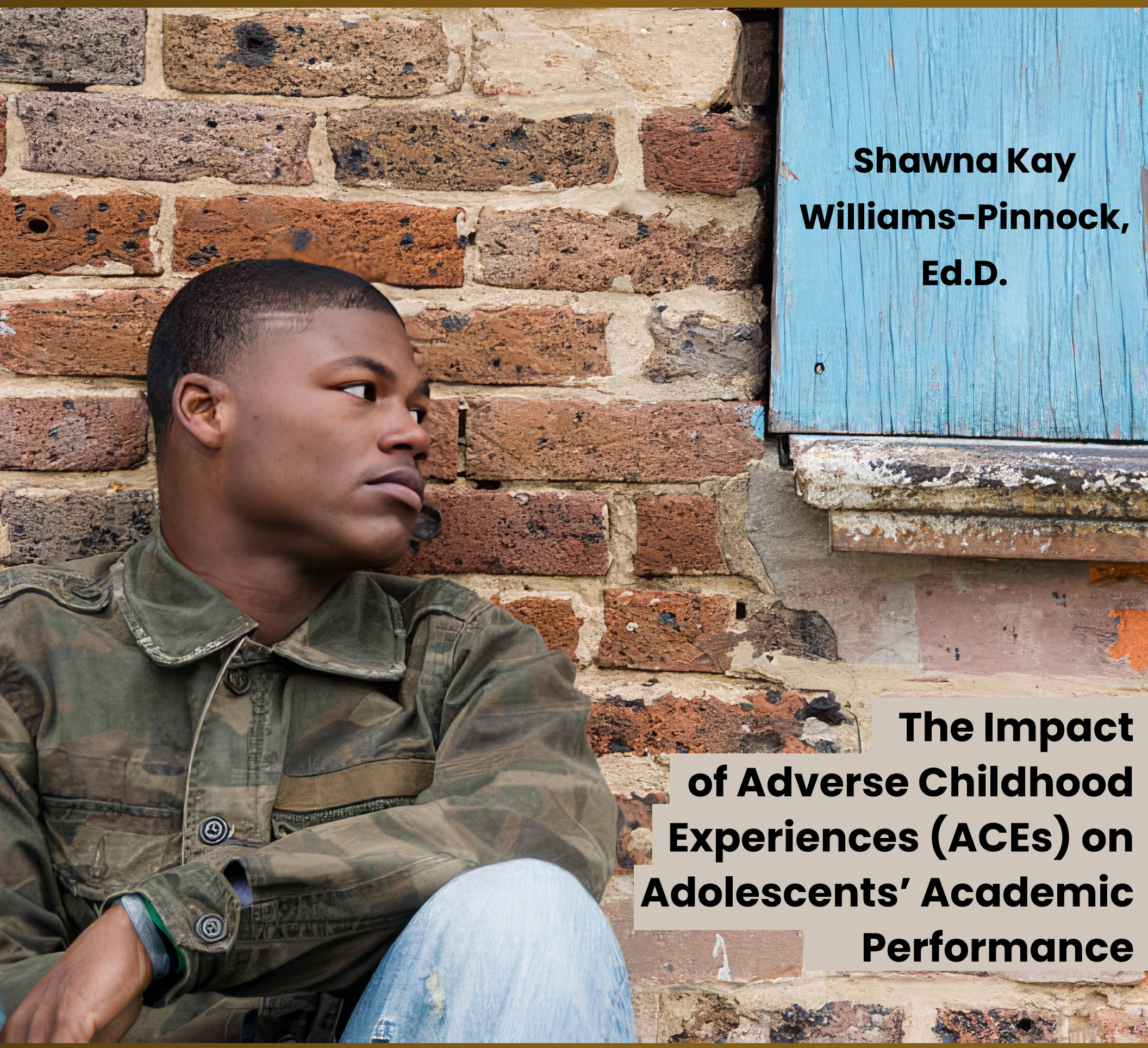
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The Impact of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) on Adolescents' Academic Performance

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Abstract

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are stressful events that occur before a person reaches 18 years old. The five most commonly reported types are abuse (physical, verbal, and sexual), violence exposure, divorce, parental incarceration, and economic hardship. These experiences disproportionately impact African American, Hispanic, and Latinx students compared to Whites. Childhood trauma often compromises adolescents' academic performance, leading to lower scores in subjects such as mathematics, English, history, science, and social studies.

Affected students may need to repeat a grade, and some may not finish high school. This is because trauma affects cognition. It leads to emotional distractions which make it difficult for adolescents to remain attentive, process information, and retain it. However, when traumatized students are resilient, adept at managing their emotions, academically engaged, and financially endowed, they may still excel in school.

Because of their prevalence and potential impact, ACEs have received increased attention in education. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), for example, promotes inclusive and trauma-sensitive instruction. Teachers are also encouraged to set clear classroom expectations, establish routines, and reframe their perception of student misbehavior. They are further advised to forge positive relationships with students, explicitly teach social-emotional skills, and exercise empathy.

Keywords: adverse childhood experiences, adversity, trauma, trauma-informed instruction, adolescents, academic achievement, engagement, attainment

The Current State of Education

The education system in the United States, like that in many other countries, is beset with numerous issues. Some of the most troubling are adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) that impact students' learning. Five of the most common examples are abuse (verbal, physical, and sexual), violence exposure, divorce, parental incarceration, and economic hardship (Giano et al., 2020; Murphy & Sacks, 2019). These adversities have affected approximately 34.8 million children in the United States (Koball et al., 2021). This means many adolescents entering the classroom have experienced one or multiple forms of trauma.
Not all teachers are trauma literate. Many "lack knowledge related to the impact of trauma and trauma-informed practices" (Rahimi et al., 2021, p.75).

Some do not know enough about the causes and signs of ACEs, and some have erroneous knowledge about the matter. To address this issue, relevant professional training should be provided (Eller & Hierck et al., 2021). With said provision, more teachers would be able to effectively collaborate with school counselors and social workers to create safe and supportive learning environments for trauma victims. Temkin et al. (2020) have also found that informed teachers are less likely to retraumatize students.

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which was passed in December 2015, has acknowledged the need to address trauma in all US schools. The Act recognizes that some students have learning challenges, either as a consequence of their disabilities, socio-economic background, or emotional trauma (Frankland, 2021). Thus, it urges educators to specially attend to vulnerable, marginalized, and traumatized pupils, so they may successfully navigate existing learning barriers and advance their education.

Laws in over 11 states also mandate trauma training for teachers, and more schools seem poised to follow suit (Temkin et al., 2020). ESSA requires licensed school personnel to be trained in identifying students with trauma and mental health risks (Frankland, 2021). Additionally, scholars, like Attwood et al. (2021), have urged teachers to collaborate with school counselors, psychologists, and social workers to ensure their students receive the requisite educational and clinical support to thrive in school.

Some schools have also been using the Pediatric ACEs and Related Life-events Screener (PEARLS) to screen students (Thakur et al., 2020). Eller and Hierck (2022) have also encouraged teachers to be observant and to take note of students' speech and behavior, so they can make appropriate referrals for help. Several schools have apportioned some of their Student Support and Academic Enrichment grants to provide support staff and mental health services to help traumatized students (Temkin et al., 2020). Still, to successfully address the impact of ACEs, it is crucial to enhance understanding of their academic effects. Stakeholders, such as school administrators, counselors, teachers, and parents, would benefit from the awareness this paper seeks to spread as the following research question is answered: How do adverse childhood experiences impact adolescents' academic performance?

Background of the Focus on Childhood Adversities

Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) attracted nationwide attention following Felitti et al.'s (1998) seminal study. The researchers surveyed over 13, 000 adults who underwent standard medical exams at a healthcare facility in the United States. They later discovered that many of them had experienced one or more types of the following adversities: physical, psychological, or sexual abuse, and violence exposure. Some grew up with parents who struggled with substance abuse and mental illness, including suicidality.

Persons who encountered four or more of the foregoing traumatic events were more vulnerable to alcoholism, depression, abuse, and suicide. They were more likely to smoke, engage in promiscuous activities, and contract various sexually transmitted diseases. They were prone to multiple health problems, as well: obesity, heart, liver, and lung diseases, and cancer. These correlations aroused concerns, especially since the aforementioned health conditions are among the leading causes of death in the United States (Felitti et al., 1998).

There has been a surge of research on the health effects of ACEs (Herzog & Schmahl, 2018; Novais et al., 2021; Webster, 2022). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has declared ACE a public health issue (Nealy-Oparah & Scruggs-Hussein, 2018). But ACEs do not only affect one's health. They have educational implications. Several researchers have confirmed this through quantitative and qualitative studies in the United States. This related literature review focuses on the academic effects of the five most commonly reported adversities. Instructional strategies for combatting ACEs are also provided, so educators can effectively support affected students.

Academic Impact of Adverse Childhood Experiences

The five most prevalent ACEs are abuse (verbal, physical, and sexual), exposure to violence, divorce, parental incarceration, and economic hardship (Giano et al., 2020; Murphy & Sacks, 2019). They have comparable academic effects on adolescents from diverse races, communities, and socio-economic backgrounds. Overall, traumatized adolescents may be in a perennial fight-or-flight mode. In other words, they may be unusually watchful of danger and other environmental threats. When danger is perceived and related signals are sent to the brain, cortisol (a stress hormone) is released. Learning, problem-solving, and creative thinking are then immediately impaired (Eller & Hierck, 2021). Nonetheless, ACEs may vary in effects, due to several moderating factors: personal resilience, strong emotion regulation skills, continuous intervention, home stability, education, and positive social networks.

Violence

Generally, researchers found that violence exposure, whether at home or in the surrounding community, adversely affected adolescents' academic performance. Ghanem (2021), for example, noted that 16.8% of the violence-exposed Hispanic and Black students in her study missed more than 11 days of school and had to repeat a grade. School officials often contacted their parents or caregivers to discuss their misconduct, as well. O'Brien et al. (2021) had similar findings. Adolescents from high-crime neighborhoods scored lower on standardized mathematics and English language arts tests. The higher the crime levels in the communities, the lower the students' test scores, especially for African American adolescents (King & Mrug, 2018). However, adolescents with high academic engagement and strong emotion regulation skills seemed less affected by violence exposure. Usually, those who were invested in learning forged positive social networks. This connectedness seemed to

keep them focused while reducing their encounters with violent behaviors (Elsaesser et al. (2020). Adolescents who had strong emotion regulation skills, as per parent reports, had better grades on internal assessments in math, science, and English. They also scored higher on standardized Alabama Reading and Math Tests (King & Mrug, 2018).

Abuse

Abuse, like violence, can be academically debilitating for adolescents. According to Cage et al. (2018), only 58% of self-reported abuse victims completed high school. This was 15% lower than the national average for high-school completion at the time. In addition, all types of abuse unfavorably affected the adolescents studied. For instance, those who were emotionally neglected were just as likely to drop out of school as those who were physically or sexually abused. Correspondingly, Morrow et al. (2018) found that abused adolescents had lower reading scores at age 16 and were more likely to become high-school dropouts. However, it is important to note that abuse may not always hinder adolescents' academic success. Nagin et al. (2019) realized this unexpected contrast following a series of statistical analyses. Over 400 Latino and African American teens who reported physical and sexual abuse had higher grades than their non-abused peers. For instance, the mean score for those who said they were abused was 2.88 compared to 2.35 for those who reported no abuse. The researchers theorized that those who were abused had high resilience levels, or they might have benefited from supportive interventions at school or in their communities. Education might have also played a protective role, mitigating the effects of the abuse.



Divorce

Although parental divorce is a common experience for many adolescents, it has differential, academic effects. It can decrease the likelihood of some adolescents completing high school, attending college, and completing college. Further, adolescents whose parents are separated may have lower educational attainment than those whose parents remain married (Brand et al., 2019; Suleiman et al., 2019). Despite these findings, Brand and colleagues still realized that some white and nonwhite adolescents are differently affected. Their educational gains may not be unfavorably affected after parental divorce. In fact, said gains may remain unchanged.

Parental Incarceration

Like divorce, parental imprisonment may not always hamper adolescents' academic progress. McCauley (2020) observed that adolescents with incarcerated parents were less likely to score B's and better in English and mathematics. They had lower school attachment and involvement when compared to students whose parents had not been incarcerated. They were more likely to skip school, fight, and be suspended or expelled. Their academic performance and school completion rate were usually low, as a result. On the other hand, Norris and Weaver (2021) recognized that parental incarceration did not affect some adolescents' GPAs in any statistically significant way. Adolescents' absenteeism and grade repetition did not increase either. These findings are surprising since trauma is usually linked to impaired cognition and poor learning outcomes. However, the researchers have speculated that sometimes when a parent is away serving time, adolescents may be relocated to a more stable and supportive environment. This, in turn, may lead to improved focus and academic gains.

Economic Hardship

Economic hardship can limit adolescents' academic success. Gordon and Steele (2020), for instance, realized that most adolescents who resided in impoverished homes experienced poor academic outcomes. Suleiman et al. (2019) had the same finding. They also noted that financial difficulties were associated with higher rates of school-related problems among adolescents: absenteeism, low academic engagement, misconduct, grade repetition, and more frequent parent-teacher communication about student behavior issues. All have since reasoned that the financial challenges in the home might have led to parental distress and conflict. Therefore, the adolescents sampled in the study might not have received the resources, nurturing, and management needed for academic success.

Trauma-Informed Strategies to Support ACE-Affected Students

Combatting adolescents' trauma is a gargantuan task, but educators might find success with a few strategies. Dombo and Sabatino (2019) recommend that teachers increase students' sense of safety, build positive connections, and foster social-emotional competence. By maintaining a calm demeanor and avoiding punitive disciplinary practices, teachers can create a haven for ACE-affected students. This would be a welcomed change from the abuse or aggression they might be experiencing at home. Importantly, teachers should avoid being punitive as any such action may trigger some students' trauma. Moreover, classes should have clear expectations, structured routines, and opportunities for student autonomy and agency. Uncertainty and unpredictability can cause anxiety among already vigilant students, and teacher dominance may be reminiscent of the abusive power imbalance ACE-impacted students might have encountered (Pearce et al., 2019).

Positive connections can be forged through friendly teacher-student interactions. For example, at the start of the school year, teachers may spend time getting to know students socially and emotionally. As the year progresses, instead of reacting with anger to perceived misbehavior, teachers can calmly respond and investigate students' needs. This tempered approach requires positive reframing: teachers would need to refrain from viewing disruptive students as "troublesome," "bad" or "provocative." As an alternative, they would consider the possible root of the students' behavior–trauma and the fight to survive (Dombo & Sabatino, 2019).

For sustained self-management and self-direction, social-emotional learning has to be emphasized (Dombo & Sabatino, 2019). Durlak et al. (2011) in their seminal meta-analysis found that students who were explicitly taught social-emotional regulation skills improved academically. MacDonnell et al. (2021) had similar results when the MOSAIC program (Mastering Our Skills and Inspiring Character) which was used to facilitate over 255 youths in New Jersey. Students improved in math, reading, writing, science, and social studies. This is not surprising as training in social-emotional learning is known to help students recognize and regulate their emotions, build resilience, and improve their sense of self-worth and social connection. These would have then buffered the effects of ACEs (2021). In going forward, teachers should ensure targeted social-emotional skills are explicitly and systematically taught, modeled, practiced, and reinforced. Students will be more likely to use said skills to independently manage their dysregulations (Bierman & Sanders, 2020).

Learning Theory Association

Given the complex nature of ACEs (Roques et al., 2020), a single theory cannot be used to adequately explain its related academic effects. The three most pertinent schools of thought have been selected and discussed, as a result. Behaviorists, such as Ivan Pavlov, have long posited that behaviors become associated with specific stimuli (anything that elicits a response) or events based on their frequency.

For instance, if a neutral stimulus (like the sound of a bell) is repeatedly paired with a naturally occurring stimulus (like food), over time, the neutral stimulus will become associated with the natural stimulus. This will result in a conditioned response, such as salivating (Schunk, 2020). Put differently, once people observe that two things are consistently presented together (food and the sound of a bell), they will begin to anticipate this pairing. They may start salivating at just the sound of the bell because of their expectation of food, just as the animal in Pavlov's classical conditioning study did.

This theorization can also explain how ACEs may affect adolescents academically. If adolescents usually experience physical or verbal abuse at home immediately after someone starts shouting or becomes aggressive, they might cower in fear when a teacher or peer becomes slightly hostile, thinking that similar levels of abuse will follow.

Adolescents will also be in a fight-or-flight mode, if a teacher is not generally warm, or if they come to associate school with stress, tension, threat, or danger (because of repeated encounters of said nature). This increased anxiety can prevent adolescents from focusing, paying attention, and succeeding in school. Instead, they would be hypervigilant, worrying about potential harm, and seeking a way to escape (Eller & Hierck, 2021). Therefore, their academic focus would be constantly interrupted. Hence, trauma-sensitive support, like what Dombo and Sabatino (2019) have recommended above, is important in creating a positive, anxiety-reducing classroom ambiance.

The information processing theory can also be used to explain how ACEs may compromise adolescents' academic performance. Central to this theory is the idea that learning and memory are influenced by several factors, including attention, perception, encoding, storage, and retrieval. Adversities can interfere with these cognitive processes. They can lead to heightened physiological arousal, which can make it difficult to concentrate, process information, and retain same for future application. Remember, too, that students who are plagued by adversities may have elevated cortisol. This stress hormone often impairs critical thinking, problem-solving, and memory (Eller & Hierck, 2021). Therefore, keeping anxiety levels low is important in optimizing focus and learning.

Bandura's social cognitive theory offers added insights into how ACEs can impact adolescents' academic performance. This theory highlights the importance of cognitive factors such as beliefs, expectations, and self-perceptions in shaping behaviors. In particular, Bandura emphasizes the concept of self-efficacy. This is a person's belief in their ability to succeed at a particular task or behavior (Schunk, 2020). Research suggests that people who have high self-efficacy are more likely to take on challenging tasks, persist when obstacles prevail, and achieve their goals.

Unfortunately, adolescents who have been traumatized tend to have low levels of self-efficacy, due to the stress of their experiences (Jian et al., 2022). They may develop negative beliefs about themselves and their abilities. This negative sense of self can lead to feelings of helplessness and a lack of motivation to pursue academic goals. As a result, adolescents may struggle with academic tasks and have lower academic performance compared to their peers. Conversely, those with high self-efficacy levels are more adaptive and less likely to drop out of school (Supervia et al., 2022).

Gaps in Research

Most studies on ACEs focused on their physical and mental effects. In their seminal study, Felitti et al. (1998) only examined the relationship between ACEs and adult deaths. Other researchers followed with a similar health-centric focus (Herzog & Schmahl, 2018; Novais et al., 2021; Webster, 2022). Only a few studies have emphasized the academic impact of ACEs (Morrow & Villodas, 2018; Myat Zaw et al., 2022). Therefore, there is a need for further research to understand the effect of common traumatic experiences on students' learning and performance in school (Stewart-Tufescu et al., 2022).

Additionally, published investigations have concentrated on adults who have experienced trauma (Daines et al., 2021; Hilgen Bryan, 2019). Adolescents have been underrepresented in the literature (Hall et al., 2021). Consequently, there is an urgent need for multidisciplinary, multi-participant, and multi-focused studies. These would advance current scholarship on ACEs and improve teachers' knowledge and classroom practices.

Methodologically, almost all the ACE-related studies conducted were purely quantitative. However, ACE is a complex phenomenon that cannot be comprehensively understood or explained with a single research design (Roques et al., 2020). Hence, some of the researchers mentioned in the related literature had to "theorize" or make assumptions about their numeric findings (Nagin et al., 2019; Norris & Weaver, 2021).

Given this, there is a need for more mixed methods studies to help in understanding the differential academic effects of ACEs among adolescents from diverse ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds. A sequential explanatory design, for example, would facilitate follow-up open-ended interviews with students, teachers, and parents. These sessions might yield rich, qualitative details to explain the "why" behind the numeric data and to contextualize the findings (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

Conclusion

It appears that childhood adversity, regardless of the form, is a serious issue that transcends race and class. Various types continue to affect adolescents' academic performance: abuse, violence exposure, divorce, parental incarceration, and economic hardship (Cage, 2018; Norris & Weaver, 2022; Scott, 2020). Nonetheless, high academic engagement, strong self-regulation skills, resilience, and positive social connections can mitigate the effects of these kinds of trauma (Elsaesser et al., 2020; King & Mrug, 2018; Nagin et al., 2019). In fact, if adolescents are positively engaged and connected, they may remain academically focused and persistent, amidst their myriad emotional challenges.

Still, ongoing, trauma-sensitive instruction and interventions should be provided. Through these, trauma-affected adolescents can access the requisite support. Teachers can start by creating structured, safe, and warm classrooms where positive teacher-student and student-student relationships can flourish. They should also endeavor to make students feel valued, respected, and supported. However, in order for all these improvements to be made, more teachers will need training in trauma care. They may also need to adjust their attitude and mindset, and make greater efforts to respond to students in caring, empathetic, and supportive ways (Eller & Hierck, 2021). This can be challenging, but it is feasible. After all, educators should be willing to follow God's lead and extend the same level of compassion He has generously offered to His people. Trauma-affected students should also rest assured that God will support them through their pain and heal them if they open their hearts, invite His presence, and supplicate.



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