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Trauma Informed Learning in the Classroom: A Literature Review

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Trauma Informed Learning in the Classroom: A Literature Review

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Abstract

More than 3.1 million children a year are either abused or neglected (The State, 2022). During my student teaching this semester, I have seen first-hand the importance of trauma-informed learning in the classroom. How we teach our children has changed a lot throughout time, but change can be very important in making sure that students get the most out of their education and making sure that they can be productive members of society once they graduate and go out on their own. Trauma-informed learning is one big change happening in education. Trauma-informed learning is an understanding of how trauma can impact learning and behavior on the children in the classroom and how it can be used to help support students with trauma who may have a harder time in school. This literature review seeks to analyze how trauma-informed learning can help students in the classroom and to use this information to explain why it should be thoroughly taught within EDFN 220 Educational Psychology as well as how I believe it should be done.

By teaching trauma-informed learning early on in their degree, future teachers will better understand how to implement trauma-informed learning. By receiving an education about trauma-informed learning in college and not just once the teacher is being trained by a trauma-informed school, the teacher will go into job interviews already being trauma-informed and ready to help students as soon as they start.

Trauma Informed Learning in the Classroom: A Literature Review

Micere Keels (2021) said, “Behavior is the language of trauma. Children will show you before they tell you that they are in distress.” (Keels, 2021, para. 3). For this reason, it is very important to ensure that teachers know how to read into each student's behavior in order to see when students are showing signs of trauma. This literature review will cover how trauma affects students in the classroom, what trauma-informed learning does to help traumatized students, why it is so important that teachers are taught how to be trauma-informed in college, and know how to handle students who have trauma in the classroom.

There are different things that can cause trauma in people such as violence, death, abuse, and illness. Things that can cause trauma include witnessing and/or being involved in one or more of a broad range of traumatic experiences. Trauma affects children in many different ways and can result in symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder or PTSD (Frieze, 2015). According to Finkelhor (2013), “Almost 60 % of children either experience or witness some form of violence, often multiple times, and as many as 15 % experience six or more incidents in a year.” This means that it is possible that almost 60% of all children have symptoms of PTSD. The first ten years of life are very important to the development of a student. Early experiences and environmental influences can leave a lasting signature on the genetic predispositions that affect emerging brain architecture and long-term health, meaning that anything that happens in childhood can leave a lasting impression on a person into their adult life (Shonkoff et al., 2012). As a student teacher looking to work with younger students (mostly kindergarten and first

grade), this is such an important topic in education that needs to be taught to more educators to prepare them to be able to help their future students.

How Childhood Trauma Affects Students

In order to see how trauma can affect students, it is important to understand child development, which all teachers learn about in educational psychology. After experiencing trauma, children often view themselves and the world differently, because they lose their ability to make sense of their experiences. Not only is their rational thinking altered, but their brain's emotions are also affected. Symptoms of trauma may sometimes include PTSD, anxiety, depressive symptoms, and dissociation (Frieze, 2015). It is important to understand that beginning prenatally and continuing throughout infancy (childhood and beyond), development is driven by both biology and ecology. We have learned that it is not a fact of nature vs nurture, but rather a mixture of both (Shonkoff et al., 2012). It is so important that teachers know and can recognize the signs that point to a student having trauma.

The National Scientific Council on the Developing Child has proposed a conceptual taxonomy made up of three types of stress responses in young children. These types of responses are positive, tolerable, and toxic. A positive stress response is brief and mild to moderate in magnitude and is associated with things such as the first day of school and getting a vaccine. This type of response is usually because there is a caring and responsive adult who helps the child cope with the stressor. A tolerable stress response is associated with an experience that presents a bigger threat to a child, such as a death of a family member or a divorce. Without proper support, these circumstances can lead to physiologic harm and long-term consequences for health and learning. The main characteristic that makes this form of stress response tolerable

is the way adult relationships facilitate the child's adaptive coping and a sense of control. The third stress response is toxic stress. This can result from strong, frequent, or prolonged activation of the body's stress response systems in the absence of the buffering protection of a supportive, adult relationship. Examples of this are child abuse or neglect. The main characteristic of this stress response is changes in a child's body and brain that can cause later issues in learning and behavior and it is possible that it is the root of chronic, stress-related physical and mental illness (Shonkoff et al., 2012). It is important that teachers know these three types of stress responses because it can help a teacher understand why their students may be acting in unusual ways. By knowing these types of stressors and what a child needs in order to cope with that type of stressor, a teacher can better help the students in their classroom and set them up for success later in life. By knowing what the students have experienced, it can lead the teacher to be more aware and more prepared to be a positive adult role model for the student. This in turn can restore trust with adults and facilitate healthy bonds.

Children in poverty are more likely to be exposed to abuse, loss, and violence. Therefore, they may be more reactive to stressors and less likely to possess behavioral and emotional regulation skills. Exposure to trauma and stress over time can become toxic and harmful during child and adolescent development, which can contribute to physical and mental health issues later in life (Shonkoff et al., 2012). There are environmental adversities that can cause trauma in young children such as poverty, unsafe housing, and inconsistent or negligent caregiving. These environmental adversities can cause stress in young children and even infants (Blitz, 2016). Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs says that children whose physical needs are not met, will struggle to achieve their full potential (Frieze, 2015). It is a teacher's job to help students reach their full

potential, and without proper training and classes, teachers will not be able to help their students in ways that they may need.

What Trauma Informed Teaching Does For Students

One type of trauma-informed teaching is called culturally responsive pedagogy. A pedagogy is a method and practice of teaching. According to Blitz (2016), this pedagogy helps students learn how to locate problems in the context of social order instead of internalizing their problems. This means that students are taught how to look at the culture around them in order to identify problems instead of blaming themselves. The goal of culturally responsive pedagogy is to teach students how to understand, and challenge, social injustice. This pedagogy may not directly address trauma, but by addressing the chronic stress that can be associated with students living in poverty, students will be able to better understand themselves while promoting resiliency and student achievement (Blitz, 2016).

When a child develops PTSD and does not have any intervention, the severity of the symptoms can worsen which can negatively impact student learning and behavior. Researchers have studied programs that have been effective in supporting traumatized children. It has been shown in different studies, that when children are given support during times where they are exposed to trauma, they are able to overcome the responses that can be caused by this exposure (Frieze, 2015). Responses such as anxiety and depressive states can be seen to lower in the children after the supports are given. For example, in the Support for Students Exposed to Trauma program, teachers or school counselors engage with students who have been exposed to traumatic events in lessons designed to reduce symptoms of PTSD and depression. When measuring the outcomes of this program, a decrease in students symptoms was observed (Frieze,

2015). This study showed the importance of positive role models and encouraging interactions with students who have been exposed to a traumatic event.

Why it is Important for Teachers to Learn about Trauma Informed Learning in College

It is so important that teachers know how to implement trauma informed teaching at the beginning of the job. Teachers need to be taught how developing close relationships with students is important in order to identify and build upon their strengths and the strengths of their families and communities while using students' culture, ethnic heritage, and experiences of oppression as foundations for teaching and learning (Blitz, 2016). For example, when talking about culturally responsive pedagogy, teachers have to understand the impact of social oppression within the community that their students live in. Teachers have to use this understanding to come up with strategies for student engagement (Blitz, 2016). There is such an importance in trauma informed learning and the effects it can have on students. When students receive support through traumatic times, they are able to learn how to cope and begin to have a decrease in the symptoms of PTSD and depression (Frieze, 2015)

It is important that teachers know about the types of stressors that can occur in their students' lives, and what the students will need from an adult relationship based on these stressors. It is important to know what the students need because leaving students alone with these stressors with no support or coping strategies can cause later impairments in learning and behavior as well as be the roots of chronic, stress-related physical and mental illness (Shonkoff et al., 2012).

Teachers and classroom aides are in a position to teach coping skills, help build resilience, model emotional processing and problem solving, and establish psychological safety by the institution of consistent expectations and familiar routines. Teachers can deliver interventions that address mental health, including coping with trauma and toxic stress, which are caused by both prolonged adversity and the absence of a supportive network of adults who teach coping. Teacher-provided interventions can effectively improve self-esteem and coping skills, reduce student anxiety and depressive symptoms, and social difficulties in students (Blitz, 2016).

It is suggested that teachers increase their awareness and attention to students with trauma by referring them to school counselors, developing a professional awareness of the harm traumatic exposure can have on school achievement, and monitoring students for exposure to traumatic events (Frieze, 2015). While this suggestion is very helpful, it is unrealistic that teachers should take time out of their already busy schedules to know what to look for when increasing their awareness of their class. It is important that pre-service teachers are being told what to monitor when looking for signs of trauma within their classroom when they are attending classes in university. Without this instruction, teachers will have no idea what they are looking for in their students' behaviors or the teachers will misunderstand a situation and not provide the right guidance.

While it is important that teachers understand and use trauma-informed learning strategies for their students' academic achievement and mental health, it is just as important that teachers learn about trauma-informed teaching for their own mental health. Secondary trauma is an experience of caretakers who are in close proximity to and have relationships with others who

are experiencing trauma and toxic stress. This can happen to teachers who feel that they are not adequately equipped to help their students. Teachers may experience indicators of trauma such as negative intrusive thoughts, being distractible or “on edge,” and feeling hopeless about the possibility for change. Secondary trauma makes it crucial that teachers are taught how to incorporate trauma-informed approaches in the classroom so that they feel that they are appropriately equipped to help their students (Bitz, 2016).

How to Add Trauma Informed Learning

To Educational Psychology

While it is true that education majors learn about the types of trauma and how trauma can affect people, they do not learn nearly enough about trauma informed learning. While knowing about trauma can be very important as a teacher, simply knowing about it does nothing to help the students who will come into the classroom. Because of this I believe that there should be a unit about trauma informed learning embedded in educational psychology coursework within the education field. By adding a whole unit about trauma informed learning into educational psychology’s coursework, future teachers will be able to learn about what to look for in their students, how to address trauma in the classroom, trauma informed teaching strategies, and how their students' trauma can affect their own lives as well as their students.

This unit would begin by addressing what trauma is and how it can affect people. This is already covered in most psychology classes so this would not be anything different. After learning about the different types of trauma and how they can each affect children differently, it is important that teachers know that different types of trauma can affect a child in a different

way. For example, it can cause PTSD symptoms, attention problems, or cause a student to have lower cognitive functions than the students around them (Frieze, 2015).

Once a teacher knows what to look for in their students, it is important for teachers to know how their students' traumas may make the teacher themselves feel. Most people would assume that another person's trauma would not affect them in any way, but this is not true. As mentioned previously, caregivers of those who have trauma may begin to suffer from symptoms of trauma themselves, which is called secondary trauma. This can happen if they feel that they are not adequately equipped to help the person that they are caring for. It is important that teachers know that this may happen so that they are able to appropriately manage their own feelings and are not caught completely off guard.

The most important part of this unit is that the soon to be teachers will know what trauma informed learning is and how it can be implemented into the classroom. It is important to know about different types of trauma informed strategies because no one single strategy or practice will work with every student in every class. Buchanan (2017) defined trauma-informed practices as, "models of care and support provision that consider the prevalence of childhood trauma and its subsequent impacts on development, learning, and well-being"(pg 288).

Trauma-informed practices are a way to engage in aspects of counseling and education with an understanding of trauma and with a goal of creating a safe environment where students have choice, control, and empowerment. There are different types of trauma informed practices that include general trauma-informed approaches to providing support, trauma specific services like trauma assessment, psychoeducational programs, and trauma-focused interventions. Trauma

informed practices also include educating and empowering students and families by advocating for support on safety, support, and wellness at home (Buchanan, 2017).

Once the concept of trauma informed learning and trauma informed strategies is taught, the students will be given a case study with an example of a class and student(s) with trauma. This can either be a group project or individual. The class would go over the background information of the case. The background information about the students in the case study would then be used for a project about how to implement trauma informed learning in the classroom. The students of the psychology class will then be asked to write a paper on how they would implement trauma informed learning into that classroom and what trauma informed strategies would be used in this classroom. This will assess if the student understood trauma informed strategies enough to be able to properly plan and implement the strategies in the classroom within a specific class and situation.

How to Address Trauma Informed Learning

Outside of College

I believe a potential solution to addressing trauma in students would be to spread the awareness of trauma-informed learning. I believe one way to do this would be to make mandatory classes for teachers and school faculty about this matter. The curriculum could focus on how to identify and address any behaviors that are associated with trauma. I believe this curriculum could go far in helping students that are experiencing trauma because with the support of their teachers, classmates, and other school faculty, they will have a support system to build them up after a traumatic event.

Another potential solution I have is more access to resources for the parents through the schooling system. By offering parents the ability to address socioeconomic concerns (offering the opportunity to receive their GED, a school pantry to receive food, etc.), receive counseling for the loss of a family member, provide after school care, and supply an active parenting body that supports each other and can be a reliable social connection. I believe that these few changes could revolutionize the schooling system in the United States. The school system in the United States falls behind when it is compared to other countries according to PISA, the Programme for International Student Assessment. According to Desilver (2020), “One of the biggest cross-national tests is the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), which every three years measures reading ability, math and science literacy and other key skills among 15-year-olds in dozens of developed and developing countries. The most recent PISA results, from 2015, placed the U.S. an unimpressive 38th out of 71 countries in math and 24th in science. Among the 35 members of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, which sponsors the PISA initiative, the U.S. ranked 30th in math and 19th in science” (para. 2). While trauma cannot be completely avoided, as teachers it is our responsibility to notice, and guide students that are struggling in our classes. Any support we can provide to the parents who are also going through a rough time or traumatic experience would potentially benefit the student in our class.

Trauma Informed Learning in Ohio

According to the Ohio Department of Education (ODE), there is a continued commitment to monitor the students in schools for any signs of trauma-related effects. One of the main indicators of trauma occurring in students right now is absenteeism. There are a large number of

students missing classes. According to the ODE, “From 2020-2021 to 2021-2022, the statewide rate of students missing at least 10% of their instructional time due to absences increased by six percentage points to 30.2%. Chronic absenteeism has risen across nearly all grade levels, district types and student subgroups. In 2021-2022, the largest increases were in kindergarten and 12th grade. Students with disabilities and those from economically disadvantaged families also experienced substantially higher chronic absence rates” (Keeping, 2023, para. 1). This large gap in attendance is a sign of various factors interrupting the students’ education. There are many reasons why students have started missing classes including socioeconomic factors. If students cannot afford to arrive at the school, have clean clothes or a clean body, a lack of food at home, or the need to work to help support their families and maintain their household, they will be less likely to come to school. There are other factors that can be included such as having a prolonged sickness due to lack of proper care or access to medication, or having a parent or guardian that has a disability or has a chronic illness.

According to the CDC, “6 in 10 adults in the United States have a chronic illness and 4 in 10 have two or more chronic illnesses” (Centers, 2022). This is a major factor for students' absences in the classroom. As teachers who aimed to be trauma informed, we are pursuing to understand the importance of students’ lives outside the school just as much as in the school. It is unlikely that students will forget what is going on in their home just because they are in the school building. By being trauma-informed educators, there is a call to action for the teachers to step in as they can to provide accommodations and support for students that are going through this at home. We expect students to come in everyday ready to focus and learn as much as we

can teach them, when in reality, this is simply not the case. It is very important for educators to understand the effects that our expectations can have on the students.

The Ohio Department of Education (ODE) has tasked itself with ensuring that Ohio students are attending school. The ODE stated, “ The time a child spends in school is precious and should ensure all aspects of a child’s well-being are addressed, including the physical, social, emotional and intellectual aspects. Ensuring Ohio students are in school every day is a crucial first step” (Attendance, 2023). Knowing that the state’s department of education is taking these absences and that there are pushes for students to attend school seriously makes me feel better as a teacher. I believe that by implementing trauma informed learning, we can cut down on the absences that are affecting students and teachers. Now that there will be more support for educators, this lifts a load off of the educators because they are now seeing the support provided by the department of education and the positive effects that can occur.

How to Implement this in the Classroom

One way to implement trauma informed learning is to make it a part of the curriculum when teaching at the collegiate level by having a required class that discusses educational awareness of trauma informed learning into the curriculum. I think that by implementing the basis of trauma and how it can affect the students and their families, we could introduce a collaborative class with the psychology department that could focus on trauma and its effects that could be a general education class or a class specifically with the educational requirements. By having teachers be required to be educated in trauma and how it can affect the average student could impact the lives of many children.

If there was a collaboration between the psychology and education departments, there could be a psychology professor who specialized in trauma that could be the one to teach the education students about it. There are many facets to education that fit with psychology and they overlap together.

Discussion

As a student teacher, I have personally seen students in my class that are going through a traumatic time. As I've witnessed various events over the course of my classes, it has really hit home to me the importance of trauma-informed learning.

For example, one of my students came to school on numerous occasions with severe cases of lice. We tried bringing this to the parents' attention, but they sent her back quickly, without fully getting rid of the problem. Other students commented about it, along with numerous parents expressing their concern of the neglect that this student was facing. According to De Bellis and Zisk (2014), research is explaining how childhood traumas such as abuse, neglect, and extreme household dysfunction can alter children's physiological functioning, damage their developing immunologic, neurologic, emotional, and cognitive systems, and causes poor emotional and physical health (De Bellis 2014). This pushes the importance of intervening in childhood traumas as educators see trauma occurring. With the proper education regarding trauma informed learning, it will make it easier for educators to actively search for traumatized students.

Another student had been exhibiting anger issues and was lashing out at other students. I talked to him and learned more about him and I found out that he lived with his grandmother. I could easily know that something had happened with his parents and that there was a traumatic

event there that was then being projected into the classroom through his actions and his words to the other students. Because he was acting out by using a defense mechanism known as displacement, but his actions were affecting others in the classroom. Displacement was first identified by Anna Freud, a psychologist that focused on psychoanalysis and divided defense mechanisms up into categories. She described defense mechanisms as “unconscious resources used by the ego” (NCBI, 2023, para. 3) . My student demonstrated this by exhibiting violence when he was upset. With trauma-informed learning, there could be more resources available to him and his family, or more awareness could be spread to the teachers about why some students are acting out.

Seeing these cases in real life and getting first hand experience with these two past students, made me aware of the students' lives and what an important role that they play in the education that our students receive. I was able to see how their lives outside of school impacted their behavior and actions in the classroom.

These personal experiences plus some of my own experiences from childhood, which could have been made better by trauma informed learning, have hit home to me that I have not learned nearly enough about trauma and trauma informed learning as I feel that I should have. Without this knowledge I have felt useless in being able to help my students and be able to look out for their well being. I was not taught how to help students who have trauma other than that I should make my students feel safe.

I believe that by adding a whole unit about trauma-informed learning, I would have felt so much better about my ability to help children who are struggling with trauma at home. I would have known what behaviors to look for in my students and how to address it in class. By

giving education majors the tools needed for trauma-informed learning, they would be able to give children the best shot they can, while without those tools the students will continue to struggle and more teachers will begin to feel hopeless that they are unable to help their students.

In conclusion, by implementing an extra unit into educational psychology about trauma informed learning and trauma informed strategies, it will better the classroom environment for teachers and students alike. By being trauma informed, a teacher can build a healthy environment in the classroom where all of the students will feel safe. A trauma informed teacher can use their knowledge of trauma to build relationships with their students in order to make them feel safe and to help the students to build healthy coping mechanisms within the school environment. Students will feel supported and will be able to move forward from their traumatic experiences and teachers will feel like they are making a difference in their students' lives. While a teacher's job is to educate their students, it is also to help them get ready to become productive members of society, and if a student is struggling with trauma and does not feel safe, they are less likely to succeed in school. Without proper coping mechanisms and support systems a student will struggle in all aspects of their life. By being trauma informed, a teacher can help a student by giving them more than just the academic knowledge they need in order to move on to the next grade, but a lifetime of learning how to move through this crazy thing we call life.

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