TRAUMA-INFORMED ADULT EDUCATION: AN INTERPRETATIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT
The traumatized learner has a more difficult school experience. In an educational setting, academic performance, classroom behavior and social relationships are negatively affected by trauma. The trauma survivor is therefore likely to develop a negative or ambiguous learner identity. Trauma-informed practices in adult education are a relatively new way to create safe learning spaces where traumatized learners can re-shape their learner identity. The purpose of this Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis is to explore how the participants' childhood school experiences and their learner identities inform their experience of an adult educational program that is based on trauma-informed practices. The central thesis is that the educational history of the traumatized learner as well as his or her learner identity are important because they contain clues as to how to help this individual learner best to thrive in the classroom. The results of this study are twofold: First, on an individual basis, each participant found the aspect of the program most beneficial which helped him or her make a positive experience in the area where they had been wounded most in their educational history. Second, four superordinate themes that apply to all participants were identified: no parental support and social struggles at school, an alternative learning identity, and the importance of a safe community in trauma-informed practice. The article concludes by making recommendations for implementing trauma-informed practices in adult education.
Keywords: Trauma-informed practice, developmental trauma, learner identity, adult education

INTRODUCTION
'Difficult Students' was a mandatory class in my teacher training in the late nineties. My fellow students and I were taught a variety of strategies to manage student behavior outside of our expectations. I don't remember devoting much thought throughout my early years at university to the question of *why* students would 'misbehave'. In a similar vein, we nowadays have a plethora of new diagnostic labels available to describe students' behavioral, emotional or social disorders. While these labels may be helpful to raise awareness of the need for special attention towards these learners, they nevertheless fail to explore the cause of the disorders. This has been a widely voiced concern about the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (see for example Frances, 2013). Much research, especially in the field of neuroscience (Cozolino, 2013; Perry, 2009; Van der Kolk, 2014), has helped to a much greater degree answer the question why some students are unable to live up to their teachers' expectations, both intellectually as well as socially. One of the factors that emerged is developmental trauma (Van der Kolk, 2014).

This article looks at developmental trauma in an educational context. Acknowledging the impact of trauma on learning is of great importance if we want to create more socially just education systems and not disadvantage traumatized learners. The article explores the childhood school experience of trauma survivors and their learner identities in order to analyze how these affect their experience of a trauma-informed adult educational program. According to a trauma-informed approach, an educator needs to have a sense of 'something happened to the learner that makes him or her vulnerable in my classroom'. The central thesis of this study is therefore that the educational history of the traumatized learner as well as his or her learner identity contain important clues as to how to help this individual learner best thrive in the classroom. The better the trauma-informed educator can identify the key needs of each learner, the better he or she will be able to empower the learner. The first part of the article introduces key research findings in the areas of developmental trauma, trauma-informed practice and learner identity. The next part presents the research process of the study. The final part analyzes the data and shows how past school experiences affect learner identity and the experience of an adult education program. The conclusion offers recommendations of how the trauma-informed classroom can mitigate some of the negative effects of trauma and potentially heal some of the wounds inflicted by former negative school experiences. The study thus contributes in an important way to the small but emerging field of trauma-informed educational research by extending it into the novel area of adult education and by identifying strategies to enhance the trauma-informed adult classroom. The next section of the article looks at recent research on developmental trauma.

Developmental Trauma
The seminal Adverse Childhood Experience study (Felitti et al., 1998) has shed new light on childhood trauma's prevalence and its effects on human well-being. Developmental trauma, defined broadly to include abuse, neglect, attachment disruption and toxic stress (Rahim, 2014; Scaer, 2005; Walkley & Cox, 2013), has emerged

as a factor to explain why some so-called difficult students remain undiagnosed or mis-diagnosed because they are actually traumatized. The negative effects of complex trauma on the developing brain are now well documented (see i.e. Cozolino, 2013; Van der Kolk, 2014). Traumatized children suffer from a complex web of overlapping developmental issues, including 'hyperactivated stress response systems, cognitive biases and deficits, and dysfunctional attachment patterns' (Ellenbogen, Klein & Wekerle, 2014, p.1366). In an educational setting, academic performance, classroom behavior and social relationships are negatively affected (Cole et al., 2005). A traumatized learner's brain is often in 'fight, flight or freeze' mode, focused on immediate survival rather than on learning and cooperation. He or she will observe the teacher and fellow students hyper-vigilantly for any sign of perceived danger (Cozolino, 2013). In light of this, Greene (2014) concludes that these learners are unable rather than unwilling to fulfill the teacher's expectations, and that they would do well if they could. Difficult behavior can therefore be interpreted as the symptom of a formerly useful, but now misguided survival strategy (Cozolino, 2013). The next section of the article looks at how trauma-informed practice (TIP) can be used with traumatized learners.

Trauma-Informed Practice
In light of the research on developmental and complex trauma, the need for service providers to become knowledgeable about trauma has become evident. This has led to the development of the trauma-informed practice approach (also known as trauma-informed care), which has been expanded over the last decade from a social work context into other systems such as juvenile justice, health care and education (Wilson, Pence & Conradi, 2013).

> A trauma-informed perspective recognizes that people who have been chronically abused or neglected may have many possible triggers. These triggers often include situations where clients experience a lack of respect and safety and an absence of control and choice – experiences that often mimic and resonate with past traumatic experiences (Haskell, 2012, pp.9-10).

There are various definitions of what 'trauma-informed' means in an educational context and different frameworks of what constitutes TIP in schools (see i.e. Cole et al, 2005; Ko et al., 2008; Wolpow, Johnson, Hertel & Kincaid, 2011). All have the ultimate goal to create a physically and psychologically safe learning community that allows trauma victims to let down their guard and enables them to focus on learning. Carello and Butler (2015) have developed a framework for the classroom that includes awareness of the following core elements: a) Some students in the classroom may be traumatized, b) some content and assignments may have potential to re-traumatize, c) instructor and student behavior are potentially re-traumatizing, d) classroom characteristics may be unhelpful for traumatized learners, e) self-care for both teacher and students is important. TIP basically asks the question 'what happened to you?' instead of 'what is wrong with you?' (BC Provincial Mental Health and Substance Use Planning Council, 2013, p. 24). The next section of the article looks at how trauma impacts learner identity.

Learner Identity
The negative impact of trauma on learning has only relatively recently been acknowledged. Adult learners who have survived childhood trauma have generally not profited from trauma-informed educators. Their learning history may therefore have resembled Freire's (1970/2000) experience that 'so often do [the oppressed] hear that they are good for nothing, know nothing and are incapable of learning anything—that they are sick, lazy and unproductive—that in the end they become convinced of their own unfitness' (p.63). This will in many cases have impacted and shaped how they see themselves as learners, hence their *learner identity*. Rossiter (1999) conceptualized identity through a narrative lens: 'The self […] really is constituted of the narratives of experience—the stories we tell about ourselves in order to explain ourselves to ourselves' (p. 62). This is in line with Wojecki's (2007) observation that

> concerning the learner; identity is integral. Working from a narrative perspective, the learner affected through wounding learning practices continues to narrate these previous painful experiences from formal schooling, thus, constructing one's identity in relation to participation in learning later in life….The 'wounds', or the internalized experiences of learning, become storied threads which work towards weaving how the individual sees oneself. Often, these stories become the binding themes for individuals, limiting self- actualization (p. 633).

Similarly, Perry (2006) notes that traumatized adult learners may find it difficult to maintain self-esteem in a new learning environment, may feel overwhelmed, inept or helpless, and become angry. They may have a negative learner identity, where 'the classroom triggers memories of failure and shame that might have once driven them from school' (Cozolino & Sprokay, 2006).

TIP in an educational setting can therefore serve as a strategy to create greater equity and reduce inequalities in the classroom by providing extra support for the needs of traumatized learners (Smith, 2012). In a capabilities framework (Nussbaum, 2003), trauma is a factor that diminishes the capability of learners to adequately access

and profit from education. Positive new learning experiences, facilitated by a caring and safe educator, can help the learner reshape his or her learning identity and re-create this capability. The next section of the article looks at TIP principles in an adult education context.

Trauma-Informed Classrooms For Traumatized Adult Learners
Trauma-informed principles are relatively new in educational settings. Their efficiency in mental health and social work with adults (Muskett, 2014), and in education with youth (Morgan, Pendergast, Brown & Heck, 2015) as well as with children, is well documented (Cole et al., 2005; Wolpow et al., 2011). However, no research could be found that evaluates trauma-informed practices in adult education. This study explores such a setting, a life-skills program based on trauma-informed practices offered by an non-profit organization (NPO). (In order to protect the identity and sensitive information of the participants, the name of the NPO is deliberately withheld. Also, the name of the life-skills program has been changed in the participants' quotes below.) The program is for marginalized adults in a neighborhood characterized by a high prevalence of poverty, homelessness, mental health issues and substance abuse in a large Canadian city. It takes place one evening a week for two hours. It is free of charge and on a drop-in basis. The content is geared towards life-skills such as conflict resolution or non-violent communication and social justice issues relevant for the participants (i.e. housing rights). It is enhanced by community activities for participants such as cooking meals together or birthday celebrations. It is a small-scale program with ten to fifteen participants per evening.

METHOD
This study uses the qualitative method of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA, Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009), which is a formidable tool for giving voice (Larkin, Watts & Clifton, 2006) to people at the margins of society, voices that often go unheard. IPA has an idiographic and phenomenological focus (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014), meaning that the interest is on the unique subjective lived experience of each participant, and how the participant makes sense of it (Eatough & Smith, 2006). The relatively small sample size in IPA studies allows for depth in the analysis and to give appropriate weight to the 'gems…the relatively rare utterance that is especially resonant and offers potent analytic leverage for the study' (Smith, 2011, p.6). IPA is based on a constructionist epistemology, acknowledging that the process of meaning making takes place in a double hermeneutic, where the researcher interprets the participants' interpretation of their experience, thus co-creating meaning (Smith & Osborn, 2003). In that sense it is interpretative and implies that there is not one objective truth to be found but that individuals create meaning within their social relationships (Willig, 2001).

Researcher
As a researcher, I am also the Director of the NPO that offers the life-skills program the participants attend. I oversee the program and have known the participants for many years. This study therefore takes place in a practitioner-research context. Due to my closeness to the participants, it has been important to keep a reflexivity journal as proposed by Landridge (2007), especially in regards to power dynamics, my own position, and interests, as Hertz (1997) urges the researcher to do. This journal helped me in my awareness of research participants possibly commenting on the life skill program in a positive fashion to please me. However, their openness and critical comments toward the program during the interviews relativized this concern.

Sampling
IPA requires purposive sampling (recruiting participants who can offer a meaningful insider perspective relevant to the research topic) and a relatively small number of participants in order to generate rich, personal and detailed data. Six participants is a standard sample size for IPA studies (Smith et al., 2009) and allows for giving voice to the individual participants within the constraints of academic writing.

Participants
The participants from the life-skills program that self-identify as abuse survivors (3 years or more of either physical or sexual abuse) and whom I have personally known for at least two years, were approached and invited to participate in the study. 6 volunteers were chosen for the study (see table 1). It later turned out that all participants had grown up with at least one parent who was an alcoholic, which was not a prior inclusion criterion.

Table 1 – Participant Demographics

Name (Pseudonym)	Age	Ethnicity	Marital status	Education	Employment	Addiction background	Abuse sexual / physical
Joe	54	Caucasian	single	Grade 6	Welfare	yes	both
Nicole	31	Caucasian	Married with children	Bachelor	Employed	no	both
Kurt	28	Caucasian	single	Grade 11	Disability	yes	physical
Matt	51	Mixed race	single	High School	Disability	yes	physical
Lynn	62	Mixed race	divorced	High School	Welfare	yes	sexual
Moe	42	Caucasian	single	Grade 11	Disability	no	physical

Ethical Considerations

In the afterword to her seminal work *Trauma and Recovery,* Herman (1997) points out that trauma survivors are often motivated to participate in research in order to help others, yet cautions that researchers need to be aware of the power dynamics when doing research with trauma survivors and advocates for a personal relationship with participants. In light of these recommendations, I decided to only interview participants that I have known for more than two years and with whom I have built a strong personal relationship. Reviewing the literature on trauma research, Legersky and Bunnell (2010) find that trauma survivors participating in research studies only face a minimal risk of re-traumatization and that the benefits (i.e. sense of helping others through their experiences) generally outweigh the risk. This is also reflected in Downes, Kelly and Westmarland's (2014) *positive empowerment* approach which sees victims as 'active agents in making decisions about whether and how to take part' (p. 6) in the research. According to trauma-informed practice principles (BC Provincial Mental Health and Substance Use Planning Council, 2013), I did not ask any direct questions about the participants' abuse history, but let the participants volunteer as much information about the abuse as they wished. It was also important to meet the participants with cultural humility (Yeager & Bauer-Wu, 2013) and not to presume that I could entirely understand their experience or ask the right questions to do their experience justice. As described in more detail in the next section, no ethical issues seemed to arise during the interviewing process.

Data Collection

After ethical approval was obtained from Lancaster University and written consent was given by the participants, I conducted semi-structured interviews with the 6 participants at the life skills training facility. They were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Each interview took between 60 and 90 minutes. Open-ended questions were asked focusing on a) the participants' school experience in retrospect, b) how they presently see themselves as learners and c) how they experience life-skills education in the trauma-informed classroom. While the atmosphere at the interviews was quite relaxed, the gravity of the experiences shared was at times palpable. It was hard for me to hear some of the horrible things that had happened to the participants. However, sharing the stories did not seem to affect the participants negatively. Some participants had difficulties focusing on the questions and would deviate repeatedly from the topic at hand. All participants were willing to share quite vulnerably but also felt free to be critical about certain aspects of the trauma-informed program. One participant (Lynn) told me that she would not have taken part in such a study if she did not know me personally.

Data Analysis

I analyzed the interview transcripts according to IPA standards (Smith et. al, 2009). I read and re-read the transcripts to immerse myself in the participants' experience and to get a general sense of their journey, annotating them with first observations and impressions. I then coded each transcript in detail and looked for subordinate themes within each transcript, which I then clustered into superordinate themes. I repeated this process for each interview and then looked for the seemingly most prominent superordinate themes across all cases. My personal observations in the trauma-informed classroom and my past informal conversations with the participants served as a helpful guide through this process. I also presented the findings in anonymised form to some key staff of the program for feedback.

During the analysis, it became clear that there were some obvious inconsistencies and contradictions in the participants' accounts. However, I was less concerned with verifying the truth of each account as with exploring how the participants' account shaped their present learner identity and their experience of a trauma-informed classroom. According to Power (2004) 'an interpretive analysis offers qualitative researchers a satisfying, if never certain or unambiguous, way of understanding apparently contradictory remarks' (p. 859).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION
Themes in Individual Cases
While analyzing the data, I found that there was one prominent recurring theme of struggle in each participant's account of his or her educational history. It is precisely this theme of struggle that each participant brought into the trauma-informed classroom. Except for Moe, all participants reported that what they found most helpful in the trauma-informed setting was that they could make positive experiences in the area where they had been wounded most. This reflects a key tenant of Hendrix's (1996) imago relationship therapy, namely that 'since the wounding occurred in relationship…the healing [can] occur only in a context which reactivate[s] the wounds' (p. 5). This section will identify the key need of each participant based on his or her personal struggle.

Joe – lack of love versus love
Joe, who grew up with an alcoholic single dad, in the foster system and in juvenile correctional centers for most of his life, mentioned five times during the interview that he was not brought up right and three times that he did not experience any love as a child, from his parents or in school. **'If you are not raised with love, you turn out broken-hearted.'** Joe is very distrustful of people and believes that everybody is out to get him. This paranoia could be due to insecure attachment as a child (Pickering, Simpson & Bentall, 2008). His strategy of causing trouble at school in order to be sent to a more favorable place can be seen as hidden resilience (Ungar, 2008). In contrast, Joe especially appreciated the staff at the life skills program.

> Curt and Nina [JustWorld staff], I just love watching them raise their kids…I guess I just never had that. That's why I gravitate to that so much I guess….Just watching this, I fell in love with it, it just broke my heart. It's weird how that works. I'm a hardcore looking guy with tattoos all over my body, I just see that and I just melt. It's weird.

For Joe, it is therefore mainly the personal relationship with the staff that draws him to the program, where he sees love in action. A key need for Joe to be met in the trauma-informed classroom is therefore *loving relationships*.

Nicole –criticism versus affirmation
Nicole grew up with a verbally, physically and sexually abusive alcoholic stepfather and felt constantly afraid of doing something wrong and getting in trouble for it. She was a good student and the only participant who enjoyed the academic side of her school experience as a child, which was a reprieve from home:

> Home life felt more like oppressive, or like negative…being criticized, and so in some ways at school – and that is probably why I enjoyed it so much – I was affirmed….At home any kind of mistake or shortcoming was seen as a weakness and a devaluing of my personhood and of who I was and my worth. I think I can easily equate my achievement with my worth, and so that's why it feels so risky to then try to attempt something that I will not with most certainty be a high achiever at, and so being mediocre then means that I am essentially mediocre.

Feeling anxious about failure, and the possibility of criticism and rejection, what she most appreciates about the life skills program is:

> Because there is a number of people coming from more difficult backgrounds or less academic backgrounds, I think that definitely helps to decrease any kind of anxiety or pressure to know more, be smarter than you actually are. So that's really freeing to actually engage with what's being learned.

Nicole mainly enjoys that the trauma-informed classroom is not a competitive environment but has much more of a cooperative and affirming feel to it. An important need for Nicole in the trauma-informed classroom for Nicole is *affirmation*.

Kurt – being an outsider versus being accepted
Kurt 'hated school' because he was relentlessly bullied by other students:

> At home I knew what kind of abuse to expect whereas at school it could have been anything….There was always this anxiety and fear around my classmates and you know, I had no friends.

He reported that what he really liked about the life skills program was:

> I feel very accepted. Because you know, that is kind of the point of JustWorld, is to accept everybody. If I was not accepted, I would not be here. And it makes it *that* much easier to learn. You can focus.

What Kurt reflects in his account is the importance of belonging and acceptance for the traumatized learner in an educational setting in order to be able to relax and focus. The greatest need for Kurt in the trauma-informed classroom is therefore *acceptance*.

Matt – instable school history versus staff turnover

Matt grew up with alcoholic parents and moved around a lot during his school years. He said that school was 'a pain in the ass [because] I got bullied. And moving from school to school….It was just like as soon as you got into a friendship with somebody, you're gone, you're moving. It was constant.' This theme of not being able to connect with fellow students or teachers on a deeper level was the one thing he struggled most with in our trauma-informed program:

> To see so many people leave and go on that were actually part of [the staff] has been tough. You get attached to them as friends and then they go away and kind of disappear….Yeah, there are so many of them, they are gone, the constant turnover.

Matt's quote illuminates that in order to have a safe learning space, continuity in relationships is of great importance. High staff turnover is therefore definitely problematic for a trauma-informed educational program. Matt would probably identify *stable relationships with staff* as an important need of his in the trauma-informed classroom.

Lynn – vulnerable versus protected

Lynn, who was severely abused in a Canadian residential school (for an exploration of trauma in residential schools, see Elias et al., 2012), touches on the sense of being vulnerable and helpless throughout her school experience. She recalls a conversation with a doctor about her sexual abuse: 'You don't know what's going on behind those doors. Once those gates close, all hell breaks loose….We were like lambs going to the slaughterhouse, that's how I felt.' She then contrasts this later in the interview with the trauma-informed program: 'JustWorld [staff are] like shepherds and they are watching over their lost sheep.' This contrast between being a vulnerable lamb that is slaughtered and later the staff that watch over the sheep shows a deep appreciation for how the staff care for their students and how Lynn feels safe. Having a *safe space* is the key need for Lynn.

Moe – distrust

Moe's account shows a deep distrust for authority in general and for teachers in particular. He was put into special education classes throughout his school career and always felt like having been put in the wrong program. He recounted one particularly emotional experience:

> [The teacher] kept on saying I was cheating. Seriously, I tried to kill her. I jumped on the table and went over and started choking her. That was how pissed-off I was. Because she said I was cheating, because 'there is no way some retard from special ed can get these marks'. That's when I just lost it.

When asked about his experiences in the trauma-informed classroom, Moe didn't seem to have been able to entirely shake his distrust towards the staff:

> M: There is some stuff I don't agree with, I just don't bring it up.
> I: You think it would not be safe to share your opinions?
> M: Well, yeah.
> I: So you feel like during discussions, not everybody is always free to say what they think?
> M: I don't know. I just think instead of making it a bigger conflict, I prefer to keep quiet about it.

Moe had been coming to the program for 6 years. His case shows that TIP is not a panacea for the traumatized learner and that some of the needs cannot be met easily even over a long period of time. We can identify *trusting relationships* as Moe's key need in the trauma-informed classroom.

What all the six cases show is that the past school experience has a profound influence on how the learner approaches the adult education classroom. The past hurtful experiences are projected on the present learning situation, which is in line with Perry's (2006) and Cozolino and Sprokay's (2006) findings. The wounding that was inflicted in the early years of school would need to be healed through positive experiences in the same area. In their differences, the six cases highlight that each learner brings his or her individual struggles to the classroom, and therefore different aspects of the program are most meaningful to them. The following elements can be teased out from these participants as crucial for trauma-informed adult education: loving relationships (Joe), affirming teachers (Nicole), an accepting learning community (Kurt), a safe learning space (Lynn), stable relationships with staff (Matt), and building trust (Moe). This shows the importance of approaching the traumatized learners with the mindset of 'what happened to you?' and to see learners as individuals with their individual story and individual needs. Finding out about the learners' individual needs is crucial.

Themes Across Cases

During the data analysis, I identified four superordinate themes that were present in at least five of the six cases: no parental support, social struggle at school, an alternative learner identity, and the trauma-informed classroom as a safe community.

No parental support

All participants reported that they did not receive adequate support at school from their parents.

> 'They didn't give a shit. They didn't care. They didn't care at all. Half the time they didn't even know whether I was going to school or not.' (Kurt)

Schwerdtfeger Gallus, Shreffler, Merten and Cox (2014) note that 'the perceived presence of parental support and care may be critical to youth adjustment following a range of interpersonal traumatic experiences' (p.995). Lee and Bowen (2006) found that parental school involvement and parental educational expectations have a significant influence on their children's educational achievement. The parental abuse resulted not only in developmental trauma for the participants of this study but also in a disturbed parent-child relationship with a direct influence on perceived parental support and parental educational expectations. The abuse had therefore a double negative impact: The learner would struggle both directly from the trauma and indirectly from a lack of parental support in their education. The learners will therefore carry this sense of lacking support into the adult classroom and will appreciate the educator's supportive relationship.

Social struggles

Another theme that was present in all accounts was that of social struggle at school. All four male participants reported having been bullied in primary school and having been involved in fights in high school. 'So that was basically my entire high school, was a series of me fighting and getting in trouble and skipping school' (Kurt). This is in line with Shields and Cicchetti (2001) finding that maltreatment (physical and sexual abuse) makes children more vulnerable to becoming victims of bullying. Both women struggled with social acceptance. Nicole recalls: 'I was socially awkward….I was so shy, it was hard to make friends and I was very dependent on other kids just saying 'hey, join us', you know.' This is confirmed in research (Ferguson, McLeod & Horwood, 2013; Sperry & Widom, 2013) that shows a link between child abuse and low self-esteem.

All participants except for Nicole had predominantly strained relationships with their teachers. Schwerdtfeger Gallus et al. (2015) observe that 'perceptions of support and safety within the school environment, frequently referred to as school connectedness, have been found to be positively related to self-esteem, academic achievement, and motivation' (p.995). It is clear that most participants did not have a good sense of school connectedness but on the contrary, their school experience was harmful for their development. Except for Nicole, they all seem to have become double victims of domestic violence and, in Francis and Mills' (2012) words, 'schools as damaging organizations'. They will carry this sense of low self-esteem and victimization into the adult classroom and will therefore especially appreciate a sense of supportive community.

We are smart

The impact of developmental trauma, difficult school experiences and little parental support are reflected in the participants' educational achievements. Only Nicole and Matt graduated from high school. However, in contrast to Cozolino and Sprokay's (2006) observation that 'when [traumatized] students examine their emotional learning state, their self-identity as poor learners is often revealed and their shame triggered' (p. 14), all participants created an alternative learner identity of being smart or capable, even if it is not necessarily in an academic sense, as the following quotes show: 'I was just a little bit slow at some stuff, but that didn't make me

stupid' (Moe). 'I was actually really smart' (Joe). 'In terms of learning auditorily, I'm a genius' (Kurt). 'When people show me things, I learn what they know and how they do it. Equate it out for myself and see if that's actually a reasonable way of doing things or not' (Matt). **'**The teacher said: '[you] are the dumb ones.' They call us dumb because we're not thinking like them….I don't think I'm dumb…I find myself smart.'(Lynn)

This alternative learner identity comes close to what Hatt (2007) calls 'street smart vs. book smart' of marginalized urban youth: ' 'Street smarts' are more important because they are connected to being able to maneuver through structures in their lives such as poverty, the police, street culture, and abusive 'others' ' (p.145). It seems that this alternative learner identity might be used by the participants to partly compensate for some of the academic underachievement and to re-direct some of the responsibility towards the teachers, institutions and parents that failed them. It is also possible that there is some shame in their academic failure, and they wanted to portray themselves in a more positive light to the interviewer. However, the important finding here for trauma-informed adult education is that while the learners see themselves as competent, for most of them it is not in the academic sense. This needs to be taken into consideration in order to not overextend them academically and thus damage their fragile learner identities.

A safe community
The final common theme in the participants' accounts was that all except for Moe appreciated the trauma-informed classroom as a safe and supportive learning community. This is highly relevant in light of their personal experience of not being supported either at home or at school in the past.

> I love coming here because there are a lot of people I can love….I see a lot of people coming here when they are having problems. And I think that is good, that they trust [the staff] enough to come here and say 'this is what I need'. (Lynn)

> There is definitely a sense of community in regards to mutual respect and there is definitely an attempt to connect and build friendship with each other, so there is a more personal kind of relating that you don't see in other settings. (Nicole)

> Just the people. The relationship building. Just the sense of family and belonging. And we always seem to have a really good time. (Matt)

> If it wasn't for JustWorld, I wouldn't know what to do, because I got absolutely no one to talk to down here. So with me having JustWorld down here has been a life line for me, and I thank [the staff] for that. (Joe)

> I mean I know that for one, it's a safe place. It's a place where my opinion is allowed…and I think that's what allows people to learn much better….In order for me to ask a question, I have to show part of myself. And in order to receive an answer, you have to show a part of yourself. And it brings together a community. (Kurt)

Research shows how important belonging is for school success (Lam, Chen, Zhang & Liang, 2015; Ostermann, 2000) and for generally doing well in life (Schonert-Reichl & LeRose, 2008). Belonging is seen as a fundamental aspect of creating 'school as community' (Furman, 2012). Also, the accounts highlight the importance of safe, personal relationships where no one asks 'what's wrong with you?' but instead, according to trauma-informed practice, 'what happened to you?', showing a genuine interest in the persons and a sensitivity towards their difficult life stories. The trauma-informed approach then seems to be able to provide this safety and sense of community that helps the traumatized learner to enjoy participating in an educational program.

CONCLUSIONS
The themes identified in this study confirm to a great degree what we know about many traumatized learners: They have both social and cognitive difficulties in the classroom. All participants struggled socially in school, both in relating with peers as well as with the majority of teachers. While the participants created alternative identities of being 'smart', most of them nevertheless underperformed academically. Only two out of six graduated from high school and only one went on to get a tertiary education. In addition, these victims of domestic abuse were doubly punished as they missed out on the important parental school support. Each participant carried a predominant theme, an unmet need from their early school experience, into the trauma-informed classroom. Their accounts of how they experienced the trauma-informed setting are encouraging. At least some of their needs seem to have been met. A safe community and a relationship-oriented educational program seem to create a learning platform where the traumatized learner can thrive.

Based on the results of this study, the following recommendations can be made for successfully implementing trauma-informed practices in adult education: a) each learner must be seen as an individual, with specific wounds inflicted by unique personal circumstances. Being mindful that 'something happened to you that makes you vulnerable in this educational setting' should be a key attitude of the trauma-informed educator. It is not the role of the educator to actively find out the details of the abuse. According to trauma-informed practice, the trauma survivors should volunteer any information about their trauma. However, a key to success is to find out what the greatest individual *need* is (i.e. affirmation, safety, acceptance etc.) and to meet this need as best as possible in the classroom. b) We therefore see that a big part of trauma-informed practices has less to do with techniques than with relational skills. Vulnerability, openness, self-reflection and genuine interest in the learner are the foundation of trauma-informed practice. Only if the educator is a safe person, can he or she create a safe space for others. This requires personal introspection. Questions such as 'What situations prevent me from being loving, affirming and safe?' or even 'What are the wounds I carry from my own educational history?' need to be asked and ways need to be found to grow in personal awareness and self-care. c) Working with traumatized adult learners shifts the focus in the adult classroom from content to relationship. The traumatized learner will not be able to learn if his or her deeper needs are not met.

Limitations

This study focused on the lived experience of six participants in one particular adult education program. The intent was to communicate a few personal perspectives of 'what is working'. While we get a good sense of what strategies to implement in a trauma-informed adult classroom, some of these findings may not be transferrable to other trauma-informed programs. As trauma-informed adult education is a new field, much further research is needed, both in evaluating trauma-informed adult education programs, as well as in quantitative studies that explore in more detail what elements and factors of the trauma-informed approach work in all adult education programs.

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