## **Facing Our Fears**

### Confronting Life's Traumatic Experiences through Literature

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I hide my tears when I say your name.

But the pain in my heart is still the same.

Although I smile and seem carefree

there is no one that misses you ...... more than me!

Anonymous, 2018

#### Introduction

Many children today experience childhood without a biological parent. In the United States, there has been a drastic increase in the attention and research on a child's effects with an absent father. The U.S Census Bureau (2002) has reported that more than 24 million children live in a home deprived of a father's physical presence. As cited in Based on accumulated research, it is evident that a father's involvement has a significant impact on their children in terms of increased cognitive, social, and emotional developmental abilities and decreased negative behavioral consequences.

This curriculum unit is designed to teach special education students in the third through fifth at Oberle Elementary School. Oberle ES is a Title I school in the Christina School District. Many of the students who attend Oberle ES are eligible to receive free or reduced lunch by the federal guidelines. The special education students all identified as having either academic and/or behavior disabilities will be selected to participate based

on their responses to a questionnaire about family dynamics. Guardian or parental consent will be required before the student eligibility to participate.

Oberle ES, home of the Penguins, is the largest elementary school in the Christina School District. The school is located in the suburban geographical portion of the school district. The current enrollment at Oberle ES is approximately 594 students in grades KN – 5. The seventy-five faculty members services this diverse population. The school also employs two guidance counselors, three full-time behavior interventionists, and a Delaware State Family Assistance Counselor.

Oberle has a dominating Hispanic population. Many of our parents have immigrated to Delaware from Hispanic Countries, particularly Mexico. Many immigrants contribute to the labor workforce. In 2018, 91,230 immigrants (foreign-born individuals) comprised 9 percent of the population in Delaware.<sup>3</sup> During the same period, about 6 percent of children in the state were U.S. citizens living with at least one undocumented family member (11,875 children in total).<sup>4</sup> Undocumented parents leave the child vulnerable to having an absent parent in the household.

Oberle ES also enrolls students from Sparrows Run, a high crime development.

All students receive free breakfast lunch and snacks as part of a federally funded grant.

Oberle ES is a "Leader in ME" school. The students are given Stephen Covey's 7 Habits to a Happy Kids to incorporate into their daily life. These skills serve as the foundation of the school's social and emotional learning component. Oberle Elementary School's mission is "Developing Leaders: one student at a time."

#### Rationale

It is very upsetting to see children struggle to make sense of loss. The loss of a parent may be a traumatic experience for many children. It may be accompanied by other traumatic experiences, such as encountering uncertainty regarding how long the parent will remain away from the household. In some cases, many children anticipate the return home of the parent. When faced with loss, children seek answers to tough questions: Why did this happen to my family and me? What is going to happen now? Adults try their best to provide kid-friendly answers, which are often empty and lack a sense of security. We do not have all of the perfect solutions. The best help we can give children is an attentive ear to express their feelings, concerns, and questions.

Childhood trauma is a silent epidemic. We often think of trauma as an event, which occurs under extreme circumstances, such as physical abuse, rape, domestic violence, neglect, bullying, or experiencing a natural disaster. However, acute trauma is often common in children. These subtle events can have life-lasting effects on a child's life. The human response to psychological trauma is one of the most important public health problems in the world. The CDC estimates that overall costs for childhood and adolescent trauma exceed those of other illnesses such as cancer or heart disease. <sup>5</sup> Children showed a 4 to 12 times greater risk for developing alcoholism, depression, drug abuse, and suicide attempts; a 2 to 4 times greater risk for smoking, >50 sex partners, and sexually transmitted disease; a 1.4 to 1.6 times greater risk for physical inactivity and

obesity; and a 1.6 to 2.9 times greater risk for ischemic heart disease, cancer, chronic lung disease, skeletal fractures, hepatitis, stroke, diabetes, and liver disease.<sup>6</sup>

Van der Kolk's research has shown that childhood trauma can be devastating. When children are faced with life-threatening or other traumatic experiences, they primarily focus on survival and self-protection. They experience a mixture of numbness, withdrawal, confusion, shock, and speechless terror. Children who experience trauma at a young age can have suffered from lasting consequences that not only have an impact on their life but can be passed down through generations. Childhood trauma is a silent epidemic. We often think of trauma as an event, which occurs under extreme circumstances, such as physical abuse, rape, domestic violence, neglect, bullying, or experiencing a natural disaster. However, acute trauma is often common in children. These subtle events can have life-lasting effects on a child's life. Children who grow up in an environment with an absent parent can suffer lasting emotional damages. These children are more likely to drop out of school, end up in poverty, have a child out of wedlock, suffer from addiction, or end up involved in the judicial system. In some families, the parental absence is often accompanied by symptoms of poor psychosocial well-being, an increase in stress, change in behavior, and developing unhealthy sleep patterns.

An absent parent is often viewed as someone who has appeared to abandon their child. They may not live with the child or make an effort to see or bond with their child for several months or years. A parent's absence can be caused by divorce, immigration,

incarceration, or death. A parent-child separation can be incredibly stressful and emotionally painful for children. The prolonged separation of young children and parents can be traumatic, potentially resulting in posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and long-lasting impairments in functioning.

One of the most traumatic events that can occur during childhood is the death of a parent. According to the Social Security Administration, in the United States, approximately 2.5 million children under the age of 18 have experienced the death of a parent. Research indicates that the death of a parent places a child at risk for many negative outcomes, including mental health problems. <sup>7</sup> When a parent dies, life for the child often becomes infinitely uncertain and scary. This leaves the child to wonder what is to come in their life. In some cases, a child may experience increase family pressure and take on the responsibilities of the dead parent. Some children may also isolate from friends and things that they like to do. The educator must identify these negative outcomes associated with parental death and teach children strategies to grieve healthily.

A new interest in research is the examination of the effects of divorce and the absence of the father in the household. According to the Social Security Administration, fatherless households lead the absent parent statistics 4 to 1 against any other household. Research is particularly interested in the child's economic success and social-emotional well-being throughout the course of their life. Research has documented a negative association between living apart from a biological father and multiple domains of offspring well-being, including education, mental health, family relationships, and labor

market outcomes.<sup>9</sup> Children who grow up without their father's presence develop feelings of resentment. This especially occurs when the father is alive and living with another family.

Recently there have been some exciting discussions throughout education on the impact of trauma on students. While there is a wealth of research documenting the impact of trauma on a child's health and ability to learn, there is often a lack of clarity about instructional strategies for teachers. As van der Kolk notes, trauma is specifically an event that overwhelms the central nervous system, altering the way we process and recall memories. "Trauma is not the story of something that happened back then," he adds. "It's the current imprint of that pain, horror, and fear living inside people." <sup>10</sup>

Individuals who face some sort of Traumatized event frequently develop posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), a disorder in which the memory of the traumatic event comes to dominate the victims' consciousness, depleting their lives of meaning and pleasure. A child can have a traumatic stress reaction without having a diagnosis of PTSD. When victims experience trauma, they try to cope by taking action, while others dissociate. Neither response prevents the subsequent development of PTSD, though problem-focused coping reduces the chance of developing PTSD, while dissociation during a traumatic event is an important predictor for the development of subsequent PTSD. Symptoms of trauma do not necessarily develop immediately or soon after a traumatic event. Delayed onset PTSD may develop years after the original event, it may sometimes be triggered by something unrelated. The longer the traumatic experience

lasts, the more likely the victim is to react with dissociation. Bessel A. van der Kolk, M.D., has been active as a clinician, researcher, and teacher in the area of posttraumatic stress and related phenomena since the 1970s. Bessel van der Kolk MD spends his career studying how children and adults adapt to traumatic experiences and have translated emerging findings from neuroscience and attachment research to develop and study a range of treatments for traumatic stress in children and adults. He has focused on studying treatments that stabilize physiology, increase executive functioning, and help traumatized individuals to feel fully alert to the present.

### Family Structure

In the 1980's television show such as The Cosby Show, Bart Simpson, and Good Times all depicted what was once considered the traditional family. The traditional family was long held in esteem in society as being ideal in which to raise children. Children in a conventional family receive strength and stability from having two parents and therefore have more opportunities due to financial and emotional stability. However, trends in the household and the family composite have evolved In more recent years. The percentage of traditional families in the U.S. has steadily declined over the past 40 years. In 1970, traditional families accounted for 40% of U.S. households. By 1990, the percentage of conventional families had fallen to 25.6%. In 2010, the U.S. Census Bureau estimated that only 20% of all U.S. households were traditional families. Another term used to refer to a traditional family is a nuclear family.

As defined by the United States Census (2020), a family is a group of two people or more (one of whom is the householder) related by birth, marriage, or adoption and residing together; all such people (including related subfamily members) are considered as members of one family.<sup>13</sup>

#### Nontraditional families include:

Cohabitation families, or unwed couples who live in the same household

Single-parent families, which consist of one parent and one or more biological or adopted children

Extended families, which consist of two or more adults from different generations of the same family who maintain a household together

Same-sex families, which consist of couples of the same sex and one or more children.

There is no right or wrong answer when it comes to what is the best type of family structure. As long as the family is filled with love and support for one another, it tends to be successful and thrive.

#### Growth Mindset

We live in a world today where so many children face traumatic events at such a young age. Children who experience the death of a loved one, a life threating illness, the stress of living in poverty, or any form of abuse develops some form of negative lasting effects

on their life. Even more tragic is the number of children who are suffering the effects of ongoing stress disorder bought on by trauma. The effects of stress and trauma on the brain in the classroom can affect a student's academic outcome and alter their behavior as well. It is the school's responsibility to create intentional strategies, which give students the tools to overcome the effects of stress created by trauma.

Developing a growth mindset allows a child to embrace the idea that things can be different from how they are feeling about their current situation. The ability to think positively about overcoming a challenge or an obstacle requires well developed strategies and supportive teacher instruction in facing trauma that is present in their life.

#### Trauma and the Mindset

When a child experience trauma, breaking out of a fixed mindset can be a daunting experience. The brain develops during the early stage of life. In addition, during early childhood a child is experiencing academic opportunities to develop their academic knowledge. The brain also experience change when a child experiences trauma. These activities occurring simultaneously can have damaging efforts on the child's social development. Children have a hard time perceiving dangerous situations and reacting according to the event. Usually the either over values or play down an event. These events cause mindset to change in a child.

### **Growth Mindset Intervention**

Every student enters into a new classroom with a different mindset. Some students will enter into a new school year, excited about the opportunity to learn new things; on the other hand, others begin their new school year discouraged, with a lack of motivation. Early research conducted by Carol Dweck has shown that our mindset towards ability levels has a significant effect on our learning. <sup>14</sup> Mindsets are a set of beliefs or "self-perception" a person has about their intellect. The way an individual looks at their intelligence shapes their academic processes. Having a growth mindset is a belief that a person's intelligence can increase with effort. A fixed mindset is a belief that a person's intelligence is predetermined and limited. The sizeable achievement gap that exists between students who face external vulnerabilities, and their peers is a common trend across the country. Fortunately, mindset intervention research has consistently targeted those students most in need, with exciting success.

The implementation of this curriculum using a growth mindset intervention on the academic performance among students faced with vulnerabilities of an absent parent will add to the significance of the research to both education practitioners and the field of Growth Mindset. After learning about growth mindset statements, the intervention will assist the students in developing their growth mindset statement. Growth mindset strategies help create resilience in students. Finding a way to help these students develop resilience, support each other, and create a sense of belonging while meeting the myriad of pacing calendars is a tall order for even the most skilled, which I was not. Research base around mindset and resilience has advanced a great deal, and there are several

resources available for educators to efficiently incorporate mindset interventions into their instruction. Once we consider the number of youth today growing up under adverse circumstances, it may be critical to embed growth mindset and resilience training into the daily curriculum, we are to begin providing high-quality, trauma-informed care

Most people who have experienced a traumatic event must recover naturally from the symptoms of trauma, given time, and the right support and conditions. Research shows benefits from early intervention during the acute phase in the first four weeks after trauma. This helps to alleviate symptoms and reduce the likelihood of developing PTSD. As in treatment, the therapeutic and supportive relationship is key to success. When working with growth mindset practices, be mindful that some strategies will work right away and some will not be as successful. Allow for grace. Understand that this journey must be taken one day at a time. The pain associated with the loss of a parent will likely never go away completely but the surviving parent and their children will find happiness again.

Oberle ES has a population of students that have been identified with experienced some type of childhood adversity. The Harry Potter books provide a valuable and innovative resource for educators who support children with complicated and traumatic lives. These books could be read to students or made available for upper-grade students themselves. When a book is read to a child, they can imagine themselves in the story. There are many books on the educational market about appropriate behavior and character traits; however, I choose this series of books because I wanted to explore books

that deal with actual childhood adversity. The Harry Potter Series are books that could be used with children who have ACEs, Adverse Childhood Experiences.

The seven books in the series are vivid examples of real-life situations. The author uses the elaborate and magical art of storytelling to tell the story of a boy who experiences and overcomes trauma. As in the early books of the series, children who experience trauma face difficulties building positive relationships and healthy attachments. I watch students struggle with grief and rage throughout the school day as they seek to gain control of a situation. The unit will provide nurturing discussion topics for students to engage with teachers, peers, and parents/guardians. The curriculum will offer several quick therapeutic lessons that help students repair and improve relationships, heal past trauma, and change problematic behaviors.

Through this unit, I want students to imagine themselves in the story situations as they will discover that the aftermath of trauma is LOVE.

### **CURRICULUM DESIGN**

This curriculum designed for grades Kindergarten through 12th aims to provide a comprehensive program to help students identify and discuss their emotions involving the absence of a biological parent.

I carefully selected academic strategies to create lessons for students with diverse backgrounds and skill levels. Teachers will be able to use this curriculum to make

connections for the student participants and the storybook characters. Also included in this curriculum is moment-to-moment support for facilitators to address any highs and lows of student's feelings/emotions that may arise within their group. The teacher will analyze the instruction and activities to make sure that their students understand the content. The author (I) have removed all academic responsibility, such as content-based test and quizzes, from the lessons and activities. The importance of recreational reading and its impact on children's motivation, attitudes toward reading, and reading achievement. The curriculum's objective is to allow the students to enjoy a good book while identifying with the main character and theme to help them develop the confidence to discuss and heal from the absence of a parent.

The facilitator will select students to participate in a group for a six-week session. The students for each group will be chosen based on the category of the absence of parents. The facilitator will identify each participant with a level of trauma as mild, moderate, or intense. Students need parent or guardian consent for participation in each group. The facilitator will take daily notes and collect all of the student activities.

During these discussions, the adult must keep their responses simple. We do not want to give the child more to think about than necessary. Children know when adults are genuine and honest. When children see that adults have strong feelings and find ways to cope, it helps them learn how to manage. This is a significant opportunity to show children ways to understand and express their upset feelings. Sharing the experience of loss with your students helps everyone recognize, feel, and cope with strong emotions.

Before instruction begins, the teacher needs to take the time to explain the idea of "passing" during discussions that include personal opinions. Students need to understand that they do not have to share personal views or beliefs if they so choose. Help students differentiate between facts and opinions. Be sure that students know that the decision to share an idea or thought during one class session does not mean they must continue to share during other lessons. Conversely, if a student opts to "pass" during a discussion, he or she can decide to share an opinion or belief during another class session. Students must also understand that they should not share personal information about others during class discussions. Students' families and friends have the right to privacy.

## **Curriculum objectives**

### Objectives:

The main objective of this curriculum is to transition their thoughts about their absent parent. Students will make connections between them and the main character of the book selected to be used in the intervention. Each day the teacher will attempt to accomplish the below lesson objective to ensure that the book study is running smoothly.

During the book study the students will

- Describe the main character, the setting and events of the story.
- Compare the main character, the setting and events of the story to you.
- Define Boggarts including what form they would take for different group members, with the group,

- Define and identify fears; illustrate a fear, draw a transformation that might make the imagery less frightening
- Develop a ritual that repels Boggarts as a strategy to managing fear

**Teaching Strategies** 

**Book Study** 

The student groups will participate in a book study. The objectives of a book study is to encourage turn-taking, highlight different perspectives on one issue, and encourage alternative means of participation (e.g., writing, drawing). The books chosen all have characters who experience the absence of a parent(s). Books study groups are formed to open up the opportunity for a specific book to be read and discussed by the teacher and students. Book study groups promote conversations among teachers and school staff that will lead to the application of new ideas in classrooms and the improvement of existing skills. Thoughtful book study discussion builds classroom community, strengthen reading comprehension skills, and develop higher-order thinking skills.

## **Chunking Strategy**

"Chunking the text" means breaking the text down into smaller parts. Casteel theory states that the presentation of chunked material separated into meaningful related groups of words improve the comprehension of some readers, most noticeably those readers who are classified as poor or low ability reader. <sup>17</sup> The bite-sized pieces of the text

are beneficial to students allowing the brain quickly to digest new information. The reason the brain needs this assistance is that working memory, which is where we manipulate information, holds a limited amount of information at one time.<sup>18</sup>

Sometimes teachers chunk the text in advance for students, especially if this is the first-time students have used this strategy. Other times, teachers ask students to chunk the text. Students can work on chunking texts with partners or their own. Depending on the students' reading level, the lengths of chunks can vary. A struggling reader may work with phrases rather than sentences. A stronger reader can often work with longer chunks of the text. The chunked text can be used to evaluate students' understanding and reading ability. The chunking strategy is a useful and good technique to use in teaching reading comprehension because this strategy helps students understand and remember the information quickly. <sup>19</sup> Facilitators will use other academic teaching strategies during the book study.

### Activities

I choose to use the Harry Potter series of books as the primary teaching tool for this curriculum unit. I will begin with book three, The Prisoner of Azkaban. The J.K.

Rowlings' Harry Potter series is about an orphan who also happens to be a wizard. The stories are about mythical characters, magic, family, trauma, and survival. The books have a dark undertone and filled with images of death and loss. The main character's first experience with death occurred at an early age when the evil Lord Voldemort murdered his parents. He then grew up in an abusive household with his uncle, aunt, and cousin.

Harry decides to leave his dysfunctional family and enters the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, where again, he experiences trauma. The series of books takes us on a journey with a boy who searches out to find his place in the world and settle into a forever home. I hope to continue this curriculum through the series because as you reach the fourth and fifth books, you see Harry realize that the events of his life were traumatic, and he confronts his trauma head-on.

- Book 4. Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire (2000).
- Book 5. Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix (2003).

**Activity One**: Scribble Art

Each session will begin with a SCRIBBLE ART activity. As defined by the American Art Therapy Association (2007), art therapy is an integrative mental health and human services profession that enriches the lives of individuals, families, and communities through active art-making, creative process, applied psychological theory, and human experience within a psychotherapeutic relationship. <sup>20</sup>Art Therapy, facilitated by a professional art therapist, effectively supports personal and relational treatment goals. Art Therapy is used to improve cognitive, and sensory-motor functions, foster selfesteem, and self-awareness, cultivate emotional resilience, promote insight, enhance social skills, reduce, and resolve conflicts and distress, and advance societal and ecological change.

Color is a form of nonverbal communication. Each color represents an expression

of feelings. This activity will use basic colors. Primary colors are base colors in the art

color wheel.<sup>21</sup> Colors are red, yellow, blue, green, black, and white. The facilitator will

create anecdotal notes based on the SCRIBBLE ART DRAWING activity rubric.

**Activity Two**: *Draw a family Portrait* 

As a group, the teacher and students will create a family portrait of the main

character's family in the story. The teacher can use resource cards to display different

members of the family. The teacher will identify the type of family by definitions

provided in this document. Provide students with paper and coloring utensils to create a

family portrait of their family. The teacher will then compete a graphic organizer

comparing the two family. This will create a connection between the child and the book

character.

**Activity Three**: Introduction to *Growth Mindset Statements* 

The teacher will introduction *Growth Mindset Statements* to students. The teacher will

define and provide students with examples of Growth Mindset Statement. These

statements should be posted around the classroom. The teacher should begin to use these

statements when communicating with students whenever possible.

**Activity Four**: *Growth Mindset Activities* 

The students will complete a minimum of three worksheet pertaining to mindsets. As an alternate, students can create a free account to the Mindset Works Website. The online activities will teach them about growth mindsets.

**Activity Five**: Develop a Growth Mindset Statement

Using activity three, students will create a *Growth Mindset Statements*. These statements should be written on sentence strips and displayed on student's desk.

#### Resources

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C. McFarlane, & L. Weisaeth (Eds.), Traumatic stress: The effects of overwhelming experience on mind, body, and society (p. 303–327). The Guilford Press.

### **CURRICULUM RESOURCES:**

J. W. Rawlings; <u>HARRY POTTER and PRISONER OF AZKABAN</u>

William H. Armstrong; <u>SOUNDER</u>

Erich Kästne; The Parent Trap

Teaching strategies during the book study.

Objective	Strategy
To encourage	Concentric Circles
turn-taking	Also called Inside/Outside Circles. One group
	of students forms an "inside"
	circle, facing the second group of students in
	an "outside" circle. Students
	pair off to discuss a prompt or question, then
	the outside circle rotates so
	that students have a new pair for the next
	round.
	Fishbowl
	A smaller group of students discusses a topic while the rest of the class
	observes the process or takes turns entering
	the "fishbowl" to participate.
	Think-Pair-Share
	Students have time to individually reflect on
	their response before sharing it
	with one other student. Pairs report on their
	conversations to the larger
	group.
Highlight different	Four Corners
perspectives on one	Students must stand in a corner of the room
issue	to indicate their position about
	a statement (strongly agree, agree, disagree,
	strongly agree), then they
	engage in a discussion about their opinions.
Encourage alternative	Chalk Talk
means of participation	Also known as Big Paper. Students silently
(e.g., writing, drawing)	write their responses to text
	excerpts posted around the room, including
	posing questions or responding
	to other students.
	World Café Students discuss tonics in small groups at
	Students discuss topics in small groups at tables, writing or drawing their
	ideas on a paper "tablecloth," and move to a
	new table for each round.
	new table for each round.

### **COLOR CHART**

# **BLACK**

sophistication power mystery formality evil death

# **GRAY**

stability security strength of character authority maturity

# **PURPLE**

royalty luxury dignity wisdom spirituality passion vision magic

# YELLOW

joy cheerfulness friendliness intellect energy warmth caution cowardice

# WHITE

freshness hope goodness light purity cleanliness simplicity coolness

# PINK

romance compassion faithfulness beauty love friendship sensitivity

# RED

danger passion daring romance style excitement urgency energetic

# **BLUE**

peace stability calmness confidence tranquility sincerity affection integrity

# **GREEN**

life

growth environment healing money safety relaxation freshness

## Appendix A

### Common Core Standards:

The curriculum will be aligned with the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) in Literacy and Social and Emotional learning goal (SEL).

## Appendix B

## Technology

We live in a digital era, and educators should embrace technology to help their students find success. The Coronavirus pandemic required schools in America and around the world to shift to remote, video, learning. Teacher can connect with their students through online meeting tool such as ZOOM, Skype, or FACEBOOK Video. Remote learning can include many different learning activities. Some learning activities can be completed by use of a compute, tablet, or smartphone. Remote learning is a great strategy to deliver lessons to students while remaining at home. However, it is important to develop engaging activities for students while not having the opportunity for student- teacher interaction. To effectively deliver remote learning school district should assure that students have adequate one to one compute device and efficient internet access.

This curriculum is designed to support both remote and in-person learning. The materials used are all available in a digital format. There are also movie versions of the books.

# Notes

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