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Microadventures: Student-Empowered, Trauma Informed Outdoor Learning Projects

Jennifer Lyn Flaumenhaft

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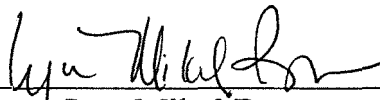
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Microadventures: Student-Empowered, Trauma-Informed Outdoor Learning Projects.

**Jennifer Flaumenhaft completed the requirements
for Honors in Education
May 2019**



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Abstract

This project began with colored Post-It notes and a classroom of Colby College students with a mission to promote student voice in an under-resourced rural elementary school. Lyn Mikel Brown's Youth-Fueled Activism class paired with Transforming Rural Experience in Education (TREE), an organization that transforms rural communities into hubs for opportunity and civic empowerment.¹ TREE uses trauma-informed principles to improve the school experience for students at Seabrook and Portside Elementary Schools. Our class worked with TREE to engage in curricular reform that reimagines learning in a way that promotes student voice. Our class took Maine Common Core State Standards and created project-based, outdoor learning lesson plans that connect the classroom material to the community. We built the basis of a curriculum around microadventures: lessons based on students' desire for more movement, time outdoors, and time together. This project also includes a podcast designed to tell the story of microadventures and make the theory and practices of microadventures accessible to schools, teachers, and parents. My Honors Thesis affirms and documents microadventures as student-empowered, trauma-informed outdoor learning. The goal of this thesis is to explore the idea that microadventures improve school climate, student experience, and student performance.

¹ "Why TREE?," Cobscook Community Learning Center, accessed May 19, 2019, <https://www.theccclc.org/why-tree>.

Introduction

“Given the chance, a child will bring confusion of the world to the woods, wash it in the creek, turn it over to see what lives on the unseen side of that confusion” – Richard Louv²

Play Time

My memories of elementary school take place somewhere between the green grass of the old soccer field and the wooden play structure. At recess there was a circus: the jugglers and the hula-hoopers. The older kids found tennis balls, apples, litter on the ground and tossed these items into the air, catching one then the other. A collection of girls lined the sidelines, hips and arms swaying effortlessly in circles. On the other side of the tennis court there was a game of kickball. The fourth-grade class rivalry was the world series of elementary school. The red bouncy ball flew into the air, some students ran for the base and others for their lives.

On other days we circled the playground collecting and trading acorn currency, then organizing the acorns into a bank in the hole of a grand oak tree. In one of the trees that lined the tennis courts, we stored all the acorns we could find. Sometimes the wood chips around the play structure became sizzling hot lava. We jumped into the twisting slide to escape the lava and the monsters that lived in the haunted old house up on the hill. We stuffed as many students as we could into that piece of blue plastic testing friction and our immune systems. Underneath the slide was a green tunnel that was our submarine. We would peek out the holes until someone called and we fell out of our plastic hideaways to climb the monkey bars and wooden castle avoiding the lava, the monsters, and the recess bell.

² Richard Louv, *Last Child in the Woods* (Chapel Hill: Algonquin Book Of Chapel Hill, 2005), 7.

In my younger years, I took refuge in slides, on top of monkey bars, and in tree trunks, but my favorite escape as a fifth-grader was a quiet spot at the end of a fence. In a nook in the fence, I held recess office hours for upset students. I told my peers to throw pebbles into a hole we would dig together in hopes that they would attack the ground and not each other. I called this space Anger Management Place (AMP). While I did not have the language for it then, I had this impulse that the outdoors had healing powers. I reimagined the outdoors as my sanctuary. It was during recess that students were granted full control over their day. Through play, we learned lessons of camaraderie, independence, and freedom. My fond memories of the stories, games, and spirit of the playground in many ways reflects the purpose of my research today: to use the outdoors as a space for students to grow, connect, and learn.

Later in life, I continued to find myself drawn to the outdoors for its therapeutic nature. In high school, a few friends and I started a hiking club. On the weekends we'd meet at the high school parking lot. We would all pile into the car of the one person with their driver's license and journey to the nearest mountain range. Saturday was dedicated to navigating the trails. With our attention directed on breathing and our footing, traversing mountains became a game of balance, concentration, and perseverance. The sense of accomplishment when we summited the mountain carried me through countless late nights studying for final exams. Humbled by the vastness of trees and choice, getting outside has been a template for my self-reflection. Throughout my young adult life, getaways covered in green blew away a suffocating to-do-lists. Energized by the freedom to explore, to run, to find flowers in rock cracks, and watch a small raindrop create a huge ripple in a hidden river at sundown, mountains and lakes are the backdrop to my favorite memories.

TREE

Five years later, I found myself in a college classroom, thinking about a new challenge posed by another form of TREE, Transforming Rural Experience in Education. My “New Civics and Youth Activism” course was centered around designing a project to help a rural, under-resourced school in Seabrook, Maine promote student voice. Our class worked with the TREE research team, a project of the Cobscook Community Learning Center, to support schools in rural areas through equity and trauma-informed learning. TREE is dedicated to finding and creating learning techniques that give students the ability to mitigate the stress they bring into the classroom. As a trauma-informed approach to rural school reform, TREE offers a resource and instructional coach, an in-school mental health provider, and ongoing professional development to help schools and communities meet basic needs, support student development, and improve instructional practices.

TREE’s trauma-informed approach is grounded firmly in four key principles: safety, connection, cultural responsiveness, and student-empowerment.³ TREE works with the Seabrook principal and teachers to reimagine the role of students in the school’s transformation. By prioritizing student voice, TREE hopes to build students’ resilience and promote healing from traumatic events through giving students a sense of personal control over their environments.⁴ While teachers cannot always know what challenges or history of adversity that students bring to school, they can create opportunities for children to voice their needs, passions, and strengths.⁵ In collaboration with Brittany, The Director of TREE, Laura, the Seabrook TREE resource coach, and the teachers and students at Seabrook Elementary School, our class set forth to develop a trauma-informed project that allowed students to be agents of their own learning.

³ Brown, et al., “Student Empowered Social Emotional Learning as Trauma-Informed Practice,” (2019).

⁴ Lyn Mikel Brown and Jenny Flaumenhaft, “Student-Empowered Curricular Change,” *Phi Delta Kappan* 100, no. 6 (2019): 13–19.

⁵ Brown and Flaumenhaft, “Student-Empowered Curricular Change,” 13–19.

The Story of Microadventures

Using fundamentals of design thinking, our TREE team of undergraduate students, practitioners, and researchers set out to develop a student-empowered approach to curricular reform. Thirteen creative minds went to the drawing board. We colored our classroom with sticky notes filled with ideas and themes. We read articles about student voice and student-empowered learning. Our goal was to allow students to use their potential, to drive their own learning. Adult-child relationships that lean toward the horizontal sharing of experience, knowledge, and power offer opportunities for students to express themselves and teachers to re-examine their assumptions about children's capabilities. We wanted to reframe the classroom as a place where students were the teachers, the experts of their own prior knowledge. We dreamed up ideas of hands-on learning projects that were both school and community centered. We brainstormed projects that allowed the students to be the problem solvers. Then we put our ideas aside and arranged a video conference with a group of third and fifth grade students at Seabrook.

When we first asked students about the kind of changes to the curriculum they would like to make, we were met with confusion. "But we don't have the power," a 5th grader responded. "The teacher tells us what to do." "Okay," we asked, "if you did have the power? If you could change anything, what would it be?" Over and over, we heard a version of the same answer: more outdoor time together, more recess, more movement.

"We wish we had more time outside."

"We used to be able to play with the younger kids at recess, and we miss spending time with them."

“Even ten more minutes of recess would be fine.”

“We love to go on field trips.”

“We’re stressed from work and we want a break. Sometimes the teacher takes the classes out for a walk because she knows how much we like to be outside.”⁶

At first I thought, *what kid does not want more recess? We need to keep asking questions, pushing these students to think critically about their education.* I felt a pull between the improvements our class imagined for Seabrook Elementary and the desires of the students. Our project was founded on the idea that we must listen to students and take their ideas seriously. The students asked for more recess so our class investigated their recess time.

Their request was more than warranted. Morning recess had been taken away to provide breakfast for children arriving to school hungry. No one liked the idea that the older students were left with just ten minutes each day to play outside, nor that the older and younger children no longer had outdoor time together; but reality ruled; the children needed to be fed and teachers could not afford to give up instructional time.⁷ Seabrook teachers faced an enormous pressure to improve test scores. For years Seabrook has had the lowest test scores and the highest absentee rates in the district.

These kids needed a low cost, low barrier, accessible solution to grant them time outside, but not extend the school day. From working with outdoor education at Colby, I thought about the term microadventures. A British adventurer and author coined the term *microadventure* as a small achievable adventure, meant for people living busy lives to find a way to utilize the outdoors.⁸ Microadventures are expeditions that focus on getting people outside, regardless of

⁶ Section from Brown and Flaumenhaft, “Student-Empowered Curricular Change,” 13–19.

⁷ Section from Brown and Flaumenhaft, “Student-Empowered Curricular Change,” 13–19.

⁸ Gary Morley and Olivia Yasukawa, “Global Explorer Alastair Humphreys Discovers ‘Microadventure,’” *CNN Sports*, August 20, 2014, <http://edition.cnn.com/2014/08/20/sport/alastair-humphreys-adventurer/index.html>.

socioeconomic class, location, and comfort level with outdoor activities. I wondered if we could bring microadventures into the classroom. I brought this idea to the class and to the head of Outdoor Education at Colby and we began to integrate microadventures into the classroom curriculum.

Although not originally intended to be a school-based activity, microadventures offer a flexible format for outside learning adventures. Microadventures were a way to support pre-existing curricula and use the school facilities and the natural resources surrounding the school to engage with the classroom material. In conversation with teachers and students about the concepts children struggled with the most and with Maine's Common Core Learning Standards in hand, our class planned microadventures for Seabrook. We recognized the time and energy teachers at Seabrook dedicate to their job. Our class's goal was to make microadventures as easy as possible for teachers to use and adapt to the classroom. We hoped that eventually it would not be the teachers planning the microadventures, but that the students would take over the design process. The idea was to create programming where students lead their own adventure, decide the direction of the lesson plan, and take agency over their learning. Our class compiled our semester's work on a website that summarized important articles written on student voice and engagement, told the story of our work with Seabrook, introduced microadventures, and offered a variety of example microadventures.

The teachers were given a new toolbox, a way to reimagine students as creative, complex, and thoughtful producers of knowledge. This project opened my eyes to the ways we can reframe current curriculum to take a new approach that empowers student voice. As the semester came to a close and TREE began developing plans to implement the approach to

another school, Portside Elementary, I wanted to continue to work with TREE on implementing and creating microadventures. I decided to dedicate my research to understanding more deeply and supporting the pedagogy that connects outdoor education to student-empowered, trauma-informed learning. In this thesis, I document my time journeying to schools around Maine that take a non-traditional approach to their curriculum, value project-based, collaborative hands-on learning, and get students involved in their work and their community. I draw from interviews with TREE coaches and mental health providers as well as students and faculty at Seabrook. Developing a thematic analysis from these conversations, I evaluate the ways in which microadventures engage students in self-directed, hands-on projects that improve the school climate for students in this high poverty, rural setting.

Methods

Seabrook

Seabrook is well north of Acadia National Park and way downeast. With stunning views of an icy pink river at sunset, lively at four in the morning with active fishermen ports, this is a small town of lobster boats, traps, and fresh seafood. Seabrook also has the nation's leading blueberry growers and marketers.⁹ Seabrook's blueberry and fishing industry has brought in many immigrant families looking for work. Shops are mostly family owned, many houses were built from scratch and passed down through generations, and with a population of less than 1,400, everyone seems to know everyone. Bustling hard at work during the summer days and silent with a whistle of a truck down a long winding road in winter, Seabrook is a town of character and compassion.

At the heart of Seabrook, people are working hard to provide for themselves and their families. This is not always the picture painted of Washington County. Outsiders talk about Washington County as a desolate, isolated part of Maine. As the poorest county in the state, the unemployment rate is as high as 60% and the average household income in Seabrook is about \$30,000 less than the typical Maine family. Over 70% of the students at Seabrook receive free or reduced lunch.¹⁰ This area deals with the effects of the opioid crisis, drug overdose, and alcohol abuse. Washington County has the lowest life expectancy for men and declining life expectancy for women.¹¹ Research suggests that children who have experienced poverty during their younger childhood years are more likely to suffer from physical health problems including weight and

⁹ "Milbridge," *The Maine Thing Quarterly*, accessed May 14, 2019, <https://visitmaine.com/places-to-go/downeast-and-acadia/milbridge>.

¹⁰ "Milbridge, Maine (ME) Income Map, Earnings Map, and Wages Data," *City-Data.com*, 2019, accessed May 14, 2019, <http://www.city-data.com/income/income-Milbridge-Maine.html>.

¹¹ "Why TREE?," Cobscook Community Learning Center.

growth stunting, cognitive development issues such as verbal ability, lower achievement test scores, and emotional and behavioral outcomes such as aggression, fighting, internalizing, withdrawing, and depression.¹²¹³ Research also demonstrates a correlation between poverty and school drop-out rate, showing that children who live in poverty are more likely to drop out of school.¹⁴

Seabrook Elementary School is home to 116 students ranging from pre-kindergarten through 6th grade. The student to faculty ratio of Seabrook Elementary is about 1 to 18. Just over 30% of the student body identify as Latinx, which distinguishes Seabrook from neighboring Washington County towns where over 90% of the student body identify as White.¹⁵ There has been a distinct effort to ensure all students meet academic standards and feel involved and accepted at Seabrook, but the state does not consider the language barrier many Seabrook students face when it comes to state testing. Seventy-two percent of the students are not meeting the standards in math and 64% of the students are not meeting the standards in literacy, and over one quarter of the population qualifies for special education services.¹⁶ Seabrook teachers feel pressure to boost standardized test scores, but lack the resources, time, and Spanish skills to get students to grade level.

Like many of the schools in Washington County, Seabrook pre-K through 6 elementary school's test scores are low, absentee rates are high, and resources are scarce. But, unlike other schools, Seabrook Elementary is committed to changing its school climate. Transforming Rural

¹² Jeanne Brooks-Gunn and Greg J. Duncan, "The Effects of Poverty on Children," *Future of Children*, 1997, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1602387>.

¹³ Jeanne Brooks-Gunn and Greg J. Duncan, "The Effects of Poverty on Children."

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ "Milbridge, Maine (ME) Income Map, Earnings Map, and Wages Data," *City-Data.com*.

¹⁶ Cobscook Community Learning Center, "TREE: Transforming Rural Experience in Education." Prospectus, Trescott, n.d., accessed May 19, 2019, www.thecclc.org.

Experience in Education (TREE) is invested in taking the unique context of Washington County and using a trauma-informed approach to work with rural schools to improve overall health and community. TREE has also been working on making the classroom a place that is culturally responsive. TREE has put effort into making sure students feel like school connects to their home life by working closely with a local nonprofit serving the Latinx community to translate the posters along the wall into Spanish and ordering new posters in Spanish that will have English translations.

Seabrook Elementary feels like a small home. The principal waves and welcomes in anyone who walks through the door. TREE has decorated the Seabrook walls with messages of inclusion. TREE posts teachers faces around the school with their best piece of advice. On the principal's door is her face with the advice bubble that reads, "The toughest job in the world is being a kid and if you remember that you'll do well." Seabrook acknowledges student circumstances in ways that emphasize positivity and perseverance. A blanket hanging front and center in the school entrance, decorated with student handprints, reads, "In the world everyone counts and everyone belongs." This poster grants students a sense of space and belonging. Students skip through the single long school hallway lined with tiger mascot trophies and words of wisdom from teachers and students. Words like empathy, kindness, trust, respect, and hard work hang in both English and Spanish, promoting expectations, social learning, and community. These posters bring warmth to the old wooden walls.

Poems written about lobster boats, blueberry fields, and family have a spot next to the poster of The Island Readers and Writers, one of the regional partner organization TREE supports at Seabrook. The Island Readers and Writers is an organization that brings Maine authors into schools to foster a love of reading and writing. Island Readers is an initiative that

invites the Maine community inside the school doors. Next to the Island Readers poster is a door leading to a closet sized room that functions as the English as a Second Language (ESL) room, the testing room, and the school's food pantry. There's a single table, a couple of chairs, a refrigerator filled with dairy products, fresh fruit, and vegetables and floor to ceiling bookshelves lined with canned soups, rice, beans, hummus, and crackers available to any child, family, or teacher looking for extra food support. Like this room, many of the rooms at Seabrook Elementary are multi-purpose spaces. The TREE resource coach's office is also the library, student work space, laundry room, and school closet with boxes filled with winter coats, boots, extra mittens, and spare clothes for students. The gym doubles as the school lunchroom and after the school day ends, becomes the EdGE, the popular after school program for 2nd-6th graders.

The classrooms are not the only multi-purpose piece of Seabrook. Most of the teachers hold several other positions as coaches, extra hands in other classrooms, resource room special education teachers, and after school EdGE teachers. Teachers support of one another keeps Seabrook running smoothly. There's a consistent willingness to pick up the pieces and step into any role. Through high-fives, hugs, and check-in's in the hallway, it is clear that every teacher knows every student. Teachers show up to the pick-up soccer games, work the concession stand at basketball games, and run after-school events.

The Seabrook basketball games are a community-wide events. The whole town attends, filling the bleachers that line one side of the small gym. Fans take chairs to the stage to create more seating for their entire family. There is a distinct hustle to both the Seabrook basketball teams. Whether ten points behind, or a tie game, there's not one member of the Seabrook's team that is not running the court and pushing for every rebound. If a player falls over, which happens often because this is elementary school basketball, a Seabrook player pauses to help that player

up. This sportsmanship is learned through the Seabrook community culture. The principal yells “Go Tigers” into the loud speakers every day before dismissal. The third graders switch off helping the boy in the wheelchair dance along to the music at lunch. The older kids at EdGE teach the younger ones how to play the running and passing games. Seabrook is filled with team players. The coaches are the teachers and the teachers are extended family.

These teachers have taught generations of Seabrook families. Many grew up in Washington County; some went to Seabrook Elementary. Their familiarity with the school and town create a sense of consistency. Yet some of the older teachers have lost mobility and energy. They are used to their routines and spread thin with classroom and extra-curricular responsibilities. While the Seabrook community is open to change, the teachers struggle to find the time and the resources. One of the most instrumental pieces of TREE is providing in-school coaches and mental health providers. These extra layers of support allow the teachers to step back and take a breath. Laura, previously the English as a Second Language teacher and presider over the food pantry, is an integral and respected part of the Seabrook community. Her new position as the TREE resource coach, she explains, allows her to be the support system that teachers wish they could be:

I always think that it's that ability to be the person that a teacher wants to be, but doesn't have the capacity to be. I feel really lucky and fortunate that Seabrook could be a part of TREE and have someone like me here, because I lived through eight years here at Seabrook, and wanting to be, "If only there was a person would could sit with this kid." "If only there was a person who could help me make this activity happen." "If only there was a resource to support this family right now," or, "If only we had snacks." ... [Now] they have a resource that they didn't have before.

Not just a financial one, but a human one that helps them meet those needs, and not just be like, "I wish I could do something," and be frustrated that you can't...

TREE provides Seabrook with Laura, the resource and instructional coach, as well as Kandi, the in-school mental health provider, and ongoing professional development to help Seabrook meet basic needs, support student development, and improve instructional practices. TREE offers the support necessary to allow curricular reform and enable all school climate change.

Data Collection

I spent one month at Seabrook (and Portside another school TREE works with) and traveling throughout Maine speaking to educators about experiential learning, outdoor education, and a trauma informed approach to learning. I started my data collection interviewing educators who have been involved in the lifelong project of creating schools based on non-traditional, adventure-based, student-empowered learning. I interviewed the director of elementary education at the Chewonki school, which uses placed-based learning to create an individualized curriculum that is guided by the Next Generation Science Standards, National Council for Social Studies Learning Targets, and Common Core standards for Math and Literacy. I met with Becky, the director of Riley School, which is a small, alternative school focused on developing cognitive, emotional, and social growth through promising self-directed, student choice within a structured program. I spoke with Donna, the director of the Sweetser Adventure-Based Learning Program, an experiential learning program that helps implement outdoor learning into public schools around Maine. Lastly, I talked to Christine and Crystal two teachers at the New School, a democratic, community-centered high school that works in collaboration with parents and students to create its policies, curriculum, and budget. With no principal, the New School makes all-school decisions based on discussion and voting system. The New School supports

individual, student-driven learning and has found lots of new ways to bring the community into the classroom. I asked these educators about the strengths and weakness to applying student-empowered, experiential learning in their classroom. I wanted to know if they thought any of their learning practice could be implemented into a traditional, under-resourced, public school curriculum. I was trying to understand if the curriculum and values of these outdoor, alternative education schools could align with trauma-informed, student-empowered learning and microadventures.

I also spent time interviewing educators affiliated with TREE in Seabrook and Portside. I asked targeted questions based on TREE's trauma-informed approach to learning (highlighting ideas of safety, connection, cultural responsiveness, and empowerment). I was able to better understand the history of TREE in Seabrook and the school's administration through interviewing the principal, Ms. White. I interviewed a fifth-grade teacher at Seabrook Ms. Lissee about her involvement with microadventures, as well as the adventures she had taken with the students in collaboration with the Maine Outdoor School. I interviewed the TREE resource coaches in Seabrook and Portside, Laura and Ashley. I asked the resource coaches about their positions at the schools as well as about trauma-informed, student-empowered learning and the purpose and place for microadventures.

In addition, I spoke with both schools' TREE mental health providers, Kandi and Serita, about how they integrate student-centered, trauma-informed practices into their work. I was also able to talk with a few groups of students in kindergarten through sixth grade about their experience at Seabrook and more specifically with microadventures and somedays. Similarly, I spoke to two different 8th grade focus groups in Portside, learning about their experience at school. I also had the opportunity to speak to Hazel, the co-founder of Maine Outdoor School

about the school's partnership with TREE. Every Thursday and Friday Hazel takes the Seabrook 3rd and 5th graders to learn outside. I asked Hazel about her work with Seabrook and the importance of bringing the classroom outside and using outdoor resources.

(See Figure 1 for a list of interviewees and focus group participants, Figure 2 for a list of questions posed to experiential outdoor learning program educators and Figure 3 for questions asked of TREE coaches, mental health providers, teachers, and students.)

Figure 1:

Participant List

<i>Kat</i>	Director of Elementary School at Chewonki
<i>Donna</i>	Director of the Sweetser Adventure-Based Learning
<i>Becky</i>	Principal of the Riley School
<i>Crystal</i>	Head of Admissions and Development
<i>Christine</i>	Literature teacher at The New School
<i>Ms. White</i>	Principle of Seabrook
<i>Ms. Lisse</i>	5 th grade teacher at Seabrook
<i>Laura</i>	TREE resource coach at Seabrook
<i>Kandi</i>	TREE mental health coach at Seabrook
<i>Ashley</i>	TREE resource coach at Portside
<i>Serita</i>	TREE mental health coach at Portside
<i>Hazel</i>	Director and Founder of Maine Outdoor School

Figures 2 and 3:

School Philosophy	Trauma	Hands on Learning	Outdoor Education	Student Voice
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • General introduction: name, how you got into program, founding principles, and philosophy. • What do you think are the most important lessons to help teachers teach to this curriculum? • How do you make sure everyone is on one board with your integrated curriculum? • What do you like most about your school? • What would you change about school? • What makes this place special for you? What would you do differently if you were in charge of running the school? • Did you have any challenges getting full community buy in? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Our program is specifically looking at a trauma-informed curriculum highlighting ideas of student empowerment, connection, cultural responsiveness, and safety. Would you say your school is trauma-informed? In what ways? Examples? • How do you create a safe, sense of belonging for students? Examples? • How does your curriculum look at child safety, connection, sense of belonging? • How is social justice taught and represented in your program? Examples? • How do you make students more culturally aware? Examples? • What does being culturally responsive mean to you? Does your classroom fit this mold? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What does active student engagement look like at your school? • What do you find the children want and look for in education? • How do you keep academic rigor within a hands-on education program of self-discovery? • How do you find opportunities for hands-on learning using the natural resources? Can this sort of learning happen anywhere regardless of location? • What are some examples of small collaborative projects students have been working on? • How do you pair lesson plans with the Common Core? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do you feel like the outdoors fosters resiliency? • How does outdoor education empower student voice and choice? • What is place-based learning and what are the advantages of using the outdoors as a resource? • Why is it important for students to get outside? Do you think it is important that outdoor education is part of the school curriculum? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Why do you think student voice is important to highlight in the classroom? • How do you promote student voice and empowerment within the curriculum? • Can you give me some examples of how students participate in the design of the curriculum and the governance of the school? • What is one of the biggest struggles implementing student voice in the classroom? • What does the process of student-reflection look like throughout the day and why is that important to you? • Is student voice and empowerment a key feature of your school? Why/why not? How so? Examples? • Do you find the kids engaged? What allows student to be engaged in class?

Principal White	Ms. Lissee	Serita	Laura and Ashley	Kandi	Hazel	Students
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What's special about Seabrook to you? • What was the story of when TREE came knocking on your door? • What does trauma-informed mean to you? What does student-empowered learning mean to you? • What pressure are teachers facing in adapting these new models? • What is working about somedays and microadventures? • Why do you think microadventures are important? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What do you think of somedays and microadventures at Seabrook? • Which microadventures have you participated in with your class? • How have you seen your school shift since TREE? • In what ways do you feel like this school still needs changing? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is it like being the mental health coach for Portside? • How did you get involved with TREE? • What does the TREE model mean to you? • How do you actively meet kids where they are at? How does an educator do this? • What does Trauma-informed mean to you? • How can we create relationships based on safety, connection, cultural responsiveness and self-determination? <p>How did you get involved with TREE?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How does student voice play a role in what you do? • How have you found microadventures and somedays? Have they improved the school climate? • What barriers does Portside face in adapting microadventures and somedays? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How did you get involved with TREE? • What does your role as resource coach entail? • How have you seen TREE transform your school climate? • What do you think the purpose of somedays and microadventures are at your school? Which have you found most meaningful and successful? • What does trauma-informed mean to you? • In terms of safety, cultural responsiveness, empowerment, and connection-- how do microadventures align with a trauma-informed model? • What is about recess, getting outside that is important for students? • What still needs work? • What are the major barriers to adapting microadventures 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What do you think the relationship between your work and outdoor work is? How do you find that relates to trauma-informed practices? • How are things going? What could be better? • How are you working with the rest of the TREE team? • How do you feel the culture is shifting at Seabrook? • What do you notice about the racial dynamics at Seabrook? • Do you find that kids are with you now, are having some form of issue at home tend to make a safe environment at their play? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Why did you get invested in outdoor education work? How did you start Maine Outdoor School? • What has been working at Seabrook and Portside? What is different about working with this population? • Have some teachers bought into the idea of outdoor learning more than other teachers? What does that buy in take? • How do you feel your work fosters resiliency? • In terms of a trauma-informed approach: safety, connection, cultural responsiveness, and student voice -- what part of these competency register with outdoor education for you? • How does outdoor learning empower student voice and choice? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If you could change your school in anyway how would you change it? • What would you need to do to make that change happen? • How do you feel your school has changed since you've been here? • What makes school special for you? • What is unique about your school? • How do microadventures and somedays effect your day? • What do you look forward to most throughout the day? • What activities do you wish you had more of? • When do you have power in a classroom?

Data Analysis

I recorded and transcribed each interview I conducted with the Maine experiential and outdoor education school educators and the educators working with TREE in Seabrook and Portside. I spent time reading through each transcribed interview to familiarize myself with my participants and their narrations. I was interested in exploring how TREE's trauma-informed approach to learning connected to outdoor adventure learning.

Moving back and forth between the interview responses and a theoretical perspective on trauma and trauma-informed practice, I began to identify patterns.¹⁷ I highlighted concepts, phrases, and opinions that remerged in both the literature and in the interviews, and I identified eight themes: student voice, teacher voice, relationships and community, project-based and placed-based learning, social-emotional learning, learning outside, trauma-informed learning, and the power of flexibility. Employing a comprehensive understanding of theories of trauma and trauma-informed practice, and utilizing the reoccurring themes in the interviews, I then collapsed these nine themes into five major categories: student-empowerment and student voice, teacher voice, relationships, safety and cultural responsiveness, and outdoor, experiential learning. I devote a chapter to describing and analyzing each major category, below.

Reading the interviews through a trauma-informed theoretical framework, then, I took both an inductive and deductive approach to data analysis: the themes informed the research questions and new themes arrived from the narrative findings that extends the literature. In a combination of top down and bottom up approaches, I moved back and forth between the literature and data to find a connection between the respondent's narratives and larger theories and learning practices. I

used the interview responses to offer examples and extend the analysis of my theoretical perspective. The theory works to frame the data, empower the stories of these educators, and ground their experience with context, theory, and clout. I interwove the theoretical perspective into my narrative findings to create cohesion in the way these themes were addressed in both theory and practice. Using theoretical analysis to illuminate patterns between the teaching experiences of these educators and research from trauma-informed and outdoor learning practices, the chapters, below, work to examine the relationship between theory and practice. The themes discovered were strongly linked to the data and the research surrounding the data to understand student-empowerment and student voice, teacher voice, relationships, safety and cultural responsiveness, and outdoor, experiential learning in both theory and practice.¹⁸

¹⁸ Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology," *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 2006, <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>.

Trauma and Trauma-Informed

Definition Trauma and Toxic Stress

“Babies do not remember being held well--what they remember is the traumatic experience of not being held well enough” — Donald Winnicott¹⁹

“You’re a great student because you don’t have any baggage, a teacher once told me, at which moment the subterfuge of my life felt complete” – Maggie Nelson²⁰

A growing literature illustrates the prevalence of trauma, as well as the impact of childhood adversity on a child’s ability to learn. Trauma is defined as any negative or harmful experience that overwhelms an individual’s ability to cope, function, or poses a threat to a person’s physical and mental well-being.²¹ Acute trauma can occur after an isolated event (for example rape, a car accident, or a natural disaster), while chronic trauma refers to consistent exposure to traumatic events (child abuse, violent homes or neighborhoods, or divorce).²² Whether acute or chronic, trauma arises from a range of experiential and observed events, and also oppression, discrimination, and racism, all of which can cause insecurity that effect a child emotionally and physically.²³ The effect of childhood adversity is often referred to as toxic stress, the body’s response to being constantly in a high alert state. There have been additional studies that have shown the link between toxic stress and experiences of racism and oppression. Students who face race-based trauma can suffer mental health symptoms including anxiety, depression, which can result in poor academic achievement based on psychological distress of being victims

¹⁹ Maggie Nelson, *The Argonauts*, (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Graywolf Press, 2015), 142.

²⁰ Maggie Nelson, *The Argonauts*, 102.

²¹ Kristin Souers and Peter A. Hall, *Fostering Resilient Learners: Strategies for Creating a Trauma-Sensitive Classroom* (Alexandria: ACDC, 2016), 15.

²² Kristin Souers and Peter A. Hall, *Fostering Resilient Learners*, 15.

²³ Brown, et al., “Student Empowered Social Emotional Learning.”

of discrimination.²⁴ Without a support system to buffer the effects, toxic stress can disrupt the architecture of a child's brain.²⁵

Trauma effects one's central nervous system (brain and spinal cord), including the limbic system, which is responsible for our heart rate, emotional control, instinct and mood.²⁶ Trauma's effect on the limbic system may cause increased heart rate, effect a child's ability to eat, sleep, relax, and learn. If complex trauma occurred before the age of six, while the midbrain is developing, a child may have trouble with motor function, coordination, and spatial awareness.²⁷ If trauma occurs during the time the cerebral cortex is developing, an individual may have trouble organizing and planning their time, problem solving, developing language, and with higher order thinking.²⁸ Early childhood trauma affects the neural networks crucial to learning, causing patterns of attention, memory, and executive function deficits.²⁹

A traumatized child may not be able to use language and reasoning to manage heightened reactivity to the right hemisphere of the brain, because that child's brain is struggling to compartmentalize negative feelings and emotions.³⁰ Trauma can cause children to have a more difficult time focusing and controlling impulses, which can affect a child's behavior in the classroom. The National Child Traumatic Stress Network developed a diagnosis for developmental trauma disorder (DTD). DTD manifests in schools as unprovoked aggressive

²⁴ Monica Williams, Adriana Peña, and Judy Mier-Chairez, "Tools for Assessing Racism-Related Stress and Trauma Among Latinos." In *Toolkit for Counseling Spanish-Speaking Clients*, 2017, 71, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-64880-4_4.

²⁵ Susan Craig, *Trauma-Sensitive Schools: Learning Communities Transforming Children's Lives, K-5*. ed. Jane E. Stevens (New York: Teachers College Press, 2016), 19.

²⁶ Esta Soler et al, "Changing Minds: Preventing and Healing Childhood Trauma State Policy Guide," Futures Without Violence, 2018. https://www.futureswithoutviolence.org/wp-content/uploads/State-Policy-Framework_FINAL3B.pdf.

²⁷ Soler, "Changing Minds."

²⁸ Soler, "Changing Minds."

²⁹ Susan Craig, *Trauma-Sensitive Schools*, 52.

³⁰ Susan Craig, *Trauma-Sensitive Schools*, 52.

behavior, distrust in authority figures, and limited motivation and ability to learn.³¹ Recently, educators have been looking at the way traumatic experiences interfere with a child's ability to focus, learn, and experience emotions in order to provide a classroom environment that supports a child's cognitive and social development.

ACEs

Dr. Robert Anda and Dr. Vincent Felitti led a collaborative project with the Centers for Disease Control and the Department of Preventive Medicine to explore the relationship between Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE) and a child's emotional and physical health.³² Dr. Anda and Dr. Felitti categorized 10 different types of childhood experiences: verbal abuse, sexual abuse, physical neglect, emotional neglect, a parent who is an alcoholic, victim of domestic violence, a family member in jail, exposed to mental illness, disappearance of a parent through divorce, death or abandonment.³³ Each adverse experience counted as one point. The ACE study is distinguished from other investigations that studied the effect of trauma on the brain, because it looked solely at interpersonal adversity and included many of the hidden stressors like household dysfunction in the definition of adversity.³⁴ The ACE study tested a demographic of primarily older, white, middle class people: 54% of participants were females, 46% were male, 74% of participants were white, and 46.4% of the participants were over 60 year of age.³⁵ Almost two-thirds of this population had a least one ACE, proving that ACE are a universal problem.³⁶ Later studies found just how pervasive ACEs are; the National Survey of Children's Health's

³¹ Susan Craig, *Trauma-Sensitive Schools*, 21.

³² Kristin Souers and Peter A. Hall, *Fostering Resilient Learners*, 17.

³³ Daniel Chapman et. al., "Adverse Childhood Experiences and the Risk of Depressive Disorders in Adulthood," *Journal of Affective Disorders* 82, no. 2 (2004): 217–25, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2003.12.013>.

³⁴ Susan Craig, *Trauma-Sensitive Schools*, 52.

³⁵ Vincent J. Felitti et. al., "Relationship of Childhood Abuse and Household Dysfunction to Many of the Leading Causes of Death in Adults: The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study," *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* 14, no. 4 (1998): 245–58, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0749-3797\(98\)00017-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0749-3797(98)00017-8).

³⁶ Vincent J. Felitti et. al., "Relationship of Childhood Abuse."

modified version of the ACEs survey reported that 23% of children between the ages of zero to seventeen and 31% of children between the ages of twelve to seventeen experienced two or more ACEs.³⁷ Similarly, a study at Washington State tested students in support systems and programs and found that of the over 5,000 students tested, 81% had two or more ACEs.³⁸ While ACE are common in every population, the ACE scores of people living in poverty are significantly higher than middle-class participants.³⁹ Poverty can act as chronic stressor characterized by pressures such as food supply and transportation.⁴⁰ Additionally, children living in poverty are less likely to receive as much or as responsive parental support as children in more economically secure homes, making it harder for a child to learn to regulate.⁴¹ Living in chronic poverty also can affect a parental figure's ability to effectively problem-solve, as they may not have the resources and support to help themselves or their family.⁴²

Studies show that the more ACEs a child has tallied, the more likely that child is to experience cognitive delays and behavior issues. With an ACE score of four or more, students are thirty-two times more likely to have learning or behavior issues, five times more likely to have poor attendance, and six and half times more likely to have an identified behavioral health problem.⁴³ Similarly, in a study based on a group of 2,000 elementary schoolers, researchers found as ACEs increased, there was increased risk for academic failure, chronic attendance

³⁷ Christopher Blodgett and Joyce Dorado, "A Selected Review of Trauma-Informed School Practice and Alignment with Educational Practice," *CLEAR Trauma Center*, no. 1 (2016), 88.

³⁸ Christopher Blodgett and Joyce Dorado, "A Selected Review of Trauma-Informed School Practice."

³⁹ Susan Craig, *Trauma-Sensitive Schools*, 25.

⁴⁰ Samaah, Sullivan et al, "Neighborhood Poverty and Hemodynamic, Neuroendocrine, and Immune Response to Acute Stress among Patients with Coronary Artery Disease," *Psychoneuroendocrinology* 100 (2019): 145, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psyneuen.2018.09.040>.

⁴¹ Susan Craig, *Trauma-Sensitive Schools*, 35.

⁴² Susan Craig, *Trauma-Sensitive Schools*, 26.

⁴³ Steven Crane, "Trauma-Based Care," *American Academy of Family Physicians*, https://www.aafp.org/dam/AAFP/documents/events/rps_pdw/handouts/res-62-crane.pdf.

problems, persistent school behavior problems, and poor reported health.⁴⁴ The Head Start Program study confirmed the effects of trauma on school behavior; they found that children with four or more ACEs were rated as significantly delayed on multiple cognitive and social emotional development indicators.⁴⁵ These studies illustrate that adverse childhood experiences are common and have measured effects on children's thinking and behavior.

Trauma-Informed Practice

“Adversity, stress, and trauma are not just individual mental health issues, but also systemic, generational issues that are most effectively addressed by thoughtful, informed, and committed action on the part of all members of the community” -- TREE⁴⁶

With the knowledge that childhood trauma is a persistent struggle for many students, and that trauma can negatively affect brain function and one's ability to form prolonged, trusted, relationships, the question becomes: how can we make our classrooms places where recovery and safety is possible? Despite many of the negative health effects of trauma, a child's brain has a certain plasticity and ability to adapt and persevere through difficult circumstances. A trauma-informed approach looks to support resilience in the classroom.⁴⁷ Since trauma at its core disrupts systems that provide a child with care and protection, healing from trauma requires rebuilding structures that have previously disempowered students and creating an environment for a child to feel connected, empowered, and supported.⁴⁸ The goal of trauma informed schooling is to

⁴⁴ Christopher Blodgett and Joyce Dorado, “A Selected Review of Trauma-Informed School.”

⁴⁵ Christopher Blodgett and Joyce Dorado, “A Selected Review of Trauma-Informed School.”

⁴⁶ Cobscook Community Learning Center, “TREE.”

⁴⁷ Susan Craig, *Trauma-Sensitive Schools*, 95.

⁴⁸ Brown, et al., “Student Empowered Social Emotional Learning,” 5.

proactively address the pervasiveness of childhood adversity through practices and policies that support the needs of all students, many of whom have suffered from traumatic experiences.

Trauma-informed schools create environments where students can learn and succeed by utilizing resilience-building practices that “meet a child where they are.” Meeting a child where they are is a common phrase used in such practices to address the way teachers should not assume anything about a child’s life when they walk into the classroom, or punish a child for behavior that is likely out of their control, but instead work with the child to create a conducive learning environment.⁴⁹ Dr. Felitti describes a trauma-informed approach as a mindset shift from *what is wrong with you* to *what happened to you*.⁵⁰ Focusing on ways to support a child’s cognitive and social development mitigates the way traumatic experiences interfere with a child’s ability to focus, learn, and emotionally develop. In *Fostering Resilient Learners*, Souers and Hall suggest that to build resiliency educators should be aware of triggers, intentionality model strength, honesty, and connection, and have the tools to help students identify and talk about their emotions. Similarly, in their book, *Hope and Healing*, Rice and Groves encourage building and modeling healthy relationships, and creating physical space for sharing and listening as strategies to help students build resilience.⁵¹ Trauma-informed schools emphasize positive relationships with teachers and peers to help manage stress and avoid traumatic triggers.⁵² The emerging consensus of principles that undergird trauma-informed learning practice include establishing safe, culturally responsive learning environments that create healthy attachments through relational connection and empower self-determination and student voice.⁵³

⁴⁹ Soler, “Changing Minds.”

⁵⁰ *Resilience*, film, directed by James Redford, KPJR, 2016.

⁵¹ Kathleen F. Rice and Betsy M. Groves, *Hope and Healing: A Caregiver’s Guide to Helping Young Children Affected by Trauma*, (Washington DC: Zero to Three, 2005), 19.

⁵² Susan Craig, *Trauma-Sensitive Schools*, 11.

⁵³ Brown, et al., “Student Empowered Social Emotional Learning,” 6.

Chapter 1: Student-Empowerment and Student Voice

“Equality of capacity highlights everyone’s ability to learn to be a protagonist and political actor, equality of insight draws attention to everyone’s ability to add to collective analysis and political understanding, and therefore everyone’s right to democratic inclusion, recognition, and voice” – Jessica Taft⁵⁴

While improving school climate requires collaborative effort among administrators, teachers and students, the key component is student leadership.⁵⁵ While many schools embrace community service activities that involve young people, schools tend to fall short when it comes to engaging students in decision making about school policies and curricular reform efforts.⁵⁶ According to Preble and Gordon, authors of *Transforming School Climate and Learning*, “Using student empowerment as a school improvement strategy is consistent with the practice of collaborative, participatory, and emancipatory action research...including students in school improvement can transform negative energy into positive, proactive civic engagement.”⁵⁷ Empowering students means thinking not *what does school do for kids*, but *what does school do with kids*, in partnership, as a whole community.⁵⁸ Providing students with choice, voice, and real-world connections engages them as productive, creative problem-solvers. There’s an energy shift that happens when student voice is taken seriously, when students who have heard “cannot” and “no” start to take ownership of how to transfer that dialogue into *what can I do? How can I*

⁵⁴ Taft, “Peru’s Movement of Working Children,” 93.

⁵⁵ Bill Preble, and Rick Gordon, *Transforming School Climate and Learning: Beyond Bullying and Compliance* (Thousand Oaks, CA: 2011), <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781483387499>.

⁵⁶ Dana Mitra and Stephanie Serriere, “Student Voice in Elementary School Reform: Examining Youth Development in Fifth Graders,” *American Educational Research Journal* 49, no. 4, (2012): 743-774, <https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831212443079>.

⁵⁷ Bill Preble and Rick Gordon, *Transforming School Climate and Learning: Beyond Bullying and Compliance* (Thousand Oaks, CA: 2011), 39.

⁵⁸ Preble and Gordon, *Transforming School Climate and Learning*, 112.

make this change? Students crave the pleasure of completed action; the therapeutic effect of having agency over their space, their learning, and therefore their circumstances.⁵⁹

The premise of student voice is that students are the experts of their own lived, learning experience; treating their perspectives and ideas with respect is essential to the development of their voice.⁶⁰ A key to trusting students' expertise is not just granting power in the classroom to natural leaders, but finding ways for every person in the classroom to show and take part in school reform.⁶¹ Students who struggle emotionally, academically, and/or behaviorally are less likely to be invited into leadership positions in the classroom setting.⁶² It is essential that a trauma-informed approach emphasize ideas of equity and consider how to create an environment where every student not only feels safe to become part of the change, but feels empowered to help and feels wanted and needed. On the most basic level, student voice is sharing an opinion about the problems of schools and working collaboratively with peers and adults to enact school reform.⁶³

Student voice is an effort to increase youth engagement in school and strengthen student ownership over their learning.⁶⁴ In a study exploring how student voice contributes to youth development, Dana Mitra defines youth development through the lens of the ABC's: agency (exerting influence over a situation), belonging (developing meaningful relationships to feel part of a community), and competence (feeling appreciated for one's talents).⁶⁵ Mitra claims that student voice programming allows students to claim agency over the process of changing their

⁵⁹ Brown, et al., "Student Empowered Social Emotional Learning," 9.

⁶⁰ Preble and Gordon, *Transforming School Climate and Learning*, 44.

⁶¹ Preble and Gordon, *Transforming School Climate and Learning*, 45.

⁶² Preble and Gordon, *Transforming School Climate and Learning*, 52.

⁶³ Dana Mitra, "The Significance of Students: Can Increasing 'Student Voice' in Schools Lead to Gains in Youth Development?," *Teachers College Record* 106, no. 4 (2004): 653, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9620.2004.00354.x>.

⁶⁴ Dana Mitra, "The Significance of Students," 655.

⁶⁵ Dana Mitra, "The Significance of Students," 655.

school climate, a sense of belonging amongst the facility and school, and the opportunity to critique their environment.⁶⁶ Promoting student voice in the classroom reframes students as skillful listeners and active participants with the ability to communicate, negotiate, and facilitate change.

Empowering students and treating them as equal players in school reform is a step towards validating and respecting student voice and deconstructing the power hierarchy between adult and student. This inclusion of students in school reform is a form of horizontal learning: learning that's based on shared decision-making, where youth and adults are working in an interdependent, reciprocal partnership. Students become the problem-solvers. Students discover the answers. This sort of agency takes a grassroots, bottom-up approach to teaching. In the article "Student-Empowered Social Emotional Learning as Trauma-Informed Practice," Brown claims that, "Without engaging students, without listening and working with them on issues that emerge out of their lived experience at home, in school, in the community, such a practice becomes a pedagogical echo chamber, reinforcing an increasingly disconnected, limited adult perspective on children's needs and capabilities."⁶⁷ Brown reinforces the importance of student voice, emphasizing the quality and quantity of what a child can bring to the table and questioning the normal, westernized ideology of all-knowing, adults. Our nation's compliancy with the idea that children need to be motorized and protected can mitigate their growth and maturity opportunities.⁶⁸

In Jessica Taft's introduction to her book on the Peruvians children's workers movement, she also addresses the way "ageism" and "adultism" reflect power structures that marginalize

⁶⁶ Dana Mitra, "The Significance of Students," 681.

⁶⁷ Brown, et al., "Student Empowered Social Emotional Learning," 18.

⁶⁸ Jessica Taft, *The Kids Are in Charge: Activism and Power in Peru's Movement of Working Children* (Critical Perspectives on Youth) (New York: New York University Press, 2019), 8.

children's voices.⁶⁹ Taft refers to the differences between children and adults in the United States as "un-equal age-based power-relations" that are culturally embedded in our organizational and institutional practices as well as our social habits.⁷⁰ The lack of trust in children is not confined to social reproduction but encoded in our legislation. The United States is the only United Nations member to not ratify the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Article 12 of the Convention of the Right of Child states that a child has the right to form and express his or her views "freely in all matters affecting the child." Article 13 highlights this notion of freedom, claiming, "the child shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right includes freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child's choice."⁷¹ Articles 12 and 13 illustrate the potential freedom of thought and conscience, as well as the respect and responsibility that our country could, but fails to, grant children.

Microadventures are attempts to empower student voice and agency. While every student has a voice, most students rarely have the opportunity to use their voices to suggest or make crucial changes to their school. Students may be called on to answers a question, but as Preble and Gordon, Mitra, Taft, Sarason, and Brown all point out, most students have never been invited to participate in changing policy, practice, curriculum, and school climate. In the time I spent interviewing educators, many of my central questions revolved around how to create a classroom space that welcomes student-centered learning and prioritizes listening to students.

⁶⁹ Taft, "Peru's Movement of Working Children," 5.

⁷⁰ Taft, "Peru's Movement of Working Children," 13.

⁷¹ UN General Assembly, *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, 20 November 1989, United Nations, Treaty Series, vol. 1577, <https://www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6b38f0.html>.

The patterns that arose from the educators I interviewed illustrate that to successfully promote a student-centered approach to learning, a distinct shift needs to occur in how the classroom is set-up, how teachers use language, and how they develop their curriculum. Students and teachers both need to be fully invested in horizontal learning for student-empowered learning to successfully take place. The educators I spoke with echo the idea that student-empowered, student-directed, and student-centered learning are all collaborative processes between school, teacher, and student. This process is slow and co-created. Becky, the director of Riley School, an elementary school dedicated to keeping children as the center focus of the classroom, speaks to the ways an educator needs to reframe the language of teaching to invite genuine student voice:

A fourth-grader... [was] rolling around on the floor and refusing to do work, because he's never been given agency or empowerment... there's no intrinsic value for him in learning. But yesterday, we said, "So, why aren't you doing this? Why aren't you cooperating? Why aren't you participating?" He said, "Well, because these aren't teachers. These are facilitators." We call our faculty facilitators...we had an amazing conversation...He had a complete turnaround this afternoon.

This student associated the word 'teacher' with power and control. So much so, that a fourth-grade student changed his behavior based on his understanding of the power shift that happened because the Riley school used the word 'facilitator' instead of 'teacher'. This is not just a change in language, but a change in practice. The more collaborative approach to learning invited this student to critically reflect on his behavior in the classroom. In this case, this student felt a sense of liberty and because he was unfamiliar with this type of freedom in the classroom, he lost control and took full advantage. Without the title of teacher, the teacher-figure lost power and therefore did not have this child's respect. This anecdote illustrates the ways in which students couple the word 'teacher' with power, understanding a teacher's role as imparting knowledge

and policing behavior. While this fourth-grader picked up on the power shift, he had not yet been giving the tools to know how productively to make use of his newfound sense of control.

This fourth-grader did not get in trouble for his behavior. He was brought into a conversation about language and about the Riley School's educational philosophy. Becky believes that student voice is the ability "to really articulate what you really want" and the premise of their conversation was to understand what this child needed in that moment. Learning to communicate, tapping the roots of a student's concerns, and then addressing them in a conversation is the structure that a student-centered approach. The language we create around student-voice becomes essential to the collapse of the power hierarchy—or at least it's renegotiation—in the classroom. Teachers and students need to be in collaboration for student-empowered learning to occur.

At Portside Elementary School, Serita, the TREE-supported mental health provider, also emphasizes the importance of communication when addressing student-empowered learning:

When you're working with parents and children, you're trying to facilitate communication. You're trying to help the child to be able to articulate what's going on...so they can do some collaborative problem solving and some rewards and some reinforcements because children feel happier and better when adults are happy with them. They feel better inside. So I really don't believe that they misbehave if they have something better to do.

Serita makes the claim that young students do not act out if they have opportunities to feel happy, rewarded, and acknowledged. Communicating and creating a language for this communication between adult and child creates a space where compromise is valued over control. This communication allows for students to feel safe, granting each student a sense of belonging in the classroom.

Teachers must strike a balance between encouraging their students to be authentic thinkers and designing their own approach to the learning material, while still not over

influencing a students' decision-making process. Kat, the director of Chewonki, a placed-based, experiential elementary school trains students to develop their voice:

We've had kids come in, say as a new sixth grader from a public school, and they're so used to just doing what people tell them to do that when it's suddenly like, "What do you want to do? You get to decide how you want to learn," they're like, "What are you talking about?"...the ones that have been here for a while are super well-trained in that... I feel like for some kids it takes almost a year to be like, "Your learning is in your hands,"... [at] a lot of schools it's like, no, no, the learning is coming from the teacher. These guys who are here know that it's not. Like, I'm there, but it is not coming from me. The drive needs to come from them, and all of the work is coming from them. I'm here on the side. I'll help you along, but that's not me...It's so fun, because as a teacher, it's like we're just learning with them.

Kat emphasizes that the drive to learn needs to come from the students. That drive is not natural for all students. It takes time and effort to tactfully devise a strategy so that the decisions and direction of the class are originated and developed by students. Kat wants to be in a place where she's helping her students along, but to get to that place takes some practice for both students and educators. Preble and Gordon feel that school transformation can only happen when students and teachers are in partnership, which Kat takes seriously when she develops her curriculum.⁷² Kat explains that when she introduces a new unit, like Egyptian mythology, she first asks her class *what questions do you have? How do you want to research this?* The class creates their own projects based on their questions and ideas. Yet, even this sort of guidance relies heavily on a teacher. Kat continuously checks in, making sure that the direction the students want to take relates back to state learning standards and goals.

Christine, an English teacher at the New School, which utilizes democratic education based on students' finding their voice, explains collaborative learning strategies in a similar way:

So yeah, my literature classes, we agree on how much are we going to read. This is what we want to read. How much are we going to all tackle? [I] was going to have them write a big synthesis theme paper at the end. They were like, "No, we want to write a story. We

⁷² Preble and Gordon, *Transforming School Climate and Learning*, 112.

want to do some creative writing." I was like, "Okay. So sell me on that idea." They had lots of good reasons why they thought that would be a better assessment, so that's what we're doing... I think that negotiation is the biggest piece. Being willing to listen to what your students are actually asking for and saying about what they need to learn, right?

The power of yes opens a world of possibilities. In many ways, school tarnishes a child's sense of imagination. Math problems and spelling words take over what was once a universe of superhero drawings and LEGO lands. By asking the students what they want from their learning, educators are opening up a space for 'yes', for creativity and positive reinforcement. So much of the time teachers love to say there's no right way and then proceed to give students one way to go about writing a story, the right way to answer the question, a packet of instructions to follow. 'Yes' invites endless possibilities but can seem like a risk to both educators and students.

Christine, an English teacher at the New School has found ways to scaffold the imaginative responses, such that yes does not mean chaos, but grants her students the gifts of possibilities and engagement:

When [the teacher is] like, 'No, no, no. You need to tell us what to do,' [students] can't function. So there's always this sort of like, "Okay, so we'll do a little bit more, and then we'll fade back." It's a lot of positive reinforcement. It's a lot of conversations. It's a lot of honest conversations.... Let's talk about why you're making those choices and what we can do about it." So I often feel like a counselor more than a teacher. I think my role as advisor sometimes trumps my role as content deliverer.

The moment when students start to generate the lessons students' wheels start to turn. Students feel the freedom in the *what if* moments. When these students embark on a journey to bring their ideas to life, their work becomes a passion. The concept of student-driven learning hands students an intense sense of ownership. Student-empowered learning works to build relationships (the negotiation between teachers and student), confidence (the power of yes), and a sense of responsibility (the investment in the project, because students created the idea). At the Riley School students have the opportunity to negotiate their day with facilitators like Becky:

In terms of building their own schedules, the children are invested in their schedules. And, you never know which way their requests are gonna go. We had a child who came and said, "Ugh, can I please drop Art and add more math class?" ...We're absolutely gonna do that.

If a child has the ability to adjust the material to their liking, Becky suggests, they are invested in making that change possible. If students initiate the desire to deep dive into a certain field, they'll put the effort in to making the new solution work.

Student-empowered learning is founded on the principles of negotiation and communication. For example, while the New School does not have a principal, Crystal's job as developmental coordinator is dedicated to making the logistics behind a democratic school system run smoothly:

[We] want to engage all the students. We're a school that promotes self-directed learning. If they're not self-directed, then we're failing... because we're not reaching them where they're at...that's our mission.

The goal of student voice is to meet a child where they are at, in whatever form, shape, feeling that takes. To meet a student where they are means teachers don't just welcome children into the classroom, they invite and validate their ideas and their passions.

At Seabrook Elementary, Laura, the resource coach, presses student voice as a trauma-informed approach:

Especially with kids who have adverse childhood experiences that impact them on a daily basis, there's not a lot of sense of control over what happens to you. There's not a lot of sense of **voice** in your life experiences, and there's a lot of unknowns, and there's a lot of things you don't control. It just becomes surviving, and getting through, and coping with these things that are just happening to you...Really [we're all about] trying to give kids the skills and the tools to be resilient, and to bounce back.

Dr. Anda and Dr. Felitti suggest that students who have faced trauma often fall into habits of repression, learned responses to patterns of feeling overpowered and undervalued.⁷³

⁷³ *Resilience*, film, directed by James Redford.

Teachers cannot always know what challenges their students bring to school, but they can create opportunities for children to voice their needs and embrace their strengths, enabling students to foster cohesive, collaborative learning experiences. Student-empowered learning teaches educators how to be guiding support systems that give students the tools to take their learning into their own hands. In a world of unknowns, becoming a problem-solver and knowing how to birth an idea and see it come alive presents students an opportunity to be proud, involved, and motivated with their work at school. This emphasis on student-empowerment is central to creating a trauma-informed approach to learning because it offers students a sense of control over their environments, enables active, engaged citizenship, and also gifts students with a sense of place and belonging in school.

Chapter 2: Teacher Voice

Giving student voice and power in the classroom, means teachers need to willingly let go of their power. There needs to be teacher and administrative investment for horizontal learning to take place. In regard to education reform, Seymour Sarason claims that “schools will remain intractable to desired reform as long as we avoid confronting (among other things) their existing power relationships.”⁷⁴ Working in collaboration with students is a time-consuming process that takes scaffolding. The teacher must allow their role to shift from personal authority to group membership, aiding the group in determining academic and social objectives, arranging classroom, criteria, and a way to process progress and product.⁷⁵ First, teachers need to give students the tools to recognize their voice and then the space to affirm the importance of their voice. Dana Mitra’s work on student voice echoes the idea that teachers need to be fully invested in developing student voice for this practice to function, “Without an intentional focus on building relationships, student voice can easily become tokenism. True engagement requires a ‘rupture of the ordinary,’ which demands as much of teachers as it does of students.”⁷⁶ But a teacher cannot let go of their power if they feel they do not have power in the first place.⁷⁷

To sustain and promote student voice, teachers need to feel heard by the administration and school. Student-empowered, trauma-informed educational practice considers the life and relationships of the teacher. Likely about two-thirds of students in high poverty settings have experienced some sort of trauma and therefore teachers, many of whom themselves have

⁷⁴ Preble and Gordon, *Transforming School Climate and Learning*, 43.

⁷⁵ Alice Udvari-Solner, “A Decision-Making Model for Curricular Adaptation In Cooperative Groups.” In *Creativity and Collaborative Learning: A Practical Guide to Empowering Students and Teachers*, ed. by Jacqueline S. Thousand, Richard A. Villa, and Ann I. Nevin, (Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co., 1994), 62.

⁷⁶ Dana Mitra, “Balancing power in communities of practice: An examination of increasing student voice through,” *Journal of Educational Change* 9, (2008): 222.

⁷⁷ Preble and Gordon, *Transforming School Climate and Learning*, 9.

experienced trauma in their lives, often find themselves in the role of counselor and emotional healer.⁷⁸ Secondary trauma syndrome (STS), indirect exposure to trauma, is similarly associated with post-traumatic stress and has symptoms of withdrawal, hopelessness, irritability and often times, in the case of teachers, persistent anxiety about students.⁷⁹ STS has serious implications on a teacher's ability to be effective in the classroom.⁸⁰ Burn out, lack of compassion, fatigue can result in teacher suffering and mental health issues.⁸¹ Understanding a teacher's role, creating a language, and providing methods of self-care school-wide is essential to creating a trauma-informed practice that empowers teachers.

The principal at the Riley School claims that it is her job to support the faculty above all else. Becky explains that if her faculty “don't feel loved and trusted and respected by me and by proxy, the Board, then they're not operating in that place of safety and possibility.” In emphasizing safety and possibility, Becky highlights how she supports teachers to create a trauma-informed environment. Having the teachers feel loved and trusted allows the students the same sense safety. Becky also emphasizes the way cultivating a positive environment creates an open setting, where teachers and students alike can explore and engage in options. Becky's use of the word ‘possibilities’ reiterates the power of ‘yes’, granting teachers the support to help guide their students. In the same way that students thrive when they are encouraged to pursue their passions, teachers feel the same sense of empowerment when handed the tools to take their curriculum in the direction of their choosing.

⁷⁸ Maura McInerney and Amy McKlindon, “Unlocking the Door to Learning: Trauma-Informed Classrooms & Transformational Schools,” *Education Law Center* (2014): 1–24. <https://www.elc-pa.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Trauma-Informed-in-Schools-Classrooms-FINAL-December2014-2.pdf>; Jessica Ladner, “Helping Teachers Manage the Weight of Trauma,” *Harvard Graduate School of Education* (2018), <https://www.gse.harvard.edu/news/uk/18/09/helping-teachers-manage-weight-trauma>.

⁷⁹ Jessica Ladner, “Helping Teachers Manage the Weight of Trauma.”

⁸⁰ Susan Craig, *Trauma-Sensitive Schools*, 90.

⁸¹ Susan Craig, *Trauma-Sensitive Schools*, 90.

Christine at the New School echoes the idea that for student voice to transpire, a school must first hear out the teachers. At the New School, Christine claims teachers are “in charge of ourselves.” The basis of the New School is that all students, parents, and teachers have an equal voice about school reform. Christine insinuates that without full buy-in from each party (parents, students, and teachers alike) the school would completely fall apart.

While teaching at Portside before she became a TREE coach, Ashley experienced an overload of second-hand trauma. She reached a point, she decided, that the impact of STS was affecting her ability to be a successful teacher. Ashley took some time off. After a few years working at another school, Ashley was contacted by an old favorite teacher, the director of TREE, and offered the opportunity to come back to Portside in her new role. Using the support system she had from faculty, friends, and family, Ashley re-entered Portside with energy and a mission to create trauma-informed classrooms to aid students’ and teachers’ in their healing process. Ashley is dedicated to helping students find a sense a belonging at school when they might not feel that sort of comfort at home.

In order to provide children with a voice at school, Ashley focuses heavily on ensuring teachers also have a voice in school reform. Ashley thinks student voice is important, but feels that it is impossible to achieve if teachers themselves don't feel empowered. She explains that if you give students a voice, but do not place that same value on teachers, “Then you have this uprising of students that are feeling empowered, and it's seen as a negative instead of a positive.” Ashley points to the fact that, without the energy and investment of teachers, a bottom-up approach to learning is impossible.

Ashley makes a distinct effort to allow the teachers to recognize each other. She writes uplifting quotes on the bathroom mirrors, brings in cookies and treats, and started a staff shout-

out board so that they can affirm one another. Ashley believes that without community, empowerment becomes another form of hierarchy and student voice seems like an ‘uprising’ and a protest, instead of a strategy to improve the community and life for both teachers and students. Especially in a rural area with lack of resources, the teachers need to be willing and want to support this form of school transformation. By building a community of teachers, Ashley is supporting Preble and Gordon’s claim that improved school climate and positive school reform relies on all-school collaboration.⁸²

⁸² Preble and Gordon, *Transforming School Climate and Learning*, 9.

Chapter 3: Relationships

“At a tender age, children learn not to be tender. A dozen years of schooling often do nothing to promote generosity or a commitment to the welfare of others” – Alfie Kohn⁸³

“We want our teachers to tell us, I’ve got your back” – Julian (Student)⁸⁴

Positive, healthy school climate boils down to relationships: relationships between faculty and students, faculty and faculty, and between students and students.⁸⁵ These relationships are built on respect, nurturing a sense of belonging, and having students feel valued. So much of our memory and lasting takeaways from our schooling experience is a collection of personal connections, the quality of the relationships we created.⁸⁶ Relationship building is essential to a trauma-informed, student-empowered learning process. Children who have faced adversity are more likely to be hypervigilant to potential threats, danger, or possible causes of rejection.⁸⁷ Scaffolded opportunities for students to feel connected, included, and accomplished strengthen the neural pathways and override the brain’s tendency to react with caution. Trauma-informed practices rely on differentiated teaching and learning techniques as a sort of call and response, where the teacher is adapting their method based off student request and student need.⁸⁸ This feedback loop creates a language of communication between adult and student, increasing trust in the student-teacher relationship. Student teacher collaboration builds community, which works to help students overcome adversity. In *Transforming School Climate and Learning: Beyond*

⁸³ Alfie Kohn, “Caring Kids: The Role of the Students,” *Phi Delta Kappan* (1991), <https://www.alfiekohn.org/article/caring-kids/>.

⁸⁴ Steven Goodman, *It’s Not About Grit: Trauma, Inequity, and The Power of Transformative Teaching* (New York City: Teachers College Press, 2018), 132.

⁸⁵ Preble and Gordon, *Transforming School Climate and Learning*, 16.

⁸⁶ Ibid, 16.

⁸⁷ Susan Craig, *Trauma-Sensitive Schools*, 79.

⁸⁸ Ibid, 9.

Bullying and Compliance, Preble and Gordon claim that improved school climate relies on positive peer and teacher relationships and a collaborative effort to develop and engage in a new type of learning.⁸⁹ Teachers have the ability to model appropriate social behavior and improve a child's ability to navigate their emotions and feelings.⁹⁰

Educational practices dedicated to relationship building and understanding practices of knowing, caring, and respecting each other in a classroom create an environment where students feel supported.⁹¹ Prioritizing social and emotional development functions as a trauma-informed learning practice in its commitment to deep listening skills and ongoing communication between teacher and student. Trauma-informed practices emphasize creating connections between a student, their peers, and their teacher.⁹² Children with a history of trauma feel disempowered and disconnected, sometimes as a result of abuse or neglect. In *Learning Community: Finding Common Ground in Difference*, Patricia Calderwood explains that resiliency is created in part through moments of vulnerability and the ability to feel supported in those moments.⁹³ Teachers have the ability to work with students to provide positive caregiving are more likely to be able to build resiliency and connect with others.⁹⁴

According to *Promoting Resilience In The Classroom*, resilience, the ability to succeed despite adversity, takes empowering student voice and fostering caring relationships.⁹⁵ At Portside, an eighth grader spoke to the way some teachers have instilled in her the ideas that have been forced upon her all her life: "you're not gonna be this," and, "you're just gonna be that.

⁸⁹ Preble and Gordon, *Transforming School Climate and Learning*, 9.

⁹⁰ Susan Craig, *Trauma-Sensitive Schools*, 33.

⁹¹ Brown, et al., "Student Empowered Social Emotional Learning," 17.

⁹² Brown, et al., "Student Empowered Social Emotional Learning," 18.

⁹³ Patricia Calderwood, *Learning Community: Finding Common Ground in Difference* (New York City: Teachers College Press, 2000), 3.

⁹⁴ Susan Craig, *Trauma-Sensitive Schools*, 9.

⁹⁵ Carmel Cefai, *Promoting Resilience in the Classroom: A Guide to Developing Pupils' Emotional and Cognitive Skills* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2008), 24, ProQuest Ebook Central.

You're never gonna amount to this.” Emma says these teachers have “gotten into [her] head.” These comments are not only detrimental to Emma’s healing and ability to thrive, but destroy Emma’s dream to break the pattern she grew up with. At thirteen, Emma’s goals in life are to stay out of debt and trouble, buy her own car, and save enough money to support a happy family.

Emma is motivated by teachers who care. Emma explains that a good teacher is someone like her principal who is able to put students first. Emma describes her favorite teacher by saying, “She doesn't think about her. She puts our lives before hers, every single time. If something's going on in school, she makes sure that we agree with it and that we like it before she goes ahead and does stuff.” Students can see and feel when they are valued by the adults around them.

Numerous studies have shown that creating a caring school community can compensate for the impact of living in high poverty, social marginalized, racially discriminatory, violent or otherwise traumatic circumstances, and help students build resiliency.⁹⁶ Positive attachments with teachers and positive experiences in school give students an ability to confidently pursue new experiences, reshape their vision of themselves and others, and build attachments.⁹⁷ When a teacher says what Kat at Chewonki tells each of her students, “I care about you. I see you. We can care about each other” the student and the teacher are able to build mutual respect. By honoring a relationship there is a distinct transformation that happens in children; they feel safe, supported, and therefore capable of doing their best work. Emma’s positive relationships with her principal and teachers inspire such resilience and high hopes for her own future.

⁹⁶ Michael Ungar et al, “School-Based Interventions to Enhance the Resilience of Students,” *Journal of Educational and Developmental Psychology* 4, no. 1 (2014), <https://doi.org/10.5539/jedp.v4n1p66>.

⁹⁷ Susan Craig, *Trauma-Sensitive Schools*, 43.

Relationships support the development of socio-emotional competence, which gives students a sense of belonging and in turn builds resilience.⁹⁸ Relationships take time and effort to build. When developing a tentative schedule for the year, Christine prioritizes the relational aspect—putting aside time to get to know kids as people:

[You] need time. You have to actually take time away from sitting at the desk and delivering content and actually recognize that no, actually sitting out there and having lunch with each other, or we start off the school year usually with a three- or four-day sort of "Let's just get to know each other," play games, above and beyond just the normal ropes course stuff, right?

Christine recognizes the value in setting aside time to promote collaboration and allow students to have positive interactions with each other in the classroom. Team building games and facilitated bonding conversation activities are typically isolated to the beginning of the year only or saved for recess and lunch time. These sorts of activities are looked at as time fillers, when in reality they are an invaluable part of creating an environment where students feel accepted. Christine highlights the small moments, like eating with the children at lunch or one-on-one conversations, that build relationships and foster a safe space and open community. Calderwood claims it is that sense of belonging that builds community and camaraderie.⁹⁹ Taking a break from the lectured material and thinking about how to get to know students creates a more engaged classroom, one in which the teacher appreciates students as individuals with specific wants, needs, and desires. Valuing relationship in a classroom creates an environment built on respect and care.

Christine speaks to the importance of appreciating the whole child if we are to empathize and understand their behavior. Christine references a moment in morning meeting when the students were introducing themselves to me and talking about their weekend. One student

⁹⁸ Cefai, *Promoting Resilience*, 26.

⁹⁹ Calderwood, *Learning Community*, 3.

responded to a teacher using a swear word and everyone laughed. Christine later explains in an interview that in her mind this was not a moment to punish Gabe, but an opportunity to check in:

I think that is the heart and beating soul of this school, the relational aspect. I mean, you saw the relational aspect of that, right? If Gabe had said that to a teacher in a public school, he would be in detention right now...But we know those kids. Those kids know us. It's a real relationship, and so you knew that was in jest, and there's something going on for Gabe today that one of us should check out, that he needs to be that salty.

Christine claims that the soul of the New School is relationships. Christine trusted Gabe and their relationship. She knew that he did not mean to hurt this teacher's feelings but was trying to make a joke and get a rise out of his audience. While Christine claimed that a public school would send a student right to detention, schools that value the relational aspect of a trauma-informed approach may be more likely to respond to Gabe in the same way Christine was able to.

Christine comments on how private institutions have more freedom when it comes to the way they discipline. By their nature, smaller classroom sizes and different policies, teachers at private institutions are often given more liberty when it comes to discipline techniques and have more opportunities to know the child.

While in the past, Seabrook and Portside have taken a more traditional approach to disciplinary measures, these schools are working to adapt a trauma-informed approach to learning by focusing on creating an environment of mutual trust. Students and teachers at Seabrook and Portside are capable of acknowledging one another's personalities, such that slip ups can be interrupted as mistakes or a sign, as with Gabe, that "there's something going on," and handled with kindness, concern, and conversation rather than punishment.

Kandi, the TREE mental health provider in Seabrook, speaks to the way trauma-informed learning is about valuing and trusting our relationships at school:

I always think about anything that has to do with [a kid's experience with] trauma... starts with their relationships... connection. It's that understanding of where exactly that child

is... It's more about kind of educating [students] and educating the teachers on what's impacting them and less about the treatment. I mean you really have to think about how you would do that in the classroom...It's not a discipline or kind of getting onto him. It's more of, "Oh what do I need? What does this child need to be ready to learn?"

Trauma-informed learning requires teachers to connect with students, in order to know what they need. In *Promoting Resilience in the Classroom*, Carmel Cefai states that building connection in a classroom fosters resiliency.¹⁰⁰ Kandi stresses the importance of relationships to a trauma-informed approach, because of the way it requires her to understand the full experience of a child. Kandi explains that those connections come from an attempt to meet a child where they are and to understand that their behaviors are learned coping patterns.

Kandi points specifically to the importance of facilitating conversation instead of taking disciplinary action. She suggests dialogue as an active attempt to understand the needs of a child, rather than punishing and policing their behavior. Kandi is trying to coach teachers to communicate, clarify, and check in, instead of immediately punishing inappropriate behavior. Kandi proves the way relationships and resiliency go hand and hand. She draws on the correlation between strong relationships and a trauma-informed approach, claiming the two are intertwined. Ashley, the resource coach from Seabrook, makes the same connection between relationship building and a trauma-informed approach to learning, "For me, it's thinking about relationship first. Thinking that that's what we're here for. We're here to build relationships with kids. To me, that's what "trauma-informed" means". Children feel safer when they experience trusting relationships in collaborative settings.

¹⁰⁰ Carmel, *Promoting Resilience*, 24.

Chapter 4: Safety and Cultural Responsiveness

“Students are marinating in injustice—squeezed at the bottom of wealth gap hierarchies, dangling at the precarious edge of housing insecurity, living a knock away from deportation, anxious about racialized policing, vulnerable to a state and interpersonal violence—and yet yearning to be respected, educated, and recognized as creative” – Steven Goodman¹⁰¹

Trauma-informed practices emphasize relationships as a way to promote a child’s safety. In the book *It’s Not About Grit*, Goodman promotes trauma-informed learning as a way to acknowledge oppressions that students face outside the classroom. A trauma-informed practice aims to make students who have been marginalized, attacked, stigmatized, or otherwise isolated feel included and acknowledged. Students impacted by ongoing experiences of racism and oppression seek safe environments to decompress. A trauma-informed practice is also giving students a sense of safety through valuing a child’s home experience, culture, and unique voice.

There is healing power in a comfortable, supported environment where students can retell traumatic stories with a sense of control.¹⁰² Schools are not therapy spaces, but they can offer students some measure of control over their lives and environments. To enable healing, schools can offer tools and language that create safety and support in a way that is culturally responsive to each individual student’s experience. In this way schools can disempower the root cause of the person’s distress.¹⁰³ A trauma-informed classroom creates a democratic structure where students can actively resist precarities and discuss structural injustices that manifest their everyday life.¹⁰⁴ In other words, a trauma-informed classroom empowers a person who feels powerless due to

¹⁰¹ Goodman, *It’s Not About Grit*, xi.

¹⁰² Brown, et al., “Student Empowered Social Emotional Learning,” 6.

¹⁰³ Brown, et al., “Student Empowered Social Emotional Learning,” 9.

¹⁰⁴ Goodman, *It’s Not About Grit*, xi.

toxic stress and oppression. For a student to fully engage in school, a school must actively attempt to challenge the oppressions that are directly or indirectly impacting the lives of students.¹⁰⁵ When school fails to take action to confront sexual harassment, racial profiling, and other issues of inequity, students learn to distrust the education system.¹⁰⁶ Taking a trauma-informed approach commits a classroom to equity and builds bridges between the classroom and the cultural and linguistic differences students experience outside the classroom.¹⁰⁷

Highly populated by immigrant families, Seabrook Elementary has the highest rate of English Language Learners (ELL) in the district. Immigrant students face their own set of challenges, including potential traumatic experiences like prolonged parent absence, familial separation, the risk of police investigations, and social isolation.¹⁰⁸ Furthermore, with 24-7 news coverage of anti-immigration politicians and policies, immigrant students try to stay invisible.¹⁰⁹ For fear of deportation and in reaction to a new language, culture, and school, immigrants students often remain quiet as a survival technique.¹¹⁰

Many immigrant students also face poverty, ethnic, religious, or political discrimination and displacement from their homeland; such alienation can cause a variety of social, emotional, and behavior issues rooted in trauma.¹¹¹ Immigrant students can be further disempowered by the language barrier; these students score on average about 20-50 percentage points below a native-English speaker on English language standardized testing.¹¹² Studies show immigrant students' poor performance in school increases their likelihood of dropping out.¹¹³ It is essential to provide

¹⁰⁵ Goodman, *It's Not About Grit*, 8.

¹⁰⁶ Goodman, *It's Not About Grit*, 8.

¹⁰⁷ Brown, et al., "Student Empowered Social Emotional Learning," 7.

¹⁰⁸ Goodman, *It's Not About Grit*, 57.

¹⁰⁹ Goodman, *It's Not About Grit*, 58.

¹¹⁰ Goodman, *It's Not About Grit*, 58.

¹¹¹ Goodman, *It's Not About Grit*, 58.

¹¹² Goodman, *It's Not About Grit*, 58.

¹¹³ Goodman, *It's Not About Grit*, 59.

immigrant students with effective bilingual teachers, community resources, and support that attend to the specific needs of each learner.

Seabrook is making a distinct effort to help immigrant students succeed and also value and retain their home culture, although there is much to learn. TREE translates directions for work assignments and school event announcements into Spanish and has begun to hang posters on the wall in Spanish with English translations and vis-versa. Yet, teachers are under an enormous pressure to raise test scores. Because the standardized tests are in English, teachers feel the need to require Spanish speaking students to only practice English in the classroom. There are no academic opportunities for Latinx students to speak Spanish in school, so the students self-segregate during recess and after-school programs.

Hazel, founder of the Outdoor Education School that partners with TREE, explains that, as an educator, you need to meet your students where they are if you want to meet the learning goals: “What it comes down to is, if we're trying to meet goals.... learning goals...trauma is a huge gap in somebody's learning...So anybody who's trying to be an educator about anything needs to make sure the needs are met. And to me that's such a simple concept, and we can call it being trauma informed.” Meeting a student where they are, a phrase repeated in a trauma-informed practice, means taking steps to understand the background of a student, their cultural values and norms, and bring these elements into their school community. Hazel explains that if a school wants to raise test scores, they first have to help their students build resilience. Without a feeling of safety in their school community, learning is not a possibility for students who experienced severe trauma.

Serita, the TREE mental health provider at Portside echoes Hazel’s point: trauma prevents learning:

[It's about] recognizing that when kids aren't ready to learn or they're not [learning], it's not because they don't want to, it's because right now there's something in the way. And so I think it's just that looking a little deeper about what's going on and trying to come up with a hypothesis and testing what would help. Involving the child in what's going on, what can we do, what's going to make it better, what do you need.

Asking students what they need empowers student voice in the classroom. The goal is not just for teachers to empower student voice, but for students to empower one another. Donna, head of the Sweetser learning program, claims that community means creating a space where we are all invested in each other's wellbeing, "How you build that community is really how you make it a safe place for them to feel that they can talk to each other and that they can play safely. That's, the biggest thing that I think is lacking in some of our schools is being held accountable and taking care of each other." It is that investment, that care for one another, which builds a space that is safe and culturally-responsive. The opportunity for students to share their personal experiences, histories, and community values in a school setting validates students' experience, creating a culturally responsive community that fosters empathy, compassion, and diversity.¹¹⁴

Promoting student voice, agency, and empowerment in a classroom works to create a safe environment for all students.

At Chewonki, Kat starts every day with a sharing session:

"What did you do this weekend? Let's hear from you. Oh, I have questions. Let's ask you questions. Let's do an activity together. Let's talk about what's happening for the day." So every day [begins with] community, community, community. Yes, kids need to feel safe, they need to be able to empathize with each other, and they need to be able to have a certain cohort feeling before they can even do any academics.

Students acknowledging communities, identities, and experiences outside of school and sharing those experience inside school bridges the gap between home and school life. Kat highlights the way that being culturally responsive and drawing in and on community creates safety in a

¹¹⁴ Goodman, *It's Not About Grit*, 9.

classroom. To ensure a culturally responsive school environment, schools must make an effort to have conversations that transcend societal barriers and challenge stereotypes, racial oppression, and aggressions that alienate immigrant students.¹¹⁵ Schools should also celebrate different cultures, communities, and voices.

Part of having these conversations is also teaching the language of feelings and addressing the ways Donna emphasizes the need to put a language to what safety feels like in a classroom. At the end of each day, Donna asks her students what made them feel safe that day. Putting a language to safety is a means of regenerative and restorative justice, as it grants students the space to trust their learning environment will accept them, despite rejection they might feel from forces outside school. Donna claims the key to successfully coaching trauma-informed practice is to have a common language to support children. Similarly, Ms. Lisse, Seabrook's 6th grade language arts teacher, believes that a trauma-informed practice works at Seabrook because the entire school has the same language to talk about trauma:

We've all got the same language. We've got the same training. I mean, we all understand that kids have trauma, but now, we've got the vocabulary to go with it, we've got some ideas. I mean, the number one thing TREE has done is brought in counselors. I mean, that's where kids need the help... I mean, academics is important...but having the kids that have trauma have someone to talk to, that comes back into the classroom. If they are well mentally and emotionally, then they can learn.

Ms. Lisse emphasizes the same points Hazel, The Maine Outdoor School's founder and teacher, and Serita, Portside's mental health coach, make: academics are important yet cannot happen unless a child feels their emotional needs are being met and they are stable, safe, and respected. It's no coincidence that these educators are all prioritizing meeting a child where they are, because they were all trained to translate that language into shared practice. Having a common

¹¹⁵ Calderwood, *Learning Community*, 16; Goodman, *It's Not About Grit*, 79.

language and practice amongst educators creates consistency that works to sustain community. Recognizing that a child is suffering and his or her behavior is representative of that suffering, allows educators to respond by helping a child feel more comfortable and accepted. Fighting the root causes of oppression that affect that child's behavior and not the behavior itself and helping to bridge school and home life allow a child to feel affirmed. This form of validation is what makes a child ready to learn.

Kandi, the TREE mental health coach at Seabrook affirms that a child needs to know that their classroom is on their team. It's also something she needs to know to be effective in her work as well. Kandi explains, "I just want to be part of the team. You know, I'm not someone who just has all the answers or thinks they know everything or yeah, I'm just part of the team. I want to help. How can we work on this together?" This community spirit drives trauma-informed learning, making Seabrook a place of shared language and practice, a united front. A trauma-informed practice values community, which means creating a place where students can respond, address, and disempower systematic racism and alienation. To build community, we must know and respect all that a student brings to school, valuing their home life and finding ways to introduce that life into the classroom.

Chapter 5: Why Outside?

“Man’s heart, away from nature, becomes hard; [the Lakota] knew that lack of respect for growing, living things soon lead to lack of respect for humans too.”

– Luther Standing Bear¹¹⁶ (c.1868-1939)

When we originally asked students what they would change about their school many asked for more time outside. Their request was more than warranted. The test-centric nature of the United States public schools has forced teachers to prioritize boosting standardize test scores. At Seabrook this pressure to improve test scores resulted in teachers limiting recess to increase instructional time. Seabrook is not alone—nearly 40% of American Elementary schools have either eliminated or considered eliminating recess due to the pressures of standardize testing.¹¹⁷ All too often, educators associate recess with leisure, an unacademic waste of precious class time. Our public education system, and on a grander level our society at large, undervalues how time spent outside is an opportunity for emotional and cognitive development. As a creative outlet for children, nature and outdoor activity are not the problem, but the solution.

Richard Louv refers to this overall decline in appreciation of the outdoors as a “nature-deficit disorder” with symptoms that include attention difficulties, diminished use of senses and creative play, as well as a higher rate of physical and emotional illness.¹¹⁸ Louv intentionally labels society’s jaded exploration of the great outdoors as an illness, because he finds the effects detrimental to a child’s wellbeing. Louv is not the only one proving that kids are not getting enough time outside. In her study, “Home Media and Children's Achievement and

¹¹⁶ Louv, *Last Child in the Woods*, 123.

¹¹⁷ Louv, *Last Child in the Woods*, 99.

¹¹⁸ Louv, *Last Child in the Woods*, 36.

Behavior,” Sandra Hofferth found that over the span of six years, from 1997 to 2003, half as many children ages nine to twelve spent time playing outside (participating in activities like hiking, walking, fishing, and gardening).¹¹⁹ Rhonda Clements, a professor of education at Manhattanville College, also found a drastic decrease in the amount of time children are spending outside. In her study, “An Investigation of the Status of Outdoor Play,” Clements surveyed eight hundred mothers and 71% claimed they played outside every day when they were children, while only 26% declared the same for their children.¹²⁰

Jane Clark, a kinesiologist and educator on human movement at the University of Maryland, refers to the most recent generation’s lack of movement as the “containerized kids.”¹²¹ These kids spend time on couches in front of screens: iPads, computers, and TVs, sit in the backseat of cars and in strollers, inside and contained. Lindt, a professor of curriculum and learning, and Miller, another professor of kinesiology, in their article “Movement and Learning in Elementary School,” connect increased movement in a classroom with improvements in children’s overall physical activity, which then boost their interest level and allows them to learn more effectively, committing concepts more easily to long-term memory.¹²² Not only do studies show that 21st century children move and play outside less, but when they do play they experience healthier boundaries with respect to where they can play, who they play with, and how they can play.¹²³

¹¹⁹ Sandra L Hofferth, “Home media and children's achievement and behavior,” *Child development* 81, no. 5 (2010), 1598-619, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8624.2010.01494.x>.

¹²⁰ Rhonda Clements, “An Investigation of The.” *Fracture Mechanics* 5, no. 1 (2008): 485-485-18. <https://doi.org/10.1520/stp17413s>.

¹²¹ Louv, *Last Child in the Woods*, 35.

¹²² Suzanne F Lindt and Stacia C. Miller, “Movement and Learning in Elementary School,” *Phi Delta Kappan* 98, no. 7 (2017): 34-37.

¹²³ Louv, *Last Child In the Woods*, 34.

Studies have also shown proven cognitive benefits to both controlled and uncontrolled interactions with nature and outdoor play. In a study done at University of Michigan, Marc Berman, John Jonide, and Stephen Kaplan found that nature improves children's directed-attention through attention restoration.¹²⁴ The study claims that after an interaction with natural environments, students are able to pay more attention in class. Nature not only plays a restorative role in a child's cognitive function, rebooting fatigue, but also works as a calming mechanism for children who might suffer from being hyperactive. Over 4.4 million children in the United States are diagnosed with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and research suggests that exposure to greenspace can reduce ADHD symptoms.¹²⁵ The act of being outside not only reduces symptoms of ADHD, but helps mitigate attention fatigue, calms and destresses students, and is proven to aid with depression.¹²⁶

Every day Hazel, founder and teacher at the Maine Outdoor School, is outside working with kids. She does not know a student's diagnosis, but she can see the change that happens when students get outside. Hazel speaks of how one student she worked with at Seabrook made a complete transformation when she brought the classroom outside:

Who knows whether he's diagnosed with ADD or whatever. Who knows? It's irrelevant. But the fact is, he can really struggle in an indoor environment with all that's going on, but as soon as he's outside, he goes above and beyond. He's critically thinking, he's reading and writing in a way that he's not doing inside, because he's super engaged in the content.

A trauma-informed practice seeks to appreciate each student as an individual and teaches them accordingly. Thus, a trauma-informed practice must find new strategies to engage learners who

¹²⁴ Marc Berman et al., "The Cognitive Benefits of Interacting With Nature," *Psychological Science Research* 19, no. 12 (2008): 1207–12. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9280.2008.02225.x>.

¹²⁵ Faber Taylor et al, "Could Exposure to Everyday Green Spaces Help Treat Adhd? Evidence from Children's Play Settings," *Applied Psychology: Health and Well-Being* 3, no. 3 (2011): 281-303, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1758-0854.2011.01052.x>.

¹²⁶ Louv, *Last Child In the Woods*, 35.

might not fit into a traditional classroom mold. The restorative properties of outdoor education work to reinvent what education can be for students who might struggle with or rebel against the traditional classroom setting. There's an energy to getting outside. Becky explains the ways, "it's air, it's sun, it's oxygen. It's a different level of stimulation." Kat takes her class outside between every academic block, "just move the body and get the fresh air, come back in." Kat implies that it is insane to hold students to the expectation that they need to constantly perform, participate, and focus, but sit still inside the same room all day. "Your brain shuts down. Mine does," Kat admits. The change of scenery creates a change in many students' behavior.

In a day and age where psychotropic drugs like antidepressants are prescribed to children more than ever before, finding alternative solutions or additional solutions like exposure to nature is critically important. Over 100 studies have confirmed the relationship between nature and stress reduction.¹²⁷ Studies have also shown a relationship between the absence of parks and open space and an increase rate of depression.¹²⁸ According to a study by Nancy Wells and colleague Gary Evans, children with nature near their homes rated themselves higher on a global measure of self-worth, illustrating that nature buffers the impact of stress on a child's life.¹²⁹ Well and Evans reported that nature as a protective buffer works best for those most at risk and thus nature helps build resiliency and reduce pressures on children who have suffered adversity or traumatic experiences.¹³⁰ The director of the Institute for Child and Adolescent Development claims nature has the power to shape our psyche, and therefore can play a significant role in helping traumatized children.¹³¹ The outdoors has healing and learning powers.

¹²⁷ Louv, *Last Child In the Woods*, 50.

¹²⁸ Louv, *Last Child In the Woods*, 36.

¹²⁹ Nancy Wells and Gary W. Evans. "Nearby Nature: A Buffer of Life Stress among Rural Children," *Environment and Behavior* 35, no. 3 (2003): 321, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013916503035003001>.

¹³⁰ Wells and Evans, "Nearby Nature," 321.

¹³¹ Louv, *Last Child In the Woods*, 53.

Silenced, marginalized students get to share the power of community in outdoor experience.¹³² Hazel claims that the goal of outdoor education is inherently trauma-informed—it builds resilience and focuses on safety and connection:

Outdoor education really shines at meeting students where they're at and helping them see where they're at... [It puts] kids or people in uncomfortable situations so that they can grow out of that. And my feeling is being a kid is uncomfortable and especially for kids who have a rough home life... they're already dealing with so many challenges, so what I wanna be able to show them is the outdoors is a safe space that can provide challenge in a fun way.

A trauma-informed practice confronts the lack of control students have in their lives. Yearning for independence and acceptance, the outdoors can provide a place of clarity and perspective. Dirty, messy, structureless, the outdoor setting can feel uncomfortable to students. Yet, Hazel comments on how the outdoors is also an equalizer. Obstacles, chilly winds, muddy paths, rainy weather affect all students. They learn resilience: how to create shelter in the rain, stay warm by packing the snow into underground tunnels. The outdoors pushes students to become problem-solvers. The outdoors supports a trauma-informed practice because its inclusive nature supports equity by providing a space to talk about safety, to build relationships, and to ensure that children feel empowered.

Connecting the classroom to the outdoors is particularly important for students growing up in rural areas like Seabrook and Portside. In these areas the majority of working adults rely on natural resources for their occupations. These students are particularly accustomed to accommodating to outdoor environments, because many of their parents work jobs outside on boats or in the fields and woods. Hunting, fishing, helping their parents rake blueberries is often an important part of these students' home life. For many students, working outside bridges the

¹³² Mitra, "Balancing power in communities of practice," 238.

connection between home and school. The students are constantly prodding Hazel to take them deeper into the woods and teach them about the resources that are directly related to how their caregivers work. The outdoors provides an environment that helps promote the key principles of trauma-informed practice: safety, connection, cultural responsiveness, and self-determination.

Outside also provides an inclusive environment in its physical openness. Its vast nature gives children a sense of freedom. This sense of liberation lends itself to exploration, creation, and fantasy, where children often include one another in their imaginary universe distant from our adult controlled world.¹³³ Outdoor educators notice a pattern: a student has to adjust to learning in a new environment. Laura, the resource coach at Seabrook, explains that this type of learning takes time, but becomes a life lesson in how to create structure within an unstructured environment:

The classroom becomes the place where they live, and they tend to do well there... If I take you outside, how do we start to work through what successfulness in a classroom activity looks like outside? That's not something they're going to be experts at that first time... There are way more distractions. [A child's] experience with being outside might be only recess time. Which is not structured. The first couple times, [we're] really working with students to give them enough structure for them to be successful. What does that need to look like? It's going to change as you progress through, because they're learning about how to be successful in an outside environment, or an unstructured environment. I think that's an important skill, because not every environment in life is going to be structured. Very few of them actually are. To be successful when life throws crazy things at you is an important skill.

When students have been forced to sit in the same tight, claustrophobic room with the same people for hours, the opportunity to feel the sun, to move and run loose is exciting and sometimes distracting. Building instruction and direction into a space associated with freedom allows students the opportunity to reimagine learning and the environment around them. As a mental health provider, during play therapy, Kandi speaks to the way “kids will start off with

¹³³ Louv, *Last Child in the Woods*, 7.

really aggressive or disorganized play and over time you start to see ordering and you start to see safety and you see boundaries start to come and you see relationships change and they [start] to work things out.” Kandi and Laura both highlight the way kids learn to create structure in unstructured environments. Students can be caught off guard by change, especially students who may have experienced trauma. Like anything new, it takes scaffolding and support to learn how to interact and productively learn in a new space. When Donna, director of the Sweetser outdoor program, takes groups outside, she makes sure it’s a planned, structured activity. Donna stresses the importance of reflection, “There’s a difference between just playing a game with kids, versus preparing, playing a game, and finding meaning in it.” Yet, once they start to accommodate to this new space, students learn to set their own boundaries instead of having someone else set them for them. This gives students a sense of purpose, control, and safety.

It takes a patient and dedicated educator to transform the outdoors into a classroom. Before Kat taught at Chewonki she was in a classroom where she struggled to get her students to listen, she decided to plant a garden. Kat explains the process: “I got them out every day in the garden. We reclaimed this garden. We planted stuff. They, in the beginning, they were horrors. They were running around outside, like, didn’t get it. I was like, “No, no. We’re working together. We’re doing this thing,” and it just was this bonding.” Like Laura’s experience at Seabrook, it took time for Kat’s students to buy into these outdoor based learning projects. Kat pushes her students to reflect on the meaning behind the garden. Planting a garden set Kat up for science lessons on botany, phytozoology, identification, and observation, but also for more fundamental life lessons about care, nature, and growing. The outdoors opens students to the realization that learning happens everywhere. Suddenly, just by a change in environment, students find ways to observe the patterns in trees, search the tracks of animals, explore the

shapes of rocks, and relate the outside world to inside the classroom. The outside presents a new model for students to become visionary scientists, mathematicians, writers, or historians curiously investigating the world around them.

The outdoors lends itself to integrative learning. Hazel thinks that the most important part of outdoor learning, and the reason she founded the Maine Outdoor School, is in the interdisciplinary qualities of nature. “You can't have an outdoor program that fits only one subject.” Hazel feels that education is drifting away from drawing the connection between subjects. She finds the outdoors literally and figuratively grounds our thinking, allows educators and students alike to see the connection between subjects. It’s time to shut the books,” Hazel says. In outdoor education we can use the tools we learn in class and find ways to connect those to the real world. The outdoors is free and accessible to all, fosters social interaction, and allows students to feel more connected to their space, granting them an enhanced sense of belonging. In a study from the California Department of Education, students that had outdoor education in their curriculum showed a 27% increase in a measure of mastery of science concepts, problem solving, motivation to learn, gains in self-esteem, and classroom behavior.¹³⁴

Becky, the director of the Riley School, explains how the outdoors works to create community. “There's something about having had that shared experience of looking for bugs in the meadow that's so fundamental to having that sense of community and love for learning that carries you forward.” There’s a magic to shared outdoor experiences where students are actively enjoying each other’s company and working together to reach a common goal. According to Taylor, Wells, and Evans, places with natural landscaping better support social interaction and social connectedness amongst children.¹³⁵ Outdoor play supports student voice, allowing students

¹³⁴ Louv, *Last Child In the Woods*, 208.

¹³⁵ Wells and Evans, “Nearby Nature,” 321

to develop a shared language and norms around play, fostering their voice in a mutual engagement and shared experience.¹³⁶

Not only does outdoor play encourage opportunities for student engagement and student voice, but it also grants students a sense of place and belonging. Developmental psychologist Erik Erikson speaks of “the natural genius of childhood and the ‘spirit of place.’”¹³⁷ This idea of the ‘spirit of place’ acknowledges how every student has equal ownership of an outdoor space, which encourages community building. At the New School, Crystal says that the greenhouse, which a student built as their senior project, is the space that the whole community uses to gather. Crystal finds that, “When they get out there, there's a different sort of connection that's happening.” The outdoors can bring a community together, unite a school with a common place, and spark a special connection.

¹³⁶ Dana Mitra, “Balancing power in communities of practice,” 222.

¹³⁷ Louv, *Last Child In the Woods*, 86.

Discussion

Microadventures and Somedays

At Seabrook, microadventures were the result of students' expressed desire for more movement and outdoor time.¹³⁸ Teachers identified academic areas that needed extra attention, and with the Maine Common Core Learning Standards in hand, our class created example project-based adventures. The TREE resource coaches worked with the classroom teachers and planned ways to bring the classroom outside. On a warm sunny day, prekindergartners covered the grass with blankets to lie on their backs and discover the clouds, as they drew pictures in their field journals, read *It Looked Like Spilt Milk*, and told cloud stories. In the snow, preschoolers strapped on snow boots, zipped their jackets and did a grocery shopping relay race on the playground to learn about the different food groups. Fourth-graders walked in the woods on a bright brisk fall day to collect leaves and learn about photosynthesis. On an especially frigid winter morning, fifth-grade students used blue painter's tape to cover the gym floor with geometric figures. They sat inside shapes or stretched alongside them to measure angles and determine the area and perimeter, filling the gym with colorful sticky notes of their findings. These microadventures were a direct response to students' expressed desire to get outdoors and experience their classrooms and school grounds as a living, moving learning environment.¹³⁹

Microadventures naturally paired with "somedays," a TREE initiative designed to introduce teachers to the connection between student voice and student engagement. Each student and teacher received a piece of paper and was asked to complete the sentence: "Someday I would like to..." indicating one activity they hoped to experience at school before summer. Many students somedays merged into microadventures. For example, a few kindergartners asked

¹³⁸ Section from Lyn Mikel Brown and Jenny Flaumenhaft, "Student-Empowered Curricular Change."

¹³⁹ Section from Lyn Mikel Brown and Jenny Flaumenhaft, "Student-Empowered Curricular Change."

for a class wide ice cream party for their someday wish. With the help of the resource coach and the classroom teacher that someday transformed into a whole class microadventure. The entire first grade learned how to make ice cream. In a science lesson about chemical reactions, the students learned the difference between liquid, gas, and solids through making ice cream. They then practiced graphing after surveying the class about their favorite ice cream toppings. Sandra and Brian got their ice cream party, and their teacher was able to rehash a combination of math and science learning goals. Microadventures when paired with somedays became student-initiated projects. Now in the schools TREE works with, teachers and students use the language of “microadventures” and “somedays” interchangeably. With the combination of microadventures and somedays and the help of the TREE resource coaches, teachers have started to hand the curriculum over to students and the students get to determine how they learn the next subject.¹⁴⁰

One eight-grader, Jane, at Portside, loves microadventures and somedays because “it gives us freedom.” Jane explains that her day without these learning projects feels repetitive:

A lot of my classes I don't want to do. I'm the type of person that I'm never the same, I always switch things up... With our school, it's just like a set schedule and in the classes you always do the same thing. It's just boring...I think that somedays give us freedom of what we wanna do, and we can act as an individual person and we don't have to act around other people how you should act. We can just be ourselves.

Somedays and microadventures make learning fun and help engage students who might not consider themselves academically successful. Frustrated with the monotonous routine, Jane did not want to sit at desk all day. Microadventures and somedays provide an outlet for students like Jane who need to move around and change up routine. An eighth-grade boy in Jane’s class, Tim, claimed for him somedays are “something to look forward to, makes the day go quicker.”

¹⁴⁰ Section from Lyn Mikel Brown and Jenny Flaumenhaft, “Student-Empowered Curricular Change.”

These eighth-graders like microadventures and somedays because they switch up the usual classroom routine and give the students some choice in how they want to learn.

Students value this sense of control over their curriculum. Alex, a fifth-grade boy at Seabrook says that his favorite part of school are microadventures and somedays because they “give you a chance to do what you want, and nobody can control what you're gonna do.” Similarly, Serita, the mental health coach at Portside, loves the idea of microadventures and somedays because they ask students how they want to learn. Serita says often times students know better than adults what they need, and it is simply about asking the question, “What do you want to do?” Students who have experience trauma often feel powerless. As stated in chapter four, creating an environment that enhances a young person’s sense of personal control can build their resilience and promotes healing. A key component of student-empowered learning is handing initiative and agency off to the students and, by doing so, offering the therapeutic, healing affect of taking ownership over completed action.¹⁴¹

Laura, the resource coach at Seabrook, explains that kids are generating the ideas about how they want to learn and those ideas are being acknowledged and valued by their teachers, and that makes the students themselves feel valued. Laura says that “They're contributing to, not just their own experience, but a whole class experience. When that experience becomes something really positive that all your other classmates are excited about, and it was your idea... that brings a lot of value to you as a person... this sense of, *I have a voice here, and people hear me.*” Microadventures and somedays invite students to become the problem-solvers and co-create their learning environment with adults.

¹⁴¹ Bessel A. Van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (New York: Viking, 2014), 218.

Rachel, a sixth-grader at Seabrook, feels like microadventures and somedays have helped her gain trust in her teachers: “You can trust that [somedays] will come true. And you get a chance to actually get to know the teachers. Because let's say that you don't really like a teacher, and you don't really trust them, and then they make a someday come true for you. It's like, I can sort of trust these people.” For Rachel, these projects are about her relationships. As noted in chapter three, positive relationships between students and teachers motivate children, allowing them to feel safe and comfortable and therefore to learn better. Microadventures and somedays are set aside as time for relationship building between students and students and between students and teachers. Alex also enjoys that microadventures and somedays involve teamwork. He thinks that the point of microadventures and somedays is to have, “people all work together to get somebody's someday done.” This sort of team building work allows learning to become a partnership, inviting difference and diversity, valuing relationships, and creating trust between adults and students.

Microadventures and somedays provide students a sense of belonging in that students and teachers work together to engage in a common goal. Laura echoes the community-building aspects of microadventures and somedays. She explains if a student feels frustrated academically, somedays and microadventures give that student “the opportunity to give input into what happens at school, have that be heard, and have that be celebrated.” Finding ways to honor a student, especially one that might be struggling at home or academically, helps improve the school climate, because students feel positive about their learning.

Two third-graders, Ben and Rocky, expressed a someday wish to build a shelter outside. Laura connected with Hazel at the Maine Outdoor School. Hazel and Laura planned an entire shelter-building day that involved the entire class. Laura recounts how she took the children

outside and everyone was creating all these different sized shelters, small ones for fairies, and big ones that the kids could sit in: “It was a team building experience, a team celebrating experience, a whole class activity.” Rocky came to school with all the right clothes and a backpack full of tools. Rocky and Ben pondered shapes, tried out ideas, and stepped up in ways their teacher had never seen. Their suggested construction plans revealed budding math skills that had gone unrecognized in the classroom. Perhaps more important, they were excited about learning. Ben’s mother was grateful others could finally know what she knew about her son: “He has trouble at school just staying focused on basic things and he gets very frustrated. And like he just shuts down. He liked the day that they built the shelters. He said that was awesome. But he’s an outdoor boy. . . . I feel like sometimes he’s untapped on the potential that he has.”¹⁴² For the first time all year, teachers saw Ben and Rocky eager to learn. The students at Seabrook are still talking about the shelter building to this day.

Ben and Rocky’s classmate, Emma wrote, “Someday I want to teach a science class.” Her teacher was both surprised and doubtful. Emma is selectively mute. Her teacher thought, *how is she going to teach when she won’t talk*. But somedays were about wishes fulfilled. Working with her whiteboard and with the support of the TREE coach, Emma developed a microadventure in which she would teach her classmates to make snow. Together Emma and the coach collected materials and read directions; writing notes and making suggestions, Emma learned and practiced. When the day came for Emma’s lesson, her teacher was amazed: “We came out here on the picnic table . . . and she taught the other students how to make snow. . . . That was amazing to see. She had them put out all their materials. She talked.” For the first time, Emma audibly used her words at school. Emma’s someday microadventure allowed her not

¹⁴² Section from Lyn Mikel Brown and Jenny Flaumenhaft, “Student-Empowered Curricular Change.”

only to connect with and master the material, but also to interact and socialize with her peers in a way her teacher did not think was possible. Like other children across the country who grow up in high-poverty rural areas and attend under-resourced schools, Seabrook students face intersecting challenges that include economic, food, and housing insecurity, exacerbated by lack of access to both medical and mental health supports. Some students, like Emma, have experienced trauma and adversity that overwhelm their capacity to cope.¹⁴³ Microadventures and somedays offered a way to give students a voice in the classroom, even a student who had never spoken in an academic setting.

Microadventures and somedays deepen engagement in the learning process by enabling students to initiate learning goals and influence curricular development. Microadventures, in combination with somedays, not only facilitate the healing influence of ongoing student-empowered learning, but also promote cultural responsiveness and equity. In a predominantly white school, where Latinx children have limited opportunity to speak Spanish during the academic day, Jorge saw an opportunity. For his someday he invited his mother to read a book in Spanish to his class while he translated the story for the other students. Although Jorge was typically a shy child in school, his mother was struck by his ability to make the other students laugh: “The fun part was that as I was reading Spanish, like most of the kids wouldn’t really understand, so my son read the English version, and he would read it in English as I was reading in Spanish . . . and he would give it that extra sense of humor so the kids would laugh when he would read it again.” By inviting his mother to class, Jorge offered a way to model dual-language learning and bridge the divide he and other Latinx students experience between home and school.

¹⁴³ Rice and Groves, *Hope and Healing*, 11.

As addressed in chapter five, to build community and promote a trauma-informed learning, a school must respect and value a student's home life and find ways to bridge school and home. Microadventures and somedays provide a platform for students to feel their background and culture are acknowledged. Like Emma, Rocky, and Ben, Jorge also revealed a hidden part of himself: the funny, social Jorge who struggles to emerge in his English-only classroom.¹⁴⁴

Somedays value student-empowered learning as the students design the ways they want to transform the school. Microadventures promote outdoor, project-based, community learning, which highlight creative ways to teach the curriculum. These projects invite student voice, by giving students choice over their adventure, encourage relationship building, and allow students the ability to move and take the classroom outside. Seeing students as individuals with prior knowledge and present expertise is critical to creating safe, responsive, and culturally sensitive schools. Through valuing community, connection, safety, and cultural responsiveness, microadventures and somedays support trauma informed learning. The effective combination of somedays and microadventures allow microadventures to become student-empowered, trauma-informed learning, outdoor learning activities.

Barriers

There are, of course, challenges associated with this work. The first major challenge is that schools are typically top-down institutions and teachers have competing priorities. Ms. Lisse reveals that the biggest barrier for implementing microadventures is time: "We have a curriculum that we have to get done. We have quarterly assessments in Language Arts and Math. We have to teach to those tests, and then, the big thing is we have to not divert off our set

¹⁴⁴ Section from Lyn Mikel Brown and Jenny Flaumenhaft, "Student-Empowered Curricular Change."

curriculum because we have the MEAs coming up.” Teachers need their students to pass the test and that pressure makes it so student-initiated activities like microadventures and somedays are not their priority. Many of the teachers that TREE works with still consider microadventures an add-on. These teachers want to support such activities, but see them as extra built in fun, rather than valuable learning time.

Even teachers that see the academic value in microadventures are hesitant to begin to incorporate them into their daily curriculum. The teachers are already too busy. They do not feel like they have the time to plan these adventures. As Laura, Seabrook’s coach, explains, “Rural schools have teachers that are already filling multiple roles...They're the basketball coaches. They're the afterschool people... Any little spot that needs a person, that person already has two or three other spots that they're filling... There's limited people in the building to be able to do all those roles.” Laura understands that the teachers at Seabrook are exhausted. Even though TREE provides extra hands, a resource coach and a mental health provider, teachers still feel they do not have the time or energy to fit in anything new.

The teachers at Seabrook and Portside have been teaching the same way for years. “There's this hesitation of giving control over,” Ashley explains. The teachers, she concludes, do not want to hand over their power. The rules of traditional classrooms are that students are to pay attention and do as the teachers say to do. Ashley, the resource coach at Portside, admits frankly that “many teachers think, *I'm creative enough*. They are afraid to ask for help.” Ashley worries teachers fear they’ll be perceived as ineffective if they ask for her support in the classroom. They are confident they can teach the material and have not yet become comfortable enough to ask Ashley to build a microadventure to help students grasp a certain difficult concept. A cultural

shift needs to happen for microadventures to become an embedded and consistent approach to transforming the curriculum at schools like Seabrook and Portside.

Students can present another challenge. Some resist taking control of their learning. As stated in chapter four, there's a learned language to student-empowered, trauma-informed learning and students need to become familiar with ways to productively use their new freedom. Ms. Lisse says not only do the teachers need to let go of the power, but the students need to embrace that control: "They're just used to coming to school and having someone else direct them. So, it's going to take a while for them to finally click in, *oh, I do have a voice. I do have the ability to say what I want to do.*" Some students expressed concern that people in their classroom are too rambunctious to be trusted to have a voice in the classroom. One eighth grade boy said that a good teacher is one that can "keep the kids under control." While these students crave fun, new ways to learn in the classroom, they also foresee the potential for classmates to abuse the freedom that microadventures and someday grant a classroom.

Opportunities

These student-initiated project-based activities have been part of everyday life at Seabrook and Portside Elementary Schools for more than a year now. The schools are starting to adjust to the cultural shift and both teachers and students have begun to embrace new, flexible approaches to the curriculum. Teachers are beginning to feel more comfortable asking for help and students are given more opportunity to be heard. Serita, the mental health coach at Portside thinks she's starting to see the shift:

I think they're really working on it. I'm feeling so encouraged...I'm feeling the tone in the school as calmer...There's not as much directive orders if you will... But it's happening in a different way now. And I think that is maybe partially because Ashley is here so much of the time, and I think the staff are really getting that we get how hard it is to not only teach and have all these responsibilities, but then to deal with somebody who's really not ready to be able to take the material.

Teachers are more readily asking for help and using TREE's resources, such as the resource coaches and mental health providers. Laura concurs that microadventures and somedays have given students a sense of "ownership over their space and their own school, and to have a voice in what happens on a day to day basis." She thinks that this shift in giving space for students to pursue their passions at school, bridge home community and school community, and recognize their expertise is allowing teachers to be the educators they want to be. Ashley notices the difference at Portside: "There's less yelling." Ashley says school feels more 'lighthearted.' Teachers report feeling less stressed and burned out, less like they're "throwing boulders into quicksand."

One teacher summed up the advantages of rethinking the curriculum to consider student voice: "We're listening to the kids. I never thought that kids are looking at things differently. We think we're doing everything possible, and the kids are not quite feeling it; it's so good to hear each other. Shifting your mind doesn't really cost anything; it's a cheap change . . . people just need to shift their thinking." Students are more engaged, school climate has improved, and last spring saw a rise in standardized test scores. This culture shift takes time and energy and is not perfect. Yet, TREE and Seabrook's commitment to student empowerment and voice via microadventures has unsettled traditional educational practice. The students asked to go outside, to work with their hands, and to move and the school listened to this desire.

The success of microadventures has demonstrated the ways in which an outdoor environment that gives students freedom, control, and facilitates bonding and working together

also works with a trauma-informed approach which values connection, relationships, and feeling a sense of safety, belonging. By taking students seriously.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁵ Section from Lyn Mikel Brown and Jenny Flaumenhaft, “Student-Empowered Curricular Change.”

Conclusion

“You need to be well-loved to save the world” —Roxane Gay

By enacting microadventures, Seabrook and Portside have, in essence, adopted many of the learning goals of private, alternative schools that focus on cultivating creative, self-determined, and collaborative thinkers. These outdoor alternative education programs aim to educate the child as whole, academically, developmentally, and socially and have framed their curriculum around reaching that goal.¹⁴⁶ Their curriculums are built around Maine Common Core Learning Standards, but schools have the freedom to make these lessons into group, team building activities. Students practice these “textbook” concepts and themes in new, imaginative ways. They have morning meetings where students share stories and bring their home community into their school community. These schools bring the students outside and have the students work together as much as possible. They engage with local resources, use the natural resources of Maine to teach lessons and reflect after every field trip and adventure. Microadventures bring the practices of these outdoor schools into a public school setting by allowing students to control their learning, connecting class material to hands-on projects, and bridging the gap between students’ outside and school communities.

Microadventures take these same values: social and emotional connections, strong relationships, and community building into a public school setting. Microadventures not only make it possible for public schools to design their curriculum around their students and create this same flexible, adaptive learning environment as do private, alternative education schools,

¹⁴⁶ “Early Education Shapes Their Lives,” Chewonki Elementary, accessed May 18 2019, <https://elementary.chewonki.org>.

but they also promote a trauma-informed practice. Microadventures and somedays are especially important for high poverty districts like Seabrook because of the ways they work to empower student voice and build relationships. Trauma at its core shatters systems of care and protection and recovery takes careful rebuilding of these structures, promoting positive relationships, and community.¹⁴⁷ In conversation with teachers at Seabrook about trauma-informed learning, many explained that a trauma-informed approach is about meeting a child where they are, no matter what they are bringing into the classroom, and working from there. This approach to the classroom is another way of listening to students. Microadventures turn the classroom into a space where students feel liberated by choice and empowered by feeling that their voice is heard in the classroom.

Microadventures paired with somedays invite students to articulate how they want to learn. By turning a someday into a microadventure, one student's wish becomes a shared experience with the entire class. Peers and their teachers celebrate that student's choice of activity, which makes a student feel valued in the classroom. This opportunity to share in an exciting activity facilitates bonding between classmates and creates meaningful relationships. Since everyone gets to participate in the learning activity, microadventures become a team building exercise and, more broadly, a lesson in equity. By trusting students with the curriculum and co-creating their learning process, students are granted power. For students who have experienced racial oppression, invalidation, or have been otherwise disempowered, microadventures provide a sense of trust, community, and belonging.

Empowering student voice and prioritizing relationship fosters an environment that is culturally responsive and committed to equity and bridging culturally and linguistically diverse

¹⁴⁷ Brown, et al., "Student Empowered Social Emotional Learning," 5.

communities.¹⁴⁸ For a school to create an environment of trust and respect it must address, respond, and recognize systems of unequal privilege and power and challenge racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression.¹⁴⁹ Microadventures emphasize safety and belonging through creating an open space where students can communicate with their teachers and feel comfortable collaborating and sharing ideas. Through creating a sense of belonging, microadventures support a trauma-informed practice by giving children a sense of safety and a chance to voice their desires and grievances about school. In one interview a student claimed that microadventures were important at Seabrook, because they raised this student's spirit and gave her hope. This student understood that she and many of her peers had faced some difficult circumstances at home and felt that microadventures, by brightening this student's day, worked to support healing.

Outdoor education also supports healing and a trauma-informed practice. The fresh outdoor air works to reboot children. Studies have shown how the outdoors works as an attention restorative and has healing properties.¹⁵⁰ These studies suggest that just being outside lowers a child's blood pressure, indicating reduced stress levels.¹⁵¹ Not only do natural spaces aid students in physical and psychological healing and restore their attention, but they also provide students with a sense of both freedom and safety.¹⁵² The outdoors is an inherently unstructured, liberating landscape. Students have the opportunity to build their own structure in a space free of rules. Outside of the classroom and their typical routine and into green open space, students can create new imaginative ways to interpret the learning material. Through applying classroom concepts to

¹⁴⁸ Brown, et al., "Student Empowered Social Emotional Learning," 7.

¹⁴⁹ Brown, et al., "Student Empowered Social Emotional Learning," 8.

¹⁵⁰ Terry Hartig et al., "Tracking Restoration in Natural and Urban Field Settings," *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 23, no. 2 (2003): 109-123, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0272-4944\(02\)00109-3](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0272-4944(02)00109-3).

¹⁵¹ Hartig, "Tracking Restoration in Natural and Urban Field Settings."

¹⁵² Joan James and Theresa Williams, "School-Based Experiential Outdoor Education: A Neglected Necessity," *Journal of Experiential Education* 40, no. 1 (2017): 58-71, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1053825916676190>.

the outdoors, students have the chance to connect the classroom material with the outside community, deepening their engagement in their learning and their critical thinking skills.

Additionally, many of these students grew up outside. A majority of their parents and the working adults in their life rely on natural resources for their occupations. Bringing these students outside provides students with a sense of comfort and a way to connect their home lives and upbringing with the school environment. For students who did not grow up outside, the outdoor environment can seem daunting. Learning outdoors presents a challenge for students to adapt to new settings in a structured guided way. Overall the outdoors has the power to unite a community. It creates a space for a special connection, bringing the community together, and getting students engaged, thinking critically, and involved in school in ways that their teachers never thought possible. The restorative properties of the outdoors support trauma-informed learning and creates a space where students can learn, grow, and heal. Microadventures connect the benefits of outdoor learning with a trauma-informed approach to the classroom. These outdoor, hands-on learning adventures are a way to listen to students, and to facilitate healthy relationships and a sense of community which promotes equity and safety.

Maine's new Commissioner of Education, Pender Makin, has made it her mission to dial back on standardized testing. She believes that while standardized test scores are a quantifiable way to judge academic success, these scores are not telling the full story. Makin claims that these tests are given false importance; stressing test scores fails to consider a child's individual growth as a person and a learner. After working with populations who have lived in poverty and experienced trauma, Makin has seen firsthand the lasting anger and resentment these children bring to school. She hopes that the public education system can reprioritize, focusing more on equity and bridging the gap between the poor and privileged populations, attending to the safety

and happiness of students who have been neglected or otherwise traumatized at home, and less on raising standardized test scores.¹⁵³ Makin agrees that to rebuild trust in public education we must emphasize equity and appreciate the intimate relationship between a child's academic success and their social, emotional, and behavioral growth.¹⁵⁴

Microadventures and somedays bring to public schools the possibility of valuing and educating the whole child. These projects provide a strategy for curriculum reform that reflects the direction Commissioner Makin wishes to take Maine public schools: valuing student voice, trusting teachers, and allowing schools flexibility and agency over how they want to teach the curriculum, instead of teaching to the test. Somedays and microadventures are powerful tools for teachers seeking to redesign the curriculum in collaboration with students.¹⁵⁵ Students deserve to feel loved and valued, and microadventures allow students to grow not only as learners, but also as human beings.

¹⁵³ Rob Cadwell, "The Making of a Commissioner of Education," WCSH, April 16, 2019, accessed May 19, 2019, <https://www.newscentermaine.com/article/news/local/207/the-making-of-a-commissioner-of-education/97-9be896ce-8df5-4eb5-9b04-85439e3e720a>.

¹⁵⁴ Alex Lear, "Education Nominee Brunswick's Pender Makin: 'Government Should Stay out of the Classroom'," Brunswick Times Record, January 07, 2019, accessed May 19, 2019, <https://www.timesrecord.com/articles/local/education-nominee-brunswicks-pender-makin-government-should-stay-out-of-the-classroom/>.

¹⁵⁵ Section from Lyn Mikel Brown and Jenny Flaumenhaft, "Student-Empowered Curricular Change."

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