A Phenomenology of Naturally Embedded Trauma-Informed Practices Within Public Montessori Classroom Environments

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Department of Community Care and Counseling, Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

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Abstract

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the lived experiences of 12 classroom teachers in different public Montessori schools in four different geographical regions of the United States. The interview was designed to allow the teachers to describe their Montessorian approach regarding areas of safety, social interaction, and respectful classroom environments to support students who may be experiencing the consequences of childhood trauma. The theories that guided this study were Albert Bandura's (1977) social cognitive theory and the humanistic or person-centered theory of Carl Rogers (Rogers & Kramer, 1995). These theories facilitated the development of an understanding of fundamental concepts in children's cognitive, social, and emotional learning and how those are related to classroom behavior concerns. Data were collected via a personal writing prompt and interviews, allowing the teachers to explain how they prepare their classrooms to best support the needs of children who may be dealing with the consequences of childhood trauma. Data were organized into themes to inform teacher preparation programs and ongoing professional development.

Keywords: Montessori, trauma-informed practices, childhood trauma, classroom management

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my husband, Brandon Boyd Lewis. You have been a source of strength and encouragement for me throughout this entire journey and our lives together. Thank you for all the ways that you helped this dream and all of my others come to life.

This dissertation is also dedicated to our children, Abigail, Brayden, Ryman, and River. You are all loved so deeply and I hope that you know how special you all truly are. May you all have the courage and the support around you to reach for your biggest dreams.

I also dedicate the completion of this dissertation in loving memory of my momma, Debbie Staggs. You knew that I was going to finish this one day and I know you never doubted my tenacity. I love you and miss you. Thank you for your love and guidance.

Finally, I dedicate this work in honor of all the children who are one loving adult away from finding a light on their paths.

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Lastly, I would like to thank the administrators and staff at Community Montessori School. You all have been an amazing group of cheerleaders and friends. Your work with our students was part of the inspiration for this research and I hold you all dear to my heart. Thank you to all of you who spoke with me about my project and helped me understand how deeply rooted in love and respect Montessori education truly is.

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List of Abbreviations

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)

Multi-tiered Systems of Support (MTSS)

National Center for Montessori in the Public Sector (NCMPS)

Social Cognitive Theory (SCT)

Trauma-informed Care (TIC)

Chapter One: Introduction

Overview

Childhood trauma is now considered a public health crisis, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC; 2022). The CDC (2019) reports that one in six adults has experienced at least four or more types of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). Moreover, approximately one in seven children experienced child abuse and neglect in the past year (CDC, 2022). Abuse and neglect can be physical, sexual, or emotional, but these types of experiences are only part of a range of experiences that can contribute to childhood trauma (CDC, 2019). Childhood adversity includes early exposure to problematic social-contextual stress, such as school or community violence (CDC, 2019).

Because of the impacts of trauma and toxic stress on children, classroom behavioral challenges are becoming more frequent and more intense (Kurtz, 2022; National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). These challenges contribute to teachers feeling overwhelmed and becoming burned out at rapidly increasing rates, decreasing their well-being and directly affecting the teacher-student relationship (Braun et al., 2019; Christian-Brandt et al., 2020; Luthar & Mendes, 2020; Wink et al., 2021). Because of the challenges associated with teaching children exposed to traumatic stress, teachers are specifically requesting more trauma-informed training and techniques to support students in their classrooms. Teachers are concerned about their lack of knowledge and skills to support the mental health needs of their students (Braun et al., 2019; Christian-Brandt et al., 2020; Luthar & Mendes, 2020; Wink et al., 2021).

Teachers are in optimal positions to model and build positive and stable relationships with students due to the amount of time spent with them in their classrooms consistently (Post et al., 2022). Rough estimates suggest that children in public schools in the United States spend

approximately 8 hours a day, 5 days a week, and at least 180 days a year in school. Research indicates that a positive, stable relationship with a caring and reliable adult is one of the strongest protective factors to increase resilience and promote healing among those encountering ACEs (CDC, 2019). Understanding the knowledge teachers have about the consequences of trauma and their perceived skill set in supporting students who have been exposed to trauma can help provide strong foundational elements for creating and sustaining a trauma-informed environment.

Background

Over the past decade, if not longer, educators have become increasingly concerned with classroom behavior and management (Báez et al., 2019; Christian-Brandt et al., 2020). Recent literature not only includes information about the impact of childhood traumatic experiences on a child's ability to self-regulate, but it also sheds light on the importance of educating teachers and other professionals who work with children about the impact of trauma and how to respond to the emotional and behavioral needs of children with empathy, love, and understanding (Brunzell et al., 2015; Brunzell et al., 2019; D'Emido-Caston, 2019; Kraus et al., 2020; Martin et al., 2017). One of the cited protective factors that has been shown to increase resiliency and foster healing in children is a safe and supportive relationship with a trusted, stable adult (D'Edmido-Caston, 2019; Post et al., 2020). This section will explore the historical, social, and theoretical background of the research problem with a focus on the importance of a trauma-informed approach in educational settings and the naturally embedded trauma-informed practices within the Montessori foundational principles.

Historical Context

Research over the past decade has identified the necessity of trauma-informed practices in educational settings (Arnold et al., 2020; Brunzell et al., 2015; Brunzell et al., 2018; Champine et al., 2019; Christian-Brandt et al., 2019; Kim et al., 2020). This culmination of research indicates that both children and educators are affected by childhood trauma and toxic stress. The authors agree, that over time, the role of classroom teachers has evolved. What is currently needed is a holistic, child-centered approach, not only as a response to the consequences of trauma but also as a preventative measure, to not do more harm during critical developmental times in a child's life. Mental health concerns, especially for younger children, are steadily increasing in both frequency and severity (CDC, 2022). Recent research has identified childhood trauma as a public health concern, and educators are on the front lines, in positions to provide critical support for many children, especially those from low-income families (Arnold et al., 2020). Longitudinal studies examining the impact of trauma-informed educational programs are limited due to the broad nature of trauma-informed efforts, lack of universally accepted approaches across domains, and inconsistent implementation.

Many states are beginning to adopt legislation requiring trauma-informed educational support, but consistency and fidelity remain areas of weakness due to variations in policy interpretation from district to district and even school to school (Champine et al., 2019). The organizers of educator preparation programs are beginning to recognize the necessity of trauma-informed training within the preparation phase of teacher education, but research does not indicate consistent or successful integration of such programs (Brown et al., 2022; McClain, 2020). Moreover, there are very few studies investigating embedded trauma-informed practices within a Montessori classroom.

Montessori certification does not currently identify specific embedded practices as trauma-informed, but it is important to note that over a century ago Maria Montessori recognized the need to create a model combining knowledge from the fields of education, medicine, and science (Phillips et al., 2022). Educational reform, while remaining in dire need of improvement, appears to be in the beginning phases of prioritizing the holistic and educational needs of children. Studies investigating the current practices of Montessori teachers and the extent to which they are trauma-informed are needed. Montessori certification is not currently a stand-alone program and requires further training following traditional professional teacher education programs (Cossentino, 2009).

Social Context

Teacher burnout is a significant cause for concern in education (Braun et al., 2019; de Ruiter et al., 2019; Wink et al., 2021). Research shows that secondary stressors can contribute to compassion fatigue, feelings of mental and physical exhaustion, and, if not adequately addressed professionally and consistently, convey a lack of support from administrators (Wink et al., 2021). Preservice teachers must be prepared to support the evolving needs of students in their classrooms and feel supported while navigating uncharted territory as they enter the field (Braun et al., 2019; de Ruiter et al., 2019; Wink et al., 2021). Experienced educators also need support and professional development opportunities, while retaining professional autonomy, to address the ever-growing needs of their classrooms (Braun et al., 2019; de Ruiter et al., 2019; Wink et al., 2021).

The roles and responsibilities of teachers are beginning to overlap with the roles of mental health professionals within the school community (Beames et al., 2022; Sanchez et al., 2018). Whereas gaining clarity and conciseness regarding job responsibilities may help teachers

better understand the role they play in supporting the mental health needs of their students, it should be noted that supporting such needs can add additional stressors to educators who feel under-prepared to serve students with more complex or intense needs. The same research highlights the need for ongoing education regarding trauma and the specific skills and strategies to use when supporting students with mental health needs. Teachers who work with children who have experienced trauma commonly request such skills (Braun et al., 2019; Wink et al., 2021).

Theoretical Contexts

Carl Rogers's person-centered humanistic theory (Rogers & Kramer, 1995) and Albert Bandura's social cognitive theory (1977) provide important theoretical perspectives to help explain the demeanor that teachers must adopt to implement trauma-informed classrooms. The work of Carl Rogers suggests that positive regard, empathy, congruence, and safety are essential elements of healthy and productive therapeutic relationships. Bandura (1977) believed that individuals learn through observation of those around them. Children pay close attention to the "models" or the adults in their environments. Social cognitive theory also helps to shed light on the way children learn certain behaviors when exposed to traumatic events and how the interpretation of those behaviors can cause concerns in a learning environment (Abbassi & Aslinia, 2018). Social cognitive theory further explains people's beliefs about the potential consequences of their actions (Luszczynska & Schwarzer, 2005). These theories, while not necessarily stand-alone, can provide strong theoretical foundations when forming trauma-informed educational support for children who have been affected by trauma.

Additionally, Maria Montessori (2004) asserted that to support children holistically, there must be a convergence of education, medicine, and science. Montessori essential elements

include freedom within limits or the promotion of responsibility through choice, uninterrupted work periods, support for the various developmental and neuro-diverse levels of children, highly qualified educators, peaceful classroom environments, and a belief that community and family enhance the learning experiences of children (NCMPS, 2017). Through these theories, educational reform, and improved pedagogical practices, school districts are tasked with working to integrate education, mental health, and science in efforts to provide safe learning environments for children, especially those who have been impacted by childhood traumatic experiences (Bethell et al., 2019; Kraus et al., 2020; Montessori, 1973; Resler, 2017; Rogers & Kramer, 1995; SCT; 1977).

Situation to Self

This phenomenological study provided me the opportunity to speak directly with educators who are working with children, in classrooms and schools, daily. Together, the public Montessori teachers and I were able to build new knowledge by sharing experiences and adding themes from those experiences, contributing to a collective growth experience in the spirit of constructivism (Creswell & Poth, 2018). During the data collection portion of the research, I was considered both an insider and an outsider. Ontologically, this is called the emic-etic divide (Holmes, 2020). I am an educator but do not have Montessori certification. I am no expert on Montessori education but I have spent an extensive amount of time researching the ways that Maria Montessori contributed to the provision of a holistic educational experience for children. I have worked as a classroom teacher, but most of my experience is as a school counselor. I have only worked in public schools, and I have experience in both a public Montessori school and in a school in an economically disadvantaged community. Being able to understand the experience of

the educators I spoke with from both perspectives was valuable to the research process and added some objectivity to an extremely subjective experience.

As a current school counselor, I began to think about this research after a series of devastating events occurred in the poverty-stricken community and school in which I served students nearly a decade ago. Our students, in many scenarios, were unable to self-regulate and focus on academic tasks due to other factors that were directly impacting their ability to take in new information. The students were suffering academically, behaviorally, emotionally, and socially. The teachers and staff were feeling overwhelmed and under-supported. I began to do research on childhood trauma and what adults could do to help children heal and feel a sense of safety. Over and over, what I read spoke explicitly about the power of relationships and attachment as protective factors for children (Cui, 2022; Little & Maunder, 2021; McKay & Macomber, 2021). As a result of this experience, working with children in educational settings became a deeply personal experience, relying heavily on me, as an adult, to work harder to understand the needs of the children based on the way they shared their experiences and needs.

When I began working in a public Montessori school 4 years ago, I began to learn what Maria Montessori (1973) meant by the concept of following the child. Montessori asserted that the work we do with children must intentionally focus on understanding and supporting the needs of the child. Montessori (1973) stated that to best support those needs, we must first follow the child in their environment, observe them closely, and do what we can to facilitate the learning process without impeding the independence of the child. Each child and their needs are unique. To understand and support them best, we must strive to build strong, trusting relationships with our students (Wink et al., 2021). Combining the theories of Montessori (1973), Bandura (1977), and Rogers (CRT; 1977) with the daily experiences of educators currently

facing the consequences of childhood trauma, I hope to contribute to the educational community by supporting educators through knowledge and skill-building, as well as to our understanding of how to best support students as they heal and succeed in the school environment.

Problem Statement

The problem is that children, especially in kindergarten through fifth grade, increasingly face behavioral and emotional challenges related to safety, respect, and cooperation in educational settings (Bethell et al., 2019; Kraus et al., 2020; National Center for Education Statistics, 2022; Resler, 2017). Educators continuously report feeling overwhelmed and becoming burned out due to a lack of support and are specifically requesting more training on trauma-informed techniques and skill-building to support the growing mental health needs of the students they serve (Braun et al., 2019; Wink et al., 2021). As a school counselor, I witness the frustration of classroom teachers working with students who are unable to take in academic material while dysregulated. In many cases, the students are unable to regulate their emotions because they have not been explicitly taught skills that they need to self-regulate. While teachers are requesting more support and education about ways to provide opportunities for their students to learn and practice these necessary skills in their classrooms, these types of training usually occur after teachers enter the field instead of being integrated into their preservice professional preparation programs (McClain, 2021; Oberg & Bryce, 2022).

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of 12 teachers in different public Montessori schools in four different geographical regions of the United States as they prepared and managed their classrooms, utilizing the embedded trauma-informed principles that are part of the Montessori essential foundational elements. For this

study, trauma-informed practices were defined as a focus on student interactions regarding safety, respect, and cooperation (SAMHSA, 2014). Montessori's essential elements were defined by the *Essential Elements Rubric* provided by the National Center for Montessori in the Public Sector (NCMPS, 2017). This rubric is utilized by accredited public Montessori schools to assess fidelity in Montessori practices. Core values of the rubric include respect for the process of human development and support for children's independence, freedom, responsibility, and growth (NCMPS, 2017). The focus is on the application of a combination of child-centered approaches, which can ultimately improve the student-teacher dynamics within a classroom environment and the foundational beliefs of the classroom teachers (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The two theories that guided this study were Albert Bandura's (1977) social cognitive theory and Carl Rogers' person-centered humanistic theory (Rogers & Kramer, 1995). The theories of Bandura, Rogers, and Montessori provide information that can inform the demeanor that teachers must adopt in implementing best practices for children who have been traumatized. These theories help shed light on the necessity of intentional focus on relationship building and the cultivation of emotional intelligence in children (Maynard et al., 2019; O'Reilly et al., 2018; Post et al., 2020; Wink et al., 2020). The current study was intended to give a voice to the educators working with children in classrooms daily, allowing them to elaborate on the processes underlying their classroom foundational designs.

Significance of the Study

Whereas childhood trauma can have negative consequences on a child's life that can last a lifetime, positive childhood experiences can promote healing and positively affect mental health across the lifespan (Bethell et al., 2019). Bethell et al. (2019) explained how building certain skills can help children stay calm and in control when faced with obstacles. This study

aimed to provide evidence of embedded trauma-informed practices in public Montessori first through sixth grade classrooms. These trauma-informed practices promote safety, relationship building, and responsibility for the children in school settings. This study's findings can inform teacher educator programs, as well as current and prospective educators, about the parallels found between trauma-informed educational practices and Montessori principles, while providing a framework that becomes the heart of the classroom as opposed to producing additional strategies that must be implemented later, thus becoming part of the overload.

Research Questions

The researcher addressed the research problem by proposing the following research questions guided by research:

RQ1. How do public Montessori teachers explain their preparedness to work with children who have experienced trauma?

As previously mentioned, the CDC (2022) considers childhood trauma a public health crisis. Teachers are on the front lines of working with many children who have been exposed to traumatic events or toxic stress (Arnold et al., 2020). In understanding teachers' perceived preparedness for working with children who have experienced trauma or the consequences of trauma, it is important to address teacher knowledge regarding the impact trauma can have on children. It is also important to consider what resources teachers feel they have access to within their classroom environments to support the various needs of their students.

RQ2. How do public Montessori teachers ensure safety for each child within the classroom environment?

The National Education Association (NEA; 2023) states that a trauma-informed school fosters a school climate in which students feel supported and safe in their learning environment.

Within the *Essential Elements Rubric* for Montessori in the public sector, a specific domain of focus is on the adults within the learning environment (NCMPS, 2017). The rubric serves to assess the ongoing training of educators, the necessary support provided by paraprofessionals, and how all the adults working with children in the school embrace the core values of a Montessori education. Safety, in this study, refers to the physical, emotional, and psychological needs of students.

RQ3. How do public Montessori teachers describe specific areas of focus regarding learners' social interaction during the construction of the prepared environment?

According to the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN; n.d.), the fifth guiding principle to a trauma-informed approach is empowerment, voice, and choice. This principle is focused on learning rather than compliance, is designed to intentionally recognize a person's strengths, and is purposefully individualized (NCTSN, n.d.). According to the *Essential Elements Rubric*, an exemplary Montessori classroom environment supports a high degree of student choice regarding what to work on, how long to work, and where to work. Montessori classroom environments are multi-age by design and provide real-world opportunities for students to practice self-initiative, collaboration, and problem-solving skills in a safe and supportive environment (American Montessori Society [AMS], n.d.). AMS asserts that a Montessori education helps develop students who are capable, accountable, and knowledgeable, with a strong sense of self and the ability to thrive in the real world.

RQ4. How do public Montessori teachers describe ensuring the cultivation of a respectful classroom environment for all students?

Peer support, collaboration, mutuality, and cultural, historical, and gender issues account for more guiding principles of a trauma-informed approach (CDC, 2019; NCTSN, n.d.;

SAMHSA, 2014). These guiding principles outline internal assessment and areas that require constant improvement, which must be present within a trauma-informed approach. A trauma-informed approach requires ongoing attention, awareness, and sensitivity to maintain a sense of safety, respect, and collaboration (CDC, 2019; SAMHSA, 2014). NCMPS also requires that the adults in a public Montessori school treat one another with respect and model grace and courtesy in their interactions with one another (2017).

In addition to areas already discussed within a public Montessori educational environment (e.g., respect for the child and from the child), respect for the family and cultural elements are also considered (NCMPS, 2017). Within a public Montessori classroom, according to NCMPS (2017), a strong partnership between home and school must also be evident in a public Montessori school for an exemplary score on the rubric. The rubric also indicates that the school should provide ongoing school-home collaboration opportunities for the families to meaningfully contribute to the mission of the school (NCMPS, 2017).

Definitions

Adverse Childhood Experiences. (ACEs) are potentially traumatic events that occur in a person's life between 0-17 years of age (CDC, 2019). Many events can be classified as traumatic and can negatively impact health and well-being. Some common ACEs include experiencing violence, abuse, or neglect. Witnessing violence in the home or the community can also be considered an ACE. There are also influencing factors in a child's home environment that can undermine a child's sense of safety.

Compassion Fatigue. Compassion fatigue (CF) occurs from exposure to working with a traumatized individual (Cockers & Joss, 2016). Individuals, especially those working in the helping professions, are at risk of exposure due to the personal nature of those careers. Nurses,

first responders, and teachers are directly affected by CF. Relationships, job satisfaction, working relationships, and overall well-being can be negatively affected when a person experiences this type of consequence of secondary trauma (Cockers & Joss, 2016).

Multi-tiered Systems of Support. Multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) refers to a framework in education that is geared to provide tiered support that can benefit every student (Shepley & Grisham-Brown, 2019). This type of support utilizes data to provide universal support for students who may not need specialized intervention and increasing levels of targeted tier support based on identified levels of need.

Prepared Environment. In Montessori education, a prepared environment refers to, in most cases, the classroom space, which is prepared in a way that supports the academic and social skill development of children who are working to become independent and responsible beings (Macià-Gual & Domingo-Peñafiel, 2021). In Montessori education, the classroom teacher works to prepare the physical and emotional environment for students while being mindful of each child's physical and developmental needs (Astuti & Sandra, 2020). According to Astuti and Sandra (2020), special attention is paid to the cleanliness and the organization of the physical environment in such a way that it supports a sense of safety and responsibility for the children in the classroom.

Public Montessori Schools. Public Montessori schools are growing throughout the nation. Unlike privately funded Montessori schools, public Montessori schools are tasked with simultaneously adhering to quality Montessori foundational principles and state standards (AMS, n.d.). Montessori can be found in traditional, private, charter, and magnet schools around the world. In 1907, Montessori opened her first school for children who were from families who could not pay for formal education. Today, Montessori programs can be found in over 500

schools in the United States. Public Montessori schools thrive on social and economic diversity for families in a variety of income brackets (AMS, n.d.). For this study, public Montessori schools included charter schools and public Montessori schools in traditional public school districts.

Teacher Preparation Programs. Teacher preparation programs select, train, and certify public school teachers in a variety of ways depending on the individual program (von Hippel & Bellows, 2018). Details of these programs vary across the country and are not limited to a specific set of guidelines or principles.

Title 1. Title 1, Part A is a federal educational program that supports schools with low-income students across the United States (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). The U.S. Department of Education describes Title 1 as a program that provides specific funding designated to schools with high percentages of students from low-income families to help children meet academic standards. Schools with students from low-income families making up at least 40% of total enrollment qualify for Title 1 funding (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). Additionally, the U. S. Department of Education states that schools across the country use Title 1 funding to provide additional academic support and learning opportunities to help raise the achievement of the lowest-achieving students.

Trauma-Informed Care. Trauma-informed care is a way of supporting the diverse needs of people who have been affected by trauma and begins when people begin to ask what happened to a person instead of what is wrong with them (Center for Healthcare Strategies, 2021). Center for Healthcare Strategies (2021) explains that trauma-informed care encompasses an understanding of the impact of trauma, recognition of its signs and symptoms, and the paths to recovery. Moreover, trauma-informed care integrates the understanding of trauma into policy,

procedure, and practice, and actively works to avoid re-traumatization. One of the main benefits of trauma-informed care includes the maintenance of healthy and supportive relationships (Center for Healthcare Strategies, 2021).

Trauma-Informed Schools. The NEA (2023) recognizes trauma-informed schools as educational establishments that are actively engaged in finding ways for schools and educators to support children who have been affected by trauma. These schools seek to find ways to address deficits in school safety, behavior, and learning related to the consequences of traumatic experiences.

Traumatic Experiences. Traumatic experiences are events that occur in a person's life that can have profound emotional impacts, lasting a lifetime (CDC, 2019). These events, according to the CDC (2019), can take the form of either real or perceived threats to a person's safety, including death or serious injury, and can include feelings of intense fear, hopelessness, or horror. The CDC states that common responses to traumatic events can include, but are not limited to, feelings of fear, grief, depression, changes in appetite, and sleep patterns, as well as withdrawal from a person's normal activities.

Chapter One Summary

This chapter introduced the current study and the problem this study attempted to address: the current behavioral and emotional concerns related to safety, respect, and cooperation of children in Grades K-5. Many children are exposed to trauma, and as a result, manifest associated emotional and behavioral concerns in the classroom (CDC, 2019). Not only do these concerns contribute to long-term problems for children, but they also can have a negative impact on the well-being of the educators working with the children. This chapter provides historical, social, and theoretical background information and outlines some of the concerns educators are

facing today. These concerns can create challenges in the classrooms for educators, and as a result, many educators are becoming frustrated, burned out, and leaving education (Gomez, 2022). This chapter also introduced the purpose and significance of the study, which was to describe the lived experience of public Montessori teachers as they prepare their classrooms with embedded trauma-informed principles and how that preparation can benefit all students. This chapter also outlined the research questions and provided information regarding the parallels between trauma-informed practices and public Montessori foundational principles. The principles in public Montessori programs are guided and assessed by the *Essential Elements Rubric* provided by NCMPS (2017). This chapter concluded by defining terms relevant to the study relating to trauma-informed care and Montessori educational principles.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Overview

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of 12 teachers in different public Montessori schools in four different geographical regions of the United States as they prepare and manage their classrooms, utilizing naturally embedded trauma-informed principles that are part of the Montessori essential foundational elements. While the essential foundational elements do not specifically state that there are trauma-informed practices embedded, Maria Montessori recognized the need to create a model combining knowledge from the fields of education, medicine, and science to best support children in a more holistic way (Montessori, 2004; Phillips et al., 2022). Therefore, understanding the experiences of Montessori-trained teachers and how they employ these Montessori foundational elements to attune to the whole child can shed light on this subject. The study was conducted in the hope of generating further research that can support the integration of trauma-informed training into both teacher preparation courses and into public school classrooms as an integral part of the program, instead of being presented as activities to add to an existing program.

The literature review begins with the theoretical framework, which consists of social constructivism (Creswell & Poth, 2018), Albert Bandura's social cognitive theory (1977), and the humanistic or person-centered theory of Carl Rogers (Rogers & Kramer, 1995). These theories address the underlying approach to the study, which was qualitative, and played a key role in understanding concepts fundamental to children's cognitive, social, and emotional learning. An introduction to elementary classroom behavior concerns is presented as well as the necessity of early intervention efforts (Krause et al., 2020; Phillips et al., 2022, Sutherland et al., 2020). Specifically, this literature helps to shed light on the impact that adverse childhood

experiences can have on a child's social interactions, behaviors, relationships, and academic achievement (CDC, 2019; Maynard et al., 2019; SAMHSA, 2014). Next, the literature review provides information about the mental health needs of students, necessary mental health support in schools, and the role that educators play in supporting students on a whole-child level as part of the system of support with the potential for role ambiguity (Baffour, 2017; Beames et al., 2022; Blitz et al., 2016; Brown et al., 2022; D'Emidio-Caston, 2019; Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005; Herrenkohl et al., 2019; Luthar & Mendes, 2020; Martin et al., 2017; Sanchez et al., 2018). There is also a section that focuses on trauma-informed education, including why it is necessary, educator training, implementation, and the effect on educator attitudes about classroom behavior (Bethell et al., 2014; DeBellis & Zisk, 2014; Graham & Cinquini, 2022; Osher, 2018; SAMHSA, 2014; Wiest-Stevenson & Lee, 2016). The literature review also explores Montessori education including philosophy, Montessori and mental health, and the trauma-informed themes that can be found in Montessori foundational principles (Lillard, 2019; Lillard & Else-Quest, 2006; Lillard et al., 2017; Marshall, 2017; Montessori, 1973). The review concludes with a discussion of current teacher preparation programs and how some programs are currently preparing new educators to work with students who have experienced traumatic events (Brown et al., 2022; McClain, 2021).

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework guiding this study is comprised of social constructivism (Creswell & Poth, 2018), the theory underlying the study's methodological approach; the humanistic or person-centered theory of Carl Rogers, which is aimed at offering people unconditional positive regard (Rogers & Kramer, 1995); and social cognitive theory, which is concerned with peoples' beliefs about the possible consequences of their actions (Luszczynska &

Schwarzer, 2005). Creswell and Poth (2018) noted that, from an epistemological perspective, social constructivism explains how reality is constructed between the researcher and the participant; in other words, from a social constructivist perspective, reality is formed by a culmination of individual experiences. Creswell and Poth continued to explain constructivism by asserting that human beings learn from the experiences they have interacting with others. The constructivist theory helps to explain the importance of the participants' perceptions in our understanding of socially constructed knowledge about the research topic, which in this case is teachers' perceived preparedness to work with children who have a variety of behavioral, emotional, and relational needs that may be related to the consequences of childhood trauma (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

In Carl Rogers' early research, he concluded that unconditional positive regard, empathy, and congruence were necessary core conditions for a person-centered therapeutic approach (Rogers & Kramer, 1995). Rogers asserted that clients need a feeling of safety to reach their potential. Also, according to Rogers, to be congruent one must be genuine, which is a critical element in a person-centered therapeutic approach, as well as in the foundations of healthy and safe relationships. While those person-centered components from Rogers' theory are helpful for most patients, they may not be sufficient for a full system of care (Kirsehnbaum & Jourdan, 2005). According to Kirshenbaum and Jourdan, a staunch support system and other extra-therapeutic variables, such as the client's determination and even fortuitous events, play a role in client success. Furthermore, understanding the complexity of variables that contribute to positive counseling outcomes is critical in any theory (Kirsehnbaum & Jourdan, 2005). While other variables may be important to consider as well as Carl Rogers' theory, a teacher's empathy is important for this study as it is crucial in creating positive environments for students who have

been exposed to trauma (Wink et al., 2021). Wink et al. found that higher levels of social-emotional competencies can positively affect the teacher-student relationship and the teacher's perspective toward behavioral challenges.

Social cognitive theory started as the social learning theory in the 1960s by Albert Bandura (Bandura, 1977). Bandura believed that individuals learn much about the environment around them through observation. He also asserted that children pay close attention to the "models" or the adults around them in their environments. In the 1980s, Bandura renamed the theory social cognitive theory to better describe how people learn from their social interactions. In his theory, there is a clear relationship between behavior and the interactions of biology and environment (Bandura, 1977). Social cognitive theory also helps address the way children learn certain behaviors when exposed to traumatic experiences and how the interpretation of those behaviors can be concerning within a learning environment (Abbassi & Aslinia, 2018).

Traumatic experience affects cognitive functioning and can lead to cognitive impairment (Hayes et al., 2012). Finding an approach to address these deficits necessitates a multi-faceted approach for both the student and the interpretation of the work being observed through the study (Phillips et al., 2022). Maria Montessori and Albert Bandura had different beliefs regarding areas, such as reward and punishment or intrinsic motivation, but by understanding how social interactions influence behavior, researchers can better understand the need for creating an environment or learning culture that promotes safety and self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977; Montessori, 1973).

Related Literature

Before reviewing the literature for this study, it is important to introduce the alignment between trauma-informed care and the Montessori educational model. Teachers must know how

to provide an environment in which children who have been traumatized can be successful (Maynard et al., 2019). Educators should seek to apply foundational elements to the classroom regardless of a child's age/ability level, or type of school; they must provide an environment that will benefit all children on a cognitive, psychomotor, affective, and social level (Báez et al., 2019; Martin et al., 2017).

The six principles of trauma-informed care are safety, trustworthiness/transparency, peer support, collaboration/mutuality, empowerment/voice/choice, and cultural understanding (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration; SAMHSA, 2014). The five foundations of the Montessori educational model are respect for the child, absorbent mind, sensitive periods, prepared environment, and auto education (Kiany, 2021). Key elements from the Montessori educational model that align with the six principles of trauma-informed care are the importance of evaluating safety and emphasizing trustworthiness, peer support, collaboration, empowerment, and cultural understanding (Phillips et al., 2022; SAMHSA, 2014). These key elements constitute effective support in incorporating trauma-informed care in a Montessori classroom for the overall improvement of school culture and skill improvement. Two themes identified in both the Montessori educational model and foundations of trauma-informed care (TIC) are building classroom relationships (i.e., attachment and unconditional positive regard) and increasing psychological resources for well-being (i.e., character strengths, growth mindset, and reaching goals; Brunzell et al., 2019). Students who have had traumatic experiences can benefit from targeted support delivered over time utilizing school staff, mental health agencies, and community partners, regardless of the level of trauma they have been exposed to (Báez et al., 2019).

Elementary Classroom Behavior Concerns

Understanding the impact of trauma and the behavioral consequences in the classroom is critical for caregivers and educators (Krause et al., 2020). Guerrero et al. (2022) explained the importance of early interventions for child behaviors in the classroom. Guerrero et al. indicated that the general focus is on why the child is exhibiting certain behaviors when the focus should be on what happened to the child to cause the child to respond in this manner. According to this research, educators must consider that children can only respond to stimuli with the skills they have learned and have had an opportunity to practice, whether they be desirable skills or the opposite (Guerrero et al., 2022). Bronstein et al. (2021) asserted that when considering the behavior management system of a classroom, educators must understand the children they serve and the environment in which they share. Many behavior specialists and experienced classroom teachers also assert that relationships are the first place to start when beginning to create behavior goals for a classroom (Bronstein et al., 2021). Additionally, Bronstein et al. claimed that strong teacher-student relationships can help create both a sense of safety and encourage inclusiveness in elementary classrooms. A sense of safety and inclusiveness are both foundations of trauma-informed educational approaches (SAMHSA, 2014).

Educators continue to struggle with balancing the behavioral needs of their students with their academic needs (Berger, 2019). Studies continue to show that there is a direct relationship between ongoing classroom behavioral concerns and decreased academic performance (de Ruiter et al., 2019; Fondren et al., 2020; Krause et al., 2020). These authors concur that while it is not always possible to focus on academics because of a variety of other classroom activities, behavior obstacles and meeting the basic needs of students can impede on the academic aspects if these obstacles are not addressed through proactive approaches. This may be why de Ruiter et

al. (2019) found that social-emotional aspects of student behavior tend to be more relevant for teachers than achievement-related behaviors.

Research has investigated tiered behavior intervention programs to determine their effect on both achievement- and social-emotional-related behavior (Anderson & Borgmeier, 2010; Sutherland et al., 2020). Tiered approaches allow an opportunity to provide universal support to all students in Tier 1 (Anderson & Borgmeier, 2010). Additionally, Anderson and Borgmeier explained that as students are identified for Tier 2, more individualized and focused efforts are implemented for students who are at risk for either behavioral or academic concerns based on the function of the multi-tiered system of support. Sutherland et al. (2020) examined a Tier 2 intervention targeting problematic behaviors in the classroom, academic achievement, teacher-student relationships, and classroom quality. They found that Tier 2 approaches, utilized in a small-group setting, have positive impacts on teacher-student relationships. While the intervention in Sutherland et al.'s study was based on a trauma-informed approach and focused on elementary classrooms, short-term improvements were noted in behavior, but no relevant improvement regarding academics was noted. Also, the authors noted that Tier 1 interventions and practices were not in place in the group studied. Multi-tiered support systems, such as a comprehensive approach to mental health or trauma-informed needs, promote proactive skill-building for all learners and can benefit all students, regardless of exposure to traumatic stressors (Sutherland et al., 2020).

Consequences of Childhood Trauma

Trauma is the result of a person experiencing a harmful or stressful event that happens to them or someone close to them (CDC, 2019). A traumatic experience can be something in the form of a natural disaster, a neighborhood shooting, an unexpected death of a loved one, abuse,

neglect, rape or sexual assault, intimate partner violence, or other harmful/stressful events (Briere & Scott, 2015). Briere and Scott suggested that when a person endures a traumatic experience, a variety of consequences may occur following the event and can have life-long implications. The fifth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-5; American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013) defines trauma as exposure to actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence. While that definition is useful in a clinical application, people can still experience trauma in other ways that will have a serious impact on their lives (SAMHSA, 2014). SAMHSA (2014) also indicated that trauma is a unique experience for each survivor and must be viewed from a phenomenological perspective.

The NCTSN (n.d.) described a traumatic event as a terrifying, dangerous, or violent event that is life-threatening or threatens the physical integrity of a child. Some examples from the NCTSN include, but are not limited to physical, sexual, or psychological abuse or neglect, national disasters, acts of terrorism, family or community violence, sudden loss of a loved one, substance abuse disorder (self or family member), serious/life-threatening accidents, terminal illnesses, military family stressors, and war experiences. The NCTSN explained that the way different children/adolescents experience and respond to the various types of traumatic experience is dependent on a variety of factors, including the developmental age of the young person at the time the trauma occurs. For example, findings demonstrated that a preschool-age child might experience an overwhelming fear of separation, increased verbal emotional outbursts (compared to their typical pre-trauma disposition), have poor eating habits causing weight loss, and/or nightmares (NCTSN, n.d.). The same findings from NCTSN further demonstrated that an elementary school-aged child may be consistently anxious or fearful, experience feelings of guilt or shame, have trouble concentrating, and have trouble falling or staying asleep at night due to

exposure to trauma. Lastly, the findings showed that middle or high school-aged youth may experience feelings of depression or isolation, potentially develop eating disorders or self-harming behaviors, begin to abuse drugs and/or alcohol, and participate in risky sexual behavior, including becoming sexually active at a young age (NCTSN, n.d.). These lists are by no means exhaustive but are provided because they constitute some of the most common signs of traumatic stressors in children of each age or developmental group.

De Bellis and Zisk (2014) discussed the various consequences of childhood trauma and how those consequences can be detrimental to both social and academic development. They explained that delays or deficits in multisystem functions, such as behavioral, cognitive, or emotional regulation, can be a consequence of childhood trauma. Additionally, De Bellis and Zisk suggested that impaired cognitive development, such as difficulty in learning new things, remembering what one has learned, concentrating, or making everyday decisions, may also be evident. Behavioral challenges, such as sitting still for developmentally appropriate amounts of time, emotional regulation, impulse control, and social interaction skills may also be affected (De Bellis & Zisk, 2014).

Any exposure to traumatic events can disrupt brain development in ways that could pose immediate, as well as long-term effects on physical, social, emotional, and behavioral functioning and overall well-being (Maynard et al., 2019). Maynard et al. concluded that youth who have experienced trauma are at significant risk for a variety of mental impairments including IQ, memory, attention, cognitive functioning, and language/verbal deficits. Additionally, one of the most basic guidelines of trauma-informed practice is to reduce or avoid re-traumatization (SAMHSA, 2014).

Mental Health Needs of Students and the Role of Teachers

Brunzell et al. (2015) asserted that attending school is the most regular routine in many children's lives. Students in public elementary schools spend close to 6.5 hours a day, nearly 180 days each year in school (National Center for Education Statistics, 1996). Students must learn more than academic elements to be successful and function in the world around them. Emotional regulation, mindfulness, brain breaks, and physical regulation are all important elements in soft-skill utilization and trauma-informed classrooms (Brunzell et al., 2015). D'Emidio-Caston (2019) recognized classroom teachers are strong protective factors in their promotion of student community-building skills. D'Emidio-Caston explained the importance of children understanding their connection to the community and how that connection fosters social-emotional learning. The author continued by explaining that children benefit by seeing their role in the bigger picture through real practice in their classroom community (D'Emidio-Caston, 2019).

Necessary Social/Behavioral Supports in Schools

Akin to other multi-tiered systems of support, Tier 1 mental health support relies heavily on the collaboration of the school community and should also be inclusive, culturally responsive, and focused on barrier reduction (O'Reilly et al., 2018). O'Reilly et al. explained that Tier 1 mental health supports are universal supports that can benefit all children, including those with and without current mental health needs. The authors indicated that universal supports, such as practicing self-regulation skills and other social-emotional skills, can also be preventative and provide children with tools they can utilize throughout their lifespan (O'Reilly et al., 2018). Teachers are requesting more training, specifically related to practical support in these areas (McClain, 2021). Understanding what trauma is and how it can impact a person is an important

first step, but teachers also respect the value of evidence-based techniques, strategies, or interventions they can use in the classroom environment to support students' mental health by utilizing school-based resources (Albright et al., 2017; Brown et al., 2022; SAMHSA, 2022b). These interventions are a vital part of collaborating to create an environment addressing mental health needs.

Blitz et al. (2020) examined the lack of culturally responsive pedagogical support in economically disadvantaged communities. They concluded that children living in poverty are at a higher risk of carrying the consequences of toxic stress with them to school and having deficits in areas related to interpersonal relationships. In addition, Blitz et al. suggested that children must have opportunities to practice kindness, conflict resolution, and compassion through real-life experiences. Classroom communities are natural environments in which children spend several hours, most days of the week interacting with peers and other adults (Booren et al., 2012). From this perspective, educators must understand elements of culture and how those elements influence interpersonal relationships for the modeling and practice to be effective. Davis et al. (2022) provided evidence supporting the need to include culturally responsive elements within a social justice framework when implementing trauma-informed approaches in schools. The authors stated that it is no longer sufficient to simply follow the Golden Rule of treating others the way we want to be treated. To be culturally and socially responsible, teachers must understand some of the cultural components of interpersonal interactions within the community, whether it be a neighborhood or classroom community (Davis et al., 2022).

Role Ambiguity for Classroom Teachers

Providing social and emotional care for students' mental health is a role that is steadily increasing for classroom teachers (Beames et al., 2022). However, Beames et al. (2022) indicated

that teachers are concerned about ambiguity and conflict within their roles as teachers and fear they will only exacerbate student mental health issues. The authors claimed that teachers are asking for more training to increase literacy and competence in these areas (Beames et al., 2022). Training that is intentionally focused on both building relationships within the classroom community and building resiliency can benefit all children regardless of history of adverse childhood experiences or exposure to toxic stress (Garner et al., 2021). Additionally, Bethell et al. (2014) found that intentional efforts to improve a child's resilience are positive ways to mitigate the consequences of adverse childhood experiences. Resilience, according to Bethell et al., is a form of internal motivation to continue moving forward in the face of adversity. Resilience can also be a result of external resources, such as teachers, also called reinforcers, as a form of support in times of need, helping children learn skills that promote resilience (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005).

Sanchez et al. (2018) found that teachers with the primary role of academic instruction tend to provide most of the universal mental health support services for students and require more support and resources, suggesting the need for better utilization of school-based services more aligned with their natural roles. Sanchez et al. concluded that strategic allocation of funding for more appropriate usage and delivery of mental health supports are necessary for better long-term outcomes. Teachers can be instrumental in encouraging and teaching important social skills, modeling emotional processing and problem-solving, and establishing psychological safety to alleviate the effects of toxic stress (Blitz et al., 2016).

Educator Well-being

Wink et al. (2021) examined teachers' cognitive and affective empathy for students, as well as the overall relationship between teachers and students with behavioral challenges. The

study's results indicated that higher levels of social-emotional competencies can positively affect the teacher-student relationship and the teacher's perspective toward behavior challenges (Wink et al., 2021). The results of Wink et al.'s study also indicated that empathic distress, related to higher levels of student-teacher relationship conflict, was associated with more problems with more challenging students. Continuing to evaluate the needs of the teachers will be central to the implementation and sustainability of any school or classroom-related efforts (Morton, 2022).

Braun et al. (2019) found that teachers' well-being, emotion regulation, occupational health, and personal characteristics affect the well-being of the students they serve. Empathy, both cognitive and affective, allows one to understand that others have their own emotional experiences and that a person may have emotional responses to the responses of others (Wink et al., 2021). The authors agreed that educators and students must recognize that emotional experiences will vary from individual to individual, but it is equally imperative to recognize and allow for our emotional responses to behavior (Braun et al., 2019; Wink et al., 2021). In essence, those emotional responses are part of the human experience and influence the way we interpret one another (Wink et al., 2021). Teachers may be at risk for burnout because they are continuously tasked with supporting students on multiple levels, including academic, emotional, social, moral, behavioral, as well as overall well-being (Braun et al., 2020). Braun et al. explained that empathy is generally regarded as a positive emotion, but it can become problematic if personal involvement or overinvolvement is not closely monitored. The authors also stated that children will continue to rely on adults as models of empathy, so empathy must be taught by example in real time safely and thoughtfully (Braun et al., 2019).

Wink et al. (2021) found a significant relationship between emotional distress and burnout in the helping professions. Teachers in Wink et al.'s (2021) study reported that the more

they were able to take the perspective of their students, the more they felt competent in handling undesirable behaviors. These same educators reported more effective problem-solving skills (Wink et al., 2021). Understandably, the more a person can look at a problem or situation from an interpersonal perspective, the more they should be able to assess and respond more appropriately and with more connection (Wink et al., 2021). Further, skill-building and support management tools can equip teachers to manage classroom behavior concerns, as well as their residual emotional responses to those undesirable behaviors more effectively (Wink et al., 2021). While remaining a concern and a priority, effective affect management can benefit both the teachers and the students in the long run (Braun et al., 2019). Wink et al. (2021) called for both professional development training on specific skills and practical application to more adequately support both the social and emotional success of students and to decrease educator burnout.

Trauma-Informed Education

Why is it Necessary?

Students, especially ones who have a history of adverse childhood experiences need a sense of normalcy or routine, choices, designated support, boundaries for behavior, intentional environmental factors, and staff members, including teachers and administrators, who understand student needs and can identify concerns (Wiest-Stevenson & Lee, 2016). Current trauma-informed schools are considered responsive but are working to become more proactive in reducing school-related stressors and providing social-emotional education that can benefit all children (Luthar & Mendes, 2020). Petrone and Stanton (2021) noted that the school environment, if not prepared properly, could be traumatic for children. Petrone and Stanton called for a convergence of an understanding of trauma, educational reform, and research. These steps, understanding of trauma, educational reform, and research are critical to informing

practices (Luthar & Mendes, 2020; Petrone & Stanton, 2021; Weist-Stevenson & Lee, 2016). From this research, two areas for consideration are a universally agreed upon training program and high-quality undergraduate coursework integrating trauma-informed themes with basic classroom foundational elements.

Trauma-Informed Care Training for Educators

According to Dorado et al. (2016), trauma-informed education training efforts focus on areas regarding safety, predictability, compassionate/dependable relationships, resilience, and social-emotional learning to clarify central components of a systematic model that can be utilized in both rural and urban schools. Osher (2018) characterized trauma-informed schools as systemic programming improvement that can promote improved and sustained outcomes for both educators and students. Osher stated that trauma-informed care promotes both a sense of safety and belonging for all students and members of the educational support team. Knowledge gained through trauma-informed training is coupled with consultation efforts to address trauma while reframing what was previously thought to be problem behaviors (Osher, 2018). According to Osher, trauma-informed schools can support efforts to reduce bullying and aggression. As educators learn more about what is causing the types of problematic behaviors they are seeing in their classrooms, they can work to provide a more proactive approach that supports healing and skill-building in the areas in which their specific students experience deficits in social interaction and emotional regulation (Osher, 2018).

Tiered-Approach to Systems of Support

Berger (2019) identified three tiers in a trauma-informed multi-tiered system of support. Tier 1 is considered universal support that can benefit all students. Tier 2 implementation involves consultation, community involvement, and parental training and support. Tier 3

addresses the role of consultation with school mental health staff, classroom teachers, and outside mental health agencies. Berger (2019) suggested that more consistency in research efforts could guide and inform the implementation of trauma-informed practices within a school environment.

Trauma-Informed Care Implementation in Schools

A comprehensive mental health system within the school setting can provide one foundation for a trauma-informed school (Hoover, 2019). Research on the evaluations of trauma-informed practices in schools to inform policy and practice is limited and needed (Maynard et al., 2019). Maynard et al. (2019) explained that many schools and districts are implementing what is referred to as trauma-informed care, but the nature of these interventions may vary from district to district. Due to the rapid growth of trauma-informed approaches in schools, more information evaluating the quality and fidelity of such a complex system is required for several reasons, including the potential for harm (Maynard et al., 2019).

Baffour (2017) reiterated the importance of quality behavioral health care for all citizens as paramount for the safety and success of society. Baffour recommended shifting the focus from individual pathology to focusing on the strengths of the community or individual and using ecological approaches to improve the well-being and outcomes as related to behavioral/mental health for minorities in rural areas. Baffour also examined the prevalence of declining access to quality behavioral health care for ethnic minorities in rural areas due to the burden of travel, longer wait times, higher rates of underinsurance, and lack of providers. These barriers are often exacerbated by other factors including, but not limited to, chronic ailments (with lack of preventative care), cost of care, and language and/or cultural barriers (Baffour, 2017).

Herrenkohl et al. (2019) noted that schools are still poorly equipped to support children who have histories of trauma. Herrenkohl et al. suggested that this is especially an issue considering that schools play critical roles in cultivating resilience, especially for children who have had traumatic experiences. Defining the areas in which trauma-informed educational efforts fall short is a necessary step in the improvement and sustainability of programs (Herrenkohl et al., 2019). Additionally, Herrenkohl et al. concluded that the lack of effective intervention in schools points to the need to integrate science, mental health, and education in improvement and sustainability efforts.

Trauma-Informed Training and Educator Attitudes

Post et al. (2022) studied the impact of child-teacher relationship training on teacher attitudes and classroom behaviors. Post et al. asserted that teachers are in optimal positions to begin building a buffer for students who are experiencing toxic stress or poverty. A teacher's skillset and mindset can be affected by trauma-informed training, especially those that are relevant to both their classroom and their overall attitude toward classroom management efforts (Post et al., 2022).

Loomis and Felt (2020) concurred that the large number of various frameworks and criteria for trauma-informed training can cause issues regarding fidelity and universality. Loomis and Felt suggested that training focusing on knowledge of trauma, consequences, and trauma-related behaviors are key components of trauma-informed training programs, but there is no agreed-upon universal program for all schools. However, the authors found that trainings that specifically focus on educators provide them an opportunity to reflect on their own beliefs and responses to student interactions in the classroom (Loomis & Felt, 2020). McCullough et al. (2022) continued to study BEST in CLASS-Elementary which was previously studied by Loomis

and Felt (2020). In the 2022 study, McCullough et al. found that programs, such as BEST in CLASS, recognize the importance of professional development for teachers to improve the implementation of evidence-based practices in the classroom. This study, which was focused on elementary students and teachers, found less emotional exhaustion in teachers but no significant increase in student responsiveness over time (McCullough et al., 2022).

McClain (2021) suggested that there is minimal research that focuses on understanding teacher candidates' perceptions of how their teacher preparation programs have prepared them to teach students impacted by trauma. McClain's study results indicated that teachers continue to report feeling inadequately prepared or only moderately prepared to meet the needs of students in their classrooms who struggle with the consequences of childhood trauma. Two of the teachers' main concerns, noted by McClain (2021), were saying the wrong thing thereby triggering students and providing high-quality and equitable support to all students. More research supporting the trauma-informed training needs of educators in all levels of teacher preparation programs is warranted.

Healing Centered Engagement

Ginwright (2018) discussed the future of healing and asserted that a focus on healing is akin to focusing on what is right with a person instead of a focus on deficits. While Ginwright stated that educators must work to find ways to support students who have experienced traumatic stressors, it is equally imperative that they work to focus on an asset-driven approach. Although there is very little research on the outcomes of "healing-centered engagement," noted by Ginwright, the research results supported many of the practices that would fall into a healing-centered category. Ginwright (2018) further explained that healing must be rooted in culture and

community, and educators should be mindful that adulthood might not be a trauma-free destination.

Empathy building is a foundational step in healing-centered engagement, and collective well-being is at the heart of healing and repair (Ginwright, 2018). Another approach, noted by Ginwright (2018), equally focused on collective healing as restorative practices. Restorative practices within schools are designed to prevent and repair harm between community members (including school communities) and are critical components of healing-centered engagement (Lodi et al, 2021). Other research on a school level includes a master's level research project in a fourth and fifth-grade bilingual public, urban, and charter Montessori school classroom with 80% of students reporting as either "Black" or "Latinx" (Shields, 2021). The results of Shields' (2021) study provide evidence that school-wide circle process interventions empower students to actively listen to others and to use their voices in a safe and protected space. Additionally, Shields found that school-wide interventions such as these can be effective in supporting the entire school community, including students, staff, and families. Restorative circles can begin repairing the damage caused by trauma by guiding students in ways to best manage the results of the trauma they are experiencing (Shields, 2021).

It should also be noted that restorative justice is an alternative to outdated, zero-tolerance policies; restorative justice practices are alternatives to exclusionary discipline and promote equity throughout the community (Zakszeski & Rutherford, 2021). The authors stated that some scholars recognize restorative justice as a set of values, but others disagree and assert that it is a set of practices; however, for a full and successful supportive approach, restorative justice should include both values and practices. The seven key principles of restorative justice are as follows: (a) meeting needs or recognizing unmet needs, (b) providing accountability and support, (c)

repairing harm or "righting wrongs," (d) recognizing conflict as a critical learning opportunity, (e) nurturing healthy relationship building, (f) repairing interpersonal harm, and (g) dismantling equality (Zakszeski & Rutherford, 2021).

Very little current research focuses on peace literacy, which is at the heart of Montessori education (Harris, 2004). Activities in areas that focus on grace and courtesy are critical for younger learners in Montessori classrooms, and a personal world curriculum provides a focus for older youth who are working to become healthy and productive members of their communities, as well as the world around them (Gentaz & Richard, 2022). However, it must be noted that both empathy building and situational morality are intertwined throughout Montessori educational foundations and presented and practiced in developmentally appropriate activities and conversations (Lillard & Else-Quest, 2006). Lillard and Else-Quest received criticism for their study, which was conducted to better understand the effectiveness of Montessori educational frameworks because it was based on one school, but the authors argued that the Montessori program studied was known for its fidelity. Lillard and Else-Quest (2006) claimed that results can be generalized based on such high levels of fidelity. While there is strong support for traditional Montessori principles in educational communities, there are concerns about decreasing fidelity in attempts to increase adaptability (Marshall, 2017).

Montessori Education

Philosophy

Montessori educational philosophies are centered on supporting whole-child development (Montessori, 1973). Providing high-quality instruction with intrinsic motivators to foster deep attention and improve executive functioning are areas of focus within a Montessori framework (Lillard, 2019). A Montessori-prepared environment is an environment that prepares students to

act and move freely (Astuti & Sandra, 2020). A prepared environment is also socially friendly, stimulates intellectual abilities, and is committed to retaining its beauty throughout usage (Astuti & Sandra, 2020).

Two key elements of the Montessori educational method are the learning materials and the self-directed engagement with the learning materials (Marshall, 2017). According to Marshall (2017), learning materials in the practical life curriculum include items that children may find in their everyday lives. Marshall explained that these materials allow children real-life opportunities to practice tasks, such as pouring a variety of items from and into different containers, preparing snacks, using scissors, tongs, and tweezers, cleaning/polishing, washing dishes, and gardening. Other sensorial materials for academic subjects include items, such as touch boards, number rods, counting beads, and other various sensorial items that enable children to classify and name stimuli they may encounter daily (Marshall, 2017).

Marshall (2017) also explained that self-directed engagement with these materials, often found in a 3-hour external work cycle, allows children to select their activities and find a natural rhythm of working with selected items. Montessori (1995) observed that young children have the ability to concentrate for longer periods with certain materials that capture their interests in a spontaneous nature. Marshall (2017) noted that there is limited research on the long-term effectiveness of Montessori education and limitations include fluctuations in program fidelity. Fidelity in the usage of materials was viewed as less important than the principles associated with respect and observation of the child (Marshall, 2017). More research is necessary to understand the benefits of Montessori principles from a trauma-enlightened or informed view.

Montessori and Mental Health

Maria Montessori believed that mental health and well-being are fundamental to education (Montessori, 1973; Phillips et al., 2022). According to Phillips et al. (2022), Montessori also recognized that emotional healing should be a system that is interwoven into daily educational practices and that trauma-informed responses involve a deep understanding of the child from the intersection of educational, medical, and scientific approaches. Denervaud et al. (2020) examined emotion recognition in school-aged children within a Montessori program and found that social environment and classroom climate had a direct impact on the positive effect of the students. The study results suggest that because of the school's pedagogical practices that children experience, they show a greater bias toward positive affect (Denervaud et al., 2020). Denervaud et al. found that children attending the Montessori schools identified and perceived happy expressions for a longer duration than students in traditional environments that emphasized pedagogical practices for long-term emotional well-being. This type of study was exclusive to Montessori programs, and evidence supports that the results are affected by pedagogical practices that can be found within Montessori education and that positive mood affects positive emotional regulation, resulting in positive social interactions (Denervaud et al., 2020).

Lillard et al. (2021) furthered research efforts regarding overall well-being by comparing adults aged 18-81 (M = 36) who had attended conventional schools with those who attended Montessori programs (M = 8 years). Lillard et al.'s survey results indicated that the longer a person attended a Montessori program, the higher their well-being (engagement, social trust, and self-confidence) as an adult. Race, gender, and socio-economic differences were accounted for in the study design (Lillard et al., 2021). Limitations to the Lillard et al. study include that it was a

cross-sectional rather than an experimental study, noticeable variations in Montessori implementation, and the understanding that parents could be a potential third variable associated with Montessori attendance.

Trauma-Informed Themes Identified in Montessori Foundational Principles

Gentaz and Richard (2022) identified developmental needs, individual needs, and learning rhythms of students as primary areas of focus in teacher development and planning within a Montessori classroom environment. Gentaz and Richard also described the process of learning social behaviors through practicing grace and courtesy exercises within the daily curriculum. Academic outcomes are influenced by parental involvement in the child's educational process (Gentaz & Richard, 2022).

Graham and Cinquini (2022) maintained that there are many children in schools all around the world who have been affected by a variety of traumatic experiences. Graham and Cinquini explained that traumatic experiences can include, but are not limited to exposure to violence, sudden or unexpected death of a family member, bullying, community violence, or abuse/neglect. When a child's life is threatened or the perception of a threat is involved, there are serious consequences on a child's brain development, possible related physical symptoms, emotional and behavioral impacts, and residual effects on the nervous system (SAMHSA, 2022b). Maria Montessori believed that a model that includes the convergence of science, medicine, and education approaches could provide an environment of healing and nurturing for children so that the whole child improves, including their mental health (Montessori 1973; Phillips et al., 2022).

Phillips et al. (2022) investigated trauma-informed practices suggested by Montessori as they applied to the school environment and concluded that trauma-informed care could be a

valuable lens through which to view whole-child wellness. According to Phillips et al., as Montessori began outlining a framework to support children in their developmental planes, she was aware that specific tenets, of what we now recognize as trauma-informed schools, should be intentionally built into the educational framework as part of the program and not an additional application to be used when needed. Trauma-informed schools should be based on building relationships with children to understand the individual needs of each child, understanding and assessing traumatic stress, being culturally responsive, understanding and addressing the self-care of the caregivers/educators, and building community partnerships (Phillips et al., 2022).

Montessori educators support and nurture compassion, community, social-emotional development, mastery versus completion, an understanding and respect for developmental levels, peaceful interactions, and grace/courtesy (Astuti & Sandra, 2020; Denervaud et al., 2020; Lillard, 2019; Marshall, 2017; Montessori, 2004). There is currently research documenting the need for trauma-informed education and research regarding teacher attitudes about trauma-informed practices following training (Dorado et al., 2016; Martin et al., 2017; Maynard et al., 2019; Osher, 2018; SAMHSA, 2014). However, there is a lack of information about the trauma-informed practices that are embedded in Montessori foundational principles and Montessori educator preparation programs. There is also limited research on comparisons between traditionally trained educators' and Montessori-trained educators' classroom culture elements following different forms of trauma-informed training.

Montessori in the Public Sector

Adequate research regarding the benefits and effectiveness of public Montessori programs in the United States is lacking. The National Center for Montessori in the Public Sector (NCMPS, 2014) estimated that over 450 public schools in the United States offer Montessori

education. With fidelity of programming continuously emerging as a necessary element in traditional Montessori programs, the question of fidelity in public Montessori educational programs arises (Lillard et al., 2017). Lillard et al. (2017) studied the outcomes of children in public Montessori preschool programs recognized by the Association Montessori Internationale (AMI), which is a globally recognized Montessori association and certification that is rooted in more traditional approaches to the original Montessori curriculum, especially science and history. The other widely known Montessori association, according to Lillard et al.'s research, is the American Montessori Society (AMS). AMS-credentialed teachers are more supportive of the incorporation of traditional educational practices, including spelling tests, research groups, due dates, whole class activities, and workbooks/textbooks (Daoust & Murray, n.d.). Daoust and Murray suggested that both groups offer training and credentialing to Montessori educators in the United States. As noted by Daoust and Murray (n.d.), there are differences in the training between AMS and AMI, but study results indicate that responses to all curriculum and practice questions are geared toward what would be expected in any quality Montessori environment. They further explained that responses to the same questions by non-Montessori educators regarding individualization would most likely greatly differ (Daoust & Murray, n.d.).

Lillard (2017) noted, again, that fidelity is a critical element in successful public Montessori educational programs. Lillard found that high-fidelity public Montessori prekindergarten programs had a higher success rate in closing achievement gaps than "business as usual" prekindergarten programs for children in lower-income families. Lillard's research indicates that fidelity is critical but that it is also highly probable that the teacher training for Montessori educators changes teachers in such a way that they become more sensitively responsive or higher in instructional support. Further research is warranted to determine whether

attitudes of warmth, trust, and high expectations that Montessorians are expected to embody contribute to more positive outcomes for children. Lillard also stated that the materials and the methods of material usage in Montessori classrooms add value to Montessori education. Lillard's research, like other research of Montessori in the public sector, is limited due to factors such as lottery-style enrollment, level of fidelity variations from school to school, and small-scale study sizes.

The National Center for Montessori in the Public Sector (NCMPS; 2017) offers the *Essential Elements Rubric* for public schools implementing Montessori programs. The *Essential Elements Rubric* assesses fidelity and sustainability elements across five domains: (a) adults, (b) Montessori learning environment, (c) family engagement, (d) leadership and organizational development, and (e) assessment. Within each domain of the *Essential Elements Rubric* (NCMPS, 2017), some standards are scored across four categories in rubric style: exemplary, satisfactory, needs improvement, and unsatisfactory. Some of these standards align with the six guiding principles to a trauma-informed approach outlined by SAMHSA (2014) including safety, trustworthiness, peer support, collaboration and mutuality, empowerment voice and choice, and cultural, historical, and gender issues. There is currently no research to specifically support the evidence of naturally embedded trauma-informed approaches within public Montessori education utilizing fidelity tools and standards within specific domains. The current study aimed to address this gap in the literature.

Teacher Preparation Programs and Trauma

Teacher preparation programs function in a variety of ways to prepare preservice educators to serve students facing a plethora of different challenges (Brown et al., 2022). According to Brown et al. (2022), today's teachers are responsible for the academic, social,

emotional, and behavioral development of their students, among many other daily classroom tasks and responsibilities. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2019) recognize childhood trauma as potentially the largest public health issue facing our children today. Many educators experience burnout early in their careers due to high levels of stress, secondary traumatic stress, and lack of preparation as barriers to feeling effective in their roles (Brown et al, 2022). While there is abundant research documenting the need for trauma-informed schools, there is a gap in the literature regarding the inclusion of evidence-based practices to support students with mental health needs in teacher preparation programs (Bethell et al., 2014; DeBillis & Zisk, 2014; Graham & Cinquini, 2022; Osher, 2018; SAMHSA, 2014; Weist-Stevenson & Lee, 2016). According to these authors, in many instances, students dealing with behavioral and emotional consequences of trauma are inappropriately identified as children who are misbehaving. Traditional training programs prepare teachers with classroom management support, such as rewards and consequences to punish misbehavior (Brown et al., 2022). Brown et al. explained that when a child is struggling with self-regulation and other deficits following exposure to trauma, punishment does not teach the child the necessary strategies to feel empowered to make better choices, nor does it nurture a sense of safety for a child that may already be struggling with safety concerns. In turn, if the behaviors continue, teachers are left feeling unsupported, and the behaviors can harm the school climate (Brown et al., 2022). Teachers are asking for more training in specific strategies and techniques that will assist them in better supporting their students; they also report wanting training in how to manage their secondary traumatic stress (Brown et al., 2022; Rahimi et al., 2021).

It is evident that many children are facing the consequences of trauma daily, and SAMHSA (2022) estimated that whereas one in seven children experienced abuse or neglect in

2017, it likely an underestimate of the true number. In addition, two-thirds of children reported encountering at least one traumatic childhood event by the age of 16 (SAMHSA, 2022). The impact of trauma on children can manifest in numerous ways, including the way the child interacts with their environment, peers, and teachers (McClain, 2021). McClain (2021) suggested that understanding trauma and how it is relevant in classroom settings is an important step in increasing teachers' perception of preparedness when teaching students who have experienced trauma. Behaviors associated with trauma include disruptive external behaviors, such as defiance, aggression, bullying, self-harm, unsuccessful peer relationships, and antisocial behaviors (Rahimi et al., 2021). Rahimi et al. (2021) explained that internalized behaviors include lack of focused attention, poor academic performance, poor school attendance, anxiety/depression, social/familial withdrawal, disrupted eating patterns, and physical ailments not related to physical illness.

McClain (2021) investigated 500 preservice early childhood teachers in a Midwestern university to further understand the challenges teachers are facing and what those teachers need to feel more prepared in their roles. McClain's study results indicated that every one of the childhood teacher candidates surveyed (100%) believed that trauma would be relevant in their future classrooms or their current field placements. Some of the concerns noted from the study were that the teachers were afraid of saying the wrong thing in their efforts to support the child and did not know how to provide equitable support for all students (McClain, 2021). Subsets of concerns from this research included ineffective classroom management and not having the correct strategies or techniques to support students' mental health needs. These findings support a focus on developing and nurturing classroom relationships to promote reciprocated respect and increased motivation and school learning (McClain, 2021). McClain also indicated a continued

need to incorporate trauma-sensitive teaching strategies throughout teacher preparation coursework.

Rahimi et al. (2021) surveyed 414 Southern Georgia educators to examine teacher awareness of trauma-informed practice more closely. Again, Rahimi et al.'s findings indicated that educators self-report a lack of knowledge related to the impact of trauma and trauma-informed practices and a desire for more specific trauma-informed professional development. Approximately a third of the teachers in the study noted that they were unfamiliar with de-escalation, mindfulness, social-emotional learning (SEL), self-care, and self-regulation. One-half to three-fourths of those same educators were unfamiliar with restorative justice, trauma-informed pedagogy, trauma symptoms and triggers, and wrap-around services. Teachers reported that they relied heavily on sending students to the school counselor when trauma-related needs arose (Rahimi et al., 2021). Rahimi et al.'s findings are consistent with others, showing that teachers are uncertain about their role as mediators regarding mental health concerns and support (Brown et al., 2022; McClain, 2021; Moon & Mendenhall, 2017). Additionally, due to a lack of mental-health-specific training, as well as systemic and structural factors at the school level, there may be problems implementing interdisciplinary collaboration to support the mental health needs of students (Rahimi et al., 2021).

The American School Counselor Association (ASCA; 2019) contends that relying solely on school counselors to address de-escalation and coping skills becomes problematic due to high student-to-counselor ratios. The ASCA provides steps counselors can take to improve collaboration within schools to better support students. A response to understanding ways to support teachers in their classrooms, when working with children who are facing obstacles related to trauma and traumatic stress, involves appropriately educating and empowering the

teachers as stakeholders who continue to spend the most face-to-face time with students within the classroom environments (ASCA, 2019).

Montessori Educators, Essential Elements, and Professional Preparation

Maria Montessori (2004), during her work as a physician, examined a specific period in a child's life she referred to as *normalization.* This term should not be confused with typical normal development. According to Montessori, normalization occurs when the child moves from being undisciplined to self-disciplined, disordered to ordered and distracted to focused through intentionally prepared work within the classroom environment. Cossentino (2009) described the foundational elements of Montessori classroom environments as woven together to unify the psycho-emotional, physical, and academic functioning of the child. Through the foundational elements described by Cossentino, Montessori environments are well thought-out and centered on the children's development. Cossentino explained that Montessori classroom environments are organized and planned to create a sense of safety and belonging, to teach and reinforce prosocial and problem-solving behaviors, such as conflict resolution, and to nurture a strong sense of self that will support children as they learn to self-regulate and overcome negative emotion.

Lillard and Else-Quest (2006) described characteristics of traditional Montessori classrooms, which include many of the same characteristics one may find in a public Montessori school. Lillard and Else-Quest explained that Montessori education can be characterized by multi-level classrooms. For example, 3, 4, and 5-year-olds (and sometimes 6-year-olds) are considered to be in an early childhood phase of development (Montessori, 2004). Additionally, lower elementary school spans first through third grades. Then, upper elementary is comprised of fourth through sixth grade students. Finally, seventh and eighth-grade students, who are middle

schoolers, are in the "*erdkinder*" or "*children of the earth*" stage of young teens preparing to enter the larger world through natural development (Montessori, 2004). Each level has its own specially designed educational materials, student-chosen work in long time blocks, and individual/small group instruction in both academics and social skills (Lillard & Else-Quest, 2006).

Montessori certification programs provide a unique perspective on professional preparation, and they are available to educators who have at least a bachelor's degree in one of several areas of education (Cossentino, 2009). As with other teacher preparation programs, courses vary depending on the program, but Montessori-accredited programs are internationally recognized and accepted by most public and traditional Montessori schools around the world (Montessori Accreditation Council for Teacher Education, [MACTE], 2023). Through the certification journey, Montessori educators participate in a variety of training that aligns with Montessori philosophy, assume the role of a "guide on the side," and work towards a common standard of intentionally providing students opportunities to self-develop their personalities in real-time with real-world experiences (MACTE, 2023). Cossentino (2009) surveyed teachers at schools in Turkey who applied the Montessori approach in their schools to further investigate Montessori preparation programs around the world. A consistent theme emerged from Cossentino's research findings, outlining the basic qualities required for teachers who apply the Montessori approach from a universal perspective. Cossentino found that the teacher should watch/see/assess what and how children do things, intentionally speak less, and watch well to observe the child in a way that the teacher can recognize the individual needs of each student. These results or themes indicate that the teacher should also be patient, calm, observant, and tolerant (Cossentino, 2009). A consistent message throughout teacher preparation programs is

that educators believe that onsite, real-time studies with children who will be served are necessary and beneficial to pre-service teachers (Cossentino, 2009; McClain, 2021; Rahimi et al., 2021).

Cossentino (2009) described how Montessori educators experienced courses as adult learners recognizing teaching as a craft and not an art or science. According to Cossentino, Montessori-trained educators go through a transformative process observing the coherence of how, why, and what for, redefining what is meant by "learning to teach." This transformation promotes Montessori philosophy as consistent, ambitious, and full of strong, active energy (Cossentino, 2009). Results from Cossentino's study indicated that the Montessori professional preparation changes adult learners' outlooks on human development. Additionally, Cossentino suggested that learners embrace the shift from traditional educational mindsets to mindsets more aligned with Montessori's vision, which includes the following premises: (a) it is biologically imperative for children to learn, (b) adults sometimes misunderstand the way learning occurs and can impede healthy learning environments that allow a child to correct and learn from mistakes, and (c) the constructive nature of human development. Results from Cossentino's study also supported the notion that Montessori preparation education focuses on both the hows and whys of human development, demands extraordinary attention to detail of the craft, and may be the root of what is missing from mainstream teacher preparation programs.

Chapter Two Summary

Traumatized children can exhibit a wide variety of symptoms, including many symptoms that are difficult to observe (Martin et al., 2017). Martin et al. (2017) stated that symptoms vary based on the age and developmental levels of the individual child. Several barriers to the success of trauma-informed school initiatives include the following: lack of support from administrators

and teachers, competing teacher responsibilities, parental engagement, and cultural or linguistic barriers (Martin et al., 2017).

As research evolves and new trauma-informed approaches are being introduced to school communities, educators are being tasked with developing classroom supports that focus on the educational, behavioral, and social-emotional needs of students (Luthar & Mendes, 2020). Luthar and Mendes (2020) concluded that understanding the basics of traumatic experiences and the consequences of traumatic experiences on a child's brain and development are central to understanding the need for a trauma-informed approach. The findings of multiple studies suggest that more work is needed to measure psychometric properties and establish links to outcomes for stakeholders (Blitz & Anderson, 2016; Chapmine et al., 2019; Fondren et al., 2020; Herrenkohol et al., 2019).

Lesley University (2012) provides a trauma-sensitive school checklist and asserts that a trauma-sensitive school is a safe place where children can learn to build healthy relationships, learn and practice self-regulation skills, and feel supported academically, emotionally, and physically. Báez et al. (2019) discussed the prevalence of lower social skills and higher behavior concerns associated with higher levels of reported traumatic experiences in students, suggesting that improved social skills and improved behavior are potential outcome goals for trauma-informed approaches. Wink et al. (2021) examined teachers' cognitive and affective empathy for students, as well as the overall relationship between teachers and behaviorally challenging students. Wink et al. found that improving the social-emotional competencies of teachers has a positive impact on teachers' perspectives and the teacher-student relationship. Emotional development and child-centered approaches can also play critical roles in healing from the

effects of traumatic experiences (Wink et al., 2021). Emotional development and support of the whole child are central themes in Montessori educational programs (D'Emido-Caston, 2019).

Teachers are consistently having to balance multiple responsibilities related to their classrooms and students and little time is left to protect their own emotional well-being and self-care practices (Luthar & Mendes, 2020). Wink et al. (2021) found that higher levels of social-emotional competencies have a positive effect on both the teacher's relationships with students and the teacher's perspective toward behavioral challenges. Wink et al. also reported that teacher preparedness to work with children who are traumatized is likely to reduce the stress that accompanies feeling they are unable to effectively interpret and manage classroom behavior. Gaining a deeper understanding of teachers' awareness regarding children's adverse experiences and their attitudes toward the impact of those experiences on the children is crucial to determining how prepared they are to create an environment that these children need to learn and ultimately be successful (Luthar & Mendes, 2020; Wink et al., 2021). Understanding the attitudes and knowledge educators have about children is foundational to determining the most effective approaches to providing trauma-informed training to educators (Post et al., 2022). The purpose of this study was to understand public Montessori teacher experiences and the way teachers manage their classroom culture related to behavior expectations, relational elements, student choice, student engagement, and discipline practices. Maria Montessori, in the 1890s, became interested in the convergence of science, medicine, and education (Phillips et al., 2022). Phillips et al. stated that Montessori's vision, now over a century old, was supportive of trauma-informed education. Montessori believed that nurturing the psychological health of children was essential in effective educational settings, a sentiment that parallels the tenets of trauma-informed care (Montessori, 2004; Phillips et al., 2022).

Chapter Three: Methods

Overview

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the lived experiences of 12 public Montessori teachers as they prepared and managed their classrooms, utilizing the embedded trauma-informed principles that are part of the Montessori essential foundational elements. This researcher sought to understand Montessori teacher perspectives of daily classroom practices that addressed working with students in a way that parallels trauma-informed educational practices. The researcher aimed to explore how teachers incorporate elements of the *Essential Elements Rubric* from the National Center of Montessori in the Public Sector (NCMPS, 2017), specifically in the areas of safety, respect, and responsibility, which are aligned with the six principles of trauma-informed care (SAMHSA, 2014).

Children have different experiences and different responses to similar experiences, so a better understanding of the individual child aligns with the individualized nature of trauma-informed care (NCTSN, n.d.). Understanding the different ways children can experience trauma and the ways classroom teachers can support the needs of trauma-impacted students can inform methods of integrating trauma-informed practices into pedagogical foundations, as well as teacher preparation programs. In turn, this integration can support a more holistic education for teachers instead of free-standing practices that become part of the extra duties that create additional stressors for classroom teachers.

The design of the study was qualitative phenomenological, which by nature is focused on the shared experience of a group and how the members of that group interpret those experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Educators in this study were invited to share their experiences as classroom teachers in public Montessori schools and how they work to attune to the whole child.

Understanding the whole child is an underlying theme in trauma-informed practices (CDC, 2019; NEA, 2023). The teachers' experiences in this study can add valuable insight into how to embed trauma-informed training within required teacher preparation programs, which would provide the teachers with skills and tools to effectively support all children regardless of exposure to traumatic events. This chapter provides an outline of the elements of the study, which includes the research design, questions, setting, participants, procedures, and data collection and analysis procedures. The chapter will also provide a description of the role of the researcher in this qualitative study. The chapter will conclude with how this study ensured research trustworthiness, ethical considerations, and a summary.

Design

Qualitative research, according to Creswell and Poth (2018), is an approach that allows the researcher to become an observer of the world around them. The qualitative approach was the appropriate design to examine and further understand the everyday experiences of teachers who work directly with children in public Montessori classrooms in four different geographical regions throughout the United States. Qualitative research is a collaborative process whereby the researcher explores the experiences of people who have first-hand knowledge of the topic of study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). According to Creswell and Poth, data collection often occurs through interviewing, and through the analysis of that data, the researcher begins to construct meaning. In this case, the researcher gained insight from the perspectives of teachers who are actively engaging in trauma-informed practices, which are naturally embedded within Montessori foundational principles and classroom practices (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Montessori, 1973; NCTSN, n.d.). Qualitative research provides a rich, holistic account of the problem as it is

experienced and described from multiple perspectives and factors that are part of the experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

For this study, the researcher chose a phenomenological approach to study the lived experiences of public Montessori teachers who work in a variety of public Montessori schools with children from different communities and cultures. Creswell and Poth (2018) described phenomenology as an approach that is used to explore the lived experiences of the interviewees regarding the phenomenon at the heart of the exploration. A phenomenological approach allowed the researcher to interview several individuals and find the common meaning or themes within their lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this study, the researcher hoped to discover themes regarding the physical, emotional, and pedagogical components of teachers' classroom designs as part of teachers' lived experiences with different aspects of the Montessori *Essential Elements Rubric* (NCMPS, 2017) that align with SAMHSA's (2014) principles of trauma-informed care.

The specific phenomenological approach of this study was transcendental phenomenology. Transcendental phenomenology was largely developed by Edmund Husserl (1970) and is a philosophical approach to qualitative research that focuses on understanding human experience (Moustakas, 1994). Husserl introduced the concept of putting aside one's thoughts, beliefs, and notions to limit bias, which is referred to as epoché, regarding the topic of study. This type of methodology is an approach aimed at setting aside one's biases and assumptions, which enables the researcher to see the phenomena exactly as it is; enabling the researcher to provide a situation in which true meaning can emerge (Moustakas, 1994). Moustakas (1994) referred to this notion of removing biases through epoché as seeing things for the first time. When interviewing public Montessori teachers about the way they prepared their

physical and emotional classroom spaces, the transcendental phenomenological design was a valid and thoughtful approach.

Research Questions

RQ1. How do public Montessori teachers explain their preparedness to work with children who have experienced trauma?

RQ2. How do public Montessori teachers ensure safety for each child within the classroom environment?

RQ3. How do public Montessori teachers describe specific areas of focus regarding learners' social interaction during the construction of the prepared environment?

RQ4. How do public Montessori teachers describe ensuring cultivation of a respectful classroom environment for all students?

Sites

As of 2023, Pennsylvania, Washington, and Illinois were the only states with policies that required training for trauma in recognition of the impacts of childhood trauma and the additional secondary stress that teachers experienced (National Association of State Boards of Education, 2023). The sites chosen for this study were three different public Montessori schools in three states and one district with a cluster of public Montessori schools in a fourth state in four different geographical regions within the United States. Based on criterion and convenience sampling, and to gather information from a variety of public Montessori schools, the selected schools were chosen based on the fact that they were representative of a broad range of geographical locations, student population size, student demographics, population of town or city where the school was located, state rankings for education, state rankings for ACEs scores, and availability of licensed educators in Grades 1st-3rd and Grades 4th-6th. The teachers were

interviewed individually via Zoom due to the locations' distances from the researcher. Pseudonyms were used for the sites and for the participants in this study to assure anonymity.

Site 1 (Southwest): Montessori Utah was a kindergarten through seventh grade public Montessori charter school with approximately 240 students. The location of the school was considered fringe rural and located in a town with a population of approximately 32,000. The school's minority enrollment was 31%. The student population consisted of 50% female students and 50% male students. The school enrolled 32% economically disadvantaged students. There were approximately 21 equivalent full-time teachers and no school counselor. This site was chosen because of its geographic location in the southwest, its demographic makeup of the student population (32% Hispanic), and the variety of grades served.

Concerning trauma, according to the State Healthcare Access Data Assistance Center (SHADAC; 2023), Utah was ranked number 45 for the percentage of ACEs in the United States. At the time of the study, Montessori Utah utilized Title 1 services to support the needs of many of its students. Title 1, Part A is a federal educational program that supports schools with low-income students across the United States (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). The U. S. Department of Education (2018) states that schools across the country use Title 1 funding to provide additional academic support and learning opportunities to help raise the achievement of the lowest-achieving students.

Site 2 (Southeast): Montessori Tennessee was a prekindergarten to sixth grade public Montessori charter school with approximately 480 students. The location of the school was in a large city setting with a population of approximately 635,000. Over 79% of the enrolled students in the school were African American. The student population was made up of 47% male students and 53% female students. At the time of the study, at least 67% of students qualified for a free

lunch based on family income. There were approximately 20 equivalent full-time teachers and one school counselor. The site was chosen because of its geographical location in the southeast, the demographic make-up of the student population (majority African American), and because it was the only school with a public Montessori program in the school district where the school was located. Also, concerning trauma, Tennessee was ranked number nine for the percentage of ACEs in the United States (SHADAC, 2023).

Site 3 (West): Montessori Alaska was a public Montessori school, in a traditional public school district with approximately 225 students in prekindergarten through the eighth grade. The location of the school was in a small town in a remote location with a population of approximately 32,000. According to information found on the district website, the student population was made up of 44% female students and 56% male students, and there was no current information regarding economically disadvantaged students. There were 13 equivalent full-time teachers and no school counselor. Alaska was ranked number 20 for percentage of ACEs in the United States (SHADAC, 2023).

Site 4 (Northwest): Montessori Wisconsin was in a public school district with a large cluster of public Montessori schools and was located in the largest school district in the state of Wisconsin. The student population of the district is made up of over 75,000 students and approximately 60% of the students were eligible to participate in free and reduced meal programs. This district, with a variety of potential sites, was chosen because of its geographic location in the northwest, large student enrollment, and because it was a school district with a large cluster of public Montessori schools. The district was located in a large city with a population of approximately 1.5 million. According to information on the district website, schools in the district that have an enrollment with at least 40% of students living in poverty may

apply for Title 1 schoolwide status and schools with a minimum of 35% of the students living in poverty may provide a Title 1 targeted assistance program. Wisconsin was ranked 28 for percentage of ACEs in the United States (SHADAC, 2023).

Participants

According to Creswell and Poth (2018), purposeful sampling enables the researcher to intentionally sample a group of people who can provide information that is deeply relevant to the subject at the heart of the study. In this study, classroom teachers in public Montessori schools were invited to be interviewed about their experiences in their own classrooms. To be eligible to participate in this study, teachers had to meet three inclusion criteria (at the time of the study):

1. Teachers must hold a current teaching license in the state where they are employed at the time of the survey and interview.
2. Teachers must hold current Montessori certification from an accredited Montessori training program recognized by the Montessori Accreditation Council for Teacher Education.
3. Teachers must currently serve children in either a lower elementary (Grades 1 through 3) multilevel classroom or an upper elementary (Grades 4 through 6) multilevel classroom.

These three criteria ensured that all the classroom teachers who participated had similar levels of training regardless of geographical location. The number of teachers who qualified to participate in this study was 12. Two first to third grade teachers were interviewed from Utah because only two teachers in the school held Montessori certification. Three first to third grade and one fourth through sixth grade teachers from the Tennessee public Montessori were interviewed. The fourth interviewee was added to make up for the lack of a third participant in

Utah. Two first to third grade teachers and one teacher serving students in first through sixth grades were interviewed from Alaska. One first to third grade teacher and two fourth through sixth grade teachers from Wisconsin were interviewed.

Procedures

I first sought to gain approval for this transcendental phenomenological study from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Liberty University and then sought approval from each of the schools based on requirements for each location. I sent a letter (Appendix A), via email, to the appropriate school or district-level administrator of the schools in which participants would be recruited. The superintendent granted permission to conduct research in Alaska via an email response. No other permissions were required for Alaska. School-level administrators granted permission in both Utah and Tennessee. No other permissions were required for either Utah or Tennessee. Wisconsin required a letter of recommendation from a district-level employee and the completion and approval of a permission to conduct research application located on the district website. Permission was granted in Wisconsin through the Department of Research and Data within the school district.

I asked four teachers (two teaching first to third and two teaching fourth to sixth grades) from the public Montessori school where I am employed to serve as an expert panel to review the interview questions and the writing prompt. The school where I am employed is a public Montessori school, the same as the schools selected for the study. The purpose of the expert panel was for individuals who met the same criteria as the participants to review the interview questions and writing prompt for clarity. No adjustments to the interview writing prompt or the interview questions were deemed necessary.

The following procedures were used for the study. Because the study was a

phenomenological study, which required participants who have experienced the phenomenon, criterion sampling was employed to find candidates who fit the criteria with consideration of differences in length of experience, gender, and grade levels taught, when possible (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Criterion purposive sampling ensured that participants' thought processes and understandings represented a larger population (Palinkas et al., 2015). First through sixth grade teachers from selected schools received an email, which included information describing the purpose of the study and details about what participation would involve, including filling out a short survey, completing a short writing prompt, and participating in an interview, with assurances of anonymity (Appendix D). The emails were sent to the teachers from the principals once approval was granted. Included in the email was a link to a survey where the teachers were asked to confirm current state licensing, Montessori credentialing information, and grade level(s) currently teaching (Appendix C).

The survey contained the three inclusion criteria questions in yes or no format to determine the eligibility of the potential participant to participate in the study (Appendix C). They were asked to respond to, "Do you hold a current teaching license in the state where you are currently employed?" "Do you hold a current Montessori certification from an accredited Montessori training program recognized by the Montessori Accreditation Council for Teacher Education?" and, "Are you currently serving children in either a lower elementary (Grades 1st-3rd) or upper elementary (Grades 4th-6th) multilevel classroom. The survey had an open-ended space for them to provide whether they teach in a lower elementary or upper elementary classroom. Any potential participant who responded "no" to any of the questions was directed to a page at the end of the survey that read, "Thank you for your interest in this study. Unfortunately, for this study, certain requirements must be met to participate, and I must decline

your invitation to participate at this time. However, if you would like a summary of the results of this study, please provide your email in the space below, and I will send them when the study has been completed."

Those teachers who fit the inclusion criteria were asked to provide their email on the next page. The information on this page stated, "You meet the requirements of the study. If you are still interested in participating place your email in the space below, and the researcher will contact you to invite you to participate in the next part of the study." The teachers who provided an email address received an email from the researcher inviting them to proceed to the individual interview portion of the study. All interviews were scheduled via email correspondence based on participant availability. Since the IRB concluded that the study was exempt, there was no consent form to complete.

Participant information sheet (Appendix E) addressed risks, rights, possible benefits, confidentiality of records, and contact information. The participant information sheet was emailed to the teachers after they completed the online participation survey before any other information was requested. Email addresses used were provided by each teacher after their inclusion criteria survey (Appendix C). The teachers were also informed that their interviews would be audio and video recorded so that the researcher would have an accurate account of their interviews. The IRB determined that no informed consent document needed to be signed, so the teachers received the participant information sheet (Appendix E) in the very first email correspondence so that they would have adequate study information before providing any further information. Before the Zoom audio/video interview, teachers were emailed a demographic questionnaire (Appendix F) to complete and a writing prompt (Appendix G). Through the demographic questionnaire, they were asked to provide years of teaching experience, years of

Montessori teaching experience, information about Montessori training received, grade level in which they were currently teaching, and how long they have worked at their current school and how long they have been teaching their current grade level(s). The writing prompt allowed all participants the opportunity to produce a thoughtful response as an introduction to who they are and why they were interested in becoming educators, specifically in public Montessori programs. The teachers were asked to complete both the demographic questionnaire and the writing prompt before the scheduled interview and return both to the researcher before the scheduled interview.

The Researcher's Role

I am a school counselor in a prekindergarten-eighth grade public Montessori school in TN. I have been a school counselor for 9 years and have worked in my current school for the past 4 years. My previous school was in a high-poverty area. I was also a school counselor there and was certified as a trauma-informed practitioner (education) through Starr Commonwealth and an ACEs trainer through the Building Strong Brains/TN ACEs program. In that school system, I noticed a variety of concerning behaviors in the students we served. Our teachers were struggling to understand and support the various and growing needs of our students. During that time, I was introduced to professional development opportunities, which allowed me to learn more about childhood trauma and traumatic stress. Within that role, I also served as a family and community engagement coach and worked to improve my skills to help better support our school, family, and community connections.

I have worked as a substitute teacher, classroom teacher, and as a school counselor. I continuously seek out opportunities to gain more training experience in the areas of trauma-informed educational practices, mindfulness, restorative practices, and school safety. I do not have any official Montessori training, but I have studied, collaborated, and sought to better

understand Montessori principles. I have my own training and thoughts related to public education, Montessori approaches, and trauma-informed practices. To identify my role within this transcendental phenomenological study, I bracketed my own experiences and situated myself in a neutral stance, so that I was open to hearing and thoroughly understanding the perspectives of the participants in the study (Moustakas, 1994).

As a researcher, my primary role in this study was to design and implement a study that will be relevant to everyday concerns regarding the relationship between trauma-informed approaches and Montessori foundational principles within public schools and add to the empirical knowledge that is currently available. It was also imperative that I respected the knowledge and rights of the participants through the utilization of ethical practices throughout the entirety of the study. Bracketing, according to Creswell and Poth (2018), is necessary for phenomenological research so that the researcher is intentional about putting their feelings and assumptions aside while fully focusing on the perspectives of the participants. As I began the recruitment process, I ensured that I had no prior knowledge of the teachers who were selected for the study. I continuously checked to ensure all terminology in the communication throughout the interviews was clearly articulated and understood by participants. The end goal for the interviews was to hear the words and perceptions of the teachers being interviewed without being influenced by outside sources or from my internal dialogue.

Data Collection

Data collected were in the form of responses to an open-ended journal-style essay and semi-structured interview questions from public Montessori teachers who have had Montessori training and who were currently working with students in first to third and fourth to sixth grades. The first form of data collection was in the form of a writing prompt that was provided to the

participants before the Zoom interviews. The second portion of the interviews was conducted via Zoom enabled with a waiting room and audio/video recording options. The interviews were completed via computer login to the Zoom platform. Audio and video were enabled and recorded for the interviewer and the interviewees throughout the entirety of all the interviews. I was isolated in a room alone when I conducted each interview. The participants logged into Zoom on their computers as well. The interviews served as a social interaction to construct new knowledge (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Immediately following the conclusion of each interview, I purchased a $20.00 Amazon gift card and sent it from the Amazon site to the emails provided by each participant. I was able to see when each gift card was received through emails from my Amazon account. The writing prompt Word file, audio and video files and transcribed interview Word document files have been stored digitally on an external hard drive, which is locked in a filing cabinet and on my personal laptop using password protection.

Demographic Questionnaire

Participants were asked to provide years of teaching experience, years of Montessori teaching experience, information about Montessori training received, grade level in which they were currently teaching, how many years of classroom experience they have within a Montessori school, and how long they have worked at their current school and with current grade level(s).

Open-Ended Journal-Style Essay

A journal-style prompt was provided to each of the participants. They were asked to write a response to a prompt that served as an introduction of the participants to the researcher. The prompt was an open-ended essay question. In that portion of data gathering, the researcher intended to establish equity and rapport by allowing each participant an opportunity to have

plenty of time to draft and edit their thoughts in such a way that the participants could provide an account of themselves (Harris, 2002). Harris (2002) explained that correspondence is not typically viewed as a primary source of data gathering and that there is not a great deal of research supporting its usage. The purpose of the writing prompt in this study was for the researcher to gather introductory information about the participants thoughtfully, promoting equality, and allowing the participants ample time to organize their thoughts and words in a reflective atmosphere. The writing prompt was not a stand-alone document but was part of the interview that continued virtually. The writing prompt was emailed to the teachers with the participant information sheet. The participants returned the writing prompts in a Word document via email before their scheduled Zoom interview.

Interviews

The following questions comprised the interview protocol, which was administered to participants via Zoom.

1. What types, if any, of trauma-informed training have you participated in during the past 3 years?
2. What ways do you think your Montessori training has prepared you for working with students who have experienced trauma?
3. What experience do you have utilizing trauma-informed practices in your classroom?
4. How would you describe your way of working with children who have been traumatized?
5. In what ways do you ensure physical safety within your classroom environment?
6. In what ways do you ensure psychological safety within your classroom environment?

7. In what ways do you ensure emotional safety within your classroom environment?
8. What physical elements are present in your classroom that promote social interaction and/or peer support?
9. In what other ways do you encourage your students to collaborate with other students within your classroom or school?
10. In what ways are your students allowed to make choices regarding their own work in your classroom?
11. In what ways do adults in your school model respect, grace, and courtesy in their interactions?
12. In what ways do you cultivate inclusiveness in your classroom?
13. In what ways do you cultivate a strong school-home association with your students and their families?

The first four questions of the interview addressed RQ1 and were questions designed to find out more about each participant's experience with trauma-informed educational practices and public Montessori teaching. In Question 1, the participants were asked how much trauma-informed training they have had in the past three years. Trauma-informed practices are constantly improving to keep up with the growing needs of students and educators. For this study, it was important to note how much, if any, trauma-informed training educators have had. The data gathered from that specific question identified the possibility that the way they operate in their classrooms might be the result of a combination of Montessori training and trauma-informed training. Question 2 was designed to help elicit ways in which teachers believe their Montessori training helped prepare them for working with children with trauma. Question 3 helped differentiate what the participants think about how they employ trauma-informed practices they

may have learned and to what extent those practices play a role in their classroom culture. Question 4 gave participants a chance to discuss the ways they specifically support and/or respond to children who have been traumatized.

Questions 5-7 addressed RQ2 and the trauma-informed principles regarding safety and trustworthiness and transparency as they converge with the way the teacher, as an adult, embraces the core Montessori principles (e.g., respect for the child, absorbent mind, sensitive periods, prepared environment, and auto-education; CDC, 2019; Montessori, 1973; NCMPS, 2017).

Questions 8-10 addressed RQ3 and the social interactions within the participants' classroom environments regarding the trauma-informed principles of peer support and empowerment, voice, and choice as they converge with Montessori elements of supporting a high degree of student choice in work, such as when, where, and how much (CDC, 2019; NCMPS, 2017).

Questions 11-13 addressed RQ4 and the trauma-informed principle of cultural issues as it converges with the Montessori elements of modeling respect and a strong partnership between home and school (CDC, 2019; NCMPS, 2017).

Data Analysis

The following procedures describe the process by which the data was organized into themes that align with the research questions, problem statement, and purpose of the study. The written portion of the survey was downloaded from the website and manually coded separately from the interview data. The interviews were transcribed verbatim from audio to text using an artificial intelligence program called Notta, loaded into NVivo for analysis, and then manually coded into Microsoft Excel. Moustakas (1994) explained analyzing phenomenological data as a

systematic process that is accessible to qualitative researchers but also as a rigorous process for constructing meanings and essence of experiences. According to Moustakas, the phases of data analysis involve epoché, horizontalization, grouping, textural descriptions, structural descriptions, and essence. The data analysis process for this study started with epoché, which required me to clear my mind of my views so that I could focus on the views of the participants (Moustakas, 1994). Epoché, according to Moustakas, should continue throughout the study. By bracketing my own professional and personal experiences, I was better prepared to receive information and experiences fully and more accurately from the perspectives of the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994).

In the horizontalization step, I went through the participants' responses to the prompt and the interview questions and highlighted significant wording that added to an understanding of how the participants experienced their work in a public Montessori school (Moustakas, 1994). In this phase, I looked closely at the words and phrases the participants used and worked to identify how the participants experienced Montessori principles, trauma-informed approaches, and parallels between the two (CDC, 2019; NCMPS, 2017). Following horizontalization, I coded significant statements using NVivo and then manually loaded those statements into a Microsoft Excel document based on themes or clusters of meaning as they emerged (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

In the next step of the data analysis process, I used significant statements and themes found in the interview prompt and interview questions to develop both textural and structural descriptions. According to Creswell and Poth, this step involves writing a description of the participants' experiences and a description of the context or setting that influenced the experience. Moustakas (1994) recommends that the researcher also describe their own

experiences and contexts that influenced their experience. For this study, the researcher's role section fulfilled this step.

The essence or the essential, invariant structure is a composite description that identifies the common experiences of the participants in the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Creswell and Poth explained that combining the structural and textural descriptions, along with synthesizing the essence will yield a narrative account to provide greater insight into the phenomenon. I thoroughly described the way the teachers perceived their own experiences as Montessori-trained teachers in a public school implementing *Essential Elements* aligned with trauma-informed educational approaches (CDC, 2019; NCMPS, 2017).

Trustworthiness

Qualitative research can be such a highly variable experience, and as readers interpret the written work, trustworthiness can also promote a sense of confidence in what the researcher has reported (Stahl & King, 2020). Lincoln and Guba (1985) asserted that demonstrating trustworthiness in a research study involves establishing credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability. Lincoln and Guba explained that trustworthiness serves to evaluate the study's value and provides a variety of methods that can be used to assist the researcher in increasing confidence in each aspect of trustworthiness. Stahl and King (2020) explained that qualitative research does not seek to create replicability, but rather a documentation of unique experiences and outcomes or a version of constructed reality.

Credibility

Credibility, in qualitative research, parallels the notion of validity found in quantitative research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To increase the credibility of this study, I used what is known as the researcher's lens (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Creswell and Poth (2018) described the

importance of the researcher identifying and disclosing their understanding of potential biases, values, and experiences that they bring to the process so that readers can see the position of the researcher as related to the subjectivity of the investigation. According to Creswell and Poth, this is especially important in a phenomenological study, because it is nearly impossible for the researcher to be fully detached from the data or remain completely objective. Additionally, researcher bias, if not identified and managed, can impede the interpretation of the participants' experience (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this chapter, I have presented my role as the researcher and disclosed any potential biases that I may hold. This entailed fully describing the role I serve in my school, as well as my understanding of Montessori educational practices and trauma-informed educational practices from the perspective of a school counselor. I also disclosed my own personal and professional values and experiences as they pertain to the study. Being transparent about my role as the researcher allowed me to engage epoché, or to set aside my biases to be open to exploring participants' experiences from their perspective (Moustakas, 1994).

Dependability

Lincoln and Guba (1985) explained that dependability in qualitative research is a process in which both the researcher and the participants build trust as the contextual meaning of a phenomenon unfolds and a deeper understanding is being constructed. External audits, also known as the reader's lens, are one of the techniques described by Stahl and King (2020) to help achieve dependability in qualitative research. Stahl and King asserted that many students utilize their research committee to evaluate the researcher's interpretation of the data analysis. Creswell and Poth (2018) explained that the role of the auditor, with no connection to the study, is a person who is recruited to examine the study's process and products (findings, interpretations, and

conclusions) to verify supporting evidence. For this study, I utilized both my research committee and a dissertation coach for external audits. External audits are important because they support the overall quality of the work of the qualitative researcher and ensure that processes and products are grounded in and supported by data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The audits also help establish whether the conclusions of a study are visible, comprehensible, and acceptable. The study's findings have increased visibility, comprehensibility, and acceptability based on the auditor's assessment (de Kleijn & Van Leeuwen, 2018).

Transferability

Transferability, as explained by Lincoln and Guba (1985), is concerned with the extent to which the patterns and descriptions from one context apply to another. Lincoln and Guba recommended generating thick descriptions to increase the transferability of the findings of a qualitative study. Creswell and Poth (2018) explained that thick description consists of thoroughly describing the contextual relationships within the study, as well as the settings and participants. According to Ponterotto (2006), thick description requires the researcher to describe the participants in a way in which they can be visualized without compromising anonymity; the setting and procedures are described in adequate detail, providing a context for understanding the results of the study, and assuring that the results of the study are translated in such a way that they maintain the cognitive and emotive states or "voice" of the participants. As themes emerged, I provided explicit detail and explanation of the themes, as well as the context from which they were derived to enhance the transferability of the study results.

Ethical Considerations

Throughout the process of planning a study, beginning a study, gathering data, analyzing findings, reporting data, and publishing the study, researchers must consider ethical issues that

may arise in each step of the qualitative research process (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Gaining institutional review board (IRB) approval was a necessary beginning step in ensuring that participants and schools would not be harmed throughout the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Additionally, according to Creswell and Poth, local school district policies regarding conducting research studies should be followed. Due to IRB exemption status, the informed consent portion of the study was replaced with a participant information sheet, participants were informed of the general purpose of the study, were not pressured to participate, and the norms and charters of the cultures of the schools and individual participants were respected (Creswell & Poth, 2018). It was of utmost importance that the participants understood what data was to be collected and what was to be done with that data (Sanjari et al., 2014). This was communicated to them through the participant information sheet (Appendix E). Research materials have been locked digitally using password protection, and any physical materials utilized have been stored in a file cabinet using a lock and key. Data from the study will be stored for 3 years and then destroyed either digitally or physically shredded depending on the nature of the document. Pseudonyms have been used for participants and for their respective schools.

Chapter Three Summary

This chapter outlined the steps that were taken to complete this phenomenological research study. The study explored the experiences of public Montessori classroom teachers and how they apply various portions of the *Essential Elements Rubric* and addressed how those elements align with the six tenets of trauma-informed education (NCMPS, 2017; SAMHSA, 2014). This chapter outlined how the researcher utilized a transcendental phenomenological research design to focus on understanding human experience (Moustakas, 1994). Additionally, this chapter provided a rationale for the different interview questions that were asked and

explained how responses were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed. This chapter also explained how the different interview questions aligned with the research questions, as well as provided evidence as to how the questions are grounded in research. The setting selection rationale, along with the rationale regarding participant selection, was also explained. IRB approval steps, and other procedures including providing participant information, ethical considerations, and the researcher's role were also addressed in this chapter. Additionally, this chapter addressed factors of trustworthiness, which was supported by credibility, transferability, confirmability, and dependability. This methods chapter concluded with ethical considerations. The next chapter reports the results of the study, includes participant demographics, and details the results of the analysis of the prompts and responses to interview questions.

Chapter Four: Findings

Overview

This chapter presents the findings of phenomenological research conducted to better understand the lived experiences of public Montessori teachers in public Montessori schools in the United States and the naturally embedded trauma-informed practices within their classrooms. The information presented in this chapter represents the analysis of the data that were gathered during this investigation. Through narratives provided during the interview process and journal-style writing prompts completed by the participants, a deeper understanding emerged in the areas of preparedness for working with students who have been impacted by childhood trauma, with a focus on creating safe (physical, emotional, and psychological) respectful environments. Subsections of this chapter highlight subthemes and patterns that surfaced from the teacher narratives, emphasizing the naturally embedded trauma-informed practices that can be found in the classrooms of public Montessori educators.

The teachers and their unique experiences formed a foundation for recognizing parallels in student interactions regarding safety, respect, and cooperation found in trauma-informed educational practices and in the Montessori essential elements of support for children's independence, freedom, responsibility, and growth. Through analysis, the results of the study uncovered themes that reflected a focus on respect of the child, safety of the whole child, observation-based designs of the physical and emotional classroom environment, and a combination of virtue-based education and student-led learning. The findings not only highlight each narrative but also contribute to a broader understanding of essential elements within public Montessori classrooms and how many of those elements are part of the holistic Montessori approach that combines education, medicine, and science. When that convergence is

deconstructed, it is evident that there are trauma-informed elements within Montessori's foundational elements. However, it is important to remember that the way these trauma-informed elements are incorporated into the classroom environment is at the heart of Montessori education, which is rooted in a deep respect and understanding of each child.

Participants

There were 12 teachers interviewed for this study. All teachers, except one, were serving students in either first to third or fourth to sixth grades. The one other teacher was serving a combination of students in prekindergarten through eighth grades. A breakdown of each teacher's state, grade level, total years teaching, and years in public Montessori is provided in Table 1. All teachers have had Montessori training from an accredited Montessori training program and were working in public Montessori schools at the time of the interviews. Six of the teachers were working in public Montessori schools in traditional school districts, and six of the teachers were working in public Montessori charter schools at the time the interviews were conducted. Ten teachers were female and two were male. In terms of years of Montessori classroom experience, participants had been teaching in Montessori schools from 1 year to 32 years. Each participant was asked to complete a journal-style writing prompt to introduce themselves to the researcher. That material was utilized to form the descriptive information provided in the participant information section and helped develop a deeper understanding of certain qualities of each participant. Each participant was asked 13 questions in an open-ended, semi-structured interview to allow them to describe their personal experiences in the classroom regarding trauma preparedness, safety, social interaction, and respectful classroom environments. The teacher participants were given pseudonyms to protect their anonymity.

Table 1

Participant Information

Pseudonym	State	Grade Level	Total Years Teaching	Years in Public Montessori
Allison	Tennessee	4th-6th	7	1
Brenda	Tennessee	1st-3rd	7	7
Camille	Utah	1st-3rd	15	10
David	Alaska	pk-8	32	25
Jason	Wisconsin	4th-6th	17	6
Kerri	Utah	1st-3rd	21	21
Kimberly	Wisconsin	1st-3rd	7	7
Lilli	Alaska	1st-3rd	5	5
Lisa	Tennessee	1st-3rd	5	1
Natalie	Wisconsin	4-5	13	4
Rachel	Alaska	1st-3rd	4	4
Stacy	Tennessee	1st-3rd	6	1

Allison

Allison was a seventh-year teacher and in her first year in a public Montessori classroom. She had been at the school where she was working at the time of the study for one year teaching students in fifth grade. She stated she felt like her current school "found her" after she posted her information on a public school teacher website where she lived. Before she was hired to work at her public Montessori school, she was almost ready to leave the teaching profession due to not feeling supported or valued. When she was interviewed at the school where she was working during the time of the interview, she said that she fell in love with the idea of Montessori and was enamored with the way the teachers spoke to one another and the children.

Allison explained that she believes, "A Montessori classroom is a beautiful place to be a child." She went on further to explain she feels her students get a well-rounded education because she is allowed to go back and fill in gaps they may have, while also being able to encourage other learners in her classroom to step outside of their comfort zone in a place that is

safe and supportive. Allison reflected on her values and the way her Montessori training has helped her learn how to intentionally model virtues for her students as a primary contributor to a healthy and positive classroom culture.

Brenda

Brenda was also in her seventh year as a teacher with all seven serving students in the only school she had ever worked. She had been teaching first to third grades, or lower elementary, for the past six years as a lead teacher. She began teaching to gain what she felt would be necessary classroom experience before starting a career in educational policy. Early in her college career, she said that she wrote a paper about alternative education methods, including Montessori, and she said that she fell in love with the combination of self-motivated learning and multi-sensorial experiences. She chose to work in a public Montessori school because of what she had learned when she was writing that paper. Brenda said that after seven years in the classroom, she felt that the real work is done in the classroom and no longer desired to pursue a career in educational policy.

Brenda said that she feels her role as a Montessori educator is to be present, to notice, and to supervise. She explained that she works hard to be present for her students both physically and mentally. She added that she greets as many children as she can each morning with unconditional positive regard, no matter her opinion on other factors regarding academics or behavior and believes this is an important part of what she does. Brenda also noted that she requires her students to work through, and sometimes struggle, with challenges so that they can develop their independence and ability to think and problem-solve.

Camille

At the time of the study, Camille had 15 years of teaching experience, with 10 of those years in public Montessori education. She was working with first to third graders at the time of the interview and had been working with that grade level for the past five years. Camille also had experience as an administrator in a public Montessori school.

Camille explained that a Montessori education places value on the unique needs of each child and puts effort into providing authentic opportunities to develop independence, and these are some of the values that drew her to working in public Montessori education. She noted that she places high value on spending time with her students outside of their classroom when they go to recess or lunch. She also explained that, over the years, she has become a better observer and more in tune with the variety of needs her students have by observing their social interactions in her classroom as well as other areas of the school.

David

Of all the teachers interviewed for this study, David had the most years of experience in education, as well as in public Montessori education. At the time of the interview, David had been working in the school where he was working for the past 32 years. He had worked at his school in several capacities over the years, including serving first to third grades for three years, fourth to sixth grades for one year, and as a specialist working with prekindergarten to eighth grades for 25 years.

David said that he places value on simplicity and observation in his work. He spent a great deal of time discussing how we, as adults, sometimes overcomplicate things that are best served through a focus on simplicity. He told me that he relies heavily on observation and respect in his daily practices. David said that he continues to seek ways to respect individuals and focus

on the importance of working with children as they are and where they are, both developmentally and emotionally.

Jason

Jason came to our interview with many questions for me. He was naturally curious about my understanding of Montessori and was not certain that his Montessori training had prepared him to work with students who had experienced trauma. At the time of the interview, he had 17 years of teaching experience and six years of public Montessori experience. He was working with fourth to sixth grades and had been in that grade level at that school for the past six years. Jason also had a background in special education and relied heavily on restorative practices and other training he received over the years to support the diverse needs of his students.

It is interesting to note that Jason was the only teacher interviewed who spoke of receiving their own Montessori education. He never considered going into education as a career but was continually pointed in that direction as he began to do career inventories and self-searching. He stated he places a lot of value in his content knowledge and "arsenal" of lessons that he has committed to memory after many years of practice. He also believes that the Montessori educational approach of "following the child" offers much more opportunity for children to learn than traditional approaches, which he believes are much more restrictive.

Kerri

Kerri has had 21 years of teaching experience and all those years have been in a Montessori classroom. Eighteen of those years were spent teaching in private Montessori classrooms. At the time of the interview, she had been teaching in the same first to third grade classroom for three years at the public Montessori school where she was working.

She began her career in Montessori education after she began researching educational opportunities for her own child. She has been highly invested in adding to the levels of fidelity in the Montessori programs that she has been a part of throughout her career. In explaining why she moved to a public Montessori program, she told me that she genuinely believes in Montessori's power to change lives and wanted to be part of something that could offer such a brilliant approach to education to even more children.

Kimberly

Kimberly was in her seventh year of teaching lower elementary (first to third grades) in public Montessori schools at the time of our interview. She was in her fifth year in the same grade level at her current school. Before beginning her career in Montessori education, Kimberly spent several years working for an environmental education center. She was introduced to Montessori educational practices by watching her mother's career as an executive assistant in a private Montessori school. Kimberly assisted with various childcare elements at her mother's school and reflected on those experiences as well as her fascination with Montessori education when she was ready to make a career change.

Kimberly spoke about her beliefs on the importance of seeing each child on an individual level and her passion for guiding children through the learning process. She described her thoughts on the importance of student choice and empowerment through experiencing responsibility, self-advocacy, and authentic social interactions. She said she is thankful to be able to work in a public Montessori school and to be able to provide an environment that has little to no judgment towards children's ability or family income.

Lilli

Lilli was in her fifth year of teaching first to third grade students in the same classroom at the public Montessori school where she worked at the time of our interview. She had five years of teaching experience and all of those were in a public Montessori classroom. She is from the same town where she works as a teacher and has always been interested in the quality of education and the love of learning that she found within Montessori educational practices.

Lilli said that she believes that children should be active participants in their learning process and that by providing them opportunities for choice and ownership in that process, there can be a lasting impact on their desire to learn. Lilli spoke of herself as a riverbank, guiding the children and their learning, and she referred to the children as the river, flowing along the course of that learning. She also spoke of her love for the outdoors and how that influences many of the activities that she enjoys helping her students take advantage of in the area where they live.

Lisa

Although it was only her first year teaching in a public Montessori classroom, Lisa had been teaching for five years. During that first year in a public Montessori school, she taught students in first to third grades. When she began her career, she was specifically interested in building educational support for all students in her community but said she was quickly confronted with a bleak reality that she could not be what she needed to be for her students without support or a sense of safety. She credits the refreshing environment that the public Montessori school offered her with helping her come out of survival mode as an educator.

Lisa said that she appreciates the Montessori focus on following the child and feels as though because of that focus, she can speak of a child's strengths and offer tailored support where they need it. She also talked about the transformative nature of peace education and how

that type of learning guides students toward virtue, concentration, and self-construction. Going back to the beginning of her educational journey, Lisa said that her favorite parts of teaching have always been building relationships, meeting students where they are, and watching them grow.

Natalie

Natalie had 13 years of teaching experience and was in her fourth year of teaching in a public Montessori classroom. For the first three years of teaching, she taught students in first to third grade, but at the time of the interview, she was teaching fourth to sixth grade students. Natalie said that she had wanted to be a teacher since she was a young child and always thought that she wanted to teach kindergarten. During the pandemic, she was able to get her Montessori certification, which helped open some doors in her educational career.

Natalie said that she believes education should be engaging, personalized, inquiry-based, and respectful. When she began working in a public Montessori school, she said she knew right away that Montessori was where she belonged and it spoke to who she was as an educator. She talked a lot about self-reflection and how important it has been for her to think about her classroom and how she can best support her students while helping them practice problem-solving skills in a safe environment.

Rachel

Rachel had been working in her public Montessori school for four years at the time of the interview. She had worked as a substitute teacher for a couple of years before she earned her teaching certificate and Montessori certification, so she had more than four years of experience in a public Montessori school. She was a lower elementary teacher and stated she had wanted to be a teacher for a very long time.

Rachel said she places a lot of importance on community and community-mindedness in the way she approaches education. She explained that she gives her students a lot of responsibility within limits in their classroom and that they must be guided to take ownership of their learning from an early age. She said she finds beauty in the way that Montessori education provides the children with real-life opportunities to practice building the skills they need to be successful in the world around them.

Stacy

Stacy, a first to third grade teacher, was in her first year of teaching in a public Montessori school, but she had six years of total teaching experience. Like several of the other teachers interviewed, Stacy said that she knew she wanted to be a teacher when she was a young child. She was introduced to Montessori education through a previous co-worker and was so thankful to get to work in an environment that she believes opens the door for all children to learn and thrive in an individualized way.

Stacy spoke about the importance of observation and how doing so allows her to gather pertinent information about her students, their interests, their areas of need, and the flow of the environment. She said that she continues to learn and grow as an educator and that the Montessori environment feels like a natural place for learning for both the children and the adults. Stacy spoke with excitement about the future of the students in her school, and it was obvious that she genuinely enjoyed the Montessori approach to education.

Results

The results from the study represent the data collected from the semi-structured interviews and include some of the information provided in the journal-style writing prompts that the teachers completed before the interviews. The data were analyzed using Moustakas' (1994)

six-step process: (a) epoché, (b) horizontalization, (c) grouping, (d) textural descriptions, (e) structural descriptions, and (f) essence. The interview transcripts were coded by identifying repeated words and phrases and organized into groups of matching codes in categories based on how they addressed each research question. Those words and phrases were then utilized to create themes that emerged representing how the participants experienced the parallels between Montessori principles and trauma-informed practices.

Theme Development

The themes that emerged in this phenomenological study were derived from the responses to the interview questions during the semi-structured interviews. The six dominant themes that emerged were as follows: *Minimal trauma-specific training, Following the child, Prepared environment, Virtue/character education, Empowerment,* and *Relationships*. Table 2 presents the themes and subthemes of this study.

Table 2

Themes and Subthemes

Themes	Subthemes
Minimal Trauma-Specific Training	
Following the Child	Observation Respect for the Child
Prepared Environment	Peace Areas
Virtue/Character Education	
Empowerment	Freedom with Responsibility Peer Support
Relationships	Modeling Conversations

Minimal Trauma-Specific Training

The questions at the beginning of the semi-structured interview were designed to find out more about the types of training the teachers have had in the past 3 three years related to trauma-informed practices and their perspectives regarding how those various trainings had prepared them for working with children who were experiencing the consequences of childhood trauma. Only three teachers stated that they had had trauma-specific training through their school districts. Two teachers had independently sought out trauma-related training. The other seven teachers either had general training that was not specifically focused on trauma-informed practices or they could not remember the content of any training that they believed might have been related to trauma in some way. Brenda explained, “I wouldn’t say that we’ve had other trainings that have touched on them [trauma], but they haven’t been focused on trauma-informed care.” Lisa mentioned that she had some training in her Montessori certification program that touched on universal strategies for educators working with children as a baseline before they even notice certain needs a child or children might have. She went on to explain, “In my certification for Montessori, we had a session, a few sessions in a row where we talked about trauma-informed instruction, about attachment styles, and how to respond to the different needs that students are communicating with their behavior.”

There were no consistent answers to the questions regarding trauma-informed training throughout the interviews. Two teachers stated that they did not believe that their Montessori training had prepared them for working with students who had experienced trauma. However, those two participants consistently answered questions throughout the interview unknowingly contradicting that statement.

Following the Child

While it was difficult for some of the teachers to elaborate on the types of trauma-informed training they had received over the past few years, almost every single teacher used a version of the phrase "follow the child" when asked how they thought their Montessori training had prepared them for working with children who had experienced trauma. Lisa stated, "I think being able to follow the child definitely changes the way that I am able to respond to all kinds of needs they exhibit, whether that be academic needs or social-emotional needs." Stacy explained that many of her students do not understand that what they are going through could be considered traumatic, but she tries to talk with each child one-on-one to understand where they are coming from. She continued, "And then from there, I kind of follow the child." Natalie elaborated on how she, as a Montessorian, was trained to "look at each individual child in their own unique way, observing what the children need, and helping to provide that through the environment or through different lessons or resources." Allison had a similar explanation of how she believed that the Montessori model emphasizes individualized education. She stated, "Montessori allows students to . . . be assessed on an individualized basis and receive what they need. So that kind of allows me to tailor my actions, my responses to what the student needs." Both formal observation and a deep respect for each child are crucial elements of what many Montessorians refer to as "following the child" (Montessori, 1994).

Observation

During the interview, eight of the participants expressed their belief that approaching children from the aspect of observation was critical. For example, David explained that observation covers a lot of what he needed to do as a teacher to best support the various needs of his students. He went further to explain, "If we can sit down and make accurate observations and

have the patience to see what is really going on, we . . . [can] meet the children where they are, no matter where they are." He thought that different trainings sometimes gave him really good ideas but at the same time complicated issues for someone who just needs something simple. He added, "To me, what's simple is communicating with students, seeing them, meeting them where they are, and doing the same with their caregivers, parents, grandparents, whoever."

Camille referred to observation in discussing how she works to be present with her students from a different perspective, stating that at the heart of what she was trying to accomplish was to gain a better understanding of the variety of needs the students in her class have. She explained to me that she spends a lot of time with her students outside of the classroom/academic environment. She elaborated,

> And at lunch, so you can see who is missing a friend or who's missing someone to talk to. And I would always be with them at recess so I can help foster friendships. At lunch, I always rotated tables and sat with my students because it's a different environment than you see them in academically, and you can move from table to table and make sure everyone gets to talk and you kind of model how to socialize. And that was important to me to make sure nobody was left out at any point of the day. Lonely is a thing, and it is difficult for kids and adults, you know?

Camille spoke a great deal about spending time near her students, explaining that she works hard to provide them with authentic opportunities to socially navigate their environments. She stated that by remaining in close proximity to her students she could better recognize areas that might need additional support and be better prepared to guide them through situations that might otherwise become problematic. She also explained that observing, responding

appropriately, and understanding child development helps cut down on undesirable behaviors in her classroom community.

Natalie also discussed the importance of observation, stating that through her Montessori training she learned to look at each child in their own unique way. She noted, “I think Montessorians are great at recognizing that individuals are different and have different needs, and therefore observing what children need prepares you to help to provide that through the environment.” Brenda’s remarks about observing children were akin to Natalie’s, and she also mentioned how she takes it a step past simply observation, stating, “I guess here, from talking to them, seeing and trying to understand that they are experiencing something, it helps me see what might work better for them in certain situations.” Brenda told me that sometimes she has no other choice than to stop, observe, and change the way she does things for children because she knows what she is attempting to accomplish will not work if it is not the right thing for the child.

Respect for the Child

One of the five foundational elements of a Montessori education is respect for the child (Kiany, 2021). Much of this mindset is judgment-free and goes back to observing the child without disrupting their concentration. Montessori (1973) believed that children had the ability to discover their own mistakes. She also asserted that children needed to be loved, cared for, and deeply respected. Seven participants spoke explicitly of respect for the child as a critical part of creating a safe environment where children can learn. Lisa remarked, “I think the hallmark is gentleness and a way I am growing is to still hold them to high expectations within that gentleness.” Natalie said that her focus in the classroom involved trying to create a space where everyone feels welcomed, respected, and encouraged. She stated that in doing so she and her students can have a strong classroom community where they can share openly about how they

are feeling. She said that having that type of emotional focus of respect for her students helps nurture a culture of valuing and supporting one another. Additionally, Allison noted about her school:

> One thing I noticed when I first got to my school because this is my first year there, is the way the adults speak to the children with such respect. A lot of people do not look at kids like they are people in this way.

Brenda expressed a similar sentiment:

> When it comes to kids, we do a lot of work on how we interact with the kids, but overall, treating the kids with respect. It's not a big power dynamic but more of like they say in Montessori-style, in Montessori education their guide is supposed to be their person that is supposed to lead them, not boss them.

While the other five participants did not use the specific phrase "respect for the child," the ways they described their interactions with their students and their approaches to understanding the children in their classrooms implied respect for the children they serve. Kimberly, for example, told me about a child in her class who she described as "wonderfully vocal in sharing her own story" regarding her faith and cultural beliefs. Kimberly elaborated:

> So, I think in teaching about a variety of cultures and if there's something that interest someone in wanting to share it about their family, about their life, of being, just generally being open to we are all humans, we have that gift of the ability to love.

Prepared Environment

A Montessori classroom is thoughtfully designed with the physical and emotional needs of the children considered in each aspect, relying heavily on the teacher knowing and understanding each individual child and their specific needs (Astuti & Sandra, 2020). In

Montessori classrooms, everything has a purpose and a place and is meant to be open and accessible to children (Macià-Gual & Domingo-Peñafiel, 2021). All but one of the participants referred specifically to the design of the classroom or the prepared environment when discussing not only how they created a safe environment for their students but also in the context of providing an environment of peer support, which is a theme described later. With Stacy, much of our conversation regarding safety in her classroom centered around the way the classroom was intentionally designed as a space created explicitly for her students to move freely, intentionally, and have authentic social interactions. Stacy spoke about how the physical space of her classroom was laid out with an intentional flow so that she and her students were not all stepping over one another. She stated, “That’s kind of a way we facilitate a safe place physically and just try to make sure it is emotionally safe as well.” Camille talked about the multiple seating options in her classroom as well as standing table spaces, kneeling tables, floor seating, and sitting tables that gave room to a variety of activities. Lisa stated that she felt that the Montessori classroom is structured for social interaction and freedom. Allison said that her students do not have individual desks. She said that she only had group tables in her classroom but added that there are spaces where students can go work if they do not want to work with peers for a short time. Natalie’s students utilized nametags for their workspaces. She said, “So they put their name tag on a spot where they are working in that moment. And then theoretically, then they could move about the room if they are working on different things.”

When groups of children are not in a lesson with the teacher, they have what Montessorians refer to as a work cycle or work period. A work cycle is generally a 3-hour external work cycle where children choose what activities and what materials they are interested in working with (Marshall, 2017). Allison explained:

> This is very much Montessori because . . . one of their freedoms is to choose what they're working on. I give lessons that they have to come to. And yes, they are assigned follow-up work that they have to complete, but outside of that, they're choosing what they work on. I can pick and choose based on what the kid needs to work on, but also, they can pick and choose based on what they want to work on. It's balanced nicely.

Lisa added:

> I think the design of the Montessori classroom, there's something to be said for that as well, where it is not so rigid. It is structured for social interaction and for freedom and for movement and who to work with. And they have procedures we have practiced for movement throughout the classroom.

James, one of the fourth to sixth grade teachers talked about the way he designed and set up his classroom environment to encourage collaboration among his students. He stated, "Well, working together is encouraged. In fact, most of the lessons that I give to children are in small groups, in the traditional Montessori way." He later added, "I also just try to set up the classroom in the way that there are easy lanes of movement and passage." James also discussed other specific physical aspects of his classroom, such as the height of his shelves being appropriately sized for his children and stools he added that were built by a grandparent so that the smallest students could reach everything they need.

Peace Areas

The importance of peace areas in the prepared environment was mentioned by seven of the participants. Natalie spoke of her classroom as a social environment as well and about the "peace corner" in her room. Natalie said, "We have a peace area where we have our conflict resolution strategies posted and just calming techniques." Brenda also talked a bit about the

peace area in her classroom. Brenda said that there are group tables and work areas where children can sit and work on rugs with partners in the classroom, which are both common in Montessori classrooms. She explained, “So when kids have problems, they’ll go there and have conversations. So that’s kind of like our space to be vulnerable that adds to your emotional safety element as well.” Camille also talked about having a peace corner in her classroom, describing it as a place where her students could go for conflict resolution. Allison, Kimberly, Rachel, and Lilli also discussed how they have specific locations in their classrooms designated as peace spots where their students go to practice self-regulation or conflict resolution with peers.

Virtue/Character Education

During my first couple of interviews, the teachers were from the same school, so it was not surprising that they mentioned virtue studies and explained how they do those studies in their classrooms with their students. However, as I continued to conduct interviews at all the other schools, nine teachers mentioned virtue studies or character education in some form. Allison said that her school does virtue studies and that they begin with grace and courtesy each year. She said, “Virtue studies help our students realize we all need to be treated with kindness and people should be treated like they are important.” Brenda stated, “Each month we focus on a different virtue. November is gratitude and December is generosity.”

Kimberly said that her school district uses a specific social-emotional curriculum in all their schools, but she also practices grace relations with her students. Grace and Courtesy lessons are taught in many Montessori programs around the United States and are part of the necessary elements found in the *Essential Elements Rubric* (NCMPS, 2017). The lessons are designed to teach children how to greet one another, how to take turns, how to say please and thank you, and engage in other interactions that promote kindness and respect for others. Stacy referred to

"virtue circles" that she had in her classroom. She explained that they have class meetings and discuss different virtues and how they can practice those virtues in real-life situations with others, starting in their classrooms. Natalie's district also provides a specific character education curriculum that focuses on a variety of character traits, such as empathy, respect, and responsibility. She said that the teachers do it in their classrooms, and there are programs for both the younger and older students that align with one another.

Empowerment

The teachers described how students in their classrooms are allowed to have a great deal of authentic opportunities to make their own choices. Most of the choices involve where in the classroom (sometimes outside the classroom) they wanted to work, whom they wanted to work with, what work they want to work on at a given time, and when they want to do certain work. All the teachers had procedures for teaching the children what was expected of them in making those choices, but there was a lot of discussion about choices that one would not typically hear about in a traditional public school classroom. The teachers also discussed how they empowered their students by providing authentic opportunities for peer support and collaboration. Allowing children to be such an active participant in their educational journey not only promotes responsibility, but also encourages students to learn valuable skills that can aid them in self-advocacy and self-directed learning throughout their education.

Freedom With Responsibility

Freedom with responsibility and freedom with limits were phrases that came up in 11 of the interviews. Allison said, "I think it is just built into Montessori because they do have the freedom of movement, freedom to choose what they want to work on, when, and with whom." She explained to me that it does put quite a bit of responsibility on the children, but emphasized

that she is also there to support them through it and allow them to come up with ideas of what they would like to do with their time. Natalie's students had work journals that they used with her support. In their journals, they recorded each presentation that they went to and what follow-up work they chose to engage in to practice the skills they learned in the presentation. She said that it was challenging for some of her students at first because they had been used to the teacher handing them sheets and not having to be responsible for their own work choices.

Lisa said, "Genuinely being able to give [them] choices is so empowering to them." She said that she was not able to give genuine choices in a traditional classroom the way she can in her public Montessori classroom. Jason explained that freedom of responsibility in his classroom comes with a lot of conversations and some basic parameters. He added, "I will ask the children, as a rule, to write out a plan each day of three or four works that they could work on." He said that the goal is for them to touch on all of the works, even if they do not get completed. Jason continued to explain:

> First and foremost, the work they are doing should [be] comprise[d] of the lessons that I'm giving them. I always provide some type of follow-up work and I call it a work suggestion, but if they can come up with something else that will demonstrate their understanding, they can talk with me about it.

Kimberly noted that her students have an idea of what they need to focus on using work journals. She told me that they highlight work in their journals to determine how many of them need to be in their weekly goals. She added, "So it is freedom to choose, within limits. As long as they are being responsible, they can choose what work, where they would like to work, and whom they are choosing to work with."

Peer Support

Within the choices that students have in most of these public Montessori classrooms, students are able to choose the student or a group of students they want to work with. All twelve teachers mentioned some sort of peer support or collaboration in their interviews. Kimberly said, "Making people aware of that social interaction and just trying to guide it together is really important." She said that students from other classes come down and help in her classroom. She told me that sometimes they might help with students with multiplication facts or other times she might have students who need some peer support with focusing. Rachel talked about the social interaction in her class and how important she felt that it is for her students to learn to interact responsibly. She said that she tries not to shut down those interactions, providing they are not disruptive to the other students in the environment. Lilli said that the students in her classroom who are confident in their abilities are sometimes asked to give lessons to other students, to work in other classrooms, or even to work with younger or older students.

Kerri discussed the example of a new student who joined her already-established classroom. She said that the student was having a hard time learning how to be in a Montessori classroom and learning how to work in such a non-structured environment. Kerri said that she talked with a few of her older students about how hard it must be to come into a new environment and encouraged them to work together with the new student so that she could really "feel what it feels like to do the work." While there is generally a period of normalization to be expected for any child, having additional peer support can help a classroom feel like a more inviting and safe space for a child.

Relationships

As with any educational setting, relationships are at the heart of education, and Montessori teachers strive to understand how they can best support their students (Wink et al., 2021). All 12 of the public Montessori teachers I spoke with stated they have a lot about conversations with their students. Many of the conversations are one-on-one, but many of the conversations are also small-group and/or whole-group. Lisa said, “We focus on making the relationship the most important part of our day so our academics have a foundation to live on.” There were limited mentions of punitive discipline or punishment in the conversations I had with the teachers. When any behavior changes were needed, they referred to conversations they had with their students. Some of the behavior conversations would occur when a concern would arise, and the interventions relied heavily on modeling appropriate social interactions as well as how to respond to conflict or negative external stimuli.

Modeling

Modeling was a technique mentioned by 10 of the participants as a way to help children learn how to be in relationships. Rachel pointed out at the beginning of her interview that, “In Montessori training, you are taught to be calm but hold boundaries and just sit with children where they are.” Kerri said, “I really wanted to talk to children differently because I wanted to be talked to differently.” While this also relates to respect for the child, these two teachers made two important points about how to start the modeling process with students. First, start from a place of peace and calm while being present with the child, and then do whatever one is modeling the way they hope the child will learn to do; this is in the context of whatever they need help building skills to do. One of the primary places many of these teachers described starting this work with their students was with basic social interactions. Lilli commented, “I tend to keep my

voice low and approach all children with kindness and purpose." She went on to explain how the adults in her building model grace and courtesy in their interactions with one another:

> Adults tend to say please or thank you or ask if they may interrupt. It comes across as polite and then it also comes across as a partnership or a collaboration, which is what we are trying to model for kids, to be able to collaborate with one another.

Kimberly had a similar response:

> We have to have grace and courtesy in all our interactions and the way we carry materials or manage chairs. So, it's really the way we manage materials and interactions with others, being kind in the words we use. There will be times when I ask a student if they could imagine me saying something they just said to another student. So, we just try to hold up those values of kindness and respect in all of our interactions.

Jason talked about having to have uncomfortable conversations with other adults in his school from time to time or even parents, reminding them how important it is to keep in mind that all the adults are responsible for modeling to their children what the expectations are.

Conversations

Throughout the interviews, in answers to numerous questions, the teachers answered with responses that related to conversations they have with the children in their classrooms. Not only are the classrooms set up as social environments, with group seating and partner-work areas, but there are also a variety of ways that conversations take place throughout the day. Rachel said that she has a conversation bench where students go to talk about things that did not pertain to their work so that they would not be disruptive to the group working at their table. Kerri remarked of her students, "If their needs aren't met, there's no way we're going to be able to reach them academically." She continued that it was important to "just [have] patience . . .[and] lots of

conversations, seeing if they are willing to be open with you. Then make plans to move forward together." She explained to me how that approach tends to work much better than just telling the students what they are going to do. The conversations also empower the students to play an active role in their own growth and understanding. Stacy said, "We have one-on-one conversations if we need to and do a lot of emotional check-ins." Kimberly mentioned sometimes her students are not being kind to one another and she likes to start with a conversation and allow the children to adjust accordingly in a natural way. She said sometimes it is just a conversation between herself and another student, but other times there are more children involved, and the dynamic shifts. Jason said that sometimes his students need conversations about making better choices regarding the work they are choosing to do. He referred to giving them freedom within limits, but he said when the choices his students made are not the best, he has to take the time to sit down with them and talk about what might serve them better.

As mentioned earlier, many of the classes have virtue studies or character education studies that the teacher and students discuss regularly. Lilli said that her class has daily community meetings, and her students regularly participate in compliment circles where she and other students practice intentionally noticing the good in others or the efforts others are making to make positive contributions to the classroom community. Natalie remarked about their classroom community meetings:

> We do a lot of sharing of our experiences, sharing stories about each other, and getting to know each other very well at the beginning of the year and throughout the rest of the year. During some of our community meetings, we share news and other things about what is going on in each other's lives.

Allison explained her community meetings as follows:

> There's a daily chat about the virtue of the month and a little piece about that virtue. In my upper elementary classroom one day we might do a read-aloud about the virtue and other days we might have a class discussion about it. Sometimes we write about it and other days maybe we are acting out scenarios and modeling what is the right thing and what is the wrong thing. It's a little different in each classroom.

The classroom community meetings ranged from daily to weekly and were mentioned by seven of the 12 teachers who were interviewed.

Research Question Responses

The interview questions were designed to correspond to one of the four central research questions. This section presents brief answers to the research questions about the naturally embedded trauma-informed practices within public Montessori classrooms. The answers are synthesized from data gathered during the semi-structured interviews and the essence of what was revealed in the teachers' responses to the journal-style writing prompts. Responses to the research questions are presented through narrative and incorporate quotes provided by the teacher-participants.

Research Question 1

How do public Montessori teachers explain their preparedness to work with children who have experienced trauma? The themes, *Minimal trauma-specific training* and *Following the child* answered this research question. The first four questions of the semi-structured interview were designed to discover the types of trauma-informed training the teachers had received in the past three years, the ways in which their Montessori training has prepared them for working with children who had experienced trauma, experiences they had in utilizing trauma-informed

practices in their classrooms, and their ways of working with children who have experienced trauma. In the literature review, I highlighted the fact that teachers are on the front lines of working with children who have been exposed to traumatic events or toxic stress (Arnold et al., 2020). In understanding teachers' perceived preparedness for working with children who have experienced trauma, it was important to address what knowledge teachers felt they had about the consequences of trauma and what tools they felt they had access to in their classrooms or schools to support the various needs of their students. Two central themes emerged: *Minimal trauma-specific training* and the Montessori concept of *Following the child*. When utilizing the *Essential Elements Rubric* from NCMPS (2017), following the child involves observation, record keeping, and reflection that drive classroom practice. The two subthemes that accompany *Following the child* are *Observation* and *Respect for the child*.

The answers the teachers provided about the types of training they had received were not consistent across participants. Some school districts had provided minimal district-level professional development. Kimberly said that she had a yearly training on homelessness and another on signs of abuse, but that much of her trauma-informed work consisted of guiding her students to the appropriate members of their school-level or district-level support teams. However, when describing how she worked with trauma-impacted students, she said, "There has to be love and consistency and making sure that the child is in a safe environment." She added, "Taking the relationship we have and allowing time the child might need to take a break or to just get their head in the right space." Jason's response to the trauma-informed training was very similar. He mentioned receiving training in homelessness and a generalized training regarding trauma-informed care. He stated that he had independently sought out more training in ways to

resolve conflict, but that he continued to grow his skillset and adjust his proverbial toolbox based on the ever-changing needs of his students. Lisa stated:

> I definitely did not have any trauma-informed instruction in my college teacher preparation program, but because my Montessori training was based on a smaller age range, we were able to learn and use strategies that are a bit more specific for the students in our program.

As discussed in theme development, most of the teachers referred to the Montessori-based approach of following the child (Montessori, 1995). Camille elaborated:

> So, the Montessori philosophy talks a lot about brain development and what's appropriate at different planes of development. And so, then if you look at what happens to the brain when trauma is introduced at those certain levels of development, then it's easier to handle as a Montessori educator when you have that knowledge. Also, the spiritual preparation of the educator is really important. I think that helps a lot with trauma-informed practices because we're very reflective, not only in our own behavior but on the student's behavior. We try to reflect before we react.

Rachel responded with information regarding her Montessori training, "So for me, a lot of the training we get with Montessori, the way Montessori is set up, a lot of it is already trauma-informed." She continued to explain, "It is about empowering the children and not yelling and being willing to say, 'Hey, I can learn from you.'"

As Rachel elaborated on her willingness to learn from her students, she noted that following the child involves learning through observation. Kerri elaborated on her thoughts on following the child, stating she believed her Montessori training has helped prepare her for working with students who have experienced trauma:

> Yeah, so I love Montessori training just because it approaches education in such a different way. And it teaches us to think who is this child? What is happening with them? Make observations. And then it kind of goes along with supporting who they are, like who they are and where they're at in that moment. And just so being open to thinking about that, I think has prepared me to work with kids who have diverse needs and trauma.

Research Question 2

How do public Montessori teachers ensure safety for each child within the classroom environment? The themes that answered this research question are Montessori's (1973) foundational element of a *Prepared environment* and *Virtue/character education* for students in the classroom. The NEA (2023) stipulates that trauma-informed schools provide safe and supportive learning environments for their students. NCMPS (2017) *Essential Elements Rubric* has a specific focus on the ongoing training of educators and states that all the adults working with students should embrace the core values of a Montessori education and provide necessary support for all students. In this study, safety refers to the physical, emotional, and psychological needs of all students.

The prepared environment takes into consideration the various physical needs of students, as well as their different developmental needs related to growth and development. Within the theme of a prepared environment, many of the teachers interviewed described specific spaces in their classrooms that were set up in a way that children could utilize the spaces to practice self-regulation, conflict resolution, and to just take a moment to gather their thoughts when they needed it. Some of the teachers referred to this area as peace corners or peace areas. One teacher called the area in her class a conversation corner. Allison described her classroom peace corner:

"There's fidgets and pillows and a big comfy chair. So, if the student is feeling a little overwhelmed, they have a space they can kind of be away from everyone." Natalie explained:

> We have a peace area where we have our conflict resolution strategies posted and just calming techniques. What I love so much is that they have those authentic opportunities to learn how to regulate their emotions and their connections with people, with me, and with others as their guide and support in the micro-community of our classroom.

Also, the teachers talked about how they prepared their environments with consideration of the flow of traffic and freedom of movement. Jason also mentioned the variety of heights in his multi-level classroom and how he considers that when setting up the physical space:

> Most of the shelves in my room, I have tried to make them short enough so that children can reach things. But I've also added stools in the classroom, little step stools that a student's grandfather made so that even the shorter children can reach things at a certain height.

In responding to the interview questions, all the teachers related how they took into consideration the physical and emotional safety of their students and designed their rooms specifically for the students they have. The ways in which many of these elements are intertwined and part of the bigger picture as opposed to individual elements that stand alone will be elaborated in the Discussion.

Virtues/character education is a theme that emerged in nine of the interviews. Several teachers talked about virtue studies that they do with their students in community meetings or virtue studies that they talk about throughout the week. A few of the schools referred to specific character education curriculums that are part of district programming required in each of their schools within the district. Along with virtue studies, teachers spend time talking with students

about how to be people of character and discuss real-life situations when they have practiced those various character traits. Stacy talked about the virtue studies in her classroom as follows:

> We have a lot of conversations and . . . we have these things called virtue circles, which is like our way of having social-emotional [learning environment]. It just talks about different virtues you can have and show towards other people and to yourself and how it can make your heart grow, your mind grow, your body grow.

Research Question 3

How do public Montessori teachers describe specific areas of focus regarding learners' social interaction during the construction of the prepared environment? The theme of *Empowerment* and the subthemes *Freedom with responsibility* and *Peer support* answers this question. The participants acknowledged empowerment, voice, and choice as key concepts in their classrooms. Similarly, the fifth guiding principle of a trauma informed choice recognized by the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (n.d.) is *empowerment, voice, and choice*. The *Essential Elements Rubric* supports a high degree of student choice regarding what work to work on, how long to work, and where to work (NCMPS, 2017). The American Montessori Society (n.d.) also asserts that a Montessori education helps develop responsible, accountable, and capable students who have a strong sense of self and can thrive in the real world. All 12 of the teachers, even though they were not necessarily working with the same age ranges of students, elaborated on how their students were given choices in their classrooms. For example, Kimberly said, "My students have the choice of what work and where they work as well as with whom they work with." She added, "It may be with someone who is working on the same work as them or just someone who they get along well with and they can encourage each other to do well." Natalie mentioned different clubs that students in her class participate in each month. She said,

"This month we have Anime Club, Rubik' Cube Club, and Cooking Club. So, on Friday afternoons, if they have their work accomplished, then they participate in these clubs with one another, and that changes monthly."

The group tables in the prepared environment are also part of the design that promotes peer interaction and support. Allison stated:

> In our class we don't have any individual desks; they are all group tables. So, they sit in groups, and I do have spaces for the kids to go if they don't want to be with their peers at the moment. But they sit in groups full-time. And they do have the choice of where to sit during the work cycle. They can go sit with who they want to work with, and I think that is just built into Montessori because they do have the freedom of movement. They have the freedom to choose what they want to work on, when, where, and with whom.

Research Question 4

How do public Montessori teachers describe ensuring the cultivation of a respectful classroom environment for all students? The theme of *Relationships* answers this question. The subtheme, *Modeling*, is an approach the adults in the educational environment adopted so that the students can see, first-hand, what certain components of respect look like. A trauma-informed approach requires ongoing attention, awareness, and sensitivity to maintain a sense of safety, respect, and collaboration (CDC, 2019; SAMHSA, 2014). NCMPS (2017) also requires that the adults in a public Montessori school treat one another with respect and model grace and courtesy in their interactions with one another. Grace and courtesy are also taught explicitly through lessons in many Montessori classrooms around the United States (NCMPS, 2017). Allison had responses to contribute to this question as well. She explained:

> We try not to raise our voices unless we are shouting across the recess field or something. It's just like being very mindful of how you're speaking and the words you're saying. And using the language of our virtues and modeling them to the students. If I'm upset, if the students have seen me upset, they may have seen me pause, take a deep breath, think for a moment, and then move forward. So, we are just making sure that we are thinking through our actions and words because they are going to do what we do.

Over and over, many of the teachers talked about the importance of modeling and reiterated that the students are looking to the adults in their environments as guides about how to respond and react in a variety of situations.

Additionally, conversations were referred to throughout the interviews in response to many of the questions. Conversations were brought up when we discussed safety. Other teachers mentioned conversations when discussing social interactions. *Relationships* was a central theme for Research Question 4, and conversations naturally emerged in this area as well. Rachel elaborated on the importance of the conversations in her classroom:

> We have lots of conversations about how everybody has the potential to be a friend. With my various read-alouds, I try to show different people, people of different abilities, people with different bodies, people with different skin color, people of different national origin, et cetera, et cetera.

When Natalie discussed the conversations in her classroom, she talked about her focus on social justice literature and a culture fest that her school does at the end of the year. She said that the culture fest is set up so that students in her school can choose to share about their own cultures or learn about and research different cultures to present around the school as a school-wide event.

Kimberly gave me a little insight into what her students do to build community through whole group meetings in her classroom. It was similar to what other teachers described as a community meeting. Kimberly explained.

> We officially have what we call class council once a week and that is where we can bring up anything or something fun that they want to do or [have] an issue with like a rule not being followed. So, it's not in a circle like I have seen somewhere, but everyone is sitting in their own works area and we talk about things as needed.

Chapter Four Summary

Twelve public Montessori teachers were selected to provide accounts of their lived experiences in public Montessori schools in four different geographical regions in the United States. Information was collected and data were gathered through a journal-style writing prompt and virtual interviews. Throughout the narratives provided during the interviews, a deeper understanding developed in the areas of perceived preparedness for working with children who have been impacted by trauma, and the need for safe and respectful classroom environments. Six major themes emerged during this investigation: *Minimal trauma-specific training, Following the child, Prepared environment, Virtue/character education, Empowerment,* and *Relationships*. Themes and subthemes were highlighted and described through teacher narratives, emphasizing naturally embedded trauma-informed practices that were found in the classrooms of the 12 participants. The chapter concluded with a narrative description of how those themes and subthemes combined to address the four central research questions in the study.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

Overview

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of teachers in public Montessori schools in the United States as they prepare and manage their classrooms, utilizing the embedded trauma-informed principles that are part of the Montessori essential foundational elements. This study included 12 public Montessori teacher participants from public Montessori schools in four different geographical regions of the United States. This study and its research methods were designed to uncover the naturally embedded trauma-informed practices that can be found in the foundational elements of Montessori educational practices as identified by the *Essential Elements Rubric* provided by The National Center for Montessori in the Public Sector (2017). This chapter begins by providing a summary and interpretation of the results of the study. Following the summary of findings, there is a discussion of implications for policy and practice, a theoretical and practical implications section, an outline of the study delimitations and limitations, concluding with recommendations for future research that could enhance the study.

Summary of Findings

This phenomenological study was guided through four central research questions focused on the perceived preparedness of public Montessori teachers to work with students who have experienced childhood trauma. Since the study was designed to find out more about how trauma informed practices are innately embedded in Montessori foundational elements, a phenomenological research design was a natural choice. The phenomenological research utilized open-ended questions in a semi-structured format to provide public Montessori teachers an opportunity to describe how they support a safe learning environment for children exposed to trauma in their public Montessori classrooms. The following is a summary and interpretation of

the thematic findings presented in Chapter Four concerning how they addressed the research questions.

Research Question 1

Research Question 1 asked, how do public Montessori teachers explain their preparedness to work with children who have experienced trauma? In explaining their perceived preparedness in working with children who have experienced trauma, the participants provided no consistent answers about trauma-specific training. Some of the teachers had received district training on homelessness and child abuse but nothing specifically trauma-informed. Other teachers said that they independently sought out training and information that would increase their knowledge about how to support the diverse needs of their students, including traumatic experience. Some teachers said they received some information about brain development and what they believed were trauma-informed practices in their Montessori training. Two teachers said they did not feel as though their Montessori training made them any more prepared to work with students who were dealing with the consequences of trauma than any other style of teaching, but they consistently contradicted those responses when they elaborated on the specific practices they used within their classroom that could be considered trauma-informed.

All the participants discussed the concept of following the child and explained how they observe their students and have high levels of respect for the children in their classrooms. They elaborated further by explaining the importance of understanding each child from an individual perspective and how that understanding allows a more tailored approach based on the diverse needs of each child. Respect for the children was at the core of the teachers' willingness to learn from them and laid the foundation for what considerations were made in the design of the

physical and emotional space of the classroom, both as a safe place to learn and as a respectful community culture.

Research Question 2

Research Question 2 asked, how do public Montessori teachers ensure safety for each child within the classroom environment? In efforts to ensure safety for each child within the classroom environment, the teachers elaborated on what the Montessori community refers to as the prepared environment and described how they incorporate virtue studies or character education into class discussions and practices. The prepared environment is a thoughtful approach to classroom design and considers various physical, developmental, and emotional needs of the children who will be sharing a learning space. Teachers described their classroom designs as focused on providing safe and thoughtful ways for children to practice self-regulation, conflict resolution, problem-solving, and other practical skills in authentic ways. Within many of the classrooms, teachers set up peace areas for their students to take necessary calming breaks when they need a place to practice conflict resolution, regulate their emotions, or take a moment to regroup or reset internally. The peace areas were not all the same, but the premises behind them were similar in nature.

Regarding psychological and emotional safety, the teachers described how they promoted virtue/character education studies in their classrooms. In some of the classrooms, community meetings were held in which students discussed different virtues or character traits. In other classrooms, virtues were discussed throughout the month. Related children's literature was shared in small group lessons or a whole-class read-aloud, and the teachers guided conversations about real-life scenarios when the virtues or character traits were essential. Other schools had specific character education programs provided by the district for all the schools, which teachers

presented in their individual classrooms. Some of the traits or values mentioned were respect, empathy, and courage. Additionally, some of the teachers mentioned grace and courtesy, which are typically presented together, in specific lessons, as part of the Montessori peace curriculum.

Research Question 3

Research Question 3 asked, how do public Montessori teachers describe specific areas of focus regarding learners' social interaction during the construction of the prepared environment? Public Montessori teachers described specific areas of focus regarding learners' social interaction during the construction of the prepared environment, with an emerging theme of empowerment. The teachers stated that students are given authentic choices regarding who to work with, what to work on, where to work, and when they work. They added that all these choices are within limits so freedom comes with responsibility and may be adjusted accordingly. In this way, the teachers were upholding the principle of providing freedom with responsibility. Empowerment, voice, and choice is also considered a key principle in trauma-informed care (NCTSN, n.d.). Additionally, the National Center for Montessori in the Public Sector (2017) supports a high degree of student choice.

Peer support was another area that teachers viewed as supporting the empowerment of students in public Montessori classrooms. Peer support comes in the form of group work, group seating, partner work, and a variety of other collaborative opportunities occurring within the classroom community. The prepared environment, previously mentioned, is part of the design that encourages and nurtures peer support, freedom with responsibility, and genuine opportunities for social interaction. Freedom of movement is a key characteristic of a Montessori classroom, so purposeful and respectful movement is modeled from an early age.

Research Question 4

Research Question 4 asked, how do public Montessori teachers describe ensuring the cultivation of a respectful classroom environment for all students? Public Montessori teachers described their intentional cultivation of a respectful classroom environment through a focus on relationships. Consistently, the teachers stated that it is essential for them to model how they want their students to respond and react in a variety of situations. They reiterated that the students are looking to the adults as guides and that modeling is one way that they help their students learn appropriate actions, reactions, and interactions. Allison, one of the participant-teachers, emphasized the importance of being very mindful of how she speaks and the words she uses with other adults and the children. She said that some of her children had seen her when she was upset, but in those moments, they also saw her pause, take a deep breath, and think about what she was going to do next. Not only did the teachers speak about the value of virtue education, but they also recognized the importance of showing their students what those virtues look like in real life through modeling.

In addition to modeling, the teachers also frequently mentioned the importance of having conversations. When discussing safety, the teachers talked about the conversations they have had with students about concerns or conflicts. When discussing social interactions, they emphasized the ways in which conversations were a significant part of the learning process. When discussing virtues, conversations were brought up again by the teachers. *Relationships* were a central theme for Research Question 4, and conversations were applicable in this area as well.

Discussion

The foundational components of this phenomenological study were built on the empirical and theoretical literature reviewed in Chapter Two. This section discusses the interpretation of

the six themes that emerged from the results of the study. The findings provide details describing the lived experiences of public Montessori educators and how they support safety, social interaction, and a respectful classroom environment in their public Montessori school classrooms. The information gained from this research may guide higher educational programming development for preservice teachers in efforts to prepare educators entering the field with much-needed techniques that they can use to promote a safe and respectful learning environment for all students, especially students who are dealing with the consequences of childhood trauma. Information presented from the results of the study may also inform other public school districts around the country in ways that some of the foundational elements of Montessori theory and practice can be utilized in any classroom and be integrated into the classroom design to support the emotional, behavioral, and developmental needs of all students, and especially those who have been exposed to traumatic experience.

Minimal Trauma-Specific Training

According to the literature, trauma-informed educational training should focus on the importance of providing a learning environment that is safe, predictable, that fosters resilience, social-emotional learning, and where relationships are both compassionate/dependable (Dorado et al., 2016). Maynard et al. (2019) explained that consistency in any trauma-informed efforts in many schools and districts is lacking and varies from district to district. There is currently no agreed-upon universal trauma-informed programming for all schools, but some research suggests that training focused on knowledge of trauma, consequences, and trauma-related behaviors should be key components in such training (Loomis & Felt, 2020).

In the current study, the only consistent answer regarding trauma-specific training was that there was a lack of it. This finding is consistent with previous studies mentioned in the

literature review regarding the lack of a universally recognized approach to trauma-informed educational training. Also, it was not surprising that teachers, especially Montessori-trained teachers, did not have an abundance of consistent training that was labeled as trauma-informed. Maria Montessori recognized emotional healing as a system that should be interwoven into daily educational practices and that trauma-responsive education requires a deep understanding of the child that intersects with knowledge found in education, medicine, and science (Phillips et al., 2022). Each of the themes that emerged would not be sufficient for a systematic approach as free-standing elements. However, the combination of the themes begins to build a strong foundation for a child-focused and healing-centered approach. When deconstructed, the components of a Montessori education, as well as trauma-informed practices, do not have the same impact as they do as an intertwined and systematic approach.

Considering the results of this study and information from the literature review regarding the lack of consistent trauma-informed training for schools, as well as the lack of trauma-informed preservice training, it may be time for a shift of focus. This shift would constitute a departure from focusing on stand-alone components to incorporating elements of trauma-informed care into already existing pedagogy; this can simplify the approach and streamline care given across the educational community. The results of this study can provide an introductory understanding of how some of these trauma-informed elements are already embedded into Montessori education and identify a starting point in gaining a better understanding of each individual child. From here, we can begin looking beyond the trauma and into the healing.

Following the Child

As themes emerged, an understanding of necessary elements regarding child-centered engagement began to develop. Before trying to decipher the needs of a child, one must first strive

to understand the child. Cossentino's (2009) study outlined some of the basic qualities required for teachers who apply a Montessori approach from a universal perspective. From the study results, Cossentino found that the teacher should watch/see/assess what and how children do things, make an intentional effort to speak less and observe well to recognize and better understand how to support the needs of individual children. Research has shown that teachers have expressed feeling overwhelmed with too much role ambiguity and the fear that they might exacerbate underlying mental health concerns (Beames et al., 2022). By understanding children on a more individual level, teachers can be better equipped to recognize and understand the needs that children have, and in turn, assist in finding additional appropriate services depending on severity.

Prepared Environment

In the context of providing universal support for children's mental health needs from a Tier 1 perspective, O'Reilly et al. (2018) indicated that practicing self-regulation skills and other social-emotional skills can be preventive in nature and utilized throughout the lifespan. Not only are Montessori classrooms designed with the physical and developmental needs of each child in mind, they are also designed as a social space where children can experience authentic social interactions. Through this design, teachers are acutely aware that students may need a space to self-regulate and practice conflict resolution with peers. Many of the public Montessori teachers' classrooms had such a space and they referred to the space as a peace area or peace corner. These spaces varied in terms of where they were located in the classroom and how they were set up, but the basics remained the same. They were specific areas dedicated to providing children with a safe spot to feel their feelings and work through big emotions. To be successful and function in the world around them, it is crucial for children to learn more than academic tasks. Emotional

regulation, physical regulation, mindfulness, and how to take brain breaks are all soft skills that are utilized in trauma-informed classrooms (Brunzell et al., 2015). Providing a dedicated area for these practices not only promotes the importance of these skills but also serves as an encouragement to the students to practice them. Brenda talked about the ways her students utilize the peace area in their classroom as a space to be vulnerable and have conversations to work through problems, which she explained, adds to the emotional safety of the classroom.

Virtue/Character Education

Throughout the interviews, most of the participants discussed how they utilize virtue studies or character education programs within their classrooms. Montessori educational practices generally include lessons in grace and courtesy as part of the Practical Life Curriculum for younger students (ages 2-6) in Montessori classrooms, while older students (Grades 7th-9th) participate in *Personal World* to continue to learn ways to be positive members of their community (Gentaz & Richard, 2022). While these parts of Montessori programming were not discussed in detail during the interviews, many of the teachers did communicate that they do practice some form of virtue studies or character education programs within their classrooms.

Empathy building and situational morality are intertwined throughout Montessori educational foundations and carried out through developmentally appropriate activities and conversations in Montessori classrooms (Lillard & Else-Quest, 2006). Other literature supports the idea that teachers can be instrumental in encouraging and teaching social skills, modeling emotional processing, and helping establish psychological safety in efforts to alleviate the effects of adverse childhood experiences (Blitz et al., 2016). Building on existing knowledge and research of the benefits of character education and the necessity of soft-skill building, the results from this study corroborate the fact that virtue/character education is a vital component of a safe

and nurturing classroom environment and can potentially promote healing-centered engagement for students regardless of exposure to toxic stress or traumatic events. Additionally, Denervaud et al.'s 2020 investigated social recognition in children within a Montessori program and found students were directly, positively affected by the social environment and classroom climate. Soft-skill building and classroom climate are directly related, and there is a positive relationship between character-building activities and safe, respectful classroom environments. Baez et al. (2019) asserted that the prevalence of lower social skills and higher behavior-related concerns associated with the consequences of childhood trauma could potentially be mitigated by addressing social skill deficits, so it stands to reason that incorporating virtue/character education from an early age and continuing through the educational lifespan is a warranted approach, as well as providing universal support to individuals exposed to childhood trauma.

Empowerment

The two subthemes identified under the central theme of empowerment were *Freedom with responsibility* and *Peer support*. Providing children with authentic opportunities to interact socially and with genuine choices in the educational environment fosters empowerment from which children, even at an early age, thrive. Additionally, the Montessori-prepared environment supports freedom of movement and social interaction (Astuti & Sandra 2020). The prepared environment is well-thought-out and safe both physically and psychologically. It should be prepared in such a way that provides real opportunities for peer-to-peer interaction and collaboration while maintaining a safe and respectful classroom climate.

One of the six principles of trauma-informed care is empowerment, voice, and choice (NCTSN, n.d.). It is important for people, including children, to feel as though they are active and valued participants in their learning, academically and beyond. Providing children

opportunities to make choices and collaborate with peers fosters a sense of responsibility both internally and externally. D'Emido-Caston (2019) explained how a connection between a child and their community fosters social emotional learning by allowing children to see themselves as part of the bigger picture. During our interview, Lilli told me that her Montessori training prepared her for working with children who have experienced trauma by equipping her with the knowledge and skills she needs to help empower children to be active parts of their communities. Throughout the interviews, several teachers explained how they nurtured responsibility within their classrooms. They talked about how they give choices regarding when, where, what, and with whom the children choose to work. On the same note, the teachers also discussed how they utilized conversations to support that freedom while enforcing responsibility. The teachers I interviewed spoke a great deal about group seating and ways that the students in their classes were encouraged to collaborate through a variety of activities, including group work, partner work, and special interest clubs.

Relationships

In so much of the current literature regarding educational practices, the theme of relationships is a topic that appears to be a frontrunner, as well as a necessity. The subthemes for this central theme were *Modeling* and *Conversations*. As classroom behavior concerns continue to increase for teachers around the country, behavior management is an increasingly relevant topic of discussion. Many behavior specialists agree that when creating a behavior management plan for classroom environments, relationships are the first place to start (Bronstein et al., 2021). In addition to behavior management, mental health concerns for children are also increasing. SAMHSA (2014) states that a sense of safety and inclusiveness are foundational in trauma-informed educational approaches; both of which cannot be achieved without first building a

strong student-teacher relationship. Relationship-building and ongoing maintenance of those relationships are critical when trying to understand the needs of the students in a classroom. Post et al. (2022) studied the impact of relationship training on both classroom behaviors and teacher attitudes. They found that teacher skill and mindset can both be positively affected by training geared toward increasing trauma-informed knowledge. It is important to consider the already overwhelming demands teachers face today, and in turn, find ways to incorporate the skills and knowledge they need into practices they are already utilizing within their classroom environments.

Implications

Theoretical Implications

This study's findings support the humanistic theory of Carl Rogers, the social cognitive theory of Albert Bandura, and the educational theory of Maria Montessori. Carl Rogers' humanistic theory emphasizes the importance of offering people unconditional positive regard (Rogers & Kramer, 1995). Bandura's social cognitive theory is concerned with peoples' belief about the possible consequences of their actions (Bandura, 1977; Luszczynska & Schwarzer, 2005). Finally, Maria Montessori's (2004) vision is supportive of trauma-informed education and asserts that nurturing the psychological health of children is imperative in effective educational settings.

While sharing their experiences of supporting students' various needs in educational settings, specifically the classroom, teachers reported that they rely heavily on the relationships that they have built and are continuing to nurture with their students. Not only did the teachers place high value on the importance of a strong relationship with their students, but they also were acutely aware of the necessity of supporting children as they navigate through their social

journeys. The person-centered approach is at the heart of Rogers' theory and is a key foundational element noted within public Montessori classrooms. The teachers consistently reported that they were taught to follow the child and subsequently described ways in which they practiced respect for the children they served. While the person-centered component of Rogers' theory is not sufficient for a full system of care, the child-centered approach evident in Montessori education is not a stand-alone practice; rather, it is part of the bigger picture. A focus centered around the child or children in the classroom is a necessary starting point in constructing a safe and nurturing classroom environment with fidelity. Additionally, empathy is also a necessity in creating positive environments for children, especially those dealing with the consequences of childhood trauma.

As educational policymakers and groups focusing on school culture continue to work to support the ever-growing needs of students in schools, a child-centered approach is the most logical path to ensuring that what educators are doing is the right thing for children. Results from this study build on the foundation of child-centric educational practices. Everything we do now and continue to do in the future of education must be centered around understanding and respecting the community served within the school setting, children. Educators are on the front lines working with students daily and must have internal, as well as external, support to adequately meet the various needs of children. Additionally, the vision for all stakeholders must be shared and focused on holistic educational practices.

Bandura's (1977) social cognitive theory centers around the assumption that people can learn by observing others. This is especially relevant from the perspective of observing children to discover their uniquely different needs. Learning by observing others is also a central component of modeling. Not only did the teachers talk a great deal about the importance of

observation in Montessori education, but they also explained how they model behaviors they want to see in their students. Social cognitive theory also asserts that learning occurs in a social context through reciprocal interactions between people, their environments, and behaviors (Bandura, 1977). A central concept of Bandura's theory is self-efficacy, which relies heavily on the individual's belief that they have the ability and/or capacity to do what they set out to do or behave in a way they can choose. This belief of self-efficacy is also akin to Montessori's theory regarding auto education and the notion that children have the capacity and the willingness to self-educate so long as the environment, guidance, and encouragement are adequately prepared (Montessori, 1973).

The five guiding principles of Montessori's educational theory are respect for the child, the absorbent mind, sensitive periods, the prepared environment, and auto education (Montessori, 1973). The prepared environment and respect for the child have already been discussed at length. The absorbent mind and the sensitive period are both important times of development that occur from birth to 6 years of age. The teachers in this study worked with children older than 6 years of age, but through their Montessori training, they have been trained to understand the importance of the various planes of development from infancy through maturity. Results from this study indicate that there are important considerations regarding the prepared environment and respect for the child that are also central in trauma-informed practices. Not only did the study results show that respect for the child and the prepared environment support a high degree of safety (physical and emotional), but they also aid in the development of nurturing and supportive relationships, as well as authentic opportunities for social interaction that are critical to developing children, especially those with histories of trauma, within the school environment.

Practical Implications

From the results of this study, there are several areas identified that can be applied to a variety of classroom environments to support the developmental, emotional, and behavioral needs of children. First, training for educators needs to be practical and presented in a way that would be applicable in most classroom environments. While trauma-informed training is great, it sometimes tends to be more theoretical in nature and leaves teachers feeling like trauma-informed care is another thing to add to an already full load. Helping teachers find ways to embed different elements of trauma-informed care in daily practice can be both relevant and practical. For example, teachers receive training on assessing the academic needs of their students, but providing them with training and support on how to effectively observe children to assess needs more holistically can help teachers feel more prepared to work with children who have more complex needs beyond academics.

Creating a safe and respectful classroom culture begins before the students ever arrive, according to the thematic findings of this study. Preparing a classroom requires consideration of the physical, academic, and cognitive needs of the students. Teachers prepare their public Montessori classrooms with the intention of creating a natural flow conducive to purposeful movement and appropriate social interactions, and these environments tend to be less cluttered. Not mentioned in the interviews in this study, but generally, Montessori classrooms only utilize decorations that are meaningful to the academic and emotional growth of students. One other consideration when preparing a classroom with a Montessori mindset is being mindful of independence when setting up the classroom space. A great question to consider when a teacher is setting up the classroom or learning environment is, “How accessible are the tools my students need to be successful in our classroom?”

As a school counselor, I advocate for character education programs in schools, especially in classrooms where children spend most of their school day. In the classes of the public Montessori classrooms teachers I interviewed, many of the students receive daily exposure to virtue studies or character education. As stated before, education goes beyond the academic aspects of learning. Students are learning how to be good friends and productive members of their community. Based on the findings of this study, teachers can utilize virtue studies in a way that is relevant to the students in their classrooms by discussing real events when these character traits are utilized. Students can not only benefit from hearing more about character traits, such as courage, responsibility, respect, and self-discipline, but they can also begin to see how these traits can help them become more well-rounded and responsible citizens of their communities. Virtue studies can be incorporated into many of the daily activities that teachers already have planned in their classrooms and do not have to be done separately to be successful.

Empowerment, voice, and choice are relevant in both public Montessori classrooms and trauma-informed educational settings. Teachers in this study were able to describe a variety of ways that they provide authentic choices to their students in an educational setting. Some of the choices children have are related to the work they are doing, how they do the work, the times when they choose to work on what they need to complete, and with whom they choose to work. Understandably, a traditional classroom is a bit more rigid by design, but there are still opportunities to provide students with real options that empower them to become contributors to their educational progress.

In many of the interviews, I noted that there were several mentions of conversations in various forms that served a variety of purposes. Some of the conversations were simply for relationship building. Other conversations were had to encourage students to make better

choices. Sometimes the conversations were to help students practice self-regulation. There was very little discussion in the interviews about behavior issues or classroom management strategies. In a nonpunitive discipline approach, educators need more tools and strategies to help support students through discipline concerns while moving away from reward-punishment models that do not build on intrinsic motivation. Conversations are necessary and relevant to this type of restorative approach. Conversations are also a central part of the relationship-building process. Moreover, conversations are critical in maintaining relationships. The theme of relationships in this study was supported by modeling and conversations.

Christian Worldview

In the Bible (NIV), Psalm 127:3 says, “Children are a heritage from the Lord, offspring a reward from Him.” Children are the most precious gift and must be regarded as such, both at home and in school. I believe that love and respect for children should be at the very core of education and that our decisions regarding their education should be rooted in this approach. As both a Christian and an educator, it is not up to me to decide who deserves support or who I feel would benefit most from having help. As educators, it is our job to remain honest, sensitive to the needs of others, provide consistent and loving care, and foster a sense of safety in our environments. The results of this study brought forth themes of both character education and relationships. From a Christian worldview, we are expected to teach our children how to serve and love others. In public education settings, it is not always acceptable to speak Christian views directly. However, as a Christian, I have a strong understanding of what it means to live a life representative of my beliefs, to love my neighbor, and why it is critical to go the second mile. Proverbs 20:5 (NIV) states, “The purposes of a person’s heart are deep waters, but one who has insight draws them out.” We can not only provide service to children exemplifying these virtues,

but we also have precious opportunities to model virtues and positive character traits so children can learn how to incorporate them into their own lives and situations.

Delimitations and Limitations

An important delimitation of this study was that the teachers interviewed had participated in Montessori training from an accredited Montessori training program. Because the researcher was not Montessori trained, it was imperative to only hear from educators in public Montessori schools who were trained and could implement Montessori practices and foundational elements. A deep understanding of the Montessori approach was necessary to ensure that the rationale for classroom practices was rooted in Montessori foundation elements and theory. In many public Montessori schools, including the schools represented in this study, some teachers have not yet received Montessori training. While they may have a general idea of Montessori philosophy, it was likely that a non-Montessori-trained teacher would rely more heavily on traditional skills and pedagogical assumptions.

Due to limited response to participation in the survey, the researcher only interviewed the first two to four teachers from each region who completed the online survey and were interested in participating. Because of the limited response, one limitation was the lack of male representation. Ideally, the researcher would have liked to have had a more equal representation of male and female teachers. However, a consideration can be made that there are substantially fewer male educators in public education than there are females, so the response was somewhat representative of male representation in the field of education.

Recommendations for Future Research

Considering the findings, delimitations, and limitations of the study, three recommendations for future research are presented. First, a similarly designed phenomenological

study focusing on ways to provide authentic choice to students in a way that can be applied to a variety of educational settings could provide data in a way that would be more easily adapted to more traditional settings. One of the teachers interviewed talked about how she tried to give choices in a traditional setting but was limited because she did not feel that she had the autonomy to give actual choices to her students until she began working in her public Montessori school.

Another recommendation for future research would be to conduct a similar phenomenological study in traditional schools with teachers who are Montessori trained and examine how they apply Montessori principles in a traditional classroom to support the academic, behavioral, and developmental needs of the students in their classrooms. Combining those results with the results of this study may provide a blueprint for integrating education, science, and medicine to support the ever-growing mental health needs of our students, especially those who have been exposed to trauma.

A third recommendation for future research would be to investigate traditionally trained preservice teachers and their perceived preparedness for working with students who have experienced trauma versus Montessori-trained preservice teachers. Through the literature review in Chapter Two, it was evident that teachers are feeling overwhelmed, under-prepared, and under-supported, especially as they begin their careers. We are losing highly trained and skilled teachers because they are being asked to do too many things and not given the tools they need to do so in a safe and supported way. The answer is not to give them more to do but to find a way to help them do what they need to do so they feel better prepared and able to support their student in appropriate ways. Studying preservice teachers and their perceived preparedness and continuing to study them as they enter the field, may provide valuable insight into where

weaknesses are that are causing teachers to feel underprepared and identify areas where more external support is warranted.

Chapter Five Summary

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of public Montessori school teachers in the United States as they prepared and managed their own classrooms, utilizing the embedded trauma-informed principles that are part of the Montessori essential foundational elements. Twelve participants from four demographic regions of the United States participated in this study. Analysis of data collected from virtual interviews revealed six central themes, including (a) *Minimal trauma-specific training*, (b) *Following the child*, (c) *Prepared environment,* (d) *Virtue/character education*, (e) *Empowerment*, and (d) *Relationships*.

As they discussed their perceived preparedness for working with children who have experienced childhood trauma, the participants described a variety of trainings they have had but that were not necessarily trauma-informed. Several of the participants stated that they did not feel as though their Montessori training prepared them for working with students who had experienced trauma, but they, along with all the other participants, described a variety of ways they support students that could be recognized as trauma-informed. A child-centered focus and an abundance of respect remained central to each interview. Developing relationships with children continues to be a relevant topic, as well as a necessity in classrooms around the United States.

Practical implications include several ways that the identified themes can be embedded in already established classroom environments to nurture a safe and supportive classroom culture. Holistic education for children helps teachers identify where children are developmentally and

psychologically and allows the teacher to tailor the educational experience to best serve the needs of each child. This study began to shed light on ideals that Maria Montessori had regarding ways to support children by exploring these teachers' experiences implementing her model that integrates science, education, and medicine. These findings show how the implementation of these principles can create a much-needed trauma-informed environment that meets the needs of all children if they are integrated in a systematic way.

As a new school counselor nearly a decade ago, I began to recognize the needs of the students that we were serving in public schools were far more complex than academics and if left unaddressed would most likely impede the students' academic success and emotional well-being into the future. When I began to ask students questions about themselves and truly invested in learning more about them, I started to find ways to provide support and safety that were relevant to them. Seven years later I began my career at a public Montessori school and found myself in a building full of educators who were doing the same trauma-informed things I had been trained in. They were able to do these things in this way because they understood child development on a deeper level and were trained how to be intentional in observing the children they were serving to best meet their needs from a more holistic perspective. The Montessori approach, while over a century old, is rooted deeply in love and respect for children and may be more relevant today than ever.

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Appendix A

Consent to Conduct Research Letter

Letter for Superintendent Approval

[Insert Name of Superintendent],

Greetings! My name is Misty Lewis and I am a school counselor in a public Montessori school in [redacted]. I am also a doctoral student at Liberty University. I am currently preparing to conduct a qualitative phenomenological research study for the completion of the Doctor of Education degree through Liberty. The research is pending proposal defense and IRB approval, but I am beginning to contact school districts in which I have located schools that would be useful to my study. I will not be able to contact participants until the study is approved by the IRB but am allowed to reach out to potential school districts. It is my intent to begin the study in early August 2023.

The purpose of this email is to request permission to conduct research as the focus would be at [name of specific school]. The purpose of the research is to assess public Montessori teachers' perceived preparedness to work with students who are dealing with the consequences of childhood trauma. The specific focus areas for the survey questions are safety, respect, and responsibility as they align in the *Essential Elements Rubric* and in the 6 principles of trauma-informed care (NCMPS, 2017; SAMHSA, 2014).

The scope of the study would involve recruiting participants based on specific criteria relevant to the study and once consent is given, interviewing two teachers from the school (via Zoom or Microsoft Teams). Preferably, I would like to interview one lower elementary teacher working with first to third graders and one upper elementary teacher working with grades 4th-6th. The study will be in the form of a written interview prompt, a virtual interview and then a

follow-up meeting with each participant to discuss the themes that emerged from the data that is gathered during the interviews. The concluding results of this study will help identify naturally embedded trauma-informed practices within Montessori foundational elements and areas for further research to inform teacher preparation programs across the United States.

The needs of this study will be access to teacher email addresses from the requested school within your district, permission to contact teachers via email, and permission to record and transcribe interviews for the purpose of finding emerging themes. As with phenomenological research, my role will be a recorder of the experiences as they are described to me by the teachers I interview. All interactions, comments, and names of persons and sites will be anonymous. The study will not only be beneficial to public schools around the country but will provide further reflection for institutions engaging in teacher preparation and continuing education.

Your approval of this research would be greatly appreciated. If you have any questions concerning the nature of the research or would like further clarification, please feel free to contact me at [redacted].

Thank you for your time,

Misty Autry Lewis

Appendix B

Permission to Conduct Research Responses

Alaska Approval (via email reply from Superintendent)

9/24/2023

Ms. Lewis,

This email serves as approval for your request to conduct research at [name of school and district removed]. You have authorization to communicate with Principal [name removed] about the next steps in your research.

Please ensure your research is limited to staff only who volunteer to participate.

I look forward to reading more about your research.

Sincerely,

[name of Superintendent removed to protect school district]

Tennessee Approval (via email reply from school director)

10/19/23

Thanks for reaching out. We are happy to collaborate with you on this. Please let me know the timeframe in which this needs to be done, and how long people need to expect for each interview. We also have a team of social emotional support staff, who do a lot of classroom embedded support, so let me know if you would like to speak to one of them.

[name removed]

Utah Approval (via email reply from school director)

10/23/23

Dear Misty,

We would be happy to work with you on this project. I currently have two Montessori certified staff in our building. I will attach their names to this email and you may reach out to them to participate. Let me know if I can be of further assistance.

[name removed]

Wisconsin Approval (via email reply from school district research and data team)

Date: 12/12/2023

Name: Misty Lewis

Organization: Liberty University
Email: malewis18@liberty.edu

Application #: 2324-14
Project Start Date: 10/27/2023
Project End Date: 12/19/2023

Re: Application for Approval to Conduct a Research or Evaluation Project in [removed]

Dear Misty,

I am pleased to inform you that your research project 'A Phenomenology of Naturally Embedded Trauma-Informed Practices Within Public Montessori Classroom Environments' has been approved. It is recommended that you maintain a copy of this letter as proof that you have received district approval to conduct your study. Your application number and dates for your approval are indicated at the top of this letter for your convenience.

Please submit a copy of your final report within 3 months after completion to Research, Assessment, and Data using the Application for Approval portal on our website.

You may also find answers to your questions on our Research & Evaluation website:

[website link removed]

Sincerely,

[name removed]

Appendix C

Inclusion Criteria Questions for Participants

1. Do you hold a current teaching license in the state where you are currently employed?
2. Do you hold a current Montessori certification from an accredited Montessori training program recognized by Montessori Accreditation Council for Teacher Education?
3. Are you currently serving children in either a lower elementary (Grades 1st-3rd) or upper elementary (Grades 4th-6th) multilevel classroom?

"No" will receive this message: "Thank you for your interest in this study. Unfortunately, for this study, there are certain requirements that must be met to participate, and I must decline your invitation to participate at this time. However, if you would like a summary of the results of this study, please provide your email in the space below, and I will send them when the study has been completed."

Those teachers who fit the inclusion criteria will be asked to provide their email on the next page. The information on this page will state, "You meet the requirements of the study. If you are still interested in participating place your email in the space below, and the researcher will contact you to invite you to participate in the next part of the study."

Appendix D

Teacher/Participant Recruitment Letter

Dear Potential Participant,

As a doctoral candidate in the Community Care & Counseling: School of Behavioral Sciences at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for my dissertation for a Doctor of Education in Community Care & Counseling: Traumatology degree.

The purpose of the research study is to assess public Montessori teachers' perceived preparedness to work with students who are dealing with the consequences of childhood trauma. The specific focus areas for the survey questions are safety, respect, and responsibility as they align in the *Essential Elements Rubric* and in the 6 principles of trauma-informed care (NCMPS, 2017; SAMHSA, 2014). I am writing to invite you to join my study.

Participants must hold a current teaching license in the state where you are employed at the time of the survey and interview, hold current Montessori certification from an accredited Montessori training program recognized by Montessori Accreditation Council for Teacher Education, and currently serve children in either a lower elementary (Grades 1through 3) multilevel classroom or upper elementary (Grades 4 through 6) multilevel classroom.

Participants will be asked to respond, in writing, to a writing prompt that will be emailed to you one week prior to the virtual interview. This will be an open-ended prompt, that will take 10-30 minutes to complete. Participants will also be asked to participate in an audio/video-recorded interview that will take no more than 1 hour. The interview will be audio/video-recorded and the audio portion will be transcribed later by artificial intelligence through software called Notta. Names and other identifying information will be requested as part of this study, but participant identities will not be disclosed.

To participate, please click here (insert hyperlink to online survey) to complete the screening survey. If you meet the participant criteria for this study, I will contact you to schedule an interview.

A consent document will be emailed to you if you meet the study criteria one week before the interview. The consent document contains additional information about my research. If you choose to participate, you will need to sign the consent document and return it to me via email before the time of the interview.

Participants will receive a $20 Amazon gift card following completion of the interview.

Sincerely,

Misty Lewis
Doctoral Candidate
[redacted]

Appendix E

Teacher Participant Information Sheet

Title of the Project: A Phenomenology of Naturally Embedded Trauma-Informed Practices Within Public Montessori Classroom Environments

Principal Investigator: Misty Lewis, Doctoral Candidate, Community Care and Counseling-Traumatology, Liberty University

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must hold a current teaching license in the state where you are employed at the time of the survey and interview, hold current Montessori certification from an accredited Montessori training program recognized by Montessori Accreditation Council for Teacher Education, and currently serve children in either a lower elementary (Grades 1through 3) multilevel classroom or upper elementary (Grades 4 through 6) multilevel classroom in a Montessori school in the United States. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research.

What is the study about and why is it being done?

The purpose of the research study is to assess public Montessori teachers' perceived preparedness to work with students who are dealing with the consequences of childhood trauma. The specific focus areas for the survey questions are safety, respect, and responsibility as they align in the *Essential Elements Rubric* and in the 6 principles of trauma-informed care (NCMPS, 2017; SAMHSA, 2014).

What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following:

1. Respond, in writing, to a writing prompt that will be emailed to you one week prior to the virtual interview. This will be an open-ended prompt, that will take 10-30 minutes to complete.
2. Participate in an audio/video-recorded interview that will take no more than 1 hour. The interview will be audio/video-recorded and the audio portion will be transcribed at a later date by a member of the study team.

How could you or others benefit from this study?

There are no direct benefits to the participants of this study.

Benefits to society include understanding the different ways children can experience trauma. The ways classroom teachers can support the needs of trauma-impacted students can possibly shed light on ways to incorporate trauma-informed trainings in teacher preparation programs and in

professional developments that become part of the foundations instead of free-standing practices, which would become part of the additional duties contributing to additional stressors for classroom teachers.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

The expected risks from participating in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential by replacing names with pseudonyms.
- Interviews will be conducted virtually via Zoom and the researcher will be in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Research materials will be locked digitally using password protection, and any physical materials utilized will be stored in a file cabinet using a lock and key. Data from the study will be stored for three years after completion of the study and then destroyed either digitally or physically shredded depending on the nature of the document.
- The researcher and members of her doctoral committee and the study team will have access to the audio recordings. The video recording will only be accessible to the researcher so that she may make notes regarding non-verbal responses and surroundings. These recordings will be deleted after three years.

How will you be compensated for being part of the study?

Participants will be compensated for participating in this study. At the conclusion of the interview, participants will receive a $20 Amazon gift card. Email addresses will be requested for compensation purposes.

Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please inform the researcher that you wish to discontinue your participation, and do not submit your study materials. Your responses will not be recorded or included in the study.

Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?

The researcher conducting this study is Misty Lewis. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at [redacted]. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. LaRonda Starling, at [redacted].

Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the IRB*. Their physical address is Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall, Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA, 24515. Their phone number is 434-592-5530, and their email address is irb@liberty.edu.

**Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.*

Appendix F

Demographic Questions for Participants' Interview

1. How many years of teaching experience do you currently have?
2. How many years of Montessori teaching experience do you currently have?
3. What type of Montessori training, if any, have you had?
4. What grade level(s) do you currently teach?
5. How many years of classroom experience do you have within a Montessori school?
6. How long have you worked at your current school?
7. How long have you worked at this school in this grade level?

Appendix G

Journal Style Writing Prompt for Participants' Interview

Please tell me about yourself, including why you chose a career in education and specifically why you chose to work in a public Montessori program. Also, describe your thoughts on important characteristics of a Montessori educator and how those characteristics influence your classroom procedures and culture.

Appendix H

Interview Questions

1. What types, if any, of trauma-informed training have you participated in during the past 3 years?

2. What ways do you think your Montessori training has prepared you for working with students who have experienced trauma?

3. What experience do you have utilizing trauma-informed practices in your classroom?

4. How would you describe your way of working with children who have been traumatized?

5. In what ways do you ensure physical safety within your classroom environment?

6. In what ways do you ensure psychological safety within your classroom environment?

7. In what ways do you ensure emotional safety within your classroom environment?

8. What physical elements are present in your classroom that promote social interaction and/or peer support?

9. In what other ways do you encourage your students to collaborate with other students within your classroom or school?

10. In what ways are your students allowed to make choices regarding their own work in your classroom?

11. In what ways do adults in your school model respect, grace, and courtesy in their interactions?

12. In what ways do you cultivate inclusiveness in your classroom?

13. In what ways do you cultivate a strong school-home association with your students and their families?