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Implementing a Trauma-sensitive School Approach

Janelle Studnicka
Winona State University

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Implementing a Trauma-sensitive School Approach

Janelle Studnicka

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requirements for the Master of Science Degree in

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TRAUMA-SENSITIVE SCHOOLS

Winona State University
College of Education
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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

CAPSTONE PROJECT

Implementing a Trauma-sensitive School Approach

This is to certify that the Capstone Project of

Janelle Studnicka

Has been approved by the faculty advisor and the CE 695 – Capstone Project

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Abstract

With the rise in awareness of adverse childhood experiences, how to handle students who have experienced trauma is a growing concern. Trauma is not only inclusive of child abuse, but the result of any event such as natural disaster, death, or accident that overwhelms a child's ability to cope. The outcome is a change in the developmental structure of the brain leading to changes in student's behavior, academics, and/or emotions. Schools are beginning to implement a new approach that assumes all students have experienced trauma and therefore alters the school's policies, procedures, discipline, community collaboration, and teaching methods. Implementation of trauma-sensitive schools are helping provide students with a safer school environment and cope in more supportive ways to traumatic reactions of students with trauma. Trauma-sensitive schools include collaboration within the community, training to all staff members coming in contact with students, implementing new discipline and teaching strategies, and morphing policies and procedures to better support these students.

Keywords: trauma, trauma-informed schools, trauma-sensitive schools

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Introduction

“The most artfully devised curriculum means little to a student whose mind is fixed on last night’s shooting outside or the scary, violent fight between parents that broke out in the kitchen” (Pappano, 2014, p. 1). Teachers across the country are pouring significant amounts of effort into teaching crafted curriculums built upon evidence-based research methods and meeting growing state standard requirements. And yet, some students still fall behind, demonstrate disruptive behaviors, and remain disengaged. A new realization pointing to the negative effects of traumatic experiences on a child’s learning experience is being examined as a likely answer to some of this phenomenon.

Trauma can be defined as an umbrella term that describes a community or individual experiencing acute or chronic stress (Wolpow, Johnson, Hertel, & Kincaid, 2011). It is a tragically common experience for many students grades PK through 12. “More than 68 percent of children have experienced a possible traumatic event by age 16” (Pappano, 2014). It is estimated that 26 percent of children in the U.S. below the age of four have experienced or witnessed trauma (McConnico, Boynton-Jarrett, Bailey & Nandi, 2016). Thus, approximately a quarter of preschool students will have experienced a traumatic event prior to entering school. According to McConnica, et al., the trauma these children and adolescents have experienced correlates with poor attention and impulse control, difficulty regulating emotions, aggression, and self-harm (2016). This can create numerous barriers that effect the successful completion of each school day. Enough barriers and difficulties have been identified that a new approach has been recognized to address the issue of student’s performance in school being affected by traumatic experiences in their lives. This new approach that is being implemented in some

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schools is called “trauma-sensitive schools” (this paper may also refer to the approach as “trauma-informed schools”).

This research paper will first provide a literature review about current studies of trauma and its debilitating effects on children. It will then explore the topic of trauma-sensitive schools, research to support this approach, and core components creating this type of school. Lastly, it will delve into implementation of a trauma-sensitive school through collaboration, training, intervention strategies, and discipline procedures.

Review of Literature

Trauma

The brain is in control of everything we do, say, and think. Trauma has been proven to affect our brain structure and functioning. Trauma occurs when something so horrific happens that it overwhelms a child’s ability to cope and then causes difficulties emotionally, academically, and/or socially (Downey, 2007). Research by Walkley and Cox (2013, p.123) states, “Neuroscientists studying the impact of trauma on brain development have determined that these experiences actually alter brain structure.” When the brain structure is altered, the child’s behaviors will consecutively be altered. Trauma can cause children to be easily overstimulated, have poor emotional self-regulation, and/or impair cognitive and physical development (Walkley & Cox, 2013). Neurobiologically, trauma can overstimulate the amygdala (the fight, flight, or freeze part of the brain), which causes the child to overreact, have meltdowns, or be inconsolable for a period of time (Wolpow et al., 2011). Place a child with a trauma-altered brain structure in an academic setting designed to challenge, stimulate, and grow the brain, and imagine what difficulties might ensue. Not only are students challenged

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academically, but also socially with peers, behaviorally with expectations, and emotionally when juggling all of the above.

Trauma often occurs in early childhood. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, “approximately 56% of maltreatment victims were younger than 7 years of age” (as cited in De Young, Kenardy, & Cobham, 2011, p. 232). These students reach age four and then find themselves in a school environment, often without having processed their trauma. Researchers De Young et al., reviewed studies on young, traumatized children to assess the prevalence of psychological disorders (2011). They concluded that in addition to the presence of posttraumatic stress disorder in the young traumatized children studied, high rates of oppositional defiant disorder, separation anxiety disorder, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, and major depressive disorder were present (De Young et al., 2011).

Behavior.

Over three million children in U.S. schools are suspended yearly, and 95 percent of those suspensions are for “disruptive behavior and other reasons including: dress code violations, displays of affection, defiance, and cell phone use” (Stevens, 2012). Repetitive disruptive behavior can often be a result of traumatic experiences because trauma can affect the cerebral cortex of the brain, which causes impulsive actions and poor judgment (Wolpow et al., 2011). Trauma can be an explanation to some of these “disruptive behaviors” that result in student suspensions. Suspension takes a student out of school creating difficulty for students to keep up on their academic assignments. The National Education Policy Report states “higher rates of out-of-school suspension correlate with lower achievement scores” (Losen, 2011).

The brain of a student with trauma often has cortisol and adrenaline levels shooting off when no threat is apparent because of their history of trauma (Endocrine Society, 2018). Cortisol

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is the hormone released when the body feels stress, and adrenaline is the hormone that prepares your body to fight, flight, or freeze when a stressful situation occurs (Endocrine Society, 2018). This can cause an addiction to that adrenaline, or high-stimulus feeling, and encourages engagement in risky activities such as self-harm, drug or alcohol addiction, criminal activities, and other potentially dangerous behaviors (Downey, 2007).

Academic.

Perry, Schore, Stein, and Kendall (as cited in Oehlberg, 2008) report significant correlations between low academic achievement and trauma. According to Wolpov et al., students dealing with trauma while in school score lower on standardized tests and are two-and-one-half times more likely to fail a grade than their peers (2011, p. 27). Trauma can decrease the size and function of the brain's corpus callosum, that connects the functions of the left and right hemispheres, which can cause problems in learning (Wolpov et al., 2011). Goodman, Miller, and West-Olatunji report higher symptoms of traumatic stress predict poorer reading, math, and science achievement scores among elementary students, as well as an increase in Individualized Educational Plans used in special education services (as cited in Ridgard, Laracy, DuPaul, Shapiro, & Power, 2015). The Child Welfare Information Gateway (2015) states trauma experiences can affect a child's brain development including memory, language, and emotion. Attachment trauma can cause a child's prefrontal cortex to not develop appropriately leading to disruptive behaviors in the classroom because they do not have the cognitive ability to self-regulate (Oehlberg, 2008). These processes interfere significantly with the ability to integrate and master new skills in school.

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Emotional.

Not only does a student with trauma experience academic and behavioral problems, but it also impacts their social relationships with peers and adults. This makes healing from trauma difficult as recovery from these experiences best occur in places where healing relationships are present (Downey, 2007). Trauma can result in a child having attachment difficulties, poor peer relationships, and a need for control with peers and teachers” (Downey, 2007, p. 11). Because of the disruption of emotional and cognitive functioning that trauma has on the brain, children with trauma have difficulty regulating the many emotions that come with relationships and applying healthy thoughts and actions to problems that set their ‘fight, flight, or freeze alarm’ off. Often kids with trauma can seem thoughtless and uncaring toward others by not paying attention to instructions, demonstrating forgetfulness, or not picking up after themselves. This occurs because the child has begun closing down thinking about others’ thoughts to avoid having to consider “their caregiver’s wish to harm them” (Downey, 2007, p. 12). This impairs their ability to socially read situations and relate to others.

Trauma-sensitive Schools

Until recent, school professionals had not made a connection between students with trauma and undesirable behaviors demonstrated in the classroom; therefore, these behaviors were solely addressed by disciplinary actions and failed to address the underlying issues. These methods leave the trauma a child has experienced or is experiencing untreated and untold.

Definition.

A national movement has begun training current educational systems to become ‘trauma-sensitive schools’. This is to address the significant barriers to learning not only for those who have experienced trauma, but also the peers in the classroom beside them. “A trauma sensitive

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school is one in which all students feel safe, welcomed, and supported and where addressing trauma's impact on learning on a school-wide basis is at the center of its educational mission" (Gregory, 2016, p. 5). Trauma-sensitive schools encompass several areas of educational reformation including: school climate, techniques for instruction, behavior supports, and school policies. Through transformation of these areas, the educational system provides traumatized students what they need to achieve academic and social success (Craig, 2016). The National Association of School Psychologists state trauma-informed care "creates a sense of safety, practices trustworthiness and transparency, practices empowerment, fosters voice and choice, and recognizes multicultural issues" (2015, p. 3). Trauma-sensitive schools believe that the stress coming from exposure to trauma is toxic to the brain and can "have a permanent impact on the neurological, cognitive development of a child" (Paccione-Dyszlewski, 2016). This changes how learning and discipline is facilitated within the school because the staff realizes that trauma has changed the student's ability to handle healthy interpersonal relationships, reach developmentally appropriate cognitive goals, and self-regulate through everyday stressors (Pappano, 2014). When school staff and students come across a difficult situation such as yelling, swearing, refusal to participate, etc., the first notion considered is trauma instead of defaulting immediately to punishment (Paccione-Dyszlewski, 2016). In a trauma-sensitive school, the perspective of disruptive behaviors changes from that of "this student is a troublemaker" to "this student is demonstrating a response to a traumatic "injury" obtained from physical, emotional, or social maltreatment (Craig, 2016).

Trauma-sensitive schools are a basic framework that each school adopts and adapts according to their educational system. It is an overarching umbrella term that implies a school is implementing a change in its systems and policies to help students with trauma succeed and get

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their needs met. This could look different in every school that implements a trauma-sensitive approach, but there are several common designs schools can choose to embrace. Designs that a trauma-sensitive school might choose to implement include: Multiplying Connections, Making SPACE for Learning, Flexible Framework, and Compassionate Teaching (Crosby, 2015). The core components that each model is built upon will be discussed further in this paper.

Research

The impact of trauma is undoubtedly negative and has significant impacts according to researchers (Langley, Gonzalez, Sugar, Solis, and Jaycox, 2015). A high school in Washington transitioned their school to a trauma-informed approach, and data on school disciplinary actions were compared from the year without the trauma-informed approach to the year with the trauma-informed approach. Results indicated “suspensions dropped from 798 to 135 (85 percent reduction), expulsions dropped from 50 to 30 (40 percent reduction), and written referrals were cut in half from 600 to 320” (Stevens, 2012). This reduction of disciplinary action taken on students during the year a trauma-informed approach was taken is quite significant. Another high school that evaluated their trauma-sensitive practices reported grades were higher among 70 percent of the students (National Association for School Psychologists, 2015). Though it will surely take effort and commitment to function as a trauma-sensitive school, the current research reveals academic benefits for all students.

Oehlberg (2008) reports the benefits of being a trauma informed school includes improved academic achievement scores, test scores, and a sense of teacher satisfaction. It also proves to reduce behavioral outbursts and office referrals, dropouts, needs for special education services, bullying and harassment, absences, detentions, and suspensions (Oehlberg, 2008).

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Components

Michael Gregory, a clinical professor of law and senior attorney working with the Trauma and Learning Policy Initiative, created five core ideas for schools to implement that will help traumatized children learn (Gregory, 2016). His core ideas (see Appendix I) are split into identifying the problem (concepts one and two), the solution (concept three), and how a school gets there (concepts four and five). Gregory's essential core ideas one and two assume that many students have been exposed to trauma, and trauma impacts learning, behavior, and relationships at school (Gregory, 2016, p. 11). Core concept three states a trauma-sensitive school approach helps children with traumatic past experiences learn by cultivating a safe environment first and foremost. Concepts four and five describe the professional collaboration required to make this work, and the importance of educational reform and policies necessary to help the movement (Gregory, 2016).

Similar to Gregory's core concepts, Craig (2016), director of the Trauma and Learning Policy Initiative states the components that support any trauma-sensitive school must include: staff training and supervision on trauma, instructional methods that supports neural development, classroom management strategies and discipline that support re-training a brain with trauma disruption, and policies and procedures within the school, state, and nation that support the success of social and academic learning.

Parts of these core components may already be built into current educational system practices, and others can easily be enhanced or modified to fulfill the needs of students with traumatic experiences disrupting learning development. Any school that utilizes a multitiered system of support (MTSS) framework or Response to Intervention (RTI) has a great base to begin applying trauma-sensitive concepts (National Association of School Psychologists, 2016).

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Implementation of Trauma-sensitive Schools

To create a trauma-sensitive school, a framework is needed that involves “leadership, professional development, access to resources and services, academic and nonacademic strategies, policies procedures and protocol, and collaboration with families” (Gregory, 2016, p. 10). Core concepts necessary to create a school environment and culture that is trauma-sensitive to students will be explored more thoroughly in this section.

Collaboration.

Trauma-sensitivity requires a whole school effort, and a whole community-wide effort. It demands collaboration from school staff, administrators, mental health professionals, students, and caregivers (Crosby, 2015). Staff play a huge role in connecting with the students and noticing patterns or deficits in skill and/or behaviors. Teachers serve as positive role models that can help teach students with trauma how to regulate emotions in a healthy way. “Recovery from trauma will occur best in the context of healing relationships” (Downey, 2007). Teachers and other staff have incredible opportunities to build stable and healthy relationships with these students due to the amount of time during the day that is spent together. Counselors, social workers, and psychologists are excellent people to assess, treat, and refer students needing extra support to community resources

Training.

To implement a trauma-sensitive school, everyone working with the children must understand how common trauma is and how it impacts development. This occurs through training. As more than 68 percent of children have experienced a possible traumatic event by age 16 (Pappano, 2014)., traumatic experiences are common to students in every school in every place. “Understanding the experience of the abused and neglected child assists us to develop

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compassion, patience and empathy. It is a key intervention in itself” (Downey, 2007, p. 4).

Traumatic experiences include more than abuse and neglect, it can also include: death of a parent, divorce, natural disaster, and accidents. Knowing that trauma is very common is important. Secondly, staff needs to know how trauma significantly impacts development in social, emotional, academic, and behavioral so they can understand why students are doing what they do. “Trauma affects the whole person: their mind, brain, body, spirit and relationship with others” (Downey, 2007, p. 10). It is particularly detrimental to a child’s brain because of the developing nature where neural connections are still being made and changed – trauma rewires this process. To train staff, professional development trainings, seminars, webinars, and/or meetings are very helpful. School staff must understand the cognitive ability level of a student’s brain, so expectation levels are matched appropriately, and extra support is given where deficits are found. The key to all of this training is to create a school environment where everyone feels safe. A student cannot begin to heal from traumatic experiences until they are safe (Downey, 2007).

Strategies and Discipline.

Understanding brain development and how it is altered because of traumatic experiences such as maltreatment or abuse has “stunning implications for school policies and teacher techniques” (Oehlberg, 2008, p. 3). It significantly alters the discipline procedures of students that are misbehaving because it’s seen as something much deeper than intentional disobedience, and therefore requires a different approach to fix. Many traumatized children have not had control over what’s happened to them, and this causes them to try and take control when at school creating power struggles with peers and teachers ((Downey, 2007). It also is a defense mechanism to keep people away if the child is displaying aggressive and oppositional behaviors;

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therefore, simply removing the child from class and punishing is increasing their trauma, feelings of worthlessness, and lack of control (Downey, 2007). Creating structure and regular routines each day in the classroom is important as well as informing of change in routine. Often when a child with trauma is behaving, teachers give warnings and second chances to help them comply with the request. This is not as helpful for these students because they often don't have the same pattern of connection that a non-abused child has to want to please the adult by compliance ((Downey, 2007). More helpful teaching practices can be seen in Appendix B.

Policies and Procedures.

Helping traumatized children should be a major focus of educational reform
To help with this, schools can utilize the Framework and Self-Assessment Tool to create and implement an action plan that is legally required in their school. (Gregory, 2016, p. 16). The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) provides funding and instructional support for schools to increase these kinds of services (National Association of School Psychologists, 2016). Schools can also utilize funds to make sure that social-emotional learning curriculum are being implemented within the Tier 1 approach of their schools (National Association of School Psychologists, 2016). Some states, including Minnesota, have issued The Safe and Supportive Schools Act, which is a law to help create a safer school environment from bullying, intimidation, and any kind of harassment (MN Department of Education, 2017).

Conclusion

A child's academic, social/emotional, and behavioral success are significantly affected by experiences of trauma including: family member incarceration, natural disasters, any type of abuse, death of a loved one, etc. The affect that trauma has on a developing child's brain can alter the way a child thinks and reacts, causing difficulty through daily activities at school.

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Through addressing the trauma children have experienced, staff and students can achieve greater successes throughout the day.

Utilizing a trauma-sensitive school approach has shown a decrease in behaviors, increase in academics, and increase in overall staff satisfaction at school. This approach assumes that all children coming into school have experienced or witness a traumatic event, and alters procedures, policies, and strategies to address this phenomenon. Discipline is adjusted in a way that it doesn't reactivate trauma or worsen effects of trauma. Classroom strategies are utilized that help adjust to the cognitive and emotional alterations trauma does to a developing brain. A lot of training is provided to staff in regard to trauma, the effects of trauma, and how to manage it.

Limitations

More research is needed on the trauma-sensitive school frameworks to conduct further evidence on the effectiveness levels as well as a comparison of which frameworks show more effectiveness in what ways. So far, trauma-sensitive school research holds promise for seeing changes, but not enough research has been done due to its novelty. For example, Cognitive Behavioral Intervention for Trauma in the Schools (CBTIS) has been tested in one RCT, one field trial, and one quasi-experimental design (Langley, Gonzalez, Sugar, Solis, and Jaycox, 2015).

Author's Note

I have been very excited to become so engrossed by the research related to trauma-sensitive schools. I am passionate about mental health and feel it's effects are severely underestimated in school situations causing a lot of frustration, burn out, and ineffective strategies. Because trauma is unfortunately prevalent in so many students' lives and has many

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effects on behavior and learning processes, it's something that can be attributed to many of the difficulties student's face. Without taking it into considerations, students are stereotyped as "difficult, troublemakers, and manipulative", and success is not attained. If we are to look at these students through a perspective of 'What happened to you?' and letting that explain why behaviors are exhibited, we have a much better chance of using a compassionate approach to work together and overcome whatever barrier is in the way of success.

Writing this while in my internship has been a very interesting experience because so many behaviors and students brought up on the child study team are not considered for their history. The only thing looked at is their current behavior that is unacceptable, and how to correct it.... a fallible fix. When asking questions at the meeting such as 'What is this child's home environment like?' or 'Do we have a history of this child?', people usually have no answer. This has astounded me at how often we are not looking at a student's background or present circumstance outside the school setting to understand what is occurring or being reenacted in the school setting.

It is my goal to integrate a trauma-sensitive school approach when I become a licensed counselor and begin experience in my own school setting. I see the need for this in every school I'm in, and want to utilize what currently exists, as well as further that research to implement effective trauma-sensitive schools.

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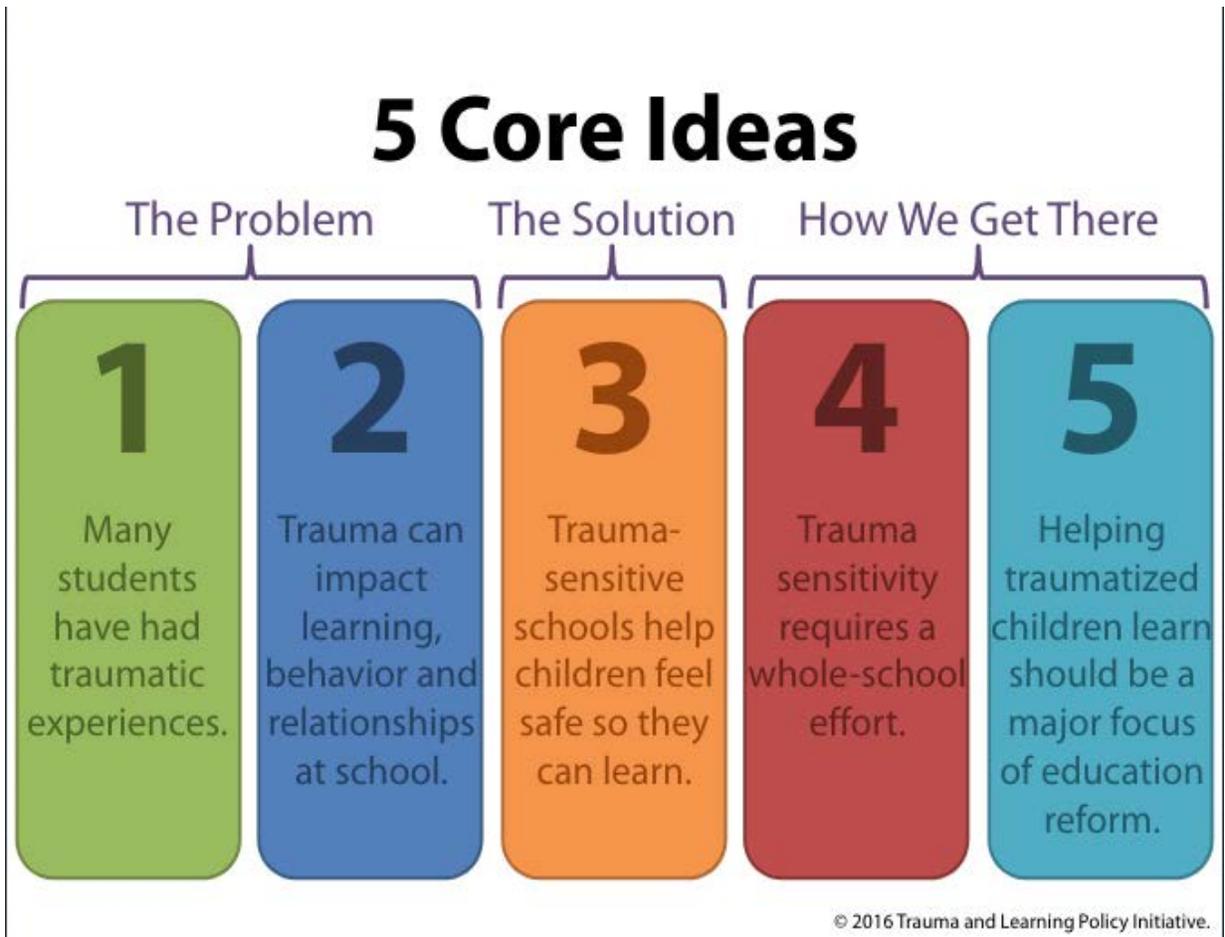
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Appendices

Appendix A “5 Core Ideas”



Appendix B “Classroom Practices for Dealing with Traumatized Children”

Classroom practices for dealing with traumatized children

Understand the child Understanding trauma and attachment difficulties brings compassion and empathy; understanding that the child may be developmentally younger than their chronological age will guide teaching practices.

Manage your own reactions Working with traumatized children can bring strong emotions; staying calm will help the child to calm themselves.

I see you need help with ... Help children to comply with requests. Because they don't necessarily want to please adults, helping them comply will avoid power battles.

Structure and Consistency Traumatized children often have little internal structure and need firm boundaries, rules, expectations and consequences—applied with sensitivity and calm.

Time in, not time out Traumatized children experience time out as yet more rejection, increasing their feelings of shame and worthlessness; time in keeps them engaged in a relationship.

Connect Dissociative children, who are often quiet and compliant, need gentle and consistent attempts to connect with them.

Consequences, not punishment Use natural consequences that relate to the problem behaviour and are designed to repair damaged property or damaged relationships.

Structure choices to remain in control Offer choices with humour and creativity to avoid power battles; keep the child responding to you rather than allowing them to control the interaction.

Acknowledge good decisions and choices Traumatized children often don't respond well to praise, but still need positive reinforcement for doing something well: comment on the job well done rather than intrinsic characteristics.

Support parents and carers Get to know the parents or carers; keep up good communication and don't communicate through the child. Try to be understanding and compassionate: living with a child who has trauma and attachment difficulties can be very stressful.

Maintain your role Don't be tempted to move too far out of your role. These children need caring and competent teachers.