

SURVIVOR LEADERS: A GROUNDED THEORY INQUIRY INTO LEADERSHIP
PRACTICES OF CHILDHOOD TRAUMA SURVIVORS

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ABSTRACT

Most research about childhood trauma focuses on the damage it causes. Some research delves into how resilience and posttraumatic growth can mitigate the effects of trauma and how survivors may thrive in the aftermath of trauma. However, no previous research has examined how childhood trauma shapes leadership. This grounded theory study explored the influence of traumatic experience in childhood on the professional practice of school leaders. Four study participants, all former or practicing principals, took part in two individual interviews. The first interview focused on the participants' childhood experiences of trauma including physical, emotional and sexual abuse; physical and emotional neglect; family violence; as well substance abuse and alcoholism of parents. The core category of survivor leader emerged from the data. Survivor leaders arise from abuse and neglect, combined with intelligence and opportunity. They demonstrate resilience and posttraumatic growth in their commitment to use their powers for good by being student advocates and protectors, though they also exhibit lingering indicators of abuse including symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and unhealthy coping strategies. Despite these issues, however, the survivor leaders in this study were a deliberately hopeful group. Undergirding the core category are four themes: loner who seeks to connect, from ignorance to penetrating insight, a soft place to fall, and a voice for the voiceless. The core category reflects who the survivor leaders are, and the underlying categories reflect what the survivor leaders do. The results of this study suggest a need for further study into the newly identified phenomenon of survivor leadership. Noted implications for education and practice include the importance of educating school leaders on the long term effects of childhood trauma to enrich their understanding of the staff and students in their care.