

THESIS/DISSERTATION SUBMISSION

Instructor Communication of Social Support With Trauma-Affected Students

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I , Clement Qenehelo Selepe, declare that the Master's Degree research dissertation or interrelated, publishable manuscripts/published articles, or coursework Master's Degree mini-dissertation that I herewith submit for the Master's Degree qualification in Communication Science at the University of the Free State is my independent work, and that I have not previously submitted it for a qualification at another institution of higher education.



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DEDICATION

To my daughter, Princess Keeley, whose addition to the family at the time of writing this dissertation, brought me so much joy and purpose.

ABSTRACT

Many students in higher education institutions are exposed to traumatic events, such as violence and sexual abuse, which adversely affect their academic and social lives. The classroom is regarded as the most consistent environment in the lives of trauma-affected students and should serve as a therapeutic space for effective intervention. This study investigated how instructors at the University of the Free State communicate social support to trauma-affected students in the field of instructional communication. Guided by the rhetorical and relational goals theory (RRGT) and the social support theory (SST), the study examined how relational and communicative processes shape instructor-student interactions in the context of trauma. Employing an interpretivist design, a qualitative approach, and convenience sampling, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with 15 trauma-affected students and 15 instructors. The data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2022) reflexive thematic analysis. The study found that students often refrain from disclosing their trauma due to fear, distrust, and language barriers. It also illustrates how large class sizes and the absence of trauma-informed training impede communication between instructors and students. Furthermore, the study found that smaller classes and caring communication enhance trust and engagement. The study extends the RRGT and SST by demonstrating that rhetorical success is contingent upon relational safety and linguistic sensitivity in multilingual classrooms. The findings underscore the necessity of trauma-informed training and caring pedagogies to enhance social support in higher education. Ultimately, the study highlights the central role of instructor-student relationships in supporting trauma-affected students and advocates for institutional policies that promote trust, empathy, and culturally responsive communication.

Keywords: instructional communication (IC), trauma-affected students, social support, instructor-student relationship, trauma disclosure

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

HEI	Higher education institution
IC	Instructional communication
PTSD	Post-traumatic stress disorder
RRGT	Rhetorical and relational goals theory
RQ	Research question
SAMHSA	Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration
SCD	Student Counselling and Development
SST	Social support theory
TIC	Trauma-informed care
UFS	University of the Free State

CHAPTER 1:
INTRODUCTION

1.1 CHAPTER PREVIEW

Instructional communication (IC) focuses all dimensions of interaction between instructors and students, as well as interactions among students in the educational environment. This field does not solely concentrate on the pedagogy of communication; it also examines the significance of communication in the processes of teaching and learning. Communication influences the quality of interpersonal relationships that develop between instructors and students, which in turn, directly or indirectly influences teaching and learning (Frymier & Houser, 2000). This study of IC centred on the relationship between instructors and students, specifically investigating the experiences of trauma-affected students as they communicate their trauma to their instructors. Essentially, this research explored how instructors convey social support to trauma-affected students at the University of the Free State (UFS). This inquiry is pertinent, given that instructors are in close proximity to students and that research indicates that many students enter the university environment having already been affected by trauma, while others encounter trauma during their first year of study.

The following sections delineate the background and rationale of the study, identify the research objectives, elucidate the research methodology employed, define key terms, explicate the theoretical framework that underpins this study, and provide an overview of the structure of this dissertation. This chapter establishes a foundational understanding of how communication can serve as a support mechanism for trauma-affected students in higher education contexts.

1.2 BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE

Numerous students in higher education institutions (HEIs) are exposed to traumatic events (Galatzer-Levy et al., 2012), including violence and sexual abuse (Brunzell et al., 2015). There is growing concern regarding the impact of trauma on students, which manifests as difficulties in concentration, lower academic performance, negative self-perception, withdrawal from tasks or peers, and subsequent effects on their classroom engagement (Brunzell et al., 2016; Graham, 2021). Students exhibit these

trauma-related effects in various forms in the classroom setting. Furthermore, the incidence of distress is steadily rising; in South Africa, this increase is associated with events such as the #FeesMustFall movement and the COVID-19 pandemic (Walker, 2022). It is noteworthy that a particular event may be traumatic for one student while another may recover without enduring difficulties (Imad, 2020). Moreover, students who experienced multiple traumas display more pronounced symptoms of trauma and depression compared to those who encountered a singular traumatic event (Frieze, 2015). The provision of individualised social support is therefore critical, which necessitates that support be tailored to the unique needs of each student.

Exposure to trauma not only affects a student's social life and academic progress but may also result in mental health disorders, including depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and substance use disorders (Anders et al., 2012; Walker, 2022). These disorders may manifest as negative classroom behaviours resulting from trauma, thereby raising concerns for instructors and campus mental health support services. Although HEIs have trained health professionals to assist students in coping with their challenges, this support may be insufficient. Consequently, there is a pressing need to investigate the role of instructors in providing support to trauma-affected students.

In South Africa, the burden of trauma is exacerbated by socio-economic disparities (De Beer & Draper-Clarke, 2022), with HEIs expected to address the needs of students from impoverished backgrounds who frequently endure additional trauma (Anderson et al., 2015). By responding to the evolving needs of students, instructors can help students feel supported, manage their trauma, and enhance the instructor-student relationship. Furthermore, effective communication between instructors and students contributes positively to the classroom environment (Wells, 2023), which will enable trauma-affected students to gain confidence, engage actively in class, and improve their academic performance. The communication strategies employed by instructors are essential in aiding students to cope with the repercussions of trauma and must be understood to enhance the effectiveness of instructor-student interactions.

Given the impact of trauma on students' learning, the communication behaviours of instructors are critical to facilitate recovery and engagement. Communication is central

to education (Abdul et al., 2020) and serves as a fundamental link between students and instructors (Mottet et al., 2016). Through both verbal and non-verbal communication, students are able to acquire knowledge and form attitudes regarding themselves, their instructors, and the course content (Richmond et al., 2020). Thus, when instructors communicate effectively, they address the academic and personal needs of students (Hannah, 2023). In the field of communication studies, IC was developed to focus on the role of communication in educational settings, rather than merely on the teaching of communication itself (Myers, 2010). IC therefore encompasses all aspects of communication between instructors and students in the educational environment.

IC stimulates meaning in the lives of students and instructors (Scott & Wheeless, 2017). Students enter the educational environment with diverse educational, social/emotional, health, and physical needs (RB-Banks & Meyer, 2017). Educators are at the forefront of addressing the effects of trauma and the subsequent needs of students (Brunzell et al., 2015; Korinek, 2021). Consequently, research indicates that instructors can mitigate the effects of trauma on students (Davidson, 2017) by communicating supportively, among other strategies. Although IC presents challenges, such as the development of adaptable teaching strategies, it facilitates the establishment of positive instructor-student relationships. Furthermore, teaching and learning are inherently communicative processes (Houser & Hosek, 2022; Hannah, 2023), and learning is enhanced when it occurs within a positive instructor-student relationship (Witt, 2016; Frymier & Houser, 2000).

IC can be employed to provide emotional support, which reduces anxiety among students, improves classroom participation (Perez et al., 2009; Drageset, 2021), and promotes a mutual and trustworthy bond (Frisby & Martin, 2010). In essence, IC is not merely the verbal exchange of information (Mutiah & Utami, 2020) but constitutes a significant component of education and trauma recovery within the educational context. Instructors can utilise communication strategies such as active listening and validating students' experiences to convey social support to trauma-affected students and assist them in the healing process. Another approach for educators to support trauma-affected students is by being trauma-informed, thereby using their understanding of trauma to accommodate survivors and create a trauma-sensitive

environment. IC, in conjunction with trauma-informed care, can expose students to positive university experiences that can mitigate the effects of trauma.

Given the symptoms experienced by trauma-affected students (Smyth, 2017), trauma-informed care can assist in supporting and restoring students' well-being (Downey, 2007; Imad, 2020). Principles of trauma-informed care serve as a framework for understanding the mental, emotional, and physical impacts of trauma. This approach emphasises the importance of supporting and treating the whole person, rather than focusing solely on specific behaviours (Ginwright, 2018). Trauma-informed practices encompass problem-solving skills and social-emotional development that educators are well-positioned to facilitate (Anderson et al., 2015) through communication, among other methods. Additionally, protective factors against suicide and trauma among university students include enhancing self-esteem, social support, maintaining healthy relationships (World Health Organization, 2014), and respecting privacy (Owusu-Ansah et al., 2020). An educator's emotional supportiveness contributes to a positive teacher-student relationship, as it can enhance emotional skills, motivation, and interpersonal relationships (Jennings, 2019). It is crucial to understand students' perceptions of the support they receive from instructors, as well as instructors' needs to communicate supportively.

Although research exists on supporting trauma-affected students (Smyth, 2017; Brunzell et al., 2016; Jennings, 2019), there is a paucity of studies on students' perceptions of how IC is utilised to support trauma-affected students (Graham, 2021). This gap is particularly evident within the South African context; it is therefore essential to evaluate the effectiveness of IC in supporting trauma-affected students. Gaining insight into students' perceptions of the support they receive will enable educational institutions to develop meaningful student support systems.

To address the gaps identified in existing research, this study aimed to understand how instructors communicate social support to trauma-affected students. The classroom is considered the most consistent environment in the lives of trauma-affected students and should serve as a therapeutic space for effective intervention (Perry, 2006). This study therefore sought to comprehend how trauma-affected students at the UFS are supported by lecturers both in and outside the classroom, as well as to understand the needs of instructors to communicate supportively. There is

a relative absence of students' voices in research studies compared to educators' perspectives (Gonzalez et al., 2016). Universities cater to students from previously disadvantaged backgrounds, international students, and those from affluent backgrounds (Lukacs, 2021). Given this diversity, a one-size-fits-all approach may not be effective; it is therefore vital to investigate students' perspectives to enhance their university experiences. This will assist instructors and faculties to understand the needs of trauma-affected students and to provide tailored support to meet those needs. Furthermore, it will minimise disruptions in the classroom, as research shows that emotions influence how individuals perceive activities and approach the learning experience (Hill et al., 2021).

1.3 RESEARCH AIM AND OBJECTIVES

The aim of the study was to explore trauma-affected students' experiences of instructor communication and to identify the needs of instructors in this regard.

The objectives of this study were:

- To understand instructors' communication of social support with trauma-affected students.
- To identify and analyse the perceptions of trauma-affected students regarding lecturer support received when addressing trauma.
- To determine the types of support that trauma-affected students require from their lecturers to effectively navigate their traumas and academic responsibilities.
- To investigate the approaches employed by instructors in interacting with and supporting trauma-affected students in and outside the classroom environment.
- To understand instructors' needs to better prepare them to communicate supportively.
- To establish whether trauma-affected students communicate their trauma experiences to lecturers, and when they disclose this information.
- To establish how class size affects the ability of lecturers to provide individualised support to trauma-affected students.
- To determine if lecturers have formal therapeutic training, or if they serve primarily as a referral point to campus support services.

1.4 METHODOLOGY

1.4.1 Research design

This study aimed to explore the lived experiences of trauma-affected students concerning the IC they receive from their instructors, as well as to identify the needs of instructors in this context. Through in-depth interviews, the participants articulated their perceptions and experiences, which allowed the researcher to identify shared themes that reflect common experiences across individuals.

This study was grounded in the interpretivist paradigm, which enabled the researcher, as noted by Alharahsheh and Pius (2020), to gain depth by seeking to understand perceptions and experiences within specific social contexts. This worldview aligns with the interpretive nature of the social support theory (SST) and the rhetorical and relational goals theory (RRGT), both of which examine meaning-making in human communication. Consequently, reality is subjective, and different individuals may possess their own accounts of unique realities based on the context of their experiences. This study endeavoured to understand students' perceptions of social support from instructors, guided by the interpretivist worldview.

A qualitative approach was employed through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with trauma-affected students to gather detailed descriptions of their experiences (Creswell, 2009) and to interpret reality based on the frame of reference of the participants (Gray, 2004).

The researcher utilised thematic analysis to identify common patterns and meanings in the data, which is consistent with the principles of interpretivism. These themes provide insights into how IC functions as social support for trauma-affected students.

1.4.2 Data collection

The participants were interviewed using in-depth semi-structured interviews to understand their lived experiences. The interviews were audio-recorded, which ensured that the participants' narratives were captured verbatim for subsequent analysis and interpretation. The interviews employed open-ended questions. Brinkmann and Kvale (2018) suggest the inclusion of several questions phrased in a

manner that is comprehensible to the interviewees (Creswell, 2013). The interviews were conducted face to face at the UFS for the convenience of the participants.

1.4.3 Sampling method and size

The participants consisted of students and lecturers recruited from the UFS. The participants were recruited using convenience sampling. This technique is suitable for obtaining the perceptions of participants and allows researchers to establish inclusion criteria and approach potential participants who are readily available and meet the criteria (Golzar et al., 2022). A sample size of 15 students and 15 lecturers was deemed appropriate for this qualitative study. It facilitated the collection of detailed, in-depth accounts without overwhelming the analysis process (Creswell, 2013). This range ensured a thorough exploration that was aligned with the study's objectives while remaining manageable for thematic analysis. Including both students and instructors enabled the researcher to compare their perspectives.

The use of convenience sampling in this study facilitated the specified sample size, as the objective was not to generalise the findings but to provide descriptions in a clear, detailed, and in-depth manner (Cohen et al., 2007). The inclusion criteria ensured that participants were selected based on their most recent trauma, which had to have occurred within the last five years. The criteria must encompass key characteristics of the target population that are relevant to addressing the research question (Patino & Ferreira, 2018). In this study, the student participants self-identified as trauma-affected, regardless of the type of trauma experienced. Lecturers were selected based on their experience working with trauma-affected students. This involved contacting departmental heads to inform lecturers in their departments of the study and seek their participation. Following this, the researcher followed up with direct invitations to lecturers who expressed interest, either through student recommendations or departmental outreach. The researcher sent a call for participation to students via Blackboard announcements and posters. Blackboard announcements were directed at students who were enrolled in communication science modules and were selected due to their high levels of student-lecturer interaction. This selection was significant as students in these modules are more likely to engage with lecturers and may provide deeper insights into the support they received. To reach a broader range of students, posters were displayed across all three UFS campuses to encourage participation.

1.4.4 Data analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to analyse the collected data, as this method facilitates the identification, analysis, and reporting of themes in a dataset (Creswell, 2013; Braun & Clarke, 2022). A systematic coding framework was utilised to examine the data by uncovering patterns and categorising the information into distinct groups (Guest et al., 2012; Brink et al., 2012). Thematic analysis focuses on accurately and comprehensively representing the experiences and narratives of research participants (Guest et al., 2012; Creswell, 2013). This methodological approach ensures that the findings possess credibility for an external audience due to its transparent and structured procedures (Guest et al., 2012). The thematic analysis steps outlined by Braun and Clarke (2022) were implemented in this study: (1) transcribe the verbal data, (2) generate codes, (3) search for themes, (4) review and refine the themes, (5) define and name the themes, and (6) produce a report.

1.5 DEFINITION OF KEY TERMS

Instructional communication (IC) is a field of study in communication science that examines human communication in educational settings, regardless of subject matter, grade level, or learning environment (Mottet & Beebe, 2006).

Rhetorical and relational goals denote that both instructors and students possess rhetorical objectives (teaching and learning) and relational needs (establishing relationships) within the educational context, which should be fulfilled (Mottet et al., 2006).

Social support encompasses communication that responds to another person's needs by providing comfort, encouragement, reassurance of care, and facilitating effective problem solving through various forms of assistance (Gardner & Cutrona, 2004).

Trauma-affected students are those who experienced trauma that impacts their behaviour, learning, and emotional well-being (American Psychological Association, 2021).

Trauma-informed care refers to an approach that recognises the intersection of trauma with various social and health issues, with the aim of addressing trauma and the individual's challenges (Bowen & Murshid, 2016).

These terms delineate the conceptual framework of the study and clarify their application in subsequent chapters.

1.6 THEORETICAL BASIS OF THE STUDY

This study was underpinned by the SST and the RRGT.

1.6.1 Social support theory (SST)

In IC, emotions are not extensively examined; however, research has demonstrated that both teachers and students experience emotions (Horan et al., 2010) that must be addressed to facilitate effective teaching and learning. The SST posits that the provision of psychological resources can enhance an individual's ability to manage stress (Cohen, 2004; Kort-Butler, 2018). Emotional support entails utilising communication to achieve outcomes such as positive relationships, reduced emotional stress, effective coping strategies, and improved emotional health (Burleson, 2009). Overall, the need for social support involves an awareness of the other person's difficulties, as an informed individual would understand when and how to provide assistance in a stressful context (Vangelisti, 2004). Within the framework of IC, this theory elucidates how supportive messages from instructors can affect students' emotional and academic outcomes.

Social support may play a crucial role in alleviating distress among students (Jenkins et al., 2013), which can ensure that they are protected from the adverse effects of trauma. The SST indicates that students can benefit from an enhanced emotional state, improved coping capacity, a willingness to adhere to advice, and a sense of being respected (MacGeorge, 2009). Social support can manifest as emotional, self-esteem, tangible, informational/feedback, and network support (Rains et al., 2015). Instructors can deliver these forms of support to students through effective communication and caring behaviours. Consequently, students who receive social support demonstrate improved health, social functioning, and academic progress.

Titsworth et al. (2010) found that when educators communicate clearly, promptly, and competently, students perceive higher levels of social support. Social support has been shown to protect adolescents from mental health issues by promoting prosocial behaviours such as school engagement (Kort-Butler, 2018; Cohen, 2004). In the absence of social support, students may struggle to cope in a university environment and exhibit symptoms that interfere with their academic performance, such as poor concentration in the classroom. Although the SST has been applied to students affected by trauma (Hao et al., 2023; Judeel & Ramhurry, 2018; Mai et al., 2021; Bejerano, 2014; Wei, 2022), there is a paucity of research on its application within the South African classroom context. This study thus employed the SST to ascertain how effective instructor communication of social support can impact trauma-affected students. However, to effectively evaluate this, it is essential to understand the instructor-student relationships within the educational environment, which necessitated the application of the RRGT in this study.

1.6.2 Rhetorical and relational goals theory (RRGT)

Rhetorical goals concentrate on learning outcomes, while relational goals encompass connectedness, liking, caring, and perceived supportiveness (Kaufmann & Frisby, 2017). This study emphasised relational goals to ascertain students' perceptions of their instructors' social support through communication behaviours that are characterised by confirmation and rapport. Teacher confirmation refers to communication behaviours that acknowledge the significance and value of students (Mansson, 2016), while rapport denotes the perception of enjoyable, positive personal interactions with others (Kaufmann & Vallade, 2020). Positive instructor behaviours facilitate the provision of social support to trauma-affected students.

The rhetorical perspective centres on the message, whereas relational goals focus on addressing emotions (Houser & Hosek, 2022). Furthermore, the relational perspective posits that instructors and students collaboratively create and utilise communication to manage their interactions. When the relational goals of students are fulfilled, they are more likely to achieve other objectives, such as class attendance. Conversely, the teaching strategies employed in the classroom depend on the rhetorical and relational goals of the instructors. Consequently, the RRGT serves as a framework designed to comprehend the goals of both instructors and students in the classroom (Lee, 2024).

The SST and RRGT complement each other and were deemed suitable for this study, as the SST aided in understanding how to support trauma-affected students, while the RRGT elucidated the relationship between instructors and students both in and outside the classroom.

1.7 STRUCTURE OF THE STUDY

This dissertation is organised into five chapters. The first chapter introduces the study and outlines its significance. The second chapter reviews existing literature to highlight previous research conducted in the field of IC and positions the study within current scholarship. The third chapter explains the research methodology employed in this study and details the process of data collection. The fourth chapter presents the findings from both the students' and instructors' interviews and highlights the emergent themes and subthemes. Lastly, Chapter 5 discusses and analyses the findings and makes recommendations for future research.

1.8 REFERENCES AND APPENDICES

This study utilised the Harvard referencing style throughout the dissertation to cite sources and quote the findings. Furthermore, the interview questions, information leaflet, consent forms, and the ethical clearance letter from the Faculty of the Humanities at the UFS are included as appendices at the end of this dissertation.

CHAPTER 2:
LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 INTRODUCTION

A review of the extant literature indicates that communication transcends mere verbal exchanges of information; it constitutes a critical component of education and the process of addressing trauma. Communication serves as the foundation for instructor-student interactions and facilitates an understanding of how meaning is constructed in various contexts. Existing literature on trauma reveals that research is predominantly grounded in psychological perspectives and focuses on the relationship between trauma and the development of PTSD and other related disorders, as well as the causes and effects of trauma. Within the realm of IC, literature reviews offer extensive background information on pedagogical strategies in the classroom because students and teachers are connected by communication. Consequently, IC enhances the understanding of instructor behaviour and elucidates how educators can support students and influence their behaviours. To illustrate these points, the following sources were utilised to identify relevant literature: peer-reviewed journal articles and publications, psychology and communication texts and handbooks, dissertations, electronic databases, and supplementary information from educational websites.

IC encompasses all facets of interaction between instructors and students, as well as among students in the classroom, with the aim of improving teaching and learning processes (Alhamami, 2023). This principle remains applicable to contemporary IC practices. Given that students bring various aspects of their lives, including their experiences of trauma, into the classroom, it becomes essential to comprehend students' experiences regarding instructor communication of social support to ensure their success and well-being. The following themes guided this literature review: communication science and its evolution, understanding trauma and its impact on students, challenges faced by trauma-affected students, the role of educators in supporting trauma-affected students, and theoretical frameworks for understanding trauma-sensitive communication.

2.2 COMMUNICATION SCIENCE AND ITS EVOLUTION

2.2.1 Definition of communication science

Communication is concerned with how individuals utilise messages to construct meaning in diverse contexts, and it is the discipline that examines all modes, forms, media, and outcomes of communication through humanistic, aesthetic inquiry, and social science (The National Communication Association, 2015). Furthermore, the word “communication” encompasses mediated, written, and non-verbal forms, as well as perspectives on human relationships (Keith, 2009). In simpler terms, communication refers to the means of transmitting a message from one point to another (O’Hair & Eadie, 2009).

2.2.2 The emergence of instructional communication (IC)

IC is posited to have emerged as a distinct area of academic inquiry in 1972, when the International Communication Association established a division dedicated to IC (McCroskey & McCroskey, 2006; Sprague, 1992; Houser & Hosek, 2022; Witt, 2016; Myers et al., 2016). The primary objective of this division was to emphasise the role of communication in educational contexts, rather than solely focusing on the pedagogy of communication itself (Myers, 2010). Subsequently, in 1975, a journal originally titled *Speech Teachers* was renamed *Communication Education*, with the intention of assisting educators across various academic levels and disciplines in the application of communication theories and research in their teaching and learning processes (Sprague, 1993). A pivotal moment in the development of IC was marked by the publication of the first IC textbook by Hurt et al. in 1978 (Myers, 2010; Myers et al., 2016).

During the 1990s, research publications predominantly centred on topics such as teacher communication, classroom management, student communication, pedagogical methods, the utilisation of technology, the effects of mass media on children, and teacher-student interactions (Strawser, 2023; Myers et al., 2016). The 2000s heralded a surge in the formulation of IC theories, including the relational power and instructional influence theories, as well as the RRGT (Mottet et al., 2006). More recent research shifted the focus towards the role of communication in various instructional contexts, moving away from the earlier emphasis on instructor behaviour

and student learning (Myers et al., 2016; Witt, 2016). Between 2017 and 2021, studies analysed by Houser and Hosek (2022) concentrated on student and faculty perceptions, which indicates the contemporary focus of IC research. Understanding the evolution of IC provides essential background to the field and highlights its significance within educational contexts.

2.2.3 IC in educational contexts

IC refers to the academic study of human communication in educational settings, regardless of subject matter, grade level (Mottet & Beebe, 2006), or learning environment (Myers et al., 2016). It constitutes an interdisciplinary field that encompasses pedagogy, communication, and educational psychology (Alhamami, 2023; Mottet & Beebe, 2006; Farris et al., 2018). Essentially, IC focuses on all dimensions of interaction between instructors and students, as well as among students themselves, in the classroom, with the aim of enhancing teaching and learning processes (Alhamami, 2023). This field of inquiry, according to Goodboy (2018), examines instructor attributes and behaviours (e.g., the methods by which feedback is provided to students), student attributes (e.g., how students' fear of communication influences group work), and classroom management and pedagogy (e.g., the impact of technology policies on student participation). Instructors employ various communication behaviours, such as immediacy, confirmation, clarity, humour, and care, to fulfil students' relational goals (Wang & Derakhshan, 2023). The discourse surrounding IC offers insights into its historical context and the role it plays both in and outside the classroom. It is therefore imperative to discuss the role of effective communication in learning to ensure that instructors utilise communication strategies effectively to promote student learning.

2.2.4 The role of effective communication in learning

Instructors must be proficient communicators to fulfil their teaching roles effectively (Hannah, 2023; Richmond et al., 2020). This proficiency enables instructors to recognise the interdependence of communication and learning, as the knowledge and attitudes acquired by students in the classroom are influenced by both verbal and non-verbal messages regarding the teacher, the subject matter, and the students themselves (Richmond et al., 2020). Scholars in IC assert that teaching and learning

are intrinsically communicative processes; without the exchange of verbal and non-verbal communication, learning cannot occur between instructors and students (Houser & Hosek, 2022; Hannah, 2023). When instructors predominantly employ spoken communication to convey instructions, the strategic and skilled use of language significantly impacts learning outcomes. Moreover, if instruction occurs in a positive teacher-student relationship, the potential for improved learning increases (Witt, 2016; Frymier & Houser, 2000). Goodboy (2018) posits that employing a clear structure when delivering messages aids student learning, as exemplified by providing learning materials that present important points in a hierarchically organised manner for note-taking. Ultimately, students' needs are met when instructors communicate effectively (Hannah, 2023). Given the critical role of effective instructor communication in fostering positive instructor-student relationships, it is essential to examine the challenges that may arise in IC.

2.2.5 Challenges in IC

IC struggles to provide adaptable teaching strategies that facilitate an interactive learning environment (García-Farina, 2025). An interactive learning environment enables students to engage actively in the construction of knowledge, rather than remaining passive recipients of information conveyed during lectures (Campbell et al., 2016). Such engagement allows trauma-affected students to benefit from the teaching and learning process. Another challenge may involve disengagement that stems from language barriers, as classrooms often comprise students from diverse cultural backgrounds. Moreover, students from certain cultures may refrain from engaging due to a cultural perception that the instructor is an authority figure who should not be questioned or challenged (Campbell et al., 2016). These cultural differences, combined with students' trauma, can render the classroom experience unbearable. Consequently, adaptable teaching strategies may be essential for maintaining student engagement. Furthermore, language significantly influences both cognitive processes and communication. As a result, miscommunication may occur due to language barriers when a medium of instruction is employed to educate non-native speakers (Alhamami, 2023). To be effective, instructors must consider the unique characteristics of individual students (Campbell et al., 2016), including specific challenges such as trauma.

2.2.6 Possible solutions to instructional challenges

These challenges can be addressed by allowing students to collaborate in groups (García-Farina, 2025), which will enhance their communication skills and foster rapport among peers (Campbell et al., 2016). To accommodate the diversity of abilities and levels of understanding, IC should be adapted in the classroom (García-Farina, 2025). Furthermore, the instructor should also act as a cultural guide and pose questions that encourage student comfort (Campbell et al., 2016). Finally, assessments and instructional strategies should provide students with clear expectations and rubrics (Campbell et al., 2016; García-Farina, 2025). The discussion of solutions to IC challenges offers strategies to address potential obstacles that may arise. The next section therefore examines the connection between IC and trauma-affected students to establish how IC can be utilised to support these students.

2.2.7 The importance of IC for trauma-affected students

Malchiodi (2020) proposes eight reasons why arts-based practices can alleviate the effects of trauma. One of these reasons is the recognition that such trauma interventions may enhance communication. This highlights the importance of communication in addressing the needs of trauma-affected students. Furthermore, instructors frequently find themselves at the forefront of addressing the consequences of trauma and the subsequent needs of their students (Brunzell et al., 2015; Anderson et al., 2015; RB-Banks & Meyer, 2017; Korinek, 2021). Consequently, there is a pressing need for South African educators to be equipped with the knowledge and resources necessary to assist trauma-affected students (De Beer & Draper-Clarke, 2022). Additionally, trauma-informed instructors can employ communication strategies that help to disrupt the cycle of trauma for students (Davidson, 2017) by fostering a caring, supportive, and safe environment (Davidson, 2017; Venet, 2019) and assisting students in effectively managing their circumstances (Knight, 2015). For these reasons, an understanding of IC enables instructors to utilise both verbal and non-verbal communication effectively in and outside the classroom. Maragha (2021) asserts that educators who struggle to communicate knowledge and information effectively often fail to establish productive teacher-student relationships, which can adversely affect student outcomes.

2.2.8 Building trauma-informed classrooms

Instructors can influence their students' social and emotional well-being beyond the confines of traditional classroom teaching (Buthelezi et al., 2024). Effective IC can be utilised to satisfy students' specific personal, academic, or interpersonal needs (Richmond et al., 2020). Instructors can leverage language and communication styles to shape student experiences and learning outcomes (Witt, 2016). Consequently, instructors who adopt a trauma-informed approach recognise that students' actions are profoundly influenced by their life experiences. Rather than posing the question "What is wrong with you?", they enquire "What happened to you?", which initiates a more constructive student-teacher interaction (Huang et al., 2014). Furthermore, IC can be employed to establish innovative strategies that are aimed at breaking the cycle of trauma among students (Davidson, 2017) by fostering positive teacher-student relationships (Wells, 2023). Instructors increasingly support trauma-affected students by establishing resources that assist them, engaging them in their learning, and cultivating a conducive and safe environment to facilitate their success (McInerney & McKlindon, 2014). Additionally, IC can be utilised to validate students' feelings and experiences to aid them in understanding their past and managing their present circumstances effectively (Knight, 2015). It can also provide emotional support that fosters trust and alleviates anxiety among students (Perez et al., 2009; Drageset, 2021). IC contributes to positive student experiences, such as increased motivation and classroom participation (Frisby et al., 2016), and promotes a mutual and trustworthy bond (Frisby & Martin, 2010).

2.2.9 The purpose of the literature review

Davidson (2017) asserts that students who are affected by trauma can succeed in higher education if there is collaborative engagement from the campus community in sharing responsibility for the physical, emotional, social, and academic well-being of these students. The preceding section delineated the connection between IC and trauma-informed education, which established a foundation for understanding how educators can assist trauma-affected students. The presence of instructional processes in communication indicates that communication transcends mere verbal exchanges of information (Mutiah & Utami, 2020) and constitutes a significant component of education and trauma intervention. IC plays a pivotal role in teaching

and learning as it encompasses all facets of interactions between instructors and students, as well as among students themselves, both in and outside the classroom (Alhamami, 2023). It offers insights into instructor communication competence and provides communication pedagogy with essential teaching behaviours that enhance student learning (Goodboy, 2018). Moreover, the effectiveness of teaching would be compromised if instructors lack knowledge of trauma and strategies to support trauma-affected students (De Beer & Draper-Clarke, 2022). Trauma-informed instructors can utilise communication (Davidson, 2017) and their understanding of trauma to provide services and develop systems that accommodate the needs of trauma survivors, which will facilitate their recovery (Butler et al., 2011). In the absence of this knowledge, instructors may struggle to employ communication effectively and risk retraumatising students (Davidson, 2017). Having examined the robust relationship between IC and trauma-informed education, the focus now shifts to a comprehensive understanding of trauma and its impact on students in order to better support them in overcoming their challenges.

2.3 UNDERSTANDING TRAUMA AND ITS IMPACT ON STUDENTS

2.3.1 Defining trauma

Trauma is defined as an extreme experience that leads an individual to question the goodness and safety of the world (Brunzell et al., 2015; Brunzell et al., 2016) and diminishes their capacity to cope (Downey, 2007; Hoch et al., 2015). Kaminer and Eagle (2010) argue that indirect exposure to trauma can elicit responses similar to those experienced by individuals who are directly confronted with traumatic events. Consequently, trauma is not merely the event itself but encompasses the emotional responses that erode a person's coping mechanisms (Ayre & Krishnamoorthy, 2020; Novilla et al., 2024). Furthermore, these emotional responses may manifest shortly after a traumatic event or lead to protracted effects, such as flashbacks or unpredictable emotional states (Eliasson & DeHart, 2022).

Understanding trauma is essential for providing adequate support to students who are affected by such experiences. Approximately half of the students who enter tertiary institutions encounter trauma during their first year of study (Galatzer-Levy et al., 2012), with some exhibiting symptoms prior to commencing their studies (Walker,

2022). Research indicates an increasing demand for counselling services among students, with concerns escalating in severity (Adachi et al., 2020; Craig et al., 2023). Adachi et al. (2020) assert that students who seek campus counselling typically report difficulties related to university life. Global challenges that impact HEIs include, among others, disparities in access to education, rapid technological advancement, and the processes of internationalisation and globalisation (Abduwani, 2017; Tsou, 2024). In addition, South African universities are undergoing significant transformations, such as calls for the decolonisation of curricula and improved access to tertiary education, which have the potential to affect students' well-being (Shefer et al., 2018). These transformative discourses are further exacerbated by violent student protests, which may leave students with profound psychological scars (Luescher et al., 2023). Moreover, Walker (2022) notes that the rates of distress observed in his study were not solely attributable to the COVID-19 pandemic but have been steadily increasing since 2015 due to events such as the #FeesMustFall movement. Such protests, characterised by intimidation and violence, may be traumatic for some students while simultaneously retraumatising others. Consequently, HEIs often reveal students' mild developmental disorders, particularly when students reside away from their families (Adachi et al., 2020). These disorders, also known as neurodevelopmental disorders, encompass conditions that affect the neurological system and brain, which influence functioning in areas such as attention, memory, problem solving, and social interaction (Morris-Rosendahl & Crocq, 2020), among others. Trauma also impacts students' academic progress (Davidson, 2017) and mental health (Wang et al., 2021). It is therefore crucial to comprehend trauma within an educational context to facilitate a more informed approach to addressing its challenges.

2.3.2 Types of trauma

Davidson (2017) posits that certain traumatic experiences occur only once in a lifetime, while others are ongoing. Simple trauma refers to a singular event that causes or threatens serious bodily harm, such as natural disasters or accidents (Brunzell et al., 2015; Novilla et al., 2024). In contrast, complex trauma, also referred to as relational trauma, involves prolonged exposure to multiple events that are characterised by personal threat or violence, including neglect, sexual or domestic violence, or bullying (Terrasi & De Galarce, 2017; Brunzell et al., 2015; Bulford et al., 2024). Students who

experienced multiple traumas exhibit greater symptoms of trauma and depression than those who encountered a singular trauma (Frieze, 2015). Understanding the various types of trauma enables instructors to comprehend why students may respond differently to traumatic experiences.

2.3.3 Causes and effects of trauma

Exposure to trauma encompasses either direct involvement in or witnessing one or more traumatic events (Frieze, 2015), including violence, sexual abuse, death, destabilisation of the home environment, life-threatening injury or illness, road accidents, poverty, and bullying (Brunzell et al., 2015; Haden et al., 2007; Craig et al., 2023; De Beer & Draper-Clarke, 2022; Padmanabhanunni, 2020). Furthermore, South Africa's trauma burden is exacerbated by socio-economic disparities (De Beer & Draper-Clarke, 2022). A study by the University of the Western Cape revealed that numerous causes of trauma stem from economic and social ills (Padmanabhanunni, 2020). Students often carry the impact of these economic and social challenges into the classroom, which affects their academic performance.

According to Galatzer-Levy et al. (2012), students in tertiary institutions are particularly vulnerable to trauma exposure, such as sexual assault. This exposure can adversely affect students' behaviour and learning capabilities, which may result in unsatisfactory academic performance, low reading levels, and poor class attendance (Frieze, 2015). Richmond et al. (2020) further note that students may exhibit anxiety in educational environments if they experienced severe trauma. Hoch et al. (2015) assert that even after experiencing trauma, affected individuals may continue to respond as if the stress or trauma persists. They may become self-protective, remain in a state of hyper-vigilance, and experience a constant sense of fear, which restricts their capacity for curiosity, exploration, and learning. To fully understand the effects of trauma, it is imperative to discuss the challenges faced by trauma-affected students.

2.4 CHALLENGES FACED BY TRAUMA-AFFECTED STUDENTS

2.4.1 Academic challenges

All students face challenges related to their transition to higher education; however, students with a history of trauma tend to fare worse (Davidson, 2017). Trauma-

affected students may experience difficulties in focusing, recalling information, and may engage in negative self-talk (Brunzell et al., 2016; Graham, 2021; Smyth, 2017; Korinek, 2021). Furthermore, trauma-affected students may feel uneasy about examinations, public speaking, group work, and deadlines (Hoch et al., 2015). These challenges impact various areas of a student's experience, including academic performance and retention (Wells, 2023), as students may miss classes and exhibit unsatisfactory academic progress (Zins et al., 2007; Frieze, 2015). Students facing these challenges are often referred to counselling by their instructors (Adachi et al., 2020).

2.4.2 Social and psychological challenges

Individuals who experienced trauma are likely to suffer from emotional dysregulation and difficulties with self-esteem (Godbout et al., 2019; Craig et al., 2023; Hoch et al., 2015). The effects of trauma can vary depending on the severity and type of trauma experienced, as well as personal resilience (Craig et al., 2023). Other effects include difficulties with impulse control and the potential development of an avoidant attachment style (Godbout et al., 2019; Craig et al., 2023). Moreover, trauma impairs psychological well-being by weakening one's social sense of self, relationships with others, and connections to the environment and the world (Haslam et al., 2018).

Exposure to trauma increases the likelihood of students being affected by various mental health disorders (Anders et al., 2012), which sometimes lead to suicide attempts (Adachi et al., 2020). The most common mental health disorders among students include depression, anxiety, PTSD, and substance use disorders (Anders et al., 2012; Walker, 2022; Haden et al., 2007). These disorders present serious concerns for campus student services and mental health professionals (Rytwinski et al., 2013). Such disorders may manifest in the classroom as effects of trauma (Brunzell et al., 2015), which makes it important to understand these disorders in order to tailor support to trauma-affected students. Additionally, it is beneficial to understand institutional support when considering ways to help students cope with their trauma.

2.4.3 Institutional support for trauma-affected students

HEIs employ licensed counsellors (Adachi et al., 2020), who are essential in assisting students to cope with their ongoing challenges (Craig et al., 2023); however, these

resources may not be sufficient. Providing virtual counselling to assist students 24 hours a day could be a solution for those who may have difficulty accessing counselling services (Walker, 2022). This approach could help students to address daily life issues such as addiction and self-control, as it is easily accessible, time-efficient, and offers privacy from the comfort of their own homes (Abu Shahim et al., 2021). Research by developmental and cognitive psychologists and advancements in neuroscience indicate that instructors can mitigate the effects of trauma on students (Davidson, 2017). These effects can be mitigated by connecting students with the campus community and providing opportunities for them to practise their skills, embrace shared leadership and teamwork, and adapt to the changing needs of students and the community (Hoch et al., 2015). Consequently, students will know where to seek help for their diverse needs and feel supported by instructors who respond to their evolving circumstances. Understanding the challenges faced by trauma-affected students enables instructors to employ effective communication to support these students. The next section investigates how instructors can utilise trauma-informed approaches to support students in the classroom.

2.5 THE ROLE OF EDUCATORS IN SUPPORTING TRAUMA-AFFECTED STUDENTS

2.5.1 Trauma-informed teaching approaches

According to Venet (2019), a significant aspect of trauma-informed practices is the provision of a caring, supportive, and safe environment for students, regardless of lecturers' knowledge of students' backgrounds. However, Walker (2022) notes that Black, Asian, or coloured students who attend historically white universities, younger students, and gender-nonconforming students are likely to be exposed to trauma. Instructors must therefore educate themselves about the symptoms and impacts of trauma on students in order to modify their pedagogical approaches (Harney & Gross, 2020). Instructors can prevent retraumatisation of students by applying their knowledge of trauma and communicating effectively (Davidson, 2017). Consequently, trauma-informed care (TIC) can facilitate support and restoration of students' well-being (Ginwright, 2018; Downey, 2007; Imad, 2020).

2.5.2 Trauma-informed care (TIC)

TIC refers to an approach that acknowledges the intersection of trauma with various social and health issues. It aims to address trauma and individual challenges (Bowen & Murshid, 2016). Furthermore, Fallot and Harris (2008) posit that trauma-informed service providers are those that possess a thorough understanding of trauma, its effects, and incorporate conditions that enhance healing throughout the entire service delivery process. This highlights that comprehension of trauma and its consequences is paramount for the effective application of TIC. In fact, TIC should not harm, retraumatise, or blame survivors for their attempts to manage trauma (Moses et al., 2003).

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA, 2014) posits that TIC is anchored in six primary principles, which have been elaborated upon from the foundational principles outlined by Fallot and Harris (2001). Accordingly, this study adopted the following principles delineated by SAMHSA (2014) as the guiding tenets of TIC:

- Safety (e.g., students must perceive an environment of safety).
- Trustworthiness and transparency (e.g., instructors are required to foster relationships with each student).
- Peer support (e.g., student-to-student relationships facilitate recovery, healing, and the establishment of trust).
- Collaboration and mutuality (e.g., positive relationships between students and university staff are instrumental in promoting healing).
- Empowerment and choice (e.g., interventions should be customised to meet the individual needs of students).
- Cultural, historical, and gender issues (e.g., educators should demonstrate sensitivity to the diversity of students in their interactions and remain responsive in classroom decision making and policy formulation).

Drawing from these main principles of TIC, scholars delineate additional specific principles of trauma-informed practice, which include comprehension of trauma and its impact, sharing power and responsibility, integrating care, the belief that recovery is possible, and the acknowledgement that healing occurs in relationships (Moses et

al., 2003; Butler et al., 2011; Ayre & Krishnamoorthy, 2020). This indicates that the application of the main principles necessitates supplementary context-specific principles that address trauma in the particular environment of application.

TIC should benefit all students, and the frameworks proposed by Venet (2019) are believed to assist educators in providing a safe, predictable, and nurturing learning environment. The suggested frameworks include fostering unconditional positive regard for students, adopting restorative methods of discipline, establishing foundational relationships, considering student motivation, and focusing learning experiences on skill development and capacity. Trauma-informed practices that could be implemented in the classroom include being sensitive to students, demonstrating unconditional positive regard, checking in with students, maintaining appropriate boundaries, being attuned to family structures, setting high expectations, and identifying additional support systems and mentors (Downey, 2013; Carello & Butler, 2014; Hoch et al., 2015; Davidson, 2017).

2.5.3 Instructor communication and student well-being

Effective instructor-student communication fosters a positive classroom environment and enhances engagement (García-Farina, 2025; Wells, 2023). It also strengthens confidence, improves academic performance, and promotes student independence, which are necessary qualities for holistic development (McCroskey et al., 2004). By utilising effective communication, instructors can dynamically adapt their approaches to meet students' individual needs and provide personalised learning experiences (García-Farina, 2025). This ensures that the impact of trauma is alleviated for students, which will enable them to concentrate on academic achievements.

Moreover, effective instructor-student communication that combines clarity with empathy contributes to the creation of a supportive and inclusive environment (García-Farina, 2025). Instructor empathy and active listening enhance the instructor-student relationship and foster a sense of connection and re-engagement in learning among students (McInerney & McKlindon, 2014). Furthermore, instructor-student interactions facilitate the identification of individual needs and the establishment of trust (García-Farina, 2025). The implementation of trauma-informed approaches ensures that students are treated with empathy and compassion (Wells, 2023). Consequently,

instructors can employ clear communication and empathy to empower students to play an active role in their learning (García-Farina, 2025). Having discussed the role of instructors in supporting trauma-affected students using TIC, the following section focuses on the theoretical framework to enhance the understanding of trauma-sensitive communication. This understanding is crucial for instructors in a context where they must continually interact with students who have diverse needs.

2.6 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS FOR UNDERSTANDING TRAUMA-SENSITIVE COMMUNICATION

2.6.1 The SST

Rook (1984) defines the SST as the fulfilment of specific needs in response to distressing life experiences or situations. Given that social support serves as an effective mechanism for helping individuals cope with distressing experiences, Kim et al. (2008) posit that social support involves the utilisation of social networks to address specific and distressing life events. Drageset (2021) adds that social support encompasses being valued, belonging to a social community, receiving information and guidance, as well as emotional support and practical assistance. For the purposes of this study, social support is defined as communication (both verbal and non-verbal) in response to another person's needs that serves to comfort, encourage, reassure that one cares, and/or facilitate effective problem solving through information or tangible support (Gardner & Cutrona, 2004).

2.6.1.1 Types of support

Social support, as articulated by Drageset (2021), has been shown to have a significant impact on various aspects of quality of life, including anxiety, meaning, psychological distress, mortality risk, loneliness, hope, burden of care, and depression. Barbee and Cunningham (1995) further corroborate this perspective by asserting that recipients of effective social support may experience outcomes such as improved mood, enhanced health prospects, solutions to problems, and perceptions of a successful social support network. To comprehend the nature of support provided, it is essential to examine the types of support that individuals who have undergone traumatic experiences may find beneficial.

Five types of social support are recognised. Some sources delineate four types: emotional support, self-esteem support, tangible support, and informational/feedback support (Barbee & Cunningham, 1995; Perez et al., 2009; Drageset, 2021; MacGeorge, 2009), while excluding network support (Rains et al., 2015; Cutrona & Suhr, 1992; Ashley, 2012). Emotional support encompasses empathy, acts of physical affection, motivation (Rains et al., 2015), comfort, security, active listening (Drageset, 2021), trust, and caring (Perez et al., 2009). Informational support refers to the provision of advice, guidance, or factual information (Rains et al., 2015; Drageset, 2021). Esteem support involves compliments and expressions that acknowledge the perspectives of the support seeker. Network support pertains to efforts aimed at broadening the support seeker's connections or strengthening existing relationships. Tangible support involves the provision of financial or physical assistance (Rains et al., 2015).

Cutrona and Suhr (1992) categorise these types of support into two overarching categories: action-facilitating support and nurturant support. Action-facilitating support encompasses informational and tangible support, which are particularly beneficial when confronting controllable stressors, namely those that individuals have the potential to avoid or mitigate. Conversely, nurturant support includes emotional, esteem, and network support, which are more advantageous when dealing with uncontrollable stressors, namely situations where individuals have limited capacity to avoid the circumstances or alleviate their consequences.

2.6.1.2 Application in education

Social support has been a focal point in research that compared first-generation and non-first-generation students to explore their perceptions of social support differences. Given that first-generation students may encounter unique stressors during their transition to university, one study employed measures such as PTSD symptoms, life satisfaction, and depression to assess social support (Jenkins et al., 2013). An investigation conducted by Hefner and Eisenberg (2009) examined the relationship between social support and mental health among students. Their study revealed that higher perceptions of social support were associated with a decreased likelihood of anxiety, eating disorders, depression, and suicidality, regardless of the students' characteristics or frequency of social contact. Haden et al. (2007) explored

undergraduate students' perceptions of social support following traumatic experiences and found that those who experienced acute injury during their trauma reported fewer PTSD symptoms when they perceived higher levels of social support. Reid et al. (2016) investigated whether perceived social support could serve as a protective factor against depression and anxiety for first-year students with a history of bullying. Their findings indicated that these students perceived lower overall levels of social support, encompassing support from family, friends, and significant others. While these studies examined how social support may shield trauma-affected students from developing PTSD, depression, and anxiety, there remains a gap in the literature regarding how students perceive social support from their instructors in coping with trauma. Given that instructors are among the most frequent sources of interaction for students in the educational environment, it is essential that this aspect is thoroughly investigated.

Social support may play a crucial role in alleviating distress among first-generation undergraduate students (Jenkins et al., 2013; Gist-Mackey et al., 2018). Given the recent increase in the number of students seeking psychological counselling at universities (Adachi et al., 2020), it is evident that students could benefit from improved mental health associated with social support (Hefner & Eisenberg, 2009; Cluver et al., 2009). The provision of social support may enable students to perceive a situation as less stressful when they believe that social support will be available to assist them in coping with the event (Evans et al., 2013). For example, instructors might offer students information regarding campus resources or provide positive reinforcement in the classroom. Furthermore, social support can provide essential resources and emotional backing, which will allow individuals to cope with trauma and facilitate the development of positive emotions, enhanced relationships, and motivation to reassess their perceptions of themselves, others, and the world (Zhou et al., 2018). MacGeorge (2009) highlights that the advantages of social support encompass improvements in emotional state, enhanced coping abilities, a willingness to adhere to advice, feelings of respect, satisfaction with conversations, fondness for the support provider, and overall satisfaction with the relationship.

Social support embodies the intention of the provider to offer support, which the recipient then recognises and which leads them to feel cared for, liked, and valued (MacGeorge, 2009). In this context, the support would be rendered by the instructor and received by the students. Instructors are likely to be well-regarded by students,

who may express satisfaction with the teacher-student relationship (MacGeorge, 2009). Consequently, instructors may foster a cohort of students with improved mental health (Hefner & Eisenberg, 2009), which will facilitate a greater focus on enhancing academic success.

2.6.1.3 Gaps in research

Current research on the application of the SST within the context of communicative support remains limited. Although some studies have explored social support, they predominantly adopted a psychological perspective. This study therefore aimed to contribute to the existing body of knowledge on communicative support and to elucidate how instructors can assist students in achieving better mental health through social support (Hefner & Eisenberg, 2009; Cluver et al., 2009). An understanding of the SST provides a theoretical framework for examining how instructors can utilise communication to support students. Consequently, there is a need to also consider the RRGT to gain insight into the relational and academic needs of both students and instructors.

2.6.2 The RRGT

Rhetorical needs are intrinsically linked to students' aspirations to acquire knowledge and to achieve objectives such as learning or attaining a specific grade (Waldeck & LaBelle, 2016). According to Houser and Hosek (2022), from a rhetorical standpoint, educators intentionally utilise both verbal and non-verbal messages to exert influence over students, with emphasis on the conveyed message. Rhetorical goals suggest that educators possess specific objectives regarding the communication of course content, while students, conversely, have defined academic needs for learning that content (McDermott & Ashby-King, 2021; Hannah, 2023). Mottet et al. (2006) argue that rhetorical goals represent the outcomes of effective course instruction, such as the achievement of learning outcomes and the attainment of satisfactory grades.

Relational goals encompass an individual's desire for affirmation both as a student and as a person, which is fulfilled through interactions between teachers and students, as well as among students themselves (Waldeck & LaBelle, 2016). The relational perspective posits that instructors and students collaboratively create and employ both verbal and non-verbal communication to manage their interactions. In contrast to the

rhetorical perspective, this view acknowledges that the focus extends beyond the message to include the consideration of feelings and emotions (Houser & Hosek, 2022). The RRGT posits that instructors have relational objectives for engaging with students, while students have relational needs for connecting with their instructors (McDermott & Ashby-King, 2021; Hannah, 2023). Students exhibit a range of goals, and instructors employ various communication behaviours, such as immediacy, confirmation, clarity, humour, and care, to fulfil students' relational objectives (Wang & Derakhshan, 2023). Furthermore, when students' relational needs are adequately addressed, they are more likely to achieve their academic goals, including learning, class attendance, motivation, and engagement (Mottet et al., 2006).

Wang and Derakhshan (2023) assert that the RRGT is the principal theory employed in IC studies to elucidate the significance of instructor communication behaviours for students' academic outcomes. Lee (2024) posits that the RRGT not only emphasises the importance of instructors but also serves as a framework that is intended to comprehend the objectives of both instructors and students in the classroom. The RRGT is predicated on the following six assumptions (Houser & Hosek, 2018):

1) Students possess rhetorical and relational needs.
2) The manner in which instructors teach is determined by their rhetorical and relational goals.
3) Effective teaching occurs when instructors actively strive to achieve rhetorical and relational goals.
4) When students' needs are recognised and fulfilled, they become motivated.
5) Context and grade level dictate instructors' goals and methods.
6) Students' rhetorical and relational needs are changeable.

The implementation of the RRGT may encounter limitations due to the unique economic, educational, and social context of the country. South Africa is a diverse nation, and what is rhetorically effective and relationally supportive may vary across cultures. When applied to trauma-affected students, the RRGT may prioritise goals and strategic communication, which can oversimplify trauma by neglecting its non-verbal dimensions. This suggests that the application of the RRGT should be contextualised to enhance its efficacy.

2.6.2.1 The RRGT and trauma

Teaching is fundamentally a relational profession (Xie & Derakhshan, 2021; Frymier & Houser, 2000). However, instructors possess both rhetorical and relational goals, and through their communication with students, they may prioritise one of these goals over the other (Waldeck & LaBelle, 2016). Furthermore, effective teaching transpires when instructors establish relevant objectives and utilise communication to achieve these goals, which enhances student learning and motivation by addressing their needs in the classroom (Waldeck & LaBelle, 2016). Confirmation and rapport can be employed by instructors to support students during interactions.

Confirmation is a form of instructor communication behaviour that enables instructors to establish a satisfactory learning environment and foster emotional bonds with students (Derakhshan, 2022). It is characterised by the absence of disconfirmation, the use of an interactive teaching style, responsiveness to students' questions and comments, and a demonstrable interest in students' learning (Wang & Derakhshan, 2023). This behaviour can predict students' emotional outcomes (Goldman & Goodboy, 2014). When students' relational needs are satisfied, they are more likely to achieve their academic goals (Mottet et al., 2006). Instructors can employ confirmation to fulfil these relational needs (Wang & Derakhshan, 2023; Frisby, 2019). When instructors simultaneously decrease their disconfirming behaviours and increase their confirming behaviours, students feel valued and understood and receive emotional and interpersonal support (Goldman et al., 2017; Wang & Derakhshan, 2023).

Rapport is another crucial aspect of education (Xie & Derakhshan, 2021). It refers to a harmonious teacher-student relationship (Catt et al., 2007) that comprises a mutual and trustworthy bond (Frisby & Martin, 2010). Rapport contributes to positive student experiences, such as enhanced motivation and increased classroom participation (Frisby et al., 2016). These qualities in instructors strengthen instructor-student relationships and assist trauma-affected students in coping with their experiences.

2.6.2.2 Relevance to the study

The RRGT is a framework that is designed to comprehend the objectives of both instructors and students in the classroom (Lee, 2024). When students' relational needs are met, they are more likely to achieve academic goals, including learning, class

attendance, motivation, and engagement (Mottet et al., 2006). It is therefore essential to understand the RRGT, as effective teaching occurs when instructors establish relevant objectives and employ communication strategies to achieve these goals, which will enhance student learning and motivation by addressing their needs in the classroom (Waldeck & LaBelle, 2016). Examining the RRGT raises instructors' awareness of rhetorical goals (Mottet et al., 2006) and relational goals, which are realised through instructor-student and student-student interactions (Waldeck & LaBelle, 2016). Instructors will also gain insight into the assumptions underlying the RRGT (Houser & Hosek, 2018), which can assist in supporting students' well-being and academic success. By recognising students' needs, it becomes feasible to establish approaches and strategies that are tailored to address those specific needs. Understanding the SST and RRGT provides a foundation for comprehending trauma-sensitive communication. Consequently, this highlights the necessity of addressing gaps in research, which renders this study a vital endeavour.

2.7 RESEARCH GAPS AND CONTRIBUTIONS OF THIS STUDY

2.7.1 Gaps in existing literature

Many empirical studies in IC have adopted a quantitative research methodology (Myers et al., 2016). Houser and Hosek (2022) add that IC scholars prioritise post-positivist research over interpretive and critical/rhetorical approaches. This study, however, employed a qualitative methodology with the aim of interviewing participants to gain an in-depth understanding of their lived experiences. This was guided by the interpretivist paradigm. Although there is research on supporting trauma-affected students (Smyth, 2017; Brunzell et al., 2016; Jennings, 2019), limited studies have been conducted on students' perceptions of how IC is used to support trauma-affected students (Graham, 2021). Moreover, TIC is widely applied, but there is limited research on its application in the South African education context.

The SST is usually applied from a psychological perspective and is limited in its communication perspective. This study thus aimed to contribute to the body of knowledge on communicative support. Research on the RRGT is limited in the South African context. This study aimed to add to the body of research on the RRGT in relation to how it is applied in supporting trauma-affected students. Addressing these

visible gaps will provide an understanding of instructor communication regarding social support for trauma-affected students.

2.7.2 Contributions of this study

Much research on trauma focuses on a psychological perspective. However, this study aimed to demonstrate how IC can be used to support trauma-affected students. Furthermore, much research on supporting trauma-affected students centres on campus-wide facilities. This study aimed to contribute to the body of knowledge on the role played by instructors both in and outside the classroom in supporting trauma-affected students. This study also provides practical recommendations for trauma-sensitive teaching to ensure successful interactions with trauma-affected students.

2.8 CONCLUSION

IC focuses on all aspects of instructor-student and student-student interactions to improve the learning process. The number of students in need of counselling services is increasing, and student concerns are becoming more severe. Students bring all aspects of their lives, including their trauma, into the classroom, and instructors are at the forefront of dealing with the effects of trauma. This underscores the significance of studying the perceptions of trauma-affected students regarding instructor communication of social support to ensure positive student experiences in HEIs. Focusing on communication science, understanding trauma and its impact on students, the role of educators in supporting trauma-affected students, and theoretical frameworks for trauma-sensitive communication are areas that can help to improve instructor communication of social support for trauma-affected students.

To understand instructors' communication of social support with trauma-affected students, this study explored literature in the fields of communication science, psychology, education, student learning, IC strategies, and social support. Research shows that IC plays a critical role in supporting trauma-affected students by using the SST and RRGT to ensure that students' needs are met and that there is a positive student-teacher relationship.

The next chapter addresses the research methodology. It elaborates on how data were collected in this study and provides clarity on the researcher's philosophical stance.

CHAPTER 3:
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 INTRODUCTION

The research design for this study was interpretivist research, as it focused on the description, understanding, and interpretation of participants' experiences (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020) regarding a phenomenon to establish common meanings (Creswell, 2013). This study aimed to understand the lived experiences of trauma-affected students concerning the IC they received from instructors during trauma recovery, as well as to identify the needs of instructors in this regard. By employing a qualitative approach, the researcher could gain an in-depth understanding of students' experiences to comprehend their challenges and determine the support needed to help them cope with their trauma. Furthermore, this approach would assist in understanding the needs of instructors in providing social support to trauma-affected students.

This research methodology chapter highlights the research paradigm, research approach, sampling, and criteria for the selection of participants for this study. Moreover, this chapter elaborates on the research instruments and procedures, data-analysis techniques, and the ethical considerations.

3.2 RESEARCH DESIGN

3.2.1 Research paradigm

According to Kivunja and Kuyini (2017), a research paradigm can be characterised as the conceptual lens through which a researcher decides on the research methods and data analyses to use. From this viewpoint, diverse paradigms have been established, and each paradigm is guided by different assumptions and beliefs to help accomplish specific goals (Sprake & Palmer, 2022; Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020). Positivism and interpretivism are the two most common paradigms used in scientific research and analysis (Junjie & Yingxin, 2022; Sprake & Palmer, 2022). Positivism holds that there is a single reality that exists for all people, whereas interpretivism posits that reality is socially constructed and subjective (Junjie & Yingxin, 2022; Thanh & Thanh, 2015).

While positivists focus on observable and measurable facts, interpretivists focus on the meaning and experiences expressed by the participants.

This study was rooted in the interpretivist paradigm, which enabled the researcher to gain an in-depth understanding by exploring perceptions and experiences within specific social contexts (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020; Pulla & Carter, 2018). According to Junjie and Yingxin (2022), interpretivists emphasise the subjective meaning of the phenomena studied; therefore, reality is subjective (Pulla & Carter, 2018; Goldkuhl, 2012), and different individuals have their own accounts of unique realities based on the context of their experiences. This study sought to understand students' perceptions of social support from instructors, as well as the needs of instructors, guided by the interpretivist worldview. This worldview aided in understanding the meanings assigned by trauma-affected students regarding their experiences of the support received from instructors. It was therefore suitable for this study to gain an in-depth understanding of both the perceptions of students and the needs of instructors in providing social support to trauma-affected students.

Researchers are not detached from the phenomenon studied, as empirical data are generated through researcher-respondent interaction (Hussain et al., 2013; Irshaidat, 2022). Consequently, researchers are actively involved in the construction of meaning. Interpretive research provides a myriad of meanings and complexities that go far beyond the written or spoken word and observation. For example, the researcher was able to note non-verbal cues that would not have been possible through written or spoken words alone. This study employed face-to-face interviews, which enabled the researcher to gain insight into the participants' experiences.

People exist in a society that is characterised by various attributes such as ethnicity, gender, and spirituality, among other things. Additionally, there are individualised characteristics such as trauma, economic security, and self-worth (Pulla & Carter, 2018). Considering all these human factors, one singular truth cannot exist; interpretivism was therefore deemed a suitable philosophy for this study, as it helped to understand the meanings embedded in the lived experiences of the participants. In essence, interpretivism is more inclusive in this sense because it accepts multiple meanings from various people and groups (Thanh & Thanh, 2015).

Interpretivism, like other worldviews, has certain disadvantages. The first downside is that interpretive research has been criticised for being too subjective in its inquiry and results (Hussain et al., 2013). Secondly, critics of interpretivism argue that this paradigm leaves gaps in the validity of results because it focuses on gaining a deeper understanding of social realities, which may not be generalisable to other domains (Cohen et al., 2011). Lastly, there may be bias in the results due to the inevitability of research findings being influenced by the views and interpretations of the researcher (Junjie & Yingxin, 2022). Although these factors warrant consideration, this paradigm remains the most practical for understanding the meanings embedded in individuals' experiences. To mitigate these downsides, the researcher employed reflexive journaling to document thoughts and experiences while collecting data, which aided in understanding the interview responses and contextualising the findings (Meyer & Willis, 2019). Interpretivism helps in gaining a deeper understanding of participants' perceptions while the researcher contributes to the creation of meaning. Having discussed the research paradigm in this study, it is important to note that interpretivism is closely associated with qualitative research (Goldkuhl, 2012; Pulla & Carter, 2018); it is therefore important to also consider the research approach adopted by this study.

3.2.2 Research approach

A qualitative approach is suitable when the objective is to gain a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of participants (Sprake & Palmer, 2022; Pulla & Carter, 2018; Thanh & Thanh, 2015). This study aimed to explore trauma-affected students' experiences of instructor communication, as well as to identify the needs of instructors in this regard. Both students and instructors were interviewed. This approach therefore aligned with interpretivist research.

A qualitative approach was employed in this study through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with trauma-affected students to gather detailed descriptions of their experiences (Creswell, 2009). Qualitative research is subjective and provides a depth of understanding that allows researchers to make rich interpretations of data that hold countless meanings (Black, 2006). Furthermore, in qualitative research, researchers are involved in collecting data and must be sensitive and able to follow the thoughts of the participants to understand their lived experiences (Pulla & Carter, 2018). The researcher in this study has significant experience in higher education as an academic

facilitator. Therefore, he has familiarity with issues facing students and instructors, which informs his understanding and interpretation of the research data. To reflect on the researcher's positionality, journaling was used to document his experiences and feelings during the data-collection phase. Understanding the choice of research approach necessitates a discussion of the number of participants and how they were selected based on their direct experience with the phenomenon to enable them to articulate it meaningfully.

3.3 SAMPLE AND SELECTION CRITERIA

Probability and non-probability sampling are the two main methods of sampling. Probability samples can ensure generalisability, while non-probability samples are useful in exploratory situations (Ahmed, 2024; Stratton, 2021). This study used non-probability sampling, which allows researchers to target certain groups from the wider population with no intention to generalise (Cohen et al., 2018). This clearly applied to this study, as trauma-affected students and instructors with experience in interacting with trauma-affected students were targeted without a desire to generalise the findings.

A convenience sample was used in this study as a form of non-probability sampling. This technique is suitable when the intention is to obtain perceptions from participants. It also allows researchers to create inclusion criteria and attract potential participants who are available and meet these criteria (Golzar et al., 2022). This method enables researchers to advertise the study in accessible places and allows interested participants to approach the researchers (Andrade, 2021; Ahmed, 2024). This process is continued until the required sample size is reached (Cohen et al., 2018). The popularity of this sampling method lies in its simplicity, cost-effectiveness, and time efficiency compared to other sampling strategies. However, its downside is bias, as the results are not generalisable (Ahmed, 2024; Stratton, 2021). Lastly, this sampling method is also consistent with the qualitative approach (Ahmed, 2024), which was adopted for this study.

The participants were recruited from the UFS's Qwaqwa Campus, South Campus, and Bloemfontein Campus. This was accomplished by contacting departmental heads to inform lecturers in their departments of the study. After the departmental heads were

contacted, the researcher followed up with direct invitations to lecturers who had expressed interest, either through student recommendations or departmental outreach. The researcher sent a call for participation to students via a Blackboard announcement and posters placed on the campuses. Blackboard announcements were directed to students in communication science modules, which were selected due to their high level of instructor-student interaction. This selection was important because students enrolled in these modules are more likely to engage with lecturers and may provide deeper insights into the support they receive. To reach a wide range of students, posters were also placed across all three UFS campuses to attract students from other faculties and departments to participate.

A sample size of (n=15) students and (n=15) lecturers was deemed appropriate for this qualitative study. It allowed the researcher to gather detailed, in-depth accounts without overwhelming the analysis process (Creswell, 2013). This range ensured that the depth of exploration aligned with the study's goals while remaining manageable for thematic analysis. The use of convenience sampling in this study permitted this sample size because the aim was not to generalise the findings but to provide descriptions in a clear, detailed, and in-depth manner (Cohen et al., 2018). Inclusion criteria were established to ensure that participants were selected based on the most recent trauma, which had to have occurred in the last five years. The five-year trauma window was chosen to ensure relevance to the study and memory accuracy. The inclusion criteria entailed key characteristics of the target population used to address the research question (Patino & Ferreira, 2018). The participants self-identified as trauma-affected, irrespective of the type of trauma. Consequently, the participants were asked questions during the recruitment phase to verify whether they met the criteria. Lecturers were selected based on their experience in dealing with trauma-affected students in and outside the classroom at the UFS. Having outlined the sampling and recruitment strategy, the next section discusses the data-collection instrument, with particular attention paid to how the semi-structured interviews were designed to reveal the participants' lived experiences.

3.4 RESEARCH INSTRUMENT AND PROCEDURES

Interviews are commonly used data-collection instruments in qualitative research (Cohen et al., 2018; Dunwoodie et al., 2022). They refer to real-time conversations

between researchers and participants that are intended to uncover the participants' personal views (Gichuru, 2017; Edwards & Holland, 2013). Cohen et al. (2018) opine that interviews enable researchers and participants to discuss their interpretations of the world and the meanings they attach to their experiences. As previously stated regarding the research paradigm, interpretive research provides a myriad of meanings (Black, 2006) by allowing the exploration of multiple realities and interpretations of experiences during researcher-participant interactions. This aligns with this research, which employed multisensory channels such as verbal, non-verbal, and written communication in the interviews (Cohen et al., 2018). Furthermore, the interpretivist approach posits that human interaction is the foundation for the creation and understanding of social life; it is therefore the researcher-participant interaction in interviews that generates knowledge (Edwards & Holland, 2013).

This study used semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions (Cohen et al., 2018; Edwards & Holland, 2013). In semi-structured interviews, researchers have a list of questions that allows flexibility in how questions are asked and responded to. Furthermore, researchers can also ask follow-up questions to explore the angles of discussion revealed by the participants (Edwards & Holland, 2013; Cohen et al., 2018). For instance, if a participant states that instructors do not care, this could prompt the researcher to probe why they think instructors do not care. The participants in this study were interviewed using audio-recorded, in-depth, semi-structured interviews to understand their lived experiences. Recording interviews ensures that the participants' stories are documented verbatim for analysis and interpretation. The participants in this study were informed that they would be recorded, and their written consent was stored on a password-protected computer. The interviews were conducted using open-ended questions, which were flexible as they allowed the researcher to probe further to gain depth or clarify misunderstandings (Cohen et al., 2018). The interviews took place face to face on the UFS campuses for the convenience of the participants and to manage emotional sensitivity. Face-to-face interviews were also preferable for observing non-verbal cues and ensuring rapport with the participants. However, two participants were interviewed telephonically due to distance and availability. Each interview lasted an hour to minimise disruption to the participants' work or study time. To ensure comfort, the participants were provided with water and allowed to take breaks.

Interviews allow participants to share their feelings, attitudes, opinions, and prejudices towards various phenomena they experience (Dunwoodie et al., 2022). Although interviews are an essential tool for researchers, they do have downsides. Firstly, interviews may be time-consuming (Cohen et al., 2018; Creswell, 2013); confidentiality procedures were therefore explained in advance to save time. They may also be influenced by the researcher's bias (Edwards & Holland, 2013; Creswell & Creswell, 2018), which can make the findings less generalisable (Edwards & Holland, 2013). In this study, an interview guide was used to limit researcher bias. Interviews may also be inconvenient for participants, and it may be difficult to guarantee the participants' anonymity. Lastly, participant fatigue may interfere with the interview (Cohen et al., 2018); the participants in this study were allowed to take breaks to mitigate this issue. Recorded interviews with participants formed the basis for the thematic analysis of the study, as discussed in the next section.

3.5 DATA-ANALYSIS TECHNIQUES

Thematic analysis aligns with the interpretivist focus on understanding subjective meaning and lived experience. This method was employed in this study because it is a widely recognised technique for systematically generating findings by identifying, analysing, and reporting themes in data (Creswell, 2013; Braun & Clarke, 2022; Saunders et al., 2023). It seeks to uncover themes that reveal stories in the data (Dawadi, 2020). Thematic analysis is concerned with accurately and comprehensively presenting the experiences and narratives of research participants (Guest et al., 2012; Creswell, 2013). This method ensures that findings are credible to an external audience due to its transparent and structured procedures (Guest et al., 2012). The steps employed in this study entailed transcribing verbal data, generating codes, searching for themes, reviewing and refining themes, defining and naming the themes, and producing a report (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Firstly, the researcher transcribed the verbal data and familiarised himself with the entire dataset of interview transcripts. Understanding the transcripts is essential to ensure success in the coding and theming stages of thematic analysis (Saunders et al., 2023). The researcher took notes and posed questions to initiate early analytical reflection during the transcription process. This approach helped the researcher to identify the types and quantities of themes that may emerge from the data (Dawadi,

2020; Naeem et al., 2023) and track emerging ideas. While reading through the transcripts, any information of interest was highlighted.

Secondly, the researcher read through all the datasets and systematically assigned codes to the data. Codes serve as labels for concepts in the data that are relevant to a study's objectives (Saunders et al., 2023). A coding system enables data to be analysed by discovering patterns and providing explanations that separate the data into categories (Guest et al., 2012; Brink et al., 2012). Through initial coding and theme development, the researcher ensured alignment with the research objectives by iteratively moving between stages. The purpose of this coding phase was to consider and establish relationships between categories and subcategories to understand the phenomenon and its dimensional variations. As more data were examined, the researcher continually adjusted the framework of emerging concepts. All data were coded after the transcripts were read multiple times. Therefore, after initial coding, subsequent data yielded variations of existing data, indicating that saturation has been met.

Consequent to coding, the third stage was to construct meaningful themes. Themes unite the dataset and should be evidently clear, pertinent to the research objectives, and repeated throughout the collected data (Saunders et al., 2023). The significant focus in this stage is on the broader themes rather than the codes. The exploratory nature of this study required re-reading all the transcripts before sorting the codes in accordance with the themes (Dawadi, 2020; Naeem et al., 2023). As the themes are developed, researchers can bring in concepts identified in the literature review (Dawadi, 2020) to contextualise the themes after their development.

In the fourth step, the researcher reviewed the themes by looking back at the datasets and notes from Step 1, the codes developed in Step 2, and the themes developed in Step 3 to name and define the themes. Thematic analysis is a non-linear process that involves constantly moving back and forth through the stages (Dawadi, 2020) to validate emerging categories. The researcher returned to earlier stages several times to ensure that the themes addressed the research objectives and aligned with the participants' narratives. All the themes were reviewed with the aim of refining the initially developed themes and checking if they formed a coherent pattern (Dawadi, 2020; Naeem et al., 2023). The fifth stage is to define and name the themes before

producing a report. This was achieved by presenting the data using illustrative quotations from the participants.

3.6 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

All the participants in this study participated voluntarily, to respect their autonomy, and they were informed that they could withdraw their participation before, during, or after participating. Prior to the commencement of the interviews, the participants were given information leaflets about the study. The participants provided written informed consent after reviewing the study's guarantee of confidentiality before participating in the study. To ensure confidentiality, all the participants were given pseudonyms, and the collected data were stored on the researcher's password-protected computer. Considering the sensitivity of this research, where participants had to discuss their traumatic experiences, such as rape, they were informed that, should they experience any distress, they could contact Student Counselling and Development (SCD), which was made aware of this study, and its services are free. Lastly, this study received ethical approval from the General Human Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of the Humanities at the UFS (reference number: UFS-HSD2024/2314).

3.7 CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter provided an overview of the research design adopted in this study. The aim of this study was to explore the experiences of trauma-affected students regarding the support they received from their instructors. It further aimed to establish the support needed by instructors to communicate more effectively. To accomplish this, the interpretivist paradigm was adopted, as it allows for multiple interpretations and the co-construction of meaning. Moreover, a qualitative approach was consistently employed in line with the chosen paradigm, as it enabled the researcher to gain a deeper understanding by exploring perceptions and experiences within a specific social context. Additionally, convenience sampling was used to select participants who were easily accessible to the researcher. Subsequently, the chapter discussed semi-structured interviews as the chosen data-collection instrument for this study. Further discussion focused on thematic analysis as a qualitative method of data analysis to clarify how the results were generated from the interviews. Lastly, a discussion of relevant ethical considerations concluded the chapter in terms of how this study

adhered to the ethical requirements involved in conducting research on human subjects.

CHAPTER 4:
RESEARCH FINDINGS

4.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents the results of an analysis of instructors' communication of social support to students affected by trauma. The data were interpreted through the frameworks of two theories, namely the SST and RRGT, in order to elucidate these findings. This research was guided by the following research questions (RQs):

- **RQ1:** How do trauma-affected students communicate their trauma experiences to instructors?
- **RQ2:** How do trauma-affected students perceive instructor communication of social support?
- **RQ3:** What types of support do trauma-affected students need from instructors?
- **RQ4:** How do instructors experience and handle students' trauma?
- **RQ5:** What are the needs of instructors that could better prepare them to communicate supportively with trauma-affected students?

Table 4.1 presents a summary of the participants' information to contextualise the participants prior to reporting the findings.

Table 4.1: Participant information

Student participant information				
Participant no.	**Pseudonyms**	**Trauma suffered**	**Age**	**Gender**
1	Dineo	Armed robbery	21	Female
2	Masabata	Sexual assault	23	Female
3	Thabiso	Relationship / loss	24	Male
4	Disebo	Loss of a loved one	30	Female
5	Charnel	Sexual assault	23	Female
6	Buhle	Assault / witnessing abuse / loss of a loved one	20	Female
7	Zinzile	Loss of loved ones	22	Female
8	Thobeka	Verbal/emotional abuse	22	Female
9	Thandolwethu	Verbal abuse / neglect	21	Female
10	Amohelang	Loss of a loved one / family member severely ill / physical abuse	23	Female
11	Fizokuhle	Loss of loved ones	24	Female
12	Anele	Witnessed a traumatic event	21	Male
13	Koketso	Witnessed a traumatic event	20	Female

Student participant information				
Participant no.	**Pseudonyms**	**Trauma suffered**	**Age**	**Gender**
14	Ntombi	Kidnapping / sexual assault / drugged	23	Female
15	Alex	Family emotional trauma	27	Female
Instructor participant information				
Participant no.	**Pseudonyms**	**Lecturing experience**	**Gender**	
1	Dr Coetzee	11 years	Female	
2	Ms Van Wyk	13 years	Female	
3	Mrs Goliath	7 years	Female	
4	Ms Naidoo	8 years	Female	
5	Dr Williams	19 years	Female	
6	Mrs Seoe	8 years	Female	
7	Ms Motaung	15 years	Female	
8	Ms Dhlamini	14 years	Female	
9	Mrs Mthombeni	6-7 years	Female	
10	Dr Khowa	2-4 years	Female	
11	Mr Ndlovu	3 years	Male	
12	Dr Mosia	10 years	Male	
13	Ms Togo	9 years	Female	
14	Mr Mhlongo	9 years	Male	
15	Dr Cloete	20 years	Male	

4.2 STUDENT COMMUNICATION OF TRAUMA

This category addresses RQ1 by examining how students affected by trauma disclosed their experiences to their instructors, with a particular focus on the barriers and conditions that influenced such disclosures. Data collected from the interviews with the students revealed two primary themes: motivation to disclose and barriers to disclosure, as shown in Table 4.2. Motivation to disclose indicates that students were driven by specific conditions to share their trauma with instructors, with some individuals exhibiting a greater willingness to disclose than others. The subthemes that emerged from this theme are conditional disclosure and necessary disclosure. Conversely, barriers to disclosure suggest that students refrained from communicating their trauma experiences to lecturers due to various hindrances. The subthemes identified within this theme are distrust, not wanting to be a burden, fear, language barriers, and perceived insignificance.

Table 4.2: Student communication of trauma

Theme	Subtheme
Theme 1: Motivation to disclose	Subtheme 1.1: Conditional disclosure Subtheme 1.2: Necessary disclosure
Theme 2: Barriers to disclosure	Subtheme 2.1: Distrust Subtheme 2.2: Fear Subtheme 2.3: Not wanting to be a burden Subtheme 2.4: Language barriers Subtheme 2.5: Perceived insignificance

4.2.1 Theme 1: Motivation to disclose

The students demonstrated varying levels of motivation to disclose their traumatic experiences to their instructors, with some exhibiting greater openness than others. Two distinct forms of disclosure were identified: conditional and necessary.

4.2.1.1 Subtheme 1.1: Conditional disclosure

Conditional disclosure refers to the voluntary sharing of one's trauma, which is predicated on a sense of comfort in a particular environment or the establishment of a trusting relationship with an individual. For instance, Disebo, who experienced the loss of a loved one, articulated how she shared her traumatic experiences with the entire class, prompted by the subject matter discussed in class. She said:

> *"It was in class. We had a class session. And the topic for the day, actually, for the module, like I said. And I shared my experiences with the class. I think it was about two weeks after we buried my cousin."*

Disebo was able to share her experiences with the entire class due to her sense of comfort, as the environment and subject matter were conducive to her disclosure. Similarly, Ntombi highlighted how she utilised an opportunity during an assessment to reveal her trauma to her lecturer:

> *"My facilitator found out when we were writing an assignment where we were writing 'the river of life' in the first semester. They wanted to know us better, where we come from, what happened in our past, so that's when I got to express myself and write this is what happened to me, this is who I am, this is what I am holding in my heart."*

Another student, Masabata, discussed her experience of disclosing her trauma, noting that she developed rapport with her lecturer, which facilitated her comfort in sharing. She stated:

> *"I disclosed my trauma very late in the year to the lecturer because I felt like she was the one reaching out. She saw that this girl is not okay, so she reached out, so I couldn't leave someone who is reaching out. I mean, her calling me even at night, being available, so, yah, I disclosed it very late."*

There is an indication that students are more likely to disclose personal information when they feel comfortable in a particular environment. Additionally, students may be inclined to share information if they established rapport with the instructor, which aligns with the relational goal of the RRGT. The timing of such disclosures may vary, occurring either early in the semester or later, depending on when opportunities arise or when students feel at ease in their relationship with their instructor.

4.2.1.2 Subtheme 1.2: Necessary disclosure

Some students reported that they only disclosed because it was necessary. They expressed that their challenges were impeding their academic responsibilities, which necessitated disclosure. For instance, Amohelang, a student who experienced multiple traumas, including physical abuse, described her reluctance to inform any lecturer of her situation, except for one whose test would have been adversely affected by her inability to participate. She said:

> *"No, I did not tell my lecturers, but I did tell one because we were about to write a test and I received a call from our neighbour who informed me that my sister had collapsed. So, I went to my lecturer. Also, we did not talk much or get into the details, but he told me I could go and then write the supplementary test."*

Dineo also indicated that she only informed the instructor whose subject would have been affected by her challenges:

> *"I told one lecturer. I think it is because after that whole thing, we had an oral presentation to do that week, and I explained to my lecturer the next day and he was very understanding."*

This illustrates how students tend to inform instructors about their trauma to ensure that their academic work is not negatively impacted. Consequently, conditional disclosure aligns with the RRGT because disclosure is a relational act wherein students determine to whom they will disclose their trauma. Furthermore, when a safe relational space exists, students are more likely to disclose, as they perceive that relational trust has been established. Conversely, when students disclose only when their academic performance is affected, it reflects a pragmatic rhetorical choice.

4.2.2 Theme 2: Barriers to disclosure

The results also reveal that some students do not communicate their trauma to their lecturers. They indicated that their non-disclosure was influenced by factors such as distrust, not wanting to be a burden, fear, language barriers, and perceived insignificance.

4.2.2.1 Subtheme 2.1: Distrust

Distrust implies the reluctance to confide in an individual due to uncertainty linked to personal issues being treated with confidentiality. Disebo explained that although she was aware of her lecturers' support, she was uncertain whether she wanted to share her problems with them. She said:

> *"And, in as much as in our department, lecturers are there to support you, but sometimes you just, like,* hai*, I'm not sure if I want to tell them my story or what's going on in my life because we are people* mos*, and we don't trust people that easily."*

Charnel also indicated that a lack of trust rendered her lecturers unrelatable. Consequently, she never disclosed her trauma to anyone. She stated:

> *"I never, because I do not feel comfortable sharing any kind of trauma with them because I feel they are not relatable. I feel it's just the trust thing that makes them unrelatable."*

Thobeka echoed these sentiments and highlighted how her fear of being judged made it difficult to trust people with her personal issues. She remarked:

"I definitely have trust issues. I don't easily open up because people tend to judge more when they don't understand something than trying to understand."

These comments demonstrate that a lack of trust inhibits individuals from confiding in or seeking assistance from others. Even when help is evidently available, distrust creates barriers to outreach.

4.2.2.2 Subtheme 2.2: Fear

Fear appears to affect students and impede their willingness to seek assistance. Zinzile articulated how her fear of vulnerability prevented her from disclosing her trauma:

"We express ourselves in different ways and we don't want to open up because we feel like if you open up, you become vulnerable, which is part of the healing process or part of the process you need to go through. It's like sometimes when you are used to people not listening, is like everyone is not gonna listen."

Zinzile was also impeded in her ability to communicate with her lecturers due to her belief that they may not be receptive, which was influenced by her past experiences of individuals not listening to her. In contrast, Koketso expressed that she refrained from communicating with anyone because she feared potential penalties from the Residence Head for discussing her trauma. She stated:

"No, I am not really close with any of the lecturers. I just go there for sessions. I didn't tell my parents and lecturers because they told us not to tell anyone and it must stay among us, and no one was allowed to leak the information or post because it's gonna put a bad name on their reputation. And if we talked, the RAs [Residence assistants] would tell the Res Head, and we would be fined."

Charnel articulated that she refrained from disclosing her trauma due to concerns that she would not be believed, given that the perpetrator was a prominent figure in the community:

"I also did not tell my parents or anyone because he is a well-known person in the community and I was afraid no one is gonna believe me."

This shows that, even when students require assistance, they may hesitate to reach out due to fear. Such fear may stem from the social status of the perpetrator, the desire to protect their reputation, or simply the apprehension of being vulnerable or not being heard.

4.2.2.3 Subtheme 2.3: Not wanting to be a burden

The participants also indicated that they did not wish to impose on others, which led them to keep their traumas to themselves. Buhle explained how she desired for others to perceive her as normal rather than as someone grappling with trauma:

> *"I have never. I don't want to be a burden or people to sympathise me or show any, I don't like that, it makes me feel uncomfortable, it's like all the times I aways have a story. There is literally nothing good happening in my life this year. So, I don't want to be the person whom, each time I pass by, they would be like, shame, she is going through the most, she is going through a lot, this and this happened to her. I don't want that. I just want people to see me as a normal person, not someone who is going through something back at home or academically."*

Thobeka articulated that she was reluctant to burden others with her difficulties, as she perceived herself as someone about whom no one was concerned. Consequently, she felt compelled to address her challenges independently. She stated:

> *"No, I have never done that. The only time I would be talking to my lecturers about my struggles would be about assignments. I have this thing that people can come to me with their issues, but I can't bother them with mine. It's a mentality of being a child that no one worries about. That you have to have it under control no matter what. So, me bothering, well, not bothering, but me telling my lecturers about things that are not school related would make me feel like I'm a burden and it's the last thing that I need."*

This is indicative of the effects that trauma has on students, which leads them to withdraw or isolate themselves while convincing themselves that they were strong enough to manage their struggles. Rather than prioritising their own well-being and seeking assistance, they often concerned themselves with the potential burden they

might impose on others, as well as the possible treatment they might receive from peers upon disclosing their issues.

4.2.2.4 Subtheme 2.4: Language barriers

Some students indicated that language barriers hindered their ability to communicate effectively with their lecturers regarding their trauma-related challenges. Koketso explained that she would rate her interactions with her lecturers as 8 out of 10, primarily due to the lecturers who utilised a language she understood. She stated:

> *"So far, I think I can rate it 8 out of 10, more especially with Black lecturers because they use a language that we can all understand compared to the white ones; their English is too deep, so sometimes we can't hear. Also, I think they can't project their voices to be loud enough for us. It's like their voice is made to speak in smaller rooms, so you can't hear, but with the Black ones, I am good. But the white ones, I can't interact properly because even if I might know the answer to the question, I can't answer because I probably didn't hear the question correctly."*

Thabiso articulated the challenges he faced in expressing his trauma in English. He remarked:

> *"I feel like explaining myself in English is harder because I can't explain the events the way they happened."*

Thobeka echoed these sentiments, noting that it was increasingly difficult for her to filter words and to make sense of both her own expressions and the discourse of others. She stated:

> *"It's language barrier. It's having to filter voices and trying to find appropriate translation to the word, even though you know that this word doesn't mean exactly that, but it is the closest one to that. And meeting new people, having to filter words and having to think that I may have grown this way, but I have to change my approach to people because I'm in a different space."*

This highlights the challenges faced by students affected by trauma. Students from diverse backgrounds may struggle with language barriers while simultaneously confronting trauma-related issues, which can become overwhelming.

4.2.2.5 Subtheme 2.5: Perceived insignificance

Other participants expressed that they did not disclose their traumatic experiences to their lecturers, as they perceived it to be unnecessary. Thandolwethu, who experienced verbal abuse and neglect, stated:

> *"I feel like it is not necessary, and I told myself that I can handle it. Most of the time I write down since I am a writer and like to sing about it. And if there is, like, a choir, I go with and listen to music. Sometimes there are days where I feel these things coming back and I would speak to ChatGPT and it would give me tips. It happens sometimes randomly when I wake up or when maybe someone had said something, then I would tell myself that I need to focus."*

This indicates that students are more likely to seek coping mechanisms rather than engage in communication with their lecturers, as they perceive such interactions to be unnecessary unless directly related to academic matters. Anele further elucidated that he refrained from disclosing his traumatic challenges to his lecturers, believing that no positive outcome would result from such communication:

> *"I don't think that it would be anything good to communicate my trauma to my lecturers because I feel like, as much as I am traumatised by what traumatised me, it doesn't really affect them, so it would be good if I just keep it within me."*

This indicates that Anele perceived a lack of support from his instructors. Nevertheless, his decision to confront challenges independently may not be the most effective approach. These obstacles reflect deficiencies in the support system's efficacy. Furthermore, barriers such as distrust, fear, and the perception of being a burden highlight shortcomings in achieving relational objectives. Consequently, enhancing instructor-student relationships according to the RRGT may enable students to perceive the establishment of relational trust, thereby fostering an environment where they feel comfortable communicating with instructors without the fear of being perceived as burdensome.

4.3 PATTERNS OF INSTRUCTOR COMMUNICATION

The students who participated in this study identified patterns of instructor communication that they perceived as either supportive or detrimental to their learning experience. This category addresses RQ2 by examining the students' perceptions of instructor communication. The themes that emerged from this category are supportive instructor communication and harmful instructor communication, as illustrated in Table 4.3. The subthemes associated with supportive instructor communication are intentional support, unintentional support, compassionate behaviour, and instructor availability. Conversely, the subthemes related to harmful instructor communication comprise dismissive communication and triggering communication.

Table 4.3: Patterns of instructor communication

Theme	Subthemes
Theme 1: Supportive instructor communication	Subtheme 1.1: Intentional support Subtheme 1.2: Unintentional support Subtheme 1.3: Compassionate behaviour Subtheme 1.4: Instructor availability
Theme 2: Harmful instructor communication	Subtheme 2.1: Dismissive communication Subtheme 2.2: Triggering communication

4.3.1 Theme 1: Supportive instructor communication

Some students articulated that their lecturers were instrumental in assisting them in coping with their traumas, even in instances where they did not disclose their experiences. They reported instructor behaviours that fostered a sense of support, including intentional support, unintentional support, compassionate behaviour, and instructor availability.

4.3.1.1 Subtheme 1.1: Intentional support

The participants conveyed how encouragement from lecturers significantly aided them in managing their trauma. Masabata, a student who was sexually assaulted, recounted a particular instance of support from one of her lecturers. Although the lecturer was unaware of the specific trauma, she sensed that something was amiss with the student and took the initiative to check on her. Masabata stated:

"Every morning, she would send me a text to say, 'I hope to see you', and then I would go. She sent me encouraging messages. Then I started attending her classes."

Masabata felt motivated to attend class due to the encouragement she received from her lecturer, which helped her to cope with her trauma.

Ntombi reflected on the support she received from her lecturers in managing her trauma:

"I can say that they are supportive because my facilitator sometimes calls me to check up on me and remind me of my appointment and even events at student counselling."

This illustrates the direct support provided by instructors who exhibit intentional support to assist students in navigating their trauma. The students regarded these messages of support as crucial to their recovery journey because, according to the SST, when support is accessible, individuals who are affected by trauma are better equipped to confront their challenges.

4.3.1.2 Subtheme 1.2: Unintentional support

Unintentional support refers to assistance rendered by instructors who are unaware of students' trauma. Buhle, a student who had experienced multiple traumas, including assault, described the classroom as her safe space and relayed how she was uplifted by messages from her lecturers. She stated:

"I realised that when I am in the classroom, interacting with my lecturers and classmates, I actually forget a lot of things. So, some lecturers do give a sense of a life lesson, and I would pick some things from that, and I would be okay. So, I would say they actually do play a role in our lives, so some of them are like our parents so they know how to manoeuvre emotions."

Although some lecturers were unaware of the students' trauma, their messages conveyed a sense of support. Buhle perceived herself as supported because she was confident that her classmates and lecturer would assist her in momentarily alleviating the challenges she might be encountering. Consequently, the lecturers were regarded

as supportive, as their words aided her in managing her trauma. This perspective was also reflected by Thobeka, who experienced verbal and emotional abuse. She articulated how her lecturer encouraged her and supported her healing journey:

> *"There is this one lecturer, she is a yapper, she talks. So, for the whole 30 minutes, she would be advising us on life, like, you shouldn't be doing this, you should be focusing on your work. You are still young, you should be focusing on achieving your academics, you will see the rest when you are older. She is like an older version of a sibling. So, her words are often quite comforting to what I am going through at times."*

These encouraging words from lecturers were regarded as comforting by students who had experienced trauma. They perceived an encouraging lecturer as more relatable, which contributed to the creation of a safe space in the classroom.

4.3.1.3 Subtheme 1.3: Compassionate behaviour

The students also described how some of their lecturers exhibited kindness and understanding when they communicated their traumatic challenges. They articulated that these lecturers were dedicated to helping them cope with their difficulties. Anele, who experienced family-related trauma, stated:

> *"In terms of humility, being kind and considerate, they do, do that and some even go an extra mile."*

Koketso, who had experienced a traumatic event, explained how her lecturers consistently showed kindness and were never rude to her. She expressed her sense of support from all her lecturers by stating:

> *"All my lecturers are calm; no one has ever shouted at me or anything. They are calm, they just do what they have to do and I do what I have to do."*

Koketso felt supported because she had not encountered harmful communication directed towards her. The relationship was cordial, and both instructors and students fulfilled their respective responsibilities, which contributed to the students' comfort. Additionally, Masabata explained how her lecturer demonstrated understanding when she conveyed her inability to focus in the classroom:

> *"Studying is a problem. Concentrating is a problem. I lag behind on my work. I always doze off. There is a lecturer who allowed me to leave about three or four times, because I couldn't focus and I told her that I could not focus in class. Studying is difficult."*

These compassionate behaviours relate to the RRGT by demonstrating a balance between rhetorical and relational objectives, where instructors not only prioritise academic performance but also attend to the emotional needs of students. Furthermore, these behaviours are connected to the SST, as acts of compassion are inherently supportive in an emotional context. For example, Masabata recounted an experience in which a lecturer displayed kindness by recognising her struggle with concentration. She regarded the lecturer as compassionate because she understood the difficulties Masabata was encountering and permitted her to leave the classroom to find a more comfortable environment.

4.3.1.4 Subtheme 1.4: Instructor availability

Several students articulated how their lecturers conveyed support simply through their availability. They described instances in which some lecturers listened attentively, provided affirming messages, and assisted them in coping with trauma. Ntombi, who endured multiple traumatic experiences, including kidnapping, stated:

> *"My lecturers have been helping me because as a first-year student doing social work, I would be dealing with people, social problems and things I have experienced in the past, so they have been helping me with that, building my confidence because I was losing myself in a way."*

Ntombi was pleased with the increasing confidence she was developing and attributed this to the supportive nature of her lecturers, who took the time to monitor her progress. She felt a sense of support not only in terms of her academic pursuits but also concerning her overall well-being. Masabata expressed similar sentiments, stating:

> *"I was able to interact with one lecturer. You see, when some[one] gives, she is, like, 'Hi, I'm here', who shows that she is available, and she is not about schoolwork and can help beyond schoolwork. I would actually come to campus having three classes but end up attending only her class, because she was*

there, not only as a lecturer, but she was there, without knowing what was happening. She only found out before we went for recess."

This suggests that availability to students can be perceived as a form of support, as it fosters a sense of care and acknowledgement of their challenges. These findings align with the relational goals outlined in the RRGT, as instructors strive to address the relational needs of students by being accessible and assisting them in coping with their trauma. Furthermore, these results underscore the assertions of the SST, which posits that students are better able to manage their trauma when provided with adequate support.

4.3.2 Theme 2: Harmful instructor communication

Several students expressed feelings of a lack of support from lecturers during their recovery processes, both in and outside the classroom. They recounted various instances of instructor behaviour that contributed to their sense of neglect, including dismissive communication and triggering interactions.

4.3.2.1 Subtheme 2.1: Dismissive communication

The students reported that certain lecturers exhibited dismissive attitudes, which hindered their ability to address their trauma-related challenges. Dismissive attitude implies communication that downplays or ignores the emotions of another person. Masabata shared her experiences and the reasons behind her decision to cease attending classes:

"But the lecturers are rude, they are not nice. Everything happened in the first semester, and I couldn't handle everything, so I stopped coming to classes. The lecturer sent me an email that I should come to class, and I should be leading by example. I went to her and told her that I was not okay. I felt like I should go to her and tell her that I was not okay. I'm trying but I'm not okay and I am not ready to talk about it; even my mom doesn't know what is happening. And she was like, 'No, you should lead by example.' And I was like, 'Okay, cool, sorry.' We were told to squeeze ourselves for tutorials. Mind you, I have not been to tutorials. So, she said those who have tutorials on Friday should raise their hands and I raised mine as well. And she said to me, you are the one suffering

from trauma. I don't know you; your class is in the afternoon. Leave my class. And then said, with an attitude, 'That time you are coming to class for the first time, jirr*!' Since then, I tried going to class, but… yah."*

Masabata experienced profound humiliation when her lecturer publicly referenced her trauma in front of her peers. Having confided in her lecturer about the trauma that impeded her attendance, she was subsequently advised to attend a particular class, only to be subjected to humiliation for being present in a class that she was deemed not to belong in. Fizokuhle, who experienced the loss of loved ones, noted that while she generally maintained a cordial relationship with her lecturers, some exhibited insensitivity, which made her feel that they were dismissive of her challenges related to trauma. She stated:

"Some lecturers, who become rude unnecessarily, seem less sensitive to my trauma. For instance, I could be absent-minded in class, maybe thinking about my trauma or maybe having been triggered. Instead of the lecturer asking why I am not concentrating, they would be rude, as if I don't know I have to concentrate in class."

This indifferent behaviour and unkind communication contribute to the perception among students that their lecturers are unhelpful in addressing their trauma-related challenges. The students felt that insufficient effort was made by the instructors to understand the reasons behind their lack of concentration in class.

Several students reported feeling unsupported by their lecturers, who appeared unsympathetic to their difficulties. They indicated that whenever they disclosed their issues to their lecturers, their feelings were often dismissed. Alex, a student who experienced trauma due to challenging family circumstances, stated:

"No, she showed no sympathy. I told her a lot was going on and she told me I should be studying and not worried about something that happened back then because I cannot change it."

Alex felt unheard, as she articulated her feelings and challenges but was advised to focus solely on academics, despite her emotional struggles. Consequently, she perceived a lack of sympathy for her difficulties. Charnel, who was a victim of sexual assault, remarked that the instructors did not appear to care about their students. She

further noted that even when attempts were made to engage in conversation, the lecturers seemed primarily concerned with academic performance rather than personal issues. She stated:

> *"No, they are not supportive because they [are] all about finishing the work and not like being there for the students. They just want to teach and then go. So, whatever happens, if it is not related to academics, they do not care."*

This shows that the students perceived their lecturers as only concerned with academics, and that they could not lean on them for support when they needed personal support. This unsympathetic behaviour contributed to students' perceptions of instructors as lacking support during their healing journeys. According to the RRGT, this is indicative of an imbalance between rhetorical and relational goals, where instructors prioritise rhetorical objectives, such as delivering course content, while neglecting relational needs, which involve establishing positive relationships with students. These dismissive behaviours also undermine the supportive functions of the SST because students do not feel cared for. For instance, students require attentive listening as a form of emotional support and often feel unsupported when instructors dismiss their feelings.

4.3.2.2 Subtheme 2.2: Triggering communication

Some students reported feeling uncomfortable or triggered by certain statements made by their lecturers. They acknowledged that some comments arose in the context of the lesson. Although they understood that lecturers might be unaware of their personal experiences, these utterances nonetheless affected them and made it challenging to cope. Amohelang, who has endured multiple traumas, including a miscarriage, explained how classroom discussions can be particularly distressing:

> *"For example, when I was doing psychology and had to deal with childbirth. It would be triggering and took me back to my own trauma and the lecturer would talk about the process of childbirth and things like that."*

Another student, Zinzile, who has experienced the loss of loved ones, expressed that she was impacted by communication regarding her academic performance due to the standards set by her parents:

> *"I knew what I wanted to be, because it was more influenced by the parents because I was doing science and all these things, so when I lost them, I had a question on what I want to do because I felt like I don't really know what I have done. So, I put myself through so much pressure, a lot of pressure to be perfect, because already, there was that standard that you are doing maths and science. And even though they are not present, I feel like I have a watchdog… not a watchdog, but that I still have to maintain that perfectness, good grades and good behaviour. I think there was a final assessment, I think it counted 40%, and the way it was portrayed, like if you don't pass this one, you are failing. And for me, having good grades and maintaining good marks was like a thing for me. So, it was kind of like triggering, panic, panic, you really need to work hard and make sure that you don't get anything less than a pass mark."*

Some communication from the lecturers appeared to instil fear in the students, which led to feelings of panic and discomfort. Ntombi articulated that the communication from lecturers within the classroom context was triggering for her, despite her understanding that it pertained to the lesson:

> *"The way they communicate does trigger me too much. They are teaching us about the problems that are faced in life, like social issues, so they do speak or ask questions that would trigger my memories. For instance, if they ask, 'How would you approach someone who has been abused, who has been through this situation?' it is part of the lesson. Sometimes I do understand that they should ask those questions, but it does trigger."*

In contrast to the preceding theme concerning supportive instructor communication, this theme elucidates the detrimental impact of failed relational goals, as harmful messages appear to undermine instructor-student relationships. Furthermore, it highlights a lack of social support, as dismissive and triggering communication seems to impair students' coping capacities. For example, Ntombi reported feeling triggered whenever situations analogous to her own experiences were discussed during lessons, which contributed to her discomfort. This kind of discomfort affects the instructor-student relationship, as students may feel uneasy in the classroom environment.

4.4 TYPES OF SUPPORT NEEDED

This category addresses RQ3 by examining the types of support required by trauma-affected students from their lecturers in order to effectively manage their trauma alongside their academic responsibilities, as illustrated in Table 4.4.

Table 4.4: Types of support needed

Themes
Theme 1: Academic flexibility
Theme 2: Emotional support
Theme 3: Informational support

4.4.1 Theme 1: Academic flexibility

Several students indicated that they required academic support from lecturers to assist them in managing the workload and challenges associated with their trauma. They articulated that each day presented unique difficulties, and they occasionally struggled to cope and meet their academic obligations. Fizokuhle, who experienced the loss of loved ones, conveyed that she would feel more supported if she were granted additional time to complete her assignments. She stated:

> *"Sometimes the workload is too much to handle when you have other things going. I try but it is not easy. Maybe lecturers could allow extra time in terms of assignments because days are not the same."*

Dineo elucidated her request for an extension from her lecturer, citing her ongoing processing of a traumatic event. She expressed concern that she would be unable to complete her academic task within the allotted timeframe. She stated:

> *"I only disclosed to the lecturer I had to do the oral presentation for, only because I couldn't do the presentation the following day. The incident happened on Monday, and I was supposed to do the presentation on Tuesday, but he gave me some time, and I presented on Friday."*

This indicates that providing extra time can assist students in managing their workload and enable them to fulfil their academic commitments. This tangible support in the form of assessment extensions and accommodations directly corresponds with the

SST. Without the provision of extra time, students would struggle to cope and meet their academic responsibilities.

4.4.2 Theme 2: Emotional support

The students also articulated the necessity of emotional support from their lecturers to aid them in their healing journeys. They emphasised kindness, active listening, and understanding as the forms of support they required from their interactions with their lecturers. Alex elucidated her expectation that both lecturers and students should exhibit kindness towards her, as they might not be aware of the challenges she faced:

> *"I think, firstly, it will depend on the kind of trauma. For my experiences, I believe both students and lecturers should be kind to people, be more generous to people because nobody knows what the other person is going through."*

Buhle expressed a similar perspective when she remarked that she understood that students sometimes engaged in behaviours that might upset lecturers; however, she expected kindness and understanding from the lecturers in return. She further elaborated on the importance of lecturers exercising kindness, noting that their words and actions might have a significant impact on the lives of students. She stated:

> *"Students come from different backgrounds, and you don't know who is who and who is going through what, so I would expect that, even though I know students do some things that upset the lecturer, but then I expect the lecturer to be understanding and kind. They should be kind to people they don't know because they might say something to someone and then that person is suicidal and the next thing, they kill themselves. So, they should be kind, be nice, and if there is something that is upsetting them, find a way to approach it, not in a rude way, but a way to show that you are in control but try to be nice."*

This indicates that students perceived kindness as a significant form of emotional support that aided them in coping with their traumatic challenges. Such kindness is also essential from fellow students to ensure that those affected by trauma feel at ease.

Furthermore, the students identified active listening as a crucial form of support they required from lecturers to facilitate their coping and healing processes. Thabiso, who

experienced a loss in a romantic relationship, articulated his desire for his lecturers to engage in attentive listening regarding the unfolding of experiences, rather than merely focusing on the highlights.

He stated:

> *"I believe if they could listen attentively and follow the experience, how it went. Not just to listen to major highlights, but if they are helping me, they should try to help me get into everything, into details. Because in most cases, traumatic events are not caused by things outside; sometimes they are caused by us. They cannot happen without us."*

This demonstrates that students expect to be heard, with their experiences acknowledged as they occurred. Attending only to the "highlights" of their narratives may convey a sense of dismissal or disinterest in what the student is expressing or experiencing. Alex echoed these sentiments by asserting that students should not be categorised as fabricating stories to achieve their objectives:

> *"I believe if lecturers listened to us and avoided being rude it would be better. It is not all students who make stuff up or try to cheat. Some things are real, and we shouldn't be dismissed."*

As a vital communication skill, listening is essential not only for comprehending the information conveyed but also for providing effective feedback. The responses from these students highlight the need for lecturers to possess and utilise this skill in order to better support trauma-affected students. Furthermore, some students articulated that they would feel more supported if the lecturers endeavoured to understand their individual circumstances. Charnel described her diminished academic performance after being informed of the loss of funding, particularly noting her inability to concentrate. She expressed a desire for her lecturers to comprehend the reasons behind her poor performance:

> *"If they are more understanding. For instance, in the previous year, I lost my NSFAS [National Student Financial Aid Scheme] funding, and I stressed so much and got like a 68 on my test; for me, I consider that bad. I found out on the day that I lost my funding, and, on that day, I was writing a test. So, I was thinking of this thing all the time, so I feel like if lecturers are more*

understanding, and act more understandable, students would reach out to them."

Charnel expressed the belief that had her lecturers exhibited greater understanding, she might have felt compelled to disclose her circumstances. However, she refrained from reaching out, as she perceived a lack of comprehension among the lecturers. Anele similarly articulated the view that lecturers ought to recognise that students' behaviour is not always intended to disrupt the learning environment but often signifies a cry for help. He stated:

"One way that lecturers can try to support trauma-affected students is to try to be considerate at some moments, because trauma doesn't just visit you when you are reading. Sometimes you break down in class, so that moment of breaking down in class, not concentrating fully on what the lecturer is saying, sometimes you are not trying to cause disruption; it's what just happened at that moment. If they would just try to be emotional[ly] intelligent, try to be more lenient with the students and try to understand that trauma visits anytime, even in class."

This indicates the need for instructors to possess a comprehensive understanding of trauma in order to effectively support students. Additionally, it aligns with relational objectives by emphasising the importance of trust and intimacy in the instructor-student relationship. According to the RRGT, acts of kindness foster relational trust and contribute to positive instructor-student interactions. Furthermore, these findings resonate with the SST, as they highlight the importance of emotional support, which encompasses the need for care and empathy. By demonstrating kindness and empathy, instructors can convey to students that they recognise their challenges and genuinely care for their well-being.

4.4.3 Theme 3: Informational support

The students expressed the need for guidance regarding the sources of help available to them, which indicated a lack of knowledge about where to seek assistance. Specifically, the students highlighted the need for referrals to campus support services. This demonstrates that informational support is essential in aiding students to manage stress effectively. Some students may exhibit disruptive behaviour due to

their uncertainty about where to obtain help. Providing students with pertinent information that facilitates their trauma recovery is crucial. Anele articulated that lecturers should endeavour to provide students with information, as many do not know where to seek assistance:

> *"Even if someone breaks down in class, it would be considerate for the lecturer to try and communicate with the person to just step outside of the class for the moment until they feel they are better to be back in class, and try to find out what is happening with the student, so that if the lecturer has means to help, to refer them to SCD and things like that. Because most of the students here, as much as they do have problems, they are not familiar with where to go to; that is what I have been seeing."*

Ntombi also elucidated how she was referred to a support system of which she was previously unaware. Without the lecturer's provision of information, she would not have discovered or may have struggled to locate the necessary support. She stated:

> *"My facilitator told me to have an appointment with her, so that's when we got to talk. I told her about my trauma. She told me about student counselling. I didn't even know about student counselling or where it was. She directed me and since the first semester, we have been talking."*

This indicates the significance of informational support in assisting students not only in coping with their trauma-related challenges but also in understanding the resources available to them. This form of perceived support – knowing that support is available – helps to alleviate the stress associated with trauma. The findings reveal that students generally lack awareness of where to seek help. Information and referrals are therefore instrumental in guiding students towards meaningful support that can aid them in addressing their challenges. The manner in which this information is disseminated to students can either discourage or empower them, which highlights the rhetorical dimension inherent in this theme. Additionally, the informational support element of the SST is evident as instructors provide guidance and referrals to campus support services. When Ntombi received information from her instructor, she felt supported because the information was beneficial to her. When students are provided with information during times of need and are guided towards appropriate resources, they experience a sense of support. Ntombi further emphasised a positive relational

approach from the instructor, noting that the instructor requested to meet with her privately and provided her with the necessary information. This indicates the presence of social support.

4.5 INSTRUCTORS' EXPERIENCES OF STUDENT TRAUMA

This category addresses RQ4 by exploring the emotional impact of trauma on instructors and their responses to students' trauma. The findings reflect data collected from interviews with instructors. The themes that emerged from this category are emotional strain, addressing students' trauma, and the influence of class size. The subthemes related to addressing students' needs consist of assistance from support structures and management, as well as creating safe spaces, as shown in Table 4.5.

Table 4.5: Instructors' experiences of student trauma

Theme	Subthemes
Theme 1: Emotional strain	
Theme 2: Addressing students' needs	Subtheme 2.1: Assistance from support structures and management Subtheme 2.2: Creating safe spaces
Theme 3: The influence of class size	

4.5.1 Theme 1: Emotional strain

The instructors articulated the impact of students' trauma on their emotional well-being. They expressed feelings of sadness, particularly when they lacked the means to provide assistance. This situation underscores the emotional burden borne by educators, whose primary responsibility is to facilitate learning. One instructor, Mrs Seoe, provided a personal account of how students' trauma influenced her experiences:

> *"When a student falls pregnant and now they have to go home and they don't know what is going to happen to them, and we also transfer them to the Wellness Department, but with other students [it] is not possible to help, and they end up just quitting or deregistering, so it makes you feel numb, especially when you are unable to help, when the situation is out of your control. I am not sure how I feel about that. They normally, on a personal level with me, they leave me burdened. There are days where I can't breathe anymore because of*

what I just heard or what we dealt with. So they take away from a person emotionally."

Another instructor, Ms Motaung, expressed the emotional distress she experienced when interacting with a student who was affected by trauma, particularly when she felt unable to provide the necessary support for the student. She stated:

"It's sad. Some of them are painful and some are aggravating. It's always different depending on the context of the matter. But I think what is frustrating is that sometimes there is help in our university, but most of the time it is not well communicated. So students don't know what is actually available to them."

Ms Togo expressed similar sentiments when she reported feeling disheartened when required to assist a student but the available resources were insufficient to address students' issues in a timely manner. She stated:

"It's very disheartening, especially when I'm gonna keep on mentioning the one that I just told you about, the guy who lost his dad right in front of him; his dad got shot right in front of him. It's very traumatic as a person. I know the study is about students, but just [as] a person, seeing your loved one leaving earth in such a traumatic way. It's very disheartening, especially if there aren't enough resources to be able to assist students because sometimes, I remember I did speak to a student when I told them about going to a psychologist on campus and that it is for free. They said yes, it is for free, but because there are so many other cases that are before you, it's not like your case is gonna be dealt with immediately. So you have to carry the burden that you have at that particular time up until you get help. So I think that is why some of them don't even want to go to a psychologist."

This indicates that students' trauma significantly impacts instructors, who are required to respond to the challenges presented by the students and make efforts to address their needs. In the absence of adequate resources on campus, instructors are left to bear the emotional burden resulting from students' trauma.

4.5.2 Theme 2: Addressing students' needs

The instructors also reported their attempts to meet students' needs through active listening, granting assessment extensions, referring students to campus support services, and demonstrating kindness. These actions align with the support the students indicated they received from instructors. Furthermore, the instructors noted that they sought assistance from colleagues and created safe spaces for students in an effort to help them cope with their trauma-related challenges. Additionally, the instructors explained that they encountered contextual factors that influenced their capacity to provide support to students who are affected by trauma.

4.5.2.1 Subtheme 2.1: Assistance from support structures and management

Mrs Seoe reported how she had sought support to assist her in managing the effects of students' trauma on her:

> *"I did communicate with the wellness centre that I need to better deal with this, so I have been doing short courses on how I can come and take a breather. These programmes help because this year I felt overwhelmed by students' problems, and I did reach out when I realised I wasn't coping anymore."*

Mrs Mthombeni indicated that she sought assistance from her colleague to address the challenges faced by a student, who subsequently received satisfactory support. She stated:

> *"I also approached our programme director in terms of housing and stuff, and she helped me with referral to student affairs, and the student got assistance. The student then came back to thank me for helping solve their problem and I think that was somewhat gratifying that not only academically you assist your students but also on a personal level."*

Ms Motaung expressed similar sentiments when she indicated that, at times, she sought assistance from colleagues in order to better support students who are facing challenges:

> *"Some students don't know the resources available to them. Some needed [an] ambulance, counselling, and so on. On some other level, some need spiritual*

assistance. I have had students who needed spiritual encountering and something needed to be done and up until last semester, there was no assistance with regards to that. Sometimes, I ask students to give us a moment or postpone class. Sometimes I ask colleagues for assistance."

This shows that positive relationships among colleagues facilitate mutual support among instructors when addressing the needs of students who are affected by trauma. Such support is essential for both instructors who are impacted by the trauma of their students and for the students themselves who require assistance.

4.5.2.2 Subtheme 2.2: Creating safe spaces

Dr Khowa indicated that she would permit students to visit her office if their challenges necessitated the use of her office as a safe space. She stated:

"Lecturers need to be intentional, not just focus on moving through their slides and leave. So, in my classes, I don't just present slides; I have activities, and when I notice something, maybe a student afraid to speak, I would ask the student to see me after class and ask them, 'Why were you afraid to speak?' One student said, 'I want to express myself in English, but when I speak, Zulu is the only one that comes.' So, I told the student, 'Whenever you get the time, come to my office, and we will just converse in English.' I try to offer that environment.

By permitting the student to use her office as a safe space, the lecturer facilitated the development of the student's confidence, which enabled her to participate more actively in class. Mrs Seoe, who has eight years of lecturing experience, noted that she allowed students to access her office in order to offer them the necessary support:

"Some of them, it would be one-on-one interactions, they can come anytime they want to. I have some that I would allow to study in my office because that way, when you pull them aside, you are able to share lunch with them without anyone realising or them realising that you are helping them. As they are working alone there, you just bring lunch and ask, 'Would you like to share with me?'"

This indicates that lecturers endeavour to support students and ensure responsiveness to their needs by actively listening and being accessible. Furthermore, it suggests that availability can be perceived as a form of support, as it fosters a sense of care and acknowledges students' challenges.

4.5.3 Theme 3: Influence of class size

The instructors articulated the constraints associated with large classes, which diminish opportunities for close contact with students and shift the focus predominantly to content delivery. They noted that, in such environments, instructors often do not know their students' names or understand their individual circumstances. Dr Coetzee remarked that students tend to become mere numbers in large classes, which highlights that instructors are often unaware of the personal challenges their students may be facing. She stated:

> *"The bigger classes become numbers. I mean, you don't know your students as well. You go in and do your lectures, but I don't know what is going on with you. Maybe you are sleeping, and I am shouting at you, 'Why are you sleeping in my class?!' or maybe you are late, and I lock you out. The bigger the class numbers are, the less [likely] you are to build that personal relationship, to know how our students are really coping. We try to say to students that we have the open-door policy, and they can come and talk, interact with your lecturer so that we can know if there are obstacles that we can assist with."*

By failing to establish rapport with students, instructors may find it challenging to adequately support those who experienced trauma, as they are less likely to recognise the unique difficulties faced by these individuals. Dr Cloete, who has 20 years of experience in the field, also noted that instructors often struggle to attend to the needs of all students in large classes:

> *"I believe it has a big impact. This year we got much more students than we planned for. And I could see that my colleagues, especially the people that are responsible for field instructions, they struggle to pay attention to all the students."*

Dr Mosia also noted the challenges associated with providing individualised support in large classes. He further asserted that in such settings, he depended on students to initiate contact; however, they typically do not do so unless it is deemed necessary. He stated:

> *"I have 264 students so, of course, class size does play a role, so it is impossible to give individualised support. Then again, for you to know which student is experiencing what, they have to come to you and not many of them really come forth. They come forth when there is a problem or when they have missed an assessment; that's the only time you would know about the problems they are encountering. They wouldn't come up to voluntarily."*

This indicates that students do not communicate with instructors voluntarily unless it is deemed necessary. Consequently, this also obstructs instructors' ability to communicate supportively with students. According to the RRGT, instructor-student interaction is vital for achieving academic goals. However, Dr Coetzee noted that understanding students is a challenging task in larger classes, which implies that interactions will be impeded, which will affect students' recovery and academic progress. Healing occurs in relationships, as posited by the SST. Dr Mosia expressed that providing students with individualised support is improbable in large classes, as students are less likely to reach out due to the reduced interactions that are characteristic of such environments.

The instructors also conveyed that smaller class sizes facilitate closer relationships with students. They indicated that they could discern when something is amiss with students and can proactively reach out to them. Mrs Mthombeni remarked that a smaller class size enabled her to know her students well and to reach out to them when she observed any changes in behaviour:

> *"For example, in my honours class, the class is a bit smaller. I know all of them; I know how they generally behave, I know those who would zone out and those who are active, so it would be easy for me to pick up when a student shift[s] in behaviour and approach them."*

Ms Van Wyk also expressed similar sentiments, noting that in smaller classrooms, educators can foster relationships with students and more readily discern when a student may be experiencing difficulties. She stated:

> *"I definitely think it would make a difference. We fortunately don't have classes of 200, 300, or 400 students, because in a case like that, I don't think you can really be in intimate contact, if I can put it that way, in a sense that I can see the class in front of me and can say, 'What is wrong with you? I can see you are not yourself.' If it's a big class like that, you would not know your students. Some of our classes are a bit too big, but in general they are smaller, and we build a relationship with the students. So, we can definitely more easily pick up if something is wrong."*

Ms Naidoo also noted that smaller class sizes are conducive to offering individualised support:

> *"Obviously, there is a lot to be said about class size; classes need to be smaller, but it is not realistic. The University of the Free State is always going to be married to the idea of trying to make more money. So, I am not going to be the different one. Smaller class sizes are ideal for providing individualised support."*

This demonstrates that smaller class sizes are optimal for fostering close relationships with students. However, universities continue to perceive larger class sizes as necessary due to the increasing number of students accessing higher education. This observation is consistent with the RRGT, as it indicates that relational goals, such as personal recognition and intimacy, are more effectively achieved in smaller classes; conversely, these relational goals are compromised in larger classes where communication tends to be depersonalised.

4.6 INSTRUCTOR DEVELOPMENT

This section addresses RQ5 concerning the needs of instructors to effectively communicate social support to trauma-affected students. The themes in this category emerged from the interviews with the lecturers, who articulated that students approach them with their trauma and encounter challenges when providing adequate support. The predominant theme identified in this category is instructor needs for capacity

building. The subthemes that emerged are workshops and training, trauma awareness, and therapy training and role conflicts, as shown in Table 4.6.

Table 4.6: Instructor development

Theme	Subtheme
Theme 1: Instructor needs for capacity building	Subtheme 1.1: Workshops and training Subtheme 1.2: Trauma awareness Subtheme 1.3: Therapy training and role conflicts

4.6.1 Theme 1: Instructor needs for capacity building

The instructors reported that they lacked the necessary training and preparation to engage effectively with trauma-affected students, which highlighted a need for additional support. To facilitate meaningful communication with these students, as well as to acquire the skills required to respond appropriately, it is essential that instructors receive training in trauma-informed practices.

4.6.1.1 Subtheme 1.1: Workshops and training

Dr Khowa indicated that she was developing her own initiatives to support students; however, it would be advantageous for her to receive instruction from a qualified professional on the foundational principles of engaging with trauma-affected students. She stated:

> *"So, I think if we could have workshops where we are taught the basics on how to deal with somebody who is traumatised. I am coming up with my own initiatives, but imagine if someone who has gone to school, specialised in this, comes and says, 'Fine, you talk, but you can do 1, 2 and 3 as a lecturer.' Because yes, we teach so many students, so you use some of your skills to deal with them. So, workshops and training could go a long way."*

Mr Ndlovu indicated that there was a gap in the training of staff members regarding essential life skills:

> *"I think we need a lot of workshops, a lot of training from the university. I know the university dedicates a lot of its time and resources to train its staff in terms of the administration and providing of lectures, but I think there is a gap in life*

skills, general life skills of a human being when interacting with another human being."

Ms Togo stated that her psychology training was beneficial to a certain extent. Consequently, she believed that other instructors could derive advantages from basic training on how to interact with students who are affected by trauma. She remarked:

"I think a lot of training is needed. I am lucky because I studied psychology and I still teach psychology, so in a way, to a certain extent, the things that I studied are able to assist me, that I can be able to transfer here in the practical side of teaching, like having empathy, listening to your students, offering any kind of support. So, it would be great for people who did not do psychology, facilitators and lecturers from different races, actually, to just get training."

This indicates that instructors recognise the necessity of training in trauma to equip them with the requisite skills to support students effectively. The instructors underwent training aimed at achieving their rhetorical objectives. Consequently, the proposed training would enhance their relational competencies to facilitate the establishment of positive relationships with students.

4.6.1.2 Subtheme 1.2: Trauma awareness

The lecturers also expressed the need for assistance in understanding trauma and its repercussions. Ms Dhlamini articulated how she would benefit from instruction on appropriate communication strategies to avoid triggering students:

"I think, for me, to better equip me with knowing exactly what to say and what not to say. Because sometimes you think you are helping, and you say something, and it can be a trigger, or a student can run away when you were thinking you were providing a safe space."

Dr Cloete also noted that many students are subjected to trauma without their awareness. This underscores the need for the implementation of trauma-informed practices in educational settings. He stated:

"I think much more students were exposed to trauma and they are not aware of that. In our first-year field instruction module, we take the students through a

certain process where they must do certain techniques, and it is terrible to hear what they go through, and they must compile a portfolio afterwards. You can't even imagine the things that they had to go through and, of course, it's not only social work; I believe it's all the students and we miss out on that. So, I think we should start thinking about a trauma-informed approach in our lecturing of students."

Dr Coetzee expressed similar sentiments when she stated that her background as a trained social worker facilitated her understanding of trauma, which in turn enabled her to support students effectively. She remarked:

"I think, with my background now, we are taught for trauma, but also thinking about all lecturers; it just helps for everyone to understand what trauma is, what are the effects of trauma, because a lot of time at schools as well, students are expected to focus. You are here to study; you have to focus. You have a parent who is ill at home; you have to focus. If we can start thinking how trauma affects our brain and ability, and understand that, we can be more trauma-informed, to make classes trauma-sensitive and help students to cope better."

This is indicative of the necessity of trauma-informed practices that would empower instructors to understand trauma, recognise its effects, and communicate with students in a supportive manner. These findings demonstrate that trauma-informed training enhances the capacity to provide meaningful social support. Furthermore, it illustrates that the achievement of rhetorical and relational objectives by instructors is facilitated or obstructed by systemic preparations. Ultimately, trauma awareness enables instructors to avoid unintentionally harmful communication.

4.6.1.3 Subtheme 1.3: Therapy training and role conflicts

Mrs Goliath disclosed that she has formal therapy training; however, in her capacity as a lecturer, she referred students to campus support. She stated:

"I have formal training as I am a social worker by profession, and I do have practice wisdom as I have years of experience in the field of social work and then my internship with trauma incident reduction. So, I refer. We have to be

mindful that there are people dedicated to do that, so right now in my position, it is all about referrals."

These perspectives were also articulated by Ms Motaung, who indicated that although she pursued studies in psychology at one point, she lacked formal training in therapeutic practices:

"I don't have. I think many of us just did psychology at some point. But I don't have that, and also as somebody who has other expertise, but the university doesn't recognise such things and they are personal to you, then you basically just become a referral point."

Ms Motaung also indicated that she had other areas of expertise that were not acknowledged by the university. This suggests that there may still be a gap in the integration of diverse expertise in the system, which is necessary for ensuring comprehensive support for students. Dr Cloete further remarked that although he was trained, he directed students to SCD:

"I have formal therapeutic training, but when students come to me, I do refer them to student counselling. And if they have a medical aid, we also refer them to private counselling. They also have a limited number of sessions when they go to Kovsie counselling and usually for complex trauma, it's long-term therapy. Five or 10 sessions will not do a thing."

Dr Cloete also highlighted a concern that had been echoed by both students and instructors regarding the limitations of student counselling services. Both parties agreed that the department would benefit from an increase in staff members to ensure that students did not face waiting periods of up to two months for support.

All the instructors referred students to campus support services to avoid conflicts of interest in their roles. Consequently, the instructors require support to effectively balance their teaching responsibilities with the need to provide social support to students. Dr Coetzee noted that counselling her own students would complicate the relationship, as students may develop differing expectations when their instructor also assumed the role of a counsellor. She stated:

"With the lecturers, I know that most of lecturers still try to keep that, uhm, how can I say, the professional student-lecturer kind of relationships. So they wouldn't support the student emotionally, but would rather refer students to student counselling or the social workers appointed specifically for debriefing and working with the students because if today I give you a hug and say everything is going to be okay, and tomorrow I give you a bad mark, you know, it's conflict of the roles."

Mrs Mthombeni indicated that training would assist her in maintaining clear boundaries while supporting students with their challenges:

"I think some other form of training on how you can deal with students facing trauma, where they will provide us with skills where you can still be supportive, but emotionally detached and to help us on how to not blur the lines because now, we are the person almost responsible for solving this person's trauma. At the end of the day, I am one lecturer against a whole lot of students. If I were to try and take on, to solve every student's problem, I probably wouldn't get my own job done."

The results indicate that referrals are beneficial when interacting with students who are affected by trauma. They also suggest that instructors need basic training in trauma awareness to facilitate supportive communication with students. According to the SST, referrals are considered a form of support, even in the absence of direct counselling provided by instructors. Consequently, these results align with the SST. Additionally, these findings are relevant to the RRGT, as they highlight the existence of role tensions, which indicate conflict between achieving relational goals through support and adhering to rhetorical goals as a lecturer, which entails maintaining a professional identity rather than that of a counsellor.

4.7 CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter presented the results of the study. It emphasised the perceptions of the participants through the identified themes and subthemes. The themes were discussed concerning their relation to the SST and RRGT, with a focus on instructor-student communication. These findings emphasise the significance of the SST in supporting students who are affected by trauma. It became evident that various forms

of social support are beneficial to these students. Furthermore, the findings illustrate the importance of the RRGT in ensuring that trauma-affected students receive adequate support. They also demonstrate that rhetorical and relational goals are interdependent; for instance, the fulfilment of students' relational goals is essential for them to achieve their rhetorical goals related to learning.

The following chapter focuses on the implications of the findings.

CHAPTER 5:
DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

5.1 DISCUSSION

This final chapter reviews the objectives and purpose of this study. It then proceeds to discuss the implications of the findings and future research directions, and concludes with an examination of the study's limitations.

5.2 KEY FINDINGS

This study was guided by two theoretical frameworks: the SST and the RRGT. It explored the experiences of trauma-affected students regarding instructor communication and identified the needs of instructors in this context. The primary objective was to understand how instructors communicate social support to trauma-affected students. Following thematic coding of in-depth interview data collected from both instructors and students, the findings revealed various experiences of instructor communication and highlighted the need for instructor training.

5.2.1 Instructor-student relationships

One of the objectives of this study was to establish whether trauma-affected students communicate their trauma experiences to their lecturers, and when they disclose this information. According to the relational perspective of the RRGT, students have relational needs to connect with their instructors (McDermott & Ashby-King, 2021; Hannah, 2023), and instructors fulfil those needs through various communication behaviours such as confirmation, care, and immediacy (Wang & Derakhshan, 2023). The most significant finding was that many students do not communicate their trauma experiences to their instructors due to factors such as distrust, fear, not wanting to be a burden, language barriers, and perceived insignificance. For instance, Thobeka stated:

> *"I definitely have trust issues. I don't easily open up because people tend to judge more when they don't understand something than trying to understand."*

This illustrates a poor instructor-student relationship, which undermines the relational goals of the RRGT, as the student opted not to disclose her experiences due to a lack of trust in her instructors. Consequently, instructors are unable to provide intentional social support to students. A study by Van den Berg et al. (2017) examined the factors that contribute to the rejection of therapeutic services among university students in South Africa and found that fear, a desire to deal with issues independently, and distrust were significant factors in this rejection. These findings are consistent with those of this study, which reflect the reasons why students do not communicate their trauma experiences to instructors. This non-disclosure is linked to instructors' failure to satisfy students' relational needs by affirming them and fostering a trustworthy relationship. The findings indicate that harmful communication by instructors leads to a lack of trust, which hinders students from discussing their trauma with their instructors. Carello and Butler (2015) assert that instructor behaviour, even when unintentional, may be detrimental to students; to mitigate this, instructors should communicate in ways that do not dismiss students' concerns, exhibit impatience, or permit threats, ridicule, disappointment, or displays of power. According to the SST, students experience less distress when provided with social support (Jenkins et al., 2013). In this study, students reported distress due to insufficient social support from their instructors.

Help-seeking behaviour is frequently discouraged in many African societies, owing to communal expectations (Ntumi et al., 2025), reliance on spiritual or informal support, and stigma (Van den Berg et al., 2017; Ntumi et al., 2025). A study conducted by Sikweyiya et al. (2025) revealed that male students often refrain from disclosing their challenges due to cultural influences that shape their identity and socialisation. This highlights the difficulties in IC, where students may be reluctant to engage or seek assistance because of their cultural values, language barriers, and power dynamics (Campbell et al., 2016), which demonstrates that disclosure is culturally mediated. This leads to the next finding of the study concerning the influence of language barriers on support-seeking.

Non-disclosure is also associated with language barriers, which were established in preceding chapters as a significant challenge in IC (Campbell et al., 2016). Many prospective higher education students lack sufficient fluency in the languages of instruction inherited from colonisers, which impedes their ability to succeed in higher

education. Furthermore, this highlights the need for further development and utilisation of African indigenous languages in higher education (Rakgogo, 2024; Ngidi & Mncwango, 2022). Language barriers diminish contact with academic staff, as students find it challenging to articulate their concerns freely and persuasively (Mkhize & Ramrathan, 2021). This is a crucial finding, as it illustrates how trauma-affected students are constrained by language limitations, which hinder their access to social support. For instance, Thabiso stated:

> *"I feel like explaining myself in English is harder because I can't explain the events the way they happened."*

This indicates the difficulties he encountered when attempting to convey his trauma. Koketso similarly noted that educators often employ language that is difficult to comprehend:

> *"… the white ones; their English is too deep, so sometimes we can't hear."*

This indicates that language not only interferes with students' academic pursuits but also adversely affects their relationships with their instructors. Language barriers create challenges in clarity, understanding, and relationship-building between instructors and students. As highlighted by the findings of this study and supported by Salih (2025) and Makeleni (2024), students who are impacted by language barriers may experience difficulties with academic and social integration. This implies that language remains a challenge in IC, as it influences the achievement of both rhetorical and relational goals. These goals are interdependent, and the presence of language barriers adversely impacts their attainment. Furthermore, without a positive instructor-student relationship, educators encounter difficulties in supporting trauma-affected students, which results in feelings of marginalisation among these students. Consequently, these findings suggest the existence of a dysfunctional social support system that is significantly affected by language barriers.

Conversely, the findings of this study indicate that some students disclose their traumatic experiences to instructors when they feel comfortable or when their academic performance may be impacted. The act of trauma disclosure in this study was primarily comfort-based, as illustrated by Masabata's assertion that her instructor's availability facilitated her decision to disclose. Additionally, it is pragmatic,

as evidenced by Dineo's statement that she disclosed her trauma due to her inability to present in one of her classes. Lindecker and Cramer (2021) support this notion and suggest that students often disclose to instructors as a justification for missing class, to explain subpar work, or to request extensions. This aligns with the necessity to achieve rhetorical goals and is consistent with the findings of this study. Nevertheless, instances of students disclosing their trauma due to a sense of comfort were notably infrequent in this research, which suggests a deficiency in rapport in the instructor-student relationship, as proposed by the RRGT.

Evidently, the students were generally satisfied with the course content and its presentation. For instance, Charnel expressed dissatisfaction with the instructor's dismissive communication, which suggests that instructors appeared to prioritise teaching over students' emotional well-being. This observation indicates that students were adversely affected by instructors' triggering communication. Conversely, they reported satisfaction with the academic flexibility and support provided, which enabled them to achieve their academic goals. The students' dissatisfaction therefore primarily stemmed from the lack of social support or interactions related to non-academic issues, which indicate a deficiency in positive relationships between instructors and students. Waghid and Davids (2022) argue for the necessity of caring pedagogies in South Africa that would enhance instructor-student relationships by improving instructors' listening skills, empathy, and responsiveness. Moreover, Carello and Butler (2015) advocate for a transition to trauma-informed practices to enhance instructors' responses to students' challenges. The findings also revealed that the instructors were able to provide assistance when the issues were academic in nature, as these were in their control (rhetorical goals were met), but they encountered difficulties when addressing personal matters, as these were beyond their control (relational goals were not met). This distinction elucidates the students' dissatisfaction regarding social support and their satisfaction concerning academic support. The instructors' inability to meet relational goals undermines the foundation of IC, as rhetorical and relational goals are interdependent (Mottet et al., 2006). Furthermore, multilingualism and cultural diversity complicate disclosures in South Africa and make instructor-student communication challenging. However, with enhanced developments in multilingualism and cultural understanding in universities, these complications could be mitigated.

5.2.2 Class size challenges

Another objective of this study was to establish how class size affects the ability of lecturers to provide individualised support to trauma-affected students. As a result of massification in South African higher education (Adetiba, 2019; Nyagope, 2024), the findings indicated that large class sizes hinder instructors from offering support to trauma-affected students, as students become mere numbers. For example, Dr Coetzee noted that larger classes reduced her ability to provide individualised support due to diminished personal relationships. Dr Mosia also expressed that delivering individualised support was impossible in large classes. This demonstrates that relational goals are not met in this instance, as close interactions do not occur according to the RRGT. Furthermore, student engagement in large classes is reduced, as such environments foster student invisibility (Pravina, 2020). This study established that instructors faced challenges in adapting teaching strategies to create interactive learning environments (García-Farina, 2025) where students are not rendered invisible. This also implies that rhetorical goals in the RRGT are similarly affected in large classes, where student participation and engagement are reduced. The calls for transformation in South African universities, such as improved access to tertiary institutions (Shefer et al., 2018), further exacerbate the challenges posed by large class sizes, as infrastructure development does not progress at a comparable pace (Adetiba, 2019; Nyagope, 2024). An example from this study illustrates this issue: an instructor indicated that this year, they had more students than originally planned, which consequently affected their ability to provide support. This demonstrates that the social support offered to students is compromised due to the constraints of large classes, which, according to research, inhibit instructors from establishing close interactions with students and understanding their attributes (Pravina, 2020; Nyagope, 2024).

What was also salient in this research was that the students indicated that lecturers focused on completing the coursework (rhetorical goals) without regard for their emotions (relational needs). This phenomenon is attributed to large class sizes and is supported by Wang and Calvano (2022), who indicate that student satisfaction in large classes is lower in comparison to small classes. Waghid and Davids (2022) posit that care and responsiveness should balance task focus. Moreover, one principle of trauma-informed practice is the acknowledgement that healing occurs in both

professional and personal relationships (Butler et al., 2011; Ayre & Krishnamoorthy, 2020; Carello & Butler, 2015), and establishing relationships becomes difficult in large classes, as the findings indicated. This implies that students' relational goals will not be met, and social support will also not be provided satisfactorily, if at all. In large classes, the establishment of many of the principles of TIC (SAMHSA, 2014) becomes challenging. For instance, the establishment of trustworthiness and transparency becomes improbable because instructors fail to develop close relationships with each student. South African instructors could adopt interactive technologies and facilitator models to improve IC and address challenges associated with large classes. The SST suggests that relationships are significant to the provision of social support; without relationships, there will not be information support, emotional support, esteem support, instrumental support, or network support. The results of this study thus demonstrate that in large classes, the provision of social support to trauma-affected students becomes improbable due to poor instructor-student relationships. IC in large South African classes must therefore explicitly adopt trauma-informed communication practices to enhance instructor-student relationships and to improve the provision of social support.

Instructors can employ techniques such as asking questions, facilitating group discussions, and implementing problem-based learning in large classes to motivate and engage students (Exeter et al., 2010; Nyagope, 2023). Solis and Turner (2016) concur that asking questions enhances student engagement in large classes. They found that students in their study reported increased motivation to learn and a heightened connection with instructors who displayed caring leadership through instructor passion and self-disclosure of personal experiences related to course content. These techniques could be utilised in large classes to attempt to establish relationships with students.

Many instructors concurred that smaller class sizes are ideal for providing support because close interactions between students and instructors become possible. This view is also supported by research studies that found that smaller class sizes are associated with increased instructor-student interactions (Yi Xe, 2017; Rothmann & Barkhuizen, 2008). Mkhize and Ramrathan (2021) suggest that class sizes should be proportionate to the available infrastructure to ensure that students are not disadvantaged. This is an important finding because it demonstrates how contextual

factors negatively influence the provision of social support to students. Instructors in small classes are likely to provide students with individual attention and establish close relationships, thus meeting students' relational needs, which aligns with the RRGT. In their study, Wang and Calvano (2022) found that students in small classes perceived higher levels of instructor social support, which is consistent with instructors' positive views of smaller classes in this research.

This research indicates that smaller class sizes are advantageous, particularly for trauma-affected students, as instructors can notice when a student is not doing well and reach out to them. Van Breda (2018) states that close relationships help students to develop resilience to overcome challenges. This is particularly beneficial for introverted students who may not necessarily communicate their trauma-related challenges. According to García-Farina (2025), instructor-student interactions promote the identification of individual needs and the building of trust. Small classes are ideal for instructors to proactively reach out to students rather than waiting for students to initiate contact, as is often the case in larger classes. Thus, in small classes, not only do students initiate disclosures, but instructors also initiate interactions that encourage self-disclosure and the provision of social support.

These findings are pertinent to both the RRGT and SST. Firstly, the establishment of close relationships and recognition of students in small classes assist in creating space for reciprocal relational goals, as theorised by the RRGT. Secondly, these close and personal interactions in small classes enable instructors to support students, which aligns with the SST.

5.2.3 Instructor compassion challenges

The findings of this study indicated a discrepancy between the support provided by experienced lecturers and that offered by less experienced lecturers. Additionally, the results revealed tension in IC where conflict exists between caring for students and establishing boundaries. For instance, less experienced instructors in this study reported making additional efforts to assist students, such as allowing them to work in their offices. Conversely, experienced instructors prioritised the establishment of clear boundaries between instructors and students, as well as the completion of tasks. This suggests a degree of emotional detachment on the part of more experienced

instructors. These findings may be indicative of compassion fatigue or burnout among instructors. Compassion fatigue is a concept in psychology that explains a situation in which caregivers, including instructors, experience a decline in their capacity for care, emotional engagement, and acts of compassion, which leads to increased impassiveness with a focus on tasks rather than emotions (Stoewen, 2020). Bezuidenhout and Cilliers (2010) found that instructors exhibited negative, detached feelings towards students, colleagues, and their work in general. They further posit that instructors in South African universities may experience burnout due to work demands, among other factors. The RRGT argues that instructor-student relationships are crucial for achieving the goals of both students and instructors. Although these boundaries serve to protect rhetorical objectives, such detachment interferes with the establishment of relationships and consequently hinders the achievement of relational goals. Furthermore, it impedes the provision of social support to trauma-affected students due to a diminished focus on, or reluctance to address, students' emotional needs.

According to McAllister et al. (2014), instructors experience an additional layer of emotional strain when they are aware that the student support services to which they are expected to direct students may not adequately address students' needs. Research has demonstrated that instructors can mitigate the effects of trauma on students (Davidson, 2017) by providing social support, such as information and referrals to campus resources (Hoch et al., 2015). However, instructors face obstacles in alleviating these effects, as referrals may not benefit students. The lack of resources to fulfil the demands of instructors' roles contributes to burnout due to insufficient support (Bezuidenhout & Cilliers, 2010) and a lack of skills (Rothmann & Barkhuizen, 2008), among other factors. For instance, the findings of this study revealed that instructors perceived the SCD as understaffed, leading to two months waiting period and only offering limited sessions to students, which may prove inadequate in addressing the impacts of complex trauma. This emotional strain may contribute to the emotional detachment exhibited by instructors. Another potential factor highlighted in this study is that instructors often lack training in managing students' emotional needs; they frequently do not know how to respond and, in some cases, are uncertain about where to refer students. HEIs lack clear guidance regarding the processes for referring students and the responsibilities associated with issues disclosed by them (McAllister

et al., 2014). For example, Anele articulated that students require referrals because they are unaware of available resources for assistance. Instructors similarly expressed their uncertainty about how to support students who face challenges. Consequently, instructors are left with the burden of wanting to assist students with their trauma-related issues, yet lack clarity on how to proceed due to the absence of well-defined referral structures at the institutional level.

Another finding of this study is that instructors require basic training to understand trauma and to interact effectively with trauma-affected students. Dr Khowa and Mr Ndlovu, among other instructors, indicated how they would benefit from workshops that could provide them with fundamental training to interact effectively with trauma-affected students. De Beer and Draper-Clarke (2022) assert that instructors in South Africa need to be empowered with the knowledge and resources to assist trauma-affected students. This is an important finding because it demonstrates that when instructors lack skill development, students do not receive adequate social support. Dutton and Sotardi (2023) highlight that, in their study, instructors experienced greater stress when students communicated personal problems than when they addressed academic issues. This underscores the earlier point that instructors are prepared to tackle academic challenges that they perceive to be in their control (rhetorical goal) but are inadequately equipped to assist with traumatic challenges due to a lack of training (unfulfilled relational needs). This strongly indicates that instructors are prepared to meet the rhetorical goals of teaching and learning but are ill-equipped to fulfil the relational goals of providing social support to students. There is lack of educator training on trauma-informed approaches (Shoko, 2024) and HEIs have made slow progress to adopt trauma-informed practices (Gao et al., 2023). According to Iwara et al. (2018), workshops could help to improve the instructor-student relationship. Therefore, through workshops designed to train instructors in TIC, universities could ensure that instructors are prepared to communicate supportively with trauma-affected students.

5.2.4 Invisible barrier between instructors and students

The results of this study indicated the existence of an invisible barrier, potentially unarticulated, between instructors and students. For instance, instructors often maintain distance from students, ostensibly to avoid delving into personal issues and

to uphold a professional boundary. Dr Coetzee elucidated how instructors endeavour to preserve the instructor-student relationship while refraining from directly addressing students' emotional concerns. Bezuidenhout and Cilliers (2010) articulate that the pressures associated with increased class sizes and the demand for personal guidance by students compel instructors to adopt a stance of professional detachment to shield themselves from feelings of emotional depletion. Conversely, students tend to distance themselves from instructors, which is driven by a reluctance to burden them with personal issues and a belief in their ability to manage their challenges themselves. Thobeka and Buhle expressed their desire to avoid troubling instructors with their problems and opted to keep their concerns to themselves. Iwara et al. (2018) posit that instructor behaviours, including unfriendliness, language barriers, and poor communication skills, hinder students from establishing meaningful relationships with instructors. This study illustrates how students may experience retraumatisation and withdraw from interactions with lecturers due to triggering communication. This invisible barrier restricts instructor-student communication to course-related matters only. Consequently, this limitation adversely affects the instructor-student relationship and interferes with students' learning and coping mechanisms. According to the RRGT, rhetorical goals cannot be adequately achieved when relational goals are unmet (Mottet et al., 2006). By integrating care into pedagogy, instructors can better address students' relational needs (Waghid & Davids, 2022). For relational goals to be realised, it is also crucial that positive instructor-student interactions occur (Waldeck & LaBelle, 2016; Iwara et al., 2018). The findings of this study revealed a deficiency in instructor-student interaction, which suggests that trauma-affected students may not receive sufficient communication of social support from instructors, which could consequently hinder their academic progress.

The findings of this study indicated that this invisible barrier adversely affects students' well-being and diminishes their resilience (Van Breda, 2018). According to Davidson (2017), students who experienced trauma can successfully navigate higher education if there is a collaborative effort by the campus community to share responsibility for the physical, emotional, social, and academic security of these students. This study suggests that further action is required to enhance this collaboration in the campus community. For instance, the results indicated that students either do not receive timely support from the SCD or are unaware of its existence and fail to communicate

their challenges to their instructors. This suggests that trauma-affected students do not receive adequate social support from the campus community to aid in their perseverance. This phenomenon was also observed in a study by Strydom et al. (2010), which found that students underutilise support services due to a lack of awareness regarding their availability. Consequently, this impacts students' resilience in the university environment. This situation could be alleviated by increasing awareness of campus support services, improving response times from the SCD, and fostering closer interactions with students to reduce the invisible barrier.

5.3 THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

This study extends the significance of the RRGT in the South African context by illustrating the dichotomy of rhetorical success (content delivery) and relational failure (lack of support). The research demonstrates how the interdependence of rhetorical and relational goals disintegrates due to barriers to disclosure, such as language and instructors' behaviours, including triggering communication, which adversely affect instructor-student relationships. Our understanding of the instructor-student relationship is enhanced by applying the six assumptions of the RRGT (Houser & Hosek, 2018) in the South African context. Waghid and Davids (2022) advocate for relational pedagogy, which aligns with the principles of the RRGT. The findings of this study indicated that both students and instructors possess rhetorical and relational needs, and that these needs can be compromised when ineffective instructor-student communication prevails. Frymier and Houser (2000) conclude that instructor-student communication encompasses both rhetorical and relational dimensions. This perspective is supported by Fredericks and Alexander (2021), who assert that positive interpersonal relationships must exist between instructors and students for optimal learning to occur. Furthermore, this study indicates that trauma-affected students may struggle to achieve their rhetorical goals if their instructors fail to fulfil their relational goals by communicating supportively and establishing positive relationships with students. When instructors do not communicate effectively, they not only fail to achieve their rhetorical goals but also undermine student trust, which results in deteriorating instructor-student relationships. Given that language can either retraumatise or provide comfort, this study revealed that essential positive interactions, which are crucial in both the RRGT and SST, appear to be lacking in instructor-student

relationships. Consequently, future iterations of these frameworks within multigoal contexts must consider linguistic sensitivity as a vital dimension of relational communication.

This study further emphasises that trauma-affected students rely on emotional, instrumental, and informational support to cope with the challenges posed by trauma. This aligns with the SST, which suggests that students perceive situations as less stressful when they recognise the availability of social support to assist them in managing trauma (Evans et al., 2013). Language and expression serve as forms of emotional support or harm. Additionally, Carello and Butler (2015) argue that neglecting to address trauma (relational goals) undermines learning (rhetorical goals). Lecturers can significantly influence students' social and emotional development; when students interact with instructors who are enthusiastic, caring, accessible, and helpful, they feel a sense of belonging in the educational environment (Buthelezi et al., 2024). This finding is consistent with the results of this study, which indicated that when instructors fail to provide social support through dismissive communication, students feel unsupported. A lack of social support therefore correlates with poor academic performance (Buthelezi et al., 2024), as students may miss classes, among other detrimental outcomes. Strydom et al. (2010) found a strong link between the support provided and the academic outcomes of students. This highlights the notion that when sufficient and appropriate support is offered, academic performance is enhanced. This finding carries significant theoretical implications, as it highlights the importance of instructor communication regarding social support for students' well-being, academic success, and the enhancement of instructor-student communication. This study contributes to the IC theory by elucidating how the relational goals of the RRGT influence trauma disclosure, how language affects instructor-student relationships, and the interdependence of rhetorical and relational goals in IC. It also emphasises the significance of disclosures, linguistic sensitivity, supportive communication, and positive relationships in the provision of social support, which demonstrates the applicability of the SST in the realm of IC.

5.4 PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

Trauma-affected students encounter significant challenges in the educational environment and require social support to navigate these difficulties. Van Breda (2018)

argues that resilience enables individuals to achieve better-than-expected outcomes during stressful periods. He further contends that relationships play a crucial role in enhancing resilience through social support. In the context of trauma-affected students, instructors' communication serves as a primary avenue for social support, given their proximity to the students and their direct engagement with the effects of trauma. Fostering positive instructor-student relationships can facilitate the development of resilience among students.

Universities employ trained counsellors who are vital in helping students cope with ongoing challenges (Craig et al., 2023). However, this study revealed that such services may be insufficient due to inadequate staffing and limited session availability for students. Cloete (2017) highlights that technology can increase student participation and provide a platform for students to express their voices. Dlaza and Marais (2025) suggest that the utilisation of online counselling is on the rise, although this method has not been extensively explored in South Africa. They also found that students exhibit a positive attitude towards online counselling. Consequently, implementing virtual counselling to assist students around the clock could be a viable solution (Walker, 2022) to help students manage their trauma. Furthermore, instructors' communication through emails or class feedback can inadvertently retraumatise students; this risk can be mitigated through training focused on language awareness and trauma-sensitive communication. Additionally, Strydom et al. (2010) found that many students underutilise or are unaware of campus services. Instructors could therefore bridge the gap between students and these underutilised services by enhancing awareness of available student support services and the processes for accessing them.

The findings of this study also indicated that instructors lack training in providing supportive communication to trauma-affected students. This highlights the need for HEIs to offer support to faculty and staff to equip them with knowledge regarding trauma. Carello and Butler (2015) advocate for trauma-informed training, while Waghid and Davids (2022) promote caring pedagogies and emphasise the need for instructors to be trained in empathetic engagement. The findings of this study indicate that workshops are essential, but they should extend beyond classroom management skills to encompass soft skills such as avoiding retraumatising language, using affirming and clear communication, and acknowledging personal disclosures to enhance instructor-

student relationships. These workshops would enable universities to move towards trauma-informed classrooms, which would ensure that students receive support irrespective of instructors' knowledge of students' backgrounds. This approach would address relational needs through compassionate communication, which will enable students to feel supported in achieving their academic objectives. Such findings align with a study by Wells (2023), which concluded that trauma-informed approaches ensure that students are treated with empathy and compassion. Additionally, these workshops would equip instructors with essential communication skills, such as active listening, the strategic use of silence, reflecting, and paraphrasing, to facilitate opportunities for students to share their experiences. Such communication skills would enhance instructor-student relationships (relational goals) and, in turn, allow students to concentrate on their studies (rhetorical goals). Instructors could also be guided on how to incorporate information about various support services into module guides.

Rakgogo (2024) posits that English remains the primary language in research, communication, and teaching and learning, even three decades post-democracy. Limited efforts have been made to promote the development and utilisation of South African indigenous languages. The results of this study indicate that students continue to face language barriers in HEIs. Many South African HEIs lag in the implementation of multilingual education (Bwowe et al., 2024). Without addressing these language barriers, both rhetorical clarity and relational affirmation remain unfulfilled. Moreover, the UFS's adoption of a language policy is recent, with implementation commencing in 2024 to promote multilingualism, focusing on Sesotho, South African Sign Language, Afrikaans, isiZulu, and English. However, English still serves as the primary language of instruction (UFS, 2023). The findings of this study suggest that further efforts are necessary to promote multilingualism, in order to provide students with the opportunity to express themselves in a language with which they are comfortable. By promoting multilingualism in IC practices, barriers to disclosure could be alleviated, which will strengthen social support as students would be able to seek assistance and articulate their challenges in a language in which they feel at ease.

5.5 LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The limitations of this study are acknowledged but are not confined to this discussion. The first limitation pertains to potential sampling bias, as all participants were recruited

from a single institution, which limits the generalisability of the findings to other institutions. Future research could involve multiple institutions to enhance the generalisability of the results. Another limitation is that this study involved a limited number of participants, which did not adequately represent gender and race, and did not encompass all departments or faculties. Future research should seek to include a larger and more diverse sample of both students and instructors, as this may yield better outcomes. While qualitative studies contribute significantly to a deeper understanding (Sprake & Palmer, 2022), quantitative studies could facilitate the inclusion of more participants and the generalisation of findings (Creswell, 2009). Importantly, future research in South Africa should not only expand samples but also refine IC theory for the contexts of trauma-affected students.

This study did not investigate the mental implications for instructors when providing social support to trauma-affected students. This is significant, as these implications may influence the nature of the social support provided. Future studies could therefore examine the mental health implications for educators who offer social support to trauma-affected students, including the risks of compassion fatigue and burnout. The study also did not explore how students' identities (such as gender and cultural background) may affect their reception and perception of social support. The findings suggest that language influences support-seeking behaviour, which indicates that identities may shape instructor-student interactions. Future studies could investigate how students' identities influence their reception and perceptions of instructors' communication of social support. Another potential bias is self-report bias, where participants may provide responses they believe the researcher wishes to hear, thus not accurately reflecting their experiences. This study relied on the participants' perspectives, self-reported information, recollections of events, and their willingness to disclose trauma, which may have affected the data collected. Future studies could employ mixed-methods approaches to collect data on trauma-affected students. Lastly, this study focused on instructor-student relationships and did not holistically examine the role of the institutional environment. Future research could therefore explore the role of institutional environments and policies in either hindering or supporting effective educator communication and student well-being.

By addressing these limitations, future research can strengthen and refine theoretical contributions by exploring how the RRGT and SST can be applied in multilingual,

trauma-informed South African classrooms. This will also enhance the understanding of IC as encompassing not only rhetorical goals in the classroom but also all aspects of interactions, including the establishment of close relationships that facilitate the provision and reception of social support.

5.6 CHAPTER SUMMARY

This final chapter discussed the key findings of the study, as well as the theoretical and practical implications, future research directions, and limitations of the study. This research contributes to the field of IC scholarship in South Africa by highlighting challenges in IC, such as language barriers. Furthermore, it extends the application of the RRGT by demonstrating the interdependence between rhetorical and relational goals within the context of trauma-affected students' interactions with instructors both in and outside the classroom. The findings of this study indicated that positive instructor-student communication is essential for achieving both rhetorical and relational goals, as well as for providing social support. The results elucidated several reasons for students' non-disclosure of their traumatic experiences to instructors. Moreover, the findings revealed how instructors are constrained by systemic and contextual factors in their ability to provide social support to trauma-affected students. This study also highlighted the discrepancy between the willingness to support, or the support provided, by instructors with varying levels of experience. Additionally, suggestions were offered on how institutions can enhance support for faculty and instructors, as well as for students.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: INFORMED CONSENT

Research study information leaflet and consent form

Date: 29 May 2025

TITLE OF THE RESEARCH PROJECT:

Instructor communication of social support with trauma-affected students

PRINCIPLE INVESTIGATOR / RESEARCHER(S) NAME(S) AND CONTACT NUMBER(S):

Clement Selepe	2012118135	051 505 1441

FACULTY AND DEPARTMENT:

The Humanities

Communication Science

STUDY LEADER(S) NAME AND CONTACT NUMBER:

Ms E. du Plessis	0798728	051 401 3493
Prof. D.L. Breshears	0876092	058 718 5418

WHAT IS THE AIM / PURPOSE OF THE STUDY?

Although there is research on supporting trauma-affected students (Smyth, 2017; Brunzell et al., 2016; Jennings, 2019), there is limited research on the perceptions of students regarding how instructional communication is used to support trauma-affected students (Graham, 2021). This is also limited in the South African context; hence, it is important to consider the effectiveness of instructional communication in supporting trauma-affected students. Understanding the perceptions of students about the support they receive would ensure that educational institutions gain awareness of, and thereby the means to provide, meaningful student support systems.

WHO IS DOING THE RESEARCH?

The research is conducted by Clement Selepe for the purpose of a Master of Arts degree in communication science. The supervisor for this study is Ms Rentia du Plessis, and the co-supervisor is Prof. Diana Breshears.

HAS THE STUDY RECEIVED ETHICAL APPROVAL?

This study has been approved by the Research Ethics Committee at the UFS, and a copy of the approval can be obtained from the researcher.

Approval number: UFS-HSD2024/2314

WHY ARE YOU INVITED TO TAKE PART IN THIS RESEARCH PROJECT?

Participation in this study is voluntary. You are asked to participate in this study because you have experienced trauma and have responded to a call to participate. The researcher would like to understand your perception of the support you received from instructors in dealing with your traumatic experiences.

WHAT IS THE NATURE OF PARTICIPATION IN THIS STUDY?

You will be expected to participate in a face-to-face interview with the researcher. The interview is expected to last 60 to 90 minutes. The interview will be recorded with your consent. You will be asked questions related to your traumatic experiences and how you were supported, or not supported, by your instructors to deal with your trauma. Because of the sensitive nature of this study, you may decline to answer any question that makes you feel uncomfortable.

CAN THE PARTICIPANT WITHDRAW FROM THE STUDY?

Participation in this study is voluntary, and there is no penalty or loss of benefit for non-participation. Being in this study is voluntary, and you are under no obligation to consent to participate. If you do decide to take part, you will be given this information sheet to keep and will be asked to sign a written consent form. You are free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason.

WHAT ARE THE POTENTIAL BENEFITS OF TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?

Your participation in this study will be kept confidential. However, the results will be shared with participating departments, but the results will not be linked to you directly or indirectly. By participating in this study, you will have a voice to share your insights

to help instructors and the university improve their support mechanisms for trauma-affected students.

WHAT IS THE ANTICIPATED INCONVENIENCE OF TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?

By participating in this study, you will be expected to share your traumatic experiences. As a result, some participants may feel distressed or uncomfortable sharing their experiences. However, you may skip questions that make you feel distressed. Should you need counselling services, you can contact Student Counselling and Development on the following numbers:

Bloem Campus	**QQ Campus**	**South Campus**
scd@ufs.ac.za	scdqq@ufs.ac.za	scdsouth@ufs.ac.za
051 401 2853	058 718 5125	051 505 1989

WILL WHAT I SAY BE KEPT CONFIDENTIAL?

Your personal data will be kept confidential and known only to the researcher. Your participation will be anonymous. The results of the study will be accessed by members of the Department of Communication Science. However, the results will not be linked to the participant directly or indirectly. The results of the study may be used for research reports, article publications, or conference presentations, etc., but you will not be identifiable in such reports.

HOW WILL THE INFORMATION BE STORED AND ULTIMATELY DESTROYED?

Where applicable, hard copies of your answers will be stored by the researcher for a period of five years in a locked cupboard/filing cabinet at the UFS for future research or academic purposes. The intention is to store all information electronically on a password-protected computer. Should the information be used for future research, it will be subject to the research ethics committee for review and approval.

WILL I RECEIVE PAYMENT OR ANY INCENTIVES FOR PARTICIPATING IN THIS STUDY?

Participation in this study is voluntary, and there will be no payment or incentives for participation.

HOW WILL THE PARTICIPANT BE INFORMED OF THE FINDINGS/RESULTS OF THE STUDY?

Please contact the researcher, Clement Selepe, on 051 505 1441 or 2012118135@ufs4life.ac.za if you would like to be informed of the research findings. The findings are accessible for six months. Should you have concerns about the way in which the research has been conducted, you may contact Ms Rentia du Plessis on 051 401 3493 or email duplessise5@ufs.ac.za. You may also contact Mr J. Buti on 051 401 2848 or email butim@ufs.ac.za

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet and for participating in this study.

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY

I, the undersigned,

_____

(participant's full name to be included), (the "Participant")

confirm that I voluntarily agree to participate in the research study referred to as "Instructor Communication of Social Support with Trauma-Affected Students" (the "Study") in relation to

The fulfilment of a master's dissertation

_____ and which Study is being conducted by

Clement Selepe

_____

(insert the name of the researcher), (the "**Researcher**").

I, the undersigned Participant, further confirm that–

1. the Researcher has explained the nature, procedure, potential benefits, and anticipated inconvenience of my participation in the Study;
2. I have read (or had explained to me) and understood the Study as explained in the attached information sheet;

3. I have had sufficient opportunity to ask questions and am prepared to participate in the Study;
4. I understand that my participation in the Study is entirely voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without penalty (if applicable);
5. I voluntarily provide the UFS and the Researcher with my personal information and consent to the UFS and the Researcher collecting, disclosing, and processing my personal information in order to conduct the Study and any related activities in relation thereto;
6. I hereby acknowledge and confirm that I understand the purpose for which the UFS and the Researcher may collect, store, use, delete, destroy, outsource, transfer, or otherwise process, as the context and circumstances may require and as contemplated in terms of POPIA, my personal information as set out herein;
7. I am aware that the findings of the Study will be anonymously processed into a research report, journal publications, and/or conference proceedings and that my personal information will be aggregated and de-identified at such stage;
8. I also give the UFS permission to share, without notification, the collected data with other researchers at the UFS or other higher education institutions. This permission is dependent on the same principles of ethical research practices, anonymity/confidentiality, safekeeping of information, and other issues listed above applying.

I, the Participant, agree to the recording of the interview.

Full Name of Participant: _____

Signature of Participant: _____ Date: _____

Full Name(s) of Researcher(s): _____

Signature of Researcher: _____Date: _____

APPENDIX B: STUDENT INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Demographic Information

Year of Study:

Course:

Age:

Sex:

Race:

Home language:

Interview questions

1. How do you find your university experience at the UFS?
2. What are some factors that you think could improve your university experience?
3. Do you consider yourself to be a trauma-affected student?
    a) Tell us more about your trauma.
4. What kind of challenges do you face within the university environment as a student who has experienced trauma?

Perceptions of instructor support:

1. How do you find your interaction with your lecturers in the classroom?
2. How do you find your interaction with your lecturers outside the classroom?
3. Would you consider communication with your lecturers sensitive to your trauma?
    a) Why do you think so?
4. Do you think the way your lecturers communicate with you is supportive in helping you deal with trauma?

Types of expected support:

1. Did you communicate your trauma experiences to lecturers, and if so, when did you disclose this information?
2. How do you expect your instructors to communicate in a way that would be supportive to you?
3. What type of support would you consider meaningful to support trauma-affected students?

APPENDIX C: INSTRUCTOR INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Demographic Information

Department:

Lecturing experience:

Race:

Sex:

Interview Questions

1. Can you tell us about your experiences interacting with students who have experienced trauma?
2. What do you find students who have experienced trauma need from interaction with lecturers?
3. Can you explain more about the effects of trauma on students?
4. What methods of support do you provide to students who have experienced trauma?
5. How do you feel about the traumatic challenges that students face?
6. What do you think would better prepare you to communicate supportively with trauma-affected students at the UFS?
7. How do you think class size impacts your ability to offer individualised support to students who have experienced trauma?
8. Do you have formal therapeutic training, or do you primarily act as a referral point to campus support services for trauma-affected students?

APPENDIX D: GENERAL/HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (GHREC)

UNIVERSITY OF THE FREE STATE
UNIVERSITEIT VAN DIE VRYSTAAT
YUNIVESITHI YA FREISTATA
UFS

Registration Number: REC-112922-058

12 May 2025

Dear Mr Clement Selepe

Application Approved

Research Project Title:
Instructor communication of social support with trauma-affected students
Ethical Clearance number: **UFS-HSD2024/2314**

We are pleased to inform you that your application for ethical clearance has been approved. Your ethical clearance is valid for twelve (12) months from the date of issue. We request that any changes that may take place during the course of your study/research project be submitted via an Amendment on RIMS to the ethics office to ensure ethical transparency. Furthermore, you are requested to submit a Final Report on RIMS for your study/research project to the ethics office once the project has concluded. Should you require more time than the allotted 12 months to complete this research, please apply for an extension by submitting a Continuation/Report on RIMS. Thank you for submitting your proposal for ethical clearance. We wish you success with your research.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Alison Stander

Vice-Chairperson: General/Human Research Ethics Committee

205 Nelson Mandela Drive P.O. Box 339

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Bloemfontein 9301, Tel: +27 (0)51 401 2392
South Africa, standerag@ufs.ac.za

APPENDIX E: EDITING LETTER

GRAMMAR GUARDIANS

26 November 2025

To whom it may concern

Re: Proofreading and academic editing: Mr C.Q. Selepe

I, Ms Jeanne-Louise van Aswegen, hereby confirm proofreading and academic editing of the master's thesis entitled *Instructor Communication of Social Support With Trauma-Affected Students* by Clement Qenehelo Selepe in November 2025. The editor is not liable for post-editing changes made by the researcher (date of document release: 26 November 2025).

Please contact me on 082 811 6857 or at jeanne@grammarguardians.co.za regarding any queries that may arise.

Kind regards,

J.L. van Aswegen

Grammar Guardians