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The Impact of Trauma-Informed Professional Development on Classroom Climate

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The Impact of Trauma-Informed Professional
Development on Classroom Climate

A Project Presented to
the Graduate Faculty of
Minnesota State University Moorhead

By

Amber Lenz

In Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of Masters of Science
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Abstract

When students experience trauma or adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) in the home, such as substance abuse, mental illness, neglect, or violence, schools become an important place in which support, kindness, and understanding are needed the most. School can, for some students, be a place of physical safety and emotional stability. Oftentimes, the weight of what is going on at home or in the community is being miscategorized and is seen as misbehavior or a laziness in a student. If teachers do not learn how to deal with the trauma in a supportive and validating way, students will stay distracted and disengaged and inevitably fall behind, and even the best curriculum can't get students with ACEs back on track. This study will look into teacher professional development on trauma and ACEs and how it can impact the classroom climate and create a more understanding environment that will foster growth and learning in students who have otherwise been unsuccessful.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Introduction

Trauma does not always look like a bruise, a black eye, or a broken bone. It is not always obvious. In the classroom, trauma can look like a long stare, a sleepy child, a distracted student, or an unwanted behavior. When students experience trauma or adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) in the home, such as substance abuse, mental illness, neglect, or violence, schools become an essential place in which support, kindness, and understanding are needed the most. School can represent safety for students who, in most aspects of their lives, do not feel safe. Often, the weight of what is going on at home or in the community is being miscategorized as misbehavior or a lazy student. Students, like adults, are the weight of their experiences. They can not just check their trauma at the door. If teachers do not learn how to deal with the trauma effectively, students will stay distracted and disengaged, fall behind, and even the best curriculum can't get students with ACEs back on track. This study will look into teacher professional development on trauma and ACEs and how it can impact the classroom climate and create a more understanding environment that will foster growth and learning in students who have otherwise been unsuccessful.

Brief Literature Review

Exposure to trauma, such as community violence, poverty, discrimination, and maltreatment, has far-reaching effects on children's learning and behavior (Sonsteng-Person & Loomis, 2021, Herrenkohl et al., 2019). The psychological stress caused by trauma in childhood and adolescence can result in students' cognitive and executive functioning problems, difficulties relating to peers and school staff, the onset of childhood and adolescent Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, depression, anxiety, behavior problems, and greater suspensions and exclusions from school (Perfect et al., 2016). ACEs can lead to a lifetime of

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issues for individuals, including mental and physical difficulties and a shorter life expectancy. According to the website, centerforchildcounseling.org, early relational health matters, setting the foundation for the rest of our lives. Using a trauma-informed approach, schools have reduced students' incidence of PTSD and depression, and improved students' school engagement and academic achievement (Berger, 2019). The use of trauma-informed practices promotes inclusive education practices for children and adolescence with disrupted development, learning, behavior, and emotional control as a result of their trauma or ACEs (Berger and Martin, 2021). Trauma-informed schools honor the impact of trauma for potential recovery, recognize signs of trauma, respond with policies and interventions, and resist re-traumatization (Wiest-Stevenson & Lee, 2016).

Statement of the Problem

Chronic stress in children has been linked to higher school absences, impaired attention and concentration, reduced creativity and memory, high rates of anxiety and depression, and reduced motivation and effort (Osborne, 2017). The effects of ACEs often mimic other problems and students may find it difficult to form secure relationships with their teachers. Schools traditionally use disciplinary action rather than support or attention, which leads to further isolation. Although evidence shows that kids who experience trauma are more likely to face difficulties in school, it doesn't mean that they can't be academically successful when shown understanding and empathy.

Purpose of the Study

As a teacher, I believe the learning environment is as important as the content we teach. A classroom environment that doesn't encompass the ideas of understanding, patience, and safety can not be conducive to good learning and good behavior. Sometimes it is hard for educators to show patience if they don't really understand what is going on in a student's life. From this study, I want to know how

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professional development will help teachers see what isn't always obvious so they can make positive changes to the climate of their classrooms.

Research Question(s)

How does trauma-informed professional development impact a classroom climate in a K-12 school setting?

Definition of Variables.

- **Independent Variable:** A trauma-informed professional development is given to the staff before interviews and observations take place.
- **Dependent Variable A:** Classroom Climate as described by the primary teacher.

Significance of the Study

I have been a teacher for 13 years. Throughout these years, I have come to better understand the saying, “You must Maslow before you Bloom”. I have heard that at many teacher professional developments, but I didn't fully understand it until I practiced it in my classroom. It is a play on words meaning students' basic needs must be met before they can learn. It is our job as teachers to create an environment where students feel their needs are being met before we can effectively teach a curriculum. I have seen firsthand what a difference a simple, “Are you ok?” can do compared to, “Why aren't you paying attention?” Not all teachers can recognize the trauma that doesn't happen in front of them. As teachers, people say that we are there to shape minds. More often than not, we reach their hearts, too. When students feel cared about, and safe, and they can trust their teachers, the learning can begin and the behaviors start to change.

Research Ethics

Permission and IRB Approval. In order to conduct this study, the researcher will seek MSUM's Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval to ensure the ethical conduct of research involving human subjects (Mills & Gay, 2019). Likewise, authorization to conduct this study will be sought from the school district where the research project will take place (See Appendix X and X).

Informed Consent. The protection of human subjects participating in research will be assured. Participant minors will be informed of the purpose of the study via the Method of Assent (See Appendix X) that the researcher will read to participants before the beginning of the study. Participants will be aware that this study is conducted as part of the researcher's Master's Degree Program and that it will benefit her teaching practice. Informed consent means that the parents of participants have been fully informed of the purpose and procedures of the study for which consent is sought and that parents understand and agree, in writing, to their child participating in the study (Rothstein & Johnson, 2014). Confidentiality will be protected through the use of pseudonyms (e.g., Student 1) without the utilization of any identifying information. The choice to participate or withdraw at any time will be outlined both verbally and in writing.

Limitations

One limitation of this study is access to the participants. There will be scheduled days to go and collect data. The quality and amount of data may be limited to how the participants are feeling on that scheduled day and may not be representative of student behavior more broadly. Another limitation is the demographics, all participants will be coming from the same school.

Conclusions

Trauma and ACEs come in different forms and degrees and similar experiences affect students in dramatically different ways. Each student's experience comes out looking a little different and how their experiences affect their behavior is not always easy to detect. A student's stress may show up as what is

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perceived as misbehavior or inattention because teachers may not know enough about trauma in general or the specific trauma that might be going on in their student's life. Trauma-informed practices may be a way to help open a teacher's eyes so they can see the different ways trauma and ACEs may manifest in the classroom. In turn, this new trauma-informed approach could help teachers find better ways to handle misbehavior and inattention in the classroom. In the next chapter, I will describe ACEs, trauma-informed teacher professional development, and the dynamics of classroom climate.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The purpose of this research is to determine if trauma-informed professional development will impact the climate of a K-12 tribal school. This information is important because trauma-informed and ACEs training has not been conducted in the specific school for many years and there have been numerous staff turnovers since the last training. Some of the staff are new and have never taken professional development in this area. Research shows that more than 40% of Native Americans experience two or more ACEs in their lives (Brockie et al., 2013). For school-aged children, such experiences can impact their physical, social, emotional, and academic development. As a result, they may have more difficulty focusing on schoolwork which leaves them in a constant state of arousal. The information gathered from this study will guide the teachers, social workers, and principals on early interventions that can be used in the classroom to help buffer the impact of traumatic stressors.

Adverse Childhood Experiences and Trauma

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are defined as “stressful or traumatic events that happen during the first 18 years of a person’s life in the confines of a home or within a close relationship” (Felitti et al., 1998). ACEs research traditionally considers 10 different types of ACEs including physical, sexual, and emotional abuse, physical and emotional neglect, a mother being treated violently, a household member with mental illness or substance abuse, incarcerated household member, and parental divorce or separation (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020). Regarding the relevance of ACEs in the general population, a study with 214,157 adults found that more than half of the respondents (61.55%) experienced at least one ACE (Merrick et al., 2018). In studies done worldwide, 46.2%-66.2% of the adult population and 75-85% of adolescents experience at least one ACE (Afifi et al., 2020). For school-aged

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children, the detrimental effects of stress from trauma are alarming, especially as they are undergoing physical, emotional, and academic development. In class, when students struggle to focus on tasks, teachers might interpret this as laziness, attention-seeking behavior, or a lack of motivation. Teachers who are unaware of the dynamics of complex trauma can easily mistake its manifestations as willful disobedience, defiance, or inattention, leading them to respond as though it were a misbehavior (Terassi and de Galarce, 2017). Experiencing multiple ACEs is associated with chronic absenteeism (Segal & Collin-Vezina, 2019). Children who experience multiple ACEs are at an increased risk of school suspensions (Bell et al., 2021), and a greater risk of repeating grades (Blodgett & Langigan, 2018). Students can experience a wide array of ACEs and those experiences can lead to many negative behaviors in the classroom.

The effects of ACEs and trauma are not just found in a school setting but are also found in juvenile justice systems. In 2018, 809,700 minors were arrested and detained in state and federal detention centers with 69% reporting 4 or more ACEs (Webber & Lynch, 2021). Repeated exposure to violence negatively contributes to risk-taking behaviors, emotional regulation difficulties, substance use, and reoffending (Kerig, 2018). Consequences of experiencing trauma or occurrence of ACEs are associated with poor long-term outcomes, such as including diminished physical and mental health, premature mortality, unemployment, and poverty (Hunt et. al., 2017).

Importance of Teacher Professional Development

While schools are a critical place to provide positive and safe spaces for students, teachers have a self-reported lack of knowledge on how to work effectively with traumatized students (Sonsteng-Person & Loomis, 2021). Teachers interact with students on a daily basis, are trusted by them, and can often be the first ones to aid a traumatized student in their time of need. Research has emphasized the need to provide training to teachers that aid in understanding, supporting, and effectively responding to students

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exposed to trauma (Hobbs et. al., 2019). Trauma-informed professional development training has been demonstrated to help teachers develop trauma-sensitive attitudes to build a classroom environment that is responsive to the needs of traumatized students (McIntyre et. al., 2019). Taking trauma-informed training can give teachers a new outlook on what they once thought might be misbehavior. Information about the vital importance of a caring and trusting teacher-student relationships and neuroscience information about the effects of trauma on the developing brain can lead to a paradigm shift in student behavior (Kim, et. al., 2021).

Managing troublesome behaviors in the classroom is a significant contributor to teacher stress and emotional exhaustion, as well as low self-efficacy, enthusiasm, and job satisfaction (Aldrup et. al., 2018). Chronic exhaustion in teachers can threaten their instructional quality and students' school functioning (Oberle & Schonert- Reichl, 2016). Teachers who are highly stressed tend to use punitive responses when dealing with challenging behaviors. Without training, teachers fail to identify the underlying cause of disruptive behaviors, despite the students' attempts to convey distress through these behaviors (Kim et. al., 2021).

Classroom Climate

In the right environment, schools can be seen as a place for helping children learn and practice social-emotional skills to deal with trauma. A classroom climate can be seen as a combination of different variables, such as mood, attitude, and tone within a classroom that work together to promote learning in a comfortable environment. Classroom climate is one of many things that will affect a student's motivation to learn.

Children exposed to trauma or adversity often have disrupted self-regulatory and attachment capacities that may manifest into disorganized behavior in the classroom (Brunzell et. al., 2016). One stored memory will be in response to a single incident that is so powerful that it repeatedly disrupts

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interactions with others (Terassi and de Galarce, 2017). Teachers may respond to these misbehaviors by using control-focused, disciplinary actions that may be triggering for adversity-affected students, which further aggravates their symptoms of chronic stress (Chafoules et. al., 2016). Traditional methods of classroom discipline may cause students with ACEs to further shut down, react explosively, or isolate themselves more.

A key element in trauma-informed training is the development of a safe learning environment. A safe learning environment is especially important for students who have experienced trauma (Cavanaugh, 2016). Students need to feel safe in order to learn and feel secure in order to participate. Teachers in a trauma-informed school understand that what may feel like risk-taking to students, needs to be supported and respected by their teacher. A positive classroom climate is evidenced by a high degree of teacher sensitivity, encouragement, and support (Hughes & Coplan, 2017). Emotionally supportive environments may foster a sense of acceptance, and belonging, which in turn may lead children to become more engaged, participate more, and have more on-task behaviors (Wang et. al., 2013).

Theoretical Framework

With my study, I would like to construct a new classroom climate. A climate that is more empathetic, warm, and understanding. Utilization of the interpretive paradigm allows the researcher to understand what worked, what didn't work, and look at what steps need to be taken next to improve classroom climate. Through a grounded theory study, researchers intend to generate a theory that is grounded in data from participants who have experienced the process. Researchers begin to collect data, suggest a theory, collect more data, revise the theory, and the same process continues. Researchers not only observe, but they interview their participants (Frankel et al., 2019). A trauma-informed professional development will be given to a group of elementary teachers. As soon as the professional development is done, the teachers will be interviewed about the current climate of their classroom. With current

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professional development and new strategies to use, teachers will be observed in the classroom throughout four weeks. When the four weeks are over, the teacher will be interviewed again to see how what they learned and tried impacted their classroom climate.

Research Question(s)

How can trauma-informed professional development impact classroom climate in a K-12 school setting?

Conclusions

ACEs and trauma affect the lives of students in and out of school. Often, when a young student is trying to communicate that something is going on in their lives, it is seen by teachers and adults as misbehavior or laziness. Trauma-informed professional development helps teachers understand that some students' behaviors are responses to ACEs. This understanding can help teachers and students work together to create a healthier classroom climate where academic learning is possible. Students that have experienced ACEs and spend more time in a classroom that focuses on a healthy classroom climate are more likely to achieve social, emotional, and academic success. In the next chapter, we will look at how the study was executed.

CHAPTER 3

METHODS

Introduction

What is going on in our students' lives at home and in the community is not always obvious to us. As hard as we try to get to know our students, some things are hard to see and may present in a way that does not always align with the problem. When a student is actually reaching out for help, it may look like a shutdown or misbehavior. Trauma-informed professional developments have been shown to help teachers gain a better understanding of trauma. Trauma-informed professional development also explains adverse childhood experiences. Through this study, I want to see what impact, if any, trauma-informed professional development can have on the classroom climate in an elementary school setting.

Research Question

How can trauma-informed professional development impact a classroom climate in a K-12 school setting?

Research Design

The research design is an ethnography paradigm. Qualitative research will be collected using the test/retest model with interviews. Part of qualitative research is going into the natural setting and observing and collecting data in the form of words or pictures rather than numbers (Frankel et al., 2019). Two informal interviews and two observations of each participant were used in this study. The first interview was to get baseline data about the teacher's background and their feelings about the climate of their classroom. Following the first round of interviews, the researcher conducted classroom observations. The last informal interview will be guided by looking back at the first interview and using some of the same questions.

Setting

This study took place on a reservation in Minnesota. The reservation is made up of 3 different districts, with at least one school in each district. Most of the people in the community work for the band at the Casino, government center, school, or clinic. They are a tight-knit community, rich in culture and traditions.

The district this study was done in is made up of two tribal schools that were created in 1975 as a result of community members and elders' vision to provide education to reservation children. The lower school is made up of kindergarten through fifth grade and the upper school is sixth through 12 grade, the study being done in both schools. There are 108 students; 54 females and 54 males. The population is 100% Native American. Instead of free and reduced lunches, they are a Community Eligible Program School. This means they don't take applications for benefits, but rather rely on Direct Certification reports to determine what their reimbursement percentage is every 3 years. To receive other funding, the families who are not directly certified fill out alternative applications for benefits. The school's Direct Certification is currently 50%.

As stated before, they are a community rich in culture and traditions. Families participate in pow-wows, cultural ceremonies, harvesting wild rice, hunting, sugar bush (collecting maple syrup), and fishing. At the same time, drugs and alcohol addiction has affected every family in some way, whether it is a parent, aunt, uncle, cousin, or family friend.

Participants

Participants of this study were 4 teachers, ranging in experience from 3 years to 41 years. The teachers taught second grade, sixth grade, high school math, and high school civics and band. Of the participants, there were 3 females and 1 male. The ethnic makeup of the teachers was 100% white.

Sampling

The sampling used in this study was a convenience sample. The participants in this study were all teachers who work at the school and who had taken the trauma-informed professional development. The researcher once worked with these participants, knows the heavy load they carry as teachers, and wanted to keep it voluntary.

Instrumentation

This study is an ethnography, the researcher being the instrument and telling the story of the teacher participants. The ethnography was completed throughout the process by recording interviews and observations. Each teacher participant in the study was interviewed twice and observed in the classroom twice. Both of the interviews were informal and included open-ended questions, allowing the participants to share feelings and stories about their classroom. Each observation was carefully documented.

Data Collection

The first interview with the teacher participants was within one week of the teacher's trauma-informed professional development. After the interview, the teacher was observed in their classroom room two times in a 4 week period, allowing them to use the new strategy or strategies they chose from the professional development. After 4 weeks of implementing the new strategies they chose, teachers were interviewed again.

Data Analysis

After the first interview was recorded, the transcripts were sorted through, looking for themes. These themes were then coded and put into 3 categories. For the observation during the implementation period, very precise notes about what was seen were taken. Those notes were sorted through and coded to

be added to previous categories. The final interview was recorded. The transcripts were analyzed to see if there were any changes in the classroom climate related to ACEs, classroom climate, and teacher stress.

Research Question(s) and System Alignment.

The table below provides a description of the alignment between the study Research Question(s) and the methods used in this study to ensure that all the variables of the study have been accounted for adequately.

Table 1

Research Question Alignment

Research Question	Variables	Design	Instrument	Validity & Reliability	Technique (e.g., interview)	Source
How can trauma-informed professional development impact a classroom climate in an elementary school setting?	IV; The independent variable in the trauma-informed professional development given before the interviews and observations. DV: The dependent variable is the classroom climate as described	The design for this study is qualitative using ethnography to paint a picture of what is happening in the classroom after a trauma-informed professional development takes place.	The researcher in ethnography is the main instrument by conducting interviews and observing in a natural setting.	Test-Retest Method: The same questions that were used to lead the first informal interview will be used for the final interview.	Teachers were interviewed one week after the professional development, then observed two times within a four-week span, and then interviewed again after the four weeks of implementing the new strategies were over.	Five teachers, ranging from the regular classroom to teachers, to a Phy. Ed teacher, and a Cultural class teacher.

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Procedures

Directly before the study started, teachers were given trauma-informed professional development by the researcher. Within one month of the professional development, the teacher participants were interviewed. After the interview, the teachers were given two weeks to implement one or two new strategies they were given in the professional development. During the two weeks of implementing the new strategies, the teachers were observed randomly in their classroom two times, for 30 minutes each. One week after the four weeks were over, the teachers were interviewed again.

Ethical Considerations

There was no danger posed to the participants of this study. All the data was kept confidential in a password-protected file. The file will be kept for two years and there is no identifying information about the participants that were shared in this study.

Conclusions

This chapter explained how the study was conducted to see if trauma-informed professional development would impact a classroom. The following chapter will analyze the results of the study and present its findings.

Chapter 4

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to see if trauma-informed professional development will impact the classroom climate and make it a more loving, welcoming, and safe space to learn. The impact of ACEs reaches far beyond a student's early years and extends into adulthood. According to the CDC-Kaiser ACE study, the impact of ACEs over a lifetime starts with disrupted brain development and leads to signs of social, emotional, and cognitive problems, risky and/or challenging behaviors and relationships, poor physical and mental health, unstable work history, poor finances, and early death. The information gathered in this study can be used by teachers, staff, and administration to help create a school connection as a protective factor against traumatic stress. No matter how much pedagogy we know, no matter how many degrees we have, unless our students know we care, they will not learn from us. We need to accept that some kids are not at school for academics. They are there to be loved. Once they get that love and feel safe, then we work on academics.

Data Collection

The data collected was conducted using a qualitative format through the use of ethnography using interviews and observations. Ethnography involves immersing yourself into a community or organization to observe their behaviors and interactions up close. An important part of qualitative research is painting pictures in a natural setting using words and pictures rather than numbers (Frankel et al., 2019). A professional development was given at the beginning of the school year for all school staff. The professional development included a PowerPoint presentation and a lot of discussion. In the presentation, staff learned what ACEs are, the effects of ACEs throughout a lifetime, and strategies that could be used in a classroom. After the professional development was done, there was a pre-observation interview done

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with the participants. There were open-ended interview questions prepared, but the participants started to tell stories about their classroom and students. Their stories gave me a look into what their classroom climate was like and the struggles they deal with as teachers. They all agreed to use a strategy given in the professional development over a two-week period. The week after the interviews, the teachers began trying different strategies with students who they believed were struggling with trauma or ACEs in their lives. Each week, I sat in their classroom and observed for approximately 30-45 minutes. While I was observing, I wanted to see what the classroom setting was like, what the student-teacher relationships look like, and the overall behavior of students in the classroom. After two weeks of observations, a second interview was to take place. Teachers were spread thin and covid was spreading through the school. Instead of an interview, an email was sent with questions about the strategies they used and if they felt it made a difference in the classroom.

Results

How can trauma-informed professional development impact a classroom climate in a K-12 school setting?

Theme 1: Adverse Childhood Experiences

As the teachers were telling stories about their current classrooms, the biggest theme to stick out was ACEs. Every teacher had a story about a student who was dealing with traumatic stress in their life.

The first teacher to be interviewed talked about a young male in their second-grade classroom that had poor attendance. The teacher went on to explain that the young male's parents were in jail and he had passed around numerous times from relatives and foster homes. When he was in class, he was tired, hungry, and “shut down” on a regular basis. When observing in her classroom, the student would put his head on his desk, not wanting to do work, or was constantly leaving the classroom and causing

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interruptions. Other ACEs this teacher spoke of were poverty, “not great home lives”, and food insecurities.

The second teacher told a story about a girl they struggled with in the sixth-grade classroom. The female student's mother had recently passed away from a drug overdose. There were days the student would just sit there and do nothing but stare or put her head down. The female student had moved in with her grandma but was also sometimes living with other relatives. Both times I was in the classroom to observe the students, that particular student sat off to the side of the room at her desk and was prompted many times to “try” and participate. This teacher also told of students who were from low-income families that lived in poverty. These students often wore the same clothes days in a row to class and a few of them were concerned about when they got to eat next. When sitting in the classroom, they were easy to spot by the worn out and dirty clothes. One boy was constantly asking about lunch and telling the teacher how hungry he was because he didn't get there in time for breakfast. Instead of doing work, he was looking at the clock, waiting for it to be time to go to lunch.

The third teacher that was interviewed had one particular class of 10th and 11th-grade Algebra I students that had “been by far” her hardest class in 41 years. Students in that classroom had many ACEs including going to rehab, poor mental health, foster families, death in the immediate family, poverty, and food insecurities. This teacher didn't give me information about what students had which stressors in their lives, but when observing her classroom, it was easy to see the challenges she faced. There was one particular boy who did absolutely nothing. He sat there and stared both times I was there and did no work. There was one particular girl who stood out the most. She was constantly asked to get off her phone, would talk back, did little to no work, cursed at her teacher, and started fights with other boys in the room. I was told after an observation that she has been in rehab more than once.

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The fourth and final teacher to be interviewed was new to teaching at this particular school, so he wasn't aware of exactly what the students in his room were dealing with. They knew a few of them "come from broken homes" and some were dealing with "extreme poverty".

Theme 2: Classroom Climate

Out of the 4 teachers, two had been teaching at this school for 20 years or more. The other two had been there for 3 years or less. When stepping into the classrooms of the teachers that had been there the longest, their rooms were the best organized. Things were neatly placed, the classroom felt literally warm, soft music was playing in the background, the rooms smelt good, the lighting was not too bright, and teachers were prepared for the lessons. Even though students were acting out or shut down, each teacher stayed calm, never raised their voice, and acted with extreme patience when behaviors arose. When the class was over, you could see their frustration and what stress it caused them, but they never let the students see it. The classrooms of the teachers that had been there for 3 years or less were very different. The rooms were literally cold, very unorganized with papers, materials, and books scattered all over the place. The teachers never were prepared for the lesson to start and didn't have control over the students' behaviors. If a student acted out or was not participating, it threw them off their lesson, their patience gradually grew thin, they seemed to be irritated, and students could see it.

Theme 3: Teacher Stress

Teachers are asked to do more and more with less time to do them, fewer resources, and little support. Teachers have enough to do by creating meaningful lessons, executing them, correcting papers, trying to stay organized, and building relationships with their students. More times than none, academics take precedence over relationships. Some are on a committee, or a board, are the leader in professional learning community projects, fill in for others when they are short-staffed, and make home visits. There is one school counselor and one school nurse between the lower and upper schools. The lower school

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principal is often moving between the schools because the upper school principal is gone a lot. There are times when the class has to stop and they have to deal with behavior, crisis, injury, sickness, or some issue because the resources they need are not in the building at that time. Some of the teachers spoke of not feeling supported and the one with the most teaching experience said she thought about quitting already this year. Besides being a teacher while wearing many hats, they have families and things going on in their lives outside of work. School work is brought home, affecting relationships and the quality of time that is supposed to be used to destress. When emailing to set up the initial email, there were delays in responses. They used phrases like, “ I have just been so busy” or “ there is so much going on I didn’t get time to respond”. Emails were sent ahead of each scheduled classroom observation, but when I arrived they would forget that I was supposed to be there that day. Some of the interventions that they were going to use didn’t happen because there was already so much going on or they would forget to do them. I tried to set up a final interview and they all said it was tough for them to fit one in. They asked about emailing them questions and they would respond that way. Only one of the participants emailed back.

Data Analysis

With the data collected through interviews and observations, I was not able to see any change or impact on the classroom climate. After conducting this research, I have become aware of how things could have been done differently. Also, there are other circumstances beyond my control that need to be factored into this result. First, before the professional development was done, there could have been an observation to get a baseline of what the class was like before interventions were attempted. The difficulty in this is timing. With the allotted time to conduct research and the school’s scheduled professional development days, I was only able to fit in the professional development the week before school had started. Second, as stated in a previous theme, teachers are already busy. The interventions that the participants agreed to try were only partially done or not done at all. Adding an extra task, like trying an intervention for 10 days, is something that takes a back seat to all the things already on their plates. I

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could have sent them more emails to see how their interventions were going and as gentle reminders to be doing them, but I remember what it was like to teach there and did not want to seem pushy and add more stress to their lives. Third, some of the students they were using the interventions with have a history of poor attendance and some were sick for numerous days. It is hard to make any impact or change when interventions are only partially done. Finally, I initially intended to give the participants 4 weeks to try interventions and for me to do more observations. Unfortunately, I had health issues of my own and had to cut back the time allowed to do the research. Rushing things or trying to cram them in may have played a role in the results too.

Conclusion

While ACEs were prevalent in the school setting and the outcome of this study did not impact the classroom climate like it had been intended to, the topic of traumatic stress was brought to a level of awareness. ACEs were in all four of the participants' classrooms, but so was the fact that teachers are spread thin with little support and very few resources. To make a difference in a classroom with students that have experienced ACEs or traumatic stress, it has to be more than a graduate student doing research in 4 classrooms. Building relationships with students and creating a safe, empathetic, and understanding environment can not happen unless the whole school is behind it with support from all the staff and administration. Even though the results are not what was expected, with more time, awareness can lead to change that creates a more understanding environment that fosters growth and learning.

Chapter 5

Implications For Practice

The study presented here was meant to see if trauma-informed professional development given to teachers and staff could impact classroom climate in a K-12 school setting. Not just any impact, but a positive one. ACEs are highly stressful and potentially traumatic events or situations that occur during childhood and/or adolescence. These experiences directly affect the young person and their environment. The effects of ACEs can resemble other problems and mistakenly label them as bad behaviors. There can be no meaningful learning if a student doesn't feel loved, understood, or that they are in a safe space. One hour of professional development on traumatic stress is not enough to buffer the effects of ACEs in a student's life.

Action Plan

As an adult working on my masters, I know how hard it can be to process information when there are traumatic life events and traumatic stress in your life. Simple tasks such as reading a chapter and writing a discussion on it can feel impossible and overwhelming. Trying to do an assignment can bring out difficult emotions like anger and frustration and leave you feeling like a failure, even though you gave it your all. As an adult who has felt malnourished with constant brain fog, fatigue, has had multiple surgeries and procedures, now eats from a feeding tube, and grieves who I used to be, I personally understand how it may feel for any student trying to learn and manage emotions at the same time. I have gone through a lot of trauma and have had a good support system to constantly be there for me and guide me. Even with all the support, it is still hard some days, and worrying and sadness can block your will to do anything, especially learn. Imagine being in elementary school, worrying about when you are going to eat next, where you are going to sleep tonight, or being constantly tired because your parents fighting keeps you up all night. How do you think you would do trying to learn a new math concept or taking a

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test on a book you just read? If it is hard for me, it is going to be hard for them. A young child's stress isn't always visible like a bruise. It can look like a shutdown, a lack of motivation to learn, or even talking back in class. These behaviors are often punished instead of trying to be understood. The further I've gotten into my research, the more I've wanted to change that.

When we think of the word school, we think of math, reading, science, and so on. We often forget that school provides consistency and physical and emotional safety for students. My goal is to help teachers and school administrators to incorporate a trauma-informed teaching philosophy in schools and classrooms. By continuing to do research about ACEs and how they affect student behavior, I will be able to understand how students process trauma and what they need to feel safe and acknowledged in schools. More teachers need to be interviewed, more data collected and reviewed, so we can learn more about classroom climates and trauma-informed professional development.

I'd like to continue doing this research. If the sample size was expanded and the timeline lengthened, we might learn something valuable about the services and support that teachers need to promote ACEs-aware teaching methods. I would like to start consulting with schools, teachers, and administrators to provide more frequent and in-depth training about ACEs and trauma-informed teaching. As part of that consultation process, I would regularly conduct interviews with teachers and administrators before and after the presentation to see how effective the training is in real-world classroom settings. This would give me more data that I could use to alter my trauma-informed development training so it is as applicable as possible for teachers who do this challenging work every day. This work is important, but it is a way to invest in the youth, and it gives everyone, no matter their background or experiences, a chance to be successful. If education is a gateway to opportunity, we can help more and more students to have opportunities. If we can accomplish this goal, and students can feel

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safe and be successful in traditional academic learning, then we can give students the chance to break the cycles of ACEs and trauma.

Plan for Sharing

This paper is something that should be shared with the people on the frontlines of education. Teachers, future teachers, administrators, families, and even wider communities would benefit from changing how they look at classroom behavior. It is important for them to know that taking the time and energy to ensure students feel safe, heard, and valid, is necessary before learning can take place. Students who engage in behavior that is typically seen as ‘disruptive’ are usually crying out for help and validation. These solutions aren’t easy and are in stark contrast to how classrooms have been run in the past. Changing our understanding of student behavior will take time and the process is ongoing. Empathy is a difficult thing to teach, but it is necessary for students who’ve experienced ACEs to be successful in an academic setting. There is huge room to do more research and learn more about ACEs and trauma-informed teaching. We need to continue to do this kind of research in order to be more effective teachers and leaders. In short, we need to take the time, and do the emotional work with our students, and only then can academic learning happen.

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Appendix A

Consent Form

Please read this consent agreement carefully before agreeing to participate in this study.

Title of Study: The Impact of Trauma-Informed Development on Classroom Climate

Purpose of the study: As a teacher, I believe that learning is as important as the content we teach. A classroom environment that doesn't encompass the ideas of understanding and patience will not be conducive to a good learning environment and good behavior. Sometimes it is hard for educators to show patience if they don't really understand what is going on in a student's life. From this study, I want to know how professional development will help teachers see what isn't always obvious and therefore impact the classroom climate.

What you will do in this study:

Study Information: Directly before the study started, teachers are given trauma-informed professional development by the researcher. Two informal interviews and two observations of each participant will be done in this study. The first interview will be to get baseline data about the teacher's background and their feelings about the climate of their classroom. Following the first round of interviews, the researcher conducted two, half-hour classroom observations over a four-week period. The first interview was to get baseline data about the teacher's background and their feelings about the climate of their classroom. Following the first round of interviews, the researcher conducted classroom observations.

Time required: Approximately 6 weeks

Risks: Participation in this study involves minimal risk.

Benefits: Participants may help improve the climate of their classroom by awareness of adverse childhood experiences and what they look like.

Confidentiality: All data will be kept confidential in a password-protected file. The file will be kept for two years and there is no identifying information about the participants that are shared in this study.

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Participation and withdrawal: Participation in this study is optional. Participants can choose not to participate or choose to withdraw at any time without any negative effects on relationship with the researcher or relationship with their employer.

PLEASE NOTE: For research involving more than minimal risk, an explanation as to whether any compensation and an explanation as to whether any medical treatments are available if injury occurs and, if so, what they consist of, or where further information may be obtained.

If you have any questions about the study, please contact:

Amber Lenz, co-investigator, at 507-327-5630 or by Amber.lenz@go.mnstate.edu,

Kathy Enger, Principal Investigator, at 218-477-2217 or by Kathy.Enger@mnstate.edu,

Whom to contact about your rights in this experiment:

Dr. Robert Nava, Director of MSUM Institutional Review Board, at 218-477-4308 or by robert.nava@mnstate.edu,

Agreement:

The purpose and nature of this research have been sufficiently explained and I agree to participate in this study. I understand that I am free to withdraw at any time and my withdrawal will not affect any future relationships with the researcher or with their employer.

In signing this agreement, I also affirm that I am at least 18 years of age or older.

Signature: _____ **Date:** _____

Name (print): _____