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Connection, Involvement, and Modeling: Co-Constructing a Story of Resilience Despite Early Parental Loss

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Abstract

The use of oral history and narrative inquiry to investigate factors of resilience in the face of parental death is absent from the literature. Also, researchers have not linked factors that support resilience against trauma and that lead to positive change in residential treatment with the role of educators. In this study, my father-in-law, Norman, and I answered the research question: What factors in Norman's adolescent life supported his resilience in the face of an early parental loss? I analyzed Norman's oral history using narrative analysis methods. Findings include factors that led to Norman's resilience including his connection to a robust community, his family's sheltering him after his father's death, involvement in extracurricular activities, and identification with successful role models. I discuss similar findings in the literature on resilience and my observations of a residential treatment setting. Implications for educators in residential treatment and general education settings include connecting trauma-affected students with positive school communities, creating easily accessible opportunities for quality extracurricular involvement, and helping students identify and analyze the trajectories of academic role models.

Keywords

oral history, narrative inquiry, resilience, trauma, residential treatment, education, death

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Connection, Involvement, and Modeling: Co-Constructing a Story of Resilience Despite Early Parental Loss

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The use of oral history and narrative inquiry to investigate factors of resilience in the face of parental death is absent from the literature. Also, researchers have not linked factors that support resilience against trauma and that lead to positive change in residential treatment with the role of educators. In this study, my father-in-law, Norman, and I answered the research question: What factors in Norman's adolescent life supported his resilience in the face of an early parental loss? I analyzed Norman's oral history using narrative analysis methods. Findings include factors that led to Norman's resilience including his connection to a robust community, his family's sheltering him after his father's death, involvement in extracurricular activities, and identification with successful role models. I discuss similar findings in the literature on resilience and my observations of a residential treatment setting. Implications for educators in residential treatment and general education settings include connecting trauma-affected students with positive school communities, creating easily accessible opportunities for quality extracurricular involvement, and helping students identify and analyze the trajectories of academic role models.

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Introduction

Moderate estimates show that about 40 percent of children in America experience at least one traumatic event by 18 (Perry & Szalavitz, 2017). The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (2014) defined trauma as an event which is perceived as harmful, induces intense distress, and has an impact on one's well-being. With a significant number of schoolchildren experiencing the psychological, emotional, and social impacts of trauma, studies on trauma-informed practices in schools are surging (Maynard et al., 2019). Many new trauma-informed practices focus on increasing student resilience, defined as an individual's experience of positive outcomes despite adversity (Tiet et al., 2010), as a method for improving outcomes for trauma-affected youth (Baum et al., 2013). The current focus of inquiry on resilience from trauma includes studies on counseling approaches in schools (Dorado et al., 2016; Fitzgerald & Cohen, 2012; Jaycox et al., 2012), alternatives to punitive and exclusionary behavior management (Cole et al., 2005; Oehlberg, 2006), and other intervention-testing (Powell & Davis, 2018; Shamblin et al., 2016). Individual oral history narrative inquiries of educational resilience, or the "unexpected educational attainments of adolescents who are otherwise vulnerable to curtailed school success due to personal- and social-level risks" (Peck et al., 2008, p. 135) are sparse, if not absent.

Oral history is a form of life history, a narrative style of data collection (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Whereas many of the researchers studying trauma-informed practices employ

quantitative methods or limit qualitative methods to case studies (Thomas et al., 2019), oral history is absent in the literature on the impacts of trauma on education and factors leading to educational resilience. Although post-positivist philosophical roots link our ability to generalize research findings to creating “equivalency between the sample and population” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 253), there is also merit in employing lessons learned from historical accounts of similar situations. Life histories often provide more depth and expansion than other qualitative methods, attending to “a single person’s experiences, understandings, and actions” (Lanford et al., 2019, p. 460) and prioritizing what events in a participant’s life meant to them (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

In this oral history, I use narrative analysis to co-construct my father-in-law, Norman’s, story of resilience despite the loss of his father. Norman’s father, Arthur, died in 1941 when Norman was 11 years old. Discovering Norman’s story of resilience required a methodology that accounted for his personal interpretation of Arthur’s death. I argue four main factors led to his resilience. Although I center the construct of resilience in Norman’s story, I also recognize that systems-level inequities experienced by many marginalized students require much more than individual resilience to overcome. In addition, I assert three of the factors leading to Norman’s resilience also supported students in a residential treatment facility where I taught and led the school. The findings from Norman’s oral history and the observations I made at the residential treatment center inform implications for educators in other residential settings and in general education settings. General education settings include classrooms in which all students are educated by a general education teacher, as opposed to a special education classroom or another alternative educational placement.

At the outset of the present study, I aimed to use oral history and narrative inquiry methods to explore ways Arthur’s unexpected death traumatized Norman and impacted his educational trajectory. Norman’s story, however, was peppered with evidence of resilience. Over the course of 89 years of life, he earned a Ph.D. in chemistry, held a steady career at IBM, raised four children, and enjoyed 65 years (and counting) with his wife.

With the dominance of Norman’s resilience as we walked together along the path of his story, I turned my attention away from my original goal of focusing solely on the impact Arthur’s death had on Norman’s education. Instead, I turned my attention to the concept of resilience. Together, we attended to what it was that allowed him to live such a successful life in the face of his early loss. With this aim, I probed a construct I have read about but rarely witnessed first-hand. That is: factors that lead to resilience in trauma-affected youth. The purpose of this study was to answer the following research question: What factors in Norman’s adolescence supported his resilience in the face of early parental loss?

In addition, with a history working as a teacher and school leader with trauma-affected youth in a residential treatment setting, I noticed many connections between factors supporting Norman’s resilience and ways in which the residential treatment setting supports students’ development of resilience. A second aim of this article is to explore implications of Norman’s story for trauma-affected youth in both residential treatment settings and general education settings. In what follows, I review the issues of familial loss, trauma, and academic achievement as well as resilience; move on to discuss data collection and analysis methods; present my findings and discussion; and provide implications for educators in residential and general education settings.

Review of the Issue

Trauma, Academic Achievement, and Parental Loss

My interest in trauma began when I taught and led a school for traumatized youth in a residential treatment center, which I will refer to as Blue Hills. In Norman's case, he was vulnerable to what the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN) terms traumatic grief, or the emotional impact of losing a loved one (NCTSN, n.d.). At Blue Hills, students' trauma could typically be characterized as complex trauma, often consisting of multiple invasive and/or interpersonal events (NCTSN, n.d.), some of which included parental loss. Also, the majority of students' trauma at Blue Hills was often compounded by a variety of risk factors, which can be associated with living in inequitable conditions related to poverty (Kiser & Black, 2005).

Definitions of trauma are both elusive and often inequitable, disproportionately pathologizing marginalized groups (Dutro, 2019). Traumatizing experiences may include typically recognizable traumas such as post-war Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), natural disasters, and physical, verbal, or sexual abuse (Alvarez, et al., 2016). In addition, certain discriminatory experiences that occur in American schools such as racism, deficit views of students (Alvarez et al., 2016; Dutro, 2019) and the impacts of "poverty...dehumanizing immigration policies, and gender normativity and heterosexism and their intersections in students' classroom experiences" (Dutro, 2019, p. 5) also count as trauma.

As recently as the early 1990s, mental health practitioners and the general public believed that children bounce back from traumas (Perry & Szalavitz, 2017). On the contrary, children and adolescents are more vulnerable to traumas than are adults (Perry & Szalavitz, 2017). When someone experiences trauma, their brain kicks primitive survival mechanisms into action, pulling resources away from the higher-level thinking parts of the brain located in the frontal lobe (Crosby et al., 2018). Having heightened survival responses and a lack of engagement in the frontal lobe can result in disruption to executive functions such as working memory and processing capabilities (Bell et al., 2013). Executive functions are vital to school performance, both academically and behaviorally (Day et al., 2015). Therefore, students exposed to trauma are at-risk of experiencing increased difficulties in school and are overrepresented in exclusionary disciplinary actions and poor achievement (Fecser, 2014). Although early and ongoing traumas pose threats to brain development, many less recognizable experiences that happen in schools and which result from systemic inequities put some children at a greater risk of experiencing trauma and being pathologized as needing to heal than others.

Losing a parent may traumatize children and adolescents (Harris, 2018). Empirical evidence abounds that children who experience the death of a parent are at a greater risk for behavioral and academic problems (Abdelnoor & Hollins, 2004; Cerel et al., 2006; Karakartal, 2012). The extensive list of the possible impacts of bereavement include difficulty concentrating, insomnia, irritability, and depression (Abdelnoor & Hollins, 2004). Whether or not a child succumbs to the detrimental impacts of the trauma of parental loss often depends on factors that either support or deter resilience (Koblenz, 2015).

Resilience

Although resilience is a powerful tool for trauma-affected youth and a strong focus in several trauma-informed interventions (Thomas et al., 2019), I must account for one caveat: supporting the development of resilience alone is not sufficient for marginalized children. There is a problem with centering resilience as the primary solution for students of color and students from poverty who are victims of marginalization and systemic inequities. According

to Gorski (2018), resilience and the buzzword “grit,” which blames student-level factors for failure, are used interchangeably. Confounding resilience and grit ignores societal barriers—poorly funded schools and neighborhoods, limited access to healthcare and childcare, and the limited availability of jobs that pay a living wage—that negatively impact children living in poverty. In addition to supporting the development of resilience, educators must also develop what Gorski (2018) calls “equity literacy,” defined as the set of knowledge and skills that educators need to recognize inequities and act for equity. In other words, educators must not blame students for failure when their failure is, in large part, a result of systemic inequities. Instead, they can look for and combat deeper reasons that certain students must develop resilience to overcome their life’s circumstances while others do not. Some of these reasons present as taken-for-granted policies and procedures in schools.

Prior to engaging with Norman’s oral history, I was used to working with students who had not developed the resilience necessary to be successful socially, emotionally, behaviorally, and/or academically. Often times, students failed to develop resilience not because of any lack of effort or ability, but rather due to systemic factors related to poverty. The students with whom I worked were in treatment to manage trauma after the intervention of school administrators, law enforcement, or both. For many of my students, treatment in the residential setting supported their development of resilience, providing stability and services that had previously been out of their reach.

Whether genetically predisposed (Beaver et al., 2011) or due to personality traits (Causadias et al., 2012), some people are naturally more resilient than others and/or live in conditions that are less likely to deter resilience. This may have been the case for Norman. However, three factors during his adolescence fostered resilience and those same factors supported the resilience of students at Blue Hills. There also exists ample research literature supporting the benefits of all three factors (Brown, 2006; Carlson et al., 2012; DiClemente et al., 2018; Fava & Bay-Cheng, 2013; Lovitt & Emerson, 2009; Tough, 2012). One finding from the literature is that connection to a cohesive community can provide essential support for adolescents in times of adversity (DiClemente et al., 2018; Fava & Bay-Cheng, 2013). Involvement with extracurricular activities and prosocial community organizations are also sources of resilience to youth in crisis (Carlson et al., 2012; Lovitt & Emerson, 2009). A final finding in the literature related to resilience is that the presence of role models and mentors (both within and outside of the family system) has the power to steer at-risk teens in the right direction (Brown, 2006; Tough, 2012).

Norman’s story stands in contrast to the life-altering impacts of trauma on students referred to Blue Hills. It shows how factors that support resilience can staunch the effects of potentially traumatizing events. Furthermore, his story provides evidence that these factors were effective decades ago in 1941. Although there is ample literature showing that these factors lead to resilience in trauma-affected youth, the oral history narrative inquiry methodology is absent. The purpose of this article is to share Norman’s story of resilience and explore implications for educators supporting trauma-affected youth.

Methods

Narrative Inquiry

I used oral history and narrative inquiry methods to gather and analyze Norman’s story. In case-centered narrative inquiry, cases take the form of stories (Riessman, 2008). Narrative inquirers interpret the details, form, and overall extended account of a story (Riessman, 2008). Using this design, I generalized from a single case by moving “toward a broader commentary” (Riessman, 2008, p. 13) by developing theoretical propositions. A qualitative design fit my

research goals because a major goal of qualitative research is to understand how individuals interpret their experiences and make sense of the world (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Initially, I aimed to explore a retrospective case-centered account of the impact of a family member's trauma experience on their education. Discovering the factors of resilience that impacted Norman, through his story, required a qualitative and narrative approach.

Participant

Norman is the actual name of my father-in-law. I gained IRB approval to use Norman's name to preserve the oral history of his experience with early loss. Janesick's (2019) comments on oral history resonated with me as I first considered contacting Norman. She is often asked why she puts so much effort into listening to, recording, transcribing, and analyzing people's stories. Her response is, "for the story, of course, and for the historical record" (p. 492). I conducted this study to document Norman's story for his family and the historical record. His story was shrouded in mystery to me and his children. He rarely talked about his father, the events of his death, or its impact. With a collective curiosity and the hope of revealing a relevant story of trauma's impact on education, I called Norman. I shared with him my initial research questions and invited him to participate in a narrative inquiry to capture and explore his oral history. He eagerly signed the consent form.

Data Collection

I used loosely structured interview methods to produce four interview transcripts for narrative analysis (Riessman, 2008). Since Norman lives in Vermont and I live in Wyoming, I spoke with him over the phone and recorded each call. The phone calls included four one-hour long interviews. I transcribed each interview prior to conducting the next, because I wanted to conduct preliminary analyses and "come alongside" Norman (Clandinin, 2013). I embraced the narrative method of becoming "wide awake" to his story (Clandinin, 2013) by reviewing each interview reflexively between meetings. Coming alongside Norman and provoking narrative accounts during the interview process required a significant shift in customary interview practices (Riessman, 2008). I guided Norman back to my research question in the first and second interviews. I was stuck in a traditional post-positivist interview paradigm, in which the interviewer directs the conversation, controlling for bias and focused on validity and reliability (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

During the first interview, I used open-ended questions specifically inquiring how Norman remembered his father and the events surrounding his father's death. In subsequent interviews, I opened with questions related to the impact of Arthur's death on Norman's experiences in school. During the final interview, I was more open to negotiating and following Norman's shifts in topic because he began actively constructing meaning and interpretation while narrating his story. In the final interview we synthesized connections between significant incidents from previous interviews and new insights into the factors that supported his resilience. Collaboratively, we pieced together the story of how Arthur's death impacted Norman's schooling and what made him resilient to the trauma of losing a parent.

Data Analysis

In narrative analysis, the story's meaning is co-constructed with the narrator. Janesick (2019) explained co-construction in saying that writing up life histories brings together three stories: "the individual participant's story, the researcher's story, and the product of these two—the story they make together" (p. 492). I employed Janesick's (2019) explanation to

support my collaborative analytic process and the implications I developed for trauma-affected youth. I started the process of data analysis immediately after the first interview, jotting initial thoughts prior to transcription, on how factors related to Arthur's death impacted Norman's education. I found that Norman spoke more about factors leading to resilience than any concrete impact his father's death had on him. Therefore, I adjusted my focus to attend to factors leading to resilience. I transcribed interviews and jotted notes on emergent findings in between interviews. During subsequent interviews, I used member checking (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), to get Norman's perspective on my emergent findings, ensuring the story was interpreted as he intended it to be (Sutherland et al., 2013).

Following the final interview, I printed all transcripts. Directly on the printed transcripts, I wrote analytic memos, making note of ideas for possible themes related to my research question (Miles et al., 2014). While writing analytic memos, I looked for ways that factors in Norman's life, across the interviews, contributed to his success despite his father's death. I also drew connections between individual stories to develop a cohesive interpretation. I attended, across and within interviews, to how individual elements of Norman's life combined to support his resilience. This aided my attention to "extended accounts that are preserved and treated analytically as units" (Riessman, 2008, p. 12), which is a cornerstone of narrative analysis. Similarities in memos started to emerge, which I categorized as themes. As I developed themes, I analyzed not only the content but also the *way* that Norman told his story (Sutherland et al., 2013), noting how emotive retellings, emphasis, and word choice conveyed Norman's intended meaning.

The initial themes were "Community Connection" and "Extracurricular Involvement" (See Table 1 for definitions of each theme). After combing the data for all instances of both themes, I realized that the theme of "Community Connection" did not account for the significance of the role models in Norman's life nor did it describe how Norman's family sheltered him from details of his father's death. Therefore, I added two other themes of "Sheltering" and "Role Models" (see Table 1) and looked across the data for examples of how the two new themes supported Norman's resilience during adolescence. Following data analysis, I composed my arguments and shared the manuscript with Norman for further member checking. He provided insightful feedback, which I considered throughout the rest of the writing process. In what follows, I use examples from the interviews to illustrate how each of the themes supported Norman's resilience. Then, I provide implications of these findings for trauma-affected youth in both residential and general education settings rooted in the literature and my work at Blue Hills.

Table 1
Definitions of Themes

Theme	Definition
Community Connection	Norman consistently interacted with a large number of friends and family and his aunt and uncle became his surrogate parents
Sheltering	Family kept Norman from exposure to events surrounding Arthur's death and did not talk about Arthur with him
Role Models	Norman identified with two financially and educationally successful male cousins and aspired to be like them
Extracurricular Involvement	Norman held several jobs, played sports, and earned an Eagle Scout ranking in Boy Scouts of America

Findings and Discussion

Three main factors anchored Norman's story of resilience despite the early loss of his father. First, Norman's memories of his father were vague, abstract, and distant. Instead of memories of his father, he shared sharply detailed accounts of a connected life within a cohesive community. This socialization and meaningful time spent with extended family and friends filled the space left by his father. Next, family members sheltered Norman from the impact of his father's death. Also, extracurricular activities including Norman's insatiable involvement in the Boy Scouts of America and several jobs held throughout middle and high school supported his prosocial development. Finally, although understated during the interviews, a key factor in Norman's resilience was the identification with two financially and educationally successful older cousins. Norman's role model cousins embodied his aspirations.

Community Connection

Connection with community as a buffer against the trauma of Arthur's death repeated throughout Norman's story. Whereas Norman told vague and short stories of his father, he recalled vivid memories of times spent at church, over the holidays, picnicking, and playing outside with a robust extended family and peer community. After his father's death, he moved in with his aunt and uncle. Their close relationship prior to Arthur's death, exhibited by frequent interactions and physical proximity, provided continuity for Norman.

Vivid Memories of Community

When I asked Norman who he grew up with, his response displayed his sense of connection to a cohesive community. He said:

Well, I had a sister, which I still have...So there were the two of us and then I had *cousins by the dozens!* Because, in my mother's family, there were nine or ten children, six of them ended up coming to the states...Then on my father's side, they all came here, except for, they were all born in England, eight of the nine were. One younger one was born here in the United States and they lived right in Lowell.

Norman and his "cousins by the dozens" grew up together in Lowell, Massachusetts. He continued to explain how his family spent time together, saying:

So, I had a lot of cousins. And you would see them, especially at Christmastime. And you would see them in the summer quite a bit. Because at the church we went to, they had these picnics over the summer. You'd go to a park and the kids would just have fun and you'd have hamburgs [*sic*] and hot dogs and then you'd go home after that. There were a lot of kids in addition to my cousins whom I knew in school and who also went to church with me and who were in my Boy Scout troop also.

With extensive details, Norman painted a picture of a thriving and busy community providing support and distraction for a young boy before and after a sudden loss.

Unlike Norman's numerous and elaborate memories of his social life, he told sparse and vague stories of his father. For instance, after much probing, Norman conjured the story of his tenth birthday, the year before Arthur died. He said:

The thing I do remember when I was 10, I had a birthday party, and I got a box in which it seemed there was nothing because it was very light. It was June of 1940. In it was a little note that said your father and uncle will be taking you to see Ted Williams. So, we went to Fenway Park, sat out in left field sometime after my birthday. My birthday was in June, sometime that summer we went. I don't remember how we got there. Whether we took the train into Boston or whether we drove or anything else. That was one event I can remember doing with my dad and my uncle.

In contrast to his memories of the larger community, Norman's recollection of the Red Sox game includes several gaps. He could not remember how they got there, and when I probed him further for details like what they ate and if he got a souvenir, he came up blank.

Whereas Norman shared only a few cloudy stories of Arthur, he recalled abundant socialization within a cohesive family and peer community. He richly described most of what he shared of his social life. One extended account started when I asked Norman to tell me about where he lived in his youth. After recalling a bit about his street, he shared some memories of playing with the neighborhood children. He said:

The street was very flat and beyond our road to the east, a nice little hill rose up. We could use that all winter for sliding [*sic*]. If you were really good at it, the house at the top of the hill had a driveway. You could slide down that driveway onto the rest of the hill and turn down rapidly. And what we did have was called a double runner. It was like having a big board on which the kids sat. Two runners in the front and two in the back. It had a steering wheel on it. You'd get a bunch of kids on it, shove it, and start it down that hill and go as far as you can. Then, you'd have to drag it back up the hill. You'd have the kids push it; it was a really heavy thing.

He continued the memory:

Across the street, there was a pretty large family. A lot of boys. So, we used to play together. They had a big dirt pile behind their house. We'd go over there and play trucks. Then in the winter, we'd build forts on both sides of the streets and have snowball fights between forts. In the summertime, you'd play a lot of games like relieve-o and hide-and-peek and there was a lamp post just up from our property and that's what you'd use to play hide-and-peek. We'd have fireworks. People would buy their kids fireworks to set off on the Fourth of July.

Norman's stories of playing with the neighborhood kids far outweigh stories of his father in length, detail, and frequency.

As a narrative inquirer, I attend to *how* Norman told his story. I treat the transcripts as an extended account and attend to the structure of Norman's stories over time (Riessman, 2008). Norman attached emphasis and positive emotion to his memories of his supportive and buffering community while struggling to recall detailed memories of his father. Juxtaposed together, vivid memories of friends and extended family dwarf washed out memories of Arthur, revealing a factor that led to his resilience: community connection.

Surrogate Parents

When Arthur died, Norman moved in with his Aunt Kate and Uncle Bill. Kate was Norman's mother's sister and Bill was Arthur's brother. He described the relationship as, "they were two sisters and two brothers." According to his description, the transition from living with his parents to living with his aunt and uncle was seamless, causing little disruption in his normal everyday life. Not only were they close in physical proximity to his previous home, but they were also in frequent social contact prior to Arthur's death. Moving in with Kate and Bill provided Norman with continuity, structure, predictability, and security. He explained:

It was very simple. There was no bread winner any longer, so they moved me...I wasn't seeing my mother and father any longer. But I took it in stride because those families were so close together. You knew Uncle Bill and Aunt Kate were right around the corner. You would see them fairly often. They were sort of like another mother and father...They didn't live that far away from each other. It was less than a five-minute walk. You'd be seeing them all the time because you went to church on Sunday, they would be there.

Norman was lucky to have Kate and Bill, not only because they were such a close match to his parents, averting serious disruption in his life, but also because they were competent parents. Norman described their parenting, saying, "They were really good. Three squares a day, made sure you were on the right track, doing things you were supposed to do, make sure you were well-clothed...made sure you looked like an English schoolboy." When he continued to describe Aunt Kate, it became apparent that he adored her and felt she was a high-quality caregiver. He said:

Aunt Kate, she really took care of everybody. She took care of her parents. She took care of her father's mother. Anybody was sick, Kate would be there. She was a very giving person. Good cook. Had her schedule. Monday wash, Tuesday iron, Wednesday clean, Friday bathe. That's the way it went. She made donuts. She made really good donuts.

Norman's emphasis on Kate's caring nature exhibited his adoration for her and his sense that she was a strong parent, supporting his resilience.

Having Kate and Bill kept Norman from experiencing poverty, allowed him to maintain connections with biological family, and provided a similar, if not more nurturing, environment to his home with similar caregivers. Billings, Ehrle, and Kortenkamp (2002) explained that these factors likely supported the resiliency of children bereaved by parents and raised by other family members. Norman benefited greatly from living with Bill and Kate.

What is more, empirical research backs the notion that connection with ones' community can support resilience for at-risk youth. According to Howard (1996), connection with family and with external support structures are two parts of a "triad of protective factors" (p. 255) that buffer against the deleterious impacts of trauma. In addition, high levels of caregiver functioning following a parental death (Cerel et al., 2006) and receiving high quality care (Lin et al., 2004) can be strong antidotes to the impacts of trauma. So, Norman's support system, consisting of a deep connection with his family and peer communities along with the strength of the caregivers that replaced his parents, checked one box for ensuring he would be successful despite his early loss.

Sheltering

Norman's adult family members avoided exposing him to any news, events, or conversation surrounding his father's death. They also did not talk about Arthur, preventing Norman from solidifying memories of his father. The way Norman talked about being sheltered from Arthur's death revealed that it minimized the impact the loss may have had on him otherwise. During the interviews, Norman treated Arthur's death matter-of-factly and showed little emotion. The details themselves also showed that his adult relatives hid specifics of the death from Norman and prevented mourning.

He explained how he learned about his father dying, saying

Well, in 1941, we were at camp up at Miles Pond. Because (Arthur) had a sister who lived in Lowell with her husband, she came to our home on Ursula Street and essentially tended house for him in the summer while we were away. That's how things used to work. My mom was in Vermont with us. As was my aunt. There was this camp on Miles Pond that was the property of another sister of my mother who used to live in St. Johnsbury, Vermont. So, my father went to bed and never woke up one day in July. It was the 21st of July in 1941. Then, my uncle Bill drove up to Vermont, picked up my mother and her sister and drove back to Massachusetts. On the way home, they told my mother that my father had died. Then, somehow, we, I don't know, somebody came to pick us up and brought us back to Lowell. It was from my aunt that I learned that my father had died. Not my mother, my aunt. She came to me and said, "Your father has gone to live in heaven." That was it.

In Norman's treatment of learning about Arthur's death, several details show that his family sheltered him from the very start, that he did not question what his aunt told him, and that such an approach minimized the events. First, Norman shared the actual act of Arthur dying perfunctorily, saying that he "went to bed and never woke up." There was no detail and no sense of loss in the way Norman shared this information. Furthermore, Norman learned about his father's death from his aunt, not his mother. This act distanced him from the event, removing the emotion of the bond that was broken between Arthur and Elsie. The loss was never shown. Finally, in this statement, Norman explained that his aunt said, "Your father has gone to live in heaven," and went on to say, "That was it." Saying "Your father has gone to live in heaven" shows an avoidance of the gravity of death. Later in the interview, I asked Norman if he had any conception of what it meant for someone to die and he said, "No, because they never used the word. They said, your father's gone and he's in heaven." Norman was sheltered from the reality of death, never getting the opportunity to mourn.

In addition to never allowing him to grasp what it meant for his father to die, Norman's family kept him from experiencing the traditional rituals related to death. He shared,

Now, we never saw his body or went to the funeral or anything. We had another uncle who had a car. Two of his daughters, my cousins, and he took my sister and me somewhere to do something every day until the funeral was done. Sometimes, we went back to Miles Pond.

Hearing this, I asked Norman if he felt like his family sheltered him. He responded, "Oh, yeah, absolutely. My sister and I never had any idea what was going on. The funeral was going on. That was it." Norman's extended family partook in Arthur's funeral but excluded Norman. Arthur's death was abstract to Norman, breezed over and hidden from him. Although

Norman's family prevented him from mourning, which may have been a healthy experience, doing so in combination with a smooth transition to living with Aunt Kate and Uncle Bill, may have supported his resilience. Downplaying Arthur's death, no doubt, kept it from seeming to Norman like a life-altering event.

Literature on how best to support children after a death in the family provides a much different approach to the way Norman's family handled Arthur's death. That is, revealing information to children about the death of a loved one and death in general helps children to process and deal with their grief (Davies, 1998; Hurd, 1999; Schoka-Traylor et al., 2003; Toller & McBride, 2013). Even so, several parents of bereaved children in Toller and McBride's (2013) study expressed that decades ago their own parents concealed details of death in the family from them. Although parents in Toller and McBride's (2013) study wanted to share details of family death with their children to aid their processing, they also, like Norman's adult relatives, attempted to protect their children from information that was too sensitive. Perhaps much less extreme than the concealment of Arthur's death, one parent emphasized that the information adults share with children about death should be appropriate to their age level and maturity (Toller & McBride, 2013).

Norman's family were congregational protestants. Their use of heaven as a way to conceptualize death with Norman may have been their strongest effort to help him understand Arthur's passing. Parents in Toller and McBride's (2013) study felt their children would have a better grasp of and ability to receive information about death in the family if they used religion as a point of reference. One parent explained their children learned about how people ask for forgiveness before death and about the concept of heaven. In their mind, that knowledge would reduce the likelihood that death of a loved one would be traumatizing to children. When I spoke with Norman while member checking, he said, "That's why you went to church and Sunday school. That's why your religious training was a part of life. That's a tool to help you grow up in a responsible manner." Norman's family relied on religion to soften the experience of Arthur's death for Norman.

Extracurricular Involvement

Perhaps the most salient factor supporting Norman's resilience following Arthur's death was his extensive involvement in diverse extracurricular activities. In all the interviews, Norman mentioned either briefly or at length jobs, sports, and/or scouting. Norman described the positive influences of extracurricular involvement, saying:

I worked summers on the farm, and then the market, then the ice cream place. In high school I had that job delivering home goods and stuff. From that point of view, there were a lot of positive things happening. A lot of good directions because you had to have a job because you needed a dollar in your pocket...I did the whole Eagle Scout thing on my own.

Norman was not only employed in the jobs he mentioned here and engaged in Eagle Scouts (although this together would have, no doubt, been transformative), he also delivered magazines (*The Saturday Evening Post* and *Ladies Home Journal*) in middle school; played basketball in the winter; was a camp counselor; and attended Sunday school, church, and youth group on weekends during the school year.

Norman self-identified as being born with an innate strong work ethic. He was motivated by things that were interesting to him and challenging. Whereas work helped to keep "a dollar in (his) pocket," the formative benefits of scouting are evident in both Norman's description of his scouting experience and in the literature on the Boy Scouts of America.

Norman was self-motivated to join the Eagle Scouts. Although he spent time with friends from school and church, he explained, “I didn’t have any of my friends who were pursuing it. Only place I found anybody pursuing it was when I worked at the Boy Scout camp a couple summers.” His intrinsic motivation is likely a factor in his resilience, yet the benefits of scouting also supported his development. As all Eagle Scouts do, he earned his Eagle Scout status by earning merit badges. Talking about merit badges, he explained:

I had to go to the merit badge counsel. I asked them, who’s doing this merit badge? And they’d give me a phone number. I’d go see them. Talk to them about what had to be done and off I’d go. At summer camp, at the outdoor merit badges like canoeing, rowing, lifesaving, swimming, other stuff, cooking, you could do those right there because there were other guys right there, on the staff, who were interested.

The Boy Scouts of America aim to enhance the physical and mental health of boys, empowering them to contribute to their community throughout their life (Polson et al., 2013). Norman’s story is littered with evidence of the enhancing impact of scouting on his life. Merit badges went beyond rote learning. Instead, they provided important life skills, many of which continue to impact Norman’s behavior. For example, he shared:

One of the simplest things was called public safety. You know, you go to cross the street. You listen, you look left, you look right, you cross the street. I still do that. I do it in parking lots and these malls because of the way people are coming along with carts but most dangerously how they’re driving their automobiles and backing them up. I still, even when we go out walking with my granddaughters, they just walk across the street. I say, hey, you didn’t look, you didn’t listen. Then we did something on public health. It was really important to try to understand about this whole public health thing. That’s where I got an appreciation for, when I was on the select board here. We were talking about extending the wastewater lines. Hearing everybody say, oh, yeah, yeah, you have to do that for the environment. I said, it’s not just for the environment. It’s public health! You don’t want contaminated water, contaminated soil. It serves two purposes.

Boy Scouts of America taught Norman myriad hard skills as well as countless “soft skills,” or social and life skills like cooperation (Polson et al., 2013). One example of a soft skill that Norman developed during his time working as a youth leader in scouting camp was self-reliance. He described his living situation, saying:

You slept on a platform there for the whole summer. You know, you have a wood platform, the bunk was there, you had an old orange crate where you put your stuff and you put it on its end, and you have two shelves. Essentially, you roll up the sides of the flap because it was hot and that’s how you’d live all summer. Fresh air. Eight weeks of it. I had a metal cot. It was covered in wood. The canvas was the tent. You’d be up on stone and it’d be off the ground and you had steps to go up into it in case of rain so you wouldn’t have to be on the ground. It was canvas and you’d roll it back or you’d roll it down and tie it to keep the weather out. All you had. There were two of us in there and the front and side flaps fit over the outside so rain would not come into the floor of your tent.

Norman spent eight weeks each summer during high school at scout camp, without any parents or adult relatives, acting as a youth leader, and being responsible for his own well-being. Should he have left the flaps of his tent open during a rainstorm, for example, his things may have gotten wet.

The Power of Role Models Absent Mentors

During our third interview, Norman expressed that, although he was resilient to his father's death in many ways, he felt he could have done better in high school if there had been more support from adults in his life. When I asked about his academic achievement in high school, he responded:

I flunked algebra the first time around in high school and had to retake it. I went back. There was nobody there to talk to you about it, speak about it...I could have done a lot better...I didn't identify sufficiently as a student.

Probing further, I asked about his academic support structure, to which he responded:

I would say, support structure, but in certain areas lack of support structure. And, you know, since I was 11 when my dad died, and I thought when I turned into junior high school, I had no father. I didn't really have a person who would act like a mentor and advisor, a discussor, a futurist, somebody to talk about what you're doing and why you're doing it and how it's going and say, "Hey, would you think about this? Maybe there's a better way of doing it." I sort of did that all by myself. And, of course, there are shortcomings to that because from age 11–18, what do you know?

He continued, revealing insights about the impact of his father's death:

I am sure it would have made a difference [to have Arthur around]. How much of a difference or what kind of a difference, I don't know? It was lacking. It wasn't there, even though I had a very good, solid support structure in terms of daily needs and a roof over your head. But that's the way it goes. And, I don't know, it probably could have made a difference if somebody would have come down on you like a pound of bricks every now and then. Every kid needs that. Get some structure. Get some guidance. Get some banging around in the head. Say, "Hey, you're not doing what you're supposed to do." "Hey! That's not going to get you anywhere." You know?

Norman was resilient, in the end, to the death of his father during his early adolescence. Nevertheless, after co-constructing his story over two interviews and pondering factors leading to his resilience, he admitted a sense of academic underachievement. However unsure of what might have happened in an alternate reality had his father survived, his conclusion that it would have made a difference to have his father around showed that, indeed, Arthur's death impacted him academically.

Norman thought he underachieved in high school and felt a lacking parental voice may have been to blame. Even so, one factor that supported his academic resilience in post-secondary education was identification with two older male cousins as financial and academic role models. I asked Norman about relational factors that may have compensated for the

missing adult in his life. His response showed a connection with family who set the bar high. He said:

The people I thought set the example were way ahead of me, like my cousin Herb. He graduated from college in 1936. I was six years old. Earned his Ph.D. in 1941. That was important to me because he was a chemist. I'll tell you, when I remember him, I used to see him. He worked in Lowell, and he had this little Roadster. And he worked in what was called the Vinegar Works in Lowell and his car stunk of vinegar. The same clothes he wore I guess he drove home, and that car just stunk. *But he worked!* And he had an automobile. That's not a bad deal, right? I remember when he was all done at Champaign-Urbana, where he earned his PhD, he decided to take a trip west and he went to Yellowstone. I remember when he came home, he talked about he was able to go to some of those hot springs and take a pan of water and boil his egg. Then, he got a job at Merck and that was, then he took off from there. He was a hard worker. One of these guys that didn't need much sleep. Maybe four-five hours a night. All his life.

In addition to the admiration Norman had for his older cousin, Herb Silcox, he mentioned another older cousin who was a strong role model for him. He explained that there was also, "Donald Silcox...He went to Harvard and got his degree in chemistry and then earned his M.B.A. in Harvard and was in the business world, a stockbroker, for the rest of his life." To clarify, I asked Norman if he thought those cousins had an impact on him choosing to become a chemist. He replied, "I think it was important, yeah." Again, more than in *what* Norman said, his admiration was evident in *how* he talked about his cousins throughout the interview. He revered Herb for owning a car, and Herb and Donald's graduation, employment, and lifestyles fascinated Norman.

Although distant in age, the influence of Norman's cousins on his career choice and academic aspirations and achievements are not unusual. Role models influence people, no matter how removed from everyday life, because they are admired (Nauta & Kokaly, 2001). Herb and Donald may be characterized as Stage role models, or role models who "assist others in identifying what they should do or how they should be" (Nauta & Kokaly, 2001, p. 82) because their identification as Ph.D. touting chemists was something to which Norman attached merit. That attachment drove him down a similar path. Norman went on to earn his bachelor's degree in chemistry from University of Massachusetts at Amherst, his master's degree, and Ph.D. in chemistry from the University of New Hampshire and worked as an inorganic chemist developing the microchip with IBM.

Conclusion and Implications

In this study, I co-constructed Norman's oral history and used narrative analysis of the transcripts, often attending to *how* he spoke about his memories, to uncover a story of resilience. I showed how Norman's connection with family and community, his family's efforts to shelter him from Arthur's death, involvement in high quality extracurricular endeavors, and powerful role models to follow gave him the support he needed to overcome his father's death and lead a successful life.

While co-constructing Norman's path to resilience, I reflected that factors leading to his resilience mirror the therapeutic approach at Blue Hills. A majority of students served by Blue Hills experienced acute, ongoing, and early traumas. The result of these traumatic experiences included emotional dysregulation. What might have seemed innocent and

unthreatening to their teachers and peers may have triggered trauma responses in these students, which would lead to reactive consequences in rigid and punitive school settings. Missing instructional time and frequently being singled out often stigmatized and labeled these students as troubled and troubling. Students at Blue Hills often underperformed academically due to overactive survival responses and a lack of access to effective social supports for them and their families. Students in residential treatment settings may struggle with the demands of school due to emotional, behavioral, and academic difficulties attributable to their trauma histories (Day et al, 2017).

At Blue Hills, like with Norman's adolescence, students find their place as part of something bigger than themselves. They are held to a consistent schedule with daily responsibilities wherein staff and peers hold them accountable for their actions. They see how they can impact their community. Students acquire new and identity-forming skills. For instance, they take up juggling, practice team sports that once seemed overwhelming for them, go mountain biking, backpacking, and skiing, and learn to cook, draw, paint, and play musical instruments. Students gain a sense of meaning and identity. Finally, staff at Blue Hills provide a gamut of potential role models with whom the students can identify. Students begin to think to themselves, "Hey, I can be successful and help others just like that person." Together, seeing themselves as essential to the operations of their community, participating in meaningful activities, and identifying with role models drive students to develop a positive self-concept, feel confident in and responsible for their own decision-making, and undergo changes that support their transition back into their home communities. With a current rate of recidivism at 10%, in a program that typically has 8-12 students at a time, Blue Hills is successful in boosting resilience.

Each of these factors: community, meaningful activities, and role models, can contribute to resilience. Together, they may help students recover from difficult life experiences and continue a fulfilling trajectory. In my quest to support trauma-affected students, Norman's story underscored the power of the work done at Blue Hills. This connection has important implications for schools within both residential and general education settings. First, the literature supports the notion that relationships and a sense of connection to a community support resilience against trauma (Cozolino, 2013; Perry & Szalavitz, 2017; van Deroort Lipsky & Burk, 2009). Even so, teachers with large class sizes and overpacked curricula may struggle to know *how* to create connection and community. Also, teachers may develop deficit lenses regarding trauma-affected students and their families, failing to tap into the community's cultural capital (Yosso, 2006).

Both Norman and the students of Blue Hills developed community through ritual and mutual accountability. Teachers may consider developing shared secular rituals to celebrate important academic and out-of-school milestones in their students' lives, no matter the grade level. Such rituals would include learning what is important to students and their families and what is going on in their home lives of which they and their families are proud. What is more, simple humanization practices such as giving students high fives, greeting them when they walk in the door each day (Cook et al., 2018), developing and talking about shared memories, knowing what is going on in their lives, and being involved in the community at large can help teachers develop a sense of community and belonging in classrooms.

Involvement in meaningful activities, like Norman's passion for scouting or the Blue Hills students' daily practice with new hobbies and group activities, can increase academic achievement and support resilience (Peck et al., 2008). What should be of particular attention for educators, administrators, and policymakers is the quality, quantity, and availability of extracurricular involvement for all students, regardless of income. Students at Blue Hills benefited from multiple and various organized activities because staff members provided a balance of structured social, emotional, and behavioral support and freedom for students to

learn from mistakes. In a longitudinal study exploring the impact of extracurricular activity quality on academic resilience of at-risk youth, Peck et al. (2008) found that college enrollment increased for at-risk youth involved in multiple positive activities (as opposed to no activities). What is more, Eccles and Gootman (2002) described the characteristics that make extracurricular activities an instrument for resilience. These characteristics include structure, pro-social norms, and skill building opportunities, which were all present in strong doses at Blue Hills. The sheer volume of time he spent engaged in the Boy Scouts of America can be linked to his success as an adult. Participation in programs like Boy Scouts of America typically requires sufficient intensity and duration to successfully nurture prosocial development (Polson et al., 2013).

All the same, conditions produced by a lack of resources may put students living in poverty at a higher risk of experiencing trauma than their more economically advantaged peers (Shamblin et al., 2016). Students in poverty, attending under resourced schools, may not have adequate access to extracurricular activities (Gorski, 2018), which could, if available, mitigate the impacts of that trauma (Peck et al., 2008; Sauerwein et al., 2016). Educators can address this double-edged sword by “refusing to charge families money for any educational experience” (Gorski, 2018, p. 155) including extracurricular activities, providing transportation, and shifting their paradigms to work around factors that typically make participation difficult for families in poverty (Gorski, 2018).

Norman’s attachment to his older cousins shaped his identity as a high achieving chemist. The impact of Norman’s role models matches the core belief of the Blue Hills’ philosophy that student identification with positive role models can support resilience and recovery from trauma. Empirical studies also provide evidence that identification with role models supports positive impacts such as higher motivation (Lockwood et al., 2002), increased self-esteem (Yancey et al., 2002), and improved academic achievement (Herrmann et al., 2016). Educational practitioners must attend not only to developing students’ attachment to positive role models, but they also should focus on supporting students’ identity development based from role models. Role models can scaffold students to their future selves by modeling strategies for success (Strasser-Burke & Symonds, 2019). Schools can support students’ identification of role models by being involved in the community, tapping into individuals in the community with whom students can identify, and helping them to analyze ways in which role models achieved the students’ desired outcome.

The mirrored experiences of Norman and the students at Blue Hills, although separated by time, space, and context, provide a clear picture of factors leading to resilience. Through oral history and narrative analysis, I uncovered how connection, involvement, and modeling helped Norman overcome the loss of his father. Implications provide a path for educators, administrators, and policymakers to support the resilience of trauma-affected youth and help avoid the need for incarceration and residential treatment.

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