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School-Based Trauma: A Scoping Review

Addison Duane
Wayne State University

ABSTRACT

School-based trauma is not a new concept, but scholars have not yet developed a comprehensive definition that coalesces. In this paper, I conduct a scoping review of scholarship across three decades and map existing definitions of school-based trauma onto a theoretical framework. I propose an updated definition for school-based trauma that encompasses existing definitions and includes a systemic lens to thinking about the concept. In doing, I invite scholars to take up the concept in a theoretically sound and comprehensive way to support children better and work towards creating school spaces that do not cause trauma.

Keywords: School-Based Trauma, Trauma, Schools, Education Trauma, Scoping Review, Education

Trauma is a prevalent problem for U.S. children and their communities. As of 2019, over two-thirds of children have experienced at least one traumatic event before the age of 16 (SAMHSA, 2020). Scholars estimate this number has increased drastically, as researchers find that the pandemic was an independent source of traumatic stress (Ashby et al., 2021). However, to date, most scholarship on psychological childhood trauma focuses on experiences outside of school settings. Of the few studies investigating the school as a potential site of trauma, many pieces start the same. Authors use phrases such as "few studies" or "little work has been done" to pepper the introduction of articles that highlight school-based trauma (SBT). For example, in 1992, Vargas-Moll wrote, "Overall, there has been little interest or emphasis in the study of psychological and physical abuse of children in the schools" (p. 1). Hyman et al. (1988) argued several years late, "victimization of students by educators, most

often in the name of discipline, is widely practiced and little recognized as a serious problem" (p. 7). Shortly after, Flannery and colleagues wrote, "Little research has focused don the impact of school-specific violence exposure" (2004, p. 560). These authors are not wrong: the school site is an understudied context compared to other locations within the trauma scholarship. For example, a Google Scholar search during the spring of 2021 of "family trauma" generated 3.6 million results, while "school trauma" returns a mere 1,470.

Within that small number, it is clear that scholars *have* taken up the work of studying the topic, but the constellation of terminology and lack of clarity around definitions have failed to coalesce. For example, researchers have used phrases including "educational trauma" (Gray, 2019), "school maltreatment" (Hyman & Snook, 1999), and "trauma in school" (Mallon & Best, 2007), to investigate how and in what ways schools cause trauma. With such variation in terms and definitions, I have wondered: how can we construct cohesive knowledge of school-based trauma? And, without a strong conceptual understanding, how can we move the needle toward preventing trauma from happening *at* school? Thus, in this paper, I engage in a scoping review to explore existing conceptualizations of school-based trauma. First, I review current literature on trauma, school-based trauma, and individualized views of trauma-informed education. From there, I provide methods and findings related to the scoping review. Finally, I discuss the relevance of the findings and provide suggestions for future research and practice.

Defining Trauma and its Impacts

Scholars and practitioners have defined trauma in numerous ways, including the American Psychological Association's definition, which states that trauma is the response to a terrible event (2021). The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) expands on this definition to note that trauma has "long-lasting adverse effects on the individual's functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being." (2014, p. 7). As Dulmus and Hilarski (2003) write, the level of personal distress associated with a trauma depends on the individual's perception of the event and personal characteristics and context (p. 27). In short, trauma is the response to an experience that impacts functioning at all levels and interrupts one's capacity to cope.

The psychological trauma response in children has been studied widely (see Trickey et al., 2012,, for a meta-analysis). As such, much is known about experiences that cause trauma in various realms. Community trauma, for example, includes witnessing and experiencing trauma in public spaces (e.g., violence, war) (NCTSN, 2018), as well as collective traumas such as natural disasters and the COVID-19 pandemic (Duane et al., 2020). Community violence, as a more specific form of community trauma, is defined as exposure to acts of violence, committed in public areas (NCTSN, 2018; Fowler et al., 2009; Osofsky, 1995). Importantly, scholars frequently collapse school-based trauma within the notion of community violence or community trauma. The Violence Exposure Scale for Children—Revised, for example, situates schools as part of community trauma. This measure is often used in trauma studies to highlight traumas endured at the community level (see Stein et al.,

2003, for more examples of community trauma measures). However, integrating school-based trauma within community trauma is problematic; it minimizes the school's potential to be a place of significant harm for children. Thus, there is a need to better understand current conceptualizations of school-based trauma, by seeing schools as worthy sites of study, to then work towards upending it.

In addition, research has explored how individual-level experiences such as sexual assault (McCloskey & Walker, 2000), abuse and neglect (Dubowitz & Bennett, 2007), traumatic grief, and bullying or victimization (NCTSN, 2018) cause trauma. Though it is less widely studied, trauma can also stem from systemic factors, including racism (Carter et al., 2020), microaggressions (Nadal, 2018), homophobia (McCormack, 2020), and other forms of institutional betrayal (e.g., the failure of an institution, such as a school, to protect individuals dependent on the institution) (Lind et al., 2020).

Psychological trauma can significantly impact functioning. Studies have linked trauma to disruptions in behavioral, cognitive, physical, and emotional domains (SAMHSA, 2014). Examples of these shifts include, but are not limited to, increased aggression (Dye, 2018), hypervigilance, and excessive reassurance-seeking (Starr & Davila, 2008), as well as memory and executive functioning challenges (Hayes et al., 2012). Disruptions in these domains have implications for the field of education, as teachers likely see trauma responses in their classrooms. What may be considered "behavior issues" could instead be a child exhibiting a trauma response. As a case in point, a classroom teacher may see a student acting withdrawn, avoiding tasks, and appearing forgetful during the school day. They may punish behavior or label the student as "oppositional" or "defiant" without seeing trauma as a root cause and, perhaps, their culpability in exacerbating the trauma response (Goldin et al., 2023). However, there is danger in naming challenges or deficits absent of a systemic lens. As Khasnabis and Goldin (2020) write, "treating trauma as only an individual level problem, when it is not, has the unfortunate and perhaps somewhat predictable effect of blaming children and families for challenges they did not cause" (p. 46). As the authors argue, this blame stems from individual-level solutions that "do little to tackle the systemic causes of trauma" (p. 45).

Beyond Individualism: Taking Up a Systemic Lens to Understanding Trauma in Schools

As we think about the role of systems in (re)producing trauma, let us first acknowledge the history that has led us here. The United States has a legacy of focusing on individualism as "central to the American character" (Spence, 1985, p.1287). Individualism emphasizes standing out, speaking one's opinion, and the idea that everyone should take care of themselves and their immediate family only (Hofstede, 2011). In contrast, collectivism highlights the embeddedness in a group, stresses situatedness, and emphasizes the need to support and learn from the social environment (Hofstede, 2011). Communities, particularly those of color, have long named individualism as a problematic core characteristic of White supremacy culture (Okun, 2021) that functions to obscure and maintain systemic racism's manifestation

(DiAngelo, 2010). Said individualism also contributes to a narrow view of the world and promotes a medicalized discourse around trauma (Westoby & Ingamells, 2009).

U.S. schools, in particular, have adopted this individualistic approach by implementing reform movements focused on neoliberalism (Braithwaite, 2017), individual academic achievement, and well-being of the self (Rothstein-Fisch & Trumbull, 2008). One such reform effort is the trauma-informed schools movement. What started as a response to trauma healing and recovery in the late 1970s and early 1980s (SAMHSA, 2014), the trauma-informed intervention approach has spanned the disciplines, including medicine (Raja et al., 2015), social work (Levenson, 2017), and criminal justice (Ko et al., 2008). Harris and Fallot (2001) advanced the phrase "trauma-informed" by distinguishing between trauma-specific and trauma-informed care, citing trauma-informed care as systems that have thoroughly incorporated an understanding of trauma to enhance all aspects of service delivery. According to Thomas and colleagues (2019), the trauma-informed movement found roots in education, with practices incorporated into school settings from preschool to college (Walkley & Cox, 2013). Hulgin and colleagues (2020) investigate the trauma-informed schools' movement and its propensity to take up a neoliberal biomedical trauma model by focusing on individual deficiencies and pathology. This limited focus on symptoms and deficits portrays children as "isolated victims who must overcome their trauma" (p. 163), assigns individual responsibility to "fix" kids, and situates the problem within a person rather than a sociopolitical context (Goldin et al., 2021; Hulgin et al., 2020). We can see a pervasive illustration of this individualized view of childhood trauma through a proposed shift in teacher language: trauma-informed educators would urge that same teacher who saw a child withdrawn or avoiding classwork to avoid the question, "What's wrong with you?" and instead inquire "what happened to you?" (Claxton, 2014). The clear emphasis on the word *you* highlights the underlying assumptions of most trauma-informed educational practices as focused on fixing individual symptoms and deficiencies. As Venet (2021) argues, it is time that trauma-informed schools and practitioners who promote the practices make the necessary shift toward thinking more systemically.

Researcher Positionality

Through that same trauma-informed educational movement, I come to this work as a White, cis-gender, able-bodied, middle-class woman with teaching experience at the elementary level. I entered the field in ardent pursuit of building strong relationships with children. A byproduct of this goal has been the strong community I have simultaneously built with families, colleagues, mentors, and community members who have guided me to unlearn harmful practices, dismantle internalized White supremacy characteristics, and interrupt the saviorism that is so deeply rooted in my Whiteness. I name my positionality to highlight my ongoing personal and professional journey related to seeing systems within trauma-informed practice. In my scholarship, I look deeply at the systemic elements that researchers and practitioners often omit from popularized versions of trauma-informed practice. To achieve this in the present study, I will employ the theoretical framework of

Systemically Trauma-Informed Practice (Khasnabis & Goldin, 2020; Goldin & Khasnabis, 2020; Goldin et al., 2023).

Systemically Trauma-Informed Practice: A Theoretical Framework

Systemically Trauma-Informed Practice (SysTIP), developed by Khasnabis and Goldin (2020), and later expanded (Goldin et al., 2021; Goldin et al., 2023a; 2023b) serves as the theoretical underpinning of my analysis. The authors proposed a model for educators to re-imagine trauma-informed practices by addressing systemic racism in addition to individual supports to devise approaches to students experiencing trauma. Though initially crafted to be a conceptual model, SysTIP also serves as a robust theoretical framework.

SysTIP expands Bronfenbrenner's 1979 Ecological Systems Theory (Figure 1), which examines the connectedness of individuals within communities and broader society. Scholars and practitioners have used Ecological Systems Theory to conceptualize the relationship between individual-level experiences and systemic factors. However, one of the most salient pieces missing from Bronfenbrenner's model is an explicit focus on systemic racism. SysTIP's framework (Figure 2) employs Critical Race Theory (Crenshaw et al., 1995) to expand on Bronfenbrenner within the educational context. SysTIP integrates systemic racism, pervasive stress, and inequality while expanding Bronfenbrenner's defined microsystem into individual spheres. The varying-sized circles in the Bronfenbrenner and SysTIP graphic are nested, meaning each sphere fits within the entire framework. As both sets of authors write, each sphere influences and is influenced by all others in the model. The spheres are permeable.

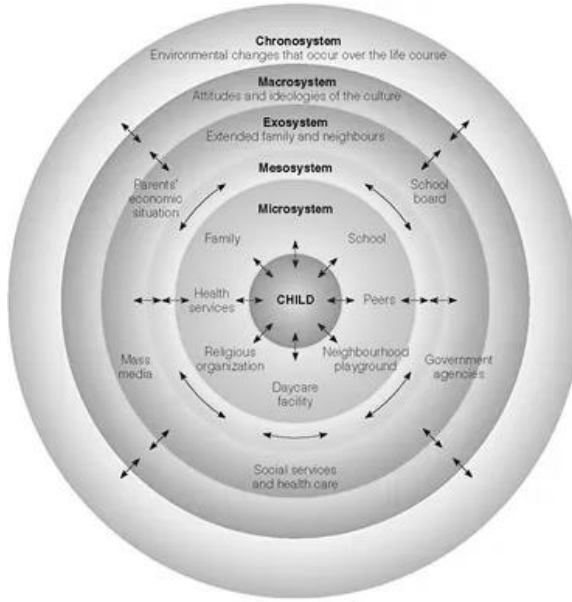

Figure 1: Graphical Depiction of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979)

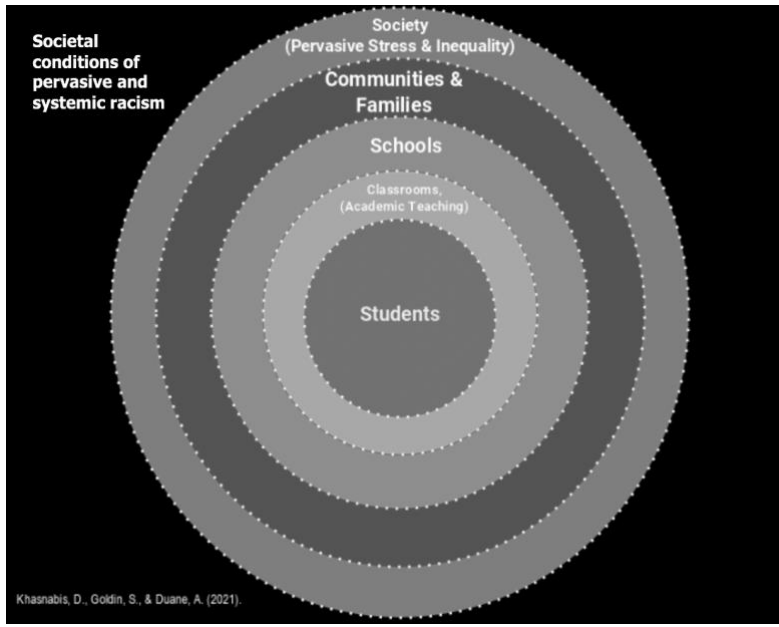

Figure 2: The Nestedness of the Systemically Trauma-Informed Practice framework (Khasnabis, et al., 2021)

The Nestedness of Trauma: A Vignette

Before exploring the realities for a student in a classroom, it is important to highlight the permeability of the entire framework and the definitions of each sphere. With SysTIP, the white dotted line border illustrates the permeability, because the experience of an individual student is influenced by and influences all other spheres. Therefore, when considering trauma at school, we must recognize that every other sphere can influence classrooms. We cannot ignore this reality when considering school-based trauma.

Societal Conditions of Pervasive and Systemic Racism

Concerning the visual itself, the background of the SysTIP model depicts the pervasiveness of systemic racism. Illustrated through a black background, systemic racism permeates and seeps into each sphere of the model. Seeing race and racism as the underpinning for all other systems aligns with the first element of Critical Race Theory, which focuses on the centrality of race and racism and the intersectionality with other forms of oppression (Solorzano et al., 2000).

Pervasive Stress and Inequality

The authors also highlight stress and inequality as nested in unequal systems. We name the following experiences in this sphere, including: housing and food insecurity; unequal access to employment opportunities; unequal access to high-quality early childhood programming; unequal access to healthcare and mental health services; and unequal access to highly qualified teachers (Goldin et al., 2023).

Communities and Families

The next sphere is "communities and families," including all community elements such as families, school districts, workplaces, daycare, religious organizations, extended family, community organizations, and neighbors.

Schools. Schools are nested within communities, and thus the next sphere highlights the school as a specific nested structure. Schools contain the physical buildings as well as all the staff, policies, and practices situated within that space.

Classrooms. Classrooms include all pedagogical decisions, curriculum, systems, rules, and procedures within the classroom and teachers and staff who serve students specifically in the classroom.

Students. The final and innermost sphere is students; students are intentionally situated at the center. But like other actors inside these systems, students both influence and are influenced by all other spheres and embody unique strengths and assets.

An Applied Vignette

With knowledge of each sphere, we can revisit the student who acts withdrawn, avoids tasks, and appears forgetful during the school day. Using SysTIP, we can name each sphere and its relation to that child in the classroom. Let us turn to this vignette with a bit more information to contextualize this framework. We will call the student Isaiah, a Black child in sixth grade. His teacher is worried that Isaiah is disengaged during class time and does not complete his work. The school recently suspended Isaiah after a teacher saw him using a cell phone during recess in the middle of standardized testing week, which is against school policy. This suspension was put in place during school hours by a school administrator, and thus has the potential to lead to school-based trauma. Research has found that suspensions may lead to individual and collective trauma (Powell, 2021; Williams et al., 2022) and contribute to feelings of shame, disconnection, and judgment. Isaiah starts exhibiting trauma responses, including avoidance, memory problems, and hypoarousal long after the suspension has passed. However, it is not just that the school suspended Isaiah that leads to potential trauma responses. This school-based trauma is also influenced by all other spheres in the framework, including systemic racism, which may influence the school administrator to hyper-police over-monitor, label (Basile et al., 2019), and disproportionately suspend students of color (Mims et al., 2021). In Isaiah's case, the administrator tended to unknowingly watch him more closely on the playground compared to White peers, giving more commands about recess behavior, monitoring how he played and walked on the jungle gym, and reprimanding him for "loitering" near the bathrooms (see Basile et al., 2019 for additional hyper-policing tactics used on Black boys in schools). Stress and inequality also influence the trauma, such as problematic standardized testing laws and lack of universal healthcare to see a doctor about persistent headaches stemming from test anxiety. Finally, it is influenced by unfair school policies (e.g., stringent cell phone usage rules), classroom procedures around recess, and teacher actions which led to reporting phone use to an administrator rather than addressing the issue relationally. We must consider these elements when naming how that school suspension might contribute to trauma for Isaiah, which led to his withdrawal during class. In each sphere, we see how experiences are influenced by, and influence, each other. A single school suspension is more than a consequence; it is nested within a classroom, school, community, and society, giving rise to trauma.

Using SysTIP to Map School-Based Trauma

Gorski (2020) writes, "The first trauma-informed step should be mapping out all the ways students, families, and even we, as educators, experience trauma at school." (p. 17). I respond directly to this call by using SysTIP to conduct a scoping review of existing conceptualizations of school-based trauma. This framework is beneficial for several reasons. First, it explicitly considers systemic racism and inequality, which is central to the aims of this project, and the notion of school-based trauma, broadly. Additionally, I do not aim to generate an exhaustive list of school-based trauma. Such a task will never be possible; racism will always transform itself to invent new ways

of causing trauma inside of schools (Love, 2019; Goodman, 2018; Shalaby, 2017). Instead, I bring an analytic sharpness to look across the literature and conceptualize the notion in a coherent and theoretically sound way. By mapping existing school-based trauma types onto the existing SysTIP framework and engaging in thematic analysis around the findings, I aim to provide an opportunity for scholars to recognize the situatedness of all school-based trauma and invite a systemic lens when thinking about trauma at school. Doing so will also allow practitioners and scholars to understand better what is happening in schools so that we can move toward collective action.

METHOD

My review questions were exploratory; thus, I conducted a scoping review methodology outlined by the Joanna Briggs framework and updated by Peters and colleagues (2020). Scoping reviews explore the breadth of literature to summarize existing evidence, identify, map, report, or discuss characteristics of concepts in a field (Peters et al., 2020), and provide an opportunity to clarify key concepts and definitions in the literature (Munn et al., 2018). I strictly adhered to the methodologies of Peters and the team (2020; 2017; 2015). To begin, I developed objectives and research questions to inform the process. I aimed to identify existing definitions of school-based trauma (SBT) and theoretically analyze existing definitions using SysTIP. My research questions were:

1) How is school-based trauma conceptualized in the trauma and education scholarship over the last 30 years?
2) What are the themes and connections between and across the literature as they relate to SysTIP?

Identifying Relevant Studies

When working specifically on downloading literature, my team included my research laboratory's assistant (RA) and the support of a university librarian who specializes in scoping reviews. Together, we conducted a systematic search process using four databases: ERIC, APA PsychInfo, ProQuest Central, and PQDT Open. We also examined references cited in the retrieved studies using Google Scholar. We limited the search to studies published from 1980 to 2021. While 30+ years is a vast timespan to explore the scholarship, the reality is that few studies have explicitly taken up the notion of SBT. The decision to include studies beginning in 1980 stems from the seminal work by Hyman and team (1988), who invited scholars in the field of educational psychology to begin investigating the role schools play in contributing to childhood psychological maltreatment. The terms were filtered through “K-12” and “United States" in all databases, given our study inclusion criteria, which I elaborate on below. Our team developed the key search terms iteratively as we became more familiar with the evidence base. We used the same Boolean search statement to extract studies for analysis: "(school" OR “education”) AND "trauma" AND (violence OR psychological maltreatment OR abuse OR victimization OR

discipline OR control OR isolation OR rejection OR motivational techniques OR assault OR bullying OR racism).

We generated a Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (Figure 3; PRISMA) (Liberati et al., 2009) flowchart to outline study selection. Using key search descriptors, we identified 101 records from the search criteria. From there, RA and I reviewed reference lists of all 101 records to hand-search for any additional studies that we may not have identified in the initial searches (see Hopewell and colleagues 2007 work for a description); this included books and dissertations, in addition to peer-reviewed articles, which is a common practice in scoping reviews (Munn et al., 2018). Our two-pronged approach generated 31 additional records. We read the titles and abstracts to screen for duplicates, which left 124 records to review using the inclusion criteria. Where there was conflict on whether or not to include a record, which occurred twice during the process, we read the entire article, paying specific attention to definitions and findings, and met to reach a consensus.

Inclusion Criteria

We established the following inclusion criteria: 1) original research and reviews focused on school experiences, 2) studies addressing the concept within K-12 schools, 3) pieces published in English, 4) population sample from the United States. The exclusion criteria included: articles that did not connect to psychological trauma, articles that peripherally included school as a site of trauma~~,~~ and theoretical pieces. I also want to clarify two important choices about the criteria. Given that the scholarship on trauma is so large, we chose studies focused primarily on school-based trauma. Many studies list "school" as a setting for traumatic experiences, when exploring the concept of community trauma or violence. For example, studies focused on psychological trauma named the various sites of trauma occurrence but only named "school" in a descriptive results table. Studies like this, while important in their way, do not contribute to the narrative conceptualization, for they do not name explicitly delineate experiences at school that cause trauma. As such, those studies were not the focus of this review. Instead, we chose to include pieces that explicitly named specific instances of trauma happening at school (thus the mandatory nature of the words "school" and "trauma" in the search statement).

Additionally, extant research has found a strong delineation between psychological stress and psychological trauma. Because the search focused on *trauma*, which has substantial long-term effects on individuals and systems, we did not include studies that referred to school stressors or stress from school. With the scoping review process, researchers do not conduct a critical appraisal or quality assessment of records, given the overarching aim of the process (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005). Given these criteria, we excluded 78 records, leaving 46 to be analyzed. Of the 46 records, seven were books, six were dissertations, and the remaining thirty-three were peer-reviewed journal articles.

Data Extraction

The primary focus of the analysis was the conceptualization and mapping of school-based trauma. We did a cursory read of all records to extract data from the 46 selected studies. From there, we did a more thorough read of each piece's titles, abstracts, and methods, making notes and moving language from the records into a shared spreadsheet. Specifically, we extracted the study's measures of psychological trauma (e.g., DSM-5 criteria, trauma-related symptoms, reports of traumatic memories, etc.) and conceptualizations or narrative definitions of school-based trauma (SBT). We also noted whether or not the study took up questions related to race and racism and used a systemic frame/lens. During data extraction, we recorded 86 independent definitions of SBT across the 46 records. From there, I engaged in the qualitative process of conducting a thematic analysis and mapped evidence onto the SysTIP framework, which I elaborate on below. As with other scoping reviews, this process supported the development of a more complex and comprehensive conceptualization (Munn et al., 2018) for future scholars, myself included, to define, understand, and study school-based trauma.

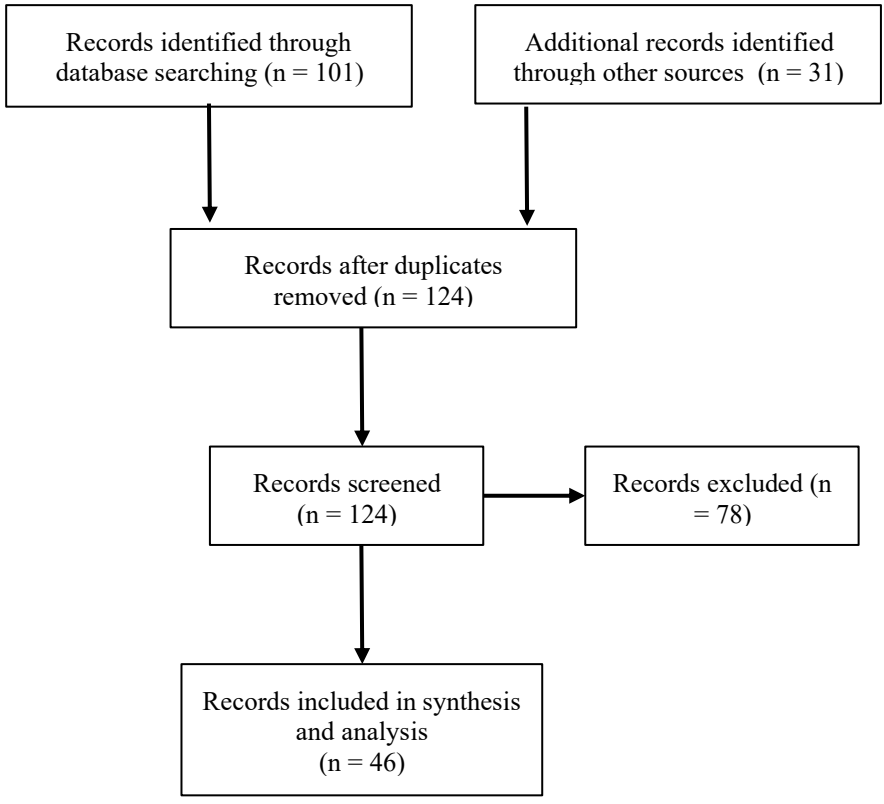

Figure 3: PRISMA Flow Chart of the Extraction and Analysis Process

Coding and Theoretical Thematic Analysis

After data extraction from the included literature, I conducted a theoretical thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2021). According to Braun and Clarke (2021), deductive use of thematic analysis means using existing theory as the lens through which data are coded and interpreted. With this approach, I specifically chose to have SysTIP drive the analytic process. Following the compass of Braun and Clarke (2006; 2021), I first started by familiarizing myself with the data and developing a codebook. I developed a preliminary codebook using each SysTIP sphere as a priori codes (Saldana, 2009). After the initial round of coding, I discussed both the codebook with a peer group and mentor to garner feedback and finalize the codes. I completed the second round of coding with the newly refined codebook. All items and indicators of SBT, drawn from the definitions provided in the records (N=86), were extracted manually and collated to conduct a thematic analysis.

In the next phase of analysis, I moved from codes to initial (candidate) themes by shifting to larger meaning patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Within this process, I analyzed the data using deductive codes as analytic units; I sorted, organized, and collated themes to make sense of the broader patterns. From there, I examined the codes to develop initial candidate themes while consistently revisiting the data to read and reflect. As I examined and checked candidate themes against the research questions and data set, I continued to process, refine, and reflect. Braun and Clarke (2021) note that "good thematic analysis" is evidenced by themes built around a singular central idea, illustrate richness within the dataset, and are focused with boundaries (p. 97). Drawing on these ideas, after generating and reviewing themes, I ensured there were strong boundaries for each, defined each theme, recorded my findings, and interpreted themes in relation to previous literature. During this phase, I also met with my mentor to discuss and revise. Importantly, my analysis went beyond the semantic level, which allowed me to make interpretive decisions within the context of an existing theory.

FINDINGS

Through the review and analysis, I invited the three-plus decades of scholarship to speak to and with each other in a coherent, theoretically sound way. As is common with scoping reviews, the purpose of charting the data is to bring an analytic sharpness to the literature. This process can serve as a conceptual way of considering school-based trauma to invite scholars to investigate SBT through a systemic lens. What follows is an explanation of findings related to a general timeline of studying SBT and the themes I generated from the theoretical thematic analysis. Finally, I end with a suggested cohesive definition of SBT for future research and practice.

A History of School-Based Trauma

Though my primary focus of this study was to map school-based trauma definitions and understand how the literature has taken up the concepts of race and racism, the first finding relates to seeing a historical timeline emerge. School-based trauma is not a new concept. Since their inception, schools have harmed and "othered" children in various ways. However, scholars have used varying constructs to define and measure this idea over the years. In addition to describing how the concept has been taken up, I also provide the number of studies included in the review (N=46) for each decade.

Prior to the mid-80s, scholars focused on corporal punishment as the main focus of SBT. During the 80s (N=3), Hyman and colleagues turned towards the concept of individual psychological maltreatment, with a keen focus on verbal and physical assault. They also considered control, fear, intimidation, degradation, limited human interaction, and encouraging students to remain dependent (Hyman et al., 1988). In the 1990s (N=5), scholars shifted the language, to investigate student victimization by school staff, teacher victimization, and broadly, school violence (e.g., assault, theft, discipline, police in schools, harsh discipline, strip searches, and surveillance). By the 2000s (N=10), scholars focused heavily on school bullying, naming teacher and peer bullying as contributors to trauma. The 2010s (N=14) brought about a continued focus on bullying, with the addition of school shootings in relation to the categories of school violence and school victimization. Within the last two years (N=8), we have seen an uptick in work around racism and systemic oppression as it relates to school-based trauma (e.g., othering, exclusion, suspensions, policing, and gun violence) (e.g., Powell, 2021). Still, scholars continue to shift the construct. In my analysis, I found that over the years, school-based trauma (SBT) scholarship has conceptualized the topic as "school violence," "victimization at school," "school scars," "school woundings," "school hauntings," "spirit murdering," "curriculum violence," "school psychoemotional abuse" and more. I explore in later in more detail the nuances between these constructs; however, much of what I found in my analysis points to these constructs being used to describe the same idea.

Additionally, in analyzing the extracted SBT definitions, I found that up until the mid-2000s, much of the scholarship on SBT failed to take up a systemic lens to consider how racism and inequality influence the (re)production of school-based trauma. For example, in their seminal work, Hyman and Snook (1999) name "harsh disciplinary policies" as a form of school-based trauma but fail to draw the connection between the disproportionate amount of students of color subjected to said policies (see Mims et al., 2021 for more on racially motivated injustices). In other studies that investigated bullying and peer victimization (e.g., Holt et al., 2007; Carney, 2008), definitions of SBT focused narrowly on individual-level impacts without attention to historical forms of oppression (e.g., racism, sexism, homophobia) that contribute to an environment where bullying occurs.

Forms of School-Based Trauma

As previously stated, I examined existing literature to understand how scholars conceptualized school-based trauma over the last 30 years. Table 1 provides an overview of each form of SBT, a brief definition, and illustrative examples pulled

from selected studies. I also note that given the overarching theoretical frame, much of the findings connect directly to systemic racism, structural inequality, and oppression. In my review, I found that many previous studies failed to take up a systemic lens. Thus, in presenting these findings as nested in a racist and unequal society, I contribute to the existing literature by laying that necessary lens on their work.

Table 1: Scoping Review Themes, Definitions, and Instances of SBT

Theme	Definition	Instances of SBT	
Institutional Betrayal	The failure of an institution, such as a school, to protect individuals dependent on the institution) (Lind et al., 2020)	• School shootings • Standardized testing • Hostile environment • Gun violence • Sexual harassment • Failure to respond/address harassment	• Religious discrimination • Class discrimination • Gender discrimination • Assumptions based on identity
Racialized Harm	A form of racial trauma *at school*, caused by racial discrimination and ungirded by systemic racism	• Bigotry • Tokenizing • Sole representative of culture • Racial microaggressions • Racial discrimination	• Hair-bias including hair shaming (nappy, hair length, teasing) and hair damage • Hate crimes • Lack of representation
Policing Tactics	The deliberate use of order and control, in school settings	• Manipulation • Suspensions • Strip searches • Criminalizing • Isolation • Demanding obedience • Intimidation • "Get tough" discipline • Forced obedience to authority figures	• Coercion • Degradation • Surveillance • Restraint • Seclusion • Harsh discipline • Police presence • Mandating compliance • Limited human interaction • Fear

Teacher Abuse	Teacher-driven school-based trauma that includes verbal and physical abuse	• Embarrassing • Blaming • Teasing • Belittling • Name calling • "Othering" • Yelling • Humiliation • Excessively over demanding	• Insulting child • Insulting family • Severe criticism • Scapegoating • Shaming • Pinching • Shoving • Excluding • Lack of play
Peer Victimization	Student-drive school-based trauma enacted by peers and classmates	• Physical violence (fights, assault) • Theft	• Weapon use • Sexual assault • Bullying

Theme 1: Institutional Betrayal

The first theme generated is related to the failings of institutions (e.g., schools, districts, counties, states). The concept of 'institutional betrayal' refers to the failure of an institution to protect individuals dependent on the institution (e.g., students in schools). Historically, research has linked this concept to instances of sexual assault; in my findings, the theme relates broadly to the concept that schools fail to protect children, and thus, cause trauma. One example of this concept in schools is that of school shootings. McLaughlin and Kar (2019) found that after students reported increased anxiety, suicidal ideation, self-harm, avoidance behavior, and more frequent and intense triggers. Johnson (2018) notes that warning signs can be clear yet often ignored– thus, the institution betrays those who rely on it, and catastrophic trauma occurs. As the research states, this form of SBT can have devastating, long-lasting impacts on an entire school community.

Theme 2: Racialized Harm

The second theme generated was racialized harm that occurs and causes trauma in schools. Extant literature has established that racial trauma stems from racial discrimination; these experiences lead to negative psychosocial outcomes and, thus, can be categorized as an important yet overlooked form of trauma (Saleem et al., 2019). My analysis found that schools are not immune to the pernicious impacts of racism and racial discrimination. Studies investigated the role of school-based racial trauma in causing harm. For example, studies selected for this review investigated concepts related to racial microaggressions, hate crimes, and hair bias. Hair bias, as one particularly salient example, is one way that teachers, school staff, and other students can continue to marginalize, oppress, shame, and cause suffering (Mbilishaka & Apugo, 2020) in school settings.

Theme 3: Teacher Abuse

Throughout the analytic process, the most salient latent theme (Braun & Clarke, 2021) was classroom events and their connection to trauma. This form of SBT relates to trauma that is teacher-driven. I generated two sub-themes within this theme: *verbal abuse* (e.g., yelling, blaming, name-calling, teasing, severe criticism) and *physical abuse* (e.g., pinching, shoving, punching). Studies investigating teacher beliefs and dispositions did not appear in any of the 46 pieces analyzed. Nor did any studies take up the concept in a systemic way; for example, Hyman and Perone's work on psychological maltreatment by teachers (1998) failed to mention any aspects of the institution of schooling, race, class, gender, or systemic racism in their conceptualization of SBT or their analyses.

Theme 4: Policing Tactics

The next theme generated was policing tactics, or the deliberate use of order and control, in school settings. In some cases, these tactics were directly tied to the police themselves. Studies investigated the harm that occurs from the presence of School Resource Officers, strip searches, seclusion, and restraint. In other studies, the connection to policing was less explicit, but still present. Literature analyzed connections between trauma responses and forced obedience to authority, harsh discipline, mandated compliance, or coercion. These findings are also suffused with the insidiousness of racism; decades of research have established that children of color are hyper-policed and over-surveilled (see Basile et al. 2019 for a school-specific example).

Theme 5: Peer-Related Trauma

In alignment with the existing literature on peer victimization and bullying, the final theme is peer-related trauma. Studies took up questions related to student-to-student school-based traumatic experiences, such as fights, theft, weapon use, and assault. In these studies, too, the connection to trauma responses was explicit. For example, Ateah and Cohen (2009) investigated whether bullying and student victimization met Criterion A of PTSD in the DSM-5. The authors found a relationship between verbal and relational aggression and student PTSD symptomology.

DISCUSSION

In reviewing and analyzing the included records to generate 86 independent definitions of school-based trauma, I could see how the literature has taken up this notion over time. An, how all of these forms of SBT fall under the broader category of dehumanization– the denial or deprivation of a person's humanity. In this case, school students experience conditions and events that view and treat them as less than human (Christian, 2011). This overarching element of dehumanization is also connects to how the extant scholarship takes up the notion of psychological trauma.

For example, Herman (1992) writes that "traumatic events overwhelm the ordinary systems of care that give people a sense of control, connection, and meaning" (p. 33); Haines (2019) asserts that trauma breaks or betrays "our inherent need for safety, belonging, and dignity" (p. 74)-- our need and desire to be seen and valued as our full selves. As humans. For schools to move towards true trauma-informed efforts, there must be a greater emphasis on humanizing– humanizing pedagogies, humanizing conditions, and humanizing interactions. So, must educators grapple with conditions that cause trauma, dehumanize, and work to see the systems and unequal structures in place?

A Working Definition of School-Based Trauma

There is a substantial evidence base for merging existing definitions to create a coherent concept of school-based trauma. Given this existing gap, I propose the following working definition of school-based trauma that will continue to evolve as the system of education does:

> School-based trauma (SBT) is: trauma-inducing experiences, witnessed or experienced in person or virtually at school, that can disrupt healthy functioning, upend an individual's capacity to cope, exacerbate educational inequities, and lead to long-term negative impacts (e.g., cognitively, physically, behaviorally, emotionally). This type of trauma can occur on school grounds during school hours, before or after school, or during school-sanctioned activities, including field trips and weekend events. School-based trauma is produced and reproduced by unequal social conditions, including structural inequities, racism, and other forms of oppression.

In considering this new construct, I do not aim to assign a new name to an existing idea. Rather, I invite scholars to integrate current definitions and conceptualizations of trauma from school into one larger school-based trauma category while also situating individual events within a broader, systemic lens. Written as a working definition, it exists within a snapshot of time, and will likely evolve and be refined as research and schooling evolves. In addition to a new working concept, my analysis also presented several other key aspects related to the investigation of SBT: thinking systemically, grappling with dehumanization, and broadening the idea of racial trauma.

Moving Beyond Individualism

As mentioned, much of the literature on school-based trauma focuses on a narrow view of students, delineated by keen attention to student behavior and actions rather than the contexts or situatedness of said behaviors. While this is consistent with other educational movements, as explored above, there is danger in attending only to this sphere in that this singular view reinforces harmful perceptions of individualism. This view also fails to see all the factors contributing

to a child's schooling experience. Physical violence between students, for example, may be measured at the student level but is also nested and influenced by factors in the surrounding spheres and may be influenced by lack of classroom accountability around bullying, school policies around harassment, negative school culture, police presence on campus, and pervasive racial and social stressors. As such, we must see these events and experiences nested within the broader systemic framework to consider the permeability of these trauma types and others.

Areas of Future Research

Coupled with this new definition and opportunities for expansion of ideas related to SBT, the trauma-informed education movement could greatly benefit from scholarship that investigates: 1) specific school-based traumatic experiences; 2) the systemic and situatedness of childhood trauma; 3) proactive systemic and individual-level supports to prevent school-based trauma; and 4) reactive structures and supports implemented at the system and individual level after school-based trauma has occurred. Taking up these questions and more will provide insights and analyses to support shifts in the education system. Equipping educators with research and supports to interrogate school-based trauma may lead to active work toward cultivating spaces that prevent, not perpetrate, trauma (Duane, 2023; Duane & Mims, 2022; Venet, 2021). By inviting the scholarship to converse with each other, we can turn to the possibilities and opportunities for advancing trauma-informed efforts in schools through this new definition of school-based trauma.

Limitations

The primary limitations of this study are related to the limited resources available to the small team who participated in data extraction and analysis and the availability and number of databases searched, which prevented us from collecting every single piece of literature on trauma in schools. Similarly, using specific search terms and the systematic search process did not pick up every study investigating school-based trauma. For instance, the search criteria did not produce Braveheart's (2011) scholarship on boarding school trauma, articles looking at school trauma for unhoused youth (e.g., Aviles & Grigalunas, 2018), or immigrant families (e.g., Salas et al., 2013). Finally, I did not include elements in the search criteria focused explicitly on teacher trauma (e.g., vicarious trauma and secondary traumatic stress). Future research could expand on my approach by including more constructs or conducting a meta-analysis or systematic review.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I explored existing definitions of school-based trauma, theoretically analyzed those conceptualizations within an existing framework, and proposed a new working definition. As Candice Valenzuela (2021) writes: we cannot heal what we cannot understand. Identifying types of school-based trauma is the first step of Herman's (2015) stages of trauma recovery called "naming the problem" (p. 156).

Schools must name problems and speak to potentially trauma-inducing experiences for children. Educators and scholars must also bring a systemic lens to this work. In doing so, the focus can move away from seeing students as responsible for their trauma and towards the systems they are nested within. This shift will also move us away from deficit views of blaming children and their families for the trauma they've experienced, and allow us to interrogate how schools may cause harm for educators, too. By keeping a keen eye on systems that cause trauma, we can continue to advocate for systemic change.

But we must also acknowledge that trauma profoundly affects an individual's perception of the experience. As such, what is traumatic for one may not be for another. Given the 30-plus years of scholarship to draw from, we do not need to ask children and adults to continue detailing their traumas to generate another trauma type. I present this analysis to map experiences and invite the fields of trauma studies and education to move beyond that. Looking ahead, scholars and practitioners alike can lean into the "now what?" questions. We know schools cause trauma. The question now becomes: how can we, as scholars and educators, meaningfully partner with students, families, fellow practitioners, and policymakers to re-imagine school spaces that are not trauma-inducing? This work is one step toward moving from the "What happened to you?" to the "Now what?" stage of understanding and upending school-based trauma.

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ADDISON DUANE, PhD, is a Postdoctoral Scholar with UC Berkeley's Innovations for Youth (i4Y). She partners with children to investigate and work to upend trauma in schools. Email: Addison.Duane@berkeley.edu