



Trauma and Developmental Disabilities in a Preschool Setting

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Introduction

Background

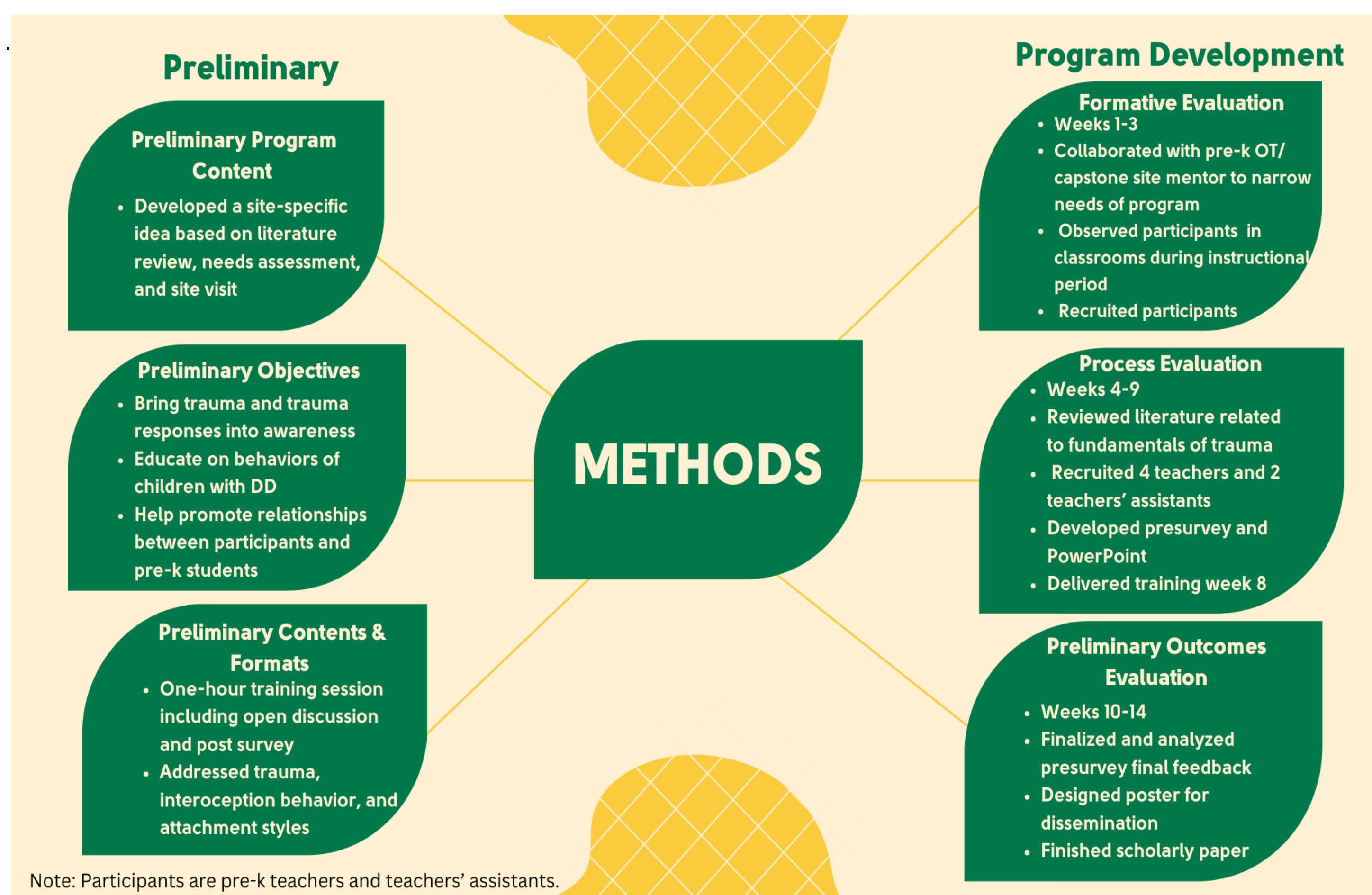
- By age seventeen, two out of every three school-aged children are likely to have experienced at least one traumatic event (Perfect et al., 2016).
- Trauma is an experience or event that is considered life threatening including natural disasters, neglect, exposure to violence, and abuse (i.e. sexual, physical, or emotional).

- The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) reports that one in six of children ages three to seventeen have at least one developmental disabilities (DD) in the United States.
- DD include but are not limited to cerebral palsy, intellectual disability, autism spectrum disorder, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, speech and language disorders, and specific learning disabilities and affect physical, cognitive, speech or language, psychological, and self-care early in childhood with effects lasting throughout the lifespan (Nair et al., 2023).
- Children with DD may have unexpected behaviors at home, school, and in the community; however, these unexpected behaviors can be a window into how they are experiencing the world.
- These unexpected behaviors seen among children with DD are “expressions of unmet need that children either cannot express in words or lack previous connections of feeling to identify emotions” (R. Ashcraft, personal communication, March 28, 2023).
- Emotional expression is rooted in the sensory nervous system and is regulated through a process known as interoception, which most children with DD have difficulty with as they have trouble with sensory integration or in other words understanding external information in the environment (Cheung, P. and Siu, A., 2009).
- Interoception can be defined as “an individual’s ability to detect and track internal bodily cues.” (Garfinkel et al, 2015), and a lack of interoceptive connection can impede on a person’s ability to develop healthy attachment styles.
- Attachment style play a vital role in day-to-day human interactions and are needed throughout daily occupations.
- Children with DD are faced with experiencing trauma at a disproportionate rate than their typically developing peers (Santoro et al., 2018) because they have difficulties with expressing their needs and appear vulnerable (Elklit et al., 2023).

Purpose

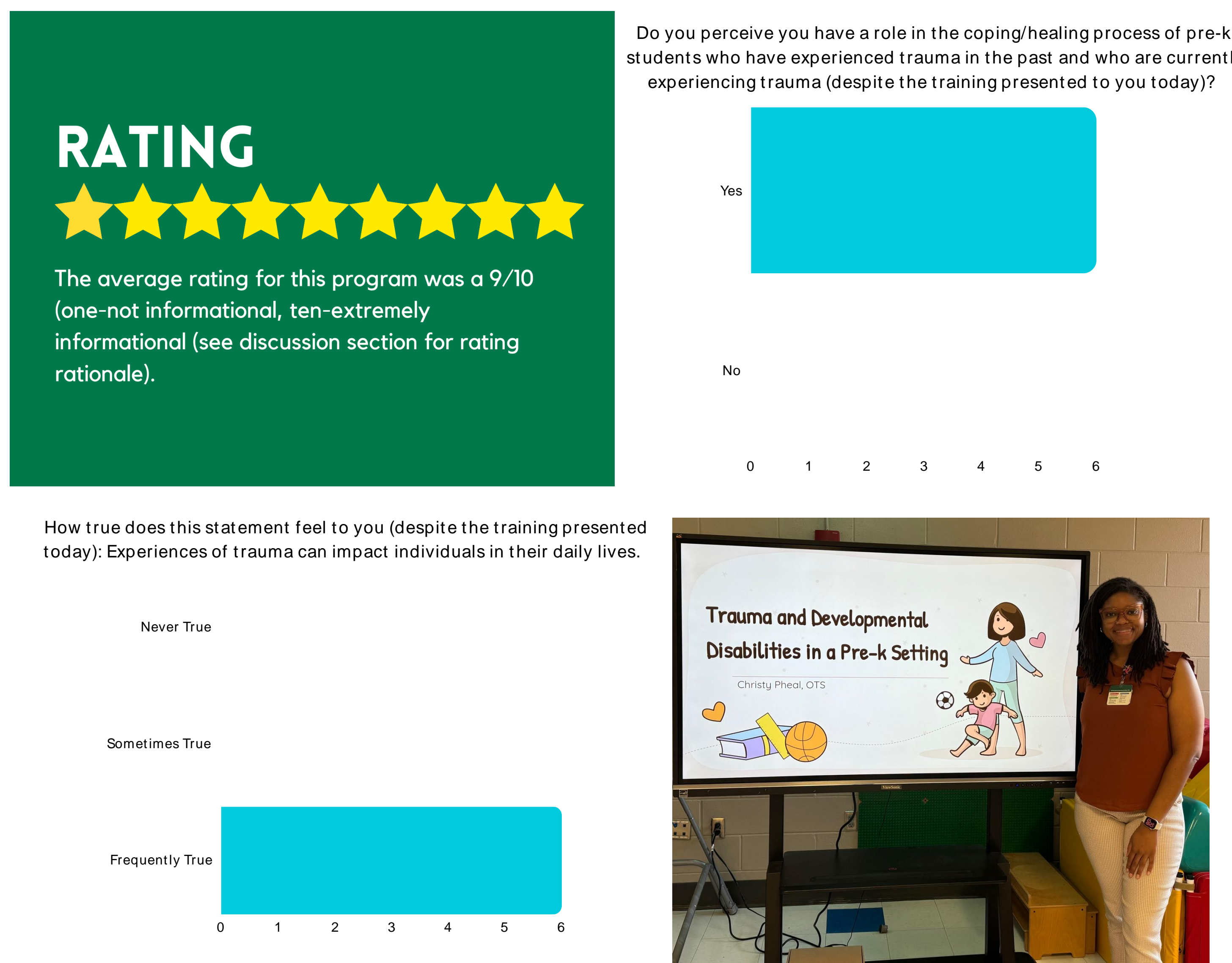
- Since children spend most of their waking hours at school, preschool teachers and teachers’ assistants play a vital role in interoceptive development in children with DD who have experienced trauma.
- Since occupational therapy practitioners (OTPs) have an in-depth understanding of the unique transaction between people, environments, and occupations, the purpose of this project is to explore the role of OTPs in educating teachers and teachers’ assistants on their role in enhancing classroom interactions that promote occupations in children with DD who have experienced trauma.

Methods



Results

Key Findings



Discussion

Topic 1: Need for Trauma Training

- Marx (2015) found that teachers’ perceptions of problem behaviors were positively impacted after attending a trauma workshop. The idea of problem behaviors were changed, and the ability to view their students in a more positive light was changed.
- Rosenthal and colleagues found teachers who expected their students IQs to rise did, and students IQs that were not expected did not rise.
- Since all participants acknowledge that trauma impacts individuals in the daily lives and perceive themselves as having a role in coping/healing process of their students who have been impacted or are being impacted by trauma, it can be inferred that children at the Burkett Center will excel academically.

Topic 2: Evolution of the Project

- Burkett’s system of operations to deal with behaviors follows a behavioristic approach vs. trauma-informed approach. A behavioristic approach considers behavior as an isolated cause and effect relationship rather than focusing on bigger picture external factors (i.e. trusted individuals) which trauma-informed approaches consider. Therefore, presentation had to cover the fundamentals of trauma.
- Trust–Based Relational Intervention® (TBRI®), a trauma-informed, attachment-centered intervention, was used as a call to action for participants to initiate learning (Purvis, 2024) .

Topic 3: Evolution of ACOTE Areas Addressed

- Initially, the program was written to cover Accreditation Council for Occupational Therapy Education (ACOTE) of education and advocacy. Adding both areas was not feasible due to time constraints. Since there was a need for trauma education, education was the ACOTE area addressed in this project.

Topic 4: Next steps for Project Development

- If this project were continued on a systems level, advocacy for the role of OTPs delivering trauma-informed continuing education within school systems would be appropriate. This continuation would be most appropriate to a population such as administrators, principals, and superintendents who can make change on a systems level.

Discussion (continued)

- If this project were continued on a classroom level, a training on trauma-informed strategies to utilize in the classroom would be appropriate. Teachers post survey responses requested strategies to managing sensory integration/processing related to behaviors that stem from trauma.

Implications of Practice

- Results of this program provide supporting evidence of the role of OTPs to educate pre-k teachers and teachers’ assistants on identifying unmet needs that present as unexpected behaviors which stem from trauma, and results convey teachers’ willingness to continue education in trauma training.

Limitations

- The student developer (SD) ’s wealth of knowledge on the topic was limited while creating the training as student is an entry level occupational therapy student. Level of knowledge made it difficult in analyzing observations i.e. (identifying behaviorism).
- Feasibility of project completion within 14-weeks posed a challenge. Due to feasibility, there may have been a level of bias while completing post survey as time to present did not allow for a pre survey.

Conclusion

- OTPs have an in-depth understanding of people, occupations, and environments and possess skills to educate teachers and their assistants on the overlap between trauma and DD in education. Teachers at the site were able to acknowledge trauma exists and perceive themselves as having a role in the healing process of children who have been impacted. Future steps include systems level advocacy and training on behavior strategies that stem from trauma.

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