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Exploring a School-University Model for Professional Development with Classroom Staff: Teaching Trauma-Informed Approaches

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Abstract

Schools serving communities with high rates of poverty face the profound challenge of meeting the needs of students who are often exposed to significant family and environmental stressors and trauma. Classroom staff are vital members of school communities who often work closely with students with the highest needs, but they are typically not provided with professional development opportunities to develop skills for social–emotional learning intervention. This study, conducted in three parts, describes (1) a needs assessment with classroom staff to determine their learning needs, (2) the development and implementation of a series of professional development workshops that incorporated findings from the needs assessment, and (3) post-workshop surveys and focus groups to assess the impact of the workshops and identify ongoing professional development needs. Findings include themes of continuing concern regarding learning, school climate, and the need to address stress and trauma in students' lives. Additionally, findings point to the workplace environment as creating barriers for classroom staff to implement new strategies and make use of the knowledge and skills gained in the workshops. Implications for building or enhancing a trauma-informed school community are discussed.

Key Words: professional development, classroom support staff, paraprofessionals, aides, trauma-informed approaches, school–university partnerships

Introduction

Classroom staff, also known as teaching assistants, classroom aides, and paraprofessionals, are vital members of school communities who typically work closely with students with the highest needs (Manz, Power, Ginsburg-Block, & Dowrick, 2010). Schools serving communities with high rates of poverty face the profound challenge of meeting the needs of students who are often exposed to significant family and environmental stressors and trauma, impacting students' health and mental health (Wadsworth et al., 2008). Classroom staff and teachers are increasingly aware of the ubiquitous role that trauma and chronic stress play in children's learning and development but feel uncertain about how to provide optimal support and struggle with distinguishing their role in the healing process (Alisic, 2012).

Schools that successfully meet the challenges presented when serving high-poverty communities do so by developing a caring and collaborative culture where all students are fully included and leadership is shared among school personnel (Ciuffetelli Parker, Grenville, & Flessa, 2011). Infusing these factors with trauma-informed practices can help schools establish safer, more consistent learning environments and help children exposed to trauma and/ or chronic stress build resiliency (Jaycox, Kataoka, Stein, Langley, & Wong, 2012). Trauma-informed practices include social–emotional development and problem-solving skills that classroom staff are in an optimal position to facilitate. All school staff can support children's ability to build resilience by teaching coping skills and helping children process their emotions and create hope for the future (Baum, Rotter, Reidler, & Brom, 2009). When students are taught self-management and coping skills, it results in fewer classroom disruptions that often interfere with learning (Bath, 2008; Ko et al., 2008).

Although classroom staff are crucial for schools and promote student achievement, relatively few studies have been conducted with this group (Brown & Devecchi, 2013), and their professional development needs have been under-researched (Bignold & Barbera, 2012). The current study examined the professional development needs of classroom staff and explored what they perceived as barriers and supports to participating in professional development to learn and implement trauma-informed approaches with their students.

Trauma-Informed Approaches

Children who experience trauma have a heightened risk of developing a range of physical, mental health, and behavioral difficulties (Cooper, 2010; Gershoff, Aber, Raver, & Lennon, 2007). Exposure to poverty, loss, abuse, and violence creates the type of neurophysiological stress response that potentially

interferes with children's ability to autonomously regulate their emotions and behavior (Cooper, 2010; Jaycox et al., 2012; Jensen, 2009). Many such children are labeled as "difficult students" due to their challenging behaviors and are often referred to alternative programs, considered part of the pipeline to prison (Garbarino, 2005). Incorporating trauma-informed approaches in school communities is crucial to effectively meet the complex needs of children who face staggering adversity (Copeland, Keeler, Angold, & Costello, 2007).

From a trauma-informed perspective, children's behavioral outbursts and/or withdrawals are not seen as conscious acts of defiance but as social–emotional responses to overwhelming stress and anxiety (Ko et al., 2008). The integrated neurophysiological responses to trauma prepare their young bodies to fight, flee, or mentally disassociate from traumatic memories or high stress situations, often resulting in violent outbursts, fleeing the situation, and lack of engagement (Shonkoff et al., 2012). Teachers and classroom staff, however, often interpret children's responses to trauma as defiance or a lack of respect (Jensen, 2009). Zero-tolerance policies have proven to be ineffective in addressing children's challenging behaviors (Skiba et al., 2014), partially because these behaviors can include internalized responses to trauma that are retriggered by punitive disciplinary confrontations. For school staff to effectively provide positive behavior supports, they must reconceptualize their understanding of the causes of these behaviors as physiological reactions to trauma or overwhelming stress (Bloom, 1995).

A School-University Model for Professional Development of Classroom Staff

An essential component of a trauma-informed school is democratic partnership among all school personnel for the care of the students (Bloom, 1995), and this partnership may be challenged if classroom staff are not included as equals. Despite their important role, classroom staff are often not provided the professional development needed to effectively deliver education and special services (Capizzi & DaFonte, 2012). Without adequate training and support, they remain in a subordinate position, and the school misses out on the optimal collaborative functioning of the full team (Burgess & Mayes, 2007). Professional development opportunities are valued by classroom staff (Bignold & Barbera, 2012), and increased preparation improves their effectiveness (Hall, Grundon, Pope, & Romero, 2010).

School–university partnerships are one promising way schools can innovate and help build capacity to respond to students' complex needs (Luter, Lester, & Kronick, 2013). A number of these collaborative initiatives involve school–university partnerships for research and service to capitalize on the university's

goals of civic engagement and applied research (Anderson-Butcher & Ashton, 2004; Benson, Harkavy, Johanek, & Puckett, 2009). This article describes a school–university partnership to support implementation of trauma-informed approaches through professional development for classroom staff.

This study offers innovative practices to strengthen the pedagogical foundation for classroom staff in elementary schools through trauma-informed practices. The overall project goals were to: (1) expand classroom staff members' understandings of the nonacademic barriers to learning for children that can result from trauma and toxic stress, and (2) review the conditions that help create supports or barriers to the use of trauma-informed practices.

Project Overview

This study grew from collaboration between local elementary school personnel and university faculty members (the researchers) and was conducted in three parts. First, a needs assessment was conducted with classroom staff. Second, a series of professional development workshops that incorporated findings from the needs assessment were developed and implemented. Finally, post-workshop surveys and focus groups were conducted to assess the impact of the workshops and identify areas for continued professional development.

Prior to the needs assessment, the researchers had discussions with the school-based social worker and building principal at the beginning of the school year and learned about the difficulties teachers and classroom staff experienced working with students with challenging behaviors. Both the school-based social worker and principal identified poverty, poor living conditions, and environmental and family stress as contributing factors to students' academic and behavioral difficulties. The school district offered regular professional development opportunities for teachers, including effective teaching strategies and positive behavior supports, but there had been very limited professional development provided to classroom staff. The principal and social worker shared their opinion that classroom staff often did not know how to meet the students' complex needs.

The researchers (one each from education and social work) have a background in trauma-informed practices and expressed an interest in working with the school to develop a trauma-informed model. The principal and social worker were supportive of the idea, and the decision was made collectively to begin with professional development for classroom staff. Thus, the underpinning for this project was to explore the needs of classroom staff and develop a foundation for further development of a trauma-informed model for elementary schools.

Methods

Community and School Context

This pilot study was conducted in an elementary school located in a small city in the Northeastern United States that served children from PreK through Grade 5. The school had approximately 425 students, approximately 50% of whom were students of color. School district data showed that over 90% of all students were economically disadvantaged. The out-of-school suspension rate was more than 5% per year, and attendance hovered around 90%. For the school year 2012–13, third, fourth, and fifth grade tests in English language arts and math showed that less than 10% of students met state standards.

The school employed 36 teachers, all state certified, with an average class size of 19 students. There were 25 classroom staff who worked directly with students in the classrooms and monitored the playground and cafeteria. Some classroom staff worked one-on-one with students with disabilities, and others provided general support in the classroom, typically spending most of their time with students presenting challenging behaviors. The school was selected using purposeful sampling (Merriam, 1998), with this school thought to be representative of a small, racially diverse, urban elementary school with high rates of poverty. This study was approved by the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB). Once this site was selected, all classroom staff were invited to participate in the study.

Participants

All of the 25 classroom staff attended one or more of the workshops, but responsibilities in the classroom prevented some from participating consistently. Sixteen classroom staff participated in the final meeting, which included completing a demographic questionnaire and the post-workshop survey and participating in a focus group. Of the 16 participants who attended the final meeting, one was male and 15 were female. A question about race/ethnicity was not asked on the demographic form, but discussions throughout the workshop indicated that all but one classroom staff identified as White, and one identified as Latina. Their educational backgrounds varied as follows: high school diploma (n = 5); some college (n = 7); associate's degree (n = 3); and a bachelor's degree (n = 1). The length of time that respondents had worked with children in a school setting varied from one year to over 20 years, with an average of 11 years. All participants spent the majority of their day in the classroom working directly with students.

Professional Development on Trauma-Informed Practices

In October 2013, the principal investigator for this study gave a short presentation on trauma responses and the behavioral impact on children during the school's regularly scheduled faculty and staff meeting. This presentation gave a brief overview of how cognitive functioning and development are impacted by the physiological changes associated with trauma and toxic stress. Staff vulnerability to secondary trauma and stress due to exposure to the pain and struggles of others was covered. The importance of a supportive and nurturing school climate and culture to help students build resiliency was also discussed. The primary purpose was to provide all school personnel with basic information on the impetus for students' behavior as physiological rather than psychological and to introduce trauma-informed approaches for the school.

Nominal Needs Assessment

In January 2014, the researchers completed the first part of this study by conducting a nominal needs assessment with 25 classroom staff to understand their ideas about their own professional development needs related to trauma-informed practices. The process began with the group reflecting back to the presentation on trauma and toxic stress and discussing their professional development needs to support their work with students. Classroom staff wrote down their top five professional development needs; each individual was then asked to share the first item on their list, which the researchers wrote on a large board. This process continued with each person stating the second and third items on their lists, at which point all agreed that everything on their lists was represented. In the discussion that followed, the needs were prioritized and defined. Their primary interest was to develop strategies to more effectively address students' challenging behaviors, specifically with what was described as "whole-body children" who are "constantly moving" and those who are defiant and/or aggressive. In the discussion, classroom staff stated that they believed the students' behaviors were related to difficult, potentially traumatic, situations at home. The results of the needs assessment were used to identify topics of interest for upcoming professional development workshops (see Table 1).

Professional Development Workshops

From February through May 2014, the researchers completed the second part of this study by developing and implementing a series of four workshops based on the findings from the needs assessment. To enable classroom staff to participate in the trainings, the principal released them from their regular duties once per month to gather in the multipurpose room for the last 45 minutes of the school day. Workshop attendance by classroom staff varied from 25 to

15 participants over the four workshops. This variation was primarily due to illness, situations in the classroom that particular day that required the classroom staff's presence (e.g., a substitute teacher or a student with behaviors that needed one-on-one monitoring), or the desire to be part of special classroom events (e.g., celebration, guest visitor, community field trips).

The trainings covered: (1) information on the neurohormonal impact of trauma and toxic stress on children's behavior and learning; (2) positive behavioral strategies; (3) stress reduction and relaxation techniques; and (4) cognitive behavioral strategies for classroom intervention. See Table 1 for additional details of the workshop topics, goals, and activities.

Procedures for Assessing Workshops

Focus groups and a short survey to assess learning and attitudes were used to collect data following the final professional development training of the school year. Since this study relied on locally developed training modules, data were also used to assess the impact of the training and identify areas for further development of the workshops.

Instruments and Analysis

Post-Workshop Survey

In June 2014, once the workshop series was complete, participants were invited to complete an anonymous survey that utilized a combination of open- and closed-ended questions to explore classroom staffs' perceptions related to trauma-informed practices and school/workplace climate. The survey asked participants to list: (1) two things they learned from the workshops, (2) two things they want to learn more about, and (3) what they liked about the workshops. Additionally, participants were asked to respond to statements related to areas of content in the workshops and school/workplace climate using a 4-point scale, noting whether they "strongly agree, " "agree, " "disagree, " or '"strongly disagree" with each statement (e.g., "Student disruptive behaviors may be linked to physical changes related to a stressful living environment;" "The adults who work here come together as a team to work together and support one another during stressful times;" see Table 2 for the complete list of questions). Questions about workplace climate were included because the trauma-informed perspective includes attention to the school climate and culture in addition to specific strategies or interventions with students. Frequency distributions were calculated.

Table 1. Professional Development Workshop Outline

Topics / Link to trauma-informed approach	Goal: Each staff member will have skills to…	Sample Activities
The neurohormonal impact of trauma and toxic stress on children's behavior and learning	Understand the physiological impetus of student behavior to support the need to use positive behavioral strategies rather than punishment	Slide presentations, handouts, and short videos that deliver the content; discussions to reinforce learning
Positive behavioral strategies / Attend to the possibility of high stress interrupting the students' ability to focus, follow directions, understand content, and remember new information	(a) Give students five positive reinforcements for every one negative or neutral feedback; (b) teach 2 to 3 behaviors at a time; (c) model "I do, We do, You do" when teaching new behavior or content; (d) give specific and concrete feedback; and (e) establish predictable and understandable routines	Mini-lecture; large and small group discussions of examples of student behavior or situations that have been challenging; role plays; drawing and other activities to reinforce learning
Cognitive behavioral strategies for classroom intervention / Reinforce social–emotional learning and development to help students develop skills that contribute to resilience	Teach problem solving, planning, decision making, and recognizing cause and effect relationships to their students	Mini-lecture to teach techniques; pair-and-share to identify how they could use the techniques in the classroom; large group discussions
Stress reduction and relaxation techniques / Protection against secondary trauma; help students identify their own stress and learn calming techniques	(a) Manage their own stress level throughout the day; (b) recognize stress building up with their students; and (c) teach stress reduction techniques to their students	Demonstrated and practiced deep breathing, stretching, muscle tense and release, and other activities that can be done in the classroom

Table 2. Post-Workshop Survey

	% Strongly Agree	% Agree	% Disagree	% Strongly Disagree
1. Student disruptive behaviors may be linked to physical changes related to a stressful living environment.	50.0	43.8	0.0	6.3
2. When an adult uses a loud voice or a stern tone it can trigger a high stress response in some students, making behavior worse.	18.8	50.0	31.3	0.0
3. Often, students will only stop a negative behavior if an adult uses an aggressive tone or strong words.	6.3	56.3	31.3	6.3
4. What I learned will be helpful in my work.	6.7	73.3	20.0	0.0
5. I plan to talk to others at my school about this information.	14.3	57.1	21.4	7.1
6. The adults in the school give supportive, corrective feedback to one another when witnessing an adult speaking harshly to a student.	0.0	33.3	60.0	6.7
7. I generally feel respected in the workplace.	33.3	46.7	20.0	0.0
8. My colleagues consistently demonstrate respect for one another.	12.5	50.0	31.3	6.3
9. The adults who work here come together as a team to work…support one another during stressful times.	6.3	62.5	25.0	6.3
10. The adults in the school help each other develop creative, strengths-based responses to difficult problems or issues.	6.3	56.3	37.5	0.0
11. I generally consider my classroom or workspace to be a calm and peaceful environment.	18.8	43.8	37.5	0.0

Note: n = 16

Focus Groups

Based on Madriz's definition, the focus groups created "a way of listening to people and learning from them" (2000, p. 835) and were consistent with how the workshops had been conducted. Because focus groups emphasize the collective, rather than the individual, they also fostered free expression of ideas.

The 16 participants were randomly divided into one of three focus groups that were conducted concurrently, each with five to six participants. Two focus groups were conducted by the researchers, and the third was conducted by a university student research assistant who had been trained in the focus group protocol. The research assistant was also trained in data analysis and assisted in this as well.

Focus groups were conducted at different tables within the school's multi-purpose room. Each focus group lasted between 45–60 minutes and explored the same questions: (1) Can you describe how the information on trauma and toxic stress informs your interactions with students? (2) Have you shared anything about trauma or toxic stress with the teacher? (3) How do you see trauma and/or toxic stress impacting the students, teachers, other personnel, and school climate? (4) Do you see trauma-informed practices being integrated into classroom and school routine? If so, what does that look like? If not, what has gotten in the way? and (5) What would be helpful to you in terms of professional development, skill building, or continued learning? Researchers took detailed notes during the focus groups and checked with participants to ensure that the notes reflected their meaning and intent.

Focus Group Data Analysis

Using content analysis methods, notes from the focus groups were analyzed inductively since this was an area with little previous research to inform deductive analysis (Elo & Kyngas, 2008). Working independently, each member of the research team conducted an initial analysis of the focus group notes to reduce persuasion or bias amongst researchers. A conventional approach to content analysis (Hseih & Shannon, 2005) was employed, by which the researchers read the detailed notes from the focus groups and highlighted key words or ideas that appeared to capture important thoughts or concepts. A second reading by each resulted in various categories emerging, allowing codes to be grouped into meaningful clusters that were then organized and ranked into categories and subcategories (Moretti et al., 2011). At this point, the research team engaged in extensive conversation, reviewing and discussing their individual findings, so they could then document and finalize agreed-upon themes and respondent quotations. These collaborative discussions increased the credibility, trustworthiness, and internal integrity of the findings (Guba, 1981) as the separate researchers identified common, overlapping, and frequently occurring themes.

Findings

Post-Workshop Surveys

Sixteen participants completed the survey. When asked what they learned most from the workshops on the open-ended questions in the survey, most of the participants (63%) noted relaxation techniques, especially deep breathing methods. Three stated that they learned the importance of maintaining a positive attitude, and three others noted that they had learned new ways of responding to challenging behaviors without specifying a particular technique. When asked what topics they would like to see offered for future workshops, four participants (25%) noted topics such as skills for working with students with learning or behavioral concerns, particularly students with ADHD and autism. Another four (25%) expressed an interest in professional development around more effectively working with more students who are aggressive, bullying, or violent. One asked for more techniques to manage stress, and another wanted "better appreciation" for classroom staff.

Table 2 shows the findings from the closed-ended survey questions. When asked about workshop content, almost all of the participants (94%) agreed that students' disruptive behaviors may be linked to physiological changes related to stress. Although most participants also "agreed" or "strongly agreed" (69%) that an adult's loud voice or a stern tone can trigger a high stress response in some students, making behavior worse, approximately one third of participants disagreed with this statement. The majority of participants (62.6%) indicated that they "agreed" or "strongly agreed" an aggressive tone or strong words are often the only way to get a student to stop a negative behavior. Most participants (80%) also "agreed" that the information provided in the workshops will be useful in their work, and 71% planned to share their learning with others.

When asked about school and workplace climate, the majority of participants (67%) "disagreed" or "strongly disagreed" that adults in the school gave supportive, corrective feedback to one another when witnessing an adult speaking harshly to a student. A majority of participants (80%) "agreed" or "strongly agreed" that they generally felt respected in the workplace. Although most participants (63%) also "agreed" or "strongly agreed" that there was consistent demonstration of respect among colleagues, just over a third disagreed or strongly disagreed. Although most participants (69%) also "agreed" or "strongly agreed" that adults come together as a team to work together and support one another during stressful times, about a third did not. While most participants (63%) also indicated that they help each other develop creative, strengths-based responses to difficult problems or issues, again over a third disagreed with this statement. Similarly, while almost two-thirds of the

participants (63%) "agreed" or "strongly agreed" that their classroom is a calm and peaceful environment, over a third disagreed.

Focus Group Themes

Six themes were identified from the analysis of the notes taken during the focus groups. Three of the themes were related to students and issues concerning learning and school climate: (1) concern about students' increased exposure to trauma and toxic stress at home; (2) students and school personnel are experiencing additional stress in the current school climate; and (3) students' unmet social–emotional needs and disruptive behaviors interfere with learning. The other three themes focused on the workplace environment and the professional needs of the classroom staff: (4) classroom staff do not get adequate professional support to work effectively with students experiencing trauma and toxic stress; (5) classroom staff feel a lack of power and authority in the school; and (6) professional development to teach classroom-based trauma-informed approaches offers many benefits.

Theme 1: Concern About Students' Increased Exposure to Trauma and Toxic Stress at Home

Data across focus groups revealed that the vast majority of classroom staff were concerned about the needs of students generated by issues in the home environment. These issues included food insecurity, lack of adult interaction and supervision, and exposure to trauma. Participants characterized some of the ways in which lack of structure and basic care of their students impacts the staffs' roles and responsibilities, including needing to meet students' basic needs. For example, one classroom staff remarked,

> Sometimes you can spend the whole day taking care of outside issues… like literally bringing kids in the bathroom and washing their necks, arms, and faces with wipes and seeing the dirt coming off or making sure to stuff a few snacks in the bags of the kids you know don't usually get dinner.

Another participant described, "The students come to school with no shoes and clothes that aren't appropriate for the weather. They don't have any supervision at home. So many of them have a really bad environment at home." Another stated, "It's hard to get students to focus on their work when they have other issues. Kids come to school on empty stomachs. They have all kinds of trauma."

Theme 2: Students and School Personnel Are Experiencing Additional Stress in the Current School Climate

The notion that the current school climate is creating additional stress for students was echoed across focus groups. Some participants attributed this to

an increased emphasis on academics. One participant described, "It used to be that kindergarten's emphasis was on building social skills, cooperation, basic learning skills. Now we have children who have no modeling at home and no time to teach these things in school." This sentiment was echoed by another classroom staff, "The expectations are too high on kids. The curriculum is too demanding." Other participants attributed these changes to increased behavioral expectations. She described, "That's part of the biggest problem with the kids: They don't have enough time to be kids, to decompress during the day. They're being made to sit and follow rules. They're told what to do all of the time." Another participant remarked, "Over the course of the school year, the climate in school becomes less positive."

Other participants noted the ways in which new learning standards and accountability reforms were negatively impacting school staff and creating stress for students. For example, one shared, "Common Core makes the stress worse. Everybody is out for themselves. The teachers are miserable; the aides are, too. The kids got it worse because we're all stressed." Others noted that the pressure made it more difficult to introduce new learning approaches that are not currently part of the school culture. One participant shared, "I don't see any of these [trauma-informed] practices in the classroom. Teachers are so tired and burned out by the end of the year, and there is a lot of yelling. The yelling is really hard on some kids." Another classroom staff shared, "It takes too much time [to use new strategies]. By the time you figure out what's going on with the students, there is no time to look up the tricks and tools we learned briefly."

Theme 3: Students' Unmet Social–Emotional Needs and Disruptive Behaviors Interfere With Learning

Across focus groups, participants talked about how students' unmet needs resulted in disruptive behaviors. One classroom staff noted, "There are so many aggressive behaviors such as hitting." Another shared, "I see frequent disruptions in class from students acting out." Another participant noted, "The kids pick on each other constantly...it starts out as teasing or playing, but then it gets out of control because they don't know when to stop." Others talked about the impact on the students' ability to engage in learning. For instance, a classroom staff stated, "In PreK we've had kids with the most severe backgrounds just give up. They are already giving up in PreK."

Data suggests that classroom staff were aware that children's behavior is in response to stressors, but they were uncertain how to intervene. Some of the classroom staff appeared to feel overwhelmed by the severity of student behaviors and appeared to believe that change was not possible because the students lacked motivation. One participant remarked, "The information [from the

workshops] didn't really inform how I work with students. That's mostly because of the kids we work with. No matter what we do, their behavior doesn't change." Another classroom staff shared, "The students we work with don't want to change so nothing we do matters. Nothing works." Another participant described her perception that disruptive behaviors can become so overwhelming that sad or withdrawn students do not get attention, "They [students] all handle stress differently. We see inactive responses like when a student won't do anything...and they are quiet so sometimes professionals just don't care."

Theme 4: Classroom Staff Do Not Get Adequate Professional Support to Work Effectively With Students Experiencing Trauma and Toxic Stress

Across focus groups, participants also described wanting greater access to information that impacts their roles and responsibilities, including school placement and student information. A classroom staff remarked, "We don't even know until August where [which classroom] we will be. It is stressful wondering all summer." "We need more information about students to do our jobs better," added another participant. One classroom staff described, "All school personnel need to know about individual students. Sometimes I work the front desk, and it is really stressful." Another participant shared,

> We should have a [student] action plan that can be shared if we are absent or get moved to another classroom. We need to know who is violent. We need to be able to tell other people working with the child what works and what doesn't.

One classroom staff described circumstances that appeared to be shared by many:

> We just get thrown into it with violent kids with no training or support. So we have to just try and figure it out each year, the behaviors and medication issues. Then we figure it out and have to start all over again the next year.

In addition to the daily challenges experienced by classroom staff, participants described frustration with the lack of information they are provided about students' needs. One participant shared, "It is very stressful for us to walk in a room and be told to work with students without getting any debrief on them." Another participant revealed, "They tell us ok, your 1:1 is autistic or yours has ADHD, but they don't tell us what that means or how to work best with kids that have those issues."

The issue of teamwork among the adults in the school was also addressed. One participant remarked, "We need more staff in classrooms to manage student behaviors." Another, however, noted difficulty if the adults were not

working as a team, "Too many staff in a classroom is confusing to students. One adult tells a student one thing, and then another adult tells a student something else. Adults in classrooms aren't on the same page." The need for close partnership was echoed by another, "We [classroom staff] need more informal conversations about students' behaviors, and we have less opportunity to do so with more focus on instructional time." Another participant described,

> I just wish that I could have just 10 minutes a day, or even just once a week, to talk to the teacher without interruptions from other people or students. Just 10 minutes to talk about what we experienced during the week and get feedback on how we could have handled it better, stuff like that. That would be a good time to go over these trauma techniques.

One classroom staff stated simply, "There is just no communication with us."

For some participants, teamwork challenges centered on a general lack of respect for classroom staff within the school culture. One aide shared that her husband had a stroke, and the principal did not even know she was out for six weeks. Another stated,

> He [principal] doesn't greet us. He's always on his phone and will look up if it is a teacher, and he'll say "hello." If it is an aide coming he'll just look back down. We are worthless people without diplomas so that means we don't get any type of respect.

Another offered a solution to increase partnership that also revealed a sense of disrespect she may be feeling,

> It would be helpful if aides could meet once a month maybe, to be able to talk about issues and have a mediator there though. We need more respect from the professionals. Just because we didn't go to college doesn't mean we are idiots.

Theme 5: Classroom Staff Feel a Lack of Power and Authority in the School

Participants described challenges they had with sharing information with teachers about techniques they learned in the professional development workshops. Some of these challenges appeared to be related to issues of power and authority in the classroom. One participant described, "I didn't share because it isn't my classroom. They [teachers] have all of the say and make decisions alone." Another participant shared, "I don't dare bring anything [strategies] into the classroom. I need my job." "It is ok to share information with teachers when you are asked, but out of place to share information if you aren't. You could lose your job," described another. One participant revealed, "It's not our place to tell teachers anything about how to do their job or run their classrooms." "We don't matter, what we see happening with kids doesn't matter," described one participant.

Theme 6: Professional Development to Teach Classroom-Based Trauma-Informed Approaches Offers Many Benefits

Across focus groups, participants described the benefits of receiving professional development, and just the fact of having professional development targeted for their needs appeared to be meaningful. As one participant shared, "It helps just to talk about this stuff. Even that makes us feel more important." Among the benefits, participants described a greater awareness of their behavior toward students. One participant shared, "I am watching my tone of voice." Another participant stated that she was "being more patient."

Through professional development, participants also developed new understandings of both children's behavior and their own. One classroom staff reflected, "It [the workshops] gave me an understanding of why children are acting out. It gave a name to what we [classroom staff] were seeing and suspecting." Another participant shared, "Now I give myself five minutes to take a walk so that I can watch my tone of voice or frustration with students." "I learned relaxation tips," noted another. This was echoed by another classroom staff, "Now I will walk away, go to the bathroom, take a short walk to tune out naughty behavior when I am very frustrated and starting to get upset."

The deep breathing exercises appeared to have made an impression, as a number of participants specifically remarked on these. One classroom staff described, "Personally, learning about the strategies like the candle [a deep breathing exercise: breathe in the flower, blow out the candle] really helped me a lot to realize how important it is to relax." Another classroom staff remarked, "The breathing helped me." "That flower and candle thing really stuck. It's silly, but it stuck with us," revealed another. Several participants also noted the benefits inherent in a shared learning experience. One participant described, "Sometimes we would say to each other 'remember the flowers' and laugh. The laughter really helped relieve stress."

Participants also shared suggestions for improving professional development for classroom staff. Some participants shared ways to improve the scheduling of the workshops and wanted reminders ahead of time to plan time away from the classroom with teachers. One participant shared, "We need reminders [from the principal] and so do the teachers." Another participant remarked, "Teachers need a warning [from the principal] ahead of time so they can plan ahead of time." Other participants suggested changes to the workshop schedule. One classroom staff noted, "It needs to be set up on a consistent day and time. Maybe every other month all year rather every month for half a year." Another participant shared, "Maybe use the half days [school is closed] when the teachers have parent conferences." "Maybe we could work on specific needs in small groups when the students are at specials," remarked one classroom staff.

Limitations

The study was limited by several factors, and generalizations should be made with caution. First, the study provides only an exploratory view of professional development for classroom staff teaching trauma-informed approaches; no actual observations of practice were made. Secondly, the instruments used in the quantitative portion of this study were researcher developed. In addition, there may be social desirability bias since the researchers provided and evaluated the professional development trainings. Finally, not all participants who took the workshops participated in the assessment.

Discussion

In both the initial nominal needs assessment and post-workshop survey, classroom staff identified the desire for additional strategies to effectively address the needs of students with challenging behaviors. This finding is consistent with other findings in the literature that suggest the role of classroom staff usually includes managing behavior, but they are often expected to complete this task with little or no training (Capizzi & DaFonte, 2012). The classroom staff were eager for professional development, and we saw several signs that they now understood the importance of attending to their own stress so they could respond rather than react to student behaviors.

We also saw indications that some were not yet open to the trauma-informed perspective. The classroom staff had a strong understanding that student behavior is often related to trauma and stress, but a significant number of them did not appear to understand how adult behavior in the school could contribute to the students' stress. Further, most participants continued to believe that an aggressive tone or strong words were necessary for effective discipline. This is not surprising as children who have challenging behaviors often elicit punitive responses from adults (Bath, 2008). The trauma-informed approach views discipline as an opportunity for social–emotional learning, and while lessons teaching desired behavior need to be clear, the tone should be caring and instructional (Bloom, 1995). One of the challenges of school–university partnerships is that the university often brings innovative ideas that are difficult for school personnel to accept in the early stages (Luter et al., 2013), and attention to building trust and sharing multiple perspectives on issues is important. Coaching to help classroom staff practice new skills may be necessary to help them better integrate the perspective.

We also saw indications that many classroom staff did not experience the workplace as supportive, and this inhibited their ability to develop and practice new skills. In each workshop, we heard frustration about the ways in which

classroom staff did not feel respected by teachers and administrators. Survey results indicated that adults in the school did not provide supportive, corrective feedback to one another, and many classroom staff did not experience supportive teamwork with colleagues. In focus groups we heard how uncomfortable it was for classroom staff to share what they learned with the teachers. These feelings of disrespect and disempowerment within the school culture translated into a lack of self-efficacy and a sense of hopelessness about students' potential for change. Several participants described a fear of losing their jobs if they made unsolicited suggestions for improving classroom practices to a teacher. Some questioned the point of receiving professional development when they could not actually implement anything they learned. Effective collaboration among teachers and classroom staff requires mutual respect, authentic communication, and shared responsibility (Manz et al., 2010). Thus, whether or not this concern was warranted, the perception was very real to our participants and could therefore impede classroom partnership.

To effectively address academic and nonacademic barriers that impede the ability of many children to succeed in school, all school personnel need the knowledge and skills to feel confident working with the whole child within an educational context (Kransdorf, Doster, & Alvarez, 2002). The need for close partnership among all school personnel is also fundamental to trauma-informed care (Bloom, 1995), and strong relationships among teachers and classroom staff is fundamental for optimal teaching and learning. Similar to Lewis (2004), our findings suggest that effective collaboration with teachers is key to successful implementation of new skills acquired in professional development. This collaboration must include the development of shared goals, expectations, and directions regarding shared classroom responsibilities (Bronstein, 2003). To be most effective, lines of communication must be open so that classroom staff can become an integral part of the classroom decision-making process (Capizzi & DaFonte, 2012).

In the classroom, teachers are often in an ambiguous supervisory role with the classroom staff and may be ambivalent about the responsibility involved (Lewis, 2004). Our participants were clear that the teacher was in charge of the classroom, and they looked to the teacher for leadership. The direct supervisory authority was with the principal, however, and he often had very little contact with the classroom staff. The lack of clarity in the power structure can make it difficult for all members of the group to take action when problems arise. Teachers often have limited or no training on how to work effectively with classroom staff (Burgess & Mayes, 2007; Capizzi & DaFonte, 2012), and few states require coursework for teaching certification that includes learning how to manage, train, and support classroom staff (Wallace, Shin, Bartholomay, &

Stahl, 2001). Our findings could reflect a need for supervisory skills development with teachers as well as attention to the overall workplace culture.

A unique finding from this study was the value of stress reduction techniques for classroom staff who struggled with job-related stress. Participants recounted ways in which they could use calming strategies with students and themselves. The deep breathing exercises taught in the workshops made a strong impression and were mentioned in both the surveys and focus groups. These findings reflect a need for stress reduction to be integrated as part of the routine, which is consistent with trauma-informed care. Secondary traumatic stress is frequently experienced by school personnel working with students who are exposed to trauma (Borntrager et al., 2012), and responding to the staffs' emotional burden is fundamental to trauma-informed practice (Esaki et al., 2013).

Implications and Conclusion

The participants in our project highlighted many points that have implications for elementary school communities. First, they noted the value of providing classroom staff with targeted professional development using a school–university model. We also heard about some of the challenges that came with this model. Because research has highlighted the need for universities to partner with schools to support workforce development and professionalization (Lawson, 2013), it is critical to address these challenges. More attention to implementing schoolwide trauma-informed approaches in the design and structure of professional development for all school personnel is needed. School–university partnerships can attract university faculty and staff who bring knowledge from a variety of disciplines, including education, social work, nursing, and psychology, to inform school-based professional development. Greater attention to the need for school–university models for professional development can create additional opportunities for interdisciplinary dialog and practice (Weist, Evans, & Lever, 2003).

Participants in this study also expressed appreciation for the infusion of professional development resources from the university, but described challenges, most notably around implementing their learning. The role of classroom staff is unique, and teachers may not feel fully prepared for mentoring the staff in their classrooms (Burgess & Mayes, 2007). Thus, while it is critically important to provide professional development for classroom staff, teachers also need professional development to ensure teamwork and the optimal use of trauma-informed approaches in the classroom.

Classroom staff play an increasingly important role in helping schools achieve optimal student outcomes (Brown & Devecchi, 2013). The ways in

which classroom staff are trained and incorporated into the school community impacts the classroom environment and school climate (Burgess & Mayes, 2007). The role of classroom staff is changing to meet students' increasing academic and behavioral needs. In response, the ways in which classroom staff are prepared for this role must change as well.

The role of universities is also changing to meet increasing community needs, and the ways in which universities partner with schools must continue to change as well. Voluntary, service-oriented, school–university partnerships are here to stay (Lawson, 2013). Schools are asking for help from university social work and teacher education faculty to help them better support children's cognitive and social–emotional development. Incorporating trauma-informed approaches in school settings is crucial to meet the needs of children who have been exposed to multiple adverse experiences. University involvement can bring the expertise of faculty into public schools, helping to develop innovative models to address complex needs and support optimal student outcomes.

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