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Addressing and Supporting Student Behaviors Related to Trauma through Social-Emotional Learning, Mindfulness, and Restorative Discipline

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Addressing and Supporting Student Behaviors Related to Trauma through Social-Emotional

Learning, Mindfulness, and Restorative Discipline

by

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Childhood Trauma

Childhood trauma is becoming increasingly prevalent in today's society. According to an infographic developed by the National Child Traumatic Stress Initiative ([NCTSI], 2015), by the age of 16, more than two-thirds of children have experienced at least one traumatic event. These events can include but not are limited to:

psychological, physical or sexual abuse, community or school violence, witnessing or experiencing domestic violence, national disasters or terrorism, commerical sexual exploitation, sudden or violent loss of a loved one, refugee or war experiences, military family-related stressors, physical or sexual assault, neglect, serious accidents or life-threatening illness, etc. (p.1).

Research has shown that trauma can have devastating and lifelong effects on children (NCTSI, 2015). According to the NCTSI, impacts of traumatic stress on children can lead to "learning problems, increased use of health and mental health services, increased involvement with the child welfare and juvenile justice systems, and long-term health problems" (NCTSI, 2015, p. 2). With the support of caring adults and appropriate services however, children who suffer trauma can recover and go on to lead happy and successful lives as adults. Educators and school personnel play an important role in this.

How adults respond to these children is key. Today's educators and school personnel must receive training on the "prevalence of adverse childhood experiences among our student population, the effects of toxic stress on the brain, and what that toxic stress looks like in terms of student behavior" (Davidson et al., 2015 , p. 9). In a school and classroom setting, trauma

often manifests itself through a child's behavior. An adult's response to that behavior is what is crucial in mitigating its long-term effects. Thus leads to the purpose of this study: *With the prevalence of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) in today's society, how can elementary educators best address and support student behaviors associated with trauma?*

This chapter includes a rationale for why this topic was chosen, the personal and professional experiences that led me here, and what I'm hoping to learn and be able to apply to my own classroom and school as a whole by conducting this research.

Influential Personal and Professional Experiences

I grew up in the stereotypical four person nuclear family - my two parents, younger brother and myself - in a suburb of the Twin Cities. Both my parents had successful jobs and worked outside the home. My brother and I both attended one of the top ranked school districts in the state. Most of my classmates and teachers were Caucasian, like myself. Many of my friends had family structures that were similar to my own, for the exception of one or two friends whose parents were separated or divorced. Adversities, like those mentioned earlier in this chapter, were not something I experienced.

It wasn't until my field experiences in college that I began discovering the diversity in upbringing and wide range of experiences that children bring into the classroom. One of the first things I noticed were the differences in social emotional skill sets among the students and their behavior. While some students needed no redirection, others needed a lot. While some students had self-regulation skills, others did not. I knew that behavior always had a root cause, however I was not aware (at the time) of how often the root cause is trauma-based. I remember overhearing, and participating in, a lot of conversations and discussions about students' home lives. This pattern continued throughout my first few years of teaching. A few years into my teaching

career, my colleagues and I did a book study and read *Lost at School: Why Our Kids with Behavioral Challenges are Falling Through the Cracks and How We Can Help Them* by Ross Greene (2008). It was then that I learned that trauma often manifests itself through a child's behavior, thus began my interest in trauma-informed practice.

According to Greene (2008), students with emotional behavioral challenges are often misunderstood and treated in ways that do not coincide with the root or underlying cause of the challenging behavior. It was through this book study and my own reflection that I vowed to dedicate myself to becoming a trauma-sensitive and trauma-informed educator. I promised myself that instead of taking behaviors at face-value, no matter how hard, I would focus my energy and attention on digging into the *why* of the behavior and learn to respond with an empathetic, relationship-based, restorative approach. I shifted my mindset from the idea that kids *choose* to do well to Greene's idea that kids do well if they have the necessary skills to do well. I began recognizing stressors, or what was getting in the way of my students doing well, and then worked to reduce and remove them.

The Need for Reform

My professional journey thus far has taught me a lot of things. One of the most significant of those is that many educators and school personnel do not carry this same mindset and that there is a pressing need for more schools and adults working in schools to provide trauma-informed care. According to Hopper et al. (2010):

> Trauma-informed care is a strengths-based framework that is grounded in an understanding of and responsiveness to the impact of trauma, that emphasizes physical, psychological, and emotional safety for both providers and survivors, and that creates opportunities for survivors to rebuild a sense of control and empowerment. (p. 1)

This approach contrasts with the all-too-common, punitive/exclusionary approach. This zero tolerance approach often leads students who have experienced high levels of trauma feeling unimportant and misunderstood. According to Luster (2018), exclusionary discipline can include harsh punitive measures such as suspension and expulsion and it can have devastating, long-term effects on children who have experienced trauma. While many schools still rely on exclusionary discipline, some schools have recognized its damaging effects and have shifted toward focusing their attention on social-emotional learning, positive behavioral interventions, and restorative practice.

While my current school has made some positive shifts in this direction, including the purchase of a social-emotional curriculum, bimonthly guidance classes, and the adoption of Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), I believe there is still a need for something more as suspensions are still too commonplace and fail to address the root and underlying cause of the behavior. It is too often that students return to school after a suspension and continue engaging in the same behavior that caused them to be suspended in the first place, thus indicating what we have been using isn't working and that the attention and focus needs to be on addressing and supporting the needs of our students. This is where trauma-informed care and interventions such as social-emotional learning, mindfulness, and restorative discipline come into play.

Many of my current and former students who have faced adversity struggle socially and emotionally. When a stressful situation is present, they will fight, flee, or freeze. This looks a variety of ways. Sometimes it is arguing and defiance, verbal aggression such as making threats, physical aggression such as throwing things or tipping desks or chairs, talking back, etc. Other times it is refusing to talk, looking away, shutting down, going under their desk, putting their

head down or their hood up, etc. It may also be physically moving away from the stressor, such as leaving the classroom or school building without permission, running, etc. Situations that are everyday typical situations to others can be extremely stressful for students who have experienced trauma. It is crucial that students are explicitly taught how to manage their emotions, especially those that have endured trauma as those skills are often compromised. This is where social-emotional learning and mindfulness come into play.

Restorative discipline is equally as important. According to *The School Leader's Guide to Restorative School Discipline*, restorative discipline is grounded in the following five principles: interpersonal relationships, personal dignity, mutual respect and understanding, restorative conferencing, and restitution (Evans & Meyer, 2012, p. 2-3). Benefits of trauma-informed care and restorative practice can go beyond just the classroom and lead to more trusting relationships. This is because the foundation of these practices lie within relationship building. Relationships are crucial to student success and healing students who have experienced trauma. Although to some educators this may be common sense, to many it is not. I believe that if all educators can adopt this mindset that our most vulnerable students will be more understood, more valued, feel more connected to their school community and therefore, be more successful.

The Role of School Staff

Throughout my teaching career thus far, I have had many students in my classroom who have endured more trauma in their short life than most adults ever will in their lifetime. Trauma such as physical, sexual, and emotional abuse, neglect, separated or divorced parents, incarcerated parents, etc. As educators and school personnel, it is our responsibility to step up to the plate and be the caring, supportive, and loving adults that these children need. Many have lost the ability to trust the adults in their life. Through a trauma-informed and restorative

approach, we have the power to rebuild their trust. Children with the most challenging behaviors are often the ones who need us the most. They are not the children who come to school to learn, they come to school to be loved, and we of course have the responsibility to do just that. This is difficult when we do not truly understand what they've been through and why they behave the way they do. It is extremely important for school staff to learn how to work with the most difficult behaviors in order to create a safe and secure learning environment in which all students can succeed.

I have always been a believer that children are placed in our classrooms for a reason. Having this mindset has helped me in a lot of ways. The most significant being when I see behaviors happening, I remind myself that there is a reason this child was placed in my classroom and that I have the responsibility and obligation to figure out what it is I was placed in their life to do (other than the obvious). Most of the time I always come back to the same answer: to be the caring, loving, and supportive adult that they may not otherwise have; an adult that truly understands them, values them, and connects with them; an adult that finds and removes barriers to help them succeed, that teaches them the skills they need in order to be successful. My number one priority every year when I have a new group of students is to build relationships and to truly get to know each of them as individuals. Doing so allows me to better meet their needs. With some students, this is an easy task. With others, often with our ones who are the most vulnerable, it can be extremely challenging. It is crucial we do not give up on these children even when they have walls and barriers up. I have had numerous very challenging students over the years and without a doubt, the single most impactful thing I ever did was learn to put relationships over anything else. I learned not to take their behavior personally and I learned to connect instead. This brings a particular child to mind. A year after having this child as a student

(a student who was particularly challenging and had experienced trauma), I was contacted by his mom because he wanted to see me. They drove about an hour each way, as did I, and we met up for lunch. It was within that moment, and moments since then, that I have realized the true power of connection.

When we truly understand our students, treat them with kindness and dignity, take an approach to their behavior that is empathetic and relationship-based, and teach them the skills needed in order to be successful, even our most vulnerable students will succeed, thus leading me back to the purpose of this study: *With the prevalence of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) in today's society, how can elementary educators address and support student behaviors associated with trauma?*

Summary

Chapter Two will address several different subtopics that will be important in understanding how elementary educators can develop a trauma-informed approach to addressing and supporting student behaviors associated with trauma including Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), Social-Emotional Learning (SEL), Mindfulness, and Restorative Discipline. Chapter Three will introduce a professional development project that was created as a product of this research and will include a detailed description of the project's intended audience, setting in which the project will take place, the timeline of the project, the framework/theory used to complete the project, as well as the project methods. The concluding chapter of this capstone, Chapter Four, will be a reflection of the capstone process and what was learned, possible implications and limitations of the project, as well as recommendations for future research projects.

CHAPTER TWO

Review of the Literature

This chapter will review the research on several different subtopics that are important in understanding how elementary educators can address and support student behaviors associated with trauma, or the question: *With the prevalence of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) in today's society, how can elementary educators best address and support student behaviors associated with trauma?* These will include: Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), Social-Emotional Learning (SEL), Mindfulness, and Restorative Discipline. First will be a review of ACEs.

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)

Prevalence

Adverse Childhood Experiences, commonly called ACEs, are traumatic events that occur before a child is 18 (Murphey & Sacks, 2019). According to a 2015-2017 study, approximately 61% of people have experienced at least one ACE, while around 16% of people have experienced four or more ACEs (Breedlove et al., 2020). The prevalence of ACEs suggest they are a critical public health issue that needs immediate attention (Murphey & Sacks, 2019). According to the 2016 National Survey of Children's Health (NSCH), economic hardship and divorce or separation of parents was the most common ACE reported at both the state and national level, among the adversities included in the survey. It was also found that adversities are not experienced equally between races. For example, the survey indicated that around 50% of Hispanic children and 60% of Black children have experienced at least one ACE, compared to only 40% of White children and approximately 20% of Asian children. These statistics held true in almost all regions of the U.S. Other recent research suggests that children living in lower

income homes or less safe neighborhoods, as well as children with special health needs are more likely to have ACEs than those who do not (Soleimanpour et al., 2017). This also holds true for children who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or questioning (LGBTQ) and those in the juvenile justice system.

Types

The original ACEs study, conducted between 1995-1997 by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention and Kaiser Permanente, measured several types of adverse childhood experiences including, "abuse and maltreatment (physical, sexual, and psychological), family dysfunction (mental illness, drug use, violence in the home), and loss of family members" (Capatosto, 2015, p. 3). Since the original study, these experiences have expanded to include, "social disadvantage (e.g., homelessness, economic hardship) and generational effects such as historical trauma" (Breedlove et al., 2020, p. 2). According to the Kirwan Institute (as cited in Capatosto, 2015), individuals experience trauma in a way that is context-dependent, meaning systems in which the traumatized individuals are a part of can either exacerbate or mitigate its effects. Trauma can also be passed through generations, through factors such as poverty.

Effects

Due to significant developmental changes that occur during childhood, adversity during these critical years can cause a disruption to normal development and pose many challenges (Capatosto, 2015). Research on ACEs has consistently found that there is an exposure-response relationship between the number of ACEs and the probability of social, emotional, academic, and physical challenges (Breedlove et al., 2020). For example, according to one study, children with four or more ACEs were more likely to have behavioral problems. In another study, 44% of youth with three or more ACEs had trouble staying calm and controlled, and 41% displayed high

externalizing behaviors (Soleimanpour et al., 2017). More specifically, research suggests that toxic levels of stress that children may experience through trauma, can lead to a change in brain structure (Murphey & Sacks, 2019).

The Brain. According to Murgia (2015), stress isn't always bad, however, when it becomes chronic, it can affect the size of the brain, its structure, and how it functions. Stress begins in the hypothalamus pituitary adrenal axis (HPA) and when the brain identifies a stressful situation, the HPA is triggered and releases a hormone called cortisol. Cortisol is what prepares your body for a response to the stress and research has shown that chronic stress can lead to high levels of it. Over long lengths of time, high levels of cortisol can lead to increased activity in the amygdala, or the part of the brain that deals with fear. As levels of cortisol increase, the hippocampus, or the part of the brain that deals with learning, memories, and stress control, begins to weaken, thus making it more difficult to control stress.

In short, when presented with danger, it is our body's natural defense to go into survival mode, thus triggering what is commonly referred to as the flight, fight, or freeze response (Souers & Hall, 2016). During this response, our body's objective is to escape the danger and return to a safe state as soon as possible. *Flight*, or to avoid or escape the danger, is usually our body's first response. When this fails, we turn to *fight*, and when the ability to process the situation becomes clouded, we *freeze*. Students who have faced adversity in their life often enter the survival mode when faced with stress in the classroom. This can look a variety of ways including withdrawing (flight), acting out (fight), or going numb (freezing). While the behaviors can be extremely disruptive to the classroom environment, their bodies are essentially responding in ways in which they have been trained to do in order to survive.

According to Perry et al. (1995), "children and infants use a variety of adaptive response patterns in the face of threat, and, in a use-dependent fashion, internalize aspects of these responses, organizing the developing brain" (p. 16). These response patterns include both hyperarousal (fight or flight) or dissociative (freeze). The more often the response pattern is used, the more internalized it becomes and the more likely the child will respond the same way to stressful situations in the future. This is why the flight, fight, and freeze response often just becomes a normal response for children who have experienced trauma.

Not only does chronic stress affect how the brain functions, it can also affect its size (Murgia, 2015). High levels of cortisol can cause the brain to decrease in size, lead to the loss of synaptic connections between neurons, and shrinking of the prefrontal cortex, or the part of the brain that regulates behaviors. High levels of cortisol can also lead to not as many new cells being made in the hippocampus.

A recent study showed that how a mother rat nurtured its baby was connected to how the baby rat responded to stress. The study found that the babies of nurturing mothers were *less* sensitive to stress compared to the babies of negligent mothers, who were found to be *more* sensitive to stress (Murgia, 2015). The difference between the two was the amount of cortisol receptors in the brain. The babies of the nurturing mothers developed *more* of these receptors, compared to the babies of the negligent mothers, thus lessening the intensity of the stress response. This is important as it indicates that certain factors in a child's life can either mitigate or exacerbate the effects of trauma. Another one of these factors is attachment.

Attachment. As defined by Howard (2013), attachment is a bonding that develops over time between a child and their caregiver and is the building block of a child's development (p. 19-20). When children need comfort and reassurance, they will seek this from their preferred

caregiver(s), most often being the parents of the child (Howard, 2013). According to Levy and Orlans (2014), "from birth to 3 years, children rely heavily on parents and caregivers to help them learn to control their emotions, impulses and behavior" (p. 93). In the event of stress, it is the parent or caregiver who protects and comforts the child until the child develops the ability to regulate themselves (Howard, 2013).

Unfortunately, exposure to trauma often disrupts healthy, early attachment experiences and the predictable response from a caregiver is no longer present (Howard, 2013). In an unhealthy attachment, the caregiver is no longer a sense of security for the child, thus leading to problems with emotional regulation and resilience. According to Howard (2013), "these types of early childhood experiences can lead to children becoming either disassociated and withdrawn or becoming hyper aroused, highly anxious and demanding" (p. 24). Tarullo and Gunnar (as cited in Levy & Orlans, 2014) state that trauma can lead to a dysregulated hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal hormonal system affecting emotional, behavioral, and cognitive responses. Contrastingly, the co-regulation that occurs within a healthy attachment can lead to more effective emotional management down the road and act as a buffer against any stress and trauma (Howard, 2013). In short, research has shown the importance and impact of a healthy bond between child and caregiver in mitigating the effects of childhood adversity.

In a classroom setting, children who have suffered from unhealthy attachments and trauma may exhibit a wide variety of behaviors, including both disinhibited and inhibited (Howard, 2013). Disinhibited, or hyperarousal behavior, may look like the child biting, kicking, spitting, punching, knocking over furniture, running from the classroom or school, yelling, etc. These children often have trouble expressing themselves through oral language. On the other

hand, inhibited, or hypoarousal behavior, may look like the child curling up under their desk, crying, sobbing, looking dazed and confused, etc.

While the outcomes for children with trauma backgrounds can seem disheartening, the brain has an incredibly plastic nature and can be rewired later in life with the right approaches (Howard, 2013). Schools and educators play an important role in this. This leads to the next section on the importance of social-emotional learning as an intervention for mitigating the negative effects of trauma.

Social-Emotional Learning (SEL)

Research has shown that there are certain protective factors that can lessen the negative effects of childhood trauma (Murphey & Sacks, 2019). One of the most important is that of a supportive, positive relationship with one or more adults in the child's life. This could be an adult in or out of the child's home. For example, it could be a child's teacher or another adult with whom the child interacts with at school. In addition to a supportive, positive relationship with an adult another important protective factor is a child's intrapersonal skills such as the ability to manage their emotions. By focusing on strengthening key social and emotional skills such as self-regulation, children *can* develop resilience. For the purpose of this paper, resiliency will be defined as the ability to adapt in the face of a difficult or stressful situation (LaBelle, 2019). There is clear evidence that children's resilience relies heavily on other people and systems in the child's life. Therefore, it is important that educational systems carefully plan and execute the appropriate services to support children who have experienced ACEs (Soleimanpour et al., 2017).

As defined by LaBelle (2019), "social-emotional learning is the process through which children and adults understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and

show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make positive decisions" (p. 1). SEL in the school setting can enhance children's ability to manage their emotions and behaviors (Paiva, 2019). This is especially important for children who have been exposed to adversity as their self-regulation skills are often compromised. The safe and secure nature of a classroom provides an excellent place for children to learn how to manage their emotions and develop self-regulation skills. Through SEL, children can be taught tools to cope with stress that is related to trauma thus leading to confidence when managing their own stressful situations.

It is important to note that most SEL programs are not designed to support students who have suffered from trauma (Pawlo et al., 2019). Like any approach used with students who have faced adversity, SEL programs must be trauma-informed and tailored specifically to meet the needs of that population. According to Pawlo et al. (2019), the difference between a typical SEL curriculum and trauma-informed SEL curriculum revolves around its intensity. Many common SEL curriculums fail to take into consideration the intensity of the trauma children have endured, as well as the intensity of the instruction that is required to support them. It is important to note that the social-emotional skills of traumatized individuals are often overpowered by the trauma or survival skill response. Operating in this constant state of fear has a significant impact on the ability to take in and process new information, thus, for an SEL program to be effective, it must be taken into account that some students may experience strong emotions that will interfere with their ability to process the new information.

The three key areas in which Pawlo et al. (2019) believes schools must address when it comes to trauma-informed SEL instruction are: creating a positive school climate, focusing on emotions, and planning for implementation.

Creating a Positive School Climate

The emotional stability of the adults in a school environment plays an important role in establishing a positive school climate (Pawlo et al., 2019). Many students who have faced adversity grew up with caregivers who were inconsistent in their caregiving. For these students, positive, supportive adult relationships in the school environment are especially important. Adults who are dysregulated themselves will have a hard time establishing these kinds of relationships, thus indicating the importance of teacher well-being in creating a positive school climate. Schools *must* support and take care of their teachers, in order for the teachers to effectively care for the children.

While a positive school climate may seem obvious, students who suffer from trauma need a climate that promotes a sense of safety and reduces fear (Pawlo et al., 2019). This can often be achieved with highly predictable routines and consistency according to Pawlo et al. (2019). According to Keels et al. (2017), highly predictable routines are important as they can counteract the lack of predictability and safety these students often face at home and can help prepare students for different parts of the day, know what to expect, aid in transitions, provide reminders and keep students calm. Consistency is important as it helps build trust between the student and adult and that adults can be seen as a source of safety. The idea of routines and consistency need to be on the forefront of all SEL programs in order to effectively support students who have faced adversity.

Lastly, trauma-informed SEL programs must focus on student strengths, rather than on their deficits (Pawlo et al., 2019). Many students who have suffered from trauma struggle with positive self-identity, therefore it is of extreme importance that SEL programs incorporate many opportunities for students to feel appreciated, understood, and valued members of the classroom

community. This often means offering ample extracurricular activities to these students as many of them may struggle academically.

Focusing on Emotions

Focusing on emotions is common with SEL, however, many SEL programs fail to address the idea that a student's background can often impede their receptiveness to such programs (Pawlo et al., 2019). Educators must be prepared for the level of intensity these students will bring, as well as the level of intensity it will take to teach them effectively. Teaching these students to recognize emotions will take a lot of work, but it is important that educators do not give up on it. For example, many students who have a trauma background operate in survival mode when a stressor is present and struggle to make informed decisions.

A study conducted on a group of 20-year-olds by Pollak (as cited in Kirk, 2017) found that the participants who experienced chronic stress as children had a hindered ability to consider risk and make healthy decisions as adults. For example, as part of the study, the participants engaged in a gambling simulation during which Pollak scanned their brain activity. Participants were given clues about the outcomes ahead of time. The results of the study found that those who had not experienced trauma as a child paid more attention to the clues and gambled more wisely than those who *had* experienced trauma.

Children who have endured trauma often operate in survival mode. According to Ly (2018), "when their internal state is focused solely on surviving, they do not have the capacity to focus on learning how to resolve their *own* emotional issues, much less those involving others" (p. 4). Because they are so used to reacting, they are unable to think properly through their emotions and situations that may present themselves. This directly impacts their ability to work through the steps of conflict resolution on their own. Thus it is crucial that decision-making skills

and conflict-resolution are explicitly taught within SEL programs and students are allowed

repeated practice (Pawlo et al., 2019).

Planning for Implementation

Implementation of a new program can prove difficult if there is any resistance by those

who are expected to implement it (Pawlo et al., 2019). There are a number of factors that can

play a role in this. For example, the responsible parties may be unaware of the program's

benefits. In terms of SEL programs, the educator might be unaware of the positive effects SEL

can have on students, or they might be uncomfortable with teaching it. They may also think this

responsibility falls on the parents of the students, or they may feel pressure to put academics

first. The continuous process of reform in schools may also bring on resistance by educators. In

short, schools must prepare for this resistance and dedicate the time, space, and resources for

their educators to familiarize themselves and become comfortable with a new program.

Acknowledging and addressing the idea that many educators are already feeling overworked and

overstressed will play an important role in this.

Conditions for Success. Research has shown that high quality implementation of SEL

programs has been linked to better student outcomes (Jones & Kahn, 2017). Below will be a

number of conditions schools must consider for such success. First and foremost, schools must

use a clear and consistent program and frequently monitor its impact. This will be an essential

part of successful implementation as it will help the school continuously improve its program to

better meet student needs.

Schools must also consider aligning the program to the needs of the students and ensuring

that it is developmentally and culturally appropriate for the population at hand (Jones & Kahn,

2017). For maximum benefits, the learning should be embedded across all settings and students should be given ample opportunities to practice the skills taught.

In addition, educators must receive adequate training. Without this support, many teachers will lack the confidence to deal with emotional and behavioral challenges (Jones & Kahn, 2017). On the other hand, when teachers *do* receive proper training, they often feel better equipped to deal with such challenges.

Lastly, teachers must receive support in developing their *own* social-emotional skills (Jones & Kahn, 2017). Adults who do not possess these skills will not adequately be able to teach children these skills. For example, according to Jones and Kahn (2017), "teachers with stronger social and emotional skills have more positive relationships with students, engage in more effective classroom management, and implement their students' social and emotional programming more effectively" (p. 11). The mindset of district leadership can also play a role in this. Jones and Kahn (2017) state that, "when principals and teachers who attempt to implement strategies and practices tied to social and emotional learning are well supported by their district leadership, they have better outcomes (p. 11). This indicates that leadership values play a significant role in the success of a program.

Benefits

According to the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (2012), effective SEL revolves around developing five core competencies. The five core competencies include: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL], 2012). The following outcomes have been associated with the five competencies: positive social behavior, fewer conduct problems, less emotional distress, and academic success. For example, a

meta-analysis of over 200 universal SEL programs used within a K-8 setting found that compared to the controls, students who participated in the SEL programs, had an 11-percentile-point gain on measures of social-emotional skills, attitudes, behaviors, and academic performance (Durlak et al., 2011).

Well-constructed SEL programs in the school setting have the power to foster resiliency and increase social and emotional skills (LaBelle, 2019). This leads back to the purpose of this study: *With the prevalence of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) in today's society, how can elementary educators best address and support student behaviors associated with trauma?* Social-emotional learning is just one of the ways schools can address and support student behaviors associated with trauma. The next section will discuss the idea of mindfulness as another intervention that schools can use in conjunction with SEL in supporting students with trauma.

Mindfulness

The idea of mindfulness dates back 2500 years ago as a traditional Buddhist practice. It has gained much popularity over the last 15 years, specifically in the West (Jennings et al., 2019). In common language, mindfulness can be described as "an increase in bodily awareness of internal or external stimuli and emotional states" (Langer et al., 2019, p. 36). It can also be described as a state "where one is not simply more attentive to life's experiences, but is also more accepting and non judgemental toward the inner and outer happenings of life" (Jennings et al., 2019, p. 4). This type of non judgemental perception has been linked to greater wellbeing and resilience (Langer et al., 2019).

Effects

Recent studies have shown that universal school-based interventions, such as mindfulness, have been effective in reducing internalizing and externalizing behaviors as well as general psychological distress in participants (Langer et al., 2019). One meta-analysis found that mindfulness-based intervention had small to moderate effects on the area of cognition, emotion, and behavior in participants. Results of mindfulness practice can generally be defined as top-down, or the idea that through routine and practice, increased cognitive ability can lead to better control of one's emotions. Less is known about the bottom-up process, or the idea of physical processes influencing one's emotions and thus affecting one's cognitive state, however, it is also important.

Effective mindfulness-based programs in schools can help students manage stress and deal with emotional challenges (Jennings et al., 2019). Recent research has shown that mindfulness programs can be effective in promoting executive functioning, and behavioral and emotional regulation skills. Each of these will be discussed below.

Executive Functioning. Often referred to as the building block of self-regulation, executive functioning as defined by Jennings et al. (2019), is the ability of shifting attention, impulse control, and retaining information despite distractions. Furthermore it is a, "set of interrelated cognitive abilities that enable goal-directed behavior" (p. 35). According to a study conducted by Quach et al. (as cited in Jennings et al., 2019), middle schoolers who engaged in mindfulness activities with a trained instructor for 45 minutes twice a week for 4 weeks fared far better on computerized working memory tasks compared to those in the control group. As indicated by teacher and parent reports in another study, second and third graders who were lower in executive functioning from the start showed greater improvement after meeting twice a

week over an 8-week period to engage in mindfulness practices, such as sitting meditation, than those who did not engage in the practices. These findings suggest that participation in the mindfulness programs helped improve overall executive functioning.

Behavioral Regulation. As defined by Jennings et al. (2019), behavior self-regulation can be defined as, "the ability to control behavior in the service of long-term goals" (p. 37). A study of approximately 120 kindergarten students who participated in a 6-week mindfulness program, in which they participated in mindfulness practices such as developing kind thoughts and mindful breathing, three times per week, found that those in the mindfulness group performed better on a Head-Toes-Knees-Shoulders task, than those in the control group. This finding suggests that participation in the mindfulness program improved behavioral regulation.

Emotional Regulation. Emotional regulation can be defined as the ability to recognize and control one's emotions. A study conducted in Baltimore of approximately 100 fourth and fifth graders, found that after participation in a 12-week mindfulness program (involving yoga, breathing techniques, etc.) participants had fewer "reactive" responses to stress, compared to the control group (Jennings et al., 2019). Another study found that participants in the mindfulness program used less negative coping strategies and showed an improvement in emotional arousal, coping strategies, and hostility compared to those who did not participate. These findings suggest that participation in mindfulness programs show hope for improving emotional regulation.

Implementation

Implementation of any new program can be challenging. It is important for schools who are looking at implementing a mindfulness program consider a variety of factors, such as facilitation, approach to delivery, and program structure (Jennings et al., 2019), as well as the

objectives of the program and how they align with school, state, or national standards (Irarrazaval, 2019).

      Facilitation. Schools must consider who will be facilitating the program as it can greatly alter the cost. While bringing in an outside person can lead to deeper student understanding due to extensive experience and training, it can also be very costly (Jennings et al., 2019). On the other hand, if a teacher delivers the program, it may be more cost effective and allow for more opportunities for modeling and reinforcement.

      Approach to Delivery. Schools must also determine what outcomes they would like to see and whether or not the program will be universal or targeted toward a certain group of students (Jennings et al., 2019). While universal programs may benefit a wider variety of students and increase the likelihood of sustainability over the long-term (Irarrazaval, 2019), targeted programs may have a stronger impact as they allow for more intentional design (Jennings et al., 2019). Schools can determine which route to take by considering what outcomes they are hoping to achieve with the program's implementation.

      Program structure. Research has shown that longer interventions, greater than 6 weeks, typically have more significant findings compared to those of shorter interventions (Irarrazaval, 2019). This also holds true for daily sessions, versus weekly sessions, when it comes to meditation practices. This suggests that it is important that schools consider the program and lesson duration, and devote time to its instruction. While it may come at the expense of academic instruction, a program that is more intensive may lead to more lasting effects, whereas a program that is frequent yet brief, may be more easily embedded into the school day allowing for teachers to still reach other instructional goals (Jennings et al., 2019). Each program structure has its costs and benefits and it is important a school weighs these prior to implementation. Research on these

costs and benefits can help schools make this decision. For example, while a frequent yet brief program may be easily integrated into the school day and allow for other instructional goals to be met, it may not be thorough enough to lead students to continue mindfulness practices after the completion of the program. Yet, these types of programs have still shown positive effects on self-regulation, thus suggesting that an intensive program may not be needed. According to Irrarazaval (2019), lessons as short as 15 minutes have shown positive results (p. 127). Because of the minimal time needed, this structure may be more widely accepted by teachers due to the demanding nature of the school day, however more research is needed when it comes to the effectiveness of different program structures (Jennings et al., 2019).

It is also important to consider the capabilities of children when considering a mindfulness program as many of the programs may be beyond what they are capable of and may require adaptation. These may include reduced practice, exercises that are more concrete, and more activities that include movement (Irrarazaval, 2019). Examples of appropriate activities include telling students to use a hula-hoop as a scanner, like that of a grocery store, when doing a body scan or giving a student a stuffed animal and instructing the student to put the stuffed animal to sleep with their breathing. When schools and educators adapt their mindfulness programs to the cognitive and emotional abilities of their students, *all* students can find success.

Teacher Role

Effective teaching entails many different skills. This goes beyond content and pedagogical skill and involves the disposition of the teacher and their ability to teach students basic social-emotional skills (Jennings et al., 2019). This section will discuss the importance of a "mindful teacher" or a teacher who is, "clear minded and aware (not distracted), calm bodied

(and not reactive), and kind-hearted (and not critical, coercive, or biased) in word and deed in interactions with students in the classroom" (Jennings et al., 2019, p. 108).

Mindfulness training for teachers is crucial when it comes to changes in teacher's mindfulness-related skills. According to Jennings et al. (2019), the learning obtained from mindfulness training can slowly transfer to the context of the classroom and change the way teacher's behave and interact with their students. This is significant as it shows the importance of training teachers in mindfulness and the impact it can have on the classroom.

The ability to stay calm and manage emotions is essential to effective teaching and can lead to stronger relationships with students and a more positive classroom environment (Jennings et al., 2019). The ability to manage a classroom is also important. An ongoing awareness of one's own classroom can lead to a strengthened ability to be proactive rather than reactive when it comes to addressing student behavior. Teachers who have clearly defined expectations for behavior and are able to respond quickly to any violation, in a firm, yet calm manner are generally more effective in managing student behavior compared to those who do not. This shows the importance of a teacher's mental clarity in the classroom.

Teacher-student relationships are essential for student success. A teacher's kindness influences the way they interact with their students and can have a profound effect on the ability to build relationships (Jennings et al., 2019). This is not always an easy task as students come to the classroom in a variety of states and with a diverse set of experiences. This can lead to challenges in the classroom and teachers responding to students in a coercive manner, thus showing the importance of teacher empathy and compassion and the awareness of students' social and emotional needs. Teachers must learn to approach students with an empathetic and compassionate nature.

In conclusion, mindfulness, when used in conjunction with social-emotional learning, can be an effective intervention for addressing and supporting student behavior associated with trauma, leading back to the purpose of this study: *With the prevalence of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) in today's society, how can elementary educators address and support student behaviors associated with trauma?* The next section will discuss exclusionary versus restorative discipline and the idea that schools consider turning to restorative discipline as it is a more trauma-sensitive and trauma-informed approach.

School Discipline

Punitive, or exclusionary discipline policies, are still widely used among U.S. schools. The values of these "zero tolerance" policies are as follows: controlling behavior, reducing symptoms, and punishing behavior (Capatosto, 2015). The focus of these policies are often on student deficits. This is opposed to a trauma-informed approach, whose values are: empowering students, increasing safety, and communicating. The focus of this approach, in contrast with punitive measures, is on student strengths, rather than on student deficits. Restorative discipline is related to the concept of restorative justice in the criminal justice system (Meyer & Evans, 2016). According to Meyer and Evans (2012), restorative practices in schools rely on five key principles including: interpersonal relationships, personal dignity, mutual respect and understanding, restorative conferencing, and restitution. In order to better support students who have faced adversity, it is important schools move away from punitive measures, such as suspension and expulsion, to a more trauma-informed approach such as restorative practice. The detrimental effects of exclusionary discipline, as well as the values and principles of trauma-informed care and restorative discipline will be described in further detail below.

Exclusionary Discipline

According to Gonzales (2012), "it has been consistently documented that punitive school discipline policies not only deprive students of educational opportunities, but fail to make schools safer places" (p. 2). Not only do these measures affect the overall school, they also affect the offender. For example, they often lead to future offenses by the offender and an increased likelihood of the offender entering the juvenile justice system. Furthermore, Martin and Loeber (as cited in Gonzales, 2012), found that frequent use of suspensions and expulsions that removed students from the school setting led to increased delinquency. They also found that it hindered educational progress, led to a continued cycle of failure, and was not effective for reducing problem behaviors.

Many schools who support this approach feel that it creates a safer school environment; however, research has found that this is not actually the case. A review of the use of exclusionary discipline policies conducted by the American Psychological Association in 2006 found no improvement in overall school safety (Gonzales, 2012). In fact, it was actually found that overall school safety satisfaction was *lower* in schools that used "push out" methods like suspension and expulsion. More significantly, "instead of promoting learning in a safe environment, zero tolerance policies promote an irrational climate of fear" (Gonzales, 2012, p. 17). This type of climate would only exacerbate the negative effects of trauma.

Trauma-Informed Care (TIC)

Control. The nature of control between the two approaches of discipline varies. While the zero tolerance approach focuses on the behaviors themselves, a restorative approach considers individual differences and context (Capatosto, 2015). This is opposed to a zero tolerance approach that usually elicits a standard response and fails to consider the context of a

situation or the idea that all students are unique. A restorative approach is one that empowers students to succeed.

Ownership. In a zero tolerance approach, a student's success is entirely attributed to the student, which fails to address a student's environment and the idea that it is outside of their realm of control (Capatosto, 2015). This contrasts with a trauma-informed approach where some of the ownership falls on that of teachers and school staff and their ability to consider barriers a student may be facing and work to reduce them.

Goals. While a zero-tolerance approach focuses on reducing symptoms, a trauma-informed approach has the mindset that meeting a child's basic needs should be the main concern (Capatosto, 2015). The goal of schools who take this approach is to focus on establishing a safe and secure learning environment.

Communication. Zero-tolerance approaches believe that taking an authoritative stance to student behavior will evoke student compliance, whereas a trauma-informed approach believes trust through positive communication is key (Capatosto, 2015). The idea behind this is once rapport is established between teacher and student, students may be more likely to make positive choices, sometimes in order to maintain the relationship. Another key aspect of this approach is teaching students how to communicate their emotional state without acting out.

Focus. While zero-tolerance relies on the idea that the focus should be on student deficits, or difficulties, and using interventions to fix the issues, a trauma-informed approach says the focus should be on building upon student strengths (Capatosto, 2015). According to Breedlove et al. (2020), "a strengths-based mindset, especially with students and families that have endured adversity or mental health issues is important for educators to utilize" (p. 13). Meyer and Evans (2016), note that children who display chronic behavior problems do have

strengths, however they are often overshadowed by negative factors which often leads to the child having a negative reputation within the school. This negative reputation can be carried with the child year to year, meaning particular children may start the school year with a teacher who already has a preconceived notion of them. When this happens, this puts the teacher at risk for blaming the problems on the child's deficits. This can then impact the teacher's mindset on their ability to make a difference in the life of the child. The way in which students are thought of and discussed is essential, so it is important educators are not only aware of their language, but work to reframe any use of deficit-focused language into a more strengths-based focus (Breedlove et al., 2020).

While both approaches focus on addressing student behavior, a trauma-informed approach is a much more comprehensive and effective approach (Capatosto, 2015). Research on social-emotional learning has found that it is profoundly connected to trauma-informed care, especially to the value of communication. Data from mindfulness programs have found that students who have participated in such programs had better outcomes in both social-emotional competence as well as resiliency. These are significant findings in that they show that trauma-informed approaches in the school setting may work to mitigate the negative effects of trauma. The next section will turn to the principles of restorative discipline.

Restorative Discipline

Restorative discipline as defined by Meyer and Evans (2016) is founded on the following five principles: interpersonal relationships, personal dignity, mutual respect and understanding, restorative conferencing, and restitution. Positive teacher-student relationships are key to restorative discipline. To achieve this, substantial effort must be made to avoid placing blame on anyone individual in a given situation. Adopting the idea that all students in the school

community belong, are valued, and have the right to be treated fairly is another key component of restorative discipline. Respect when it comes to each party's perspectives during a conflict is also important. The commitment to work together to resolve a conflict and make amends to the relationship if damaged also is key. Lastly, is a mutual agreement between all parties as to how to how the situation will be fixed. In other words, restorative discipline "emphasizes the importance of interconnectedness through building relationships and repairing relationships once harm has occurred" (Breedlove et al., 2020, p. 7).

School Climate. Restorative discipline relies heavily on a positive school climate (Meyer & Evans, 2016). Establishing a positive school climate is influenced and shaped by the following four aspects according to Meyer and Evans (2016): safety, pedagogy, relationships, and environment.

The quality of these aspects, especially safety and relationships, affect the restorative discipline approach (Meyer & Evans, 2016). A review of these aspects is essential in laying the groundwork for establishing restorative practices within a school.

Benefits. As opposed to exclusionary practices, studies have found that, "when schools approach discipline through responsive, reintegrated, and restorative mechanisms, they are more effective at maintaining safe communities" and by implementing restorative practices, "schools can promote stronger academic environments, which in turn improve school safety" (Gonzales, 2012, pp. 17-18). When school staff have high expectations for behavior, show they care and use fair disciplinary practices, students feel safer and more connected to their school communities. This is significant because it shows that restorative practices are needed in more schools in order to create safe environments where students feel safe, secure, and like they belong and matter.

Implementation. Successful implementation of restorative practices will require a shift in mindset. The values of the school community must be placed on developing relationships and connectedness rather than the promotion of suspensions and expulsions (Gonzales, 2012). This will require substantial time and effort, and more than likely will face some resistance. It is crucial that schools wishing to implement restorative discipline work to provide training to staff so that is well-understood. Without this work, staff may view it as yet another project to add to their already-full plate.

It is also important for schools to understand that this type of change will not happen overnight and accept that it will be a long-term project. According to Gonzales (2012), schools should expect implementation to take three to five years. The plan for implementation should include the following five key areas: commitment by key members, a clear vision of both short and long-term goals, responsive and effective practice, development of policies that align with restorative practice, and a continuous system put in place for growth and development.

In short, exclusionary practices have shown to be ineffective in reducing problematic behavior, and often lead to poor school climates. Restorative practices on the other hand have led to safer school environments, less problem behavior, and students who feel more valued and accepted. The latter of these environments is optimal in mitigating the negative effects of childhood trauma. In order to better support their students who have faced trauma, schools should consider adopting restorative practices.

Summary

The effects of trauma can seem disheartening. With the appropriate support and services, children who have experienced trauma can live happy and successful lives. Schools play an important role in this. When considering the question, *With the prevalence of Adverse Childhood*

Experiences (ACEs) in today's society, how can elementary educators best address and support

student behaviors associated with trauma?, schools can address and support these behaviors

through interventions such as social-emotional instruction and mindfulness practices, as well as

considering a shift towards restorative discipline.

The following chapter will outline the methodology used in the professional development

project related to this study. It will discuss the principles of adult learning, or how adults learn,

since the basis of the project will be teaching adults, particularly those who work in elementary

education settings, how best to address and support behaviors related to trauma.

CHAPTER THREE

Project Description

This chapter will provide a detailed description of a professional development project that was created to answer the research question: *With the prevalence of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) in today's society, how can elementary educators best address and support student behaviors associated with trauma?*

Overview

The purpose of this project was to create a series of professional development sessions for elementary staff. The information presented in the series is broken down into several different sessions to include: childhood trauma and its prevalence, its effects on the brain and implications for the classroom setting, and three different research-based interventions that can be used to best support students who have endured trauma.

This project was selected because of the prevalence of childhood trauma and the lack of training and resources available to equip teachers with the skills and tools necessary to address and support student behaviors associated with trauma. The project provides teachers with these necessary skills and tools so that they are better equipped and more effective in dealing with student behaviors related to trauma. It is based on the principles of adult learning which are outlined in this chapter.

Theory

The theory used to complete this project is based on the principles of adult learning according to the work of Knowles (as cited in Bright Morning, 2020). These principles include: in order to learn adults must feel safe; adults come to learning with past experiences; adults must know the purpose behind the learning; adults want their learning to be meaningful and relevant;

adults need time to practice what they learn; learning for adults should be problem-centered vs. subject-centered; and adults want to learn.

Each of these principles were considered when planning this project. For example, as the leader and facilitator of this project, I will provide a safe place for the learning to happen by showing up as a learner myself. This will address any power dynamic between myself and the learners. I will consider the past experiences of each learner by having each staff member complete a survey prior to engaging in the professional learning and use this information to shape the presentation. I will begin each session with a rationale behind why the learning of the session is important and how it will help them. I will give time during, after, and/or between each session for the learners to discuss their takeaways with one another and how they will apply their new learning to their classroom. These are just a few of the ways I considered Knowles principles of adult learning when planning this project.

Setting

The professional development sessions will take place in a public K-5 elementary school in a rural area. According to the school's report card, in the 2018-2019 school year, 258 students were enrolled in the school and 88% of the student population was white (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction [WI DPI], 2019). Approximately 54% of the student population was considered economically disadvantaged, 14% of the students had a disability and 47% of the student population was eligible for free or reduced lunch (WI DPI, 2019). According to a point-in-time collection in the 2015-2016 school year, in the school district the school is located in, 99% of the teachers were white and 77% were females (WI DPI, 2015).

Audience

The participants in this project are the teachers and staff at the school. They will benefit

from this project by gaining the necessary skills and tools in order to better support their students

who have experienced trauma. They will be better equipped, more confident, and more effective

in working with this particular population of students. The students in the school will also benefit

because the teachers and adults working with them will be more understanding, more

empathetic, and more knowledgeable as a result of the project.

Timeline

The project will be completed by May 2021 and implemented in the 2021-2022 school

year. Staff will take a pre-survey prior to the first session of the professional development (early

September). Sessions will begin in September and occur once every other month during the

school year, ending in May. A post-survey will be given to staff following the last session of

professional development (late May).

Description & Methods

Pre-Survey

A pre-survey was created using Google Forms and will be administered to staff prior to

engaging in the first session of professional development as a baseline for the facilitator. The

purpose of the survey will be to assess staff knowledge on ACEs and their level of comfortability

in addressing and supporting student behavior that is related to trauma. Staff will be asked three

questions. The first question will ask staff how familiar they are with ACEs and their effects on

students in the classroom. The second question will ask staff on a scale of 1-10 how comfortable

they feel in regards to addressing and supporting student behavior that is related to trauma (1

being not comfortable at all, to 10 being extremely comfortable). The third and final question

will ask staff which of the following supports they are familiar with (if any): social-emotional

learning, mindfulness, and restorative discipline as these will all be heavily covered within the

last three sessions of the professional development. The information from the survey will be used to help tweak the sessions so that they are tailored to staff needs. The survey was created using Google Forms and will be sent to staff via email at the beginning of the school year, prior to the first professional development session.

Professional Development

There are a total of five professional development sessions that will occur once every other month over the course of the school year beginning in September and ending in May. Each session will be 1-2 hours long and will cover the following topic areas: childhood trauma and its prevalence, its effects on the brain and implications for the classroom, as well three seperate research-based interventions used in supporting students with trauma. These interventions will include those researched as part of the literature review: social-emotional learning, mindfulness, and restorative discipline. Each session will include a Google Slides presentation as well as resources, handouts, small and large group discussion, and/or activities.

The goal of the first session will be to understand Adverse Childhood Experiences. The presentation will include an introduction to ACEs, statistics related to its prevalence, and examples/types. The session will begin with staff sharing in small groups what they know about ACEs. Results of the Wisconsin Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance Survey will also be shared, including the percentage of Wisconsin residents with ACEs, as well as their prevalence by household income and race/ethnicity. The session will end with staff discussing why they believe it is important they are aware of ACEs and their prevalence.

The goals of the second session will be to understand the effects of trauma, specifically those related to the brain, attachment, and regulation and the implications for the classroom setting. The session will begin with staff sharing in small groups what they know about the

effects of trauma and how those may impact a child in the classroom. The majority of the session will focus heavily on the idea that students impacted by trauma often operate in survival mode. Staff will learn about the flight, fight, and freeze responses and what these behaviors might look like in the classroom. A short video will be shown on how chronic stress affects the brain. Staff will discuss their takeaways from the video including how chronic stress affects the size of the brain, its structure, and how it functions as well as if there are any factors that can buffer against its negative effects. The session will end with staff discussing why they believe it is important that they are aware of the effects of ACEs.

The goals of the third through fifth sessions will be to focus on research-based interventions that can be used in addressing and supporting student behavior that is related to trauma. The first session will focus on social-emotional learning. The goals of the third session will be to understand what social-emotional learning is and how it can be effective in helping students who have been affected by trauma. Staff will learn about protective factors for ACEs, key components and core competencies of an effective trauma-informed SEL program, as well as the benefits of SEL. The session will begin with staff sharing in small groups their experience with social-emotional learning and its impact, especially with students who have suffered from trauma. The session will end with staff discussing the key differences between a typical SEL program and trauma-informed SEL program as well as what components of our current SEL program (2nd Step) are working well, where gaps might be, and how we can work to fill those. Staff will be introduced to a personal SEL reflection in which they can complete on their own time in order to assess their personal strengths and areas for growth in regards to social competence. Staff will also be introduced to a blog in which they can use to find lessons and activities that specifically focus on teaching emotions in the elementary classroom.

The fourth session will focus on mindfulness. Staff will learn what mindfulness is and how it can be effective in helping students who have been affected by trauma, especially when it is used in conjunction with other interventions, such as SEL. More specifically, they will learn about how mindfulness can improve executive functioning as well as behavioral and emotional regulation, all of which are often compromised by students affected by trauma. Staff will also learn about the teacher's role when it comes to mindfulness. The session will begin with staff discussing in small groups what they know about mindfulness and if they have ever used mindfulness with their students, what kind of impact they have seen, especially with students who have faced adversity. The session will end with staff discussing the benefits of mindfulness, how it can help students who have faced adversity, as well as the teacher's role. Staff will be introduced to two websites during the session (GoNoodle and Mind Yeti) in which they can use to engage their students in simple mindfulness activities. Staff will also be introduced to Dr. Dan Siegel's hand model of the brain, which can be taught to elementary students and used to promote emotional regulation. Finally, staff will be introduced to a blog that contains a list of additional mindfulness activities that can be used in the classroom such as yoga, breathing, focus tools, and children's books.

The last session will focus on restorative discipline. Staff will learn what restorative discipline is, how it differs from exclusionary discipline, and the benefits of the latter, especially when it comes to students who have faced a lot of trauma. Staff will be introduced to trauma-informed care (TIC) in this session and the five characteristics that vary greatly when it comes to the two types of discipline. These include: control, ownership, goals, communication and focus. The principles of restorative discipline will also be discussed: interpersonal relationships, personal dignity, mutual respect and understanding, restorative conferencing, and

restitution. This session will begin with staff discussing in small groups their knowledge in regards to restorative discipline and why this approach might be effective in supporting students who have faced adversity. The session will end with staff discussing the values/principles of restorative discipline and why it is important we move towards this approach in order to better support our students with trauma. Staff will be introduced to a restorative reflection in which they can complete on their own time to reflect on how they deal with students when an incident or issue has arisen. The results can be used to identify ways in which they can strengthen their communication skills and restorative approach in the classroom. Staff will also be introduced to a restorative script in which they can use to role-play a restorative conversation with a colleague. The script will allow them to practice the five steps of a restorative conversation including: telling the story, exploring the harm, repairing the harm, reaching an agreement, and planning a follow-up. Finally, staff will be introduced to a blog in which they can find easy ways to get started with implementing restorative practices in an elementary setting.

Post-Survey

To evaluate the effectiveness of the project, a post-survey was created using Google Forms and will be given to staff after engaging in the last session of the professional development. The purpose of this survey will be to see how their level of comfortability with addressing and supporting student behaviors related to trauma has changed due to the professional development. It will also be used to determine future staff development on the topic. Similar to the pre-survey, the post-survey will ask staff three questions. The first question will ask staff how knowledgeable they feel in regards to ACEs and their effects on students in the classroom compared to before the PD. The second question will ask staff to rate on a scale of 1-10 (1 being not comfortable at all, to 10 being extremely comfortable) how comfortable they

feel addressing and supporting student behavior that is related to trauma now that they have completed the PD. The last and final question will ask staff about their take-aways from the presentation and what they hope to implement in their classroom to better support their students with trauma.

Summary

This chapter discussed a project related to the research question: *With the prevalence of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) in today's society, how can elementary educators best address and support student behaviors associated with trauma?* Discussed in this chapter was a detailed description of the project including setting, audience, and timeline as well as the principles of adult learning by Knowles and how it relates to the project.

The next and final chapter will include major learnings from the literature review and project, as well as any limitations of the project and recommendations for future research and projects on this topic.

CHAPTER FOUR

Reflection

Childhood trauma is becoming increasingly prevalent in today's society and research has shown that it can have devastating and lifelong effects on children (NCTSI, 2015). With the support of caring adults and appropriate services however, children who suffer trauma can recover and go on to lead happy and successful lives as adults. Educators and school personnel play an important role in this thus leading back to my research question: *With the prevalence of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) in today's society, how can elementary educators best address and support student behaviors associated with trauma?*

This chapter is a reflection of my capstone journey. I will begin by reviewing the purpose of my project, discussing its implications and limitations and the sources that most influenced it. I will then move into recommendations I have for future research/projects. I will end with how I plan to share my project with others as well as how I believe it will benefit/contribute to the field of education as a whole.

Project Purpose

Throughout my review of the literature I learned about the importance of trauma-informed practices in mitigating the effects of childhood adversity. Today's educators and school personnel must receive training on the "prevalence of adverse childhood experiences among our student population, the effects of toxic stress on the brain, and what that toxic stress looks like in terms of student behavior" (Davidson et al., 2015 , p. 9). Due to the prevalence of childhood trauma and the lack of training and resources available to equip teachers with the skills and tools necessary to address and support student behaviors associated with trauma, this led me to the idea of creating professional development for use with elementary staff. The

purpose of the professional development is to provide teachers with an understanding of ACEs, its effects and implications in the classroom, as well as research-based trauma-informed interventions and approaches that have proven effective in dealing with student behavior that is related to trauma. These include: social-emotional learning, mindfulness, and restorative discipline.

Major Learnings

My capstone journey has been a real eye-opener for me. I learned that ACEs are a true public health crisis. According to an infographic developed by the National Child Traumatic Stress Initiative ([NCTSI], 2015), by the age of 16, more than two-thirds of children have experienced at least one traumatic event. While I was aware that these traumatic events can have devastating and lifelong effects on children, I was not aware to what extent. While the outcomes seemed rather disheartening at first, through my review of the literature I learned that the brain has an incredibly plastic nature and can be rewired later in life with the right approaches (Howard, 2013). As I continued my review of literature, I learned that schools play a large role in this. Some of these approaches include prioritizing social-emotional instruction, teaching students mindfulness, and implementing a discipline system that is restorative rather than punitive. The next three sections will cover highlights from the literature that influenced the information I included in my project.

Social-Emotional Learning

I found through my research that there are certain protective factors that can lessen the negative effects of childhood trauma (Murphey & Sacks, 2019). One of these is a child's intrapersonal skills such as the ability to manage their emotions. By focusing on strengthening key social and emotional skills such as self-regulation, children do have the ability to develop

resilience. A child's resilience relies heavily on other people and systems in the child's life so it is imperative that educational systems carefully plan and execute the appropriate services to support children who have experienced ACEs (Soleimanpour et al., 2017).

SEL in the school setting can enhance children's ability to manage their emotions and behaviors (Paiva, 2019). This is especially important for children who have been exposed to adversity as their self-regulation skills are often compromised. The safe and secure nature of a classroom provides an excellent place for children to learn how to manage their emotions and develop self-regulation skills. Through SEL, children can be taught tools to cope with stress that is related to trauma thus leading to confidence when managing their own stressful situations. It is important however that these programs are trauma-informed and tailored specifically to meet the needs of that population. I learned that schools must prepare for the intensity of instruction children with trauma backgrounds will require (Pawlo, 2019). They must also work to establish a positive school climate. Lastly, they must make sure the focus of the instruction is on emotions as the self-regulation skills of children who have been exposed to adversity are often compromised. When the above conditions are met, schools have the power to foster resiliency (LaBelle, 2019).

Mindfulness

The idea of mindfulness has also been linked to resiliency (Langer et al., 2019). Effective mindfulness-based programs in schools can help students manage stress and deal with emotional challenges (Jennings et al., 2019). Recent research has shown that mindfulness practices can be effective in promoting executive functioning, and behavioral and emotional regulation skills. These practices can be as simple as yoga and mindful breathing. Other recent studies have shown that mindfulness has been effective in reducing internalizing and externalizing behaviors as well

as general psychological distress (Langer et al., 2019)

Throughout my research on mindfulness, I learned that the teacher plays a crucial role in its success. A teacher who wishes to implement mindfulness practices with their students must be mindful themselves. Teachers must have the ability to stay calm and manage their emotions as well as the ability to effectively manage a classroom. Strong and positive teacher-student relationships are also crucial in addition to the teacher's awareness of the social-emotional needs of their students. When teachers are mindful themselves and work to engage their students in mindfulness practices, they have the power to foster resilience in their students.

School Discipline

According to Gonzales (2012), "it has been consistently documented that punitive school discipline policies not only deprive students of educational opportunities, but fail to make schools safer places" (p. 2). In order to better support students who have faced adversity, I learned through my research that it is important schools move away from these measures, such as suspension and expulsion, to a more trauma-informed approach such as restorative discipline.

Restorative discipline is related to the concept of restorative justice in the criminal justice system and relies on five key principles including: interpersonal relationships, personal dignity, mutual respect and understanding, restorative conferencing, and restitution (Meyer & Evans, 2012). Restorative discipline "emphasizes the importance of interconnectedness through building relationships and repairing relationships once harm has occurred" (Breedlove et al., 2020, p. 7).

While exclusionary practices have shown to be ineffective in reducing problematic behavior, and often lead to poor school climates, restorative practices on the other hand have led to safer school environments, less problem behavior, and students who feel more valued and accepted. The latter of these environments is optimal in mitigating the negative effects of

childhood trauma. While I initially was unsure of the idea of restorative practice at the elementary level, I have learned it can and does work. In order to better support their students who have faced trauma, it is important schools consider adopting restorative practices.

In considering the answer to the question, *With the prevalence of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) in today's society, how can elementary educators best address and support student behaviors associated with trauma?,* schools can address and support these behaviors through interventions such as social-emotional instruction, mindfulness practices, and restorative discipline.

Policy Implications

This section will highlight several policy implications as they relate to my project. The first and most important is that schools require their staff to receive formal training on trauma-informed practices. According to a 2015-2017 study, approximately 61% of people have experienced at least one ACE, while around 16% of people have experienced four or more ACEs (Breedlove et al., 2020). The prevalence of ACEs suggest they are a critical public health issue that needs immediate attention. Schools must educate their staff on ACEs and teach them the skills and tools necessary to effectively work with students who have them. I believe that this can and should also be addressed at the collegiate level. Trauma-informed care should be a part of every teacher preparation program.

The second is that schools prioritize social-emotional learning. Research has shown that there are certain protective factors that can lessen the negative effects of childhood trauma (Murphey & Sacks, 2019). One of these is the ability to manage their emotions. By focusing on strengthening key social and emotional skills such as self-regulation, children *can* develop resilience. There is clear evidence that children's resilience relies heavily on other people and

systems in the child's life. Therefore, it is important that educational systems carefully plan and execute the appropriate services to support children who have experienced ACEs (Soleimanpour et al., 2017). Schools must stop putting SEL on the back burner, and instead, make it the forefront of their instruction.

Lastly, I believe more schools need to shift from using a punitive approach to managing behavior to a more restorative approach. A review of the use of exclusionary discipline policies conducted by the American Psychological Association in 2006 found that "instead of promoting learning in a safe environment, zero tolerance policies promote an irrational climate of fear" (Gonzales, 2012, p. 17). This type of climate would only exacerbate the negative effects of trauma. In contrast, studies have found that "when schools approach discipline through responsive, reintegrated, and restorative mechanisms, they are more effective at maintaining safe communities" and by implementing restorative practices, "schools can promote stronger academic environments, which in turn improve school safety" (Gonzales, 2012, pp. 17-18). This is significant because it shows that restorative practices are needed in more schools in order to create safe environments where students feel safe, secure, and like they belong and matter.

Project Limitations

This section will cover limitations and constraints of my project. The biggest limitation and constraint of my project I discovered through feedback from my content expert. She felt very strongly that my project was well done and had a great deal of research included. She believed I included a good amount of information to help staff understand the big concepts and that they would be able to implement activities in their classrooms following the professional development. With this being said, she knows that the topics I addressed are very much "big ticket items" that would require a driving force to keep them going. It is too much for one person

to do alone. She provided me with a valuable question and that was, "do you have a plan for ways to continue the good work you are starting with your presentations?" This was something I had not yet thought about, however I realized will be very important to consider. My hope (as well as hers) is that my administration would back these programs and help create teacher-led committees to continue the momentum that I will have started.

Another limitation is buy-in from staff. Any new program takes substantial time and effort to implement, and more than likely will face some resistance. It will be crucial that I work with my admin to provide follow-up training on each of the programs so that they are well-understood. Without this work, the staff at my school may view it as yet another project to add to their already-full plate. In short, I must be prepared for this resistance and work with my admin to dedicate the time, space, and resources for our staff to familiarize themselves and become comfortable with the new programs. Acknowledging and addressing the idea that many of our staff are already probably feeling overworked and overstressed will play an important role in this.

Recommendations for Future Research

My capstone journey has allowed me ample time to reflect on how schools can better support their most vulnerable and at-risk students. Although there is much out there on how schools can become more trauma-informed, there is a lot left still to know. This leads me to two ideas for future research.

One area in which I believe requires more research is the effectiveness of other supports in addressing behavior related to trauma. For example, what about a multi-tiered system of supports such as Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports (PBIS)? Is PBIS an effective approach for addressing and supporting student behavior related to trauma? Throughout my own

research I learned about the importance of a positive school climate, especially with students who have been exposed to trauma as they need a climate that promotes a sense of safety and reduces fear (Pawlo et al., 2019). This leads me to believe a PBIS program would in fact be an effective approach for addressing and supporting student behavior related to trauma. My current school uses this approach, but how do the outcomes of our students compare to the outcomes of students at a school who doesn't use PBIS? Is the difference significant?

Another area in which I believe requires more research is regarding mental health services in schools. What is the relationship between access to mental health services in schools and resiliency? Children spend much of their life in school. Could this regular contact enable schools the ability to address some of the negative outcomes associated with trauma? What roles do guidance counselors play? My current school hasn't always had a full-time guidance counselor. It was just recently that she transitioned to full-time. Prior to this, she was shared among multiple buildings in the district. What kind of difference has it made with her being in our building full-time, especially with our students who are the most vulnerable? Is the difference significant?

Benefits and Contributions

I believe my project will benefit the field of education in a lot of ways. The biggest benefit it will have is that it will provide training to teachers on the prevalence of ACEs and their implications for the classroom setting. This will then have a trickle-down effect in that the training will provide teachers the necessary tools and resources to better and more effectively manage behaviors in their classrooms that are related to trauma. This in turn will affect students because they will have teachers that are more empathetic and compassionate and have a better understanding of and ability to meet their needs. Although this project is geared towards

elementary teachers, I believe it is applicable to all levels and will lay a solid foundation for any teacher who wishes to become more trauma-informed. This is important because there is a pressing need for schools to become more trauma-informed due to the prevalence of ACEs.

It is my hope that not only my own school and district will benefit from my project, but that many others will as well. I plan to share my project with past colleagues and administrators in hopes that they see the value in it that I do and use it to better support their students with trauma. In a lot of ways, I believe my project is already well on its way to doing just that. My content expert shared with me after reviewing my project that she kept finding herself wishing she could be a participant, listening to my presentation and the staff discussions that would likely generate from it. She shared with me that my project has inspired a renewed sense of energy in her to continue and strengthen the work we do as educators with our students affected by trauma. My hope is that this will be true for others as well.

Summary

This project was created to answer the question: *With the prevalence of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) in today's society, how can elementary educators best address and support student behaviors associated with trauma?* In this chapter, I discussed the purpose of my project, its implications and limitations and the sources that most influenced it. I also discussed recommendations I have for future research/projects. I ended with how I plan to share my project with others as well as how I believe it will benefit/contribute to the field of education as a whole.

My hope is that this project will equip elementary teachers with the necessary skills and knowledge to better support our students with trauma. It is my belief that when we truly understand our students, treat them with kindness and dignity, take an approach to their behavior

that is empathetic and relationship-based, and teach them the skills needed in order to be successful, even our most vulnerable students will succeed. This is where the power of trauma-informed practices come into play.

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