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The Challenge of Utilizing Misconduct Data for the Assessment of a Trauma-Informed Intervention

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ABSTRACT

As trauma-informed interventions increase in popularity across educational settings, important questions pertaining to the empirical effectiveness of these programs need to be addressed (Thomas et al., 2019). The present study serves as preliminary findings of two east Texas public elementary schools who implemented a Trust-Based Relational Intervention® program to meet the needs of students who have experienced trauma. Researchers analyzed six years of student misconduct data collected at both schools prior to implementing the interventions and found that, in line with past research, the misconduct data was not deemed appropriate to determine intervention efficacy for research use. The findings are discussed in terms of the implications for researchers, practitioners, advocates, and policymakers.

Keywords: student misconduct, education, methodology, trauma-informed, behavioral intervention

According to Thomas and colleagues (2019), trauma-informed care (TIC) interventions have steadily gained traction over the past 20 years as a response to the global awareness of adverse childhood experiences and resulting trauma impacting healthy learning, relationships, and processing. To meet these needs of children, TIC has evolved over time to serve contexts that aim to become trauma-responsive (TR; Berliner & Kolko, 2016; Plumb et al., 2016). First, trauma-focused care (TFC) interventions operate within clinical contexts, where specialists work directly with those experiencing traumatic symptomology. Alternatively, trauma-sensitive care (TSC) interventions are typically enacted in non-clinical contexts, where the aim is

to be aware of trauma when making organizational and educational decisions about policies and procedures.

Past research has demonstrated that up to 70% of children in Australia and the United States may experience a traumatic event in during their development (e.g., bullying, abuse, homelessness, racism; Emerging Minds, 2020; NCTSN, 2017). Educators often represent the first public line of contact for children who experience or have experienced trauma; however, despite years of experience in the classroom, teachers are often unable to detect the symptomatology of trauma in children of any age (Proctor, 2017). Experiences of trauma can create a cascading cycle of impairment of both interpersonal and scholastic development in children, which calls for a significant change in both individual classroom instruction, as well as in educational systems more broadly (Cook et al., 2005; Egeland et al., 1983; Ogle, 2013; Shonk & Cicchetti, 2001).

A TR intervention within a school context is designed to lift students and improve their overall health and learning (Thomas et al., 2019). Because of the holistic nature of TR strategies, the effects of such an implementation will affect the functioning and relationships of all staff in schools, from the classroom instructors and administrators, to the bus drivers, food service employees, and custodial staff (Eggleston et al., 2021). Educators who have worked in a TR environment reported an "experience of care" where all students and staff have their needs met, not just those who have been specifically exposed to trauma (Avery et al., 2022). This means all students receive the benefit from the TR approach.

There are several approaches to meeting the needs of children with trauma that have shown to be successful in the classroom. For instance, Cognitive Behavioral Intervention for Trauma in Schools (CBITS) can be applied by teachers or school counselors to improve behaviors in the classroom (Jacox, 2004; Jaycox et al., 2009). CBITS assists with relieving symptoms deriving from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and anxiety in children in both individual and group settings (The National Child Traumatic Stress Network [NCTSN], 2012). Another approach, the Heart of Teaching and Learning (HTL), is a comprehensive curriculum that extends itself into various educational settings (Day et al., 2015), pulling together a compilation of psychoeducational, cognitive-behavioral, and relational principles. Similarly, the Achieving-Behaving-Caring (ABC) project teaches proactive social skills to students who are identified as at risk for poor behaviors. This program serves as a proactive or preventative approach to address students' needs and provide intervention before problems escalate to more serious issues in the classroom (McConaughy et al., 1999).

TRUST-BASED RELATIONAL INTERVENTION®

Trust-Based Relational Intervention® (TBRI) is a model used originally by foster and adoptive parents to manage challenging behaviors from the children in their care (Purvis et al., 2013). TBRI was created by Dr. Karyn Purvis of the Karyn Purvis Institute of Child Development (KPICD) at Texas Christian University (TCU). TBRI presents three principles: Connecting Principles, Empowering Principles, and Correcting Principles. Each focus on ways to build trust and interact with children

who exhibit fear-based behaviors. TBRI was chosen as the theoretical lens for the present investigation, as it operates as a TSC paradigm, which does not require a clinical practitioner. TBRI in an educational context intervenes at the relationship dynamics within a school at all levels and aims to increase the trust between people and reduce experiences of fear-based behavior. Within this framework, student misconduct is interpreted as fear-based behaviors of students' relational needs not being met.

The main goal of TBRI centers on a balance between structure and nurture for children as part of teaching emotional regulation and coping skills. Maladaptive behaviors that stem from fear and trauma are often misunderstood by adults as willful and strategic. An adult might believe a child deliberately chooses to behave inappropriately, while in fact, the child's actions stem directly from unconscious stress responses (Henry & Blackpond, 2007). These reactions arise as products of the child's hypervigilance and search for protection from harm (Perry, 2006). TBRI promotes a trusting relationship between adult and child, which is shown to reduce the child's urge for immediate reaction, and grants them time and freedom to consider alternative behaviors (Bath, 2008; Purvis et al., 2007; Purvis et al., 2013).

THE PROBLEMS OF USING DISTRICT DATA

The effectiveness of any given intervention can only be measured with meaningful data, which in terms of interventions for trauma, entails data representative of the actual behaviors of the students. Thomas and company (2019) highlighted a concerning deficiency of school-wide measurement standard to test the effectiveness of TR interventions. However, the collection of data of this nature can be challenging. As such, utilizing misconduct data internally collected by schools, seems to serve as a viable solution for researchers, practitioners, and educators in this circumstance (especially if the respective schools lack the resources to individually evaluate students across campus). These data represents the frequency of instances students are taken to the administrative office due to their behavior not adhering to the school's expectations. These data are then coded into nominal categories, representing the typology of misconduct occurring at the school. Misconduct data has been shown to predict problem behaviors from students in elementary schools (Irvin et al., 2004; Rusby et al., 2007; Walker et al., 2005). However, additional research has brought these claims into question, as student misconduct data may not reliably reflect the actual behaviors of students, and the overall climate of a school (Hawken et al., 2007; Martella et al., 2010; Putnam et al., 2003).

The present study documents the collaborative efforts of researchers and administrators to implement and test the effectiveness of a trauma-informed intervention (Trust-Based Relational Intervention®; TBRI) at two rural, east Texas elementary schools within the same district. The elementary schools similarly shared the desire to provide a better education for their students by utilizing a TR perspective. The authors of the present study were brought into the process of transforming the campuses to assist in the assessment of these TR interventions. One of the goals of the schools' administrators was to lower student misconduct by changing the students'

relationships with each other, their teachers, and the broader academic community. The present study investigated the nature of the misconduct data from both schools to determine the efficacy of utilizing this type of data to measure the success of a TR intervention.

METHOD

The data utilized in the present study were in the form of an archive, collected by administrators of two elementary schools in the same school district in an east Texas town (Table 1). The data spanned six years for each school (2011/2012 to 2016/2017), presenting a breakdown of conduct violations into sixteen categories, shared between the schools (see Table 2). The frequency data provided by the schools to the researchers did not include student information. Thus, researchers were not able to analyze demographic characteristics of students, nor were there identifiers representing repeat offenders in the data set.

After the researchers received IRB approval from Texas A&M University-Commerce, the archive was collated by the administrations of both schools and delivered to the researchers. Additionally, the schools provided an index of the misconduct codes utilized to categorize the different violations. No further data was shared with the researchers by the school administrators.

Table 1. Conduct codes and frequencies per year of the elementary school campuses

	School													
	A							B						
Conduct Codes	‘11	‘12	‘13	‘14	‘15	‘16	Σ	‘11	‘12	‘13	‘14	‘15	‘16	Σ
State Codes														
12	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1
20	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	3
21	21	22	13	14	12	9	91	31	13	20	16	30	31	141
Σ	21	22	12	14	12	9	91	31	13	20	16	30	35	145
ISD Codes														
40	110	66	47	48	50	39	360	4	0	2	1	3	89	96
43	2	2	3	40	42	15	104	9	21	10	2	2	14	58
44	1	2	0	2	0	0	5	0	1	0	0	0	7	8
45	37	49	33	5	57	55	236	153	94	66	16	4	8	341
46	49	75	46	167	328	94	759	336	180	82	16	8	40	662
47	0	4	3	1	0	0	8	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
48	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	0	2	0	0	1	6
49	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1
50	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
51	1	1	0	0	0	0	2	23	17	24	6	1	0	71
54	0	0	0	0	2	0	2	4	0	3	1	0	0	8
56	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
TR	0	0	0	32	0	0	32	0	0	0	5	0	0	5
Σ	221	221	145	309	491	212	160	565	326	209	63	49	191	140

Table 2: Conduct Codes & Descriptions

Codes	Definition
State Codes	
12	Knife
20	Persistent Misconduct
21	Conduct Code
District Codes	
40	Bus Incident
43	Class Disruption
44	Coercion to student
45	Disrespect
46	Disruptive Behavior
47	Distribution of unauthorized materials
48	Dress Code Violation
49	Excess Absences
50	Fail to Attend Detention
51	Fail to Follow Instructions
54	Harassment / Intimidation
56	Strike #2
TR	Teacher Referral

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Treatment of the Data

After receiving the data from the administrative teams, the data were collated from separate data sets, organized by year and campus, into a single data set. Next, the descriptive variables were categorically coded (e.g., term, campus, administrative team). In terms of cleaning the frequencies of conduct violations at each campus, the only alterations made related to violations not documented for that term or campus, which were given the value of zero. The resulting data set included the following variables: term, campus, administrative team, and the sixteen conduct violations. For the analysis, the data was processed through the SPSS statistical software to calculate the frequencies of violation occurrences by term, campus, and administrative team.

RESULTS

Mutually Exclusivity

Upon review of the coding scheme employed by both schools for reporting conduct violations, it became clear that the codes were not mutually exclusive. Some of the codes were used to represent specific offenses, such as codes 12 (knife), 48 (dress code violation), and 50 (failed to attend detention), others were less well-defined offenses. For instance, offenses for codes 20 (persistent misconduct), 40 (bus

incident), 43 (class disruption), 46 (disruptive behavior), 47 (distribution of unauthorized materials), 54 (harassment/ intimidation), 56 (strike #2), and TR (teacher referral) could overlap with similar others. Thus, the present data was not deemed appropriate to measure specific behavioral outcomes from the schools' intervention.

Error

For the present data there were two administrative teams for Campus 1 (see Table 3), and three teams for Campus 2 (see Table 4) responsible for compiling and organizing this data. Both of these schools seemed to show similar trends: new administrative teams reported high numbers of violations in their first year, and each subsequent year the frequency of reported violations dropped. This finding indicated that there may not be a shared protocol for coding student misconduct both between and within administrative teams. Thus, it is not likely that the effects of an intervention could reasonably be inferred from the data available.

Table 3: Changes in District Data Collected and Reported by Administrative Teams for School 1

Year	Team	Principal	Vice Principal	Total Violations
2011/2012	ATA	A	A	221
2012/2013	ATA	A	A	221
2013/2014	ATA	A	A	145
2014/2015	ATA	A	A	309
Total Violations				896
2015/2016	ATB	B	B	491
2016/2017	ATB	B	B	212
Total Violations				703

Table 4: Changes in District Data Collected and Reported by Administrative Teams for School 2

Year	Team	Principal	Vice Principal	Total Violations
2011/2012	ATC	C	C	565
Total Violations				565
2012/2013	ATD	D	C	326
2013/2014	ATD	D	C	209
2014/2015	ATD	D	C	63
2015/2016	ATD	D	C	49
Total Violations				647
2016/2017	ATE	E	D	191
Total Violations				191

DISCUSSION

The present study provided data from two east Texas elementary schools implementing a TR intervention. The aim of the study was to determine the efficacy of utilizing the school-collected student misconduct data to evaluate the effectiveness of an intervention to improve student outcomes and school climate. After a review of the data, it was determined that this data was not appropriate, as the coding scheme utilized did not represent mutually exclusive behaviors, nor was the frequency of student misconduct stable across administrative teams. From these preliminary results, two major implications are discussed.

Implications for Scholars and Practitioners

For scholars and practitioners assisting schools in evaluating TR intervention effectiveness, the present findings highlight a concerning problem for utilizing misconduct data. One explanation for the inconsistency of reporting demonstrated could be attributed to the frequency teachers send students to the office for disciplinary action. Teachers can unintentionally skew misconduct data in two ways: underreporting and overreporting. A handful of studies have provided some insight into why underreporting occurs. For example, in businesses, employees will underreport depending on: their level in the company (Miceli et al., 1991); the responsiveness of their employer (Miceli & Near, 1988); and their commitment to their organization (Sims & Keenan, 1998). In educational settings, instructors are less likely to report cheating behavior, as they tend to handle cheating in the classroom (Maramark & Maline, 1993). Other factors can also contribute to instructors underreporting, such as a lack of institutional support, burdensome processes, inappropriate penalties, or a lack of time to report (Hughes et al., 2001).

Overreporting can also be a problem, as research has shown that teachers tend to overreport disruptive behaviors due to disciplinary preference, repeat offenders, or perceptual biases. In an international study of twenty-four countries, researchers found there exists more variability in disciplinary intensity per classroom than per school (Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development, 2009). This variability has been explained by teachers' emotional intelligence (Jeloudar & Yunus, 2011), or level of experience (Hogan et al., 2003), as more experienced teachers tend to handle problem behaviors within the classroom, rather than rely on office referrals.

Students who are regularly sent to the office represent a problematic situation for researchers, as 20-30% of students referred to the office are repeat offenders (Tobin et al., 2000). However, this is not always verifiable and depends on the quality and consistency of the data reported by the schools. Further, older students tend to receive more office referrals than younger students (Tidwell et al., 2003). Additionally, a body of literature has been dedicated to determining which students are more likely to get sent to the office. Students who are black, Native American, or Hispanic (Skiba et al., 2002; Wallace et al., 2008), with low academic competence (Abidin & Robinson, 2002), and/or LGBTQ+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Plus) also experience more office referrals and disciplinary action (Greytak et al.,

2016; Himmelstein & Bruckner, 2011; Irvine, 2010; Palmer & Greytak, 2017; Poteat et al., 2016). Thus, a thorough evaluation is necessary to determine if the convenience of misconduct data outweighs the risks.

Implications for Policy Makers

Two concerns arise with utilizing school misconduct data, which can be mediated by advocates and policymakers to improve the research conducted at public schools. The first concern stems from the determination of who shoulders the responsibility for coding the behavior. The second regards the process of ensuring the coder's accuracy. In the state of Texas, each school must have a campus behavior coordinator (Designation of Campus Behavior Coordinator Act of 2015; The Attorney General of Texas, 2013) to serve as the primary contact for handling, reporting, and overseeing the consequences of student misconduct; however, the responsibility for the process of selection for this position and the subsequent training falls entirely to the individual districts or campuses. Further, there are no state mandated procedures for checking the coordinators' accuracy in discriminating the different categories for coding student behaviors. Improving the transparency and training of administrative teams to reliably collect student misconduct data would improve the prospects of utilizing the data to test for changes in student behavior and school climate.

CONCLUSION

The present study serves as a preliminary investigation of a TR intervention implemented by two east Texas public elementary schools. Researchers assisted the schools by analyzing the misconduct data collected by administrators to determine if the data was appropriate for measuring the effectiveness of the interventions. As highlighted by Thomas et al. (2019), there is a lack of school-wide data collected with regards to TR interventions and misconduct data shows promise in addressing the empirical gap. However, as was the case with past research (Hawken et al., 2007; Martella et al., 2010; Putnam et al., 2003), the data collected by the school was not deemed suitable for use as a dependent variable to test the interventions' effectiveness. Future research should be directed toward understanding both under and overreporting of student misconduct from the perspective of teachers. Additionally, policymakers (particularly in Texas) should consider moving toward more standardized reporting of student misconduct in public schools to enable this data to be used more broadly in research settings.

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