

Enhancing Understanding of the Nature of Supportive School-based Relationships for Youth who have Experienced Trauma

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Abstract

Student-teacher relationships play a critical role in supporting the learning and well-being of students with mental health problems. The purpose of this article was to draw from both current literature and previous qualitative interview research to understand the aspects of school-based relationships that are beneficial for students who have experienced trauma. The integration of theory with the first-person accounts of the youth led to the development of a model that describes the core needs created by experiencing trauma and the nature of student-teacher relationships that can meet these needs in the educational context. The four aspects of student teacher relationships that supported trauma-related needs at school were relationships that were 1) teacher driven, 2) authentic caring, 3) attunement to students' emotional states, and 4) individualized. Establishing caring connections with teachers was pivotal to student health and well-being and to meeting the core needs created by traumatic events (safety, control, trust, self-worth, self-expression, connections). As youth with mental health problems spend considerable time each week in the classroom, a greater understanding of the nature of supportive school-based relationships can inform teachers in their efforts to teach and connect with students.

Keywords: mental health, trauma, student-teacher relationships, school connectedness

Précis/Résumé

Relations élèves-enseignants jouent un rôle essentiel dans le soutien de l'apprentissage et le bien-être des élèves ayant des problèmes de santé mentale. Le but de cet article était d'attirer à la fois de la littérature actuelle et précédente de la recherche qualitative par entretiens, de comprendre les aspects de l'école des relations fondées qui sont bénéfiques pour les étudiants qui ont vécu un

traumatisme. L'intégration de la théorie avec les comptes à la première personne de la jeunesse a conduit à l'élaboration d'un modèle qui décrit les besoins fondamentaux créés par l'expérience de traumatismes et de la nature des relations élèves-enseignants qui peuvent répondre à ces besoins dans le contexte de l'éducation. Les quatre aspects des relations élèves-enseignant qui soutenaient un traumatisme liés à l'école étaient les relations qui existaient 1) enseignant entraîné, 2) soin authentique, 3) l'harmonisation avec les États émotionnelle des élèves, et 4) individualisé. Établir des liens avec les enseignants bienveillants a été déterminant pour la santé des élèves et du bien-être et à répondre aux besoins fondamentaux créés par les événements traumatisants (sécurité, le contrôle, la confiance, l'estime de soi, l'expression de soi, les connexions). En tant que jeunes ayant des problèmes de santé mentale passent un temps considérable chaque semaine dans la salle de classe, une meilleure compréhension de la nature de l'école à base favorable relations peuvent informer les enseignants dans leurs efforts pour enseigner et communiquer avec les étudiants.

Mots-clés: santé mentale, les traumatismes, relations élèves-enseignants, liens avec l'école

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Introduction

A traumatic experience impacts the entire person – the way we think, the way we learn, the way we remember things, the way we feel about ourselves, the way we feel about other people and the way we make sense of the world. (Sandra Bloom, 1999, p.²⁾

Throughout the literature we read how critical student-teacher relationships are to student engagement and success. Students and teachers emphasize the importance of caring and support in the school context, and recommendations for teacher practice highlight building relationships with students (Klem & Connell, 2004). There is little however detailing what aspects of these relationships are most beneficial and for whom. For youth* who have experienced traumatic life events, relational resources can be foundational to healing, post traumatic growth, and positive outcomes (Bloom, 1999; Meichenbaum, 2006). Trauma, particularly when involving maltreatment, can interfere with students' ability to build relationships, create significant challenges for teachers, and leave students who most need these school-based relationships without them (Perry, 2002). Given the critical role of healthy relationships to positive outcomes for students who have experienced trauma, it is essential that we deepen our understanding of vital aspects of student-teacher relationships for these students. Bringing the perspectives of youth to the discussion is essential to supporting student well-being.

Overview of Trauma

Psychological trauma during childhood is not rare, with 25-45% of all youth, and 68% of youth who self-report emotional and behavioural symptoms having experienced

* In this paper youth refers to those aged 15-24. This definition of youth is utilized by the WHO and the UN, and also by the U.S. Department of Education and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services when reporting on youth.

one or more traumatic events before the age of 16 (Copeland, Keeler, Angold, & Costello, 2007; Yule, 2001). Trauma occurs when an event like abuse, assault, war, or a natural disaster threatens one's physical or psychological safety, causing feelings of terror, and helplessness (Terr, 1991). The psychological and physiological stress created by trauma can interfere with all aspects of a youth's life. The resulting stress can significantly impact academic functioning and more importantly psychosocial well-being, putting these youth at greater risk for delinquency, substance abuse, mental, physical, and behavioural health problems, and diminished educational and employment success (Bond, Butler, Thomas et al., 2007; Edwards, Anda, Felittit, & Dube, 2004; Fergusson, & Horwood, 2007). While some students with trauma histories present as typically at-risk with absenteeism or failing grades, others struggle socially, emotionally, or behaviourally (van der kolk, Pynosos, Chicchetti et al., 2009). Youth may lack role models and skills, required for developing healthy relationships, particularly when the trauma was perpetrated by adults the youth trusted. As the majority of adolescents attend school, educators have a critical role in developing supportive student-teacher relationships to help mitigate the negative impact of trauma, improve mental health and well-being, and optimize academic and social success (Mihalas, Morse, Allsopp, & McHatton, 2009; Shochet, Dadds, Ham & Montague, 2006; Walter, Gouze & Lim, 2006).

While school connectedness has provided a general framework for supporting all youth (Blum, 2005, McNeeley, 2005; Whitlock, 2006), there is a paucity of research that examines what aspects of school-based relationships enhance the well-being of youth who have experienced trauma. As 50% of youth with emotional or behavioural problems leave school before graduating, there is an urgent need to deepen our understanding of

the school's role in supporting students who have experienced trauma (Ferguson, Tilleczek, Boydell, Rummens, Cote & Roth-Edney, 2005 ; Meichenbaum, 2006).

Student-Teacher Relationships.

Of the components of school connectedness examined by McNeeley (2005), student-teacher relationship was found to be the key predictor of decreased at-risk behaviour. Cothran and colleagues (2003) asked 182 students with emotional and behavioural disorders what teachers' actions had most helped them to manage their behaviour, and the main themes that emerged focused on relationships, caring, and respect. Two components of caring that they described were teacher attentiveness and active listening. Noticing absences, telling students they were missed, knowing their names, saying "Hi" in the hall, and active listening were identified as the small things that made the biggest difference (Cothran, Kulinna, & Garragy, 2003; Ozer, Wolf, & Kong, 2008). Students in these focus groups and interviews reported wanting teachers to care about them as people as well as learners. Students perceived attention from teachers as an indication that they mattered and this contributed to increased engagement. Students with emotional and behaviour disorders (Cothran et al.) reported that they appreciated and valued caring behaviour from teachers even when they did not acknowledge it or appeared to reject it. Mihalas et al. (2009) attributed this to histories of chaotic or non-caring relationships that make it difficult for these students to internalize the teachers' caring actions or to reciprocate in a healthy manner despite the desire to do so. Students who had rejected all teacher efforts to engage them still responded that they wanted teachers to get to know them.

Pianta (1999) described relationships as the “infrastructure of school success.” For youth who have grown up without strong relationships with adults or surrounded by maladaptive behaviour, schools and teachers can create a context that supports the development of competencies necessary for adaptive behaviour (e.g., emotional and behavioural self-regulation). In her work on resilience, Masten (2007) identified schools as the only place for some students to access professional supports and services. Schools must also focus on building competencies and protective mechanisms beyond the individual to create an environment that fosters resilience. Resilience is multifaceted and demands an integrated approach across home, school, and community; and as Luthar (2000) asserted, “Resilience rests, fundamentally, on relationships”. While essential, the development of a healthy relationship with students who have experienced trauma can be a process that is time-consuming and effortful. To provide a foundation for understanding the trauma-related needs of youth at school and the aspects of student-teacher relationships that support these youth we examine theories on trauma (Bloom, 1999; McCann & Pearlman, 1992) and school connectedness (Blum, 2005, McNeeley, 2005).

Theoretical Framing

Trauma Theory

Trauma theory contributes an understanding of the neurobiology of trauma and the physiological and psychological responses of the body and brain to stress. Continued stress reactions can lead to students’ lashing out or leaving class in an effort to regain a sense of physiological control and to reduce their stress. As trauma often shatters assumptions about self and others, Bloom (2005) postulated that trauma-related

intervention focus on “developing sanctuary,” enabling one to feel safe, have healthy relationships and a means for self-expression. Bloom describes trauma as primarily a nonverbal experience and behaviour as the language trauma survivors use to communicate “distress that has no words.” It is essential that educators look beyond behaviours for meaning, for example an overreaction to minor provocations or avoidant / isolative behaviour can indicate struggling to deal with traumatic stress.

A second theoretical perspective, Constructivist Self-development Theory (McCann, & Pearlman, 1992; Saakvitne, Tennen, & Affleck, 1998) is based on the concept that all trauma is transformative. It describes adaptations to trauma as an intertwined web of complex variables creating unique experiences for each individual. In this theory, the experience of trauma creates unmet psychological needs in the core areas of the self (safety, self-worth, trust, interpersonal connections, and control). Students who lack trust in adults may test or resist efforts to form relationships to avoid further hurt. Lack of self-worth can leave students feeling undeserving of caring behaviour and defiant or oppositional behaviour is often an effort to maintain a sense of control. The combined effect of dealing with traumatic stress, coping in maladaptive ways, and experiencing loss of trust, control, self-worth, and safety creates barriers to building strong, healthy relationships. These core areas of self that Bloom and McCann and Pearlman describe as being impacted by trauma form the central needs that teachers can address (Figure 1). Teachers’ awareness of the challenges and needs can support the relationship-building process.

School Connectedness

Little research has studied the specific relationship between trauma histories and school connectedness however studies on at-risk youth and school connectedness (Rice, Kang, Weaver & Howell, 2008) are relevant because of the high prevalence of trauma in the at-risk population, and similar emotional, behavioural, and academic outcomes. This overlap suggests that school connectedness might benefit students known to have experienced trauma as it has benefitted at-risk youth.

Blum (2005) defined school connectedness as “an academic environment in which students believe that adults in the school care about their learning and about them as individuals” (p. 16). Recent literature suggests students who report feeling connected to their school are less likely to use substances, exhibit emotional distress, demonstrate violent or disruptive behaviour, experience suicidal thoughts or make suicide attempts, skip school, become pregnant, or participate in bullying or vandalism (Bond et al, 2005; Blum, 2005; Klem & Connell, 2004; McNeeley, Nonnemaker, & Blum, 2002; Saewyc, Wang, Chittenden, & Murphy, 2006). Students described school connectedness as feeling like they belong, liking school, believing teachers care about them and their learning, having friends at school, believing that discipline is fair, and having opportunities to participate in extracurricular activities (Blum, 2005)

In one of the few trauma-related studies, Saewyc et al (2006) surveyed over 30,000 youth in British Columbia, Canada. Youth who reported physical or sexual abuse, or violent or unstable home lives, were more likely to have attempted suicide, have substance use problems, and be involved in violence. They were less likely to have above average marks, post-secondary aspirations, or good health. In examining the role of multiple, school, family, and peer protective factors in relation to the six factors listed above, results indicated that school connectedness was the strongest predictive protective

factors for vulnerable youth. Saewyc et al. concluded that school relationships were highly influential for these vulnerable youth. A similar finding by Shochet et al. (2006) led to the assertion that the capability of school connectedness, to diminish mental health needs in students, has been greatly underemphasized. They recommended interventions that target teachers' building strong relationships with students and creating warm, accepting, inclusive classroom climates to build school connectedness.

The reported positive benefits of school connectedness on physical, emotional, and academic health of students suggests that school connectedness could greatly benefit students who have experienced trauma. Developing school connectedness requires that teachers and administrators provide high expectations coupled with support for learning, positive student-teacher relationships, and a physically and emotionally safe environment (Hutchinson, 2010; Wilson, & Elliott, 2003)

Summary

The literature conceptualizes relationships at the core of meeting the needs of students who have experienced trauma. The protective role of school and the importance of seeing school as an ideal place to “create sanctuary” and support the well-being of youth impacted by trauma is evident. Adding the personal experiences of youth to what is known theoretically can deepen our understanding of the role of student-teacher relationships.

Experiences of Youth and Student-Teacher Relationship

Case Study Method

The data presented here is a secondary use of data from previous case studies (Dods, 2010) where youth volunteered for interviews by responding by email to online recruitment notices posted on local Kijiji and Facebook sites. Recruited youth were aged 16-22 with histories of trauma who were interested in sharing their educational experiences. During initial email correspondence criteria for inclusion in the study were discussed (history of trauma leading to traumatic stress, in school in the last two years, current stable mental health, and available support system). Seven respondents met initial criteria and consented to participate. These participants completed the Trauma Symptom Inventory (TSI-A) - alternate item scale (Briere, Elliott, Harris, & Cotman, 1995) The TSI-A is an 86 item scale that can be completed in 15-30 minutes and has well established psychometric properties with three validity scales (atypical responses, response level, and inconsistent responses) built into the tool (Briere). This scale was chosen as it is non-diagnostic, and is not specific to any particular trauma. Following initial conversations and a review of the TSI-A, three youth were excluded from the study due to not meeting study criteria.

Semi-structured interviews [90-120 minutes per participant (Stake, 2006)] were held with the remaining four youth aged 19-21 who reflected retrospectively on their educational experiences while dealing with traumatic events in their lives. The four self-reported that they were from two-parent, middle-class homes, and all described average to above average academic achievement throughout their school years. While the youth were not asked to describe the trauma itself, and were told disclosure was not necessary to the study, all four volunteered information regarding the trauma they had experienced. The researcher's professional background in psychiatric nursing contributed to the safe implementation of this study. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed, with

transcriptions reviewed by two of the four participants (the other two declined the review). Codes were developed both inductively from the transcribed data and deductively by applying codes from the literature to the data (Stake). Standard methods of qualitative data analysis were used to develop themes. A cross-case analysis identified themes present across cases. Further detail on the collection, analysis, and findings of the case study data reported here are described in detail elsewhere (Dods, 2010).

Youth Perspectives

Sarah, Nick, Jasmine and Natasha reported experiencing multiple traumatic events early in life including sexual and physical abuse, witnessing domestic violence and criminal activity, bullying, and in one case the murder of a sibling. While similarities in coping strategies existed across cases (e.g., using illicit substances and avoidance by leaving class) school experiences varied greatly. For Sarah, school had been a safe place and she was motivated to excel academically as graduation was her “ticket out” of the trauma. Nick expressed ambivalence towards school, and while he did graduate after an extra year, his focus was on “just getting through [school] each day.” School was both positive and negative for Jasmine as it provoked anxiety yet was also a relief from her home life. Natasha experienced school as adding to her distress and decreasing her capacity to cope. While still passing her classes, she explained her decision to leave school before completing eleventh grade as “I had no connection with anyone that was there [school] and I didn’t care at that point.”

Despite four distinct educational experiences, one theme stood out across the cases—the unmet need to establish caring connections with teachers. Although participants were unsure how to connect, they saw these relationships as essential to their

well-being, engagement, and success at school. They used the words “alone,” “abandoned,” “invisible,” and “ignored” to describe how they felt during high school. A strong sense of what these students wanted from school-based relationships emerged from the data along with an acknowledgement of barriers (e.g., risk of false accusations, limited time) that teachers face. Participants each identified teachers and other school staff that they felt they could have trusted but expressed frustration with their perceived lack of ability to form meaningful connection with these adults. The participants spoke of specific actions, qualities and perspectives that they believed they needed from teachers to bridge the gap. Building on the earlier theoretical framing and the student perspectives, we examine the aspects of the student-teacher interaction that could contribute to stronger school relationships and increased support for students with histories of trauma. While the elements have been separated here to provide greater detail, it is the coherence of these four elements together that best describe the supportive relationship that the youth participants felt they needed and wanted. (see Figure 1):

1. Leader of Interaction: Relationships need to be teacher driven. The participants wanted teachers to *intuit* their need for a connection, *initiate* conversation, and *invite* students to connect with them. Jasmine expressed that “if they [teachers] see certain patterns of behaviour they should take the initiative to ask... is there something bothering them.” Similarly Natasha said “I figured someone would see that, okay, I’ve gotten good grades the entire time, why all of a sudden is it going bad, and help me but no one ever even offered.” Like Natasha and Jasmine, Nick also waited for someone to approach him, although for different reasons. Nick ascribed his reluctance to initiate relational conversations with teachers to not “wanting a pity party from anybody.” He wanted: “not necessarily a heart to heart but just if a teacher went out of his way and said ‘hey you

know... you cool?” In contrast, Sarah’s experience was that “there were so many students, if I’d go to talk to them, there’d be like three other students there too,” and she concluded “obviously I couldn’t talk to them, a lack of availability.” Her failed efforts to reach out to teachers meant that while Sarah “wanted to connect”, and needed “some sort of personal relationship so teachers can see beyond the facade, what’s under the surface,” she felt it had to be teacher initiated.

2. Quality of the Interaction: Relationships need to be founded on authentic caring. This included *listening* to students, showing an *understanding* attitude towards their difficulties, and *validating* their distress. Sarah reported, “probably the biggest thing is that I felt extremely alone. I really needed someone to tell me that I wasn’t alone, that other kids were going through that too.” Natasha looked for an offer of help with her assignments as a sign that teachers recognized the challenges she faced due to being homeless. She states she “expected something more from [teachers]—like telling me, you know, stay after class and we’ll talk about it or we’ll work on this or if you need extra time...something” Nick and Jasmine both spoke of small gestures of caring, mentioning a teacher saying “hey Nick” or “Hi, how are you doing” as they walked down the hallway. Nick felt that an understanding attitude meant being able to “turn a blind eye to the things that really don’t matter, like smoking, like swearing” and to focus on the real issues.

3. Active Interaction: Teachers need to be attuned to their students in order to act in a supportive manner. Participants wanted teachers to *observe* overt and covert behavioural cues, and to be *responsive* and *adaptive* to their needs. Sarah advised teachers to look beyond externalized behaviour or academic failure and recommended that “picking up on the signs [of distress]” was critical, particularly subtle signs like changes in “social networks, behaviour, changes like when I became a Goth.” Teachers’

failure to respond to the changes they saw in her was interpreted as “teachers really just blew us off.” Jasmine noted that “our facial expressions do show it” and that “if you come to class with a cloud over your head then they [teachers] should notice.” Natasha described an English teacher who noticed her becoming restless, or about to cry and “let me out of class if I needed to leave. She’d let me do my work outside the door.” Natasha saw this teacher’s attunement and responsiveness to her emotional state as “very supportive.” Jasmine had a similar experience as Natasha with a teacher who “knows if I am upset, he raises his eyebrows. He knows, he just knows.” Nick preferred a matter of fact approach that would show teacher attunement: “Hey I don’t know what is going on right now, but this is what has to happen; we need to figure out how you are going to make up these marks.”

4. Perspective of the Interaction: Relationships need to be individualized, that is students wanted to be approached *as a person* and *on their level*, and wanted relationships to be *sustained over time*. Sarah described that connecting “involves a lot of trust and... you really have to get to their level and make the person understand you are on their side and all you want to do is help them.” These ideas were echoed by Nick who had little trust in adults. Respect to Nick was earned and he spoke of the need for teachers to “actually talk to you, not as a student but as an individual.” Nick also mentioned the importance of maintaining the relationships over time as “it might take all of grade nine to get that kid into a position where he kind of looks up to you.” Natasha echoed these thoughts: “in the beginning [teachers] were more understanding...but then they thought I was faking” and she emphasized that teachers must understand that trauma “doesn’t go away in a few months.” Jasmine wanted someone who did not “put on the presence of an

authority” and who would “make time out of their busy schedules to talk to me and not talk just about school things.”

These four elements of student-teacher relationships for youth who have lived through trauma fall within the scope of teaching practice. These youth were not looking to teachers to provide counseling or interventions for trauma, (and in fact all stated they wouldn’t have disclosed their trauma to teachers), but rather sought supportive, caring relationships that were absent in their lives outside of school. For participants those needed relationships were ones where teachers led the interaction and acted in a way that demonstrated attunement. They were relationships that had quality and authenticity and were individualized to the youth and who they were. Together these themes cohere to illustrate a connection that educators can provide in the classroom setting to support the overall well-being and success of students in their class who have experienced trauma.

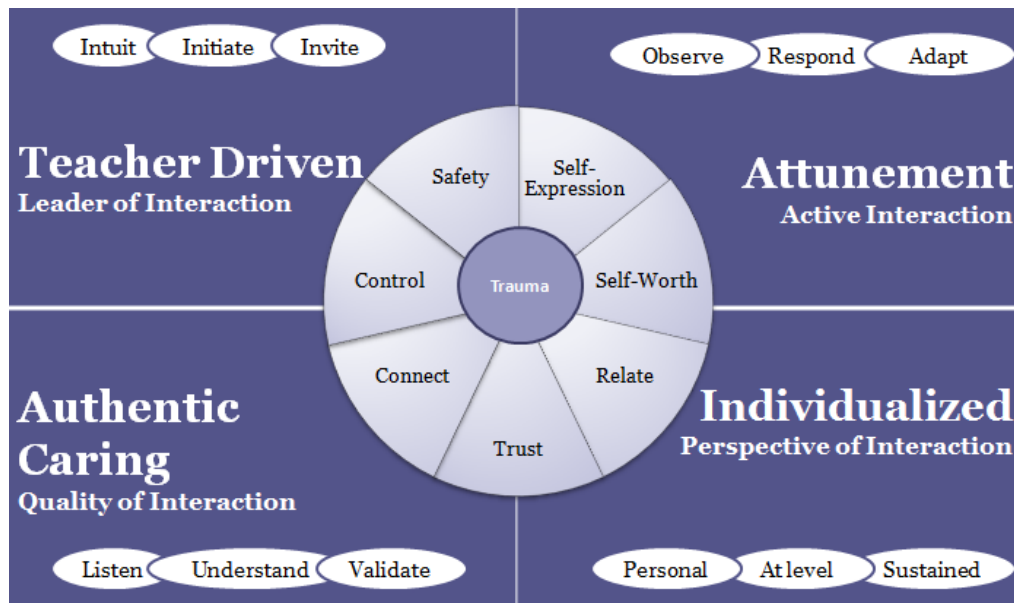


Figure 1. Visual representation of trauma related needs and the relationship building process for students who have experienced trauma.

Discussion and Implications

Student-teacher relationships are an effective strategy for supporting the learning and well-being of students who have experienced trauma. What participants in these case studies shared provides further support for Blum's (2006) and Pianta's (1999) positions on the importance of relationships at school. School connectedness was very important to the participants and often their acting out or negative behaviours were described as an effort to be noticed and to have someone respond. In Blum's work a stronger sense of school connectedness decreased those negative behaviours and while this study does not go far enough to have evidence to that effect, the youth believed that a greater connection to school would have led to more positive outcomes. What both the extant research and the reported study tells us is that what students who have experienced trauma need most is someone who cares. What works for other more typically at-risk students also worked for these students. Although the participants reported on here were not experiencing academic failure and came from what would appear to outsiders to be stable, two-parent, middle class families, they had relational deficits and needs similar to traditionally at-risk students. Cothran's (2003) study with at-risk youth identified attentiveness, active listening and caring as being key elements of school-based relationships, all of which parallel the aspects of supportive relationships the youth participants identified here. Additionally despite their middle class status, three of the four participants identified school as their only access to supports and services. Masten's (2007) identification of the school as the optimal location for the provision of supports would have benefited these youth as they could not ask parents and did not have the means or knowledge to seek community support.

One of the key messages of this paper is that expertise in trauma or clinical skills was not what these students needed or wanted from their teachers; they wanted a teacher

who provided a safe learning environment, and had a willingness to connect with students who lacked strong relational skills. Teachers were instrumental as caring adults who noticed them, and reached out; who showed understanding when life circumstances impacted their learning and well-being. These relational resources are instrumental in rebuilding a sense of safety, self-worth, trust, interpersonal connectedness, and control that McCann and Pearlman (1992) identify as having been shattered by the trauma and traumatic stress. Participants identified these needs but focused more on the importance of relationships in meetings those needs than on any direct connection between their traumatic stress and their learning. Their lack of trust was a barrier that first needed to be overcome to establish the interpersonal connection. That connection once established was believed to have contributed to a feeling of safety and the caring and understanding aspect of the student-teacher relationship added to their self-worth. Finding support at school was paramount for the participants. Teachers can meet these needs without student disclosure and without ever explicitly speaking of the trauma experienced through reaching out, caring, responding, and developing connections. Classrooms can be the environment where Bloom's (1999) concept of a necessary safe space or 'sanctuary' can be developed. While outside referrals and clinical services will always be needed, the findings here and in the literature emphasize the sphere of influence that teachers can have, simply by connecting with their students. The findings here agree with Shochet's (2006) assertion that school connectedness has been underutilized in its ability to meet mental health needs of students.

Study Limitations

Limitations of this study included the fact that these four youth were not representative of all youth who have experienced trauma. It was possible that the strong academic abilities and positive neighbourhood contexts contributed to more positive outcomes for these youth, however similar themes have emerged in students with differing characteristics. This lends support to the idea that the struggles and needs of youth affected by trauma cross socio-economic status groups and that there are shared commonalities specific to trauma (Cothran et al., 2003; Ozer et al, 2008) The recruitment strategy was a further limitation of the study. Recruitment was done online and therefore drew from a sample of people who frequent social networking and online communities. The choice to only include participants who met set criteria was necessary for the safety of the participants, but further restricted the available sample. As with any retrospective study, a further limitation is recall bias. While all participants provided first person accounts and reported that their memories of high school were very fresh and easy to articulate, it is likely that the passage of time had further shaped those memories. Efforts to minimize this bias included recruiting participants who had been out of high school for less than two years, and focusing the interview on the meaning each participant made of their experience rather than on the trauma itself.

Implications

The case studies here contribute by bringing current clinical and scientific literature into the context of personal experience in the school and classroom. Hearing the personal perspectives of youth about what specific school and educators practices were beneficial and supportive to their learning, well-being, and functioning at school can better support teachers in building meaningful relationships. Additionally, these findings

from middle class youth on the key role of relationships parallel research with youth from other socio-economic backgrounds and with differing academic abilities. It is important for schools to know that strategies they already have in place for other students can benefit students with trauma histories as well. One important consideration for schools is to have a broad conceptualization of students who are at-risk. The youth interviewed in this study believed they were giving clear signs of distress through their behaviour, yet felt that they were overlooked because they were from middle class families and not failing academically. Their academic success in the absence of well-being led to both Nick and Sarah dropping out of post-secondary education after one semester due to ongoing issues with mental health and well-being. While Jasmine remained in school, she too was struggling with her mental health. Schools must create environments that support youth in their growth and development and that are safe places to engage in learning. The need to support, not only academic success, but also mental health and well-being through relationships and engagement with school is a key message for schools from the youth. It is critical that teachers see themselves as part of the school health team. Teachers are in direct contact with students and in a position to be aware of mental health problems presenting in their classroom. Students are clear that it is hard for them to seek help on their own and that they need teachers to act and refer when necessary. While each of the four youth accessed support once they left high school, earlier access to mental health services could have led to more positive outcomes as they transitioned into adulthood.

Given that developing caring relationships lies within the scope of the teaching profession and can be implemented in the school setting without the support of outside professionals, these findings have direct implications for teacher practice. It is within the

purview of the role of educators to foster wellbeing in their students. The model described above provides a practical implementation framework for teachers. Making an announcement at the start and periodically throughout the year that the teacher is available if the student is struggling and the simple task of saying hi to students in the hallways are both easy to implement strategies students perceive as supportive. Being conscious of the need to be attuned to verbal and non-verbal cues that a student might be demonstrating and challenging one's own assumptions of who might have experienced trauma are both important areas for teacher awareness. Knowledge of school and community resources that can be shared with the class and individual students and the provision of written resources can increase availability of services for students who rely on school for access. Following-up with students after referral is also a way to show care and genuine interest in the student's wellbeing. Getting to know students is imperative to recognizing how student mental health may be impacting learning and school success. Information of how trauma presents is also important in supporting teacher understanding that the externalizing and internalizing behaviour they are seeing the classroom may be trauma related. Students may act out in an effort to protect themselves, to get their needs met, or to feel safe or in control. The coherence of these actions contributes to building a relationship that allows teachers to better understand the student and to respond in a way that is positive and meaningful for that student. Many teachers already incorporate these aspects of student-teacher relationships in their work and this does not go unnoticed by the youth. In looking back at high school, Jasmine reflected that, "I can't thank them when I'm in it but when I'm out of it I realize those people played such an important role in my life." She "pinpoint[ed] a number of teachers that helped along the way" and hoped to one day "tell them that I am thankful for them."

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