TEACHER EDUCATION CANDIDATES AND TRAUMA: WHAT THEY NEED TO KNOW

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ABSTRACT
This qualitative study explores what teacher education candidates know and understand about trauma. Teacher candidates completed an anonymous survey that questioned their knowledge of the definition of trauma and what causes trauma. The results show that those teacher candidates have a very basic understanding of trauma and that the teacher education program needs to ensure that these candidates are prepared to help students in their future classrooms. Recommendations for the program are provided.

Keywords: program evaluation; comprehension; school/teacher effectiveness; postsecondary education; teacher education/development

Within the last few years, trauma and the effect on students has become more prevalent in education. Trauma-informed schools and social emotional learning have inundated the literature as educators have focused on helping students. Many schools have begun working with local community centers to help establish resources and support for students and families. In one Midwestern city, in the spring of 2018, a local community center hosted a speaker from Los Angeles to discuss his community outreach and the impact he has had in transforming former gang members into functioning members of society. During his presentation, the traumatic experiences these people suffered were highlighted, along with their resiliency in overcoming such experiences. A discussion about what educators and community members could do help people overcome similar experiences was also discussed; however, no discussion was had regarding what future teachers might need to know in order to help their future students.

In a constantly changing world, teacher education students (teacher candidates) not only need to understand the impact that trauma can have in a classroom but also what trauma is. A small, private university in the Midwestern region of the United States recently began a new teacher education preparation program during the 2017-18 school year. Here, first and second-year students were surveyed to find out what they know about trauma and to find out what needs to be established in the program to help prepare them for their future classrooms and students.

Review of Literature
Recent studies (Eklund, Rossen, Koriakin, Chafouleas & Resnick, 2018; Harral, 2018; Souers, 2018) have evaluated the last twenty years of research focusing on trauma's impact in the classroom; however, these and previous studies have not evaluated what students in teacher education preparation programs know and understand about trauma.
Trauma has evolved over time: beginning with the Soldier’s Heart in the post-Civil War era, to Shell Shock in WWI, to a clearer understanding of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (Friedman, 2005). Today, trauma is defined as when “a child perceives themselves or others around them to be threatened by serious injury, death, or psychological harm” (Bell, Limberg, Robinson, 2013; Klain, 2014). Trauma can be differentiated between an acute traumatic experience, one event connected to a singular time (Klain, 2014), and chronic trauma, a continuous exposure to physical, sexual, or emotional abuses (Bell et al, 2013; Klain, 2014; Persyn, 2016). Acute trauma can include serious injuries or even deaths of loved ones (Persyn, 2016). It can also include situation such as “natural disasters, car crashes, loss of a loved one, assault, or terrorist attacks” (Bell et al, 2013). Contrarily, Klain (2014) also defines a complex trauma as “exposure to multiple or prolonged forms of trauma…often of an invasive, interpersonal nature, and the wide-ranging, long-term impact of this exposure.” Being able to understand and differentiate between types of traumatic events is essential to understanding how to help survivors of trauma.

Regardless of the type of traumatic event suffered by our students, “exposure to even one form of trauma can have a deleterious impact” (Wamser-Nanney & Vandenbeerg, 2013). The effects that trauma can have on the body include:

- alterations in certain structures of the brain (Friedman, 2005)
- disruptions to interpersonal communication skills, peer relationships, and academic achievement (Bell et al, 2013)
- dysregulation of the body’s neuroendocrine immune circuitry (Persyn, 2016)

Our students are tenacious; we see this day in and day out in our classrooms. But they need the adults in their lives, especially those as influential as a teacher to “understand those events, their impacts and how to talk to the victims in such a way as to recognize that they are hurting and without belittling or demeaning what they are feeling” (Harrall, 2018). In order to ensure that this happens, teachers must prepare for these situations before they even enter the classroom. Forming an understanding of what trauma is, what the symptoms of trauma are, and what can be done to help students facing traumatic events is essential to preparing teacher candidates for their future classrooms.

Methodology

Before trying to help teacher education candidates understand what trauma is and how traumatic events affect students, professors in the Teacher Education program needed to find out what the candidates know. A survey was distributed at the conclusion of education classes that asked students to answer questions about trauma and to determine what they understand about trauma (see Appendix A). There are currently twenty students in the program. One declined to participate and five other students were not of age to consent thereby leaving fourteen able participants. Of the fourteen, three are in their second year of the program and the other eleven are in their first year of education classes. Their answers were analyzed using Merriam’s (2008) qualitative research method for coding and categorizing.
Results
Within their responses to question one, teacher candidates recognized that trauma has a negative impact on a person’s life; however, candidates were unable to differentiate between the different types of trauma. All responses can be categorized under three major ideas found within their responses. The first category is definitions that all contained a negative connotation (“a bad/harsh experience”). The second category is definitions that focus on the effect of trauma and the third category are responses that detail how trauma is a life-changing event. Only one candidate wrote a response that encompassed all three categories in his/her definition by stating that “something that has happened in life that greatly affects the way [someone] sees or lives [his/her] life later on in a negative way.”

All responses for question two fell within six major categories: (1) family/relationship, (2) abuse/bully, (3) illness/death, (4) accident, (5) war/military service, (6) sexual abuse. Three candidates offered more specific examples such as miscarriage, domestic violence, kidnapping, and torture in addition to responses that fell within one of the six major categories.

All but one teacher candidate recognized that everyone can suffer from trauma in response to question three. One candidate responded that it is the “victim and [his/her] family” that suffer from trauma. Teacher candidates identified three key symptoms in their answers to question four: disengagement, depression, and the effect on one’s emotions (mood swings, anger, outbursts, etc…) in their answers to question five, the majority of teacher candidates responded that students can understand a traumatic event as they develop in their elementary and middle school years.

For question six, teacher candidates wrote down multiple ways of helping students who are suffering from trauma. Over half of teacher candidates focused on offering support in their classrooms to assist students suffering from traumatic experiences. The majority of responses focused on offering flexibility, understanding, and leniency in academics for their students. Half of teacher candidates also suggested some sort of empathetic response, such as listening, talking, providing coping mechanisms, and providing “positive vibes” to their students. In question seven, almost unanimously, teacher candidates stated that schools should provide guidance counselors or mental health services to help students.

Finally, for the most part, teacher candidates recognized the impact that trauma could have on a student’s learning. They noted that it could “hinder learning,” and affect “attendance and grades,” “their will to go to school,” “their focus in class or outside of class,” or cause them to “seem anti-social.” All candidates were able to identify that trauma did have some sort of impact on a student’s life, whether it was in school or out of school.

Conclusion
Overall, teacher candidates were able to recognize that trauma has a considerable impact on students’ lives. What they lack, however, is the understanding of the different types of trauma; the understanding of the psychological impact trauma has on students, and resources available to both them and their students. It is imperative that as we begin to prepare these teacher candidates for their classrooms that we also begin to prepare them to work with students who have suffered a traumatic event(s). Moving forward, offering classes and professional development workshops...
that focus on the types of trauma, the symptoms of trauma, and the resources at both the local and state level that are available is essential in preparing them for their futures in a classroom. Furthermore, offering the students the opportunity to talk with local resource workers, school experts, and current classroom teachers through observations and interviews will help provide a foundation for them to build upon as they begin their practicum and clinical work. While this study may be limited in the number of candidates that participated, the importance of it cannot be denied. Teachers must be able to help students who have been through or are going through traumatic situations. Preparing these teachers is of the utmost importance in higher education classrooms.

References


