organizational leadership could ingrain in the school a commitment in STS and self care.

**Barriers and Facilitators to Trauma-Informed Approaches in Schools**

Social workers reported several barriers to implementing and sustaining trauma-informed approaches in schools, including shifting priorities and inadequate funding and staffing capacity. They also reported a tendency by schools to treat new initiatives as checking a box instead of providing the necessary funding and support for success. Despite acknowledging this tendency is common in education, Thomas and colleagues (2019) cautioned against treating trauma-informed approaches as “another thing that will come and go” due to the increasing prevalence of trauma in society and need for caring, supportive school environments (p. 445; Benjet et al., 2016; Perfect et al., 2016; Turner et al., 2010). We believe that a shift in perspective can make trauma-informed approaches more palatable and attainable for school administrators and

educators. As noted above, many of the components of trauma-informed approaches identified by social workers—e.g., school-based relationships and community, safety, and positive climate—are not unique to trauma response. Others have called such components simply "good practice" for supporting individuals that have experienced trauma (Hanson & Lang, 2016, p. 96). As such, schools can leverage many existing strategies to develop and sustain caring, supportive school communities and forego thinking of TI approaches as something new or a box to be checked with limited support and resources.

***Interpersonal Skills as a Key Driver in Developing and Sustaining Trauma-Informed Schools***

Social workers in our study reported that leveraging social work values and skills—e.g., meeting people where they are, prioritizing human relationships, and engaging others with empathy and integrity—helped them garner support for and retain momentum around trauma-informed approaches. Social workers reported facilitating interest in trauma-informed approaches by building relationships across schools and districts and role modeling trauma-informed relational qualities. In short, social workers reportedly demonstrated emotionally intelligent leadership. This is an important finding because leaders' emotional intelligence has been shown to affect their leadership style, which in turn affects other staff members' feelings about an organization's culture and climate (Maamari & Majdalani, 2017). This finding is also related to prior studies that suggest leadership support is an essential component of successful implementation of trauma-informed approaches in schools, and that a lack of support is a barrier to success. Other implementation facilitators included engaging community stakeholders and students' families by building positive relationships and enhancing their emotional safety (Wassink-de Stigter et al., 2022). This finding is important because it reminds school-based practitioners of the role that they have in developing school−community relationships and

enhancing emotional/psychological safety as well as provides a path forward to influencing school leaders using skills already part of their practice. Social workers also noted that driving change would require them to speak to the needs of educators and administrators rather than in the language of social work. These findings reflect recent recommendations that social workers who want to drive institutional change learn to "hear and understand when teachers discuss pedagogy and learning" (Capp & Astor, 2024).

**Incorporating a Commitment to Antiracism, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in All Conceptual Models and Practice Implementations for Trauma-Informed Schools**

Most of the social workers in our study connected trauma-informed approaches to a commitment to antiracism, diversity, equity, and inclusion, but not all. Prior research shows schools with higher percentages of low-income and minoritized students were more likely to be identified as trauma informed (Author, Study 1, Study 2 of this dissertation). In practice, however, school staff rarely acknowledge or prioritize race-related issues (Howard, 2020). Howard and del Rosario (2000) have long called for teacher education to provide "opportunities to develop the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to effectively initiate and facilitate classroom dialogue about race and racism" (p. 127). However, this call has largely gone unanswered. Now researchers are calling for the centering of systemic societal inequities, including those involving race, in our understanding of trauma and schools' commitment to implementing trauma-informed approaches (Alvarez, 2020; Saleem et al., 2022). Schools cannot address what they ignore. Without a commitment to understanding individuals in their context, including the longstanding marginalization and oppression experienced by many minoritized groups, schools will be unable to create a welcoming, healing environment for all students (Alvarez, 2020; Astor et al., 2021; Edmondson, 2018; Zimmerman & Astor, 2021). ADEI thus

must be included in all future conceptualizations, implementation, and empirical study of trauma-informed schools.

Federal policy (e.g., Bipartisan Safer Communities Act and Every Student Succeeds Act) consistently calls for state and local education agencies to use evidence-based practices (EBPs) in schools. First there needs to be an overarching commitment to providing safe, supportive school environments for all children—and a shared understanding of what that means. Creating such environments requires recognition of school communities in their environmental and cultural context and adopting policies and practices specific to the needs of the students and families therein. Numerous challenges to the adoption and sustainment of evidence-based practices in lower resourced schools exist, and very little research has sought to understand and ameliorate these issues (Eiraldi et al., 2015; Fixsen et al., 2013). While EBPs may seem like a simple way to adopt new school strategies, their cost, lack of cultural relevance and context, and the difficulty of maintaining implementation fidelity makes them a questionable use of school resources (Adelman & Taylor, 2018; Osher et al., 2021). Policymakers are encouraged to instill guidelines for student support and learning outcomes instead of mandating specific tools for school-based practice. Such an approach would better allow for tailored, whole-school, or district-led strategies geared to the community's unique context and population. Additionally, policymakers should consider decoupling state and local education funding from property taxes. Funding should be more equally distributed to redress opportunity gaps and negative impacts on lower-income students and communities. High-need students and districts require significant support due to long-term, inequitable resource distribution (Watson et al., 2022a).

## Strengths, Limitations, and Future Research

The findings of this study should be evaluated in the context of their strengths and

limitations. As a qualitative study, responses were not intended to be representative of all U.S. social workers. Due to the limited number of participants, not all U.S. states or personal demographics were reflected in our sample. For example, our sample is missing transgender and gender nonconforming individuals and several racial/ethnic groups, including Asian, Pacific Islander, and Indigenous/Native American. Also, given the high level of experience among interviewees, it is possible that their views do not match those of social workers who have trained more recently. Newly trained social workers may also be more demographically diverse than our participants. We also recognize that individuals who volunteered to be interviewed may not reflect general social worker perspectives. Despite these limitations, we were able to reach saturation among interview responses on our topics of interest and we found agreement on identified themes and subthemes.

As one of the first studies that sought to understand how social workers think about trauma-informed schools and what they expect to see in them, significant additional research on this subject is needed. Whole-school, trauma-informed approaches are not commonly studied, both because many schools are not engaged in full-scale implementation but also because complex models require additional considerations in research design (Astor et al., 2021; Avery et al., 2021). Additional study is also needed to evaluate how structural inequities in terms of funding, staffing, and other resources may be affecting implementation and sustainment of TI approaches. Future research should explore whether well-funded, suburban schools are prioritizing trauma-informed approaches at the same rate as lower-resourced schools or if such approaches are targeted toward lower-resourced schools in an attempt to compensate for structural inequalities. As noted above, it is also imperative that future TI research includes a commitment to ADEI.

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**Table 4-1**. *Participant and Work Setting Characteristics (N = 20)*

| Self-Identified Characteristic | *n* |
|---|---|
| Gender | |
| Male | 1 |
| Female | 19 |
| Race/ethnicity [a] | |
| Black/African American | 1 |
| Hispanic/Latinx | 5 |
| White/Caucasian | 15 |
| Role | |
| School social worker | 15 |
| District supervisor | 1 |
| Head of services | 4 |
| Years of experience | |
| 3-5 | 3 |

| Self-Identified Characteristic | *n* |
|---|---|
| 6-10 | 3 |
| 11-15 | 1 |
| 16-20 | 3 |
| 20+ | 10 |
| Schools served [a] | |
| Elementary | 13 |
| Middle/junior high | 9 |
| High | 9 |
| Type of school | |
| Private religious | 1 |
| Public charter | 2 |
| Traditional public | 17 |
| Settings | |
| Urban | 12 |

| Self-Identified Characteristic | *n* |
| --- | --- |
| Suburban | 5 |
| Rural | 3 |
| U.S. Region | |
| Northeast | 4 |
| Midwest | 11 |
| South | 3 |
| West | 2 |
| School/district trauma informed? | |
| Yes | 15 |
| No | 5 |

*Note*. [a] Participants could select more than one.

**Table 4-2.** *School Social Workers' Characteristic Responses, Grouped by Identified Themes*

| Theme/Subtheme | Responses |
|---|---|
| Definition of a Trauma-Informed School/District | "A school that has trained all personnel on trauma, has a common understanding of language around trauma… Typically, that would look like understanding the ACEs and what those kinds of risks are, understanding some resiliency and recovery practices and implementing them…" |
| | "I see a trauma informed school as a holistic approach that all the staff are of the same mindset to really support students in a way that it's not just students who may have experienced trauma, it's supporting all students from a lens that really values relationship building, that really values supporting students' mental health and social emotional learning and growth and, of course, making a safe…school so that students feel safe and staff feel safe in the school building as well." |
| | "I define a trauma-informed school as a sensitive, safe environment for students with a staff that understands that every student has different needs and should be offered a sense of belonging and a sense of safety to fully express and fully be educated in the way that is most advantageous for them." |
| | "I think to really be a trauma informed school district, it has to be a super thoughtful implementation that's regularly attended, regularly trained, and [there's consideration of] how do you fold new people in. How do you say that you have a trauma-informed school or school district if you're getting new admin all the time?" |
| | "To be truly trauma informed, it's not only having a sit and get with your staff. It's also changing the way that you teach, changing the classroom makeup, changing your environments, changing your student code of conduct, and then also supporting the staff so that they can make all these changes." |
| | "It's a mindset. So I'm trying to figure out a way to get everyone on the same page. If I can get everyone to kind of start fresh each day, I would really like that as a preventative trauma-informed strategy because we don't need to intervene all the time. We can do a lot of preventative work." |

| Theme/Subtheme | Responses |
| --- | --- |
| Characteristics of Trauma-Informed Schools: Training | Training as an Essential Component:<br><br>"The certified staff have all had some training in trauma-informed practices, the clinical staff (social work/psych) all had more extensive training in trauma-informed practices, and the school leadership supports trauma-informed practices to at least some degree."<br><br>"We have a social worker on every campus and we do a lot of trauma-informed trainings with them to, well, train them to be trainers on the campus. They do a lot of training with the staff… I know sometimes it's hard for like the cafeteria workers or bus drivers and staff like that, but we try to train everybody as much as possible."<br><br>"So the social work counseling department here, we do different trauma trainings each year and we do multiple trainings throughout the year… And really we try to have practical things like calm corners in the classrooms. We're also a restorative practices school, so that aligns with the trauma informed perspective. So really, you know, getting everyone on board and kind of it's really a mindset shift."<br><br>"We've had about two years of training on trauma informed services and sensitivity to our population. Our students do come to us because they have not been very successful in other schools. So there is a certain amount of safety that they feel with this online platform. Um, we have had quite a, quite a bit of professional development on ACEs and being sensitive to students' needs and, you know, just open minded about where they're coming from."<br><br>"I wouldn't feel confident saying [our] school district is a 100% trauma informed district. I think in order to say that with assurance and fidelity, you need to have trained everyone from, you know, custodians to the superintendent and everything in between. And the hardest thing that I find about my long term work in creating trauma-informed spaces is professional development. Finding enough time to train all the folks that are on site. when you have changes every single year… turnover every single year."<br><br>Training as Insufficient:<br><br>"We also need to address how staff have a lot on their plates. And so in order for them to be able to be present and to be |

| Theme/Subtheme | Responses |
| --- | --- |
| | patient and to be prepared to work with students, they need the training, but they also need the support." |
| | "The other piece that I think is really important, having done a number of different trauma-based trainings, is the quality of the training itself. Some of the trauma-based training is outstanding and focused for schools versus like theoretical or clinical, and some just isn't the same quality. And I think from the district lens, because it is often administrators who are making that decision about where the training is coming from, and often don't think to ask their clinicians. I have been in districts where the quality of the training is different and poor…and I think that really impacts implementation and staff understanding." |
| | "We did have trauma-informed training for our entire campus. We have a sensitivity that we use to interact with our students… So we try to, you know, take a step back when we see something happening with a child and we say, 'okay, what is causing this?' It's not that they're being disruptive or wanting to be bad or not wanting to listen. It's that they're processing something in their brains that we don't even know about. And so we have to, like, take the time to understand them, to learn about where they're coming from and to then choose a plan of action, of how we're going to help them facilitate the process of healing." |
| | "About six years ago, I was…sent to a week-long professional development and we earned certification to do trauma-informed practice trainings with the staff. And we did provide professional development to staff, but we presented this information the day before school started so the staff had no time to prepare, to change any of their classroom setups. None of the discipline procedures, the code of conduct, none of that was changed. It was just a sit and get and they checked off the box and that was as far as it went." |
| | "You can provide the most wonderful, beautiful, appropriate training. But if the staff is not supported to implement those procedures or those strategies, it's a waste of money." |

| | |
|---|---|
| Characteristics of Trauma-Informed Schools: Building Community and Positive Relationships | “Trauma informed is just for the adults. The kids are all the same, and their behavior is all the same. It’s really the adult, and the way that we respond as adults, which is the big difference.”<br><br>“I think when a school is truly trauma informed, it’s not just with the students, it’s with the staff as well. And so when we’re dealing with staff, being able to look past what’s going on right now, and get a little curious and try to help them to see where [a belief or behavior] is coming from and to understand their own reaction. I also think if a school is truly trauma informed, it makes it a safe space for people to realize that there is a growth mindset wherever they are.”<br><br>“I would expect to see a principal/an admin say ‘every class, no matter what your content or your curriculum is, must have community building time… Your content is less important than making this school a community and a safe place and a place where people are seen and known and respected.’ Even before that was done [with the kids], that would be done on a staff level amongst and between the staff regularly so that you don't get to a staff meeting and just go info-info-info… You actually build trusting relationships and …professional relational trust with the staff.”<br><br>“When we talk about a staff approach, it's just kind of assuming that we've all been impacted by trauma. So we're not necessarily singling out any particular kid or group of kids. We're really coming from, when you ask about that systemic approach, we're really coming from a school wide approach that focuses on a safe and supportive learning environment where all kids feel that they are ready and able to learn.”<br><br>“I would love for us to have a wellness time every day in the morning before we even start the day. Right now on my campus, the teachers are only required to do it twice a week. I feel like every day is not enough, you know. Those kids need that time to connect to each other, first of all, and then second of all, to talk about what is going on in their lives. It's hard to just come to school and be ready to learn from the start.”<br><br>“The first two weeks of school should be all about building community and helping kids learn each other what they're about, learn about their teacher, and they shouldn't be learning any concepts until like that community is built.” |

“When we know our kids and really know them in their background, our day to day operations follow what will help them best.”

“What I try to do is build relationships with the staff first because I feel like they're the ones that have the most impact on students in education, like they're the ones down doing the dirty work. So that's where I need to be more effective is by helping them along.”

“The students tell [teachers] things because they trust them. And, you know, they're the ones that are with them most of the day…so we want them to feel confident in how they can interact with the student. And of course they can still refer them to us and we can facilitate further resources and communicate with the parent about how this is affecting their child and what we can do to support that. But the teachers need to know what to say and how to react so that they're not, you know, put off by it or like they don't scare the child. So we did practice activities and we modeled things with them and we told them you're not going to handle this all on your own. It's a team effort and we're all trying to help the child. But you're the first one that they're going to probably say something to. And so it's important that you understand the best way to help them.”

“If something comes up with a student, we will contact the parent or have them come in and we'll have a conference and talk about our concerns and the things that we'd like to see for the child and the ways that we can help the parent at home by giving them community resources or connecting them with mental health services or whatever it is that is needed to help that child… And then we get pushback from the parents, too, so we've even done trainings for our parents about trauma-informed care and how it's important that we give attention to the things that students have experienced so that when they come to school, we can get through those roadblocks.”

“I think [staff] tend to try to be more supportive of each other. I think it’s been a real demonstration of sort of that idea that you have no idea what’s going on with somebody else, and I think we have so many conversations regarding self-care, supporting each other, requesting that help. You need things like that to open so many more conversations between staff members and sort of knock down these barriers.”

| Theme/Subtheme | Responses |
|---|---|
| Characteristics of Trauma-Informed Schools: Positive Discipline and Restorative Practices | "[I would not expect to see] shame based, punishment based…exclusionary practices like sitting kids on benches, citations… Punishing behavior without understanding, you know, the root of it." |
| | "I wouldn't expect to see very rigid rules regarding discipline and just scheduling. I think you need to get creative. Also, like when we look at kids and their issues and their behavior in intervention plans…flexibility is really important to individualize things as much as possible and not make everybody adhere to the exact same standards all the time." |
| | "[A trauma-informed environment is] one without shaming, or shaming is reduced anyway. We're all human, we make mistakes. But I think the ability for families to understand, even though this might be the reality right now, it may not stay that way. There is still room for growth. There is still room for healing and for change. And I think feeling understood and feeling heard is always a huge piece of that as well." |
| | "Policies that are restorative in nature. Policies that are looking for, rather than punitive, looking for skill building, looking for building resilience. Policies that take into account what makes students and families and staff members really feel safe, feel that there is a structure that is supportive and understanding." |
| | "We were not allowed [to train school security about trauma] because they're not part of the [school system], they're part of [the local police department.] But what we did do was have conversations with them and talk about what our expectations were, and then use judiciously when we were calling them. So then we created a level between calling security and a kid having a crisis. There was a response team between that, like a buffer, that really reduced the number of incidents." |

| Theme/Subtheme | Responses |
|---|---|
| Characteristics of Trauma-Informed Schools: Mental Health Supports | “We have a really robust mental health team. But again, we’ve got to move deeper into tier one and stop doing this tier two/tier three.”<br><br>“I think about kids with Capital T trauma. You know, mom was shot in a drive by and ‘I'm not coming to school, I'm having accidents, and I don't want to participate…’ to, at the end of the year of following [the cognitive behavioral therapy] continuum, a student that was eager and ready and adjusted and, you know, still grieving but functional and feeling supported… At the end, when we had her culminating ceremony, there were 15 family members that came and learned how she moved through this trauma-informed modality, and they all got to add a page to her trauma narrative. So it brought the family together. The teacher learned along the way about what she needed in the classroom. The class benefited from some social emotional lessons on dealing with big feelings. So I think that one student, because of her tragic/horrific nightmare of an event, there were, you know, 30 kids, 15 family members, 4 or 5 staff members that all were able to come together on this kind of learning journey.” |
| Characteristics and Expected Outcomes of Trauma-Informed Schools: Positive Climate | Climate as a Characteristic:<br><br>“Number one, [we try to create] a very welcoming climate. From the get go, when someone walks in the door, they feel accepted. They feel like they're important, they feel welcomed. I think the same thing with kids in the classroom. And I think the same thing with teachers and staff, that they need to feel the same way. So we try really hard to have a very welcoming overall positive climate where everybody’s important, everybody's valued, and try to spread that kind of sentiment across the entire district as much as possible.”<br><br>“Definitely safety in the culture overall. And like when students or parents walk in, we want it to feel like home and clean and safe… The way that we have conversations is calm and really just a supportive mindset and framework to help.”<br><br>“Safety, sense of belonging, open mindedness. And also our teachers to be, you know, aware of their own biases, their own experiences, and how that plays into their interaction with students.” |

Climate as an Outcome:

"[Our climate] has started to change, to be more inclusive, less judgmental, to look at behavior first through an environmental trauma lens and then, secondly, as an individual blaming/shaming lens."

"I think that if you are trauma informed and…taking students' behavior less personally and just realizing that sometimes it is a product of their environment and just appreciating our different family structures that we have, I think that does improve…the culture for everybody, both the students and the staff and the families."

"Our culture has definitely changed… We as a team now see that we've got kids struggling with way more than just, you know, doing math and reading. And it's not expecting them to do that without help. It's not going to be successful. It's not going to get the teachers what they want if they're focusing on academic success."

"I believe [school climate has] improved. Now, I'm not saying it's perfect. There's always room for improvement. What we just try to say is, you know, it's not about our own personal agendas when we're at this campus. We're here for the students and whatever the students need. Even if it's something that we've never tried before, we're going to try to work through it. We believe in working as a team and as a unified team." [SSW in TIS, TX, 20+]

"From a staff perspective, it definitely changed how they viewed their work. It changed how they set up their classrooms to be trauma sensitive. It changed their relationships with their families, with each other." [SSW in TIS, 20+, MN]

"People that feel like kids need to be disciplined, kids just have to listen, those people leave is eventually what happens. And then people that really more agree with [the trauma-informed] philosophy have been like, 'oh, this is really what I believe in."

"We're getting a lot of new teachers that are on board with wanting to focus on [trauma issues and child-centered practices] as well. Beginning of me being here, that was not the case. There were a lot of…old fashioned perspectives on this: 'I'm here to teach academics, that's all. Behavior is not my field, not my responsibility.' Slowly, over time, those people have kind of left on their own."

| Theme/Subtheme | Responses |
|---|---|
| Expected and Reported Outcomes of Trauma-Informed Schools | "We saw behavioral referrals go down. We saw more engagement in school. We saw a decrease in suspensions and dismissals. Not to say it was perfect by any means, we still had [these things], but we definitely saw a shift and a change." |
| | "When certain needs aren't met, we can't see the growth in [the kids] that we should. But if we can continue to provide that stable, nurturing environment for them, when things are stable for them, then they do grow so much and they can catch up to their peers or surpass their peers. You see the changes in a student with…them wanting to come to school, with them having friendships. But you also see the changes in their ability to focus on work or their scores, both in math and reading. If you are trauma informed and if you're doing what the kids need, you can see improvements in all areas in many kids." |
| | "I think of one student particularly that was living in a shelter, had a commute to school, supporting them getting a metrocard, supported with a flexible grading policy and turning in work policy so that even though they couldn't come to class every day. We also made sure they had tech access with a school laptop and mobile hotspot. That student had additional time with teachers one-on-one to support them. They also had a social worker in the school to support them so that we're able to help that student cross the finish line and get their high school diploma, even though the odds are stacked against them that they're in a shelter. They're not living in a secure family. They're from the foster care system. But because of the supports that we are able to give as a trauma-informed school, they're now able to get their high school diploma and help them in their next step with their career plan." |
| | "I had a middle school student that was looking at suspension and expulsion because of chronic tardiness to school. In looking at the student and talking to the student, it was because he lived in a particular, really poor area of town, and he was walking his little sister to school because Mom and Dad were working. And he was walking around the crack house. So, in order to deviate around the crack house, he was late to school because he dropped his little sister off first, right, and his school, of course, started earlier… So instead of looking at punitive responses to this student who had quite a lot of safety based trauma, being a caretaker, being in a neighborhood that had things like crack houses and some gang violence and things like that, we were able to look at alternatives in how we treated him... His teachers |

| Theme/Subtheme | Responses |
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| | were willing to work with him differently, and the Administration did not hold strictly to their attendance policy in order to help give him some supplemental tutoring during a study hall. Teachers were willing to work with him to…relax some of those homework requirements because at home he was not able to complete them being that he was caretaking for his little sister. He's a kid that could have easily been lost in the system and been one of those dropouts. So I think the school did an amazing job in that particular instance." |
| | "One of my students dealing with a significant disability in a seriously dysregulated moment made a [threatening and triggering] statement to a teacher and I got walkie talkie-d. I went to the classroom and said, 'Hey pal, why don't we go talk so we can take some time to cool down.' He was with me for an hour and a half. Once he was at a point where he was calm, he [returned to the classroom] and the child initiated, even before we were there, seeking out that teacher and apologizing to her. It's actually kind of beautiful because he knows that's something he and I will go about if there's enough time later in the day, when he's really reset, or the next day. But he had gotten back to a great baseline and did it himself." |

| Theme/Subtheme | Responses |
|---|---|
| Barriers to the Implementation and Sustainment of Trauma-Informed Schools | "You know how schools are. Every 2 or 3 years, we change our glasses for the next initiative and whatever was done is kind of dropped. And that's a problem with the trauma informed lens. Actually one could say, that's actually trauma inducing, not trauma reducing to constantly change initiatives, right?" |
| | "I don't know that adding another program, adding another initiative that's not supported, is going to help. So it's like [leadership's] focus is to spend the money and check off the box and then move on. It's not about fully embracing the whole program and implementing it with fidelity and integrity." |
| | "There's a lot of things schools could do, but it requires a huge amount of time and attention and focus. And it requires somebody always saying, like, 'does this new policy procedure, whatever does this match with our idea of being a trauma informed and equitable school?' And if it doesn't, it's out. But as you know, the state has its own story about what we should be doing 24/7. So it's always an intense set of conflicts for the people who are in charge of…where to put our resources and energy." |
| | "There's a lot of things that I would love to do, but I feel like time and money are always going to be on the side of not letting it happen. In the school day, we have so many hours and there's like minute restrictions on how many minutes they have to have each of the subjects." |
| | "Even when mandates or strong encouraging words have been passed down about PBIS or CASEL, some districts just don't do it because we don't have the money. And so I think along with mandates should come some sort of funding." |
| | "We need more people. We need more adults in our building. We try volunteers. We try aides. We had a problem on the buses, so they gave us permission to hire bus aides. And we chose to hire the aides that work at our school so that they're the same adults [the kids] see on the bus and see in the classroom. We've made these changes and it's still a struggle. It's a constant struggle." |
| | "An urgency towards raising up academic levels is what's always been used as the reason for funneling funding and resources towards academic interventions [instead of student culture and well-being]." |

| Theme/Subtheme | Responses |
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| | "I almost think it's easier for elementary schools to be more trauma sensitive because kids are seen as more innocent at that age and a product of their environment." |
| | "I have at times heard from teachers especially that [TI approaches are] excusing behavior and we don't want to do that. We still want to have boundaries. I mean kids need boundaries, they need to know what's okay to do, what's not okay to do… So supporting teachers in knowing how to balance those things. Often a big growth place for teachers is knowing how to balance being trauma informed with also keeping those predictable structures." |
| | "I think there's some criticism of trauma informed or PBIS because it's like, hey, let's just praise everything or reward everything. But that's not the case in either. It is about teaching skills and having understanding and compassion when you are handling things." |
| | "The administrators at the building level are saying, 'do what you got to do [to create a trauma-informed environment].' But the upper level says, 'if we don't get this, this, this and this done, you're going to get a bad evaluation and you won't be employed anymore.'" |
| | "I won't say that our administration isn't trying to be [trauma informed], but it's because…the upper administration had no thought for any of that. Just as long as we're balancing the budget and we're educating kids and the parents aren't calling, [they] don't care." |
| | "In the last 13 years, we've had seven different superintendents. So to be able to get the traction you need and the buy-in from leadership to then translate that to, you know, year in, year out, consistent professional development where everybody has that prioritization of time and of focus… I'm not going to say it's impossible, but it's really hard." |

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|---|---|
| Interpersonal Skills as a Key Facilitator of Creating Trauma-Informed Schools | Trauma-informed leadership is “Compassion. Empathy. Understanding. Genuine. Approachable. Loving.”<br><br>“Number one, it's just a love and a care for people in general, particularly kids. But I think the main thing is keeping an open mind and thinking outside the box and being super flexible and knowing that what works for one kid is not going to be the same for another kid. I think the flexibility, open mindedness, genuine concern, concern for others, and not [getting] so wrapped up in, um, the rigidity of school systems.”<br><br>“Self-awareness, first of all… It's not only self-awareness about how we show up in the space, but also self-awareness around the cultural lens that we come in with. So as a white woman, I need to be mindful of my positionality, right? Whether it is working with a student or at that leadership level… I think the other piece is about empowerment and ensuring that we are empowering others to kind of step into those leadership roles and to use their voice. And then the last piece is about advocacy, and it's how we are advocating and helping educate our larger community about trauma and the impact of trauma and what that looks like, and not only how school social workers are trained and equipped, but how we are working to also help our school staff at all levels, whether you are the custodian all the way up to, you know, the superintendent.”<br><br>“A trauma informed leader, in my opinion, would definitely have a willingness and desire for staff to have the appropriate training and the appropriate time for training. So that's like the first thing. I also think that when you are tasked with facing different situations, whether it be staff situations or students’ different situations, you do approach it with a different lens… [with] curiosity as to what is going on to cause the situation.” |

| Theme/Subtheme | Responses |
|---|---|
| Role of Educators and Administrators in Trauma-Informed Schools | “If leadership themselves had more training on trauma informed and how to be a trauma-informed leader and really create a healthy organization culture, I think that would be one thing I would add.” |
| | “As time has gone on and the way that education is evolving and the way that students are evolving, we're finding that we all understand that there's social emotional needs that the students have that we all have to take a part in. It's not just the counselor or the social worker.” |
| | “The principal has really been a driving force in her leadership to make sure that trauma-informed, restorative practices are at the forefront of the school.” |
| | “I was hired by a principal who had been a school psych previously. And so she really got so many balls rolling… She's the one who implemented the PBIS and really wanted us to look at how trauma is impacting our kids.” |
| | “And we do now have a superintendent, fortunately, that really believes in this work. And so then when it comes also from the top down and the bottom up, then we really start to kind of meet in this messy middle and get to kind of play with, you know, what's really…best for kids.” |
| | “Everything…has to come from the top and not just saying it, but living it and modeling it. If you don't have that administrative support, a lot of times people, you know, have the tendency just to fall back into our old patterns. We have to stay on top of it.” |
| | “We’ve been very lucky in [the quality of our relationships with administrators]. I’ve had two different principals while I’ve been here and they each had no problem saying, ‘Well I’m coming to you on this because you’re the expert in this area. I’m not.’” |
| | “The principal became part of the crisis response team and I think that was really helpful because then we were able to work on trauma response together, right in real time. And she saw what was working and what wasn’t working. Then we could go back and debrief. When administration is not involved, you’re coming and you’re trying to [tell them] things but since it hasn’t been their experience, they’re making decisions off the cuff. So I think that was really helpful when they became part of that.” |

| Theme/Subtheme | Responses |
|---|---|
| Trauma-Informed Approaches in Relation to Anti-Racism, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion | "I think definitely under that trauma-informed lens that DEI work has to happen." <br><br> "The trauma stuff with the race stuff to me kind of goes hand in hand. We can impact all of [the children] with the trauma informed. I do think it's important that our staff need to be able to separate those and see that the experience of our black students or students of color, whether they're poor or not, is different than that of our other students. I would say it's more of a until you see it, we're not going to talk about it at a corporation level." <br><br> "I think [trauma-informed practices, anti-racism, and EDI initiatives] fit together. I think it's really a bad idea to look at race, equity and inclusion and belonging…without understanding the historical…the intergenerational trauma of brown and black bodies in this country. But to always have that front and center…whether we're seeing obvious trauma symptoms. A trauma informed lens allows the complexity of human beings to exist." <br><br> "I feel like most of these programs all have the same underlying premise. I mean, that we just have to be more empathetic and understanding of our students. So whether you're talking about anti-racism or you're talking about anti-bullying or you're talking about inclusion, it's all about accepting people for who they are and working with them. That's my gut bottom-line feeling." <br><br> "I think everything is connected in some way. I think racism is trauma. For those that are being affected by it, whoever's the victim of racism, it is a traumatic experience for them… I also believe that equity is important for students to learn about and to understand. I feel like schools are being tasked with more that they need to teach the students. We need to teach them how to be people. We need to teach them how to interact with each other. We need to teach them how to be kind, how not to treat others in a different way just because of how they look or the way they dress, or how much money they have or where they live." <br><br> "Trauma informed…can't just be focused on the individual, it really needs to be the collective." <br><br> "One thing that's unique about social work is that we have this ethical responsibility to balance our macro work as it relates to |

| Theme/Subtheme | Responses |
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| | social justice and really dismantling environmental barriers such as racism and other injustices.” |
| | “My experience here in this school district is that they have an equity and liaison department, and they put out trainings, but they’re always volunteer. So [we have] courageous conversations and things like that that are on race and diversity..but they're always volunteer.” |
| | “I can only speak from my perspective as a Latina provider, that for me, in my community, I have worked really hard to ensure that the trauma-informed practices that we do are in alignment with people’s culture and respect and are diverse, and the consultant we have coming in now that supports teachers in terms of trauma-informed pedagogy is also a person of color, and that was something that was really important to our administration.” |
| | “In terms of equity, the access to care is something that we have struggled with enormously. People’s access to resources in terms of not only financially but language wise, culturally appropriate… My families have come back to me and many times have gone, tried it, and then refused it. We just don’t have enough resources in the school building to suffice a number of students that need support. We need either more funding or we need more community support that is more culturally competent where people feel safe and seen.” |
| | “Our entire central office, minus our diversity and inclusion director, are white people and we sit in meetings and don’t identify that every single person in that room is white. The decisions on everything are made by white people.” |
| | “I think it all goes together. I think it’s all just like prongs on the same hub and treating people with respect is in the center.” |
| | “They all intertwine and overlap… I think there’s a Venn diagram over commonalities and they support each other in lots of different ways.” |
| | “We address all those issues… We offer everything to everyone. So yeah, I don’t see a difference for us.” |
| | “When you look at what the actual goal is, it’s to support the individual student. And so that's where their similarity lies I think.” |

| Theme/Subtheme | Responses |
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| | “Depending on how you are implementing it, [being colorblind] can be the case. I think there are some universal characteristics of all humans and, you know, knowledge of emotions and things like that is a really good thing. And so I think if we are trying to make sure that we are using some curriculum that’s representative of our students and looking at ways that we can promote that, that's good.” |

**Appendix I. Booking Form Survey**

| Question | Format and Response Options |
|---|---|
| Preferred name | Short answer |
| Email | Short answer |
| What is your professional role? | Dropdown menu with 4 options: School social worker; Social work supervisor; Head of services in a district; and School-based contractor |
| With what gender do you identify? | Dropdown menu with 5 options: Male, Female, Non-binary, Transgender, and Gender non-conforming |
| With what race/ethnicity do you identify? (Check all that apply.) | Checkboxes with 7 options: American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian or Asian American, Black or African American, Hawaii Native or Pacific Islander, Middle Eastern or North African, Hispanic/Latinx, and White |
| Have you worked in or supervised social workers in a trauma-informed school? | Dropdown menu with 2 options: Yes and No |

## Appendix II. Semi-Structured Interview Field Guide

### I. Opening

- Introduce myself & dissertation focus
- Confirm availability for next 30 minutes
- Reminder: Responses confidential and no identifying information will be included
- Verbal agreement to participate in research & record interview [IF YES, CONTINUE WITH FIELD GUIDE.]

### II. Grand Tour Questions

1. Tell me about your school. How long have you worked there? What is your role?
   PROBE: Grade levels/urbanicity/region of US
2. You've said your school is/is not trauma-informed. What makes you say that?
3. How would you define a trauma-informed school? What characteristics do you associate with a school being trauma informed?
   PROBE: Policies/practices, programs, environment? Relation to other models - community schools, equity/diversity/inclusion, anti-racism?
4. What characteristics do you associate with trauma-informed leaders? What actions or behaviors would they demonstrate?

### III. Questions about the Specific School

5. Can you talk about how your school became trauma informed? Who was involved and what changes were made?
6. How has the school climate changed as a result of being trauma-informed?
   PROBE: Impact for students… staff… caregivers?
7. As you think about your school, what would you want to implement to make it more trauma informed? Anything that can be done by the principal or schoolwide?

8. Can you share an example of a time you or a student personally benefited from trauma-informed approaches at your school?
9. What kind of student outcomes does your school track? Do you know of any changes in these metrics that coincided with the implementation of trauma-informed approaches?
   PROBE: Attendance, standardized test results, and disciplinary referrals?

**IV. Questions about Survey Outcomes**

10. Something we found in our analysis is that trauma-informed schools were more likely to have trauma training, resources for secondary traumatic stress, and metal detectors. Do you have any thoughts on these findings?
    PROBE: As academics, we're confused by the combination of hardening and softening approaches. Any thoughts?
11. Is there anything else you thought of during this interview that you would like to share?

## Chapter 5: Integrating Findings About Trauma-Informed Schools and Implications for Policy, Practice, and Theory in Education and Social Welfare

Schools have rapidly adopted trauma-informed practices in the last decade. Whereas support exists for some individual components of trauma-informed approaches (e.g., trauma training and/or clinical interventions), whole-school approaches have received minimal empirical study due to their complexity and a continuing lack of consensus about what such approaches entail (Avery et al., 2021; Gherardi et al., 2020; Maynard et al., 2019; Thomas et al., 2019; Watson & Astor, under review). The three studies of this dissertation provided empirical research about social workers' views of trauma-informed schools. This includes what social workers believe such schools should look like in practice and what characteristics and outcomes they are expected to have. Social workers reported on policies, practices, and climate present in trauma-informed schools. The findings address several empirical gaps in the trauma-informed schools literature, including inadequate study of whole-school, trauma-informed approaches; uncertainty about components essential to a trauma-informed school; and lack of clarity about the impact of trauma-informed approaches. The dissertation also provides insights for future conceptualizations, empirical study, and policy related to trauma-informed approaches in schools.

The three empirical studies in this dissertation are among the first to explore social worker perceptions of trauma-informed schools, including their practices, policies, and climate. Their potential implications are relevant to several academic and practice literatures. Targeted journals for Study 1, which focuses on practice and policy differences in schools, include *American Educational Research Journal*, *American Journal of Educational Research*, and *Educational Researcher*. These journals were chosen because understanding measurable

differences between policies and practices in schools identified as trauma informed is relevant to a broad education-focused audience. Because there are so few studies of whole-school, trauma-informed approaches, this manuscript provides valuable information about what is being implemented in the name of trauma awareness and response. Journals of interest for Study 2, with its focus on school climate and the perspectives of social workers, include *Journal of School Psychology*, *Journal of School Health*, or *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*. These journals were chosen because of their focus on mental health, and the first two specifically mental health in schools. In school psychology, the focus has tended to be on interpersonal, clinical interventions. When school climate is discussed, it is typically from a student perspective. Study 2 brings a school staff perspective and particularly the views of staff members who understand both clinical and organizational trauma approaches. Study 3, a qualitative analysis of social workers' understanding of trauma-informed schools, will be targeted toward social work journals that reach practitioners, including *Social Work*, *Children & Schools*, *Child & Family Social Work*, or *Journal of the Society for Social Work Research*. The perspectives of experienced social workers in our study will help to guide the efforts of other, newer school social work professionals. The findings also suggest areas for expansion of social work responsibilities and how to coordinate with school educators and administrators. Understanding the audiences for each study is important because the field of trauma-informed schools is interdisciplinary by nature and involves different professionals and perspectives. Even so, the logic behind all three studies was meant to build on findings relevant to each of the literatures described above and at the same time have conceptual clarity as a unified dissertation.

## Key Findings and Implications from Dissertation Studies

### Relationship Between Studies Conducted as Part of This Dissertation Research

The three studies of this dissertation explored the concept of trauma-informed schools from the perspective of social workers. Each study evaluated distinct concepts relevant to schools and built on each other to develop a broader picture and deeper understanding of how whole-school, trauma-informed approaches look in practice and what they are expected to achieve.

Study 1 and Study 2 both explored trauma-informed approaches in schools using quantitative methodologies, but they examined different aspects of the topic. Whereas Study 1 investigated differences in policies and practices between schools identified as trauma-informed and those that were not, Study 2 focused on social workers' experiences of trauma-informed culture and climate in schools. Both studies contribute to the understanding of trauma-informed approaches in schools from different angles and provide insights for future research and implementation. Studies 1 and 2 used survey methods and assessed statistical differences between schools that social workers identified as trauma informed and those that were not. Both studies found differences in alignment with current conceptualizations and goals of trauma-informed schools. However, these studies were not able to determine whether identified differences were an intentional or essential component of trauma-informed schools.

Study 3 involved an additional, distinct data collection of in-depth, semi-structured, qualitative interviews with school social workers. The goal was to understand how they viewed trauma-informed schools, what components they deemed necessary, and the expected outcomes. In the associated manuscript, I compare social workers' views to extant conceptual models for trauma-informed schools.

**Study 1: School Social Workers' Reports of Differences in Policies and Practices in Trauma-Informed and Non-Trauma-Informed Schools**

Study 1 analyzed data from a survey of 538 school social workers (SSWs) to investigate policies and practices associated with schools being identified as trauma informed. The study assessed associations between a school's characteristics (e.g., geographic location, urbanicity, and percentage of historically marginalized students), its social work staff, and whether or not school social workers would identify it as trauma informed. Using logistic regressions, it also examined the relationship between school practices and policies and trauma-informed identification by SSWs, holding constant school characteristics and respondent demographics.

Findings highlighted that the presence of trauma training and resources for secondary traumatic stress were key predictors of social workers' identification of a school as trauma informed. These findings are noteworthy because they indicate that real differences can be found between schools believed to be trauma informed and those that are not. It should be noted, however, that conceptual models for trauma-informed schools encompass a broader range of factors, including organizational policy changes and the availability of trauma-specific screening and treatments (Avery et al., 2021; Hanson & Lang, 2016; Maynard et al., 2019; NCTSN, 2017; SAMHSA, 2014).

***Implications for Social Work and Education Practice***

It is important for school-based professionals to understand which practices and policies promote a trauma-informed environment and which do not—in order to create environments more responsive to trauma survivors and to avoid perpetuating future harm. The literature remains unclear on what has been and is being done in the name of trauma awareness and response in schools (Avery et al., 2021; Maynard et al., 2019). Study 1 findings show that

primarily responses have been around trauma training and resources for secondary traumatic stress. Given that conceptual models have a broader view of trauma-informed approaches, findings point to a need to move educator and administrator focus beyond providing training and resources to staff. Now, school professionals should focus on adapting practices and policies at the district, school, and classroom levels to support a trauma-informed environment. Given the latest practice recommendations for school social work, social workers are well-suited to address broader conceptualizations of trauma response in schools (Tan & SSWAA, 2024).

It should be noted that every policy and practice we surveyed was more common in schools identified as trauma informed. These findings suggest that some differences between TI and non-TI schools relate more to the allocation of resources than to strategic, mission-driven policy and practice decisions to increase trauma awareness and response. Educators and school administrators should reflect on the benefits and challenges of implementing target hardening strategies (e.g., metal detectors and surveillance systems) alongside trauma-informed and restorative practices. For example, significant prior research has indicated that target hardening strategies can lead to harsh discipline and disciplinary inequities for students of color and those with disabilities (Counts et al., 2018; Ksinan et al., 2019; Nance, 2017; Okilwa & Robert, 2017; Warnick & Kapa, 2019).

We also found that schools with higher concentrations of students who qualified for free and reduced lunch or students from historically marginalized backgrounds were more likely to be identified as trauma informed. Additional consideration thus must be given to the rationale for making lower resourced schools trauma informed. Is this finding intentional on the part of school districts and administrators? Are higher income schools with fewer marginalized students and

families less in need of trauma awareness and response? Would more equitable funding remove the need for "trauma-informed" schools?

***Educational Policy Implications***

Federal legislation (e.g., Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015) called upon U.S. schools to implement trauma-informed, evidence-based practices, including in the provision of mental health services. However, there are numerous challenges associated with scaling up evidence-based practices (EBPs) designed for interpersonal or small group participation to a whole school. This is particularly true for lower resourced schools and minimal research has sought to address these concerns (Eiraldi et al., 2015; Fixsen et al., 2013). Most EBPs have not been adequately tested or proven to be effective across diverse populations. As a result, most EBPs are not sustained long-term (Fixsen et al., 2013). Although EBPs may seem like a simple way to introduce new initiatives into schools, their cost, frequent lack of cultural and contextual relevance, the difficulty of implementing and sustaining them with fidelity, and the fragmented school programming that results is not an effective use of schools' limited resources (Adelman & Taylor, 2018; Osher et al., 2021).

Fundamentally an overarching commitment to providing safe, supportive, and equitable school environments for all children must be ingrained. Creating such school environments requires recognition of communities in their environmental and cultural context and adopting strategies specific to the needs of the students and families therein. Instead of mandating specific tools for practice, policymakers should advocate that schools meet certain standards for student support and learning but allow for ground-up or district-led approaches appropriate to the unique needs of their community and population.

Previous research across more than 100 schools in Southern California found that empowering schools to implement a combination of EBPs alongside in-house responses for identified needs in concert with the expansion of schools' capacity through funding and community partnerships significantly increased students' perceptions of school safety, and decreased victimization, substance use, and weapon carrying immediately and for dozens of years post intervention. A robust data management plan enabled schools to monitor the effects of their actions and change tack as needed to achieve goals (Astor et al., 2021).

Policymakers should also consider decoupling state and local education funding from property taxes. To redress opportunity gaps and negative impacts on lower-income students and communities, funding must be more equitably distributed. High-need students and districts require significant support due to long-term, inequitable resource distribution and may need higher-than-average funding to support remediation (Watson et al., 2022).

**Study 2: Social Workers' Experiences of Trauma-Informed Culture and Climate in Schools**

Study 2 focused on the experiences of school social workers in relation to trauma-informed culture and climate in schools. The study also tested a new trauma-informed climate instrument, which assessed social workers' perceptions of a school's commitment to trauma ($\alpha$ = .800); its psychological and physical safety ($\alpha$ = .906); how strengths-based, whole-person, and equitable the school's focus is ($\alpha$ = .950); and the qualities of school-based relationships ($\alpha$ = .944). Associations between a school's characteristics (e.g., geographic location, urbanicity, and percentage of historically marginalized students), respondent demographics, and trauma-informed climate were explored. Logistic regressions also examined the relationship between

trauma-informed identification by SSWs and experiences of trauma-informed climate, holding constant school characteristics and respondent demographics.

Study 2 found that social workers reported clear and consistent differences in culture and climate between schools they identified as trauma informed and those they did not. Schools that social workers perceived as more safe were 3.8 times more likely to be identified as trauma informed. Schools that social workers reported had a strengths-based, equitable focus, and relationships that included trust, empowerment, and collaboration were both 4 times more likely to be identified as trauma informed. Schools social workers believed had a stronger commitment to trauma awareness and training were 25 times more likely to be identified as trauma informed. These findings indicate that characteristics of trauma-informed climate are associated with schools perceived by social workers to be trauma informed. One goal of trauma-informed approaches is to positively influence a school's culture so that its climate improves to benefit constituents (Bloom & Yanosy Sreedhar, 2008; Harris & Fallot, 2001) and this measure proved capable of recognizing such characteristics.

***Implications for Social Work Practice and Research***

Climate differences identified in Study 2 did not rely on the implementation of a set curriculum or program, which supported findings from Study 1 of this dissertation (Author, Study 1 of this dissertation). Instead, climate differences related to increased physical and psychological safety; more positive interpersonal relationships that included trust, collaboration, and empowerment; and a shift toward a whole-person, strengths-based, equity focus. All of these climate differences can be driven by a small group of committed individuals such as a school's or district's social workers. This recommendation is also in line with the latest practice models for school social work (Tan & SSWAA, 2024). It is important to recognize that greater

involvement by social workers in schoolwide prevention strategies and school climate will require three fundamental shifts in views of the social work position in schools: 1) a commitment on the part of the social work profession and its professionals to engage in schoolwide prevention efforts, 2) expansions of social worker roles and the workforce at a school and district level to build capacity to undertake such efforts, and 3) the support of school and district leadership to make these changes.

As with Study 1, in Study 2 we found that schools with higher concentrations of students who qualified for free and reduced lunch or students from historically marginalized backgrounds were more likely to have a trauma-informed climate than other schools. It is thus essential that considerations of race, poverty, and equity are included in future conceptualizations and empirical study of trauma-informed approaches. Prior research has shown that school staff often do not understand or prioritize race-related issues (Howard, 2020). As a result, some researchers now call for the centering of racial inequities in conceptualizations of trauma and implementation of trauma-informed approaches in schools (Alvarez, 2020; Saleem et al., 2022). These dissertation findings support these calls. Understanding students' and families' contexts and cultural heritage is required to address systemic inequities and create an inclusive environment that promotes student well-being, belonging, and psychological safety (Alvarez, 2020; Astor et al., 2021; Edmondson, 2018; Zimmerman & Astor, 2021). To that end, we recommend further consideration of why trauma-informed schools were more likely to have higher percentages of low-income and minoritized students as well as evaluation of resource allocations between trauma-informed and non-trauma-informed schools.

Study 2 also provided an opportunity to pilot a new trauma-informed culture and climate instrument based on a prior review of common conceptual components across extant models

(Watson & Astor, under review). Findings demonstrated the instrument was capable of identifying differences in culture and climate between TI and NTI schools, which is valuable from a practice perspective because schools need tools to monitor their change strategies. Implementation of whole-school, trauma-informed approaches has outpaced its empirical support. Having a new tool to assist with future study is valuable. Of course, additional work needs to be done to further test and validate the instrument. We also recommend assessment of differences in perceptions of trauma-informed culture and climate in one school or district by respondent role (e.g., students, certificated and classified staff, etc.) and identity (e.g., race, gender, ethnicity, LGBTQ+ status). Despite organizational and school researchers' tendency to distribute surveys to only one constituent group (Berkowitz et al., 2017; Ostroff et al., 2013; Schneider et al., 2013), viewpoints of multiple stakeholders enrich our understanding of multidimensional constructs like trauma-informed culture and climate. Additional qualitative study will enable exploration of school culture and climate processes and outcomes that are more neutral instead of purely positive or negative (Wang & Degol, 2016).

**Study 3: Social Workers' Perceptions of Necessary Components and Expected Outcomes for Trauma-Informed Schools**

Study 3 recruited 20 school social workers who had completed the prior survey utilized for Studies 1 and 2 for in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Interviews were conducted via Zoom and lasted approximately 30 minutes each. Participants were asked their perspectives on trauma-informed schools, the required components, expected outcomes, and their role in relation to that of educators and administrators in the implementation of TI approaches. Thematic analysis with deductive coding was used to analyze the interviews, with initial codes relating to our research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2012; Saldaña, 2021).

Findings from Study 3 can be summarized as follows:

- School social workers viewed trauma-informed schools as a holistic, systemic process that goes beyond the availability of trauma training or mental health services. They emphasized the importance of a trauma-informed lens permeating all aspects of a school's organization and activities, from its administration to support staff.
- Social workers identified several characteristics they expected to see in trauma-informed schools, including a positive and welcoming school climate, the availability of trauma training for all staff members, positive discipline, and the presence of restorative practices. They also emphasized the importance of building positive relationships among staff members and with students and families.
- Social workers recognized a positive school climate as both an essential component of a trauma-informed school and an outcome of trauma-informed approaches. They reported improved school climate resulting from trauma-informed approaches, which fostered a sense of safety, belonging, and community.
- Social workers identified several barriers to implementing and sustaining trauma-informed approaches in schools. These included a tendency among staff and administrators to view new initiatives as checkboxes, frequently shifting priorities, limited time and resources, and the complex hierarchy of educational leadership.
- Social workers highlighted the importance of leveraging their social work values and interpersonal skills to implement and sustain trauma-informed approaches in schools. They emphasized the role of trauma-informed leadership, which involved qualities such as self-awareness, empathy, humility, and the ability to maintain meaningful relationships with emotional safety.

- While most social workers recognized an important connection between trauma-informed approaches and antiracism, diversity, equity, and inclusion, a minority of participants did not explicitly mention these factors.

***Implications for Social Work Practice and Research***

Social workers interviewed for Study 3 understood that trauma-informed schools required a whole-school approach in line with current conceptual models (e.g., Bloom & Yanosy Sreedhar, 2008; Cole et al., 2013; Harris & Fallot, 2001; NCTSN, 2017; SAMHSA, 2014; Venet, 2021). This finding illustrates that social workers understand what is required in a trauma-informed school and lays the groundwork for additional study of school social workers' perspectives. Because study of whole-school, trauma-informed approaches is still so empirically nascent, we recommend future individual and comparative case studies of schools identified as trauma informed.

Social workers recognized that driving change would require them to speak to the needs of educators and administrators rather than in the language of social work. These findings reflect recent recommendations that school social workers who want to drive institutional change learn to "hear and understand when teachers discuss pedagogy and learning" (Capp & Astor, 2024, p. 379). Study 3 found that some social workers had already successfully taken up that call, illustrating its future potential. Findings also align with the latest practice guidelines suggesting school social workers are well-equipped to support schools in shifting organizational culture and climate to become more trauma aware and responsive (Tan & SSWAA, 2024).

Social workers also reported that school-based professionals needed support to implement trauma-informed approaches at the classroom level, including both additional training in recommended practices and the time to incorporate them in classroom management and lesson

planning. This finding is in line with prior calls for teacher education and support to implement culturally responsive practices in schools, including those that address societal inequities like racism and classism (Howard & del Rosario, 2000; Knox et al., 2023).

## Significance of this Dissertation for Social Welfare Practice and Policy

The dissertation explored policies and practices present in schools social workers identified as trauma informed, and the extent to which trauma-informed climate existed in these schools. The dissertation also solicited school social workers' perspectives on components requisite to a trauma-informed approach and the outcomes they were seeing as a result. As a whole, this dissertation contributed to the trauma-informed schools, educational, and social work literatures in two unique ways. First, the dissertation provided an often-overlooked perspective in schools: that of social workers, who support students and families, but are typically outside the organizational hierarchy. Secondly, the dissertation focused on the entire school organization as a system of importance and change in implementation of trauma-informed approaches.

Social workers' perspectives are typically excluded from the empirical schools literature, which prioritizes the perspectives of educators and administrators. With an interest in trauma and appropriate responses growing rapidly across the PreK-12 ecosystem, school social workers' voices are increasingly important. School social workers have advanced training in behavioral and mental health, including trauma presentation and response. They often provide clinical services to schoolchildren and their families (Phillippo et al., 2017). Social workers are also trained to work across the ecological spectrum, from interpersonal to community-wide interventions (Gitterman et al., 2018; Teater, 2014). The above characteristics make social workers ideally suited to support schools as they implement and sustain an organization-wide, contextualized approach to trauma (Dombo & Sabatino, 2019; Sedillo-Hamann, 2022). The latest

school practice guidelines call for social workers to work on organizational issues within schools, including school culture and climate (Tan & SSWAA, 2024). As noted above, social workers taking on a leadership position in the implementation of trauma-informed approaches will require fundamental shifts in the school social work role, including: 1) a commitment by the profession and individual social workers to engage in whole-school prevention strategies, 2) an expanded workforce to build capacity for whole-school approaches, and 3) the support of building and district leadership.

Capp and Astor (2024) recommend that school social workers position themselves to serve as organizational consultants to school principals and other leaders. Their rationale is that, in order to support the presence of a positive school climate, social workers need a voice in school priorities. To effect change, SSWs will need to learn how to influence the school board, district, and principals to prioritize the importance of social-emotional learning and a whole-child focus. As a profession, school social workers will need practice guidelines to help them get to the decision-making table. Social work education will also need to better incorporate organizational behavior theory in MSW programs so that SSWs understand group dynamics in organizations (not just in therapy) and how to influence organizational leadership.

## Relationship Between Dissertation and Author's Plans for Future Study

This dissertation contributed to the author's long-term research agenda dedicated to understanding how trauma-informed and healing organizations differ from other organizations, and the impact of trauma-informed and healing environments on staff and service recipients. Current research includes continuing analysis of a statewide trauma-informed culture and climate survey conducted across multiple constituent roles (e.g., board members, staff, and volunteers) in partnership with a network of nonprofit organizations. I am also engaged in an empowerment

research project with young adults with foster care experience using the Photovoice methodology. Future plans include expanding the above photovoice project to explore the experiences of other roles (e.g., foster parents and caseworkers) in the foster care system; undertaking case studies of trauma-informed organizations; and analyzing school monitoring data to further explore how identification as a trauma-informed environment relates to changes in staff and student outcomes.

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