The State of Trauma-Informed Practice in Education: A Focused Review of Literature

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Abstract: *Trauma is "the difficult experiences of life" that can affect a person physically, mentally, developmentally, and residually over time (Dutro, 2019, p. 3). In the United States, more than two-thirds of children experience trauma prior to age 16 and this will likely increase considering that more than 140,000 children have lost a caregiver to the COVID-19 pandemic. As such, there has never been a more important time to provide trauma-informed practices in education. This focused review of the literature presents the current state of trauma-informed practices in education and provides implications for enhancing the field.*

Key Words: Childhood trauma, Teacher education, Teacher professional development, Trauma-informed practices

RELEVANT BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE

Trauma has been labeled "America's hidden health crisis" because of its increased prevalence in young children (ACEs Connection, 2016). According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA, 2021), "more than **two thirds of children** reported at least one traumatic event by age 16" (bold in original, Understanding Child Trauma section). This aligns with the 60% of adults who report they experienced adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) before age 18 (Centers for Disease Control [CDC], 2021). Over the past two years, the COVID-19 pandemic has increased instances of childhood trauma, including the death of loved ones, separation from caregivers, and parental/caregiver loss of employment (National Child Traumatic Stress Network [NCTSN], 2021; Taylor, 2021). Tragically, between April 2020 and June 2021, more than 140,000 children in the United States lost a caregiver to COVID-19 (Hillis et al., 2021). With this high and rising prevalence of childhood trauma comes a responsibility for the educational community to identify and increase the use of trauma-informed practices. The purpose of this focused review of literature is to present the current state of trauma-informed practices in education and provide implications for enhancing the field.

METHODOLOGY

We conducted a literature search using a university-based search engine inclusive of the targeted disciplines in databases available through EBSCO Web, ProQuest, and ERIC. Search

phrases included the central term of *trauma-informed or trauma-sensitive,* plus the following: *pedagogy*; *teaching practices*; *professional development*; *resilience; special education; classroom management; pupil control ideology; custodial approach; or humanistic approach*, as well as variations on those phrases to finalize decisions. To be included in the review, articles or books had to meet the following criteria: (a) be peer-reviewed; (b) focus on K-12 general and/or special education; (c) include qualitative, quantitative, and/or mixed methods, and/or literature reviews; and (d) be published within the last 10 years unless deemed seminal. To screen the initial works, we analyzed the titles, abstracts, methods, and findings sections. Additionally, we also completed ancestry searching (Cooper, 2010) of citations from the included works. Ultimately, we included 34 articles, books, and organizational websites (e.g., APA, SAMHSA) in the literature review.

FINDINGS

DEFINING TRAUMA

As the term *trauma* has become more mainstream in recent years, its definition has become broader and more varied (Souers & Hall, 2016). According to the American Psychological Association (APA, 2021), trauma is "an emotional response to a terrible event like an accident, rape, or natural disaster" (para. 1). However, trauma is not only defined by an event but by the perception of the individual in response to an event or series of events. This leaves interpretation of whether experiences are traumatic to individuals and not an outside entity. For example, SAMHSA (2019) defines trauma as:

> Resulting from an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual's functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being. (para. 2)

It is an *individual's experience* of harm that can affect a person physically, mentally, developmentally, and residually over time. As such, we agree with Dutro (2019) and others who define trauma as "the difficult experiences of life" (p. 3) because only the person who lived such experiences knows their impact.

THE STATE OF TRAUMA-INFORMED PRACTICES IN EDUCATION

Becoming trauma-informed is a significant undertaking for schools and school personnel. Martin et al. (2017) suggest that "becoming trauma-informed involves a shift in culture, practice, and theoretical framework" (p. 965). Creating trauma-informed schools requires placing knowledge of trauma and its effects at the center of these systems (Clervil & DeCandia, 2013). However, there is currently no "dominant or formally agreed upon framework for trauma-informed practices [nor is there a]...consistent determination of effectiveness" (Thomas et al., 2019, p. 443). The approaches and activities for training and implementing trauma-informed practices and programs vary greatly (Martin et al., 2017). There is also a wide variety of trauma-informed resources and information across websites for national advocacy groups and state Departments of Education (Thomas et al., 2019). Despite ample empirical evidence for effective trauma-informed practices, trauma-informed program evaluations are limited (Berger, 2019).

TEACHER KNOWLEDGE ABOUT TRAUMA-INFORMED PRACTICES

Children spend significant time in school, making teachers uniquely poised to deliver trauma-informed services (Costa, 2017). Unfortunately, most teachers lack knowledge about the signs of trauma and pedagogical approaches for working with students who have experienced trauma (Márquez-Aponte, 2020). Moreover, when systems are not trauma-informed, re-traumatization can be perpetuated. Teachers must be well-informed about what trauma is, how it presents, and how it impacts students. Furthermore, they must be equipped with strategies to respond to students in supportive manners without concern of re-traumatization (Chafouleas et al., 2018). Unfortunately, teachers are entering the field without this information as it is typically not emphasized in teacher preparation programs (Walton-Fisette, 2020).

Trauma is experienced differently by individuals and is intrinsically tied to one's culture and understanding of the world (Dutro, 2019). Students from historically marginalized groups such as students of color, students who identify as LGBTQ+, and students living in poverty experience disproportionally negative outcomes resulting from high stress and trauma (Blitz et al., 2020; McCormick et al, 2018). Therefore, teacher knowledge of trauma-informed practices must also be culturally sustaining/revitalizing (McCarty & Lee, 2014). School professionals who are not knowledgeable about culturally sustaining/revitalizing trauma-informed practices may unintentionally engage in disciplinary practices which contribute to negative outcomes and potentially retraumatize students from vulnerable populations (Blitz et al., 2020).

TRAUMA-INFORMED TRAINING FOR IN-SERVICE TEACHERS

In-service teachers are primarily learning about trauma-informed practices through professional development (Crosby, 2018). This model of learning poses a significant barrier as professional development is occurring when teachers are already deep into responsibilities such as content delivery, promoting a caring learning environment, focusing on standardized testing, mediating student-to-student conflicts, and handling disruptive behavior (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). These competing teacher responsibilities can overshadow putting new professional development knowledge and skills into their daily practice (Martin et al., 2017). Additional barriers to successful professional development include lack of support from administrators, lack of support from other teachers, and stigma regarding mental health concerns (Langley et al., 2010).

TRAUMA-INFORMED TRAINING FOR PRESERVICE TEACHERS

As Brunzell et al. (2019) suggested, teachers entering the field need "to see themselves on the front line for childhood trauma work" (p. 602). Indeed, specific trauma-informed educational interventions for preservice teachers (e.g., Foreman & Bates, 2021) have improved preservice teacher self-efficacy and competence in teaching students with trauma, as well as increased teachers' awareness of how trauma can affect the development of their students. However, the majority of higher education has not shifted to a trauma-informed approach for programs that train educators or professionals for clinical practice (Carello & Butler, 2015). Although preservice teachers often learn basic classroom management, teacher education programs do not always address the effects of context and culture (Caldera et al., 2019; Flower et al., 2017). Furthermore, preservice teachers rarely learn various communication approaches and styles for working with students who experience trauma (Miller & Santos, 2020; Neitzel, 2019). Educator preparation programs must engage in trauma-informed work to meet the needs of their preservice teachers and the students they will serve.

IMPLICATIONS AND IMPORTANCE TO THE EDUCATIONAL FIELD

Teachers are increasingly responsible for their students' social-emotional development in addition to their academic achievement (Walton-Fisette, 2020), including implementing trauma-informed practices. Significant barriers to this include a lack of teacher knowledge about trauma-informed practices, competing teacher responsibilities, and inadequate pre-service teacher education. We suggest ways to enhance the field for both in-service and preservice teachers.

For in-service teachers, we echo Dutro's (2019) recommendation to weave trauma-informed practices into their day-to-day curriculum and add leveraging community partnerships. Implementing trauma-informed practices such as reading stories of characters who have faced traumas and discussing those experiences or having the choice to write about difficult life experiences may offer a way to integrate without adding more to the existing curriculum. This weaving-in approach has worked well in the past for students who struggled with reading comprehension and pro-social behaviors through implementing a relationally oriented reading instruction (e.g., Lysaker et al., 2011). In addition to lessening the time demands, this approach to trauma-informed practices allows the lived experiences of students to be acknowledged in meaningful ways through literacy instruction and practices.

Additionally, we see community-school collaborations as an effective way to leverage multiple stakeholders' knowledge to support students who have experienced trauma. For example, Perry and Daniels (2016) found that coordination between a community clinic, school, and families increased the schools' capacity to identify and provide trauma-sensitive practices as well as improving students' coping skills. Such collaborations can be tailored to the exact needs of the community, schools, families, and children involved, which is important when we consider critical differences in needs from urban to rural areas and complexities such as the need for culturally responsive approaches (e.g., Blitz et al., 2020; Morton & Beradi, 2018).

For preservice teachers, we recommend teacher education programs embed trauma-informed practices and focus on developing trauma-sensitive dispositions in the teachers of tomorrow. Teacher preparation programs must include trauma-informed practices as part of the knowledge and skills being developed in preservice teachers. Additionally, our readings and practice have led us to understand that trauma-informed work is more than a list of techniques or practices; it requires developing a disposition toward students that is open, helpful, and empathetic (e.g., McCammon, 2020). We recommend that teacher preparation programs commit to developing trauma-informed dispositions in the teachers of tomorrow.

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