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Traumatic Life Experiences and Their Impact on Factors Pertinent to Leadership Effectiveness in School Principals

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TRAUMATIC LIFE EXPERIENCES AND THEIR IMPACT ON FACTORS PERTINENT TO

LEADERSHIP EFFECTIVENESS IN SCHOOL PRINCIPALS

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ABSTRACT

Many schools across the nation are not making adequate achievement or growth goals from year-to-year. This leads to high principal turnover rates and instability in the learning environment which profoundly impacts student achievement. Currently, most efforts in schools are aimed at raising student achievement, implementing equitable practices, and limiting barriers. While these are critical actions for closing the achievement gap, the principal's role in this process is vitally important. Therefore, this quantitative study explored how trauma affects factors that are pertinent to leader success in school principals.

To determine the impact trauma has on leadership qualities, this study examined the level of trauma exposure in school principals and their self-reported leadership qualities. Linear regression analyses were conducted to determine if level of trauma exposure was a predictor of decision-making, interpersonal skills, and problem-solving scores. The results of this study revealed that there were no statistically significant relationships between level of trauma exposure and decision-making, interpersonal skill, and problem-solving scores. This finding was inconsistent with extant trauma literature which strongly indicated that trauma does impact each of these qualities commonly attributed to educational leaders. Recommendations for further research were indicated.

DEDICATION

In the fall of 1994 on the campus of Jackson State University, I decided that I wanted to earn a doctorate degree. Nearly three decades later, with the help of God, I made it! Therefore, I first dedicate this work to Him. Without Him, I would not have made it. Next, I dedicate this work to my wife, Andrea, and my son, Evan, who supported me through this process. Your sacrifices are greatly appreciated and have not gone unnoticed. I am forever in your debt. Lastly, this work is dedicated to my mom, Bernice, who passed away before this project was completed. I know that she is rejoicing in heaven.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In Tennessee, 50% of a principal's evaluation is based on student growth and achievement, and superintendents make employment decisions based on these outcomes (Tennessee State Board of Education, 2011). This suggests high student achievement correlates to great leadership, while low student achievement correlates to poor leadership. Consequently, low student achievement often results in leadership changes as proposed in the School Improvement Grant (SIG) program enacted by the Obama Administration in 2009 (Trujillo & Renee, 2015). Principals of low-performing schools were the first to be dismissed because, "SIG turnaround models prioritized the school principal as the lynchpin to success by requiring their replacement unless, alternatively, the school was simply closed" (Myers and Sadler, 2018, p. 90). Naturally, this has caused an increase in principal turnover. Mascall and Leithwood (2012) asserted that the average tenure of school principals is three years, which profoundly effects student achievement. Leithwood et al. (2004) identified school leadership as the second most influencing factor on student learning. School principals are critical components in the teaching and learning process, and increasing leader effectiveness is essential (Miller, 2011). Thus, identifying factors that impact effectiveness has become paramount.

Statement of the Problem

School principals are evaluated by effectiveness, which has been defined through multiple sources: student scores, attrition, attendance, suspension rates, and others. External factors impacting these scores can be easily identified, the researcher will examine how trauma, an abstract factor, impacts leadership effectiveness for the current study. Little research exists that explores its impact on performance. At the time of this study, research on Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) is the measure to consider when examining barriers children face. Adverse childhood experiences are traumatic events that occurred before the age of 18 and can include multiple forms of abuse and household dysfunctions which can profoundly affect the lives of individuals (Felitti, et al., 1998). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) (2019) reported toxic stress from ACEs can change brain development and affect decision-making. The National Child Traumatic Stress Network (2020) explained that traumatic experiences from childhood impact children mentally, physically, and emotionally. Trauma has been expanded to include other forms such as acute, chronic, complex, developmental, and others, which are addressed in the literature review.

Additionally, Bowlby introduced attachment theory in 1969 and explained how children form attachments to their parents and how stress caused by unhealthy attachment types have a lasting effect on people that extend across the lifespan (Underwood, 2015). Many of these traumatic experiences have resulted in posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which was added to the *Diagnostic Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, third edition in 1980 (Ringel & Brandell, 2012). It stands to reason that adults who have attachment issues, unresolved ACEs, or have faced other traumatic life experiences are impacted as well, and leaders are not exempt.

For this study, I include a variety of traumatic experiences because they fall outside of the

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ACEs framework parameters but can significantly impact one's well-being and quality of life. Therefore, traumatic life experiences will include events that generally occur during adulthood: divorce, death of a parent or loved one, partner abuse, cancer, and others. All these experiences have long-lasting implications on one's current level of productivity and can require years of emotional healing before reemerging with renewed energy and vitality. Consequently, student achievement is impacted during these times of transition because it is nearly impossible to be one's best self when experiencing personal traumas.

Considering the various types of trauma, each can significantly impact a person in many ways. In this study, the researcher will examine how traumatic life experiences affect factors relevant to a principal's ability to lead. For example, how will a verbally abused principal respond when critical decisions for student success must be made? Will the leader make sound decisions that are in the best interest of stakeholders? How are principals impacted that experienced negative attachment types during childhood? Does childhood trauma impact his/her interpersonal skills? How are leaders impacted who experienced severe physical abuse from a spouse? Will those traumatic events impact his/her ability to problem-solve? Scenarios like these and others are the focus of this study and understanding the impact trauma has on leaders is vital for leadership success and continuous school improvement.

To date, extant literature on this top is limited; however, a few exist that are slightly related and are examined in the literature review. Breisch and Lexmond (2013) studied the growth process for leaders after experiencing trauma. Meers (2009) examined how life experiences impact leadership development. Weatherspoon-Robinson (2013) examined resilience after adverse life experiences and success. Because of this gap in the literature, it is

imperative that we carefully examine how trauma impacts factors pertinent to leaders. These factors include but are not limited to the ability to form healthy interpersonal relationships, decision making, resilience, confidence, and others. Deficits in any of these areas could significantly handicap a leader and limit their effectiveness, creating additional barriers throughout the learning environment.

Purpose of the Study

Many schools across the nation are not making achievement or growth goals from year-to-year. They are led by school leaders who are required to receive leadership training from accredited universities and receive additional training to maintain their credentials. However, schools are continuing to fail. Dragoset et al. (2017) concluded, "Overall, across all grades, we found that implementing any SIG-funded model had no significant impacts on math or reading test scores, high school graduation, or college enrollment" (p. 7). Statements like these are based on student outcomes, and leadership is judged accordingly. After two or three years of low student achievement, a new leader is appointed, and the cycle begins again, which creates an insurmountable educational deficit for students to overcome. Leaders have a tremendous responsibility to manage every aspect of the school building and challenges in their personal lives. Nevertheless, they are expected to produce exceptional results.

This study is necessary to inform professional development practices of educational organizations while also adding another dimension to school systems' hiring practices. The goal is not to eliminate candidates for hire; instead, it is intended to provide insight into factors that may be limiting one's ability to lead effectively. For current leaders, this study could offer reasons why they are failing. Moreover, the purpose of this quantitative study is to inform

superintendents on how to help school principals reach their fullest potential and become their best selves. This study is for principals who reflect on their leadership journeys and would like to understand why they are effective in some areas and not in others. It will also inform the superintendent who is trying to promote social-emotional learning from the top down. Lastly, this study could also be used to inform hiring practices in the corporate sector as well.

Significance of the Study

This study will add to the body of trauma theory research by providing another area for research. It will provide insight into how leaders are impacted by traumatic life experiences that occurred in various stages of life. The data from this study will someday inform curriculum for educational leadership programs. Designers of curriculum will understand the need to include social-emotional learning for leaders within the scope and sequence of college coursework. Additionally, this study will fuel the transition from leadership as art to leadership as science which will allow success to become duplicatable when traumatic life experiences are addressed.

This study will improve policy as it relates to career paths. For example, one that scores high in trauma or traumatic life experiences may need to undergo other forms of evaluation to ensure the capacity exists to lead others. This becomes important when evaluating candidates for leadership roles or positions where leaders are responsible for others' lives and well-being or in cases where an individual is charged to lead multi-million-dollar organizations like schools and corporations. On the surface, adding more evaluations for leaders may be controversial, but there are other metrics that are yet to be considered in the field of leadership which may be the key to understanding effectiveness.

Research Questions

In this study, the researcher seeks to understand the relationship between trauma and how it impacts factors pertinent to leadership effectiveness. Leadership factors examined in this study include decision-making, interpersonal relationships, and problem-solving. The research questions for this study are as follows:

1. To what extent does the level of trauma exposure impact decision-making ability in school principals?

2. To what extent does the level of trauma exposure impact interpersonal relationships in school principals?

3. To what extent does the level of trauma exposure impact problem-solving ability in school principals?

The researcher hypothesizes that principals who have high levels of trauma exposure will score lower in decision-making ability, interpersonal relationships, and problem-solving than principals with low levels of trauma exposure. The null hypothesis for each research question is as follows:

1. There is no statistical relationship between the level of trauma exposure and decision-making scores in school principals.

2. There is no statistical relationship between the level of trauma exposure and interpersonal relationship scores in school principals.

3. There is no statistical relationship between the level of trauma exposure and problem-solving scores in school principals.

Assumptions and Delimitations

The researcher assumes that trauma impacts the mental, physical, and emotional aspects

of people in general. This can be observed in abused children's actions when engaging in play therapy and their interpersonal relationships with others. Another assumption of the researcher is that due to the study's sensitive nature, all participants will not be truthful in disclosing personal information to a stranger whom they do not know which could cause study limitations. Lastly, it is assumed the instruments used in the study will capture the information needed to understand factors that limit performance.

The delimitations for this study include the following:

1. All participants are SCS Principals or Assistant Principals.

2. Study participants are from all levels: elementary, middle, and high school.

3. Study participants are African American, Hispanic, and White and consist of male and female.

4. This study's independent variable is trauma and the dependent variables are decision-making, interpersonal relationships, and problem-solving skills.

5. This study is limited to a quantitative design.

Definition of Terms

"*Adverse childhood experiences* (ACE) are childhood abuses and household disruptions experienced before the age of 18 that includes exposure to mental illness, substance abuse, imprisonment, separation or divorce, adult violence, physical abuse, and sexual abuse (Chanlongbutra, Singh, & Mueller, 2018).

Attachment can be defined as the process of how humans form emotional bonds with caregivers and others (Bowlby, 1988).

Posttraumatic stress disorder is, "A trauma and stress related disorder in DSM-5, also

considered an anxiety disorder, arising as a delayed and protracted response to experiencing or witnessing a traumatic event involving actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence to self or others" (Colman, 2015, p. 589).

Trauma is an emotional response to a terrible event like an accident, rape, or natural disaster (APA, 2020).

Traumatic life experience is defined by Gunter et al. (2012) as "an event that would be upsetting to anyone, including physical or sexual assault, life-threatening accidents/injuries, and witnessing trauma to another" (p. 618).

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

To understand the breadth and depth of trauma, a foundation will be established by identifying and discussing the theoretical framework, trauma theory, and exploring related topics: attachment, adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), and trauma. This list is not exhaustive; however, the topics are broad enough to encompass all traumatic experiences that occur from birth throughout the lifespan. The research will identify how attachment styles are set in motion at birth, and they can significantly impact an individual's ability to relate to others. Next, ACEs are negative experiences that occur from birth through age 17, and they can impact an individual mentally and physically (Felitti et al., 1998). Trauma can occur in any stage of life. It can be as simple as having a minor fender-bender while driving or as intense as a personal attack, and it can lead to a variety of problems: depression, increased alcohol use, anxiety, anger management, sleep disorders, and cognitive impairments (Boals, Riggs, & Kraha, 2013). Thus, it becomes important to understand how trauma impacts people and if its impact extends to factors pertinent to leadership effectiveness, which is limited in the body of research.

Theoretical Framework

Trauma

Trauma is a broad topic that encompasses an array of classifications with qualifiers to identify the severity of the trauma. Weichelt and Gryczynski (2012) contended that Western conception of trauma is derived primarily from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM) criteria for PTSD. For this study, we will use the American Psychological Association's (APA) definition, "trauma is an emotional response to a terrible event like an accident, rape, or natural disaster" (APA, 2020). Furthermore, the American Psychiatric Association (2013) expands this concept by requiring that individuals must have experienced intense fear, helplessness, or horror (Weichelt & Gryczynski, 2012). From this foundation, clinicians understand, classify, and treat trauma.

The International Society of Traumatic Stress Studies (2020) described childhood abuse as traumatic events initiated by people in positions of power with intent to harm or threaten children. These can include physical, sexual, psychological, or neglect. All these types of abuse are transferable across the life span in some form or another, but they are codified with different names. The Missouri Department of Mental Health (2020) listed three primary types of trauma: acute, chronic, and complex. Acute trauma is described as a traumatic event that occurs once.

An example could be physical child abuse which occurs once. Although it occurs once, it can still be traumatic and have lifelong consequences. Chronic trauma is a prolonged traumatic event that occurs for an extended time period. This trauma type could include, but is not limited to, continuous domestic violence towards a spouse or significant other. Complex Trauma is described as multiple forms of trauma cooccurring at once. An example of this could be a child or adult that is beaten, sexually assaulted, and threatened with more abuse if authorities are called.

The effects of trauma vary by individual based on perspective, severity, and other factors. Specifically, children exposed to complex trauma can display distrust and suspiciousness, interpersonal issues, shame and guilt, difficulty planning and anticipating, and low self-esteem (Cook et al., 2005). Trauma exposure can also impact cognitive ability and personality. Delaney-Black et al. (2002) found that exposure to violence and trauma-related stress negatively impacted IQ and reading achievement. More recently, Larson et al. (2019) found a statistically significant relationship between the effects of physical neglect on decision-making. Herman (1997) stated, "Repeated trauma in adult life erodes the structure of the personality already formed, but repeated trauma in childhood forms and deforms the personality" (p.96). Additionally, trauma exposure impacts health. Garner et al. (2012) contend that children exposed to trauma have a predisposition for cardiovascular disease, cancer, asthma, and depression.

Trauma Theory

As summarized by Ringel and Brandell (2012), Trauma theory was developed in the 19th century by French neurologist, Jean Martin Charcot. Charcot studied hysteria in women who had been abused, raped, or experienced other violent acts and displayed sudden paralysis and other symptoms. During these times, hysteria often led to hysterectomy; however, Ringel and Brandell (2012) reported that Charcot was the first to realize that hysteria was psychological rather than physiological. Van der Kolk, Weisaeth, and van der Hart reported that Charcot concluded "hysteria was [a] dissociative problem" (1996, p. 50).

Ringel and Brandell (2012) also stated that Charcot's student, Pierre Janet, expanded the idea of dissociation and traumatic memories. He explored the impact of trauma on personality and behavior. Janet believed that patient reactions were relative to their perceptions of the trauma

they experienced (Van der Kolk, Weisaeth, & van der Hart, 1996). Freud and Breuer echoed this belief by concluding hysteria was caused by psychological trauma, and Freud later stated that external trauma influences the mind (Ringel & Brandell, 2012).

During World War I, psychological first aid was created to support soldiers returning from war with symptoms of shell shock (Ringel & Brandell, 2012). Abram Kardiner noted that soldiers presenting with shell shock symptoms seem to reenact the trauma using strategies that were not previously successful (Van der Kolk, Weisaeth, & van der Hart, 1996). Kardiner built upon his ideas and began using hypnosis and group therapy to treat trauma during World War II. After the Vietnam war, returning soldiers could not function in society due to the trauma experienced at war. Returning soldiers began abusing drugs and alcohol, became violent towards family members, and some became homeless because they could not cope. Lifton (1973) identified 27 common symptoms of soldiers returning from war. Many were later used as criteria for the Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), which was included in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, third edition for the first time in 1980. Because of advocates and clinicians' work, Ringel and Brandell (2012) reported that the PTSD diagnosis also included abused children, battered women, and rape victims.

Freud concluded that external trauma influences the mind (Ringel & Brandell, 2012). The mind is the source of all thoughts and emotions, and if it is impacted by trauma, side effects could become evident in all areas of life. Trauma is a common occurrence, and leaders are not exempt.

Attachment

The process of infant attachment was developed by the theorist, John Bowlby (Seligman

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and Reichenberg, 2010). Bowlby (1988) believed that humans had an innate need to form bonds or attachments after birth that would impact their emotional development. Bowlby researched with orphans and children separated from their parents (Ringel, 2012). Ainsworth et al. (1978) expanded Bowlby's research and outlined four attachment styles. Ainsworth and her team are credited with creating the "Strange Situation" where a child was in the presence of his caregiver, but the caregiver left the room and a stranger came into the room. The team observed their behaviors and categorized the children based on their actions in the experiment. Each category had qualifiers describing the behaviors of the child and they are as follows: secure, anxious/avoidant, anxious/resistant, and disorganized/disoriented.

Ainsworth et al. (1978) indicated that children with a Secure attachment were relaxed and at ease in the presence of their caregiver but became anxious in the presence of strangers. When their caregiver returned, they were comforted and returned to being relaxed and at ease. The Anxious/avoidant child presented as mildly anxious with a stranger when the caregiver left but not seem to prefer one more than the other. The Anxious/resistant child was distressed in the presence and absence of the caregiver. Lastly, the disorganized/disoriented child manifested self-directed violent behaviors in the presence and absence of their caregivers which Ainsworth attributes to neglect or abuse (1978). Furthermore, Ringel (2012) contended that adults display similar attachment styles when interacting with others.

Hazan and Shaver (1987) found that children with secure attachment demonstrate resilience, empathy and can form intimate relationships. Conversely, insecure attachments profoundly affect individuals across the life span (Hornor, 2019). Hong and Park (2012) report that individuals with insecure attachments typically develop poor social and communication

skills. Additionally, they stand a higher likelihood of developing anxiety disorders. Horner (2019) contends that children with insecure attachment tend to have more conflict with friends and problems with trust. Furthermore, Chambers (2017) states that children with insecure attachments have a predisposition for mental and physical health conditions as adults. Thus, caregivers must form healthy attachments with their children to prevent lifelong interpersonal battles and strife.

Attachment styles align with this study because poor attachment styles lead to poor interpersonal relationships (Hong & Park, 2012). Leaders must establish strong relationships with colleagues and stakeholders for any organization to reach its fullest potential. John Maxwell once said, "Nothing of significance was ever achieved by an individual acting alone" (Company, 2013). A leader's ability to build and maintain relationships is paramount; however, poor attachment, without intervention, limits success.

Adverse Childhood Experiences

"Adverse childhood experiences have been described as potentially traumatic events that can have negative, lasting effects on health and well-being. This includes maltreatment and abuse as well as living in an environment that is harmful to their development" (Boullier & Blair, 2018, p. 132.) This topic was introduced by Felitti et al. (1998) in a monumental study at the Kaiser Permanente San Diego Health Appraisal Clinic in conjunction with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The original study assessed for ACEs in two categories: Abuse and Household dysfunction; however, current questionnaires also include a third category, neglect. The study included 9,508 participants, and seven types of traumatic events were assessed, including "psychological, physical, or sexual abuse; violence against mother; or living

with household members who substance abusers, mentally ill or suicidal, or even suicidal" (p. 245). The study found that over 50% of participants reported having one adverse indicator and 25% reported experiencing two or more adverse experiences. Felitti et al. (1998) also reported that a person who had disclosed four or more adverse experiences was four to twelve times more likely to have increased health complications from alcoholism, drug abuse, depression, and suicide attempts. Participants with several adverse experiences were more likely to develop conditions later in life.

In a similar study, the ACE Task Force of Shelby County in conjunction with Baptist Memorial Hospital for Women, Knowledge Quest, and Porter Leath commissioned the Public Health Management Corporation (PHMC) to conduct survey research to assess ACEs in the Shelby County community (ACE Task Force of Shelby County, Tennessee, 2014). The report indicated that survey data was collected by phone, and results indicated more than 360,000 adults in Shelby County had experienced at least one ACE. Twenty-one percent have experienced two to three ACEs, and 12% have experienced four or more ACEs. The most common ACE for households in Shelby County was emotional abuse (23%), emotional neglect (25%), and substance abuse (25%). Shockingly, 37% of survey participants reported seeing someone shot or stabbed at some point in their lives. To improve these outcomes, Shelby County's recommendations included policy and program development for the youth of Shelby County to prevent ACEs and aid with mitigating the effects of ACEs.

Felitti et al. (1998) found a significant dose relationship between ACE exposures and the leading causes of death in adults. A relationship was discovered between ACE exposures and several life-threatening conditions like cancer, chronic lung disease, liver disease, and heart

disease. Not only do ACEs impact physical health, they also affect the mind. A study in England found that a relationship existed between high ACE exposures and low mental health (Hughes, et al., 2016). The study also concluded, "A variety of mechanisms link ACEs to poor adult mental well-being. Critically, maltreatment and other stressors in childhood can affect brain development and harmful, lasting effects on emotional functioning" (Hughes et al., 2016, p. 5). In this study, the Short Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale (SWEMWBS) was used to measure mental well-being. The researchers reported the strongest relationship on the SWEMWBS was found between numbers of exposures and rarely feeling close to others. Thus, ACE exposures can profoundly affect interpersonal skills. The study also indicated that individuals with higher ACE exposures never or rarely deal with problems well and indicated difficulties in thinking and decision-making.

Adverse Childhood Experiences are essential to the current study because Felitti et al. (1998) found that 50% of participants had experienced an ACE and 360,000 adults experienced at least one ACE. The long-term effects of ACEs on humans is concerning to say the least, but Hughes et al., (2016) found that high ACE exposures impair decision-making ability which is one of the primary jobs of any leader. Therefore, understanding how trauma impacts principals is essential because the lives of children rest in their hands.

Posttraumatic Stress Disorder

Posttraumatic Stress Disorder has been linked to many psychological and physiological responses in the body (Boals et al., 2013). Therefore, Boals et al. (2013) examined the scope to which each of the DSM-IV-TR: A–F PTSD criteria influences health and well-being.

Boals et al. (2013) concluded that data results supported the hypotheses. Hyperarousal

was the strongest and most reliable predictor of outcome benchmarks. It also has the greatest

impact on health and well-being. Rates of traumatic experiences in college students are similar to

the general population. Thus, understanding the effects of trauma can enable mental health

practitioners to improve the prevention and treatment of PTSD. Boals' et al. (2013) conclusions

further supported a premise of this study which suggests that trauma impacts the emotional

mental health of individuals. It is possible that many leaders may have undiagnosed PTSD

resulting from life experiences and may be working through their issues without intervention.

This study's greatest desire is that participants become aware of the need for intervention not

only for themselves but for the students and staff they serve.

Leader Growth After Trauma

Breisch and Lexmond (2013) suggested that leaders experience traumatic events like

everyone else. They have family members who die suddenly, family problems, or live in

constant fear of losing their jobs; however, leaders who do not reflect and adjust to these

challenges jeopardize their organizations and the people within them. Therefore, leaders must be

resilient and reflective of the challenges that life presents and make meaning out of tragedies and

setbacks. Such leaders tend to grow and become skilled in managing crises which is an

invaluable asset to the individual and the organization. The purpose of Breisch and Lexmond's

(2013) study was to measure growth after trauma and its effect on leadership.

Breisch and Lexmond (2013) found that leaders who grow after traumatic events tend to

be more purpose-centered, more learning-centered, and more relationship-centered. These

findings are consistent with the literature. Breisch and Lexmond (2013) also found that purpose-

centered leaders usually appreciate life more and have changes in life priorities after traumatic

events. Leaders who become more learning-centered are adaptive and have tremendous personal strength as a result of their experiences. Study results revealed that leaders who become more relationship centered view leadership as a partnership. The researchers relate it to the shared vision concept. The study was limited to only nine participants; therefore, the conclusions cannot be generalized to all leaders. Breisch and Lexmond (2013) recommended the study be replicated to include more participants. More research is needed on how trauma impacts different cultures and genders. Further research is needed on the spiritual change that sometimes occurs when individuals meet traumatic events. Lastly, Breisch and Lexmond (2013) recommend that additional research is needed that focuses on leadership development and support programs for leaders who experience traumatic events.

Breisch and Lexmond (2013) found in their qualitative study that leaders tend to grow after trauma. For the current study, the researcher intended to provide a quantitative approach to understanding how trauma impacts leaders. The participants may have also experienced traumatic events at some point which will provide insight into their current level of functioning after trauma. A statistical test will be run to provide evidence of the statistical significance of this phenomenon.

Adverse Life Experiences and Leadership Development

Meers (2009) performed a qualitative study that explored how adverse life experiences influence leadership development. Meers maintained that a large amount of literature exists on leader life span and the various types of leaders; however, a gap exists in the literature regarding how leaders are made. Therefore, faculty members were solicited for study participants, which yielded 28 possible participants. Meers (2009) concluded that four themes related to how leaders

learn emerged from the data: experiences of adversity or loss; experiences of "stretch assignments"; inspirational experiences; and experiences with conflict. In addition, Meers (2009) reported that six propositions emerged from the data:

> *"the influence of family plays a significant role in the response of leaders to life experiences; learning from significant life experiences provides a valuable foundation of case-based knowledge that leaders can utilize in times of uncertainty and change; significant life experiences can serve as the trigger point for the development of Authentic Leadership; significant life experiences can provide a means for developing Emotional Intelligence within leaders; the strategy of reflection used by leaders in significant life experiences can be utilized as an effective learning tool in leadership development; and significant life experiences"* (p. 124-133).

For future research, Meers (2009) suggested replicating the study with a larger sample size to solidify the theoretical model. In addition, it was suggested that a group of more diverse study participants would be most beneficial to the study. Lastly, Meers proposed that a study is needed to examine how successful leaders describe their journeys with a focus on significant life experiences.

Meers identified key factors that suggest adverse life experiences aid in the development of leaders which correlates to the adage, we are who we are because of our life experiences. However, for the current study, the researcher aimed to understand if trauma detracts from effectiveness, and if so, to what degree.

Leaders and Adversity

Diehl (2013) and Neiworth (2015) studied leaders and adversity. Diehl conducted a

qualitative study that sought to understand diversity from the vantage point of women leaders in higher education who have experienced various adversities along the way. Neiworth (2015) conducted a similar study to examine how women who have experienced adverse life experiences chose leadership development, and how they coped with adversity while yet remaining resilient.

Diehl (2013) concluded that there were 16 unique meanings of identity, self-esteem, power, connections to others, and worldview. Meanings correlated to identity were positive, but meanings correlated to self-esteem, power, and connection to others were mixed. Diehl also found that some participants had disillusioned worldviews, and some did not which she concluded was due to adversity. However, the common theme among participants was that adversity can lead to growth and opportunity, but pain and loss are a part of the process. The results from Neiworth's (2015) study revealed that women with ACEs do not have higher PsyCap scores compared to those who do not have ACEs. Neiworth concluded that the sample size for this study was not large enough to generalize to the population and external validity goals were not met. However, the data indicated that women with ACEs have greater resilience.

For future research, Diehl (2013) suggested a replication of the study with women from all regions of the United States and women of other races and ethnicities. Diehl suggested the data be analyzed by race and culture with attention also given to female leaders of historically black institutions. Diehl also suggested that non-heterosexual women be included in the study. Additional studies were suggested from a feminist or organizational power framework, a comparison study of male participants, an international study, and a quantitative study. Neiworth (2015) suggested the study be replicated with a larger sample size. It was also suggested that the

study be performed with men in order to compare results and the study be replicated outside the United States.

Diehl and Neiworth present compelling studies that examine the aftermath of trauma. Diehl (2013) concluded that adversity leads to growth and opportunity while Neiworth (2015) found that divorce in childhood promotes optimism. Continuous growth and improvement are essential to leadership and optimism is an invaluable leadership quality. Both are future oriented constructs while the current study seeks to understand the more utilized leadership qualities that occur in the moment. This sheds light on the need for future research that examines how trauma impacts thoughts versus actions.

Resilience

Weatherspoon-Robinson (2013), Gonsalves (2017), and Johnson (2018) explored resiliency in leaders. The lives of women who experienced childhood bullying and their lives as successful adults. Weatherspoon-Robinson (2013) aimed to identify factors that contribute to achievement, advancement, and success in African American leaders by conducting a mixed methods research study that was informed by Black feminist inquiry and research in leadership and resilience. Gonsalves (2017) sought to address a significant gap in the literature related to women and bullying, and she examined how their experiences influenced their approach to leadership by conducting a qualitative research study which included seven women who were victims of childhood bullying. Johnson (2018) conducted a study to explore the resiliency of African American male principals in k-12 settings in the hope of informing others who aspire to lead schools. The qualitative study focused on their lived experiences and the challenges they have faced as principals.

Weatherspoon-Robinson (2013) found the data for research question one indicated no significant themes, but unique themes were present for collaboration and consensus-building. Significant themes for research question two are new perspective, nurturer, and work-life balances. Unique themes for research question two include: open minded, new ideas, team, familiarity, lack of actualization, and ceiling. For research question three, significant themes were new perspective and nurturer. The significant theme for research question four was communication. Research question five did not yield a significant theme; however, faith, work ethic, and not buying into stereotypes were unique themes. Likewise, research question six did not yield a significant theme, but negotiation was indicated as a unique theme. The unique themes for research question seven are outlook and care. Results from the one-sample t-test were not statistically significant.

Gonsalves (2017) concluded that three themes were revealed in the study: context of the experience, enduring the experience, and changing the experience. Context of experience had four subthemes: place, personal characteristics, self-efficacy and expectations, and mentorship and guidance. Enduring the experience had three subthemes: childhood social norms, leadership norms, and being vulnerable. Changing the experience had eight subthemes: escaping, escapism, and coping; defying familial and social expectations; reaching the limit; future orientation; gifts of the past; and orientation towards followers. Gonsalves (2017) stated that these themes informed the following four results:

> *"Women leaders who were bullied as children re-experienced challenges with socially constructed norms while leading; Being bullied as a child and leading as an adult included similar psychological and psychosocial experiences; Women leaders' approach*

to leadership is informed by bullying experiences; and Women leaders who were bullied enact leadership through altruistic, empathic, and prosocial approaches"(p. 93-103).

Johnson (2018) reported that seven themes emerged from the interviews when asked what led to them becoming leaders: Someone in leadership provided opportunities for me to lead (80%); Someone saw potential or ability in me (80%); I had a mentor or advisor to provide advice (90%); I have strong faith or belief in God (60%); Strong work ethic, dedication, persistence, commitment (70%); Encouragement or support from family members (80%); and Purpose or desire to have an impact on the lives of students (80%)." Johnson also reported that eight themes emerged when participants were asked about experiencing challenges: Belief that challenges can be overcome. They are not an excuse (80%); Professional networking (80%); Viewed challenges as an opportunity to learn and grow (70%); Understanding the system and learning the unwritten rules (70%); Knowing the community you serve and how to work with them (80%); Patience—understanding timing and circumstances (80%); Encouragement/support from family members (80%); Faith/God/church family (60%). Lastly, four themes emerged when participants were asked about support systems: mentor (90%), family (80%), faith/God/church family (60%), and colleagues/network of professionals (80%).

For future research, Weatherspoon-Robinson (2013) suggested to increase the sample size, a longitudinal study to assess leadership and resilience should be performed, and a comparative study of male and females to assess leadership and resilience.

Gonsalves (2017) offered suggestions for k-12 settings, organizational and leadership development settings, and future research. In k-12 settings, it was suggested that bullying victims be identified and provided assistance tailored to the victim's needs and change school policy to

protect them. In organizational and leadership development settings, Gonsalves (2017) suggested that leaders give attention to gender norms. Lastly, follower opinions, male leader perspectives, and analysis of empathy skills are areas that could yield more information on the phenomenon of bullying.

For future research, Johnson (2018) suggested a study that expands beyond the principalship to other central office types. Also, Johnson suggested that an additional study is needed and should include males and females of other races and nationalities. Lastly, Johnson suggested including an additional demographic question about prior leadership experiences.

Grit

Duckworth (2016) describes grit as the consolidation of passion and perseverance. The seminal work of Duckworth, *Grit,* established the foundation for current and future research, and it has become an increasingly popular research topic in recent years. Duckworth's (2016) understanding of grit was shaped at the United States Military Academy at West Point where cadets were observed and assessed to determine why some survived while others did not. At West Point, the whole candidate score was significant in terms of rating talent but did little to explain why some survived Beast Barracks which was an intense seven-week training program (Duckworth, 2016). She continued to build upon her knowledge and observe successful businessmen. Duckworth concluded that highly successful individuals were resilient and hardworking with a strong sense of determination and direction. These qualities coupled with passion and perseverance equates to grit (2016).

Healing for Leaders

Commodore (2018) conducted a qualitative study which included five transformational

leaders, three men and two women ranging in age from 30s to 70s. The study's purpose was to educate the transformational leader on their personal issues that need to be addressed so that the people they lead can reach their goals. To address these issues, Commodore proposed a framework of love, forgiveness, and self-responsibility. The goal of this study is to help the transformational leader become whole so that subordinates will also seek to become whole as a result of seeing their leadership.

Commodore (2018) reported that four primary and three secondary themes emerged from the study. The four primary themes include: self-examination, self-awareness, being nonjudgmental, and transference. The three secondary themes are: integrity, truthfulness, and compassion. The data also indicated that participants were receptive to accepting responsibility which Commodore believes helped them develop authenticity.

For future research, Commodore (2018) suggested a study that compares gender, age groups, cultures, nationalities, and leadership titles when applying the four virtues (healing, love, forgiveness, self-responsibility). Commodore also suggested a comparison study that focuses on how transformational leaders achieve wholeness considering their traumatic experiences. Also, Commodore (2018) suggested increasing the sample size and a research study on how followers are affected by leaders that are not whole. Lastly, she suggested a quantitative study that uses the same variables.

This study relates to the current study as a suggested intervention for leaders. A considerable amount of research exists that supports the benefits of counseling or spiritual interventions. This will be necessary as leaders resurface past traumas which may cause significant mental and emotional distress. Suggested interventions will be discussed in chapter

five.

Summary of Literature Review

Trauma and its effect on leadership can be examined from different angles. The angles examined in this study are Attachment styles, ACEs, and Trauma. All can have a significant effect on people in general and possibly on leaders in measurable ways, sometimes negatively if left untreated. Trauma Theory was identified as the theoretical framework for this study because trauma comes in different forms and impacts people differently. Additionally, the research indicated that individuals with insecure attachments typically develop poor social and communication skills (Hong & Park, 2012). Individuals with high ACE exposures have been found to have brain development issues and poor emotional functioning (Hughes, et al., 2016). Children exposed to complex trauma were found to display distrust towards others, have interpersonal issues, difficulty planning and anticipating, low self-esteem, etc. (Cook et al., 2005). Furthermore, repeated exposure to trauma can alter the structure of personality in adults (Herman, 1997). Thus, it becomes vitally important that its effect on leaders be thoroughly examined in order to promote continuous improvement for the leader which translates to improved performance for schools.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Chapter III is a discussion of the methodology employed in this study. The researcher identified the research questions and their corresponding null hypotheses, sampling procedures, the context of the study, participants, measures, and how the results will be analyzed and reported.

This research examined the effect trauma has on factors commonly thought to bolster leader success. Specifically, interpersonal relationships, problem-solving, and decision-making scores were analyzed against trauma exposure scores to determine if a significant relationship exists. The researcher hypothesized that significant numbers of trauma exposures impact those factors which are commonly associated with the characteristics of an effective leader, making it essential for a study of this kind to be conducted.

Identification of Methodology

This quantitative study was conducted using a linear regression analysis. A linear regression is for correlational research that examines relationships between a dependent and independent variable. Creswell (2012) stated that correlational research allows researchers to predict outcomes between variables. For the current study, the researcher examined whether trauma exposure was a predictor of decision-making, interpersonal skills, and problem-solving

scores of principals, vice-principals, and assistant principals. Lastly, the researcher chose to perform a quantitative study due to the sensitive nature of the topic which will allow for anonymity.

Research Questions/Hypotheses

The researcher sought to understand the relationship between trauma exposure and factors commonly associated with school leaders; therefore, the independent variable for the study was trauma exposure and the dependent variables were decision-making, interpersonal skills, and problem solving. Three questions were answered from this study and they are as follows:

1. To what extent does level of trauma exposure impact decision-making ability in school principals?

The researcher hypothesized that principals with high exposures to trauma will have lower decision-making scores as compared to principals with low trauma exposures. The null hypothesis for the first question was there is no statistically significant relationship between the level of trauma exposure and decision-making scores in school principals.

2. To what extent does level of trauma exposure impact ability to form interpersonal relationships in school principals?

The researcher hypothesized that principals with high exposure to trauma will score lower in problem-solving ability as compared to principals with low trauma exposures. The null hypothesis for the second research question was there is no statistically significant relationship between the level of trauma exposure and interpersonal relationship scores in school principals.

3. To what extent does level of trauma exposure impact problem-solving ability in school principals?

The researcher hypothesized that principals with high exposures to trauma will score lower in interpersonal relations as compared to principals with low trauma exposures. The null hypothesize for the third research question was there is no statistically significant relationship between the level of trauma exposure and problem-solving ability scores in school principals.

Sampling Procedure

For this study, convenience sampling techniques were employed. In this case, the distinct characteristic of all participants is that they must be a head principal, vice-principal, or assistant principal in the Shelby County Schools (SCS) district. Because the researcher is an SCS employee, the researcher has access to all participant email addresses; therefore, emails were the primary form of communication with potential participants.

First, the participants received an introductory email that identified the purpose of the email. Participants received a follow up email with a link to participate in the study. Surveys within the link included basic demographic information that did not include identifying information so that anonymity was maintained. Hopefully, participants felt more comfortable and willing to participate. The link also included the two inventories used in this study. Stratification techniques were not employed. Reminder emails were sent at the midpoint of the survey window and three days prior to the close of the survey window.

After the survey window closed, subgroups were analyzed using SPSS to understand the impact trauma had on factors pertinent to leadership which included: decision-making, interpersonal relationships, and problem-solving skills. The confidence interval was set

accordingly, and the margin of error was set at .05. The necessary sample size was calculated to produce a moderate effect size so that findings can be generalized to the leadership population in general.

Description of Potential Participant Characteristics

Participants in the study were current school level leaders which included principals, vice-principals, and assistant principals in SCS. Currently, SCS lists 240 schools on their website; therefore, all principals, vice-principals, and assistant principals were solicited for the study using sampling procedures identified in the Sampling Procedures section (Shelby County Schools, 2020). The demographic make-up of study participants included African American, multi-racial, and white with African American being the majority. Both genders were represented in elementary, middle, and high schools. The study did not consider years of experience or current school levels as measures to eliminate participates; therefore, any current principal, vice-principal, or assistant principal within SCS could participate. The reasoning for this decision was so that the needs for effect size were met.

Context of the Study

Shelby County Schools is located Memphis, TN which is in the southwestern corner of Tennessee. According to the Shelby County Schools (SCS) "About Us" webpage (2020), SCS is the largest school district in Tennessee with an enrollment of more than 100,000 students in over 200 schools, making it 23rd largest school district in the nation. It has a teaching force which consists of 6,500 teachers and a combined workforce of over 14,000 establishing SCS as the second largest employer in Shelby county.

The City of Memphis was once comprised of two separate school districts: Memphis City Schools (MCS) and Shelby County Schools. After years of turmoil and debate, MCS relinquished its charter and joined with SCS; however, several legacy schools of the SCS district exited the district and created independent districts in the municipal areas. The separation was shocking to most and reasons behind their decisions are still questioned today. Nevertheless, SCS has continued to thrive and will continue to do so under the guidance of its new superintendent, Dr. Joris Ray, who became interim superintendent after former superintendent Dorsey Hopson resigned in the middle of the 2018-2019 school year.

Dr. Ray has continued the mission and vision of his predecessor who established Destination 2025. The goal of Shelby County Schools is for 80% of students to be college and career ready, 90% of seniors will graduate on time, and 100% of graduates will enter a college or career setting (Shelby County Schools, 2020). To support and achieve this goal, Dr. Ray has initiated seven next steps: increasing Academic Equity, incorporating Social Emotional Learning, improving district and school cultures, adopting the attributes of a servant leader, aligning resources, finalizing the footprint proposal, and transitioning the district office to a new location.

The demographic composition of SCS student enrollment is: 73% African American, 15% Hispanic, 7% white, 2% multiple races, 1% Asian, and 1% other races (Shelby County Schools, 2020). Fifty percent of its student enrollment is socio-economically disadvantaged; consequently, all students are provided a free lunch each day. Shelby County Schools has an annual budget of 1.4 billion dollars and spends $13,470 per pupil. Its teacher force is 80% female

and 20% male and consists of the following racial breakdown: 76% African American, 22% white, 1% Asian, and 1% Hispanic.

Measures

National Stressful Events Survey for PTSD Short Scale (NSESSS-PTSD)

This quantitative study utilized two surveys to capture data from participants. Both surveys were administered through Qualtrics. To assess the participants' level of trauma exposure, the National Stressful Events Survey for PTSD Short Scale (NSESSS-PTSD) was administered. The NSESSS is a nine-item assessment that measures stress after an event. The assessment consists of a five-point Likert scale with the following answer choices: Not at All, A little bit, Moderately, Quite a bit, and Extremely. Psychometric testing for the NSESSS-PTSD yielded a strong result. Cronbach's α=0.91, and it measures the reliability of a scale (LeBeau, et al., 2014; Field, 2013). A sample item from the survey reads, "Having "flashbacks," that is, you suddenly acted or felt as if a stressful experience from the past was happening all over again (for example, you reexperienced parts of a stressful experience by seeing, hearing, smelling, or physically feeling parts of the experience)." This response is followed by the five answer choices above. Each answer choice of the NSESSS-PTSD is assigned a value from zero to four. The scores for the NSESSS-PTSD range from zero to 36 with higher scores indicating greater severity of PTSD (APA, 2013). Clinicians are asked to total respondent answers and divide by nine to find the average score. The totals will be calculated and added to SPSS for further analysis.

Leadership Attributes Inventory

The second assessment in this study is the Leadership Attributes Inventory (LAI). The

National Center for Research in Vocational Assessment reports the purpose of the LAI is to assess 37 attributes that cause leaders to be successful at leading vocational schools (Moss, 1994). The assessment consists of 37 questions and can be completed in approximately 15 minutes. Each question measures an attribute to assess six primary leadership performances: inspires a shared vision, fosters unity and collaboration, efficiently exercise power and empowers others, community building and influence, creates an atmosphere for learning, and meets the job-related needs of colleagues. The test-retest coefficient scores for the LAI were high for most scores with three scoring in satisfactory range. The internal consistency measured alpha at .97 and .98 for two tests. A strong relationship exists between inventory scores and current level of effectiveness (White, Asche, and Fortune, 1992, Migler, 1991, as cited by Nickels & Ford, 2017). A data file was compiled from each respondent after completion, and the data was added to SPSS for further analysis.

Data Analysis

For this study, a systematic process of collecting and analyzing data was followed. As mentioned, study participants were contacted by email. The total number of emails sent, and the total number of respondents were captured in a table along with demographic data that shows gender and race. An a priori power analysis indicated 55 participants would be needed to find statistical significance with a moderate effect size and an alpha level of .05. Due to the sensitive nature of the NSESSS-PTSD questionnaire, anonymity did not allow for personal phone calls. Typically, an analysis for response bias is necessary and a wave analysis is performed, but participant anonymity will not allow for the implementation of these techniques (Creswell, 2012).

A table of descriptive statistics was created to identify the mean, median, mode, and standard deviations for each variable. This information was useful in identifying trends in the data and it helped with comparisons among participants. The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) was used for all data analysis procedures, and for this study, a linear regression was run to analyze the data. The linear regression is ideal for predicting values of dependent variables based on the value of independent values (Lund Research Ltd, 2018). For this study, the researcher assumes that level of trauma (independent variable) will predict decision making, interpersonal relationships, and problem-solving skills scores (dependent variables), and it is hypothesized that those scoring higher in trauma will have lower dependent variable scores than their counterparts.

Standardized residuals and scatterplots were examined for normal distribution and homoscedasticity between variables. Homoscedasticity occurs when the independent variable remains constant (Field, 2013). Statistical significance was determined by examining the F value where $p < .05$, and R^2 was examined to see how much of the variance was accounted for in the model which also establishes effect size in regression analysis. Ideally, the researcher would like a large effect size of .26 or above; however, a moderate effect size of .13 was the goal. Finally, results were interpreted to answer the research questions above and to determine next steps for research. Tables for each analysis were provided with explanations of the values listed and their significance to the study.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

The purpose of this quantitative study was to determine if National Stressful Events Survey for PTSD Short Scale (NSESSS) scores are statistically significant predictors of decision-making skills, interpersonal skills, and problem-solving ability in school principals. In this chapter, the researcher provides and explains survey results and descriptive statistics, with attention given to p, F, and R^2 values. Three research questions were answered from this study and they are as follows:

1. To what extent does level of trauma exposure impact decision-making ability in school principals?
2. To what extent does level of trauma exposure impact ability to form interpersonal relationships in school principals?
3. To what extent does level of trauma exposure impact problem-solving ability in school principals?

To accomplish this task, two surveys were administered. Trauma exposure was assessed by the NSESSS which consisted of nine questions that measured the level of posttraumatic stress within the past seven days. Reliability estimates for the NSESSS are reported at Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.91$ (LeBeau, et al., 2014). For the current study Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.878$; thus, the results are similar,

and both suggest a high level of internal consistency. Leadership effectiveness was assessed by the LAI which measured effectiveness for 37 qualities commonly demonstrated by leaders. Three hundred sixty-two principals in SCS were solicited for this study, and 96 principals participated from varying leadership roles which can be found in Table 1.

Table 1

What is your current leadership role?

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Principal	43	44.8	44.8	44.8
Vice Principal	10	10.4	10.4	55.2
Assistant Principal	43	44.8	44.8	100
Total	96	100	100	

Fifty-eight females participated in the study and 38 males. To protect the identity of older principals, SCS required that participants be allowed to choose an age range. Descriptive statistics are displayed in Table 2. Race and ethnicity data included the following: 80.2% African Americans, 1% multi-racial, and 18.8% white.

Table 2

How old are you?

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
31-40	19	19.8	19.8	19.8
41-50	51	53.1	53.1	72.9
51+	26	27.1	27.1	100
Total	96	100	100	

Nine principals serve in K-8 schools; 34 serve in elementary schools; 19 serve in middle

schools; and 34 serve in high schools. Table 3 contains the years of experience disclosed by the

participants.

Table 3

How many years have you served as an administrator?

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
1	2	2.1	2.1	2.1
2	6	6.3	6.3	8.3
3	10	10.4	10.4	18.8
4	11	11.5	11.5	30.2
5	13	13.5	13.5	43.8
6	2	2.1	2.1	45.8
7	7	7.3	7.3	53.1
8	5	5.2	5.2	58.3
9	2	2.1	2.1	60.4
10	6	6.3	6.3	66.7
11	3	3.1	3.1	69.8
12	7	7.3	7.3	77.1
13	3	3.1	3.1	80.2
14	2	2.1	2.1	82.3
15	4	4.2	4.2	86.5
16	1	1	1	87.5
17	1	1	1	88.5
18	4	4.2	4.2	92.7
19	1	1	1	93.8
20	2	2.1	2.1	95.8
23	1	1	1	96.9
25	1	1	1	97.9
29	2	2.1	2.1	100
Total	96	100	100	

Research Question 1. A linear regression was conducted to determine if NSESSS scores are significant predictors of decision-making scores. Descriptive statistics are reported in Table 4. By observation, NSESSS scores were normally distributed. Standard residuals were also

normally distributed. There was no evidence of homoscedasticity or heteroscedasticity in the normality plots. There was not a statistically significant relationship between NSESSS scores and decision-making ability scores $F(1, 94) = .011$, $p = .915$. Effect size was negligible with less than .001% of the variance accounted for in the model, $R^2 = 0.0001$. Thus, NSESSS scores were not statistically significant predictors of decision-making scores which results in the researcher accepting the null hypothesis.

Table 4

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations for Study Variables (n=96)

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4
1. NSESSS	0.86	0.7	-	0.03	0.01	0
2. Sensitivity, respect	5.16	0.81		-	0.19	0.05
3. Decision-making	4.99	0.74			-	0.67
4. Problem-solving	4.96	0.73				-

*$p < .01$

Research Question 2. A linear regression was conducted to determine if NSESSS scores are statistically significant predictors of interpersonal skill scores. For this study, interpersonal skills were measured by sensitivity/respect scores on the LAI. Descriptive statistics are reported in Table 4. By observation, NSESSS scores were normally distributed. The average NSESSS scores are reported in Table 5. Standard residuals were also normally distributed. There was no evidence of homoscedasticity or heteroscedasticity in the normality plots. Additionally, there was not a statistically significant relationship between NSESSS scores and sensitivity/respect scores $F(1, 94) = .065$, $p = .800$. Effect size was negligible with less than .001% of the variance accounted for in the model, $R^2 = 0.0001$. Thus, NSESSS scores were not statistically significant

predictors of interpersonal skills scores which results in accepting the null hypothesis.

Table 5

NSESSS Average Score (n = 96)

	N	%
.00	11	11.5%
.11	3	3.1%
.22	11	11.5%
.33	7	7.3%
.44	5	5.2%
.55	9	9.4%
.66	3	3.1%
.77	4	4.2%
.88	6	6.3%
1.00	1	1.0%
1.11	3	3.1%
1.22	5	5.2%
1.33	4	4.2%
1.44	3	3.1%
1.55	3	3.1%
1.66	3	3.1%
1.77	3	3.1%
1.88	4	4.2%
2.00	2	2.1%
2.11	3	3.1%
2.22	1	1.0%
2.44	1	1.0%
2.88	1	1.0%

Research Question 3. A linear regression was conducted to determine if NSESSS scores are statistically significant predictors of problem-solving scores. Descriptive statistics are reported in Table 4. By observation, NSESSS scores were normally distributed. Standard residuals were also normally distributed. The mean scores are reported in Table 6. There was no evidence of homoscedasticity or heteroscedasticity in the normality plots. There was not a

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statistically significant relationship between NSESSS scores and problem-solving score, $F(1, 94)$ = .000, p = .993. Effect size was negligible with less than .001% of the variance accounted for in the model, R^2 = 0.00. Thus, NSESSS scores were not statistically significant predictors of problem-solving scores which results in the researcher accepting the null hypothesis.

Table 6

Descriptive Statistics

	N	Mean
22. - Sensitivity, respect - Shows genuine concern for the feelings of others and regard for them as individuals.........	96	5.16
35. - Decision-making - Makes timely decisions that are in the best interest of the organization by analyzing all available information, distilling key points, and drawing relevant conclusions.........	96	4.99
36. - Problem-solving - Effectively identifies, analyzes, and resolves difficulties and uncertainties at work..........	96	4.96

In summation, a linear regression was conducted to determine if NSESSS scores were statistically significant predictors of qualities commonly associated with school leaders. Ninety-

six current principals in SCS participated in the study. Results indicated that NSESSS scores were not statistically significant predictors of decision-making, interpersonal, and problem-solving skills in school principals. The null hypotheses were accepted for each research question. Possible reasons for these outcomes will be discussed in Chapter V.

CHAPTER V

SUMMARY, IMPLICATIONS, LIMITATIONS, SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE

RESEARCH, AND CONCLUSION

Chapter V is a summary of the research results and a comparison of the results from prior

studies. Implications for educational leaders, study limitations, suggestions for future research,

and conclusions will be discussed.

Rationale for the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine how traumatic life experiences impact factors

commonly attributed to school principals. Extant literature on this topic is limited; therefore, this

study will add to future research. According to Mascall & Leithwood (2012), the average tenure

of school principals is three years, which creates instability in the learning environment, and

student achievement suffers as the principal carousel turns. Understanding how trauma impacts

leadership attributes to slow this process was the aim of this study.

Trauma is widely researched and multifaceted, but for this study, attachment, ACEs, and

trauma in general were examined to learn of its impact across the lifespan. Bowlby is the father

of Attachment Theory, and he believed that children formed bonds at birth but developed deficits

when bonding was absent (Bowlby, 1988). Hong and Park (2012) contend that children with

poor attachment have poor interpersonal skills. Felitti et al. (1998) conducted the original ACE

study which included 9,508 participants and many others have added to the body of ACE

research. Hughes et al. (2016) stated that high ACE exposures contribute to low mental health, and Larson et al. (2019) concluded that trauma effects decision-making. The types of trauma, as identified in this study, have an impact on factors pertinent to leaders; thus, it becomes important to understand the depths of its influence and explore a pathway forward to remedy its effects.

Review of Methodology

For this study, convenience sampling was used. Three hundred sixty-two principals were invited, and 96 Shelby County Schools (SCS) principals, vice-principals, and assistant principals participated. Each participant completed the NSESSS to measure their level of trauma exposure, and they completed the LAI to measure their leadership qualities. A linear regression was conducted in the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) to determine the effects of the predictor variable on each criterion variable. A table of descriptive statistics was analyzed and included in Chapter IV. Standardized residuals and scatterplots were examined for normal distribution. Statistical significance was assessed, and the corresponding tables were included in Chapter IV.

Measures

National Stressful Events Survey for PTSD Short Scale (NSESSS-PTSD)

The NSESSS is a nine-item assessment that measures stress after an event. Each question was answered on 5-point Likert scale. Each answer choice was assigned a value from zero to four and scores were calculated by adding the values of each response and dividing by nine to obtain an average total score. Based on average score, each participant score received a level of severity rating: 0 = *none*, 1 = *mild*, 2 = *moderate*, 3 = *severe*, and 4 = *extreme*. Sixty-two percent of participants scored in the none to mild range; 30% scored in the mild to moderate range; and

eight percent scored in the moderate to severe range. Possible reasons for the low trauma exposure scores will be addressed in the limitations section. Cronbach's α = .91 for the NSESSS and Cronbach's α = .878 for the current study indicates that the scores from the NSESSS are reliable and demonstrate adequate internal consistency.

Leadership Attributes Inventory (LAI)

The LAI is a 37-item questionnaire that assesses leadership characteristics. The assessment asks participants to read the leadership statement and select an answer based on their level of agreement. Answer choices include: *Very Undescriptive, Somewhat Undescriptive, Undescriptive, Somewhat Descriptive, Descriptive, and Very Descriptive*. Most participants rated themselves high or in an affirming manner: *Somewhat Descriptive, Descriptive, and Very Descriptive*. Ninety-eight percent of participants answered in an affirming manner when responding to the sensitivity/respect (interpersonal skills) statement. Ninety-eight percent of participants also answered in an affirming manner when responding to the decision-making statement. Ninety-seven percent of participants answered in an affirming manner when responding to the problem-solving statement. This data suggests response bias. See Table 6 for means which are based on a 6-point scale.

Overview of Findings

This research study was conducted to determine the effects of trauma on factors pertinent to leadership effectiveness. The following research questions were answered by the study:

1. To what extent does level of trauma exposure impact decision-making ability in school principals?

2. To what extent does level of trauma exposure impact interpersonal skills ability in school principals?

3. To what extent does level of trauma exposure impact problem-solving ability in school principals?

The researcher hypothesized that principals with high trauma exposures will have lower decision-making, interpersonal, and problem-solving ability scores as compared to principals with low trauma exposures. A linear regression was conducted for each question; unfortunately, no statistical significance was found for either of the research questions. Therefore, the null hypothesis for each question was accepted which stated that there is no statistical relationship between level of trauma exposure and decision-making, interpersonal, and problem-solving scores in school principals.

Admittedly, the results were surprising but after reflecting on the possible causes, the results seemed logical. More discussion on possible limitations will occur in the limitations section. Overall, survey distribution went well, but with the first distribution came a minor issue where participant emails were sent to spam folders because they were sent from Qualtrics. Therefore, the researcher created an anonymous link in Qualtrics and sent the link to all principals, vice-principals, and assistant principals from my SCS email. From this point, the process flowed seamlessly.

The researcher explored other reasons for the low trauma exposure scores because the ACE study conducted by Felitti et al. (1998) indicated that 50% of participants reported having at least one ACE and 25% indicated they had two or more adverse experiences. A similar study was conducted in Shelby County, Tennessee reported that 21% of study participants have

experienced two or three ACEs (ACE Task Force of Shelby County, Tennessee, 2014). The large number of participants in both studies allows for generalization to the population. Although the current study did not measure ACEs, it is reasonable to assume that at least half the participants have experienced one ACE and about a quarter or more have experienced two or more ACEs, but the current study results indicated that participants had little to no traumatic stress.

After reviewing the results, the role of resilience in the life of leaders was considered. Gonsalves (2017) conducted a qualitative study with women leaders who were bullied in childhood. She concluded that as a result of bullying, women leaders lead with empathic, altruistic, and positive approaches. Johnson (2018) conducted a qualitative study and a theme emerged which stated that challenges can be overcome, and they are not an excuse. Diehl (2013) conducted a study and concluded the common characteristic among participants was that adversity can lead to growth and opportunity, but pain and loss is part of the process. Neiworth conducted a similar study and found that women with ACEs have greater resilience and experiencing divorce in childhood promotes optimism. Breisch and Lexmond (2013) studied growth after trauma and found that leaders who grow tend to be more purpose centered, more learning centered, and more relationship centered. Moreover, Meers (2009) contended that adverse life experiences aid in the development of leaders. Considering these conclusions, resilience seems to be a biproduct of trauma or adversity and it has a positive impact on our lives which could bolster leadership qualities.

In recent years, grit has become an increasingly popular topic. Grit was not included in the literature review of this study; however, there is a considerable body of research that speaks to its impact. Duckworth et al. (2007) defined grit as, "perseverance and passion for long-term

goals" (p. 1087). The question becomes how does grit impact effectiveness even with high trauma exposure? Duckworth et al. (2007) contended that one with grit stays the course in the face of failure. This quality is essential to the leader as setbacks often happen during the school year and especially after state test results are released. The will to persevere and keep a positive outlook in difficult times is not easy; yet it is par for the course.

Implications for Educational Leaders

The results of this study were not statistically significant; however, there is much to be gleaned from extant literature on trauma. It was established by the CDC (2019) that toxic stress from ACEs can change brain development and affect decision-making. Hong and Park (2012) reported poor social and communication skills are common to individuals with insecure attachment which leads to poor interpersonal skills. Hughes et al. (2016) concluded that individuals with higher ACE exposures never or rarely deal with problems well and indicated difficulties in thinking and decision-making. Considering these factors and others, the implications for educational leaders are vast.

Although the current study did not yield statistically significant results, extant literature presented in this study suggests deep, honest reflection on past traumas and their impact on current effectiveness. A mental health professional may be needed to navigate this process. The researcher encourages meaningful dialogue with parents, grandparents, and older siblings about the details of birth and childhood to identify unknown traumas. An example of an often-overlooked condition that could be traumatizing to infants is colic. The Mayo Clinic (2021) defines colic as intense crying for no apparent reason in healthy infants. Medical interventions today are not much better than they were when study participants were infants (Roberts, 2004),

colic can lead to cases of Shaken Baby Syndrome (Mayo Clinic, 2021). After learning about your history, an ACE assessment is recommended. The results will identify the level of trauma exposure and higher numbers indicate greater risk for adverse effects on decision-making, interpersonal skills, and problem-solving skills.

For superintendents, this study uncovers the need for social emotional and mental health support for those that lead. Many school districts have employee assistance programs, but it is not enough. Administrators need other supports that will aid in this process to minimize and help manage the effects of past and present stressors. Each school is a multi-million-dollar business in itself; thus, it stands to reason that helping leaders reach their fullest potentials is paramount. Identifying the much-needed supports can be determined through questionnaires and surveys. Oftentimes, the financial resources and time are limited, but the benefits of receiving support could outweigh the long-term cost and impact.

This study is not intended to imply that leaders with high trauma exposures are unfit to lead, but the intent is to encourage exploration of other avenues that are commonly overlooked in the interviewing and hiring process. The addition of other metrics to gauge leader effectiveness are suggested. As it stands, superintendents are interviewing and hiring leaders with severe deficits in foundational leadership qualities to lead multi-million-dollar schools only to relieve them of their duties within three years. When this happens, student achievement suffers, money is lost, teacher turnover increases, school image suffers, and many other factors are negatively impacted.

Limitations

The first limitation of this study is related to the trauma survey. The NSESSS has high internal consistency, but it did not appear to measure trauma as anticipated. While speaking with a colleague about survey results, the researcher explained that the results were not significant which was shocking when considering the gamut of trauma: loss of a parent, divorce, domestic violence, separation from caregiver at birth, severe illnesses like cancer, etc. The colleague explained that she only considered trauma as sexual, physical, or mental abuse and that she never thought that any of those named could be considered traumatizing. The researcher had a moment of clarity and realized that a clear definition or description of trauma was not provided in the participant email or the Qualtrics survey. The researcher believes this could be why many participants scored in the none to mild range on the NSESSS. Table 5 illustrates the average score for survey participants. The NSESSS is scored on 5-point scale: 0 = *None*, 1 = *Mild*, 2 = *Moderate*, 3 = *Severe*, 4 = *Extreme*.

Another limitation of this study is the types of questions that were asked on the NSESSS. Question nine states, "Being extremely irritable or angry to the point where you yelled at other people, got into fights, or destroyed things?" This question implies extreme violence and answering in the affirmative could be embarrassing to one that leads a school and encourages students daily to make good choices and to control their emotions. Undoubtedly, this could have caused participants to answer untruthfully. Also, many of the participants may know the researcher from SCS administrative meetings which could have also caused reluctance in answering truthfully to avoid judgement. Even though the participant email stated the survey is anonymous, it is possible that a degree of suspicion yet remained. Conversely, those that do not know the researcher may have been apprehensive with sharing sensitive information about their

emotional well-being, which is plausible.

The last limitation of the study is the racial make up of study participants. Table 7 lists descriptive statistics for race/ethnicity. A disproportionate number of participants identify as African American/Black as compared to white and multiracial. No Hispanic leaders were represented in the study although there are Hispanic principals and assistant principals in SCS. This is not a representative sample of the nation's population. Even if study results had been statistically significant, they would not be generalizable to the population. Eighty percent of participants were African American, one percent multiracial, and 19 percent white. This is not a representation of the United States' population.

Suggestions for Future Research

For future research, the researcher suggests the study be repeated with clear definitions and examples of trauma. Consequently, participants will be able to reflect on their experiences and answer more accurately which may lead to a higher disclosure of trauma exposure. Additionally, the researcher may benefit from conducting the study in a school district where he/she is not employed. Other limitations may arise, but the likelihood of response bias decreases. The remaining characteristics of the study should be kept as is to substantiate or deny the limitations of the study.

Another suggestion for future research is to conduct the study using the same survey guidelines, but in this study, the principals from several schools are asked to complete the NSESSS, and a random teacher from each participating principal's school is asked to complete the LAI based on teacher observations of their leader. The same criterion variables should be analyzed: decision-making ability, problem solving, and sensitivity/respect. A multiple

regression should be conducted to determine if trauma exposure scores are predictors of the criterion variables. The researcher anticipates that more accurate data will be obtained, and statistical significance is possible.

Lastly, the researcher suggests a mixed-methods study so that quantitative and qualitative data is collected. Creswell (2012) stated that quantitative data allows for generalizing to the population while qualitative data focuses on interview data from a small number of participants. After the quantitative data is collected, a multiple regression should be conducted to determine if trauma is a statistically significant predictor of the criterion variables. The qualitative data that is collected will provide insight on how leaders perceive trauma and its impact on their lives. Qualitative data analysis techniques should be employed to identify significant themes.

Conclusions

In summation, a quantitative study was conducted with principals, vice-principals, and assistant principals that are employed by SCS. The study included 96 participants from varying school levels, ages, and ethnicities. The purpose of the study is to help leaders reach their fullest potential so that they can be their best selves for the students, staff, and community they lead. Three research questions were answered from the data obtained from the participants. The researcher aimed to determine if trauma exposures scores were statistically significant predictors of decision-making, interpersonal, and problem-solving skills. A linear regression was conducted to determine statistical significance with each criterion variable, but no statistical significance was found; therefore, the null hypotheses were accepted for each research question. Implications for educational leaders was discussed, study limitations were identified, and suggestions for future research were provided.

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VITA

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OBJECTIVE

To obtain a Principalship in a school district where I can apply my knowledge, experience, and New Leaders training to build a school community where high-quality teaching and learning occurs in all classrooms and academic achievement soars for all students.

Education

    University of Mississippi
    Doctor of Philosophy in Educational Leadership—degree conferred May 2021
    University of Mississippi
    Educational Specialist K-12 Leadership—degree conferred December 2015
    Argosy University
    Master of Mental Health Counseling—degree conferred August 2013
    Jackson State University
    Bachelor of Music Education—degree conferred May 1999

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

Shelby County Schools

Assistant Principal 2017-2021

- **New Leaders Principal Pathways Program** (2019-2020)
  As a New Leader, I have learned several leadership skills necessary to improve a low performing school. Turnaround strategies include: alignment of curriculum and instruction through cyclical classroom observations coupled with high-quality feedback, analysis and use of data sources effectively, building strong teams, creating a culture of collaboration and achievement, alignment of resources to support instructional needs, and personal leadership.

- **Math Department Lead** (2020-2021)
  I am the lead administrator for the Math Department. District CFA data from fall 2020 indicated that we showed growth in the following content areas when compared to 2019 CFA data: Algebra 1—0.4% On Track + Mastery to 3.3% On Track + Mastery; Algebra II—17.3% On Track + Mastery to 37.6% On Track + Mastery; Geometry—2.9% On Track + Mastery to 10.7% On Track + Mastery.

- **Data Team** (2019-2021)
  As the lead administrator for the school's data team, I analyzed data and identified

deficit areas at the start of the school year. We determined that more data was needed between district CFAs; therefore, we identified effective teachers and administrators to create 2 additional CFAs per quarter so that our students are assessed on a tri-weekly cycle. In PLCs, teacher teams analyzed CFA data, item-analyses are performed, and corrective instruction is planned. This practice has enabled teachers to identify misconceptions, learning gaps, and ineffective instructional practices and appropriately plan reteaching/retesting.

o **12th Grade Administrator** (2018-2021)
The current 12th grade class at Cordova High School consists of approximately 500 students. I am responsible for all 12th grade discipline, parent concerns, and teacher support. I am also charged with reducing the out-of-school suspension rate school-wide, and facilitating parent conferences designed to address behavior and attendance concerns. I also lead restorative circles to prevent conflict and promote reconciliation between students. Our suspension and chronic absenteeism rates have decreased significantly.

o **SCS Equity Champion** (2019-2020)
At Cordova High School, I am the school's Equity Champion. As Equity Champion, I provided Implicit Bias training and lead small group sessions with teacher and related staff members. In these sessions, a safe space is provided for teachers to be self-reflective and transparent. Instruction is provided on how to address personal biases so that healthy, non-judgmental relationships are formed with colleagues and students. In addition, surveys have been administered to students to identify cultural deficits and obtained invaluable feedback. This data is used to create an inclusive environment where all cultures are welcomed and celebrated.

o **Talent Management** (2019-2020)
As the 12th grade administrator, I interviewed and recommended for hire 11 non-instructional staff members that currently assist with the daily operations of Cordova High School. Additionally, I create the daily schedules for the Non-Instructional employees, and I monitor their program of work. I am responsible for their formal evaluations and I suggest and/or provide development training as needed. When needed, I also participate in interviews for instructional staff.

o **Community Outreach** (2016-2018)
As an Assistant Principal at Georgian Hills Middle School in 2017, I managed several operational and academic programs to support the academic culture and climate of the school. I implemented a program called "Come to School with Your Child Day" which helped to bridge the gap between school and community. Parents were invited to participate in a 2-hour event during regular school hours where we simulated a school day. Parents, with the assistance of their children, rotated to each of their classes on a 15-minute cycle. Thirty-one percent of our parents participated. I led the same event at Sherwood Middle School in 2016 where 18.5% of our parents participated. Moreover,
Promotional Summer School Administrator 2017 (MS), 2018 & 2019 (ES), 2020 (HS)
As the Summer School Site Administrator, I was responsible for managing the daily operations for teachers and students. I monitored the instructional program by performing regular classroom observations. I promoted a positive school culture by

implementing the protocols for behavior management per the SCS student handbook. I assigned teachers and non-instructional staff members duties to ensure and maintain student safety and to accommodate student needs. Lastly, I supported teachers as they implemented various accommodations for students with special needs.

Conference Presentations
Tennessee Association of Middle Schools (TAMS)—*Emotional Intelligence in Action (2014)*

Tennessee Association of Middle Schools (TAMS)—*Progression Through Regression (2016)*