

UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY | Program for Undergraduate Research Experience (PURE)

FINAL REPORT AND REFLECTION

“THE TRANSLATION OF TRAUMA: *TRAUMA AND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION IN THE ELL CLASSROOM*”

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Project Duration: “May 01/19 – June 30/19” “8 weeks”

Date of Submission: “September 2019”

Supervisor Name: Dr. David Scott

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Section 1 – Report (5 page maximum)

INSTRUCTIONS: Your final report should be no more than five pages in length, single spaced or double spaced, NOT including Figures (graphs, charts or images). References can be in either APA or MLA formatting but should be consistent throughout the report. Please complete each section of the report and read the descriptions carefully. Upload your final report and reflection as a single document to the D2L dropbox by **11:59 PM on September 23rd, 2019**. Questions can be directed to: pure@ucalgary.ca.

INTRODUCTION

Consequently, focused on the practice of teachers, this research project endeavored to look closely at trauma informed practice (TIP) in schools and those methods and strategies teachers use when working with trauma inflicted youth who are English Language Learners (ELLs). Uncovering the effectiveness of these strategies and the successes and challenges teachers encounter in working with this unique group of students was among the objectives of this research. In undertaking this work, this research aimed at articulating effective pedagogical practices that Alberta educators can adopt when utilizing TIP with ELL students and what barriers prevent these practices from being universally integrated. The specific research questions that guided this study were as follows: What challenges mitigate the teaching and learning of refugee students? What are the intersections between traumatic experience and language acquisition? And, what practices are teachers using to navigate trauma, learning and language acquisition?

The salience of this topic in current Alberta educational contexts cannot be understated. Nearly 30,000 students in Alberta are ELL students accounting for approximately one quarter of students in the CBE (Calgary Board of Education, 2018 <https://www.cbe.ab.ca/news-centre/Pages/cbe-2018-enrolment-numbers.aspx>) and enrollment continues to rise. This number includes refugee students who have escaped war conflicted countries and enter the system with additional challenges related to their limited

opportunity for schooling and the traumas associated with their migration. At this time, there remain significant gaps in what strategies and approaches educators working with such students are using in their practice.

PROCESS

Both formal and casual interviews with University of Calgary professors as well as specialists working with refugee students informed my research direction and research findings. University of Calgary professor Dr Tweedie, postdoctoral candidate Kate Beamer as well as supervisor Dr. Scott all provided helpful academic insights and avenues of research focus as I furthered my research pursuit. Interviews with specialists working with refugee students were also a bountiful source of information. Following the arduous pursuit of ethics approval, I was able to conduct interviews with these specialists who were able to provide useful insights and sources to delve deeper into my study. Due to the timing of this research, falling in line with the end of year pressures for teachers working within the school board, interviews with educators in the field became a difficult and inconvenient pursuit. However, school counsellors, Education professors, and settlement counsellors were rich resources in regards to my research. During my interviews with these professionals, I took extensive notes and was made privy to narrative accounts of those professionals working in the field. These accounts detailed both successes and challenges faced by students and educators alike.

I was also fortunate to attend a lecture conducted by Dr. Bruce Perry, a leading professional and scholar in trauma research as well as a workshop series at the Center for Newcomers regarding the resettlement of refugee students in Alberta. Following all casual conversations with specialists and professionals as well as those above listed talks and lectures, I anonymized and reviewed my notes for later reference. Throughout the study, I

also compiled a literature review of related research.

FINDINGS

Due to the short duration of my research term and the barriers to accessing teachers due to the timing of this study, my research findings have not been finalized and my research is ongoing. Though initially centered on English language acquisition for refugee students who have experienced trauma, ultimately, through the course of my research, new avenues of inquiry opened and the need for further research was highlighted. In particular, I am interested in looking at the role of gender as it plays into the expression of trauma. As a pre-service teacher, I was however able to glean valuable insights into trauma informed pedagogy, language acquisition and classroom practices that support language and learning among refugee students. What follows is a brief summation of my findings, gaps in research as well as questions for further study.

The effect of trauma on the brain is a well-studied area, pioneered by researchers including Dr. Feuerstein and Dr. Bruce Perry. However, the effect of trauma on language acquisition is a relatively new area of study. Strong evidence as to the detrimental effects of trauma on brain development, learning and social skills provides compelling confirmation to the hindering impacts of trauma on language acquisition for ELL students. Language learning requires three key factors: control, connection and meaning (Blaustein & Kinniburgh, 2010). Therefore, students with PTSD or resettlement stress are likely to be distracted with limited ability to acquire a new language. Many refugee students are put at further disadvantage due to gaps in their schooling and often times, limited literacy in their first language. While these factors mitigate the learning of refugee students, different burdens confront teachers of trauma affected refugee learners.

Systemic and budget constraints which prevent adequate supports for teachers of ELL students as well as failure to incorporate TIP as a holistic approach in schools present significant challenges for teachers working with students who have experienced trauma. Teacher burnout and secondary trauma also pose barriers to teachers working with refugee students.

In my research interviews, a commonality between participants revolved around the crucial role that counsellors and specifically “Intercultural Wellness Specialists” provide for individuals and refugee families. Likewise, the role of Trauma Informed Practice as a whole school approach to working with refugee students are structural changes advocated by educational professionals. However, within the context of the classroom and strategies that individual teachers can incorporate to forward the learning and acclimation of refugee students included creation of a “calming center” where both aesthetics and materials such as fidget toys supported the mental and emotional health of students with PTSD. Exercise, outdoor time and the critical role of routine were also pointed to as strategies useful when working with refugee students. Of these strategies noted, and those I have excluded, there were few that specifically applied to trauma and language acquisition. However, common practices that were referenced include acknowledgement and praise, emphasis on community in the classroom, flexibility, use of visual material and the important role of rules and expectations. Practitioners attested to the success of these practices within each individual arena, TIP and ELL but not necessarily to the narrow overlap of language acquisition and trauma. As such, my research pointed to significant gaps in studies on refugee youth and language acquisition.

CONCLUSION

The effects of trauma on the brain and on learning are plentiful and well-researched. Trauma informed practice, though not a new concept is one rarely utilized for a variety of reasons. Further, significant research gaps remain in regards to trauma and language acquisition. While practitioners and scholars are able to speak to issues and practices pertaining to refugee students within each domain, it is in the poignant overlap of these bodies of study that gaps remain. More research on the implementation of trauma informed practice in real-world classrooms as well as the role of gender in regards to language acquisition and trauma is needed. For this reason, the most meaningful knowledge that I gained was from interviews practitioners working with refugee students and scholars in the area of trauma and ELL education. They offered many insights into how theoretical concepts are being put into practice and what challenges arise from that process. As I enter my next practicums, I look forward to implementing these strategies into my own teaching, adapting them to suit the specific needs of my students, and discovering what works well and what doesn't.

REFERENCES

Blaustein, M.E., Kinniburgh, K.M. (2010). *Treating Traumatic Stress in Children and Adolescents: How to Foster Resilience through Attachment, Self-Regulation and Competency*. NY, The Guilford Press

Calgary Board of Education, 2018 <https://www.cbe.ab.ca/news-centre/Pages/cbe-2018-enrolment-numbers.aspx>

Section 2 – Reflection (1 page maximum)

INSTRUCTIONS: Your final reflection should be no more than one page in length single spaced or double-spaced. Please review the questions carefully. Upload your final report and reflection as a single document to the D2L dropbox by **11:59 PM on September 23rd, 2019**. Questions can be directed to: pure@ucalgary.ca.

LEARNING & SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

In alignment with the Conference Board of Canada's Employability Skills, two skills developed that I have gained from my PURE experience are "relay(ing) information effectively for different audiences" and "draw(ing) on knowledge and skills from various disciplines to make sense of information" (Conference Board of Canada, 2019).

Relaying information effectively for different audiences

This highly useful skill I honed through conversations about my research with academics, professionals, colleagues, fellow PURE students, friends and family. In translating my research topic to diverse listeners, I was also able to further articulate my project which acted to help me retain focus. In speaking with other PURE students, friends, family, and colleagues, I assumed that my readers/listeners were unversed in the arena, unfamiliar and in some cases, uninterested in my topic. I made the interesting discovery that in using the word "pedagogy" to describe my research, I immediately alienated 50% of my audience. Thus, in order to generate interest in my research, I tried to relay information in compelling and easily digestible ways. Conversely, when speaking with academics and professionals in the field, I was challenged with conveying the value of my research and posing my inquiry in a manner which provoked excitement and input. Further, as the conceptualization of trauma spans beyond the educational arena, it was important to be able to discuss it in broad terms.

Effective communication is of utmost importance in the field of education, and all fields for that matter. Developing strategies for communication with diverse demographics has global impact and is a universally relevant skill. My goal as I foray further into the field of education is to continue to develop the skill of translating academic scholarship, research findings and narrative retellings to further academic research and eventually a PhD in education, presenting new knowledge to students at conferences and in academic journals.

Drawing on knowledge and skills from various disciplines to make sense of information

This research project provided a rich opportunity to engage in study which connected my personal experiences (as someone having experienced profound trauma in my life), professional experiences (as an ELL teacher), with learning from my Education degree. This research has great potential for further development while also having direct and immediate application for use in my pre-service teaching. The study of trauma in itself engages with disciplines including social work, psychology, medicine and even the literary arts. In the course of my research, and evaluating the sources drawn from a number of academic and professional fields, I gained confidence in my abilities to both research and make sense of multiple sources but also utilized my own knowledge to gain a deeper understanding of the project. As I foray into the teaching profession, and particularly as a secondary Language Arts teacher, where understanding of context is hugely important to the study of text, I am confident in the skills in shaping the ways in which I teach, learn and understand literature while also knowing that I have the skills to teach outside of my specialization.

Conference Board of Canada. (n.d.). Employability Skills. Retrieved from https://www.conferenceboard.ca/docs/default-source/educ-public/esp2000.pdf?sfvrsn=dd440e69_0&AspxAutoDetectCookieSupport=1