

An Ecological Perspective on Emerging Trauma-Informed Teaching Practices

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Childhood trauma affects many youths across the United States and has a devastating impact on their functioning, well-being, and overall academic and vocational outcomes. Experiences of psychological trauma can impede cognitive, social, and emotional development in childhood, which can impair youth academic achievement, behavior, interpersonal skills, and general success in school. Trauma-informed educational practices in schools can provide much needed support to these students, improving their projected academic success and future life outcomes. Ecological theory can also provide an important framework for exploring holistic intervention by assisting students in the multiple contexts of their lives. This article describes emerging trauma-informed responses to students, examined through the lens of the ecological perspective. A review of these practices demonstrates that ecological perspective provides an appropriate and relevant foundation for trauma-informed educational practice with traumatized students. The article concludes with a discussion of the findings along with their implications for social work practice.

KEY WORDS: childhood trauma; ecological perspective; educational well-being; trauma in schools; trauma-informed schools

youths detained in juvenile justice residential facilities report having experienced trauma (Abram et al., 2004; Ford et al., 2012; Ford, Hartman, Hawke, & Chapman, 2008).

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) defines trauma as

experiences that cause intense physical and psychological stress reactions. It can refer to a single event, multiple events, or a set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically and emotionally harmful or threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual's physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being. (SAMHSA, 2014)

The National Association of Social Workers' (NASW's) *Code of Ethics* makes clear the social work mission of advocating for vulnerable populations and providing competent services (NASW, 2008). Social workers and other child-serving professionals have an active role in advocating for traumatized youths, as traumatic experiences can have a lasting impact on their socioemotional, cognitive, behavioral, and academic functioning (Wolpow, Johnson, Hettel, & Kincaid, 2009).

Childhood trauma and its impact on youth functioning have received considerable attention across child-serving systems. Psychological trauma can be prevalent in childhood, as stressful events are common in the general population (Costello, Erkanli, Fairbank, & Angold, 2002). More than 25 percent of children encounter physically, sexually, or emotionally abusive experiences that are perceived as traumatizing (Duke, Pettigell, McMorris, & Borowsky, 2010). Some youth populations, such as youths of color, of lower socioeconomic status, and those in the foster care or juvenile justice systems, are at even greater risk (Abram et al., 2004; Ford, Chapman, Connor, & Cruise, 2012; Lawrence & Hesse, 2010; Salazar, Keller, Goven, & Courtney, 2012). For youths of color, especially those in economically disadvantaged communities, incidents of community violence can be persistent, with long-lasting effects (Lawrence & Hesse, 2010). Youths in foster care also demonstrate higher levels of trauma and have posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) with greater frequency (Salazar et al., 2012). Into adulthood, rates of PTSD are over 20 percent higher for foster care alumni than among the general population. Youths in the juvenile justice system have also had exposure to trauma: Close to 90 percent of

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them (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This environment forms the ecosystem, consisting of five distinct levels: the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1979), and chronosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). In the microsystem, the individual has direct social interactions with his or her immediate environment, receiving from and also contributing to the environment (for example, child-parent interactions, child-peer relationships). The mesosystem refers to the relationships and interactions between the multiple microsystems that exist in one's life (for example, parent-teacher communication, school-peer interaction). The exosystem does not directly interact with the individual, but has indirect influence by affecting the individual's microsystems (for example, school policies, teacher access to professional development). The macrosystem serves as the greater cultural context of the aforementioned systems, including influential legislative policies, as well as cultural perceptions of socioeconomic status, race, and gender. Finally, the chronosystem refers to development throughout the life course and the influence of time on one's development. As individuals age, they may encounter life events that alter the way in which they interact within these systems (White & Klein, 2008). Ecological theory attributes healthy development to one's ability to independently adapt to meet the ever-changing demands of one's various roles within the ecosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). For children, this may mean adjusting their behavior to perform as successful students in the classroom, sons and daughters at home, friends to their peers, and community members in their neighborhood. Traumatized youths certainly encounter challenges in their ecosystem that can impede this development, such as high rates of PTSD, counterproductive school exclusionary discipline policies and procedures (Griffin, 2011), and a host of other issues. Youths are put at greater risk of developing unhealthy and maladaptive behaviors when elements of their ecosystem are compromised. Behaviors that have been linked to microsystems, such as poor family structure (Dennuth & Brown, 2004), mesosystem factors, such as a lack of parental school involvement, and macrofactors, such as oppression and discrimination (Stewart, 2003) and experiences of poverty (Anderson, 1994; Brandt, 2006; Stewart, 2003). Youths' responses to childhood trauma are also contingent on microfactors, such as reactions and support from caregivers; exofactors, such as attitudes of first responders

Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory views human development and behavior as the product of various interacting systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1979). Individual behavior is described as "a function of the interaction of the person's traits and abilities with the environment" (White & Klein, 2008, p. 258). As individuals develop, they are not only influenced by their unique biological and psychological characteristics, but also by the family system, school, community, and larger social system that surrounds

ECOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

Schools can play a major role in improving educational outcomes for traumatized students. Schools have a significant impact on youth well-being, being the most common institutional entry point to mental health services (Farmer, Burns, Phillips, Angold, & Costello, 2003; Ko et al., 2008). Implementing trauma-informed practices in educational settings can assist in creating environments where traumatized students can be successful (Cole et al., 2005; Wolpow et al., 2009). Trauma-informed education requires buy-in from administrators, disciplinary policies that are sensitive to students, staff professional development, and strong relationships between school staff and mental health professionals (Cehlberg, 2008). Creating trauma-sensitive school environments can improve student performance and behavior, school climate, student seat time and retention, and teacher satisfaction (Cehlberg, 2008). It can also reduce student and staff stress, student suspensions and expulsions, and the need for special education services.

THE ROLE OF SCHOOLS

Literature has linked experiences of trauma to specific academic deficits throughout childhood (Anda et al., 2006; Black, Woodworth, Tremblay, & Carpenter, 2012; Cole et al., 2005; Wolpow et al., 2009). Youths who encounter maltreatment generally exhibit diminished social skills, increases in internalizing and externalizing behaviors, as well as less school engagement (Shonk & Cicchetti, 2001). Violence exposure has been associated with lower student grade point average (Furt, Malinud, Brodsky, & Giannetta, 2001) and decreased rates of high school graduation (Grogger, 1997). In addition, trauma has been linked to lower student achievement test scores and course grades, and a higher propensity for school suspension, expulsion, and school failure (Wolpow et al., 2009).

IMPACT ON EDUCATION

based on their impact on the various levels of the individual's ecosystem. For the purpose of this review, only the micro-, meso-, and macro-environmental levels will be examined. Although an individual's chronosystem is affected by educational experiences and well-being, this level exists throughout the life course and cannot be specifically targeted at one point in time, during the school-age years. Implications for school practice relevant to each ecological level will also be provided.

Microsystem Practices

Trauma-informed educational practices can most immediately affect students through direct interactions with school social workers and educational staff. One such example, Cognitive Behavioral Intervention for Trauma in Schools (CBITS), can be used by school social workers and other school mental health staff to decrease student trauma symptoms in the school setting (Stein et al., 2003). Other practices include teachers and support staff acknowledging the progressive stages of development, and the way in which trauma may impede specific developmental phases in youths (Australian Childhood Foundation, 2010). These staff are advised to be attuned to key signals in youth behavior (that is, tone, body language) to determine student levels of engagement and when students may need breaks from the lesson plan (Perry, 2009). They should also be emotionally present (Perry, 2009), exhibit unconditional positive regard for students (Wolpov et al., 2009), and facilitate the growth of strong relationships to correct previously formed negative associations and improve student styles of interpersonal connections and improve student styles of interpersonal connections (Australian Childhood Foundation, 2010; Cole et al., 2005). Furthermore, these staff are encouraged to be careful not to retaliate when students act out in class, but rather to maintain control of their own emotions (Perry, 2009; Wolpov et al., 2009). Finally, they should demonstrate student value by maintaining high yet realistic expectations, fostering opportunities for students to take an active role in class (Wolpov et al., 2009) and to get involved in extracurricular activities to improve school engagement (Cole et al., 2005). Student interactions with the school environment are also important and can be improved with trauma sensitivity. Trauma-informed educational practices suggest that all school staff maintain settings in which they as well as their students are calm, relaxed, and focused in preparation to learn (Perry, 2009).

REVIEW OF TRAUMA-INFORMED EDUCATIONAL PRACTICES

Several frameworks now exist that provide guiding principles for administrators, teachers, school social workers, and other school-based mental health and behavioral support professionals who aim to implement trauma-informed educational practices. Muldyplying Connections (Perry, 2009; Walkley & Cox, 2013) provides a framework for helping teachers and school support staff to become trauma-informed. This model charges school staff with five tasks: remain "Calm," be "Attuned," stay "Present," be "Predictable," and "Don't let children's emotions escalate your own" (CAPPD). Another model, Making SPACE for Learning (Australian Childhood Foundation, 2010) also provides a five-tenet outline for practice with traumatized students. In addition, the Flexible Framework (Cole et al., 2005; Cole, Fisher, Gregory, & Ruscaccia, 2013) and Compassionate Teaching (Wolpov et al., 2009) provide in-depth guides for building school environments that welcome and support traumatized students. Finally, Day et al. (in press) provide promising data on the potential impact of trauma-informed practices on the emotional health of court-involved youths. The findings of this pilot study demonstrated that students' posttraumatic stress symptoms significantly decreased during a school year when school educational and support staff participated in ongoing trauma-informed training.

To date, literature has not reviewed trauma-informed educational practices from an ecological perspective. Yet, the ecology of a student is vitally important to the students well-being and should be taken into consideration when implementing interventions to improve functioning in school or other settings (Day et al., in press). Guided by an ecological perspective, the aim of this review is to highlight the existing and emerging practices for trauma-informed teaching, and to examine them

other mental health professionals in schools can also follow up with both caregivers and community-based mental health professionals to collaborate on strategies for student success (Cole et al., 2005; National Child Traumatic Stress Network Schools Committee, 2008; Oehlberg, 2008).

Exosystem Practices

Trauma-sensitive strategies in schools can assist traumatized students even without a direct interaction with students. Practices, policies, and procedures that indirectly affect students through the school climate are instrumental in influencing educational outcomes. Schools can create a schoolwide culture of sensitivity through institutional implementation of trauma-informed practices and buy-in from school principals and school administrators (Cole et al., 2005; Oehlberg, 2008). Schools can also assess staff needs for executing trauma-informed practices, review school policies using a trauma lens, and inform staff of important guidelines for student confidentiality, mandated reporting, and cross-system collaboration (Cole et al., 2005). Staff trauma training is another part of creating a trauma-informed school climate. Professional development on this topic can make teachers and support staff aware of the impact of family violence, legal considerations with traumatized students, ways to help students interact appropriately in the classroom, and many other critical skills for engaging this student population (Cole et al., 2005; Oehlberg, 2008).

Trauma-informed school policies must rely on consistent and well-communicated disciplinary processes that maintain appropriate expectations of traumatized students while also holding students accountable. Ultimately, these policies need to promote positive student behavior without compromising student classroom seat time through suspension and expulsion practices (Cole et al., 2005; Oehlberg, 2008). For example, Clara B. Ford Academy, a public charter school for court-involved young women in the metro Detroit area in Michigan, used the Monarch Room (MR) intervention to provide alternatives to traditional suspension/expulsion policies (Day et al., in press). Students were either sent or self-referred to the MR when needed and received brief services from a trauma-trained social worker. The goal was to help students to de-escalate within 10 minutes so that they could promptly return to the classroom. Another school, Ford Elementary, located in an impoverished area of Massachusetts,

Rather than creating an environment where students are subject to the complete control and authority of the teacher, compassionate teaching emphasizes shared control (Wolpov et al., 2009). Power struggles between teachers and students are regarded as extremely counterproductive to student success and well-being, potentially furthering the feelings of oppression experienced by students who have already been disempowered by their trauma. On the other hand, negotiating, compromising, and providing opportunities for students to make choices can give students a healing sense of ownership and control over their environment. Further, predictable and structured classroom routines are necessary so that students can begin to perceive their world as reliable and safe (Australian Childhood Foundation, 2010; Cole et al., 2005; Perry, 2009).

Mesosystem Practices

Trauma-informed educational practices can also affect student functioning through the interaction of the school with other systems in the lives of traumatized students. Whereas education may be a primary responsibility of teachers, relationship coaching can be another fundamental function of their role (Wolpov et al., 2009). Teachers and behavioral support staff can advocate for positive interaction in student-teacher relationships by demonstrating appropriate interpersonal boundaries and social skills, and by intervening in negative student interactions when necessary. These negative peer behaviors (for example, bullying, harassment) can be detrimental to students' well-being and sense of safety. When staff members take an active role in inhibiting these behaviors, students can learn better ways to socialize, which would reduce their fears and other negative emotions related to the peers in their environment (Wolpov et al., 2009).

Trauma-informed schools' personnel should also interact effectively with other professionals in the community and with students' caregivers (Cole et al., 2005; Oehlberg, 2008; Wolpov et al., 2009). This includes confidential case consultation between teachers and school mental health professionals to assist in managing particularly difficult issues with students, providing strategies for behavior management, and offering support for secondary trauma. In addition, teachers can also work with school social workers to provide parents or caregivers with appropriate referrals to mental health services. Using a multidisciplinary team approach, teachers, school social workers, and

her education. However, on further observation, the teacher might find that the student commonly puts his or her head down during the time when the teacher begins to call on volunteers to read aloud. This might lead the teacher to privately question the student, revealing that the youth is actually very eager to learn but becomes triggered by the potential threat of having to speak in front of others.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

As illustrated in current and emerging practices, an ecological lens is well suited for addressing the educational needs of traumatized youths using trauma-informed educational practices. School teachers, informed educational practices, and other staff should understand the value of this theoretical perspective in explaining youth behavior and methods of promoting healthy student functioning. Also, these staff should recognize their positioning in their students' ecosystems. Although schools may only represent one microsystem in the lives of their students, interventions should be careful to consider the youths' entire ecological context (Day et al., in press). Therefore, all school staff should strive to understand how their interactions with youths may affect other systems. They should also seek opportunities to make connections with other systems to improve youths' well-being and academic success.

Given the importance of the ecological perspective, school social workers, teachers, and other support staff should consider several implications for working with traumatized students. First, they can address micro-level issues by demonstrating trauma sensitivity in their interactions with students. This means giving attention to the socioemotional needs of students in addition to their academic well-being, and providing supports to increase positive coping skills (Samuels, 2011). As traumatized youths attempt to manage their trauma symptoms in the classroom setting, even traditional curricula and assignments can become overwhelming or triggering (Emerson & Lovitt, 2003). Therefore, social workers may be able to assist teachers in designing assignments that are sensitive to the issues that traumatized students face, avoiding potentially triggering subject matter (Zetlin, MacLeod, & Kimm, 2012). They can also provide strategies for creating classroom structure and varied teaching methods to accommodate the unique learning needs of traumatized students. Further, behavioral staff can assist teachers with addressing interpersonal issues in the classroom (Wolpow et al.,

has been successful in improving student academic achievement (Cole et al., 2005). This school was able to implement trauma-sensitive policies using grant funding from a state program, Creating a Safe and Supportive Learning Environment: Serving Youth Traumatized by Violence. School staff committees were established to review existing issues with difficult students and to create flexible solutions that were understandable of students' socioemotional well-being. Other school systems have also used similar crisis intervention strategies, including crisis teams and plans to detect and assess students who may be experiencing trauma (Ko et al., 2008).

Macrosystem Practices

Trauma-informed practices in schools also require attention to the broader context when attempting to help traumatized students. It is undeniable that school social workers and educational staff face overwhelming demands in their workplaces. Their work can be further impeded when school districts, policies, and legislation does not actively support the implementation of new promising practices. For example, universal social and emotional learning (SEL) programs have been associated with improvements in academic outcomes and reductions in emotional distress among students (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011). Still, school districts do not always possess the capacity to implement such programs. The Collaborating Districts Initiative, an effort of the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), is working to address this deficit by engaging school districts nationwide to improve their ability to implement SEL strategies in the school academic curriculum (CASEL, 2014).

Also, teachers commonly enter the classroom with cultural biases and other assumptions, which can lead to stereotyping and affect their interactions with the students (Wolpow et al., 2009). Compastionate teaching proposes that teachers consistently challenge these assumptions to make better decisions when dealing with student behaviors (Wolpow et al., 2009). To do this, they must first acknowledge when an assumption exists, then choose to intentionally observe their student to challenge the assumption. Observation should then lead to posing questions about the behavior observed. For example, a teacher might have a student of color who consistently sleeps in class, and might make the racially biased assumption that the student is simply apathetic about his or

2009), along with social skills and self-determination (Emerson & Lovitt, 2003). Traumatized youths usually struggle with these aspects of functioning, and school staff can serve as strong models to strengthen them in these areas.

Second, school social workers can engage in meso-level interventions by collaborating with professionals within and across systems. This type of collaboration is a key feature of best practice (Best et al., 2009). School social workers should be able to effectively communicate with students' family systems, providing service referrals to parents, foster parents, or other caregivers. They should also assume a pivotal role in providing behavioral health skills and knowledge to other school staff, as well as a holistic perspective of student development. Providing staff consultation, school social workers can assist teachers and support staff in developing strategies for dealing with difficult behavioral problems or students with complex issues. Teachers should be encouraged to develop collaborative relationships with school social workers and other teachers, engaging in regular consultation to problem solve student issues.

School social workers should also establish an integrated approach to coordinating services and sharing information with psychologists, community social workers, child welfare workers, and juvenile case workers (Day et al., in press). This ensures that youths receive a unified coordination of educational and other services and reduces the risk of youths experiencing secondary trauma, resulting from multiple instances of recounting their stories to several different professionals (Ko et al., 2008). More broadly, schools should collaborate with other schools and child care centers in their district to create a trauma-informed service network. This ensures that students who experience trauma during early childhood continue to receive systematic support and services throughout their school experience and until high school graduation (Walkley & Cox, 2013).

Third, staff can address exo-level issues by building trauma-related knowledge within the school setting. School personnel have a front row seat to the behavioral, academic, and socioemotional issues that traumatized students encounter. However, teachers do not commonly receive content on trauma in their education training programs, impeding them from fully understanding its impact on youths and ways to address it in the school setting (Ko et al., 2008). School social workers can play an integral role in introducing knowledge and education-related resources on the origins of trauma and its impact on youth functioning, as well as ways to sensitively address student issues in the classroom. Important training on recent developments in brain research; theoretical perspectives of functioning; and prevalence and impact of child abuse, neglect, and family violence can be extremely useful to school staff. School social workers can participate in providing this instruction and knowledge on trauma-informed practices and strategies, evidence-based interventions (for example, CBITS), and emerging promising practices for managing negative student behavior.

Finally, school practitioners can affect the macro-level context by further engaging with researchers to evaluate school practices. Promising findings can serve as an illustration for policymakers (for example, school district officials, state departments of education) that there are potential socioemotional as well as financial benefits associated with implementing trauma-informed practices in schools. In turn, officials can advocate for the global application of trauma-informed practices across districts. One such trauma-informed teaching effort in Massachusetts has led to An Act Relative to Safe and Supportive Schools, which was signed into law in 2014. This new legislation, a section of the gun violence reduction bill, serves to improve safety and school culture in schools statewide (Trauma and Learning Policy Initiative, 2014).

On another note, school staff should also establish routines that reinforce cultural competence. The degree to which cultural sensitivity is practiced in school settings is generally at the discretion of teachers and staff as they interact with students (Ming & Dukes, 2006). To build cultural competence into the fabric of the institution, administrators must integrate it into its routines and infrastructure (Craig, Hull, Haggart, & Perez-Selles, 2000; Ming & Dukes, 2006), and social work staff would be ideal for leading this charge. Ming and Dukes (2006) encouraged school staff to (a) self-reflect on culture and that of their students; (b) hold classroom meetings to discuss school issues; (c) allot time for culture and diversity discussions; (d) have one-on-one student conversations; (e) use multicultural literature for professional development; (f) use multicultural literature in the classroom; (g) use evidence-based approaches with minority students; (h) build strong relationships with students; and (i) build strong relationships with students' parents. When these practices are integrated into school

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