

Introduction to Special Issue: Transformative Trauma-Informed Practices in Rural Schools

Loni Crumb, *East Carolina University*

Jennifer Matthews, *East Carolina University*

Taryne Mingo, *The University of North Carolina at Charlotte*

Julia Lynch, *University of North Carolina Wilmington*

Rural schools are key places for accessing children needing supportive mental and behavioral healthcare services (Crumb et al., 2021). With appropriate supports and interventions that integrate trauma-informed principles, rural youth can overcome traumatic and adverse childhood experiences that impact their well-being, such as physical and emotional abuse, poverty, homelessness, exposure to household dysfunction, substance use, parental separation, and accidents and injuries (Center for Disease Control, 2021). The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) outlined six principles that guide a trauma-informed approach: 1) safety; 2) trustworthiness and transparency; 3) peer support; 4) collaboration and mutuality; 5) empowerment, voice, and choice; and 6) cultural, historical and gender issues (SAMHSA, 2014). All rural school personnel can embrace a culturally responsive approach and translate into practice value-driven approaches to student learning and services that leverage healing from adversity and minimize the risk of re-traumatization guided by these principles. This is especially important as childhood, adolescence, and emerging adulthood are sensitive developmental periods in which healing from adversity can occur (Cantor et al., 2018; Duane et al., 2021; Simmons, 2021). Furthermore, adopting SAMHSA's principles using a culturally responsive approach supports the well-being of rural school personnel who are at risk of experiencing burnout and compassion fatigue from working with students who have experienced trauma or who may be dealing with their adversities (Mullen & Gutierrez, 2016; Ruble et al., 2023).

A combination of strengths-based school and community interventions may circumvent barriers to mental health treatment faced by rural students, school staff, families, and community members, such as time and resource constraints, transportation difficulties, communication breakdowns, and gaps in mental health literacy (Fears et al., 2023; Mingo & Cofield, 2023). These interventions also aid in reducing the stigma associated with seeking mental health services in rural areas (Crowe & Kim, 2020; Crumb et al., 2019). In this special issue of the *Theory & Practice in Rural Education* journal (TPRE), we highlight a range of articles that capture research and professional practices that promote cultural and trauma competence in rural settings and uphold the six guiding principles of a trauma-informed approach to help build resiliency and decrease the

mental, emotional, and academic distress associated with traumatic and adverse experiences.

Overview of Articles

Adopting a trauma-informed approach in rural schools is not accomplished through any single technique, person, or organization – instead, it requires collective efforts to gain competency in recognizing and responding to trauma through ongoing attention, sensitivity, and skill-building in culturally responsive practices (SAMHSA, 2014). The articles in this special issue provide research, practical strategies, case illustrations, and valuable resources that can positively transform the well-being of rural youth and those invested in rural education. We selected six manuscripts to reflect each SAMHSA guiding principle with consideration of the importance of rural contexts.

The special issue starts with an article by Maria Frankland and Catharine Biddle that captures the principle of safety. The authors conducted a statewide (Maine) quantitative study to understand school counselors' perceived involvement in superintendents' crisis decision-making around mental health and social-emotional development during the COVID-19 pandemic. Framed by crisis decision theory (Sweeny, 2008), the authors found that school counselors' perceived involvement in crisis schooling was lowest in rural school districts. The authors call for rural district leaders to proactively prepare for crises by capitalizing on preexisting relationships with school counselors who are easily accessible resources to support students' psychological needs. Furthermore, the authors urge district leaders to prioritize the mental health needs of rural students in times of crisis in conjunction with their academic needs.

The second article in this issue centers around the guiding principle of peer support but focuses on rural school personnel. Hope Schuermann, professor of counselor education with expertise in trauma recovery, discussed how traumatic events such as school violence and shootings, student and faculty suicide, or carrying the burden of seeing children not have their basic needs met may contribute to the attrition of coping abilities and burnout of rural school staff. Schuermann detailed how many rural school personnel, who are not trained in mental healthcare, are put into positions of caring for students in distress, while living with their own mental health struggles. The author explained that rural school staff struggling with their own adversities can have trauma responses such as fight or flight reactions, unhealthy attachment patterns, hyperarousal, memory issues, disconnection from students and coworkers, and loss of emotion regulation abilities. In the article, Schuermann provided concrete strategies, with a particular focus on school staff, to address education, treatment, and prevention through the establishment of trauma-informed institutions utilizing the strengths of rural communities.

Continuing to focus on the mental health of adults working with children, the third article captures the guiding principle of collaboration and mutuality. In rural Appalachia,

authors Lori Caudle, Cathy Grist, and Hannah Thompson illustrated how a research-practice partnership can advance trauma-informed education and care in rural communities. The authors provided a description of the early stages of a partnership study with a rural Appalachian pre-kindergarten program and two universities aimed to address burnout, secondary traumatic stress, and compassion fatigue faced by early childhood professionals who may be exposed to high levels of stress and trauma in their work with young children.

The fourth article in the issue demonstrates the SAMHSA guiding principle related to empowerment, voice, and choice. Tameka Grimes, Jennifer Kirsch, Shannon Roosma, and Amanda Walters provided findings from a qualitative research study focused on the lived experience of eight rural school counselors across the United States who implement trauma-informed practices (TIP). The authors brought focus to the emotional experience of implementing TIP, receiving differential support from school leaders to implement TIP, and practical logistics for implementing TIP in rural schools. The findings from the research help to further the understanding of the idiosyncrasies experienced by rural school counselors providing TIP such as combatting community stigma, the emotional impact of heavy trauma caseloads, the value of having school- and district-level support for TIP, and building formal and informal collaborations with other professionals.

The fifth article reflects the SAMHSA guiding principle related to cultural, historical, and gender issues. Sarah Henry, Debra Jones, DeQuindre Hughes, and Ang'elita Dawkins make a resounding call to move beyond merely having information or being trauma-informed to becoming *trauma-competent*, which reflects a change in action. The authors provided perspectives to increase the understanding of historical and present contexts regarding trauma and ways to begin shifting mindsets and building skills to support rural Students of Color better. The scholars provided an overview of protective factors that support rural Students of Color, such as increasing student-staff connectedness, exploring school organizational routines, and implementing anti-racist social-emotional learning, all grounded in the SAMHSA principles.

To conclude this issue, we incorporated a research article by Travis Lewis, Lawrence Hodgkins, and Kelly Wynne that advances the guiding principle associated with trustworthiness and transparency. The study's findings help to further understand educators' perceptions regarding which forms of childhood trauma most severely impact learning outcomes for rural students. Using Q-methodology (McKeown & Thomas, 2013) with 351 teachers, school counselors, and school administrators from across North Carolina and Missouri, the participants' general perceptions centered around various forms of abuse from an adult, violent and unstable relationships at home, negative community and societal factors, and physical and mental illness. The authors found that educators in rural settings were more likely to perceive abuse and violence in the home as most harmful to students' academic outcomes. The findings of this study provide

researchers, educator preparation programs, and school leaders with insight into the misconceptions that may persist among subsets of PK-12 educators regarding traumatized children and potential areas of need for further professional learning opportunities to address the systemic marginalization of rural students.

Overall, the articles in this special issue reflect commitments to SAMHSA's six guiding principles of a trauma-informed approach. Each article individually and then collectively responds to the sense of urgency in our nation to address ongoing mental health concerns impacting education in rural spaces. The authors advocate for practitioners, researchers, community members, and policymakers to continuously gain knowledge and act to better support rural communities experiencing mental health disparities. Collective action will expand integrated support systems that positively transform rural students' educational outcomes and well-being.

About the Authors

Loni Crumb, PhD East Carolina University, College of Education

I am a Licensed Clinical Mental Health Counselor and Associate Professor in the Counselor Education Program at East Carolina University. My areas of interest include counseling in rural areas, rural education, and promoting holistic wellness for underserved populations. I serve as a Research and Innovation Associate in the ECU Rural Education Institute. My motivation to serve as a guest editor of this special issue is to highlight ways to collectively respond to the mental health concerns of rural residents who have persistently been without or have not had access to adequate and quality mental healthcare.

Jennifer C. Matthews, PhD East Carolina University, College of Health & Human Performance

I am an ECU professor in the Department of Health Education and Promotion and a certified Community Resiliency Model (CRM) Trainer. I am a substance use researcher focusing on the impact of trauma and resilience. As a public health researcher committed to empowering communities, it is important to conduct research that can be translated into practice meaningfully, particularly in rural areas where resources are scarce. As a guest editor in this special issue, I was allowed to highlight those researchers focusing on rural spaces and providing foundational knowledge on challenges associated with addressing mental health issues in rural communities.

Taryne Mingo, PhD University of Charlotte, Cato College of Education

I am a Licensed Clinical Mental Health Counselor, Assistant Professor, and Director of the School Counseling program in the Department of Counseling at UNC Charlotte. My research interests at the K-12 level of education include supporting inclusive classrooms and schools, specifically for elementary-aged Students of Color, and addressing the academic, social, and emotional needs of children and adolescents. I am honored to serve as guest editor of this special issue. I believe this privilege allows me to ensure that diverse representations of ideas and methodological frameworks are given space in academia. Specifically, these opportunities can be significant in providing context-specific, mental health-related recommendations for residents in rural areas.

Julia Lynch, EdD University of North Carolina Wilmington, College of Education

I am a Licensed Teacher, Assistant Professor, and Program Coordinator in the Department of Educational Leadership within the Curriculum & Instruction concentration at UNC-W. As an educator, I focus primarily on under-resourced rural schools that serve primarily Black and Brown communities. My research interests are teacher identity and pedagogical practices within rural education contexts. I considered it a privilege to serve as guest editor on this special issue, ensuring that culturally responsive and inclusive research and methodology highlight high-impact practices in rural educational spaces.

Citation: Crumb, L., Matthews, J.C., Mingo, T. M., & Lynch, J. (2023). Transformative trauma-informed practices in rural schools [Special Issue]. *Theory & Practice in Rural Education*, 13(2).

References

- Cantor, P., Osher, D., Berg, J., Steyer, L., & Rose, T. (2018). Malleability, plasticity, and individuality: How children learn and develop in context. *Applied Developmental Science*, 23(4), 307–337. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10888691.2017.1398649>
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2021). Adverse childhood experiences prevention strategy. Atlanta, GA: National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. https://www.cdc.gov/injury/pdfs/priority/ACEs-Strategic-Plan_Final_508.pdf
- Crowe, A. & Kim, T. (2020). Ethnicity, life satisfaction, stress, familiarity, and stigma toward mental health treatment. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 98(1), 83–93. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jcad.12302>

- Crumb, L., Appling, B., Jones, S. (2021). Don't wait, communicate: Rural school counselors and disaster mental health. *Professional School Counseling, 25*(1). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2156759X211023119>
- Crumb, L., Mingo, T., Crowe, A. (2019). "Get over it and move on": The impact of mental illness stigma in rural, low-income United States populations. *Mental Health & Prevention, 13*, 143-148. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.mhp.2019.01.010>
- Duane, A., Casimir, A. E., Mims, L. C., Kaler-Jones, C., & Simmons, D. (2021). Beyond deep breathing: A new vision for equitable, culturally responsive, and trauma-informed mindfulness practice. *Middle School Journal, 52*(3), 4–14. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00940771.2021.1893593>
- Fears, A., Henry, S., & Grimes, T. (2023). A Rural Ecological School Counseling Framework. *Professional School Counseling, 27*(1). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2156759X231202494>
- McKeown, B., & Thomas, D. (2013). *Q methodology* (2nd Ed.). Sage. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781483384412>
- Mingo, T.M. & Cofield, D. (2023). Developmental and social considerations when conducting research with children and adolescents. In B. Zyromski & C. Dimmitt (Eds.). *Research in Schools: Advancing the evidence-base for the school counseling profession* (pp. 97-116). Oxford Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197650134.003.0005>
- Mullen, P. R., & Gutierrez, D. (2016). Burnout, stress and direct student services among school counselors. *The Professional Counselor, 6*(4), 344–359. <https://doi.org/10.15241/pm.6.4.344>
- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. Trauma-Informed Care in Behavioral Health Services. Treatment Improvement Protocol (TIP) Series 57. HHS Publication No. (SMA) 13-4801. Rockville, MD: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014.
- Ruble, L., McGrew, J., Fischer, M., Findley, J., & Stayton, R. (2023). School and intrapersonal predictors and stability of rural special education teacher burnout. *Rural Special Education Quarterly, 42*(3), 124–135. <https://doi.org/10.1177/87568705231180885>
- Simmons, D. (2021). Why SEL Alone Isn't Enough. *Educational Leadership, 78*(6), 30–34.
- Sweeny, K. (2008). Crisis decision theory: Decisions in the face of negative events. *Psychological Bulletin, 134*(1), 61–76. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.134.1.61>



Mission: Initiate and facilitate partnerships and research-driven innovations that enhance holistic development and opportunities for pk-16 students and their families in rural communities. Collaborate with stakeholders towards positive transformation in families and schools.

Vision: Be a place where educational stakeholders in rural communities come and feel at home in accessing resources and support to address the issues that confront us.

Goals: Improve educational outcomes for rural students, school, and communities through

- ECU Next Gen: We grow the next generation of rural educators and researchers.
- Local and Regional Development: We collaborate with schools and communities to build capacity for all.
- Rural Education Promotion: We articulate and advocate the importance of rural schools and communities.
- Research and Evaluation: We study our practice and investigate what works in rural schools.

Sign up for our newsletter to stay informed of REI's current projects and research <https://education.ecu.edu/rei/>

Contact us at ruraleducation@ecu.edu to connect and collaborate!