Research in Progress

OJED
OPEN JOURNALS IN EDUCATION

© *Journal of Trauma Studies in Education*
Volume 2, Issue 1 (2023), pp. 119-132
ISSN: 2162-3104 (Print), 2166-3750 (Online)
Doi: 10.32674/jis.v2i1.3658
ojed.org/jtse

Helping Today's Teachers be More Trauma-Effective: Results from a Needs Assessment and a Proposed Collaborative School Counseling Intern Resource

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ABSTRACT

This article describes the process of developing a proposed trauma-related group intervention for teachers. A needs assessment was then piloted in collaboration with the state education association and local school district. Based on the needs assessment and current literature, a protocol was created for the psychoeducational groups, and the intervention was developed. This article notes the growing challenges facing teachers in dealing with trauma-related issues, even more poignant in the context of the current COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: counseling interns, group interventions for teachers, COVID-19, trauma, school counselors

Currently, K-12 schools and school districts are navigating many challenges, including delivering comprehensive curriculum while also encouraging social emotional learning. We live in an era of increased demands for accountability amid trends toward budget cuts. The federal fiscal year budget for 2021 cut education by 5.6 billion dollars before the onset of the coronavirus pandemic (Office of Management and Budget, 2020) and school districts faced additional severe budgetary cuts as a result. Despite financial constraints, teachers continue to be asked to take on multiple tasks, including social emotional learning. Studies specify that the

teacher's critical role in social emotional learning should be promoted (Howell et al., 2019); however, teacher burnout continues to be a concern. Because teachers take such a critical role in the comprehensive development of children, their own psychological well-being is critical (Luthar & Mendez, 2020).

Trauma-informed practices now more than ever are not only effective for students, but they can also be beneficial for teachers who have a history of traumatic stress. Perceived social supports can mitigate the effects of previous trauma during the pandemic (Seitz et al., 2021). Particularly relevant for schools, teachers tend to identify support of coworkers as a resiliency factor for COVID-19 related trauma (Baker et al., 2021).

The current pandemic has created a trauma-related context that is unprecedented, of which teachers and students are experiencing the effects. Recent literature on the impact of COVID-19 suggests schools that utilize trauma-informed practices reap the benefit of having at least some supports in place to address the traumatic effects on students (Aponte, 2020; Castrellon et al., 2021; Crosby et al., 2020; Wall, 2021). Clearly, creating a balance between academic, social-emotional, and a myriad of other demands, is a considerable challenge for teachers today.

One potential solution is for school districts to intentionally partner with a university training program to support and educate teachers. Such partnerships can be of benefit to both parties (Cress et al., 2020; Eyal et al., 2019; Hodges et al., 2020). In this proposed model, the university counseling students benefit by becoming trained in trauma-informed practices and are given an opportunity to lead groups as required by the program's accreditation. The K-12 teachers benefit from having a supportive psychoeducational group where they can safely explore the personal impact of teaching trauma impacted students, and the schools themselves benefit from having supported teachers who would ostensibly be better regulated (Baker et al., 2021; Seitz et al., 2021).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Negotiating the complex process of student learning and social emotional management presents many daunting tasks for today's K-12 students. Indeed, facing the demands of school within the context of a pandemic may exacerbate trauma problems for students and leave a wake of stress and confusion (Terzioglu et al., 2021; Wall, 2021). According to Finkelhor et al. (2015), more students arrive to school nowadays with more problems than in the past, often because of trauma. So too do teachers, with more professional and personal worries and anxieties, with increased awareness of their own personal issues, and with a greater willingness to seek psychological help (Camacho et al., 2018).

As defined by the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN, n.d.), childhood trauma is "a frightening, dangerous, or violent event that poses a threat to a child's safety or bodily integrity. Witnessing a traumatic event that threatens the life or physical safety of a loved one can also be traumatic". Because of the detrimental effects of trauma on development (Anda et al., 2006), children may demonstrate significant emotional, behavioral, and learning difficulties that adversely impact their ability to succeed in school (Barfield et al., 2012). Trauma-informed practices have

recently increased in mental health settings as has a push for trauma-informed interventions in schools (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2014).

Students who have experienced significant traumatic events often have difficulty with regulation of emotion (Brunzell et al., 2016). Students may demonstrate hyperarousal, hypervigilance, or other reactions to trauma triggers. Neurobiologically based trauma responses – such as flight, flight, or freeze – are based in the lower parts of the brain where reasoning does not occur (Perry, 2009). These triggers may or may not be recognized as such by the student, often leading the teacher to be unaware of the antecedents to certain behavioral responses. This lack of regulation can also impact a student's ability to focus, leading to behavior management challenges for teachers and often a misinterpretation of the behaviors as either an attention deficit concern, a learning disability, or oppositional defiant disorder (NCTSN, nd; Perfect et al., 2016).

Students who have difficulty with emotional regulation also tend to have social skill deficits (Perfect et al., 2017). These students come to the attention of teachers by demonstrating aggressive behaviors or being bullied themselves. These students may misread other people's intentions or cues as threatening or dangerous and act according to the perceived threat, while students whose trauma response is flight may retreat from social engagements (NCTSN, nd).

Some models of trauma-informed education identify that a teacher's own regulation state dictates that of their students. If the teacher is not able to regulate well, they would have difficulty regulating their students (Pyhalto et al., 2020; Rain, 2014). In other words, they would not easily navigate their students' trauma reactions. Teachers who have trauma histories themselves may be particularly vulnerable to becoming triggered by the behaviors of others (Seitz et al., 2021). Recognizing trauma triggers when or, more appropriately, before they occur can help the teacher be present and supportive to the student instead of responding with a punitive or fear-based response. Today's K-12 students experience another challenge of increased exposure to abuse due to COVID-19 pandemic isolation (Sidpra et al., 2021) which threatens their ability to succeed in an academic environment (Barfield et al., 2012; Burke et al., 2011).

Teachers are bolstered by being successful in the classroom, and those who are successful are more likely to stay in the field (Brunzell et al., 2016). Beginning teachers are impacted by the emotional toll of teaching children with trauma histories. In a study by Zetlin et al. (2012), new teachers voiced a need for on-going education on the behavioral and social emotional needs of students who experienced trauma as they felt they were ill-equipped to manage the needs of trauma-exposed students.

Years of research have shown that teaching is a stressful profession (Collie et al., 2012; Roeser et al., 2013; Wolgast & Fischer, 2017), and teaching in at-risk schools or with students who have experienced trauma increases the likelihood of burnout and job dissatisfaction (Borntrager et al., 2012; Christian-Brandt et al., 2020). Despite the emotionally intense nature of teaching, supportive interventions have been shown to work. Teachers who have the support of colleagues demonstrate greater satisfaction and lower stress levels (Richards et al., 2018; Wolgast & Fischer, 2017). Teachers who believe their students are well-behaved and motivated report greater levels of job

satisfaction as well as lower job-related stress and tend to feel more effective (Collie et al., 2012). It has been strongly asserted that current teacher professional development should specifically be focused, at least in part, on supporting teachers in becoming more trauma-informed (Christian-Brandt et al., 2020; Queyrel-Bryan et al., 2019).

Because trauma-informed practices help build student resiliency while offering teachers and staff a framework for behavioral understanding, ostensibly, teachers are better equipped to manage the more difficult dynamics of complicated classrooms (Christian-Brandt et al., 2020). The task of intervening at the optimal time or even responding to students in serious need will continue to present a critical challenge for teachers, school counselors and administrators. Multiple systematic reviews describe the research on trauma informed school practices as still limited (Berger, 2019; Berger & Martin, 2021; Cohen & Baron, 2021; Maynard et al., 2019; Thomas et al., 2019). Despite this scarcity, evidence suggests that some trauma-informed practices directed towards teacher knowledge and support can reduce burnout (Eyal et al., 2019; Kim et al., 2021) and support students (Rodger et al., 2020).

One idea that meets these needs and is cost-efficient, is psychoeducation groups (typically, 5-8 members with 8 sessions) delivered under supervision by master's students studying to be school counselors. This approach supports the contention that trauma-informed psychoeducation can be effective in both helping the recipients and training them in addressing a wide range of student trauma-related problems. It is also well-suited for the kind of developmental, crisis and situational concerns often presented by and to teachers. In addition, psychoeducational groups are appropriate because of limited resources, competing demands in the prevention arena, and an increasing number of students who need support and training.

Current challenges are plentiful, yet resources to provide them are limited. The new reality related to the recent pandemic, breeding unprecedented challenges to teachers and school districts, deems responding to the varied needs of multiple roles and students as paramount (Baker et al., 2020; Karaman et al., 2021). School counselors are uniquely qualified to meet the social-emotional needs of students and school staff during times of crisis such as the COVID pandemic (Pincus et al., 2020). The described collaborative approach is one possible cost-effective method for addressing these challenges in a universally beneficial way.

METHOD

Procedure

The pilot needs assessment emerged from a discussion with leaders of the state education association. Through their work with the local school district, a six-question survey was developed using teachers' vernacular such as "meltdown" or "dissatisfied or angry parent". The education association leaders then piloted the survey among all teachers belonging to the association in this local school district.

In an email survey format created by the Student Education Association (SEA), teachers were asked "Do any students have meltdowns in your classroom?" (Yes or No) and "If so, describe how you cope." Teachers were also asked "Do you deal with

dissatisfied or angry parents?" (Yes or No) and "If so, how do you flip the script to make the interaction positive?" Four more Yes-No questions were asked: "Do you find yourself internalizing conflict and blowing up in response?; Do you shut yourself in when you go home?"; "Do you assist students who struggle with emotional self-care?"; and "What emotional self-care do you engage in to avoid conditions such as compassion fatigue and secondary traumatic stress (STS)?" There was also a box to check on the survey if teachers were interested in participating in a psychoeducational group.

School District

The planned program model incorporates results for the needs assessment and addresses current teacher professional development challenges related to student trauma issues and for improving school counselor training. It offers a unique training-service cycle that increases the odds of a positive internship experience while expanding the limited resources of school districts.

The school district is in a metropolitan area in the Mountain West Region and has a current enrollment of 64,000 students. State Educational Association (SEA) professional staff developed a collaboration with counselor education faculty to provide direction and supervision for master's level counselors-in-training for the purpose of outreach psychoeducational counseling group delivery. It was agreed to target teacher members via a pilot survey sent by the SEA. The partnership between the counselor education program and the SEA was initiated by the SEA leaders through their discussion with teachers about the challenges of dealing with traumatized youth. The partner district was selected because of its size (second largest district in the state) and location (in the same location as the counselor education program). The school district has 96 schools at the elementary, middle, and high school levels. Only teachers who were members of the SEA were surveyed in this pilot stage (N=114), representing only 3% of total teachers in this district. It is anticipated that the credentialed school counselor(s) practicing in the school district would be involved in the design, formation, and/or facilitation of the proposed groups after the pilot stage.

Utilizing School Counseling Interns

An essentially cost-free planned approach involves the use of interns in graduate counseling and related programs. One of the greatest challenges for such academic departments is to provide an integrated and coordinated program that successfully meshes academic preparation with practical work. Fuller integration of academic counseling programs and local teacher professional development helps internship students avoid having a poor initial experience in counseling because the teachers are appropriately motivated and selected clients. It is critically important that client selection creates optimal learning opportunities for the internship students who may feel inadequate in making connections from role-playing to the concerns presented by real clients. A process that offers extensive preparation in trauma-related issues while adequately selecting appropriate clients for the internship counseling

experience can address counselor training and school district concerns simultaneously.

RESULTS

One hundred and fourteen teachers from the targeted school district responded to the piloted survey. For privacy purposes, SEA gathered no demographic information.

The survey results yielded in several insights. Eighty seven percent of the teachers indicated that they have experienced student meltdowns in their classrooms. Eighty-five percent shared that they deal with dissatisfied or angry parents. Thirty-seven percent found themselves internalizing conflict and blowing up as a result. Eighty-seven percent assisted students who struggle with emotional self-care. Sixty percent of the teachers said they shut themselves in when they go home. Ninety percent stated that they are aware of their triggers and 61.5% identified their triggers as related to/a consequence of the classroom. Specific responses of "How do I cope?"; "How do I deal with dissatisfied and/or angry parents?" and "What emotional self-care do you utilize?" were categorized into themes and are found below in Table 1.

Table 1: Educator Trauma Survey Results

Educator Trauma Survey Results	Yes	No
Had students melt-down in my classroom [a]	87%	13%
(Specifically) *How did I cope?*		
Direct interventions (provide a quiet space for students, listen, try to calm them down) (35 of 87 responses)	40%	N/A
Seek (more formal) assistance (e.g., administrator, counselor) (21 of 87 responses)	24%	N/A
Self-soothing (e.g., deep breathing, in therapy, exercise) (17 of 87 responses)	20%	N/A
Seek (less formal) peers support (14 of 87 responses)	16%	N/A
Having to deal with dissatisfied or angry parents [a]	85%	15%
(Specifically) *How did I try to flip the script to make the interaction(s) more positive?*		

Point out the positive of their child (25 of 84 responses)	30%	N/A
Teaming (e.g., we are in this together) (22 of 84 responses)	26%	N/A
Listen and validate concerns, reduce conflict (18 of 84 responses)	21%	N/A
Take responsibility for my part if/as appropriate (10 of 84)	12%	N/A
Reschedule, refer, and/or provide school district policy and procedures (9 of 84)	11%	N/A
Find myself internalizing conflict and blowing up in response [a]	37%	63%
Shutting myself in when you go home [a]	60%	40%
Assisting students who struggle with emotional self-care [a]	89%	11%
Emotional self-care engaged in to avoid conditions such as compassion fatigue and secondary traumatic stress (STS) [a]		
Exercise, rest, meditation, yoga, therapy, outdoors (54 of 106 responses)	51%	N/A
Spending time with family, friends (34 of 106 responses)	32%	N/A
Struggling with finding effective self-care (18 of 106 responses)	17%	N/A

Note. $N = 114$. Number of participant comments varied by question. Many teachers directly requested more information about compassion fatigue and secondary traumatic stress (STS). [a] $N = 114$ responses.

The data collected via the pilot needs assessment survey are simply presented as aggregated percentages across the district at the request of the SEA leaders to assure protection of confidentiality so no groups could be identified. With the intention to use the results of the survey to form psychoeducational groups of eight participants each, multiple groups will have to be created to accommodate the 114 study

participants who wish to immediately join a group. A larger survey where disaggregated data across schools or grade levels, including the appropriate descriptive statistical analyses, is planned to further explore the nuances of individual practice sites and decisions around future implementation of the proposed intervention.

Planned Psychoeducational Groups

Based on the results of the survey, trauma-informed psychoeducational group counseling was designed to address the areas of verbalized concern and lack of formal support systems. Specifically, training sections focused on addressing direct trauma-informed practices/knowledge, student/teacher relationship skill building, and self-care/processing to address secondary traumatization. The group could be defined as a relationship and a process designed to help teachers make choices to manage difficulties more effectively. Co-facilitating counseling interns act as effective listeners, conduits to resources, and providers of instruction for various trauma-related issues. This psychoeducational group counseling was planned as typically short-term (8 roughly 90-minute sessions), building on a teacher's strengths and emphasizing a teacher's potential and development. The benefits for the teacher-client were described, including a no-fee opportunity to confidentially explore a variety of issues, and an opportunity to experience the process of psychoeducational group counseling. The benefits for the Counselor Education Program were also described, including providing an opportunity for advanced master's level counselors-in-training to enrich their skills, knowledge, and competence under on-going clinical supervision. Teacher-clients were informed that this approach also provided the master's degree Counselor Training Program (with a focus on prevention services; less intensive counseling) and the SEA an opportunity to work collaboratively and in consultation to better serve teachers and their students. Teachers interested in this, then, signed up on an attached form and were fully informed of the group counseling process (including the video/audiotaping of all sessions and confidentiality). Unfortunately, due to COVID-19 quarantines impacting both counseling students and teachers, groups were unable to be implemented beyond the initial meeting. Therefore, the model discussed is proposed and not yet tested.

Table 2: Planned Trauma-Informed Group Content

Session 1	Introductions, Group Norms, Overview of Curriculum Group discussion Self-care moment
Session 2	What is Trauma? "Consider a Student" Activity Group discussion Self-care moment
Session 3	How Children Respond to Trauma Developmentally

	Group discussion Self-care moment
Session 4	Neurobiology of Trauma Group discussion Self-care moment
Session 5	Feelings, Thoughts, and Behaviors: The Cognitive Triangle Group Discussion Self-care moment
Session 6	Student and Teacher Resiliency "I Have, I Am, I Can" Group Discussion Self-Care Moment
Session 7	Creating a Trauma Informed Classroom Self-Care Moment
Session 8	Creating a Trauma Informed Classroom Self-Care Moment

DISCUSSION

Implications and Recommendations

Teacher Education

Effective needs assessment, followed by planning a strong orientation process for internship students, adequate clinical supervision, and a collaborative agreement between the teacher group and the academic unit are crucial for this model's success. This approach can at least partially meet shared teacher challenges such as addressing critical needs for self-care, psychoeducation regarding the impact of trauma, and trauma-informed classroom management skills to respond to the increased severity of student problems with limited resources. As shown by the survey results, teachers often find that they have high levels of stress, and low levels of purposeful self-care. This group adds an element of intentionality to self-care. Facilitating a supportive space for teachers to process their experiences with children who have trauma histories is beneficial for both teachers and students. The literature suggests that if teachers are better regulated, then students are too.

Teacher education programs, although becoming more trauma-informed, may not emphasize the need for trauma-sensitive classroom management strategies that attend to both the social-emotional and educational needs of the students. This pilot

group helps challenge the perception of trauma-informed practices as extraneous labor for teachers, instead highlighting such practices as valuable in decreasing problematic behaviors and increasing test scores (Barfield et al., 2012; Burke et al., 2011). Also, having the knowledge that trauma may be the root of problem behavior may ameliorate punitive responses which may have historically been the way negative behaviors were addressed.

Sharing Resources

Sharing resources between State Education Associations (SEA) and academic departments, combined with facilitating teacher support and professional training, can be a viable approach to address current challenges. COVID-19 has added more responsibility on school districts, and staff within those districts, while funding may be even harder to come by (Aponte, 2020; Castrellon et al., 2021; Crosby et al., 2020; Wall, 2021). Because this project comes at no cost to SEA or school districts, it can be effectively implemented while not increasing the burdens of effort and cost. State Education Associations strive to bolster school staff as well as help assure that staff can meet the needs of students. The proposed collaboration between the association and the academic department aims to meet the support needs of staff.

Intern Counselors

This model also benefits counseling interns. Trauma-informed practices are now considered foundational knowledge for counselors, and knowledge of school-specific trauma-informed practices is critical for school counseling interns (Howell et al., 2019). School counselors are vital to trauma-informed practices in schools as school counselors help set the social-emotional culture. Counseling students who participate in the facilitation of the groups would not passively learn trauma-informed school practices; they are required to teach it to others. These students, thus, leave their internship with a completed group that can be modeled in their own school environment once they are certified. Counseling interns are expected to be well-versed in group practice and theory, exemplified by the hands-on group facilitation, an experience they might wish to replicate once they are employed.

Limitations

The pilot needs assessment survey process and subsequent collaborative program planning has some significant limitations. It may not be representative, and the validity of the needs assessment may be affected by selection and volunteer bias.

Investigation concerning a larger survey should be implemented after this pilot phase, and follow-up of the impact of this approach on teacher retention is recommended. In addition, there may be other helping professional preparation programs (e.g., addictions counseling, social work, psychology) that could benefit from similar partnerships. Further research should be conducted to assess the effectiveness of the group intervention via pre-post design. Although COVID-19 adds to the timeliness and need for a model, the sudden impact that it had on the in-person

design limited the actual facilitation of the groups. Creation of both an in-person implementation method and a virtual option may be a viable way to meet the needs of school staff no matter how health implications might be impacting universities and school districts.

CONCLUSION

The need for teacher support and education related to trauma is particularly salient due to the stress and trauma of COVID-19 on students and schools (Baker et al., 2020; Karaman et al., 2021). Research shows that teachers benefit from peer support and trauma-informed education (Christian-Brandt et al., 2020; Queyrel-Bryan et al., 2019; Richards et al., 2018; Wolgast & Fischer, 2017) and may need even more support than they did previously (Baker et al., 2021). School counselors and school counseling interns are positioned to be helpful due to proximity and their unique understanding of school dynamics (Pincus et al., 2020). Because of the use of counselor educators or counseling students, this model of teacher support group is uniquely positioned to address the needs of teachers both at this current time of heightened stress and when, ideally, schools return to some semblance of normalcy.

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