Unconscionable Input:

Confronting the Impacts of Adverse Childhood Experiences on English Language Learners

Jeremy Louzao
Highline Public Schools

ABSTRACT

Researchers have found that traumatic and adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) can significantly affect the academic outcomes of students in schools. Consequently, educators and school systems are seeking to embed trauma-informed practices into their work. This action research project investigated the potential impacts of ACEs on beginning and intermediate English language learners (ELLs), and specifically how four trauma-informed instructional practices affected the resilience and academic motivation of five high school ELL students. The research project found that, when practiced with consistency and fidelity, trauma-informed teaching strategies can positively, even dramatically, impact student motivation.

“But this is so boring.”

“I stopped going to school when the bombs destroyed it.”

“What’s the point of this, anyway?”

“The soldiers came in and killed my sister in front of me. They shot me right here, in the stomach.”

“Fine, just send me to the office then.”

“We walked through the desert for 5 days. I thought I was going to die.”

“You can’t take my phone, it’s mine.”

“When my dad’s family took me from my mom’s family, I had to change my religion. Now I don’t know what I believe.”
At Ella Baker High School,¹ student disengagement, apathy, or even defiance are some of the most persistent challenges that teachers face. Frustrating, distracted behaviors act as a powerful barrier between our students and the thinking we want them to do. At the same time, especially with our students who are immigrants and refugees, we regularly see vulnerable and raw moments, where students’ personal stories puncture pre-conceived conceptions of normal teenage life, and reveal harsh and traumatic realities that we feel unprepared to address or support. Generally, we continue on with our existing curricula and instructional activities, but with nagging questions about what we could be doing differently.

Chances are, the two phenomena—disengaged and disruptive student dispositions on the one hand, and barely hidden real-life struggles on the other—are at least somewhat connected. Recent research into the widespread and long-term effects of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) suggests that the links might actually be quite deep, and that trauma-informed instructional strategies might have tremendous benefits for students like ours (Stevens, 2013). Yet in the body of research there is still much room for exploration, particularly regarding English language learner (ELL) populations. Schools would benefit from knowing more about how adverse childhood experiences might impact the language development that is so critical for ELL students’ academic success.

All ELL students enter the U.S. school system with a double burden compared with native English speakers: the challenge of mastering general education skills and content, while simultaneously developing both their colloquial and academic English. In this research project, I wanted to better understand how ACEs can fold in as a third burden—an often unacknowledged, but disruptive force within ELL students’ academic and personal lives. I believe that I’m not alone among teachers in wanting to know how trauma impacts my students, and how to incorporate trauma-informed strategies into my language teaching.

As chair of Ella Baker High School’s ELL department, and as a teacher of three ELL classes, I decided to investigate how traumatic and difficult realities might be affecting our ELL students.

¹ The name of the school has been changed, along with all student names.
students, and how we might pro-actively respond as educators. To explore this topic, I chose to investigate existing literature in both the ACEs and ELL fields, and I based my research around the following question:

*How do adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) impact English language development, and how can trauma-informed teaching practices support resilience and academic motivation for five beginning and intermediate English Language Learners?*

**Literature Review**

Prior to launching my own action research project, I wanted to explore existing theory and research about language acquisition, about trauma’s effect on learning, and about how the two might overlap. Below is a summary of my findings.

**What Do Student’s Need in Order to Learn a Second Language Well?**

Theories of second-language acquisition have a long and storied history, but for educators today, Stephen Krashen’s (1982) theories of language acquisition have arguably had the most practical impact. Krashen put forth five hypotheses that described language acquisition as a natural, almost inductive process—which can be enriched by direct grammar and vocabulary instruction, but which is centered in actual, meaningful communicative activity. For our purposes, two of Krashen’s hypotheses particularly stand out: his Input hypothesis postulated that people acquire languages best when the input they receive is comprehensible—not too easy, not difficult, but rather just within their reach; and his Affective Filter hypothesis argued that people’s emotional states—their senses of safety within a language context—could act as a filter, even a barrier, to just how comprehensible any input actually is. This has led educators to invest in the selection of level-appropriate content and in the creation of positive, emotionally safe ELL classrooms.

Social interactionists, such as Vygotsky (1978), Long (1985), and Gass (1997), took these ideas further, emphasizing that comprehensible input was far more powerful for learners when it was learned socially, in genuine interactions where learners were negotiating meaning together. Vygotsky discussed this as a zone of proximal development, a boundary
of learning potential that is greatly expanded when interacting with capable peers, rather than learning in isolation. From this, many ELL educators have structured ELL classrooms around authentic peer interaction about real-world situations, with decidedly less emphasis on the pure, decontextualized grammar and vocabulary lessons of past decades.

More recently instructional models such as Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP), Guided Language Acquisition Design (GLAD), and the Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach (CALLA) have sought to operationalize these language acquisition theories, while also incorporating modern brain research and proven practices across content areas (Sedano, 2013). All three of these models have hearty visions for what ELL students are doing throughout the school day, and for what is happening in ELL students’ minds: students are expected to engage in rich, multi-sensory, cognitively demanding, and highly social learning experiences, in which they actively wrestle with real-world concepts and problems. In short, current best practices within the ELL field hold that students should be socially active, self-advocating, critical thinkers.

But what happens when students’ own lived experiences have actively sabotaged their social skills, their self-advocacy skills, and their higher-order thinking? What happens when students’ lives have inundated them with not just incomprehensible input, but also unconscionable input?

**The Wrench in the Works: Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)**

While there is nothing new in acknowledging that students’ life experiences, especially experiences of trauma, neglect, or deprivation, might have a concrete effect on their learning, recent research into these areas has exploded with powerful discoveries.

In 1998, Kaiser Permanente and The Center for Disease Control and Prevention published a longitudinal study of how what they called ‘adverse childhood experiences’ (ACEs) affected the long-term health, even early deaths, of 17,000 mostly White, mostly middle class health
care patients. The study defined ACEs as “potentially traumatic events that can have negative, lasting effects on health and well-being. These experiences range from physical, emotional, or sexual abuse to parental divorce or the incarceration of a parent or guardian” (1998). The findings from the study were remarkable and definitive. Across a range of health care outcomes, from heart disease and asthma, to drug addiction and suicide, high numbers of adverse childhood experiences (a ‘high ACE score’) were so strongly linked to higher incidences of health problems that they were almost predictive. The research made a strong case: childhood trauma can cause sickness and death.

The sheer scale and convincing power of the data in the original ACE study inspired a flurry of research into how ACEs impact many other areas of people’s lives—with increasing attention to educational outcomes (ACEs Too High, 2016). Across the country, researchers have been investigating how adverse childhood experiences affect young people in schools, and Washington State has been a pioneer in some areas. In 2010, researchers from Washington State University conducted a study of 2,100 elementary students in Spokane, and concluded that ACEs had a strong correlation with student absences and behavioral infractions, and were the second-highest predictor of academic failure, with special education status being the highest (Blodgett, Harrington, Lohan, Short, Turner, & Winikoff, 2010). In 2011, Washington’s Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) published a 246 page handbook for educators, The Heart of Learning and Teaching, saying, “There is nothing new about the presence of children affected by trauma in schools. What is new is our knowledge of the problem’s pervasiveness and its effect on school performance” (Wolpaw, Johnson, Hertel, & Kincaid, 2011).

“Playing Chess In a Hurricane:” How ACEs Can Impact Language Learning

The research is clear that childhood trauma negatively impacts learning and school success, but how, and how might those impacts connect specifically to language learning?

Synthesizing decades of research related to trauma and children’s brains, Susan Craig (2008) lists numerous components of the learning process that are negatively impacted, if not completely devastated, by childhood trauma, neglect, or deprivation. See the box below.
Washington State teacher Kenneth Fox summed it up well: “Focusing on academics while struggling with trauma is like trying to play chess in a hurricane” (Wolpaw, et al., 2011).

However, research into how these impacts directly link to second language learning is disappointingly sparse. While some have published qualitative studies about teaching ELL survivors of trauma (Stone, 1995, Gordan, 2011), there has been little comprehensive research about the effects of trauma on ELL students in public schools. Websites such as Colorin Colorado and the aforementioned OSPI handbook offer resources to educators, but there is still much to learn about the hows and whys of trauma and language acquisition.

Nonetheless, with the research available, and my own 12 years of experience on Ella Baker High School’s campus, we can at least begin to sketch a picture of the ‘triple burden’ that traumatized ELL students face in public schools. Every day, in every school period, ELL students—especially newly arrived immigrants and refugees—are juggling at least three cognitive and emotional demands: the demands of their daily social-emotional realities; the academic demands of each class subject and lesson; and then an additional, unique set of language demands that don’t just manifest as the processing of new words or the parsing of new grammatical structures, but also as another layer of social-emotional stress—the fear of bad pronunciation, or the freeze response from a teacher’s question that whizzed by too fast to understand. That is, the very act of language learning in school can potentially contribute to, even compound, the deep stresses that students already feel.

“So, What Can I Do?” Trauma-Informed Practices for the ELL Classroom

In the original ACE study and other studies across a variety of fields, researchers found that not all traumatized children end up with the same negative outcomes. Indeed, they found a key factor that kept showing up for people who had more positive outcomes in their lives: resilience. According to the American Psychological Association, “Resilience is the process

Just the Tip of the Iceberg: Some of Trauma’s Effects on Learning

- Executive functioning
- Communication
- Memory
- Informational processing
- Environmental awareness
- Motivation

(Craig, 2008)
of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats or significant sources of stress — such as family and relationship problems, serious health problems or workplace and financial stressors. It means ‘bouncing back’ from difficult experiences” (2016).

Researchers have found that resilience isn’t just some innate personal trait, some individual bootstrap that people have to pull themselves up by; resilience is something that can be nurtured and strengthened by the communities and institutions that surround traumatized children—like schools (Wolpaw, et al., 2011).

Fortunately, educators nationwide have begun to answer the challenge of supporting resilience in schools. Notable examples include Massachusetts Advocates for Children’s Trauma and Learning Policy Initiative (2014), San Diego’s work to become a trauma-informed school district (Nittle, 2015), Sound Discipline (2015), OSPI’s Heart of Learning and Teaching publication (2011), and Lincoln High School in Walla Walla, Washington, which has been spotlighted in James Redford’s documentary film, Paper Tigers (2015).

All of these initiatives call for schools and school districts to implement committed, institution-wide systems of trauma-informed intervention and support, whether branded as Positive Behavior Intervention Systems (PBIS),

Response to Intervention (RTI), Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS), or even simply as Compassionate Schools (Dorn, Kanikeberg, & Mueller, 2009). More helpful for individual classroom teachers like myself, these initiatives also offer concrete suggestions for creating trauma-informed classrooms.

While many of these initiatives share similar—often identical— instructional recommendations, OSPI’s Heart of Learning (Wolpaw, et al., 2011) encapsulates them as six instructional principles, shown to the right.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Trauma-Informed Instructional Principles</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Always empower, never disempower.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Provide unconditional positive regard.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Maintain high expectations.</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Be a relationship coach.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Provide opportunities for helpful participation.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

(Wolpaw, et al., 2011)

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3 Positive Behavior Intervention Systems (PBIS) are multi-tiered, school-wide systems that try to explicitly teach and prominently reward specific positive school behaviors. Ella Baker High School uses this system to reinforce three specific behaviors: Focus, Grit, and Teamwork.
**Research Design**

For this action research project, I wanted to apply some of the above research-based recommendations to my own ELL classroom. I wanted to better understand how adverse childhood experiences were impacting the language development and daily motivation of my students. I also wanted to know how adopting a small set of trauma-informed teaching strategies might impact my students’ motivation and resilience as language learners. In this section, I will describe how I selected study participants and interventions, how I collected data, and how I analyzed and made sense of the data in order to synthesize my findings.

**Setting and Participants**

*School Context* ELL Baker High School is a small, highly diverse, low-income urban high school of about 550 students. While approximately 25% of the student population is currently receiving ELL services, more than 2/3 of students are immigrants and refugees who have received ELL services at some time in their school careers.

For this action research project, I decided to focus on students in my Beginning ELL Reading and Writing class. This was a first and second period block class, that fluctuated between 17 and 19 students, from Ethiopia, Eritrea, Honduras, El Salvador, Mexico, Guatemala, Iraq, Somalia, India, Senegal, and Kenya. Three students were taking this class for a second year in order to be better prepared for our school’s full inclusion classes beyond the beginning level; the rest of the class members were in their first year in U.S. public schools, and had lived in the U.S.A. for an average of nine months.

I teach the class using a modified Readers and Writers Workshop model, beginning each class with 10-15 minute mini-lessons in a tight meeting space, and then releasing students into independent work time at tables, where students individually and collaboratively complete various unit benchmarks. In this model, the most consistent format for individualized instruction, assessment, feedback, and student behavioral support is the one-on-one conference, where students are signed up on chart paper, and we sit down to look over their work or talk together. Understanding these classroom structures is
important because the majority of my research happened as either interventions in the collective meeting space at the front of the classroom, or in those one-on-one conferences.

**Participants** Because I decided to focus on only five students, I wanted to be careful to select particularly information-rich cases, from whom I thought I could learn the most, but also who I believed would be most positively impacted by the trauma-informed interventions that I was trying.

To select the five students, I used information from three sources:

- Students’ own writings and self-disclosures about their life experiences—especially from earlier units about life in their home countries and their immigration stories
- Students’ classroom behaviors and self-described levels of motivation in the class—based on entry tasks, exit tickets, conferences, and classroom participation
- Students’ numerical scores (1-9) on a one-time, modified, confidential Adverse Childhood Experience survey, which was derived from the original ACE survey and similar surveys used by schools across the country, and taken by the whole class (see Appendix A)

Originally, and in keeping with the research I had read elsewhere, I had wanted to base my selections in those simple, numerical ACE scores, but I came to believe that the scores from that one survey instrument weren’t reliable enough to tell me which students might most be affected by adverse childhood experiences, or who might most benefit from this action research (see findings section). So, while the ACE scores did inform my decisions, I mostly relied on my own knowledge of students, and—frankly—my desire to intervene in the toughest, most disengaged behaviors I was seeing. However, to avoid a common pattern in classroom management and instructional differentiation of only focusing on students who externalize their disengagement—the loudest, the most negative—I also deliberately mixed my selections between students who were more vocal, energetic, and actively disruptive and students who were more withdrawn and internalizing of their disengagement.
The table below provides information about the five focus students I selected for this inquiry. The English Language Level is based on their most recent scores on the Washington English Language Proficiency Assessment (WELPA).

The scale for the ACE score is 1-9, based on students’ confidential (hidden even from me) counts of various categories of adverse childhood experiences (see Appendix A).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Time in USA</th>
<th>English Language Level</th>
<th>ACE Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aida</td>
<td>Amharic</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td>Intermediate</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ahmed</td>
<td>Somali, Swahili</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>Advanced Beginner</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carlos</td>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>11 months</td>
<td>Intermediate</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Josefina</td>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>Intermediate</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Juan</td>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>7 months</td>
<td>Beginner</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*All names changed to protect confidentiality.

**Intervention Design**

From my background research, I concluded that a predominant goal of trauma-informed instruction is for the teacher to create spaces of calm, safety, and dignity, so that students can develop their own self-control, agency, and positive relationships. According to Craig (2008), adverse childhood experiences often have an impact of maintaining students in states of constant uncertainty or agitation. Because teachers have so much influence over the classroom environment, and the cognitive and emotional demands of our lessons, we have opportunities to help strengthen students own resilience, not just academic skillsets.

In the three month window of this research, I selected four strategies from Craig (2008), Sound Discipline (2015), and the OSPI handbook (2011) that I wanted to implement class-wide, with as much daily consistency as possible:

1. **Smiling, greeting, and effusive encouragement**: Standing near the door or at the front of the classroom; warmly greeting each student by name; showing authentic interest in how they were feeling as they entered my class; and positively narrating the engagement, dedication, and collaboration I was seeing throughout the period.
2. **Empathetic, academically confident, and solution-oriented interventions:**

   Strongly avoiding any comments about what students were doing wrong, what they should stop doing, or warnings about consequences; instead, using a consistently empathetic, ‘warmly demanding’ discourse style. Typical steps included: 1) Openly seeking information about what was going on for a student; 2) using concrete, recent examples of student work as a point of confidence, encouragement, and refocusing; 3) collaboratively seeking solutions that not only got the student back to work, but also to a more positive academic identity.

   This intervention rested on a teacher disposition of earnest, unflinching belief in the power of students’ thinking, and public confidence that any ‘off-task’ or unmotivated behavior was just a temporary roadblock on the way to great learning.

3. **Giving space, choice, leadership:** Coupling any positive or empathetic comments with genuine opportunities and choices for relaxing, for engaging problem-solving skills, and for shifting gears from ‘the low road’ of agitated, survival-based brain functions, toward higher-order, frontal lobe thinking (Craig 2008, Sound Discipline, 2015). This included immediate de-escalation or reset opportunities like going for a walk, getting water, or even sleeping for five minutes, but then could—and usually did—evolve into opportunities for students to choose effective workspaces, select unique academic approaches to the work of the day, help lead classroom activities, or even show off ‘think-alouds’ of their own powerful work to their peers.

4. **‘Cathartic’ content:** Within academic units, embedding opportunities for students to reflect on authentic emotions, experiences, and ongoing stresses through the expressive power of English—especially reading, writing, and class discussion.

   For example, in a unit about immigration experiences, students used various narrative techniques to process emotions and key conversations that had stuck with them, or ongoing emotions they had as immigrants living far from their countries. Or, in a historical essay unit about African American slavery, instead of only highlighting the oppression and brutality of slavery, students explored how culture, community, and resilience allowed slaves to survive, escape, and resist—and then connected their own stories of cultural resilience with those historical legacies.
Data Collection

During the three months of this study, I collected a variety of data related to this research:

- **Students’ prior writing**: Previous work that gave me information about students’ life experiences and feelings about language learning. (Collected once)

- **ACE scores**: Simple numerical scores of the quantity of categories (1-9) in which students have had adverse childhood experiences. (Collected once)

- **Samples of student work**: Collections of all relevant student writing from the research period—including reflections about their own experiences, and their feelings about language learning. (Collected as students completed work)

- **Unit benchmark completion charts**: Charts of all the steps (usually 10-15) of a given unit, and whether a student had completed each step. (Updated daily)

- **Teacher reflection journals**: My own reflections on research, planning, lessons, or interactions with students. (Updated weekly)

- **Conference notes**: Quick notes about takeaways or next steps in one-on-one academic conferences with students. (Collected daily)

- **Behavior tracking sheets**: Quick notes or tallies about specific behaviors that I would track in collaboration with students. (Collected in 1-3 day spans)

- **School wide check-in, check-out data**: Summary behavioral data from our school’s PBIS-based check-in, check-out system—three participants used this system to track behavioral goals in every class. (Collected once at the end of the study)

- **Student interviews**: 30-40 minute interviews with each focus student at the end of the research period. Conducted in English and Spanish. (Collected once)

Data Analysis

To make sense of all of the data I had collected, I used strategies suggested by Fichtman Dana (2013) and Miller Hubbard & Shagoury Power (1999).
1. During the research period, I maintained and periodically reviewed six folders: one for each student; and one for my own work, planning, and reflections along the way.

2. At the end of the research period, I organized the data within each folder chronologically, and then further organized them by in-class units.

3. I read the data in each folder, student by student, using sticky notes to capture striking information or emerging patterns and themes.

4. I then reorganized and reread the data unit by unit, rather than by individual student, using sticky notes to capture more of my evolving analysis.

5. Based on patterns I was noticing, I reorganized my data again, this time by how it related to classroom activities and interventions (outside of a lesson; meeting area; mini-lessons, one-on-one conferences; independent work time; benchmark completion; and behavioral interventions)

6. I created three data tables to track my findings:

### Student Engagement and Progress Across Units

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Engagement and Academic Progress →</th>
<th>Prior Units</th>
<th>Unit 4: Reading Non-Fiction—NewsELA Paragraphs</th>
<th>Unit 5: Comparative Writing—Native American &amp; Immigrant Experiences</th>
<th>Unit 6: Expository Essays—African American Slavery</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student ↓</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ahmed</td>
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<td>Aida</td>
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<td>Carlos</td>
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<td>Josefina</td>
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<td>Juan</td>
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</table>

### Student Responses to Interventions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response to Interventions →</th>
<th>Beginning of Research Project</th>
<th>Greetings</th>
<th>Empathetic Conferencing</th>
<th>Student Choice and Leadership</th>
<th>Cathartic Content</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student ↓</td>
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<td>Aida</td>
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<td>Carlos</td>
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</table>
Josefina
Juan

Relationship of Interventions to Themes of My Research Project

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interventions →</th>
<th>Non-Intervention, or Inconsistency</th>
<th>Greetings and Positivity</th>
<th>Empathetic Conferencing</th>
<th>Student Choice and Leadership</th>
<th>Cathartic Content</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Theme ↓</td>
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<td>Student Work Completion</td>
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<td>Student Learning Growth</td>
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<tr>
<td>In-Class Engagement and Collaboration</td>
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<td>Student Resilience (not giving up)</td>
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<td>Student motivation</td>
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By analyzing the data along these various lines, I found that I was able to draw some confident, data-based conclusions related to my research question.

Findings

The Impact of Adverse and Traumatic Experiences on Language Learning

“What Experiences?” The Challenge of Students Naming Their Own Realities Before I could even delve into my discoveries about how ACEs affect language learning, or about the effects of my trauma-informed teaching interventions on student motivation, my research process confronted me with a more foundational discovery: my students’ realities, and their naming of those realities, did not fit neatly into the pre-determined categories that the existing body of ACE research has established.
Before starting this project, I already knew many details about my students’ lives from earlier writing units. Many of them had told powerful stories of surviving war and gang violence, of harrowing and lonely treks across deserts and contested borders, of losing homes, pets, family members. Yet, later, when students first did confidential and modified ACE surveys with me, their self-reported ACE numbers were actually so low that they contradicted what I already knew about them. Their survey numbers were reporting childhoods that were predominantly safe and stable, but their own writing and discussions showed something totally different. For example, Aida scored a 3 on the survey, but just tallying the categories of adversity from her own writing would have resulted in a 6. What was happening? While I think there was some language interference in the survey process, I believe three other, more important factors were at play: 1) the actual trauma that my students, and many ELL students, experience doesn’t fit in the family-based framework of traditional ACE research; 2) many of my students’ traumatic experiences are so generalized among their people that they have become normalized parts of growing up; 3) students didn’t always want to characterize their experiences as having a lasting impact on them.

The original ACE study—and most of the derived ACE surveys that I have seen schools use—was based on 10 questions designed for 17,000 mostly White, mostly middle class Americans. As such, the adverse experiences that the study asked about were those seen as more typical of single family units—domestic abuse, sexual assault, neglect, substance abuse. Of course, these are experiences that students from all over the world can have, but the survey misses more structural forms of trauma and violence: war, human trafficking, extreme poverty and malnourishment, systemic medical neglect, forced separation across borders. These experiences are highly traumatic, and they are also highly generalized across millions of people worldwide, but they don’t fit into the family-based framework of the original ACE survey. I didn’t change my own survey to capture that.

Because many these structurally traumatic experiences are so highly generalized across my students’ families and communities, I noticed that my students often talked about them in normalized terms. Juan, for example, described the constant presence of armed gangsters outside the entrance to his school as just something that was part of the school day, but
unconscionable Input

with no mention of an emotional reaction. Further, Ahmed regularly discussed the war that displaced his own family from Somalia to Kenya, but when I asked if his family had ever been affected by violence, he insisted on answering no. In these cases, I believe that the traumatic experiences were so normal, so ever-present in my students’ lives and, that they didn’t see them as something unique to pick out as defining elements of their childhoods.

Finally, some of my students were initially skeptical of any discussion of past hardships. For example, during our immigration narrative unit, prior to this study, three of the participants had made pointed efforts to distance themselves from their pasts, declaring that they didn’t want to think about them or feel them again. I respectfully let matters rest at that and offered them alternative assignments. Later, two other students who are outside of this study—who came to the USA alone as underage refugees from Guatemala and El Salvador—asked why our class was writing stories about their immigration experiences. Walter said, “Those stories aren’t easy. We are in the United States now and we don’t want to think about those times. It’s embarrassing and we don’t want people here to know about that.” This was an important challenge to my own sensitivity and cultural responsiveness as an instructional planner, and I explained that I always give students a choice to omit parts of their stories, or even to write about an alternative topic. But I explained further that I ask them to write about this because I believe they have no reason to be embarrassed, that the difficulties they faced aren’t their fault and they are part of a much bigger story, and that if we want to prevent future young people from facing the same struggles, maybe their stories might help. All of my students decided that they did want to write their stories—and they did so powerfully—and Walter later asked to borrow a book about Guatemalan history, in order to connect his story to a bigger picture. These stories show us that students don’t always want to articulate what has hurt them, whether because it is too painful, or, often, because they don’t know how others will react.

What I learned from this, and why I have discussed it at length, is that, our students’ lives are unique and complex. As teachers, our own respect for student privacy, dignity, and emotional safety must always trump whatever interest or curiosity—however well intentioned—we have about what’s going on for them. And, interestingly, it was exactly my
own discretion, respect, and deference to students’ own thinking that made students feel safer to open up as the study progressed.

*Not Disengaged, But Engaged Elsewhere* When asked about moments of perceived disengagement—heads down, sitting away from peers, using phones under their desks, refusing to confer with me—only one of the five students ever related their behavior solely to a lack of understanding, to problems with my instruction, or boredom with lessons—and even this student only mentioned these four times during the three months of research. The other four students immediately wanted to talk about the problems in their lives that were distracting them from school. Some examples:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ahmed</th>
<th>Josefina</th>
<th>Juan</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“My problem is that when people are telling lies about me, I get really sad. I watch movies [on the class computers] to feel better. Other people use drugs, alcohol or music. I felt sad, sad, sad, so I watch movies. When I get really happy, I do my work.”</td>
<td>“When I am motivated, it’s because my mom has told me something good [in the morning]. When I’m not, it’s because she scolded me, or yelled at me, or used her way of criticizing me.”</td>
<td>“When I’m bad in class, I’m thinking about my dad who had to go to court for problems, or when they were going to operate on my grandpa in Honduras...when there are problems happening. I get scared thinking about not having my dad and I don’t feel motivated to do anything.”</td>
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Throughout my research, students described being so distracted by the emotions around them and the dilemmas that they were facing—sometimes concrete experiences that they could describe, but also sometimes perceived slights or threats from other students that I believed to be misinterpreted—that lessons and classroom instructions just pass right over them. While a purely instruction-centered perspective might see these behaviors as disengaged, a student-centered lens sees that students actually are engaged: elsewhere—with what they perceive as more urgent, more emotionally potent realities (Craig, 2008).

The ability to pay attention in a classroom setting depends on a variety of higher-order thinking processes, that are still developing in all teenage brains, but which are actively...
downshifted when students are pre-occupied with their own physical and emotional safety and well-being (Craig, 2008). Students who have faced traumatic experiences often pass much of their daily lives in those downshifted, survival focused states. Because reception and processing of comprehensible input is so critical to language acquisition, the distracted, hyper-aroused, or hyper-vigilant states that these distraught students experience don’t just hurt their grades, but their actual English language development.

Without support to calm students emotional states and empower them with self-control, these students can lose hours, days, months of not just general instructional time, but especially vital language processing time. In the months leading up to my research, that lost instructional time was clearly demonstrated for all five of these students through my unit benchmark completion charts. Across two prior units, and despite my regular interventions, these students had been missing an average of just over 1/3 of the assigned work, and they were usually 4-5 days behind their peers, even with the same attendance.

“I Come From Nothing, I’ve Been Nothing...So All I Do Is Nothing” Beyond specific moments of distress or distraction, all five students also described sometimes being gripped by a deeper lack of motivation, which extends like an ominous cloud over their futures. Ahmed described how, for eight years of his prior schooling, “In Africa, teachers didn’t talk to me. They just punished me,” and how this made him not see himself as a student. After those eight years, Ahmed still struggles with decoding words and still must focus intensely to read even at a first grade level, so when we would talk about the further academic skills that he will need to be college ready, he repeatedly started to cry. Early in the research period, Juan said, “I feel bad. I don’t know English and I can’t learn English. I can’t.” When I asked what parts of our conferences made her feel worse, Josefina said, “When you or other people talk to me about college, I think about who I’m going to be if I don’t pass high school. What will my future be?”

In many cases, students made these statements declaratively and definitively, as if they were fixed positions, and often in connection with specific class work that they were behind on. What I discovered, though, was that these pessimistic self-images, while persistent and forceful for some, were not actually fixed or permanent for any of them. In
fact, all five students described themselves, and their motivation, in directly opposite, highly optimistic terms in other parts of the study. This shows me that teachers and other caring adults do have the power to shift the balance for students own self-conceptions about their motivation, their self-worth, and their dignity, as we’ll see below.

“Ahh...I Do Matter.” The Impact of Trauma-Informed Practices on Student Resilience and Motivation

First-Language Adult Relationships Matter In all of my conferences and interviews, there was a clear gap between the precision, the depth, and openness of responses from my Spanish speaking students and the responses of the two students who spoke other languages. Not surprisingly, this is because I speak Spanish, and because many of these interactions were in Spanish, whereas my interactions with my other students were wholly in English. While this certainly marks a flaw—or at least an inequity—in the design and implementation of my research project, I think it also brings important learning: caring first-language relationships with adults in schools matter.

In addition to the various trauma-informed strategies that I tried with my students, the simple act of regularly connecting or reinforcing learning and relationships in Spanish had a palpable impact on students’ trust and comfort with me. Juan, Josefina, and Carlos all mentioned my use of Spanish as an important factor in how I motivate them. Juan said, “I don’t feel capable of talking with other teachers, only with you,” and while I would love to be flattered by that, I think language is an essential component of his trust.

Language isn’t enough, though. Caring, trusting, dignified relationships were also essential.

The Critical Power of Warm, Authentic, and Individualized Greetings “Good morning, Juan, how are you doing today?” “Josefina, it is so good to see you, and thanks for already having your notebook.” “Ahmed, I’m happy to see you, and early, even!”

Of all the trauma-informed practices that I implemented in my project, simply smiling, naming, and greeting each student every day was the practice that students most appreciated and attributed to their motivation. Carlos told me, “When you say hello, I feel
important. You see if we are feeling good or bad, and we feel good about learning more.” Aida said, “You make me feel like you’re paying attention to me.”

My own reflection journals confirm the importance of smiling and greetings. After three distinct lessons, I found myself reflecting about starting my class harried, frustrated with the copier, or arguing with a student about headphones, and noting that my distracted or grumpy attitude at the start ended up with less student focus or benchmark completion than other days. On the other hand, I wrote about a day when I had started the morning grumpy, with little sleep the night before, yet still worked to open my lesson with greetings, smiles, and energy. I made an astonished note to myself about how on-task and dedicated the class was during the rest of the period. Even as anecdotal reflections, these experiences match up with research about how mirror neurons allow people to reflect back each other’s feelings, and how the relational stance we put forward with our students can reflect back in student dispositions (Sound Discipline, 2015)—especially with survivors of trauma who are hyper-aware of adult emotional states and facial expressions (Craig, 2008).

**What a Difference a Word Makes: “How Are You Doing?” vs. “What Are You Doing?”** If a key goal of trauma-informed teaching is to create spaces of calm, safety, and dignity, so that students can develop their own self-control, agency, and positive relationships, then the front lines of that work are those moments when our students are most distracted or disruptive. After all, if we recognize that seemingly disengaged students actually are engaging with something that they think is important in their lives—and that might be actively damaging them in some way—then we have a chance to re-set the instructional table with a place for them, where they can re-engage in a learning community.

Another deeply impactful intervention during this research was my strong shift away from accusatory or consequence-based responses to student disengagement, replaced with curious, empathetic, academically-grounded, and solution-based responses. In a nutshell, it was a shift from, “Hey, what are you doing? Why aren’t you working? If you don’t starting working, I’ll...” to, “Hey, how are you doing? What do you need? Let’s figure this out together.” The outcomes from this shift were staggering.
Prior to my research, all five participants demonstrated needs and behaviors that created constant disruptions in the classroom, and which left them usually days behind their peers academically. While two of the students would internalize their disengagement through chronic phone use, sleeping, or drawing on tables, the other three students would regularly walk around the room, fidget around with class materials, laugh and yell across the room, or loudly proclaim their lack of interest in working. I had been regularly reassigning seats, arguing about phones, or writing to colleagues in frustration. However, within weeks of fully shifting my approach, student responses to our one-on-one conferences also dramatically shifted. This is best illustrated through two stories.

**Ahmed** At the start of this project, Ahmed was just beginning to decode and summarize individual sentences from the multi-paged beginning level texts the class was reading—but in between nearly every sentence of reading and writing, Ahmed was walking around the class, turning on computers to watch movies, or trying to get passes to the office to draw attention to one interpersonal conflict after another.

Talking with his other teachers, we knew this was a pattern across his entire school day. Together, we theorized that Ahmed’s numerous behavioral struggles all served a common function of helping him escape from prolonged periods of literacy work—for years, his academic endurance had been stagnating at a 3-5 minute mark because he was constantly seeking distractions.

With the switch to only positive, empathetic, and academic solution-oriented conferences with Ahmed, I worried that empathy alone would only serve to maintain his distraction by creating a pattern of constant storytelling and complaining about other students in the class. So, I directly explained this worry to Ahmed, and told him that while I always care about how he was doing, I also deeply believe in his potential as a student, and that I don’t want the difficulties in his life to be a barrier to his greatness. I began to ground every conference immediately in whatever specific work he had just completed, or completed the day before, and I framed every concern about his emotions or his conflicts with other students around the question, “How do we figure out these problems so we can get you right back to your powerful reading and writing progress?”

In a class of 18-20 beginning ELL students, it was difficult to consistently sustain those kinds of grounded and attentive conferences. There were days, even a whole week, of inconsistency when Ahmed returned to using phones and watching movies. However, in our last unit, and for the first time in his two years of beginning ELL classes, Ahmed completed every single benchmark at the same time as his peers, and proudly read his essay in front of the class.
When I was consistent with this style of conferences, all five students showed marked improvements in their daily engagement and benchmark completion. However, where I was inconsistent or didn’t make time for two to four conferences in each block period, Josefina, Ahmed, Juan, and Carlos would revert back to some previous patterns of distraction or disengagement. This raises questions about how well my interventions were building true student agency and independence, versus being too rooted in students’ specific relationship with me.

Students themselves had much to say about the power and value of this intervention.

Carlos In the beginning, Carlos was regularly arriving late, sitting toward the back with his head down, drawing on tables or on his hands—sometimes the gang number 18.

In my first conference where I focused on how he was doing, he merely shrugged and said, “Fine,” said that he would get back to work, and then was back to drawing on a table five minutes later. However, in the second conference the next day, Carlos began crying, talking about a fight with his mother, and about how nothing he did was good enough for her.

His un-motivated work patterns continued until the following week, when Carlos came in late, and visibly upset. He was using his phone during my lesson, so I knelt down next to him, said “You look sad today. Want to talk about it?” He nodded a no, but began crying. I gave him a piece of notebook paper and offered him time to leave the class and write to me about how he was feeling. He wrote two pages about his mother, a father he doesn’t know, and using smoking to distract himself.

We met and discussed the letter, then I showed him samples of his own high quality work from an earlier unit. I asked him to write a conclusion to his letter with his hopes for himself and at least one goal for the next few months. He opened his conclusion with, “Well, I want to improve everything. I want to be a better person, with every day that passes,” and declared his hope to recommit to school and join the soccer team.

For my part, I followed up with a positive phone call to his mother, and at our school’s family night, I asked him to read his own three-page immigration narrative—his first ever story in English—to his mother, with our own principal in the room. He read the story, and his mother embraced him.

Since that family night, his on-time attendance improved by 80%, and his daily benchmark completion put him at the front of the class. He also made the J.V. soccer team.
Ahmed: “[When you confer with me] I understand you, and you understand me. You explain why this class is important, then I want to change.”

Carlos: “You are like a member of my family. You see when we are sad and you ask us. You make me feel like someone important. You tell me, ‘Carlos, you can do it,’ with joy and energy. I can’t even talk to my step-father like this, because I’m scared he will scold me.”

Josefina: “When you confer with me, I think, ‘Ahhh...I do matter.’”

As Aida explained, “Teachers stress me out when they tell me again that I need to do something. But I already know what I need to do.” From this experience, I learned that students, even beginning ELL students, don’t always need more and more direction and explanation, or even more scaffolds and sentence starters—often they just need someone to listen to them, accompany them, believe in them.

**Space to Breathe, to Feel, to Choose, to Lead, and to Excel** It is nice for students to feel good about their relationships with me, and with my class, but that’s not the point of trauma-informed instructional practice. On the contrary, the point is for students to internalize and strengthen their own senses of well-being, and agency; in the case of my students, for them to embrace identities as powerful thinkers and English scholars.

Toward this end, I attempted to embed my conferences not just with empathy and encouragement, but also with specific avenues for student choice, agency, and academic challenge. When Ahmed, Juan, or Carlos entered the class meeting space upset, I would offer them a chance to choose a walk, a drink of water, a chance to write a written reflection, or to help me with a classroom job. When Josefina was calmed down from an altercation with a student, but still didn’t feel ready to do the work, I would ask her ideas about other ways she could push her English until she was ready to get back to the unit.

In their reflections, students expressed appreciation for this attention to space, choice, and academic challenge. Juan said, “[When you give me time to feel emotional] it helps me to be okay, and then come back to the class okay.” Ahmed said, “When you give me five minutes to come, figure something out, then I can do my work.” “I can explain why I am sad, and
then I can choose to find people who will help me.” Carlos told me, “When you push me to look at my work and learn from [the most advanced students in the class] I feel adrenaline, I have fun. I feel like I can do things that I couldn’t even do in Spanish.”

Interestingly, Josefina said, “I like to help, but sometimes I don’t want to help everyone. Sometimes it helps me, but sometimes I get more angry.” “Sometimes I want the teacher to read to me, like Kindergarten. To sit with me. Sometimes I want to listen to music and work by myself.” With this, she’s expressing that she doesn’t always know what’s best for herself, and that simply getting choices from a teacher can leave her more annoyed. This is where my role as a teacher is important in how it balances with student voice and choice.

**Clarity, Consistency, and Kindness** The work of Adler (1927), Dreikur (1968) and Nelson (2006) related to positive discipline elucidates the importance of both kindness and firmness in positive teaching approaches. As student comments above have demonstrated, positive encouragement and caring communication can be highly motivating, and student voice and choice can support students with critical thinking and problem-solving skills that have been stunted or degraded by multiple adverse experiences. Still, as Josefina’s quote above shows, there is still a need for firmness, clarity, and consistency from teachers.

Whenever the intense demands of my full roster of beginning students, or my own lack of organization, led me away from consistently implementing the strategies designed for this project, the push back from students was almost immediate. A day when I didn’t greet Ahmed was the same day I took a phone from his protesting hands an hour later. The three days when I didn’t notice that Juan wasn’t signing up for conferences with me were also three days where he had made little progress in his composition book. Josias, a student I mentioned earlier, even criticized me just weeks before the end of this project when he told me, “Mr. Louzao, sometimes you are so nice and happy, and then you are angry and taking our phones? I don’t understand.” While the most earnest answer would be that I’m human, and my own emotions make me inconsistent sometimes, research makes clear how damaging that inconsistency can be (Craig 2008).
Fortunately, what I noticed throughout my three months of research was student resilience is a process, not a product, and one of the key qualities of resilience is flexibility. On the days when I took the time to pause, breathe, and recommit to my chosen strategies, my journals show that I reaped the benefits in terms of student engagement, learning, and mutual respect.

**Discussion and Reflection**

When I started, and sometimes along the way, I wasn’t sure my action research project would provide me with any kind of definitive results, especially on those days when my implementation of strategies or my documentation of student responses was uneven. However, when I compiled and looked back at all of the data, and especially when I checked it against my final student interviews, the results were unmistakable: when I consistently implemented and authentically practiced interventions that were warm, empathetic, and grounded in a belief in students’ agency and academic potential, students’ motivation and benchmark completion increased—for all five focus students. Trauma informed teaching practices had an unquestionable impact on my ELL students.

Here, I want to take just a little more space to unpack what I think this means for ELL teachers, and for schools with ELL populations.

**Language Learning: A Hair-Trigger for Trauma, or a Tool for Empowerment**

In this research project, I learned that many of my students enter my classroom on a precarious knife edge between feeling positive and motivated to face the day’s learning, and feeling like they are too far behind and want to give up. As a teacher, I am not helpless as I watch them teeter and wobble in that balancing act. Through my emotional disposition, through my classroom interventions, through the content of my lessons, assignments, and academic feedback, I have some degree of influence—not complete control, just influence—over which direction my students might go from day to day. I have some influence over whether the very act of language learning weighs as a third burden on top of students
existing emotional and academic stresses, or whether language learning can be a safer space to discover, express meaning and emotions, and to feel valued as powerful thinkers.

When trauma informed teaching practices are incorporated into the established social learning practices of today’s ELL programs (CALLA, SIOP, or GLAD), my inquiry demonstrated that teachers have the opportunity to leverage language learning as a toolbox for healing, community building, and empowerment. However, it seems critical that we actually combine the learning from both fields of research—trauma and resilience and language acquisition. When masterful English language instruction fails to incorporate trauma-informed strategies, some students grow and thrive, but others fall away, or plateau as ‘long-term’ English language learners. But when teachers incorporate warm and safe trauma-informed classes, but divorce it from deep and meaningful instruction, then students might feel good and love their teacher and classmates, but they won’t be fully utilizing language as the empowering tool that it can be.

In my classroom, my best days of this action research project were those days when my smiles and empathetic questions were coupled with passionate and interesting language content, which made my students proud to embrace an academic identity with their peers.

**Beyond the One-on-One—Trauma-Informed Learning Communities**

Although my action research only focused on five students, I believe my class-wide implementation of the trauma-informed strategies had a significant impact on our class learning community. At the end of the research period, more than 90% of the class now regularly raises their hand in the meeting area to offer ideas or volunteer to read. Students clap for each other when they share pieces of writing, or when brand new students speak for the first time. Recently, when one student was feeling terrible about her English progress, the entire class circulated a note filled with compliments and then asked her to read it—the next day, she raised her hand three times in front of the class. At a recent class party, I saw a career first: more than half the class brought thoughtful foods and drinks to share in our class potluck, and instead of dividing into language groups to use their own
phones—a previously common occurrence at class parties—students crossed their language groups to take group selfies and share cultural music.

These examples of the class community benefits of trauma-informed strategies lend weight to the policy recommendations that I mentioned in my literature review: schools and school districts should consider how to make trauma-informed instruction systemic and well-resourced. While I’m pleased with the outcomes for my focus students in my classroom, those same outcomes have not translated to success in other classes for three of the five students. In order to truly support students to internalize the motivation and agency they are showing in my class, these instructional practices need to go beyond just myself. Every time my students—five out of five—told me that I was the teacher they most felt comfortable talking to, my first flushes of pride transformed into a painful wince—students should feel surrounded by adults who they can trust and talk to in schools. I don’t want to be a lone popular teacher, I want to be a part of a warm, empowering community.

Critically, trauma-informed instruction must be undergirded by comprehensive wrap-around services for students who are hurting: social workers, counselors, restorative justice, drug and alcohol support. Throughout my research, I was in regular contact with the school counselors and advisory teachers about the participants, but we all felt the need for stronger support systems to meet these students’ needs beyond the school walls.

**Final Thoughts**

At the close of this action research project, my personal recommendations and next steps are clear:

- Trauma-informed instructional strategies can have an impact on ELL students, and they should be implemented with fidelity, as part of the existing best practices of SIOP, CALLA, or GLAD ELL programs.
- At the school and district level, we should begin investigating how trauma-informed strategies can be systematically implemented—beyond the mostly material incentives (prizes, school currencies) of existing PBIS programs.
In my own school-wide leadership work, I have decided that I actually want to shift away from the strictly instructional work that I have been doing, in order to put more effort into school and classroom cultural work—along trauma-informed lines.

This research has influenced me to believe that our biggest barrier to student progress in our highly diverse district is not the quality of academic instruction. Our biggest barrier is how well our daily practices are meeting and holding students where they are at emotionally, so that we can accompany them on individualized paths toward healing, self-empowerment, and academic self-actualization.
References


Appendix A

The Modified ACE Survey

In order to explore the impacts of ACEs on my students, or how trauma-informed practices might interface with those impacts, I had to establish that my students had actually lived through adverse childhood experiences, while also respecting their legal right to privacy, respecting their dignity and right to name their own experiences, and avoiding any re-traumatization or triggering.

One tool I used was a modified version of the original ACE survey (for examples, ACEs Too High, 2016), in English and Spanish. I modified the survey to lower the stakes by focusing only on childhood experiences, and also avoiding any especially sensitive language, particularly around topics of abuse, because I didn’t feel appropriately trained, supported, or authorized to ask about such topics—even confidentially. I did make it clear to each participant that I would help them connect with our excellent school counselors for anything they wanted to talk more about, and I clarified my role as a mandatory reporter if they wanted to talk more to me.

I explained the purposes of the survey, then students were screened from my view, they could read or listen along, and they had a simple Yes/No tally sheet. I would read a statement twice, and they could ask clarifying questions, and then they would silently tally on the “Yes” or “No” side of the sheet. They then counted their yeses and gave me the score. The only actual information I received from students was their tally sheets with a final number on them. We closed with a discussion circle to re-explain the purpose of the survey, and discuss any other questions or feelings—students had no questions, but were interested in talking about “things we don’t get to talk about in school very much.”

Survey questions:

1. In your childhood, did adults often yell or insult you, or call you mean names? Were you ever scared you might be physically hurt?
2. In your childhood, did adults often push, grab, slap, or throw things?
3. In your childhood, did you often feel like no one in your family loved you or thought you were important or special? Or your family didn’t feel close to each other, or support each other?
4. In your childhood, did you often feel that you didn’t have enough to eat, had to wear dirty clothes, or didn’t have a safe and comfortable place to live?
5. In your childhood, were your parents ever separated or divorced? Have you lost a parent?
6. In your childhood, did you often worry about your parents’ safety?
7. In your childhood, did anyone in your house drink a lot of alcohol, or use street drugs?
8. In your childhood, was a family member depressed or mentally ill, or attempt suicide?
9. In your childhood, did a family member go to prison or detention?

Now add up your “Yes” answers: ___ This is your ACE Score