Pandemic Pain, Holistic Help: How One School's Trauma-Informed Approach (TIA) Provided Support and Expanded Opportunity

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Conducted at a school serving economically-challenged students, this investigation examined physical, academic, and social-emotional difficulties students and families faced during the pandemic as well as ways in which the school took a Trauma-Informed Approach (TIA) to support them. Problems related to accessing learning, developmentally-unfriendly pedagogy, and lack of socialization were addressed by cultivating relationships, sharing agency, and promoting social-emotional learning.

Overview and Significance

The COVID-19 health crisis ignited unprecedented trauma across the globe. Families worldwide were pushed to the breaking point as they experienced economic hardship, fear of infection, death of loved ones, disrupted learning, social isolation, and loss of normalcy. Trauma is defined as the inability to respond in a healthy manner to acute stress (Wolpow et al., 2016). Prolonged activation of stress response systems to fight, freeze, or take flight can result in changes to an individual's brain structure and functioning (Alexander, 2019; Wolpow et al., 2016), impacting their ability to engage, learn, and succeed in school (McInerney & McKlindon, 2014).

Though the pandemic interrupted the lives and education of all students worldwide, those who struggled the most under normal circumstances found it even more difficult to learn and thrive. Opportunity gaps that already existed within the United States only widened (Garcia & Weiss, 2020). The swift shift to distance learning exacerbated the digital divide and students in schools serving majority Latinx and Black students or located in lower-income zip codes experienced greater unfinished learning (Curriculum Associates, 2021).

Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative investigation was two-fold: (a) to identify the physical, academic, and social-emotional trauma and losses experienced during the pandemic by students at an elementary school serving a large percentage of families in poverty, and (b) to explore ways in which the focal school took a multipronged, Trauma-Informed Approach (TIA) to support them.

Theoretical Frame and Questions

The theoretical frame from which this research operates is that educators "cannot teach the mind until [they] reach the heart" (Wolpow et al., 2016, p. 18). Gaining momentum over the last decade, the Trauma-Informed Approach (TIA) is "a safe, supportive community that enables both students and teachers to feel safe, build caring relationships, regulate their feelings and behavior, as well as learn" (Alexander, 2019, p. 86). The TIA emphasizes five core components: school-wide relationships, structure, shared agency, self-regulation, and social-emotional learning.

The two research questions were: (a) What physical, academic, and social-emotional challenges did students and families face during the pandemic? and (b) How did the focal school incorporate trauma-informed practices to support students during the pandemic?

Methodology and Data Analysis

The focal school is a Title 1 elementary school in which approximately 75% of the students are considered economically-challenged and many are trauma-impacted. The school enrolls approximately 270 students and 85% classify themselves as Latinx. Questionnaire and interview data centering on pandemic challenges and the TIA were collected from 14 educators in fall 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic. In an attempt to distill, organize, and make meaning of the transcribed interview and questionnaire data, content analysis was used in which the data were sorted within Google sheets by each of the two research questions and by participant. Codes used to sort and synthesize the data were tested against the data and then dropped, refined, or retained. During this process of content analysis, themes emerged within each inquiry area.

Findings

Physical Challenges

1. **Difficulty accessing learning**
2. **Housing, supervision, and transportation challenges**. Optimal learning spaces were difficult to secure, forcing students to zoom from parent work trucks, garages, beds, campers, hotels, and/or their parents' workplaces.

Academic Challenges

1. **Unfinished learning and diminished readiness for grade-level work.**

   Unf n shed Learn ng

2. **Developmentally-unfriendly pedagogy**. Teachers struggled to support fine-motor skill development. Mask-wearing made reading tasks challenging. Sensory input, use of manipulatives, and project-based learning were inhibited.

Social Challenges

1. **Lack of socialization**. Staying socially distant was detrimental to relationship-building. Mask-wearing constrained students' ability to interact, emote, and read social cues.
2. **Emotional distress and fear.** Students often cried on Zoom, struggled to meet long-term goals, and/or became aggressive when previously easygoing.

TIA Supports

1. **Schoolwide relationships.** The school hosted online family game nights, literacy events, parenting workshops, and English as a Second Language (ESL) courses for parents.
2. **Structure and stability.** Educators clearly communicated expectations and provided warnings before modifying schedules.

   TRAUMA-INFORMED PRACTICES

3. **Shared control and self-regulation.** Educators extended deadlines, allowed cameras to be off, and modeled healthy de-escalation.
4. **Social-emotional learning.** Teachers enforced the "The 7 Habits," taught coping skills, and helped students problem solve.

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