

**SURVIVING OR THRIVING:  
EDUCATOR COPING  
FOLLOWING A TRAUMATIC  
SCHOOL EXPERIENCE**

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# DEDICATION

To my little sister, Juanita Joy.  
Our trauma journeys were much the same  
yet also very different.

I miss you each and every day.  
Thank you for being the best guardian  
angel a big sister could ever have.



# PURPOSE OF RESEARCH

- ❑ Examine the coping, change, and systemic support experiences of K-12 educators following a school-based trauma
- ❑ Collect “lessons learned” from school-based trauma survivors



# RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- ❑ How do educators cope following a school-based trauma?
- ❑ How do educators change following a school-based trauma?
- ❑ What systemic supports are available to help educators following a trauma?
- ❑ What advice do these educators have for others who may experience a school-based trauma?



# LITERATURE REVIEW

- ❑ School Violence
- ❑ Trauma
- ❑ Stress & Coping
- ❑ Post Traumatic Growth\*



# METHODOLOGY

Qualitative research design with snowball sampling participant identification process.



# PARTICIPANTS & TRAUMA

- ❑ Participants:
  - ❑ Observed or experienced traumatic violence, injury, or death in a K-12 educational setting;
  - ❑ Were willing to talk about how they had coped and changed as a result of their experience;
  - ❑ Were first responders on the scene with initial responsibility for taking care of the critical life and death needs of students and faculty.
  
- ❑ 3 Accidents, 5 Assaults, and 5 School Shootings



# TRAUMA

“I heard a lot of noise. It sounded like a boom and I saw the student slumping—with a hole in her side about the size of a silver dollar. The bullet was a hollow-point bullet and it had gone through the backpack...I began placing my hand on her hole to stop the bleeding.”





# TRAUMA

“I remember walking into the bathroom, I saw the student was lying on the floor and seeing a long knife and the blade had bent. One of the secretaries and the athletic secretary was there and she’s trying to get paper towels out of dispenser. Another teacher was trying to run to find gloves and there was already somebody—another staff member who was on the phone with 9-1-1. I’m like trying to keep the happy face on and in the back of my mind I’m thinking “Oh, dear God, oh, my gosh.”



# TRAUMA

“One of our buses was struck head-on by a truck that had crashed into a car on the highway about five miles from our school. The driver of the car was killed on impact. Our bus driver suffered serious non-life threatening injuries. Many of the students on the bus suffered a number of non-life threatening injuries—broken noses, broken legs or arms, cuts, scrapes, and bruises. I arrived on the scene about five minutes after the accident not knowing what I was arriving to—just that one of our buses was in an accident.”



# STUDY PARTICIPANTS

- ❑ Eight school leaders (principals and assistant principals) and five teachers or school staff.
- ❑ Eight women and five men.
- ❑ Ages 41–70 years old at the time of interview.
- ❑ Professional experience ranged from 13–41 years with an average of 25.7 years.
- ❑ Eleven of the thirteen educators were Caucasian, one educator described their racial identity as Hispanic and another as Filipino-Japanese.



# THEMES & FINDINGS

- ❑ Coping
- ❑ Change
- ❑ Support Systems
- ❑ Advice for Others



# THEMES – COPING

- ❑ Focus on caring for others
- ❑ A need to manage emotions
- ❑ Return to work routine
- ❑ Discomfort and need to reframe emotions



# COPING

“So I locked down the school, talked to the district office and then I ran back into the shooting scene—I guess I decided it was important for me to sit with the kids and tell them, “I am here” until help arrives. And so I just sat down and I just wanted to talk to the kids and tell them that they were okay, that they were loved, and that they were safe and that I was there to take care of them.”



# COPING

“All of the sudden the sheriff’s car comes roaring back over the hill. The officer jumps out of his car and he is frantic, he is running around. I said, “Can I help?” And he said, “I got to get something under the car.” I realized then that he was saying the students scalp had attached itself to the bottom of the car wheel. So he got that scalp and drove off and that was so weird. I was just standing there and watching this and then realized I needed to refocus and get back to taking care of things.”



# COPING

“So it was really busy afterwards, and I think for me, what I've learned about myself is probably dealing with the stress of what happened, the trauma of what happened...It was good for me to keep busy, because—and it's not that I didn't cry, but I couldn't cry because you had to go back to work and you had to hold it together.”





# THEMES – CHANGE

- ❑ Increased stress and rumination
- ❑ Need to seek support
- ❑ Emotional reaction or triggers
- ❑ Confidence in dealing with future trauma
- ❑ Increased empathy



# CHANGE

“It was about 7 months I think—I fell apart. It's like my body, I hit the rock bottom, my body hurt. I mean, I was in lots of pain and had headaches, and I had no energy, and then I found out I was depressed. I would say at that time it was all about finally finding help, going back to one of my providers and saying, "I need you to fix me. I am broken." I can't fix myself. I tried. I have been trying, and it's not working.”



# CHANGE

“I remember the next year I got moved—I was half time at one school and half time at another school. They had—they didn’t inform me because I was half, half—so I didn’t always get the information—but they had an intruder drill. At the time, I didn’t know though it was a drill. So they just said intruder, intruder—and I started shaking, I locked all the doors real quick, I told students that we’re going to get down and I turned off the lights. That was just terrifying. When I found out it was just a drill, I was relieved, but I was still scared, I just wanted to go home after that. I was done.”



# THEMES - SUPPORTS

- ❑ Discomfort talking
- ❑ Positive support family
- ❑ Positive support friends
- ❑ Positive support colleagues
- ❑ Varying support school administration
- ❑ Professional counseling
- ❑ Changes in personal belief systems



# SUPPORTS

“I experienced a lot of hurt in the end. What I found out and learned through a variety of things was from one of my closest friends. She never even acknowledged the event happened. I finally asked her about that because that was really hurtful to me. What I learned from her, and then as I looked back, it was so traumatic for her that I had gone through this. She didn’t know how to deal with it. So her way to deal with it was to close it off. It didn’t change the hurt, because I was really hurt, but it was eye-opening to me that accidentally through her love and care for me, she hurt me in essence.”



# SUPPORTS

“For me, I mean least helpful was the district. It was like I felt I had to fight to get everything, you know. So, the only thing the district has done for me—was giving me an opportunity to transfer here to this school.”



# SUPPORTS

“They really need to send someone or drive out and just check in with you. Ask “how are you doing?” after a trauma. And you know—not just take “I’m fine” as a patent answer. But rather say, “I’m going to shut the door. We’re going to talk. I’m going to make sure you're okay.” And no one’s ever done that.”



# THEMES - ADVICE

- ❑ Prepare for litigation
- ❑ Provide incident debriefing
- ❑ Practice emergency operations
- ❑ Post recovery planning
- ❑ Check in regularly (school)
- ❑ Take care of yourself





# ADVICE

“Going through a trial in a lot of ways was more traumatic than the incident itself. It was having to relive it to a certain extent—you get to a point where like, okay it happened, I acknowledge it, I can say this is how I feel about it, but I put everything in the box. I put a bow around the box and then put the box on the shelf. And now you had to dig it out all again, it was that part of it. And we’re not used to being deposed and sitting on witness stands and that’s just such a—it was an intimidating experience.”



# ADVICE

“Well, when I told my buddy, he lives in California now, that I was going to talk to you, I said, “You know what, is there something you want me to convey?” So this is an email from my buddy who went through this same thing as me. He said, “The thing that I would want to present is we didn’t debrief as a staff in a formal setting until June.” So six months it took for us to get a debrief. We talked with each other, drank, etcetera, but there was no large group meeting until we pushed for the one in June. It should have happened much sooner and didn’t until we pushed for it. It should have happened immediately and involved teachers, admin, the district, and the police. Why that never happened is still a wonder to me. I could have learned and healed with just a little forethought.”



# ADVICE

“I think my advice would be to the people around that person, to keeping (sic) checking on them—don’t just forget about it. Don’t do something now and then forget about it. Check on them in a week, and then two weeks, and then a month, and then after that because—what you say initially—you don’t really know what you want or you need. But you start figuring it out eventually and then when you do need something, there is nothing there for you.”



# ADVICE

“After the initial incident, no one from the district did ever talk to me. I just think I was a liability to them. They were in the middle of a lawsuit and I was a liability—I don’t know how I could have been. I didn’t feel like I was in that circle of support.”



# CONCLUSIONS

- ❑ Experiencing school-based traumatic events is as horrific and difficult for K-12 staff and faculty as it is for students.
- ❑ The needs of K-12 educators who have experienced school-based trauma, regardless of courage or resilience, are marginalized.
- ❑ K-12 educators need and deserve ready-access to short- and long-term coping supports in schools following trauma.



# CONCLUSIONS (CONTINUED)

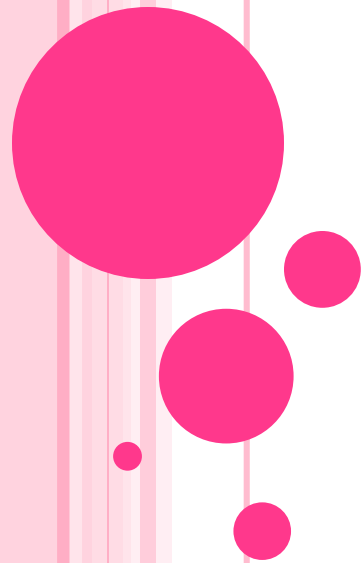
- ❑ Educators, in particular school and district leaders, lack capacity to fully understand the impact of trauma on school systems and strategies to integrate trauma-informed practices into their daily workplace interactions.
- ❑ Traumatic experiences cause anguish but can also lead to positive growth in the presence of authentic and compassionate systemic supports.
- ❑ Recovery from trauma is a long term process requiring active and collective involvement of trauma survivors, family, friends, colleagues, schools and the community.



# RECOMMENDATIONS

- ❑ Further explore impacts of school-based trauma on educators including the differential impacts of trauma and systemic supports needed to enhance coping for educators beyond the Pacific Northwest.
- ❑ Examine, identify, and implement best-practices and posttraumatic incident response strategies to minimize the short- and long-term personal and professional impacts on educators.
- ❑ Further assess theoretical implications of posttraumatic growth on K-12 educators coping with the aftermath of school-based trauma.





**THANK YOU!**