Understanding Trauma-Exposed Students:

How Educators Can Better Support This Growing Population

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August 2021

Introduction

Trauma can be defined as a "...response to a negative event or series of events that surpasses a childs ordinary adaptive skills…" (Terr, 1991, pg. 10). It is estimated that 68% of youth have experienced some form of trauma that manifests through various behaviors during their school-aged years (Korinek, 2020). This would mean in a school of 2,000, more than 1,300 individuals would be displaying some behavior due to a past trauma(s). It is important to acknowledge that trauma can take many forms and equally just as important to understand that a child's development may be directly affected by the type of trauma the child has been exposed to. Some examples of trauma are as follows: neglect, loss, verbal or physical abuse, having a mental or physical challenge, witnessing an act of violence, and/or being the victim of an assault. Over the past few decades, trauma coupled with its influence on mental health and its impact on educational development, have become an increasingly researched and studied topic. Communities across the globe have looked to educators to continuously provide safe and supportive environments for all students, more specifically for those who have been trauma-exposed. In consideration of this, districts have worked diligently to provide educational outlets that expand educators' knowledge on the subject of mental health and how to be on alert to spot characteristics of students who may be internalizing or externalizing their struggles. Through training, schools hope to implement multi-tiered systems of support, which work to "...[foster] students' social-emotional well-being and competence…" (Korinek, 2020, para. 10).

Problem

Although many schools continue to mandate training for all personnel, it is still argued that these programs are not adequately funded and researched thus causing educators to respond using retaliatory approaches rather than educational practices that are more inclusive (Berger &

Martin, 2020). Trauma may have a profound effect on youth and heavily impact their social abilities, rationale, sense of self, brain development, and educational performance. As professionals in the field of education, it is critical that we can identify how trauma may manifest itself through behaviors we may see in the classroom and that we continuously work to properly implement practices that better support these young adults and create a safe environment.

Purpose

With the rate of suicide growing temendously with each given year, it is essential that our educational system incorporates strategies, programs, and interventions that focus on the well-being of all students and assist in changing this statistic. Through the exploration of various perspectives and ideas on the subjects of trauma, school performance, and effective trauma-informed practices, this study will answer the question: *how does trauma manifests itself within the school setting and which informed practices should be implemented to better support this population?* By using the mixed-methods approach, the research seeks to discuss a childs' development and how it may be directly affected by the type of trauma he/she is or has been exposed to. It also seeks to understand trauma-exposed youth, the importance of student's voices, how educators can better respond to those affected by trauma, and further discover what steps in professional development should be taken so that schools can be proactive in incorporating effective informed practices.

Literature Review

In knowing that childhood trauma is associated "...with an increased risk of cognitive, academic, social, emotional and behavioral issues for affected children and adolescents…" , it is necessary that all professionals in the field of education are educated on these subjects (Berger & Martin, 2020, pg. 223). Studies have alluded to the idea that these trauma-exposed students

respond well to informed practices and interventions. (Dombo & Sabatino, 2019) suggest that the first step educators can take is making adjustments at an environmental level, specifically by creating a safe, balanced, and communicative space which incorporates tools that assist students in self-awareness and regulation. In light of the increased rate of mental illness, it is inevitable that educators will encounter struggling students. Through the incorporation of workable tools and practices into their classrooms, they can better promote students' well-being and abstain from further provoking these existing challenges (Korinek, 2020). This review aims to bring forth a clearer understanding of these claims by examining the various forms of trauma and how it affects students' school performance. This study will further evaluate the strategies educators can incorporate in their classrooms when educating trauma-exposed youth and examine students' perspectives on educational well being; and finally it will extensively discuss the influence professional development and training has on the effectiveness of practices and interventions.

Understanding Trauma Exposed Youth

Trauma takes on many forms and meanings to individuals, from stressors like divorce to being sexually assaulted or witnessing an act of violence; it affects a person's mind, body, and soul. Many youth find solace within the school setting, which means that educators have an obligation to create a learning environment where students both thrive educationally and feel emotionally protected. Before these professionals can implement strategies and practices into their classrooms, they must develop and maintain a strong understanding on the subject of traumas, the tendencies of these exposed students, and their needs.

The *Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration* defines trauma as the "...results from an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or threatening and that has lasting adverse effects

on the individuals...physically, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being" (Baroni, 2014, pg. 58). As mentioned, trauma itself can take on many forms and definitions including "complex traumas," defined as "multiple or chronic and prolonged developmentally adverse traumatic events" and something rooted in early life experiences (Baroni, 2014, pg. 58). Some examples of complex traumas include: emotional abuse, medical neglect, or witnessing rape of a family member. It is suggested that 15-30% of students struggle with mental health, with these figures rising to 50% among those who come from socioeconomically disadvantaged areas. Further studies have shown that 68% of children who have been exposed to trauma are more likely to display negative behaviors due to their mental health challenges during their school-aged years (Korinek, 2020). Educational success requires discipline, outside support, self-awareness, and other accessibilities that trauma-exposed youth struggle to obtain and maintain. These experiences can "...impair youths' ability to pay attention, establish appropriate boundaries, cognitively process information...control anger, aggression, and other impulses…" which may result in lower GPA's, absences, suspensions, and expulsions, putting these individuals at a higher risk for substance abuse, delinquent behaviors, and lower educational attainment (Baroni, 2014, pg. 59).

It is equally as important for educators to be made aware of the varying characteristics and behaviors of these struggling students so they may offer efficient guidance. (Korinek, 2020) identifies two major strands of behaviors: externalizing and internalizing. Externalizing behaviors can be classified as observable, meaning actions that you would witness. These actions could be anything from disruption to physical or verbal aggression, like stomping feet or slamming a book. Internalizing conditions are non-observable meaning they might be more challenging to catch. These behaviors can be anything from seeming fearful or reacting to

something in an atypical manner; withdrawing from tasks, avoidance, difficulty concentrating, excessive crying...etc. It is critical for all educators to collect data on these tendencies and remain vigilant in their observations, ensuring they take the steps necessary to foster their students' well-being.

Students' Voices and Responding to Those Affected By Trauma

Before schools can incorporate programs that reach this population, they must lay the proper foundation to create an informed school environment. This can be achieved through extensive research, observations, interviews with both faculty and students, and trials. Baroni, Day, Somer, and West conducted a study that focused on trauma-exposed youth and that they have either experiences or witnessed in regards to externalizing and/or internalizing behaviors within the school setting and why these behaviors manifested. Between September 2012 and June 2013, the researchers sampled thirty-nine randomly selected female students between the ages of 14-18 years old, with "...44% of the participants [being] court involved due to juvenile delinquency…" but all having been exposed to one or more traumatic event or complex trauma (Baroni, 2014, pg. 60). Six focus groups were formed, with the goal being to understand their students' experiences and how these said experiences directly affected their education. Each group was presented with three specific open ended questions, which were as follows: (1) Describe behaviors you see in yourself or others that are displayed in the classroom/ on school grounds? (2) What kinds of experiences do you think the girls who have come to residential care have had that lead to these kinds of behaviors? and (3) If you were principal for a day, what advice would you give to teachers to work with students like yourself? (Baroni, 2014).

Through their research, they were able to collect 16 behaviors, 23 likely causes for these behaviors, and 7 prevalent themes, all identified by the participants. 38% of students observed

emotions triggered by anger while 30% observed aggressive actions. They attributed these behaviors to environmental influences and triggers, including certain words, phrases, music, or even something as simple as another student asking them about their family. Participants suggested that educators and all personnel encourage respect for others and "...improve their management of student behavior in order to enhance engagement of student learning" (Baroni, 2014, pg. 61-62). Through these findings and the voices of students, schools may discover important information that allows them to improve their trauma-informed methods and interventional strategies.

In knowing how events and behaviors both influence students ability to learn and work at their full potential, educators should be proactive in laying a foundation to create an informed classroom environment. (Dombo & Sabatino, 2019) explore three main areas that teachers can address in their classrooms: safety, connection, and emotional and behavioral regulation. They pose the initial question - what does safety look like? More specifically, what does safety look like for children and adolescents? It's fair to claim that all individuals who are exposed to trauma felt powerless, unsade, and perhaps violated at the time. When students enter their school grounds and take their seats in the classroom, they seek an environment that is free from these things. (Dombo & Sabatino, 2019) argue that educators must be aware of the various triggers aligned with trauma and remain curious if/when a child reacts strongly to some incidence or presence while in the classroom setting. They claim that these professionals themselves should have a focused and calming presence and respect boundaries and rights of all students. Further, they examine the power of connection and challenge educators to offer various opportunities for children to develop positive interactions with peers and adults. They ask that school personnel offer guidance on the subjects of self-awareness and regulation by providing tools and labels

around the classroom that assist students in practicing mindfulness. Implementing these procedures within the classroom may result in a healthier student population.

Professional Development and Incorporating Effective Trauma-Informed Practices and Interventions

Programs should be crafted to ultimately improve overall school climate and empower youth to create positive relationships, make safe choices, spark collaboration, and set both short and long term educational goals. PBIS or Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports "...provides an effective multi-tiered framework for incorporating the knowledge about childhood trauma into all established systems of SEB (Social- Emotional Behavioral) support, rather than focusing on trauma as a separate and...competing initiative…" (Eber, 2020, pg. 3). With over 27,000 US schools utilizing the PBIS multi-tiered systems (MTSS), it has truly become the leader of informed practices. The goal of this framework is to enact early preventional tools that respond to the specific needs of the child. With that in mind, research has indicated that the effectiveness of these programs is heavily reliant on the ongoing analysis, redefinement, and consultation of educators. (Eber, 2020) presents six research strategies that may strengthen the implementation of these methods and support these concerns. They begin by emphasizing the importance of including medical personnel and/or other trained professionals in the training of these topics, as they may be more equipped to instruct educators. Similarly, (Berger & Martin, 2020) argue that health experts and other medical professionals should be coaching school personnel on these subjects and expand on the data collected and determine how schools can effectively integrate practices and interventions. (Eber, 2020) continues by expressing the importance of data collection and how through continuous review of these findings, they may be able to detect the cause of trauma in their students. The third strategy

mentioned is the elimination of separate systems and integration of all screenings through one distinct system so as to shorten response time. The team further concludes that there should be a formal process enacted at each school that determines what evidence-based intervention they should follow and how they will select said intervention. By implementing this specific step, schools will allow for consistency across all personnel and eliminate some, if not most miscommunication and error. Before each intervention is chosen, (Eber, 2020) describes the importance of progress monitoring. This means that school personnel will administer surveys and conduct observations that represent the effectiveness of these practices.

In the Summer of 2015, McIntyre, Baker, and Overstreet conducted a study that evaluated a 2-day FFD (*Foundational Professional Development*) training, which was developed and delivered to enhance teacher knowledge of informed approaches. The study further examined "...whether growth in teacher knowledge was associated with teacher perceptions of acceptability of trauma-informed approaches and wherever perceived system fit moderated that relationship" (Baker, 2019, pg. 96). It was hypothesized that teachers would demonstrate significant knowledge growth from pre to post-training. After completing the 2-day professional development, the study revealed that 70% of the participants showed mastery performance and knowledge. These findings indicate that through the right training coupled with the increase of acceptability, knowledge can be obtained thus resulting in "...high quality implementation" of informed practices and interventions (Baker, 2019, pg. 100). Through these various explorations, studies, and strategies, schools can actively work to advance understanding, acceptability, and create opportunities all in association with trauma-informed practices.

Methodology: Mixed-Method Study

In knowing and studying the different methodologies, it was determined that the mixed-methods approach would be the best course of action. All participants in the study are to be enrolled between October 2021 and February 2022 at a local public middle school, which serves grades 7th and 8th. The school must have a history and must currently be incorporating trauma-informed practices and interventions across their campus and should be seeking to reduce behavioral challenges of students that lead to truancies and other disciplinary actions, all affecting school performance. The school must also strive to incorporate stronger training for all personnel and educate their students through various curriculums and programs all working towards supporting students' mental health and well-being. The participants in the study are 10 teachers of varying grades and subjects and 60 middle school students. These teachers should be implementing informed-practices and interventions within their classrooms and the students participating must be enrolled in one of their classes. The students range in ages 12 to 14 years old, with 50% (30 students) being trauma-exposed and 50% being non-trauma-exposed. Participants will be chosen subjectively through purposive sampling and informed consent will be provided to all participants before any procedures take place. Data will be collected through observations, surveys, behavioral reports, and progress monitoring.

Data collection will be completed through both the utilization of the quantitative and qualitative approaches, hence the reason why "mixed-methods" was determined to be the best course of action. Before the training begins, the rate of truencies and behaviors between those trauma-exposed and those who are not will be collected. 50% of the 10 educators participating in the study will be randomly selected to attend an extensive 2-day long training on the subjects of trauma, informed practices, and interventions. The training will discuss a one-system approach,

meaning it will be determined which evidence-based intervention should be integrated across all classrooms, ultimately allowing for consistency and marginalizing the room for error. Those who attend training will implement these new strategies within their classrooms and those who did not attend, will continue their normal routine. Over the course of the following 60-days, the rate of truancies and behaviors will be re-collected from both classrooms implementing the new program and those who are not. The results will then be compared to one another and to the previously collected pre-training data. To further analyze this data, the T-test will be utilized. This will allow for the two groups to be compared to one another and determine if the training helped the population or if it showed no improvement. The two groups being compared will be the treatment group or those who are in the classrooms of the teachers in attendance of the said training and the control group or those who are students in the classrooms of the teachers who did not attend. More specifically, the dependent T-test will be used to compare the same group of trauma-exposed youth at two separate times, pre and post training. Both tests will be using the $p<.01$ level to determine the significance of the results and if they exceed critical value.

Simultaneously, interviews will be conducted with all 10 teachers. They will be asked to make clear observations of their students, discuss their goals for their classroom, and the effectiveness or lack thereof of their current practices. Over a 30-day period, scheduled and unscheduled observations of all 10 classrooms will be conducted and recorded. During this allotted time, 6 students, 3 trauma-exposed and 3 not exposed from each of the 10 classrooms will be interviewed. Students will be asked six open-ended questions: (1) Please share your story and your experience(s) with trauma (2) Please share your educational experience, has your trauma influenced your school performance, why or why not? (3) What triggers you while inside of the classroom? (4) What practices, interventions, and/or outlets does your teacher provide in

the classroom? (5) Do these practices work in any way to support you emotionally/behaviorally, or do they need to be changed? (6) What are your needs educationally and how do you believe these needs can be met? After all observations, interviews, and the training is completed, the classrooms will be observed for a second time, but over the course of 60-days. Once the post-training observations are completed, interviews with the teachers who attended the training and their 6 students will be independently conducted. Surveys with "yes" or "no" questions will be supplied per each student and educators will be asked to utilize progress monitoring to observe the effectiveness of these new practices. All results and findings will be compared to one another and compared to the quantitative data that has already been collected. Triangulation will be tested to discover if educators and students report similar feelings before and after the study. By using multiple students from two different populations and educators who are using the new program and those who are not, diversity in the data should be revealed. These comparisons will help further identify patterns, similar and/or contrasting opinions. The results of this study will assist schools in determining how to conduct future facility training, identify the needs of their students and how to support trauma-exposed youth within the classroom, and the overall effectiveness of informed practices.

Although there are many strengths in the study, the sample size, which verges on smaller, can be seen as a limitation. In using a smaller sample, the opinions of these teachers and students within a 600+ student body, may not accurately represent the opinions of the larger population. Further research on the different types of informed practices may be helpful in conducting future research. This may welcome the idea of concurrently running multiple studies featuring varying informed approaches, allowing for researchers to determine which practice has the greatest impact campus-wide. It is also important to note the potential threats to the validity and

reliability of the study. The researcher must self-check their own biases and actively work to remain objective, despite their own beliefs. This will be most critical during the classroom observations. If these biases are not taken into consideration, they may subconsciously influence the findings. It is equally important that the researcher documents all interviews accurately, as to not tamper, add or displace words. This may be better avoided through the use of video or audio recording and/or asking the interviewees to write their thoughts and opinions down. Further, the researcher must not impose their own meanings on anything they observe, read, or collect. This is one of the many reasons why open-ended questions are necessary to the study and its accuracy. It is vital that researchers engage with other researchers to reduce bias and ensure interpretations of data are transparent, measurements are reliable, and that sufficient analysis is offered.

Reflection

Methodology and research design are crucial in determining the value of the analysis and findings. The mixed-methods approach is appropriate in fulfilling the aim of the study and allows for the researchers to assess the data collected in greater depth. In answering the research question in its entirety, the researchers must approach it from more than one angel. It is critical to present all findings both numerically, as the numbers will speak for themselves and non-numerically, as it is equally important to interpret all the data collected. Qualitative research is concerned with the subjective meaning of an experience to an individual(s) and assists researchers in understanding the context in which people behave the way they may or may not do. However, it may lack facts about a topic and fall short in confirming or testing a researcher's theory. Quantitative research is concerned with testing or confirming themes through numbers and/or patterns but may lack in interpretation and understanding of concepts and data. Using the

combination of the two methods improves evaluation by ensuring the limitations of one approach are balanced by the other approaches strengths.

With the rate of suicide and mental illness growing tremendously, it is essential that our educational system incorporates strategies, programs, interventions, and outlets that focus on supporting this struggling population and their well-being. The study dissects multiple topics on the basis of trauma and confronts the theory that informed-practices are critical to implement across campuses. Although many schools mandate training for all personnel, the lack of research, effective education, and data collection have posed challenges in how to enact the correct practices within the classroom. With this in mind, the study also discusses the importance of testing these theories directly within the classroom setting by using a one-system approach. It further incorporates the use of interviews with both students inside and outside of this population, and with educators. In combining these approaches within the given study, future researchers may be closer to understanding the needs of all personnel and which procedures produce positive results.

It should be noted that there are various challenges in designing a research study that is both presently useful and useful for future research. First, it may be demanding to find students willing to participate in a study that reveals their pain and trauma(s). When working with young students it is important to approach them in a delicate and respectful way. Phrasing the study in such a way allows them to feel heard and reassured that their voices are what will guide the trajectory of the research. Another challenge may be that the qualitative data and quantitative data do not align. Meaning, the statistical results post-study may reveal one thing but the feedback of the individuals participating in the study may reveal another. The third challenge with the design of the research may be with the educators and how they could potentially tailor

the new practices and procedures to fit their narrative. It will be critical that the researchers thoughtfully observe the educators in real-time, as they implement the approaches into their curriculum. If educators tailor it in such a way, it may defeat the overall purpose of the study and infringe on its results.

As a graduate student obtaining my Master's in School Counseling, the subject of trauma and mental health is one that will forever be relevant to my profession. Beyond gaining a newfound respect for researchers and the complexities behind research design, I have developed a better understanding on how critical it will be to my position to provide school personnel with effective professional training on these topics and encourage them to integrate it into their daily curriculum. I learned how delicate the process is in choosing a topic, methodology, resources, designing the research itself, and weighing the limitations and strengths of that research. I believe with anything, adjustments and prioritizing various factors within the process of collecting the data would need to occur so that the results of the study can be clearly interpreted and built upon. I feel this experience has furthered my knowledge in the field of trauma-exposed youth and informed-practices, and will be beneficial for me as I continue to embark on my own educational journey.

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