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Teacher Perspectives of Professional Development Needs on Trauma-informed Practices

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Teacher Perspectives of Professional Development Needs on Trauma-informed Practices

Abstract

Trauma-informed approaches and practices are becoming increasingly more common in schools. The lack of standardized content of trauma-informed practices presents challenges for schools and school districts on deciding both what content to provide and how to provide it. This study reviews the *Culturally Responsive, Trauma-informed Educator Identity* framework, as well as a framework for effective professional development, by surveying in-service teachers enrolled in a master's program on trauma-informed practices who describe their professional development needs.

Keywords

trauma-informed practices, professional development

Trauma-informed approaches and practices have grown in momentum in schools and school districts (Cole et al., 2013; Avery et al., 2021) to address the social, emotional, cognitive, and brain development issues that students can experience as a result from exposure to trauma (Raby et al., 2019; Thomas et al., 2019). For example, self-regulation and executive functioning can be adversely impacted, with challenges in identifying and regulating emotional states, as well as interpreting cues (Blaustein & Kinniburgh, 2019). Furthermore, trauma can result in challenges with language development, problem solving, sustained attention, and abstract reasoning (2019). Through employing trauma-informed practices, educators can help support students who have experienced trauma (Wiest-Stevenson & Lee, 2016). For example, in building relationships, educators can express care and expand opportunities for their students (Sethi & Scales, 2020); moreover, certain personnel, such as the school counselor, can attend to the social/emotional development challenges that are caused by trauma (American School Counselor Association, 2016). The support that schools can provide have been magnified by COVID-19, as there has been an increase in grief and loss, as well as possible risk for violence and abuse (Halladay Goldman et al., 2020).

Despite the role that schools can play in supporting students impacted by trauma, a standard framework for implementing trauma-informed practices in schools does not exist (Thomas et al., 2019). Not having a standard set of knowledge, skills, and practices presents challenges for schools and school districts for implementation. This issue is further compounded by the lack of training in trauma-informed practices teachers receive (Baweja et al., 2016). To address these issues, organizations have posited various system-wide frameworks to create trauma-informed schools (e.g., National Child Traumatic Stress Network, 2021) that are built on the systems of care framework developed by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (2014) whose core assumptions include realizing the widespread impact of trauma; recognizing the signs and symptoms of trauma; responding by fully integrating knowledge about trauma into policies, procedures, and practices; and seeking to actively resist re-traumatization.

Although there is ongoing work in refining systems-wide approaches, we argue that a trauma-informed framework is also needed for building capacity in educators, including specific knowledge and skills for implementation, at the individual level (see Figure 1). Moreover, as schools and school districts continue to implement trauma-informed approaches, it is important to understand both what content on trauma-informed practices is taught as well as how this information is delivered. This study explores a framework for trauma-informed practices for educators and a framework for professional development to describe what and how educators can learn most effectively about trauma-informed practices.

Figure 1

Knowledge and Skills of the Culturally Responsive, Trauma-informed Educator Identity Framework

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Social, emotional, cognitive, and physical impacts of trauma 2. Trauma-informed classroom and school-wide practices 3. Culturally responsive practices 4. Student and adult social-emotional learning practices 5. Understanding of your own identity and values 6. Practicing self-care 7. Engaging in ongoing critical reflection about your role in schools and in school systems 8. Restorative justice discipline practices 9. Family and community partnerships |
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The *Culturally Responsive, Trauma-informed Educator Identity* framework (Wells et al., in press) integrates existing systems of care frameworks from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (2014) and the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (2021), as well as aspects of teacher identity, which is defined as a “concept or analytical tool [that] examines how individuals, inside social contexts, construct and continually reconstruct understandings of and for themselves as teachers” (Olsen, 2012, p. 1122). The *Culturally Responsive, Trauma-informed Educator Identity* framework was developed from a systematic review of literature on trauma-informed practices in the school setting, as well as from document analysis of the aforementioned systems-level frameworks.

The first two components of the *Culturally Responsive, Trauma-informed Educator Identity* framework are knowledge of social, emotional, cognitive, and physical impacts of trauma as well as knowledge of trauma-informed classroom and school-wide practices. These primary topics encapsulate the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration’s (2014) assumptions and provide the foundation of understanding the impact of trauma and typical strategies that can be employed in the school setting. Moreover, a core aspect of our framework is culturally responsive practice, which includes a focus on student learning, cultural competence, and critical consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 2014). Integral is how cultural responsiveness affirms students’ backgrounds and experiences, as well as engages their cultural funds of knowledge, to foster a safe, supportive, and inclusive environment.

Next, our framework includes social emotional learning (SEL), as SEL helps students develop healthy identities, regulate their emotions, and build supportive relationships (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL], 2022). SEL can be taught as standalone lessons as well as embedded into the curriculum. In addition to student SEL practices, strategies must address adult SEL, which Woolf (n.d.) defines as the “process of helping educators build their expertise and skills to lead social and emotional learning initiatives” (para. 5). Adult SEL also includes self-care, another component of the *Culturally Responsive, Trauma-informed Educator Identity* framework, because educators can

be indirectly exposed to the trauma of students, families, and colleagues, placing them at risk for secondary traumatic stress or vicarious trauma (Hydon et al., 2015; Lawson et al., 2019); self-care practices help promote educator health and well-being (Thomas et al., 2019).

Moreover, a critical component of working with students exposed to trauma is reflecting on one's practice, as reflection promotes introspection into our own identity and values, and this introspection informs our responses to students and colleagues (National Child Traumatic Stress Network, Justice Consortium, Schools Committee, & Culture Consortium, 2017). Furthermore, introspection includes a reflection on social problems, recognizing that assumptions of social problems have ethical and practical consequences (D'Cruz et al., 2007).

Finally, the *Culturally Responsive, Trauma-informed Educator Identity* framework also integrates the National Child Traumatic Stress Network's (2021) components of school discipline and family and community partnerships at the individual educator level. Educators benefit from learning and implementing restorative justice approaches to discipline (Pavelka, 2013; Sedillo-Hamann, 2022), as well as building effective relationships with families and community partners (Smylie et al., 2020).

Professional Development Framework

Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) discuss an effective professional development framework and identify seven essential characteristics, including the following:

1. Is content focused,
2. Incorporates active learning utilizing adult learning theory,
3. Supports collaboration, typically in job-embedded contexts,
4. Uses models and modeling of effective practice,
5. Provides coaching and expert support,
6. Offers opportunities for feedback and reflection, and
7. Is of sustained duration. (p. 4)

Content focus refers to the professional development being job-embedded, situated in the specific district, school, or classroom contexts, as well as aligned with school and/or district priorities. Active learning supports "modeling the sought-after practices and constructing opportunities for teachers to analyze, try out, and reflect on the new strategies" (p. 7). Collaboration in professional development includes one-on-one, small group, and school-wide interactions, as well as working with professionals outside the school. Models and modeling of effective practice refer to showing educators examples of practices to help them establish a baseline vision of what works, such as demonstration lessons, case studies, or peer observations. Coaching and expert support come from experts, including educators themselves, who can "play this critical role by employing the types of professional learning strategies...such as modeling strong instructional practices or supporting group discussion and collaborative analysis" (p. 12). This support can also be in the form of one-on-one support in a teacher's classroom. Feedback and reflection are distinct practices where educators often "share both positive and constructive reactions to authentic instances of teacher practice" (p.

15). Lastly, sustained duration in professional development requires meaningful time and quality for learning that goes beyond one-time, episodic, or fragmented approaches. Together, these frameworks for trauma-informed practices and effective professional development underpin the current study.

Current Study

The goal of this study was to examine teacher perceptions and knowledge of learning and implementing trauma-informed practices. Data on teacher perspectives will help schools and school districts better understand the needs of teachers to provide tailored support and professional development. The following research question is addressed in this study: What best facilitates teachers' growth in learning and implementing the practices outlined in the *Culturally Responsive, Trauma-informed Educator Identity* framework?

A cross-sectional survey design (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019) was employed for data collection. Closed- and open-ended questionnaire items garnered perceptions of what is needed to support participants' professional growth and development in trauma-informed practices.

Method

Measure

Participants completed the *Teacher Perceptions and Knowledge of Trauma-Informed Practices* questionnaire designed for this study that was adapted from Wells et al.'s (in press) survey. The questionnaire includes nine rating scale items, 18 open-ended response items, and nine demographic items that contextualized participant perceptions and knowledge of trauma-informed practices. The nine rating scale items asked participants to rate the components of the *Culturally Responsive, Trauma-informed Educator Identity* framework. The 18 open-ended response items include nine items that asked, "What would best help to facilitate your growth in each of the following areas?" and nine items that asked, "Within each area, what is the most important component for educators to know for implementation?" For both questions, areas refer to the components of the *Culturally Responsive, Trauma-informed Educator Identity* framework.

Lastly, demographic items included work setting, years of experience, grade level, race/ethnicity, and gender. Work setting was defined by teachers' place of work, which included two categories: location (rural, suburban, or urban) and type (public, charter, private). Years of experience as a teacher was an open-ended response. Grade level categories were defined by where teachers worked: Early Childhood, Elementary School, K - 8th grade, Middle School/Junior High, High School, and All grades/K-12. Race was categorized as American Indian/Alaska Native, Asian, Black/African American, Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander, White, Two or More Races, Other, or Prefer Not to Say. Ethnicity asked whether participants identified as Hispanic, Latino, or of Spanish origin. Lastly, gender was categorized as Female, Male, Prefer to Self-describe, or Prefer Not to Say.

Recruitment and Procedure

This study received approval from the university's Institutional Review Board of the principal investigator (IRB#927). The university is a private institution located in an urban city in the South that offers both undergraduate and graduate degrees in education. We recruited participants from in-service teachers currently enrolled in a master's program in teacher leadership and trauma-informed practices at the principal investigator's home institution. To be eligible, participants must have been enrolled in one of two master's level courses in trauma-informed practices offered during the summer of 2021 at the time of taking the questionnaire. To recruit participants, we emailed all students enrolled in both summer courses. Email invitations included a description of the study and informed consent. Data were collected online via Qualtrics from June 2021 to July 2021. Participants were not compensated and could withdraw from the questionnaire at any time.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed in Microsoft Excel. Descriptive statistics were calculated for rating scale and demographic items. For open-ended data, content analysis (Krippendorff, 2018) was employed to code and analyze open-ended response items. To organize the open-ended data analysis process, we followed processes in Creswell and Guetterman (2019). First, we read each response to gain familiarity. Second, we divided the text into segments and labeled them with codes. Finally, we collapsed codes into categories and then themes. To improve validity, each researcher analyzed open-ended data separately before coming to a consensus on final categories.

Participants

There were 15 total participants out of 77 students enrolled in the two summer courses for a response rate of 19.5%. See Table 1 for participants' demographic characteristics.

Table 1
Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Characteristic	<i>n</i>	%
Cohort A (completing final course in master's program)	9	60
Cohort B (starting first course in master's program)	6	40
Gender		
Female	14	93
Male	1	7
Race		
White/Caucasian	15	100
Ethnicity		

Hispanic/Latino	1	7
Community setting		
Urban	9	60
Suburban	3	20
Rural	2	13
School type		
Public	12	80
Private	2	13
Charter	1	7
Employment location		
Elementary school	8	53
Middle school/junior high	3	20
Combined middle school/high school	2	13
High school	1	7
K - 8th grade	1	7

Note. Participants' average years of teaching experience was 7.6 ($n = 11$).

Results

Quantitative

Participants rated the importance of each component of the *Culturally Responsive, Trauma-informed Educator Identity* framework. All components were rated as important to varying degrees (see Table 2).

Table 2

Rating of the Culturally Responsive, Trauma-informed Educator Identity Framework

Component	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Knowledge of social, emotional, cognitive, and physical impacts of trauma	4.73	0.46
Trauma-informed classroom and school-wide practices or initiatives	4.87	0.35
Culturally responsive and sustaining practices	4.73	0.46
Student and adult social emotional learning practices	4.73	0.46
Understanding your own identity and values	4.73	0.59
Practicing self-care	4.53	0.64
Engaging in ongoing critical reflection about your role in your school and in school systems	4.6	0.51
Restorative justice discipline practices	4.6	0.51

Family and community partnerships	4.6	0.74
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Note. Participants rated components on a Likert scale (1 = not at all important to 5 = extremely important).

Qualitative

Analysis of participants' open-ended responses ("What would best help to facilitate your growth in each of the following areas?" and "Within each area, what is the most important component for educators to know for implementation?") resulted in three overarching categories: (1) ongoing professional development, (2) developing a plan with effective practices, and (3) reflection and collaboration.

Ongoing professional development. Across both cohorts, participants noted that additional training is needed for development and growth in the components of trauma-informed practices. Types of suggested activities varied, including book or case studies, hearing from experts, and more specialized training. For example, under *trauma-informed classroom and school-wide practices or initiatives*, where seven participants indicated ongoing professional development, one participant recommended "talks with experts (in-person, videos, Ted Talks)" and two others wanted a book or case study. Under *knowledge of social, emotional, cognitive, and physical impacts of trauma*, where ten participants indicated ongoing professional development, one who suggested "a book study, such as *Help for Billy*," whereas another wanted "additional professional trainings on neuroscience." Lastly, under *culturally responsive and sustaining practices*, where six participants indicated ongoing professional development, one participant suggested case studies, so that school staff could see "examples of schools who are thriving in this department [with] videos of what they've done."

Developing a plan with effective practices. Salient across all components of the *Culturally Responsive, Trauma-informed Educator Identity* framework was participants' recommendation of developing a plan for implementation. However, participants' ideas of which practices to highlight varied. For example, under *student and adult social emotional learning practices*, where five participants described a plan with practices, one participant recommended a plan that included "setting time aside in class to practice with students." Under *practicing self-care*, where nine participants described creating a plan, five of those mentioned they need time, such as one who stated they need "time and opportunity to practice specific strategies." Under *restorative justice discipline practices*, where six mentioned a plan with practices, one participant noted a practice of "building relationships with the students," while another described a practice of "teaching the class how restorative justice discipline practices will be part of classroom culture." Lastly, under *family and community partnerships*, where eight participants noted a plan with practices, one participant described a practice of holding "workshops for parents and others within the community," and another described a "plan for family and community activities and incorporat[ing] them into unit planning for authentic partnerships."

Reflection and collaboration. This category highlights participants' need for reflection and collaboration with stakeholders to implement trauma-informed

practices. Under *understanding of your own identity and values*, where eight participants described reflection, three participants noted that prompts/guided reflections would be helpful, as well as another participant who suggested “meeting with a partner and sharing reflections in a safe environment.” Furthermore, under *engaging in ongoing critical reflection about your role in school and in school systems*, to facilitate reflection and collaboration, participants recommended to “join or create a 'critical friend' group of colleagues who can discuss issues within a context of professional/personal development,” a second offered “an understanding of my place and the direction of the district, along with that they are willing to do to support progress,” and three others described having a coach/mentor.

Limitations

As this study was limited to one university in an urban Southern city, the sample does not represent the broader teacher population in the United States. Moreover, the small sample size and characteristics of our sample further reduce the study’s generalizability. Specifically, participants identified primarily as white females, and the average years of teaching experience was 7.6 years. Our participants are considered veteran teachers who have pursued a graduate degree to further their knowledge and skills; therefore, their professional development needs may not reflect the needs of the majority of the teaching force. To improve the validity of and extend our findings, replicating this study in larger schools or school districts where trauma-informed practices are already in place could help refine teachers’ ongoing needs to improve learning and implementation.

Discussion

Participants described the need for ongoing professional development, developing a plan with effective practices, and reflection and collaboration as key levers for improving their knowledge and skills for implementing trauma-informed practices. Effective professional development, as described by Darling-Hammond et al. (2017), consists of several characteristics that align with participants’ responses. The request for ongoing professional development is consistent with the need for professional development to be of sustained duration. Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) note that there is not a specific time or number of sessions to reach but rather that there be a focus on providing many opportunities for educators to engage in learning on particular concepts or practices. Within this ongoing learning, participants recommended different strategies that also are consistent with Darling-Hammond et al., including “uses models and modeling of effective practice” (e.g., a book study, such as *Help for Billy*; examples of schools who are thriving in this department) and “provides coaching and expert support” (e.g., talks with experts: in-person, videos, Ted Talks).

The prevalence of participants' desire for reflection and collaboration further reinforces characteristics of effective professional development, including “offers opportunities for feedback and reflection” and “supports collaboration,

typically in job-embedded contexts.” Participants described how it would be beneficial to engage in guided reflection activities, as well as being able to collaborate with others, including peers, mentors, or coaches, in working through challenging topics.

Lastly, participants outlined the need for developing an action plan with effective practices to facilitate implementation, which highlight the need for professional development to be “content focused” and “incorporates active learning.” Content focused ensures that an action plan is situated in the specific context of district, school, or classroom, as well as aligned with school and/or district priorities, whereas active learning includes opportunities for educators to analyze, try out, and reflect on those sought-after, effective practices within the plan.

Implications for Practice

Schools and school districts would benefit from ensuring that their professional development aligns with the seven characteristics outlined by Darling-Hammond et al. (2017). Participants in this study, who were all in-service teachers, described these characteristics as ways to meaningfully continue learning and implementing trauma-informed practices. Darling-Hammond et al.’s framework could be employed in the design process of new professional development, as well as in the evaluation process of existing training. Similarly, schools and school districts would benefit from employing the *Culturally Responsive, Trauma-informed Educator Identity* framework to design and evaluate their professional development on trauma-informed practices. This framework provides a comprehensive set of topics in trauma-informed practices for individual educator development.

Despite the potential utility of these frameworks, barriers to implementation may exist. For example, schools and school districts may not have experts in trauma-informed practices available among their staff. Subsequently, they may need to rely on outside experts to train employees, presenting a potential financial challenge. Additionally, there may be a lack of interest or buy-in from current staff on the usefulness or applicability of trauma-informed practices in their context. School leaders may need to focus first on increasing staff’s awareness of the impacts of trauma (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014), particularly within the local community, to build consensus on the value of trauma-informed practices in their schools.

Finally, future directions of this research include defining key standards or learning objectives within each component of the *Culturally Responsive, Trauma-informed Educator Identity* framework for ongoing implementation tracking and evaluation. For example, researchers could investigate how the framework applies in different school contexts (e.g., elementary, middle, or high school) to determine whether certain components are more applicable depending on grade level. This type of exploration could also help illuminate more specific strategies, policies, and practices that are most relevant based on grade level. For example, if there is an initiative to dedicate time within the school day to provide SEL lessons, morning meetings could be better suited for elementary students, while an advisory period

is best for secondary students. Expounding on each component of the framework based on grade level would further help schools and school districts to refine the training in trauma-informed practices they provide.

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