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K-12 School Administrator Candidates' Perceptions of Their Roles in Supporting Teachers to Address Adverse Childhood Experiences

This study addresses a gap in the research literature on K-12 school administrator candidates' perceptions, the impact of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), and their skillset in supporting teachers under their supervision. Having current knowledge of—and efficacy in—applicable procedures and processes to support students who have experienced ACEs is a growing concern for school administrators and teachers. Traditional school leadership programs attend to topics of curriculum, school culture, community relations, budgets, and public school law; however, there has tended to be limited training on working with students with ACEs and providing professional development and support for teachers with trauma-informed practices.

School administrators and teachers should be prepared to support these students by educating themselves about ACEs and how using trauma-informed practices can transform schools, teachers' practices, and the students' lives. This study addresses the concept of ACEs as part of trauma-informed education from the K-12 administrator candidate's point of view using a concurrent mixed methods case study approach at one university. This study presents a way for administrator preparation programs to address ACEs for K-12 administrator candidates in their programs of study. Researchers collected and analyzed data on K-12 school administrator candidates to assess the need to change the curriculum in a school administrator licensure program.

Literature Review

Understanding the impact of ACEs on a student's education and psychological development is part of trauma-informed education. According to Portwood (2018): "ACEs have included physical, sexual and emotional abuse; physical and emotional neglect; exposure to adult incarceration, mental illness, substance abuse or violence in the household; and parental separation or divorce" (para. 1). Also, "more recently, other events, including poverty, bullying, exposure to community violence and discrimination have been conceptualized as ACEs" (Portwood, 2018, para. 1). Approximately 40% of American children experienced acts of violence, and 1 in 10 American children saw one family member assault another family member (Finkelhor et al., 2009). Students enter the classroom with a wide variety of traumatic experiences and social-emotional challenges (Jimenez et al., 2016). Results from a study published of 2,101 children—from kindergarten through 6th grade across 10 elementary schools—found that 44% of that sample had been exposed to ACEs (Blodgett & Lanigan, 2018), suggesting the urgent importance of trauma-informed education. The researchers in that same study on the association between ACEs and academic success of elementary school children concluded that understanding ACEs and proactively responding to students who have experienced ACEs will be an important strategy for improving academic success (Blodgett & Lanigan, 2018). This raises the need for additional research on administrator candidates' levels of knowledge and understanding of ACEs and how to design administrator preparation programs for a systematic approach to trauma-informed practices to support the teachers in their schools.

Additional research on trauma-informed education is needed, especially empirical studies addressing gaps in the literature supporting trauma-informed teaching and teacher education (Jacobson, 2021; Thomas et al., 2019). Harper and Neubauer (2021) posited a trauma-informed education and administration model (M-TIEA) that provided a framework for emphasizing administrators' roles in how to approach "health promotion education and administration from a

trauma-informed perspective. This requires changes to the way we teach health promotion and public health" (Harper & Neubauer, 2021, p. 21). This model is geared more toward higher education administrators and public health professionals rather than K-12 administrators, so there continues to be a need for frameworks or models designed for the K-12 school context. Perry and Daniels (2016) addressed this, in part, for the K-12 context, but the current administrator and administrator candidate perspective remains an area of need.

This current study addresses a gap in the research literature on the perspective of K-12 administrator candidates. This current study on the perspective of K-12 administrator candidates builds on a previous study addressing knowledge of ACEs as a part of trauma-informed education from the perspective of preservice teachers (Attwood et al., 2022). As school leaders, K-12 administrators are central in supporting teachers as they address ways to teach all students. When students have experienced or are experiencing ACEs, they may be more at risk than their peers for academic failure and other socially maladaptive behaviors (Howard, 2019). Teachers are at risk for "secondary traumatic stress" (Walker, 2019), and a system is necessary for schools to address student behavior issues stemming from ACEs while also supporting teachers to support students (Howard, 2019). Secondary traumatic stress (STS) is "defined by the National Child Trauma Stress Network (NCTSN) as 'the emotional duress that results when an individual hears about the firsthand trauma experiences of another'" (Walker, 2019, para. 5).

Teachers may be especially at risk for secondary traumatic stress because of daily proximity to students who have experienced—or are experiencing—ACEs if they are not within a systematic support system at the school level with trauma-informed leadership from the principal and assistant principals (Caringi et al., 2015). Teachers are often the first adult authority figures a student with ACEs may talk to about their situation. A student may turn to that readily available adult authority figure—one of their teachers—whom they know to discuss sensitive topics. This affects school administrators in several ways, from a personal perspective of determining how best to support the teachers and students in their building and how to design effective systems in their schools to support each stakeholder proactively (Stokes & Brunzell, 2019). Increasing administrator mindfulness can enable school leaders to focus on school culture, safety, and behaviors using a more thoughtful and reflective approach (Russell & Miller, 2024).

K-12 administrator preparation programs must train candidates to effectively design trauma-informed leadership programs and practices. Traditional school discipline procedures and the overall culture of schools have drastically changed post-pandemic, according to the National Center for Educational Statistics (2022). Students' social, emotional, and psychological needs have elevated; therefore, school administrators must not expect business as usual. Post-pandemic classrooms present unique challenges for teachers (Bruster & Lambert, 2024); therefore, administrator preparation programs must address these challenges.

Among the skills essential for K -12 administrators are an effective communication system and developing professional development plans that support teachers in meeting the needs of all their students (Turhan, 2010). Lindle (2004) highlighted the importance of analyzing the perspectives of school administrators in relation to coping with stress. As the school leaders, the principal and assistant principals are examples for teachers and essential in the school framework for providing successful support systems. Teaching and learning are the primary reasons for schools to exist; school administrators must implement effective learning conditions to build, sustain, and grow a school culture of belonging for all students (Reeves & Eaker, 2019).

In many schools, the recommended number of licensed mental health professionals is often unavailable, and if available, the level of trust between this individual and the child can be

a contributing factor that hinders communication (Eklund et al., 2017). This is a complicated dynamic in which teachers may find themselves uncomfortably placed in situations that appear in practice as *de facto* counselors. The same can be said for administrators who may be placed in similar situations as teachers screening information that needs referral to licensed mental health professionals (Lindle, 2004). This points to the need for education about ACEs and protocols for collaboration in administrator preparation programs with school districts in supporting school personnel to address these issues with mental health professionals. This present study adds to this literature to address the K-12 administrator and administrator candidate point of view with a new survey instrument (see Appendix) to gather and examine K-12 administrator candidate perceptions of trauma-informed education and their role so that administrator preparation programs may design responsive curricula.

Students will often tell teachers personal information that places teachers in the position of screening sensitive information. Teachers must then take time and energy to consult with the school counselor and/or school administrators. Therefore, K-12 administrator candidates should have an administrator preparation program designed to address trauma-informed education with specific training in understanding how to support teachers who have students who have ACEs. This must be a collaborative effort in schools between teachers, counselors, school psychologists or social workers, the students' families, and the school administrators (Illinois ACEs Response Collaborative, 2018; Thomas et al., 2019). While administrators are likely not licensed school psychologists or social workers, they should have education in trauma-informed practices to increase the likelihood of more effective collaboration with licensed mental health professionals in their schools and school districts. This is especially important when staffing ratios do not meet recommended minimums (Eklund et al., 2017).

School administrators without licensure in school psychology or other relevant mental health profession cannot diagnose and should be cautious when using terms such as "trauma." Nevertheless, Berardi and Morton (2019) noted: "We caution educators not to minimize the importance of developing trauma-informed competencies and to name them as such. This includes continued discernment regarding implementation language sensitive to social context" (p. xi). Some states have pushed this expectation further by requiring trauma-informed education for general educators (Tennessee House Bill No. 405, see State of Tennessee, 2019). The Tennessee Literacy Success Act of 2021 requires trauma-informed education in EPPs for preservice teachers. Interpretation of the law includes the requirement that EPPs teach "behavior management, trauma-informed principles and practices, and other supports to ensure students can access reading instruction" (Wessen et al., 2022, p. 18). K-12 administrator preparation programs must design trauma-informed coursework that fosters knowledge, awareness, and skills related to how to support teachers in addressing students who have been exposed to ACEs. The first step in this process is to ascertain administrator candidates' perceptions of what ACEs are and what the role of a school administrator should be in addressing ACEs. The administrator preparation program can most effectively teach these skills before a teacher becomes an administrator while in the candidacy stage of their administrator licensure program (Perry & Daniels, 2016; Wassink-de Stigter et al., 2022). School leaders committed to meeting the changing landscape of behaviors, and discipline concerns include ACE programs and practices to support students and teachers.

Methods

Participants and Recruitment Procedure

Participants for this study were all graduate students enrolled in an educational leadership program at a public university in the southeastern United States. In 2022, the researchers invited participants via email based on their enrollment in a K-12 educational leadership program at one public university. There were approximately 300 participants invited to participate in the study, and 102 voluntarily elected to participate, a 34% response rate. The initial response rate after the first email invitation was about 70 participants (23%). An additional reminder email was sent with a reminder in classes by one of the researchers, which increased the response rate to 102 participants (34%). Participants were informed of the parameters of the research study and were given the informed consent form via Qualtrics to sign electronically, as well as the option not to participate.

Demographic data were collected as part of the survey and are reported in Table 1. This sample had participants from rural and non-rural schools, of which 63% worked in a rural school when they completed the survey. While all participants were in an administrator preparation program, 38% indicated they had prior administrative experience when they took this survey. This is because those participants were already administrator interns or in temporary administrator positions while completing licensure.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Characteristic	n	%
Gender		
Female	85	83.3%
Male	17	16.7%
Age Range		
≤ 29	3	3.0%
30 - 39	47	46.1%
40 - 49	32	31.4%
50 - 59	18	17.6%
≥ 60	2	2.0%
Race		
African American/Black	21	20.6%
Asian	1	1.0%

Biracial/Multi-Racial	2	2.0%
Caucasian/White	74	72.5%
Hispanic	3	2.9%
No Response	1	1.0%
Current or Anticipated Administrator Level		
District Administrator	12	11.8%
Other Unit Level Administrator at a School	25	24.5%
School Principal or Assistant Principal	63	61.8%
No Response	2	2.0%
Type of School		
Elementary School	59	57.8%
Middle School	25	24.5%
High School	17	16.7%
No Response	1	1.0%
Years of Administrator Experience		
0 years	62	60.8%
1 -3 years	27	26.4%
More than 3 years	12	11.8%
No Response	1	1.0%

Instrument and Data Collection

These researchers designed a survey instrument called Survey of Administrator Candidates' Perception of Adverse Childhood Experiences (SoACPACE 1.1, see Appendix). Participants were asked to complete this survey containing closed and open-ended questions. The survey was administered electronically via Qualtrics. The Qualtrics link was distributed directly to the 300 potential participants via email using the approved research protocol with the informed consent form approved by the researchers' institutional review board. Participants were

informed at the top of the survey in Qualtrics, as part of the informed consent page, that the survey was voluntary and anonymous and that completing or not completing this survey did not affect their course grade in any way. Participants were informed that the approximate time to complete the survey would be 10 minutes.

Research Design

The guiding research questions of this study are: (1) Is there an association between preservice administrators' belief that instruction about ACEs should be a component in administrator preparation programs and the six variables of the participants' awareness of ACEs from outside their program, the importance of awareness, the principal's role as central figure, use of ACE-informed strategies, access for ACE consultation, and inclusion of ACE-informed instruction? (2) What are the perceptions of preservice and in-service K-12 administrators of ACEs? And (3) How can school administrators' perceptions be used to inform the curriculum for teaching about ACEs and their influence on K-12 trauma-informed education? We chose a concurrent mixed methods research design to investigate K-12 school administrator candidates' perceptions. The rationale for using a mixed methods approach to this study is that: "potentially [it] maximizes the strengths and minimizes weaknesses of each respective method" (McCrudden et al., 2019, p. 1). Qualitative and quantitative data were collected for the current study through a survey designed to gather perspectives from K-12 administrator candidates.

For the qualitative component of this study, a thematic analysis was conducted (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In this approach, the open-ended responses were synthesized for themes. Individual responses that illustrated varied points of view were analyzed, seeking how perceptions might inform the K-12 administrator preparation program in designing a curriculum related to understanding ACEs as a part of trauma-informed practices in schools. Responses also informed these researchers' interpretation of how to consider ways in which curriculum could be reviewed for addressing leadership in trauma-informed practices for schools.

A binary logistic regression was conducted for this study's quantitative component. A binary logistic regression predicts the probability of a dichotomous dependent variable based on one or more continuous or categorical independent variables (Tolles & Meurer, 2016). The dichotomous response variable in this analysis was the preservice administrators' belief that instruction about ACEs should be an explicit component in school leader preparation programs, and the regression analysis was informed by six independent variables (as listed in Table 2). Nagelkerke's pseudo R^2 was selected as the determinant of effect size (Cohen et al., 2002).

Quantitative Analysis

Quantitative Data Analysis Method

A binary logistic regression was performed to determine how preservice administrators' belief that instruction about ACEs should be an explicit component in school leader preparation programs, a dichotomous response variable, was informed given six independent variables. This was accomplished using binary logistic regression in the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), version 28.

The binary logistic regression model in this study tested the relationship of the six independent variables, X_1, X_2, X_3, X_4, X_5, and X_6, to the binary response variable Y in a model log $(P/(1\text{-}P)) = B_0 + B_1 X_1 + B_2 X_2 + \ldots + B_6 X_6$, where P = prob $(Y = 1)$. Accordingly, each null hypothesis H_0: $B_i = 0$ was tested against the alternative H_a: $B_i = B^*$, where $B^* \neq 0$ indicated that

the independent variable is related to the binary response variable. The slope coefficient B_i is the change in log odds for every increase of one unit in X_i (Hsieh et al., 1998).

The data had to meet three assumptions in order for a binary logistic regression to yield a valid result (Harrell, 2015; Ombui et al., 2011): (1) the dependent variable was measured on a dichotomous scale where it had two mutually exclusive and exhaustive categories, i.e., preservice administrators either agreed or strongly agreed that instruction about ACEs should be an explicit component in school leader preparation programs; (2) there were one or more independent variables that were either continuous or categorical; and (3) there was a linear relationship between any continuous independent variable and the logit transformation of the dependent variable. With these assumptions met, it was deemed appropriate to use binary logistic regression in this case, with the results below derived from this analysis.

Quantitative Results

The summary of observed distributions implied that, of the data used ($N = 102$), 87% of the preservice administrators strongly believed that instruction about ACEs should be an explicit component in school leader preparation programs (see Table 2). Most participants reported exposure to ACEs in their formal EPP (52%) and outside their program (63%). Most participants (over 98%) reported they believed that awareness of a child's exposure to ACEs would help them better support a student's education (with 85% strongly believing so).

Table 2

Summary of Observed Distributions

Variable	*N*	Marginal Percentage
Inclusion of ACE Instruction		
Strongly Agree	89	87.3
Somewhat Agree	10	9.8
Neutral	3	2.9
Somewhat Disagree	0	0
Strongly Disagree	0	0
Importance of ACE Awareness		
Strongly Agree	87	85.3
Somewhat Agree	14	13.7
Neutral	1	1.0
Somewhat Disagree	0	0
Strongly Disagree	0	0
Total	102	100.0

Spearman correlations were performed between all the independent variables to check against multicollinearity between them. As shown in Table 2, a meaningful pattern of correlations (i.e., $r < .60$; Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002) was observed between the variables. In addition, all six independent variables were positively correlated with the belief that instruction about ACEs should be an explicit component in school leader preparation programs (i.e., Measure 7 in Table 3), thus indicating that all six were useful for modeling purposes.

Table 3

Correlations, Means, and Standard Deviations for All Measures

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.
1. Awareness from Inside Program	--						
2. Awareness from Outside Program	-.132	--					
3. Importance of Awareness	.048	.425**	--				
4. Principal Role as Central Figure	.255**	.191*	.468**	--			
5. Use of ACE Strategies	.285**	.317**	.226**	.277**	--		
6. Access to ACE Consultation	.208**	.247**	.190*	.147	.553**	--	
7. Inclusion of ACE Instruction	.162*	.192*	.551**	.437**	.252**	.190*	--

Note. $N = 102$; $^{**}p < .05$; $^{*}p < .10$.

A binary logistic regression analysis was conducted to test the independent variables' influence on preservice administrators' belief that instruction about ACEs should be an explicit component in school leader preparation programs. The regression model was statistically significant, $\chi^2(8) = 28.566$, $p < .001$.

Regarding individual variables, only preservice administrators' belief that ACE awareness would help them as school leaders to better support their students in the school environment had a statistically significant influence on the dependent variable (see Table 4). Those who strongly agreed with this belief were over 17 times more likely to also strongly believe that instruction about ACEs should be required in school leader preparation programs.

Table 4

Binomial Logistic Regression Results

Source	*B*	*SE B*	*Wald* χ^2	*p*	*OR*	95% *CI OR*
1	.279	.920	.092	.761	1.322	[.218, 8.028]
2	-.865	1.127	.588	.443	0.421	[.046, 3.838]
3	2.864	1.057	7.341	.007**	17.535	[2.209, 139.22]
4	.390	3.232	.015	.904	1.477	[.003, 832.234]
5	.192	.484	.157	.692	1.211	[.469, 3.131]
6	-.005	.365	.000	.990	0.995	[.487, 2.034]
Constant	-6.531	1.581	17.072	<.001		

Note. $N = 102$; $^{**}p < .05$.

The model explained 45.8% (Nagelkerke R^2) of the variance in the dependent variable and correctly classified 92.2% of cases. In linear regression, R^2 is the proportion of the total variance in the criterion variable explained by the set of predictor variables. The remaining variance is unexplained and can be considered an "error" variance. Therefore, accounting for as much of this variance as possible improves the understanding of what influences the criterion. Nagelkerke's pseudo R^2 is analogous to R^2 and is indicative of the degree to which the set of predictor variables improves upon the prediction of the null model for a logistic regression (Ombui et al., 2011). Although whether the preservice administrators' ACE awareness came from inside or outside their school leader preparation programs—or any of the other factors—appeared to not have a statistically significant influence on their belief that instruction about

ACEs should be an explicit component in school leader preparation programs, including them in the set of predictor variables optimized the model by increasing pseudo R^2 to .458.

Significance Summary

A binary logistic regression analysis was conducted to investigate how certain awareness factors informed preservice administrators' belief that instruction about ACEs should be an explicit component in school leader preparation programs. With respect to RQ1, a test of the full model against a constant-only model was statistically significant, indicating that the set of awareness factors reliably distinguished between those who strongly agreed with the inclusion of ACE instruction from others. Moreover, Nagelkerke's pseudo R^2 of .458 indicated a moderate relationship between the awareness factors and the dependent variable. Most importantly, the Wald criteria demonstrated that only the "importance of ACE awareness" made a significant individual contribution to the model ($p < .05$).

Qualitative Analysis

Qualitative Data Analysis Method

The qualitative analytic method for the three open-ended response questions utilized thematic analysis. Thematic analysis "is a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). For the current study, researchers analyzed responses separately by systematically coding keywords and ideas and sorting the codes into preliminary themes (Brantlinger et al., 2005). The researchers then collaborated to identify overarching themes in the responses to describe the qualitative data. Validity for the qualitative data analyses was strengthened using multiple investigators who worked separately to code the data and then collaborated to analyze and integrate their preliminary results (Brantlinger et al., 2005; Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Qualitative Results

The researchers for the current study gathered qualitative data through open-response questions on the Survey of Administrator Candidates' Perceptions of Adverse Childhood Experiences (SoACPACE 1.1, see Appendix). Qualitative analysis of responses offered additional insight into perceptions held by school administrator candidates regarding what ACEs are and how to address the issue in their schools. Open-ended questions included those in Table 5 (see Appendix for full survey instrument).

Table 5

Selection of Open-Ended Question Responses

Open-Ended Questions	
Question #8	How would you define adverse childhood experiences (ACEs)? Respond to this question from your current knowledge base without looking it up.
Question #10	Question #10: Have you been exposed to the concept/term ACEs outside of your school administrator or teacher preparation programs?

Question #11	If yes to the above question, please explain.
Question #20	What is a strategy or strategies for school administrators to address adverse childhood experiences (ACEs)?

SoACPACEQ8: *How would you define adverse childhood experiences (ACEs)? Respond to this question from your current knowledge base without looking it up*. Of the 102 participants, 48 responded that ACES was a negative life experience for children. Forty responses referred to the developmental impact on children, including social, emotional, and cognitive. Fourteen surveys had no response to this question (see Table 6).

Table 6
SoACPACE Q8

Theme	Sample Quotes
Negative Life Experiences	"Traumatic experiences from childhood"
	"Any experience that could have a negative impact on the well-being of that child."
	"The challenges, traumas, or harsh experiences that people have faced during their childhood."
Impact on Development (Social, Emotional, Cognitive)	"Anything that is a significant life event that causes stress, physical, or emotional harm."
	"A traumatic event that occurs as a child and affects your development and ability to cope emotionally."
	"Refers to traumatic and/or destabilizing events experienced during a child's formative years that impact the way he or she reacts to daily stimuli and stresses."
	"Experiences that negatively impact a student's ability to learn, socialize, or function as well as their non-impacted peers"

SoACPACEQ11: *If yes to the above question, please explain.* This open response referred to the previous question in the survey that asked participants, "Have you been exposed to the concept/term ACEs outside of your school administrator or teacher preparation programs?" Forty-two participants did not respond to this question, which aligned with their responses to the previous prompt. Of the responses provided, 45 referenced professional development provided by their schools or districts. As noted in Table 7, 15 responses described

other work or community experiences such as social service agencies, health care experiences, church, and self-taught knowledge.

Table 7
SoACPACE Q11

Theme	Sample Quotes
Professional Development in School/District	"I have participated in trauma-informed training at my school. My district has provided multiple opportunities to learn about ACEs and strategies to mitigate their impact through student support."
	"My assistant principal introduced me to ACEs during a staff meeting at my school. We could see what the ACEs were and find out what our ACEs score was, confidentially."
	"I have completed training on the ACEs, the brain science around trauma, and mindfulness education."
	"Our school has counselors specifically targeting children with ACEs. We have received some training about what to look for with children with ACEs."
	"TN Trauma-Informed Schools Training"
Other Work, Community, or Personal Experience	"I have worked directly with an agency locally several years ago to support a group of students that were significantly impacted by numerous ACEs."
	"I am not sure how I came across these…my [family member] came from a rough childhood, so I looked them up to see where [family member] would fall on the scale."
	"When I worked at the Department of Human Service"
	"These are community organizations that focus on ACEs. They hold training sessions for community members and forums to help create programs that will provide more positive experiences."

SoACPACE Q20: *What is a strategy or strategies for school administrators to address adverse childhood experiences (ACEs)?* 34 participants stated they did not know or did not

answer. The remaining 68 participants provided one or more strategies in their responses. As seen in Table 8, these researchers identified six predominant themes among the responses.

Table 8
SoACPACE Q20

Theme	Sample Quotes
School Resources (e.g., school counselors, school psychologists, social workers)	"Referring the students to a counselor."
	"Our school is equipped with professional school counselors and social workers to help teachers with strategies to assist teachers, students, and parents."
	"We have a behavioral specialist that observes and begins to make notes on the student."
	"Have a social worker on staff who also makes home visits."
Building Relationships (e.g., students, families, parents)	"Building relationships with students is the number one strategy. This will allow the student to be more comfortable in sharing issues if/when they arise."
	"Building relationships and establishing a positive culture in our school and community"
	"Connect with families often."
Teaching Strategies (e.g., curriculum, programs, support spaces within the school)	"We have a strong RTI-B [Response to Intervention for Behavior] program in place to help students deal with trauma and also support them to acclimate to school."
	"We have also provided a [safe, supportive space] designed to provide an outlet for students that have experienced trauma."
	"Our check-in, check-out system…students meet twice a day with our guidance counselor or another teacher that goes over goals with the student for the day."

	"Having a system of restorative justice in place would be helpful."
	"Direct instruction of socio-emotional strategies that students can use to overcome emotional or mental barriers during the school day."
Communication (e.g., behavioral specialists, community resources, small group support, peers)	"Provide economic supports for students and families…Connect students and families to caring individuals and programs."
	"Small group discussion sessions for students throughout the day"
	"Family resource center, partnerships with [local health agency] with trained mental health counselors"
	"Have a plan in place to check on students when they are absent. Have a food bank for items to help families in need."
Collaboration (e.g., school teams, community, health advocates, mental health)	"Weekly or monthly meetings with counselors and ACEs team to discuss current situations and how they need to be addressed."
	"Form a wrap-around team that meets bi-weekly to discuss strategies and best practices for the student."
Professional Development Needed	"Administration should ensure that all faculty and staff are trained and understand their role in supporting students who have experienced trauma."
	"First, education. All faculty and staff need to learn and be exposed to the research surrounding ACEs, as well as strategies that they can implement for students."
	"Understanding the science around the brain when students encounter ACEs, and how teachers and school can have a drastic positive impact on their brain structure."

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to determine K-12 school administrator candidates' perceptions of ACEs, the perceived need for inclusion of ACE's curriculum in administrator preparation programs, and how the needs of students and teachers are supported in schools. Data analyses of the survey results show that most participants believe that awareness of a child's exposure to ACEs would help them better educate that student (over 98%) and that instruction about ACEs should be an explicit component of administrator preparation programs (87%). These findings suggest that there is a prevalent belief among participants that ACEs impact children in the school setting and the important for school leaders to understand trauma-informed education. However, the responses to SoACPACE Q8 indicate a distinct difference in the themes that describe the school administrator candidates' foundational understanding of ACEs. Both themes were presented strongly, with the responses almost divided in half. One is founded on the idea that ACEs describe negative or traumatic life experiences during childhood. These responses indicate a basic familiarity with the term, as many described specific hardships children may encounter. A possible concern with this perception is that school leaders and staff may make widespread assumptions about students who are known to experience various challenges in their environment or life experiences. Alternatively, many participants may assume that students' social, emotional, or academic concerns result from traumatic life experiences and overlook other possible root causes. The second theme is based on the premise of the developmental effects on children due to adverse life experiences. These responses indicate a broader understanding of how ACEs affect children in the school environment. Suppose school leaders understand the connection to social, emotional, and cognitive impairments that affect children's learning; this may make them better prepared to lead teachers and the school community in addressing ACEs.

Survey results indicate that, although a majority (63%) of participants received some exposure to the term or concept of ACEs outside of their EPPs, a substantial percentage still have had no other exposure. Participants' responses to SoACPACE Q11 demonstrate this gap, with almost half of the participants (41%) giving no response. Those participants were not exposed to ACEs other than in their EPPs. This may indicate a lack of consistency across the state of Tennessee in schools and districts training staff about ACEs, despite legislation passed in 2019 requiring trauma-informed discipline policies (State of Tennessee, 2019). Of the school administrator candidates who provided affirmative responses, the majority (75%) indicated their additional knowledge was garnered from educators' professional development in their schools and districts. The other participants indicated they were exposed to ACEs through work outside of education, in community organizations, or personal experiences.

Responses to SoACPACE Q20 demonstrate a wide expanse of perceptions regarding strategies that school administrators should use to address ACEs. With the emergence of these six themes, all were equally represented, indicating a lack of shared concerns or alignment of ideas among the participants. Building relationships with students and teachers and promoting teaching strategies speak directly to the actions and behaviors of teachers and administrators to develop school and classroom environments that support students with ACEs. These two themes contain responses describing the importance of adult interactions and structured universal programs for administrators to create trauma-informed schools that benefit all students.

The theme of school resources describes additional school personnel beyond the classroom specializing in various social, emotional, and behavioral interventions. These professionals serve students who exhibit needs beyond the classroom or schoolwide practices. This theme indicates that these participants were able to name the resources within the school or district that could support students with ACEs. However, school counselors, school psychologists, and social workers should be accessed when students exhibit the need for additional support after universal trauma-informed practices have been implemented.

Similarly, the theme of collaboration describes professional practices or structures established by the school to provide ongoing support for students who demonstrate more significant needs. The responses from these participants describe teams of professionals who collaborate regularly to implement and revise intervention strategies for specific students. Through these structures, schools bring together staff members who represent different perspectives and areas of expertise to combine efforts to effectively implement student interventions.

Within the theme of communication, some participants describe a variety of connections and community resources that school staff utilize to support students with ACEs and their families. Community resources may include mental health professionals who provide more intensive services for students than are available within the school structures. School staff may also communicate with social service agencies to provide families with economic assistance, food, and other basic needs. Peer support and small group counseling, in or outside of school, also fall within this theme of communication with others as a strategy for addressing students with ACEs.

Finally, the professional development theme is described by participants as educating school staff about the research regarding students with ACEs, the effects of professional development, and their roles in working with teachers and students in trauma. Professional development is essential to provide educators with the knowledge and skills to understand how trauma impacts students, especially in school. School administrators need to know what training and support their staff needs and what specific practices to implement to be a trauma-informed school. Effective professional development must be closely aligned with the vision and expectations established by the school leader to be implemented and sustained.

Synthesis and Analysis of Patterns from Participants' Perceptions

The themes that emerged from Question 20 on participants' understanding of strategies for administrators to address ACEs indicated that participants thought that other school personnel were needed to support students with ACEs. Participants suggested that identifying students with ACEs should be "outsourced" to another professional. This is in keeping with what Berardi and Morton (2019) noted of educators' tendency to avoid addressing ACEs or trauma-informed practices generally because of not being licensed mental health professionals. This reiterates the importance of the inclusion of trauma-informed practices into administrator preparation programs. School administrators must establish partnerships between licensed mental health professionals and general classroom teachers with routine processes and procedures in place for addressing students with ACEs. This is commonly established through multi-tiered supports that are systematically implemented as children exhibit the need for more intense interventions (Phifer & Hull, 2016). Responses did not reference school climate, classroom environments, or formalized behavior expectations. The themes, derived from participants' responses to Question 20, indicated that school administrator candidates believed outside community-based resources

were needed. This suggests that many participants were doubtful or unaware of the highly impactful role a teacher plays in trauma support for students.

By contextualizing trauma-informed education as a team effort that school administrators should proactively and mindfully lead, administrator candidates may better support teachers. An important component of this context is the staffing ratio in which regular access to a licensed mental health professional for consulting and direct support in addressing student needs is essential for administrator candidates to have a sense of efficacy in fostering trauma-informed practices. This finding from the extended responses to Question 20 is reinforced by the results on Question 19 in that about 23% of participants indicated that they did not have regular access to consulting on ACEs with a licensed mental health professional. Only 54% of participants strongly agreed that they had regular access to consulting on ACEs with a licensed mental health professional, while 23% somewhat agreed.

Overwhelmingly, the participants indicated that building relationships with parents and caregivers was important, and communication with all stakeholders was critical. The results of this study indicated that 87% of school administrators believed that having knowledge of ACEs was important; however, an alarmingly high number of open-ended responses provided evidence that other school personnel, such as school counselors, were needed to address issues of trauma. Keeping in mind the importance of the teacher being the first in line to address the needs of students with trauma (Caringi et al., 2015; Eklund et al., 2017), school administrators must address the needs of teachers, professional development and the school environment as contributing factors to address ACEs. Furthermore, professional development and teacher training were identified as essential areas in which to educate about the many facets of trauma and how best to meet the needs of students who have had ACEs. The participants indicated that extensive professional development and teaching strategies were needed, with 46% of the responses emphasizing these supports as urgent needs.

Limitations and Implications for Future Research

Limited interpretation of the quantitative results was necessitated by the analyses' low statistical power, which derived from the fact that no participants claimed to disagree with the importance of ACE awareness or its inclusion in the curriculum. The psychometric properties of this survey instrument do not currently include reliability because this is the first implementation of this instrument. Further investigation with larger sample sizes, replication, and refinement of the model would help support the reliability and validity of any causal inferences and detect any true, yet more minor, associations that may exist (Cohen et al., 2002). This study's results are not generalizable outside Tennessee; however, it provides insights into K-12 school administrator candidates' perceptions of their role in supporting teachers addressing students who have experienced ACEs. This provides a basis for developing additional case studies in other states and more extensive scale studies across states that could use the survey instrument developed for this study.

Limitations for the qualitative results center on the content analysis method (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This exploratory approach to the open-ended response data emphasizes a deeper investigation of fewer responses, which is the opposite of the quantitative process used for Likert-scale prompts. The analysis of the open-ended responses complements the quantitative findings in that they fill in gaps of understanding by presenting patterns of participants' thought processes about the prompts. As such, this study provides a survey instrument and approach to exploring the K-12 administrator and administrator candidate perspectives at preparation

programs so that the curriculum may be designed with an informed and responsive understanding of participants' knowledge and perspectives on ACEs as they relate to administrator roles in supporting students who have ACEs.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study established an empirical basis for K-12 administrator preparation program development in support of administrator candidates' training in trauma-informed education, emphasizing understanding, identifying, and explaining adverse childhood experiences. This is an especially important component of administrator preparation that prepares administrators to support teachers with students who have experienced ACEs. Emphasis on the collaboration skills needed for administrator candidates to support teachers effectively emerged from this study in which administrators need training in designing holistic consultation systems that include creating a supportive school environment, addressing the needs of teachers, and adding additional mental health professionals (e.g., school psychologists, social workers, and counselors) in individual schools and across school districts to support students with trauma and teachers better working with students experiencing trauma. The survey instrument developed for this study provides a basis for future research as administrator preparation programs may use this instrument and this case study as a foundation for institutional effectiveness research to support K-12 administrator preparation program development.

A trauma-informed school system (K-12) is one in which all teachers, school administrators, staff, students, families, and community members recognize and respond to traumatic stress's behavioral, emotional, relational, and academic impacts on those within the school system. In a trauma-informed school with supportive practices in place, the administration is responsible for providing the structure, protocol, training, and underpinnings for the entire faculty and support staff. Tiered supports must be in place to proactively identify and respond appropriately to students' behavioral, emotional, social, and academic needs. An administrative preparation program should have a curriculum that teaches future leaders how to create this environment. Coursework for administrator candidates should include case studies that address the following:

- Training in ACEs with intentionality,
- Identifying various trauma responses in students,
- Guidance in an appropriate physical environment of the classroom and school building,
- Mapping the psychological underpinnings of trauma-sensitive engagement with students,
- Addressing behavior and discipline through the lens of social and emotional safety for all students,
- Teaching best practices in building healthy, positive relationships between students and adults and student to student,
- Focusing on expected practices in consistency and predictability of adults engaging with students
- Establishing strategies for transitions in the classroom and school building.

Some of the critical learning for candidates in an administrator preparation program are in the areas of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), a teaching approach that works to accommodate the needs and abilities of all learners and eliminates unnecessary hurdles in the learning process, prevention of stressors and triggers for traumatized students, de-escalation

strategies for intense interactions, and instructional strategies that support learning. These practices cannot just be taught; they must be modeled, supported, monitored, and expected. Furthermore, the school programs must be designed to promote and reinforce the demands of advocating for both teachers and students outside of the classroom in their emotional health. Schoolwide programs of tiered interventions must be in place. This includes a social-emotional curriculum, screening of students, counseling services, emergency crisis plans, partnerships with parents, community resources, and health care beyond the school. ACEs must be held to the same priority and urgency as other areas of the curriculum and school leadership practice. School leaders must be prepared to address the changing landscapes of schools by transforming and becoming prepared, mindful, and remarkable school leaders ready to address the crisis of ACEs with students and teachers.

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Appendix

Survey of Administrator Candidates' Perception of Adverse Childhood Experiences
(SoACPACE 1.1)

Directions:

- Read each prompt/statement and provide the answer that corresponds with your view. You are answering each question from your personal view.
- The completion of this survey is voluntary and anonymous.
- Completing or not completing this survey does not affect your course grade in any way.
- For scale questions/prompts, circle the number that corresponds with your view on the 5-point scale:
  5 (strongly agree), 4 (agree), 3 (neutral), 2 (disagree), and 1 (strongly disagree).

Purpose: This purpose of this preliminary study is to gather and analyze data on future K-12 school administrators' perceptions of what adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) are and how important knowing about this as a variable in teaching might be for both administrators and teachers. Findings from this survey can and will be presented and published by the researchers.

1. What is your gender?

2. What is your age?

3. What race do you identify as?

4. Select your administrator level (choose one) –
   a. District Level Administrator
   b. School Principal or Assistant Principal
   c. Other Unit Level Administrator at a School

5. What type of school do you serve or hope to serve as an administrator?
   a. High School
   b. Middle School
   c. Elementary School

6. How many years of administrator experience do you have?
   a. Zero years
   b. 1-3 years
   c. More than 3 years

7. Do you currently serve in a rural school?

8. How would you define adverse childhood experiences (ACEs)? (Respond to this question from your current knowledge base without looking it up.)

9. Do you remember being taught anything about ACEs in your school administrator preparation program or teacher preparation program? Yes or No

10. Have you been exposed to the concept/term ACEs outside of your school administrator or teacher preparation program?

    Yes or No

11. If Yes to the above, please explain.

12. Awareness of a child's exposure to an ACE helps me as an administrator better support a student in the school environment. (5 = Strongly Agree; 1 = Strongly Disagree)

    5 4 3 2 1

13. A school should have a system in place to address student mental health.
    (5 = Strongly Agree; 1 = Strongly Disagree)

    5 4 3 2 1

14. Instruction about ACEs should be a required component in a school administrator preparation program.
    (5 = Strongly Agree; 1 = Strongly Disagree)

    5 4 3 2 1

15. Instruction about ACEs should be a required component in a teacher preparation program.
    (5 = Strongly Agree; 1 = Strongly Disagree)

    5 4 3 2 1

16. School principals should be central figures in supporting teachers to support students with ACEs.
    (5 = Strongly Agree; 1 = Strongly Disagree)

    5 4 3 2 1

17. School administrators should foster an environment of collaboration between administrators, teachers, school counselors, and other relevant staff to discuss strategies to address ACEs.
    (5 = Strongly Agree; 1 = Strongly Disagree)

    5 4 3 2 1

18. As a school administrator or administrator candidate, I have a strategy or strategies in place to address ACEs.
    (5 = Strongly Agree; 1 = Strongly Disagree)

5 4 3 2 1

19. As a school administrator or administrator candidate, I have regular access for consulting on ACEs with either a school psychologist, school social worker, or similar behavioral/mental health professional.
(5 = Strongly Agree; 1 = Strongly Disagree)

5 4 3 2 1

20. What is a strategy or strategies for school administrators to address ACEs? (Extended response)