

The Role of Child-Teacher Relationships within Trauma-Informed Education

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Literature Review

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Introduction

There is a clear consensus that traumatic experiences impact at least half of the children in the United States (Koslouski & Chafouleas, 2022; Post, 2020; Souers & Hall, 2018; Venet, 2021; Wall, 2021). Additionally, it is also clear that the number is even higher among children from low income backgrounds, children of color, and children living in urban environments (Murphy, 2018; Venet, 2021). What is unclear, but is arguable, is that in 2022, after the first two years of the Coronavirus Pandemic, the number of trauma-affected children has continued to increase. In fact, Alex Shevrin Venet mentions this in her book, *Equity Centered Trauma-Informed Education*. She writes how during the pandemic, teachers and schools felt that it was now important that they understand trauma where they didn't feel the need to understand it before (Venet, 2021). While there is no data supporting how the pandemic has influenced the prevalence of trauma among children, Venet points out that the pandemic has created an awareness among educators about how trauma impacts everyone.

Throughout the academic year of 2021-2022, educators welcomed children back into the school after a year of distance learning and hybrid learning. What was noticed by some educators was a shift in the ways children engage with each other and with the guide in their classroom. Throughout the year, the word 'trauma' appeared over and over. Educators expressed feeling unequipped to support and build healthy relationships with children in their classroom. It felt as though everyone was just trying to survive. The current climate led to a need from the education field to examine trauma-informed education more and to understand what the role of teacher-child relationships is within this approach to education.

This paper examines contemporary sources on trauma informed education and teacher-child relationships with the goal to discern what role teacher-child relationships have within trauma-informed education.

Terminology

First, however, it is necessary to define the terms used. To begin, words like trauma and child-teacher relationship need to be defined. For the purpose of this paper, the definition of trauma given by Alex Shevrin Venet will be used. She defines trauma as, “an individual and collective response to life-threatening events, harmful conditions, or a prolonged dangerous or stressful environment. Not all stressful experiences are traumatic to individuals. For those who do develop a trauma response, the impact can be intense, pervasive, and disruptive, affecting both the mind and the body” (2021, p. 6).

Child-teacher relationships are defined as the relationship that exists between a child or student and the teacher themselves. The focus on child-teacher relationship and the use of child-teacher relationship training (CTRT) comes from a study by Sepulveda, Garza, and Morrison on child-teacher relationship training. In the study, child-teacher relationships are based off of previous research on child-parent relationship therapy, and it uses child-centered play therapy as an integral part of the training (Sepulveda et al., 2011). This training is used by studies that choose to examine the effects of child-teacher relationship training on students and teachers (Opiola et al, 2020; Post, 2020). It is important to note that this study and the training presented do not draw attention to the role of equity and culture within child-teacher relationships.

Trauma-informed education, trauma-informed practices, and trauma-informed approaches are used interchangeably, and, thus, will rely on the same definition. Studies like that from Post, Grybush, Flowers, and Elmadani, use the definition for trauma-informed education given by Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA, 2015). Here they define trauma-informed education “through the four R’s; realize the widespread prevalence and impact of trauma; recognize the signs of traumatic exposure; respond by fully integrating knowledge about trauma into policies, procedures, and practices; and actively prevent retraumatization” (Post et al., 2020, p.98). Some approaches to Trauma- Informed Education rely on defining trauma in relation to adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), and understandings of the child’s brain (Post; 2020; Wall 2021).

Still, just like with the definition of trauma, trauma-informed education must include how educators respond to trauma as an individual and as part of a collective. Alex Venet, who focuses on defining trauma-informed education through the lens of equity, defines trauma-informed education as, “practices [that] respond to the impacts of trauma on the entire school community and prevent future trauma from occurring. Equity and social justice are key concerns of trauma-informed educators as we make changes in our individual practice, in classrooms, in schools, and in district-wide and state-wide systems (Venet, 2021, p. 10). It is important to consider how different sources are defining trauma and trauma-informed education. The difference in terminology shows a lack of agreement on the role of social justice and equity within trauma-informed education. Still, despite the differences, themes emerged throughout the literature examined.

The role that child-teacher relationships have within trauma-informed education

When reviewing the literature surrounding the role of child-teacher relationships within trauma-informed education, three themes emerged. (1) Child-teacher relationships are a foundational part of trauma-informed education (TIE). (2) Educators' well-being and perspectives play an important part of TIE. Lastly, (3) Understanding culture and ethnicity are becoming a more important part of understanding trauma-informed practices and child-teacher relationships. The next three sections will address these themes and the conversations surrounding them.

Child-teacher relationships are a foundational part of Trauma-Informed Education.

A clear theme throughout all of the sources exploring trauma-informed education is the importance of child-teacher relationships. Some literature makes this point directly. In the study, "Relationship over reproach: Fostering resilience by embracing a trauma-informed approach to elementary education," (2021) Carrie Wall explores the impact of trauma on student classroom behavior and learning from the teacher's perspective. She also identifies trauma-informed teacher supports and strategies, and she confirms the impact of trauma-informed approaches on behavior and learning. Most importantly, she describes the positive impact that trauma-informed education has on students' relationships with teachers (Wall, 2021).

Similarly, in the study, "The effectiveness of training and supervising urban elementary school teachers in child-teacher relationship training: A trauma-informed approach," (2020). Opiola, Alston, and Copeland-Kamp show the impact that child-teacher relationship training has on the teachers' emotional intelligence, perception of students' behaviors, and teacher-student stress. All three outcomes are important elements in trauma-informed education. Therefore, the study shows the impact that child-teacher relationships have in supporting these practices.

Some sources do not acknowledge the role of child-teacher relationships within trauma-informed education; however, their ways of assessing the effectiveness or application of trauma-informed practices rely on assessing, to some degree, the educator's interactions and relationships with their students. For example, studies like, "In the Trauma-informed care trenches: Teacher compassion, satisfaction, secondary traumatic stress, burnout, and intent to leave education within underserved elementary schools" by Christian-Brandt, Santacrose, and Barnett (2020) examine how teachers' mental health, perspectives, and level of burnout affect their relationships with children and the effectiveness of trauma-informed care. In this study we can see child-teacher relationships being used to assess the effectiveness of trauma-informed care. Additionally, the study "Key Considerations in Delivering Trauma-Informed Professional Learning for Educators" by Koslouski and Chafouleas (2022) outline six key principles of a trauma-informed approach: safety; trustworthiness and transparency; peer support; collaboration and mutuality; empowerment, voice, and choice; and cultural, historical, and gender issues. All of these are tied to not only the strategies to support educators, as outlined in the study, but also how the educator relates to the student.

Lastly, it is important to address how child behavior has been used when assessing the effectiveness of both child-teacher relationships as well as trauma-informed education. Some studies have used improvements in child behavior to show effectiveness of child-teacher relationship training and trauma-informed approaches (Opiola et al, 2020; Post, 2020); however, others argue that this method of determining the effectiveness of both CTR and TIE is not inherently reliable. Venet points out, child behavior cannot be seen as the indicator for trauma. There are many children who've experienced trauma and do not engage in problem behaviors inside or outside school (2021).

Sources like Venet and Souers and Hall expand upon this even more. They both acknowledge that educators do not always know which students have been affected by a trauma response and which have not, even if two children were to share the same experience. Additionally, educators cannot assume that all children react to trauma in the same way. Venet even notes that an educators' job within trauma informed education should not be to act as a trauma detector (2021). Instead they argue that the role of the relationship between a child and their teacher should not be to build up enough repour that the child discloses if they've experienced trauma. Therefore, it is important to see that literature surrounding trauma-informed education, and the child-teacher relationships within them, may use child behavior as an indicator for effectiveness of a program, but others see that form of assessment as limited. Still, all literature seems to point to the understanding that the role of building strong, healthy child-teacher relationships within trauma-informed education should be to foster the child's emotional wellbeing and resilience through connection, create space for the educator to care for their own emotional wellbeing, and build an environment where children feel safe and empowered.

Educators' wellbeing and perspectives play an important part in trauma-informed education

Many teachers hold reservations towards trauma-informed education and feel unqualified to guide and support children who've experienced trauma. (Souers & Hall, 2018; Venet, 2021; Wall, 2021). Teachers are not trained to be counselors or psychiatrists; however, many teachers feel that in order to engage in meaningful relationships with children who may have experienced trauma, they need to have specialized in supporting the emotional and mental needs of their students (Venet, 2021). Thus, teachers are less likely to 'buy in' to training to build relationships

with their students that have experienced trauma or adverse childhood experiences.

Christian-Brandt notes that teachers who have experienced more burnout and have lower scores of compassion satisfaction are more likely to leave the field of education than find child-teacher relationship training (CTRT) beneficial to them (2020). The low self-efficacy felt by educators influences not only their unwillingness to ‘buy in’ to trauma-informed education, but also how educators approach the relationships they have with their students.

In the book, *Relationship, Responsibility, and Regulation: Trauma Invested Practices for Fostering Resilient Learners*, Kristen Van Marter Souers and Pete Hall point out the importance of educators’ “systems of meaning” on trauma-informed education and teacher-child relationships (2018). The term “systems of meaning” is defined by how our experiences influence us and the ways we approach our current situations and our relationships with others. It is the interpretations and ‘short cuts’ we form in our mind. Souers points out that while we don’t normally rely on this system, it is most evident when we are managing stress and unpredictability (2018). It can be either positive or negative. This concept of there being a system of meaning or mindset that informs how educators approach their relationships and manage stress is referenced by Post, Grybush, Garcia, and Flowers in “Impact of Child–Teacher Relationship Training on Teacher Attitudes and Classroom Behaviors.” They note that, “Teachers experiencing stress may respond to students in ways that unintentionally reinforce disruptive behaviors and escalate, rather than de-escalate, difficult situations that can result in negative student–teacher relationships.” This is echoed again by Venet who refers to this system as ‘implicit bias’ and notes again how it comes into play when teachers need to make rushed decisions (2021). Making these decisions, especially without guidance and feelings of self-efficacy, can harm both teachers

and students as they continue to influence each other's school experiences (Koslouski & Chafouleas, 2022; Souers & Hall, 2018; Venet, 2021; Wall, 2021).

For teachers, there is an increase in the likelihood of burnout, secondary traumatic stress, and retraumatization (Christian-Brandt et al., 2020; Koslouski & Chafouleas, 2022). In their article, “Key Considerations in Delivering Trauma-Informed Professional Learning for Educators,” Koslouski and Chafouleas point out that while other researchers have given key concepts about trauma-informed approaches so that facilitators can begin delivering trainings about trauma-informed education, they did not give strategies about how to implement the principles (2022). The consequence is that educators have been experiencing secondary traumatic stress and/or retraumatization. This has made engaging in trauma-informed education as well as child-teacher relationship training taxing to educators who have not been given the skills to care for themselves and engage in practices that allow them to get close to students without hurting their own mental health. Fortunately, there are articles not only supporting the need to protect educators’ mental health while engaging in child-teacher relationships and trauma-informed education (Christian-Brandt et al., 2020; Post, 2020; Souers & Hall, 2018; Wall, 2021), but also outlining strategies to help educators enter into their trauma-informed work with strategies (Koslouski & Chafouleas, 2022; Venet, 2021).

As mentioned earlier, Koslouski and Chafouleas provide strategies to support each of the 6 key principles of trauma-informed approaches within the training. Notably, all of the strategies first rely on “learning about the school staff, and students, before leading the training” (Koslouski & Chafouleas, 2022, p. 3). The article lists strategies for peer support, collaboration, and mutuality that support educators building relationships between educators as well as between the educator and facilitator. These include instructions for the facilitator like, “foster social

networks among participants,” “provide on-going coaching or consulting opportunities,” “acknowledge the work that educators are already doing,” and “learn about the school, educators, and students as much as possible beforehand.” (2022, p. 3) Kristin Van Marter Souers writes something similar in her conclusion on the importance of relations in trauma-invested practices. She argues that educators need to build relationships with each other in order to best serve students. All of these are strategies for trauma-informed education as outlined by the article, but they are also key strategies for relationship building.

The need for strategies to accompany principles of trauma-informed approaches is also seen in Alex Shevrin Venet’s book, *Equity Centered Trauma-Informed Education*. Here, she gives strategies to educators on how to build healthy relationships between teachers and children through an equity lens. Venet addresses the point that in order to foster child-teacher relationships and trauma-informed education, there is a need to see relationships as interconnected. She notes that educators should support students building relationships with others. She writes, “Children need many more relationships in their lives than just one trusted teacher.” (Venet, 2021, p. 113). For educators, she also stresses the importance of setting healthy boundaries. She argues that this not only helps educator’s mental health, but also deter educators from taking on the role of ‘savior’ when approaching relationships with students who may have had adverse childhood experiences (2021).

In both of these sources, healthy boundaries and interconnected support systems are being encouraged to support both the educators and the students entering into the child-teacher relationship within trauma-informed education. Still, it should be stated that while Venet, Souers and Halls offer important insight, they did not conduct primary research studies. The importance of building relationship webs for students as a part of positive child-teacher relationships is

explored by O'Connor and McCartney. In their study, "Examining Teacher-Child Relationships and Achievement as Part of an Ecological Model of Development," they examine the ways in which the quality of teacher-child relationships is associated with academic achievement and the child's development. Unlike other studies, however, this study takes an ecological approach to the child's development. They take into account culture, family relationships, peer relationships, as well as individuality of the child (2007). The study does not, however, examine the relationship web needed for educators. It also does not extend to see the impact that relationship webs within CTR have within trauma-informed education.

Lastly, when discussing literature's focus on the wellbeing of educators in trauma-informed education, it is important to note the research done on the benefits that child-teacher relationships can have on the wellbeing of children and educators. In their study, "The Effectiveness of Training and Supervising Urban Elementary School Teachers in Child-Teacher Relationship Training: A Trauma-Informed Approach," Opiola, Alston, and Copeland-Kamp examine teacher stress levels, child behavior, and teacher emotional intelligence for teachers who had gone through child-teacher relationship training compared to those who did not. The study followed three charter schools in the Southeast United States for 22 weeks. They found that there was a decrease in teacher-student stress, a deeper understanding on the part of educators regarding child behavior, and teachers were more likely to reflect on their own ability to perceive, understand, and generate emotions. (2020).

The positive effects of teachers' wellbeing is also acknowledged in other studies such as Carrie Wall's study, "Relationship over reproach: Fostering resilience by embracing a trauma-informed approach to elementary education," This study first acts as a literature review of the core components of trauma-informed approaches. These include cultivating relationships,

teachers sharing control with students, addressing issues promptly, providing social-emotional instruction, and embracing a growth mindset. It then moves on to explore the positive impact of trauma on student classroom behavior and learning from the teacher's perspective (2021).

Lastly, Post, Grybush, Flowers, and Elmadani echo this point even further in their study, "Impact of child teacher relationship training on teacher attitudes and classroom behaviors." The study examines the impact that child-teacher relationship training (CTRT) has on teachers' professional quality of life, social justice attitudes, attitudes aligned with values of CTRT, attitudes about trauma-informed care, and the ability to demonstrate the CTRT skills in the classroom. The study followed 26 general education teachers in two schools and 25 teachers as a control group through a child-teacher relationship training. The training took place in weekly meetings and the content of the sessions included child-centered philosophies based on CTRT's 10 session protocol. There was also information about the impact of poverty on child development, trauma-informed care, and impacts of institutional racism on children. Attitudes of social justice were diffused into the curriculum and discussions in the training. While the article found that with CTRT the symptoms of burnout did not improve and interventions did not impact teachers' attitudes about social justice, it did find that CTRT improved their attitudes towards trauma-informed care when faced with stress or adversity. It also showed that CTRT strongly impacts teachers' skills, attitudes, and values aligned with the values of CTRT.

In conclusion, the well-being and perspectives of teachers play an important part in the conversation surrounding the role of child-teacher relationships within trauma-informed education. There is an understanding that many educators do not feel equipped to participate in trauma-informed education. Additionally, there are concerns of burnout that teachers are already facing. The levels of burnout make them less likely to buy into trauma-informed education and

benefit from child-teacher relationship training. Many of the articles discussed focus on how to incorporate practical strategies that will help educators increase self-efficacy, reduce implicit bias or a negative system of meaning, aid in stress management, and reduce the likelihood of STS and retraumatization. Among these strategies, there is a need to focus not only on the relationship between teacher and student. For teachers, there also needs to be a focus on the relationships between educators, the school community, and training facilitators. For students, there also needs to be a focus on building a system of relationships to aid the child, provide ethical and equitable training, and also reduce the possibility that any one teacher is wholly responsive for the healing of any one student. Lastly, studies have shown the positive impact that CTRT and trauma-informed approaches have on teacher's wellbeing. This data will hopefully encourage educators to engage in, and seek out, child-teacher relationship training as well as trauma-informed education.

Understanding ethnicity and equity are an integral part of trauma-informed practices and child-teacher relationships.

It is essential that trauma is seen not only in the context of an experience affecting an individual. Trauma must also be seen in regard to the trauma experienced by communities and groups of people by the systems in which they live and not just a singular incident. It is best summed up by Alex Shevrin Venet's definition of trauma given above. This includes trauma from racism, abuse or neglect, natural disasters, bullying, or other forms of oppression.

This view of trauma is becoming more accepted, and more often trauma-informed education and the role of child-teacher relationships cannot be discussed without understanding the roles that ethnicity and equity play in both. In the article, "Key Considerations in Delivering

Trauma-Informed Professional Learning for Educators,” the authors acknowledge that trauma-informed approaches need to attend to cultural, historical, and gender issues (Koslouski & Chafouleas, 2022). This includes facilitating training for trauma-informed approaches where the participants address the systemic forces that contribute to trauma, including the school. It also includes building empathy for everyone involved (2022).

Additionally, understanding the roles that culture and equity play is important in order for child-teacher relationships to have a positive impact across cultures. Opiola writes that, “common cultural disconnects between students and teachers place students from diverse backgrounds at a greater risk of behavioral problems, academic disengagement, and conflicts in student-teacher relationships” (Opiola et al., 2020, p.1-2). Alex Shevrin Venet’s work delves into this even more. She addresses first how students of color are disproportionately affected by trauma and adverse childhood experiences (2021). She then notes how teachers either neglect their role in emotionally supporting these children or embrace this role in a way that is also problematic. She discusses ‘saviorism’ in child-teacher relationships and trauma-informed education, and the ways that it harms students (2021). Saviorism is encouraged by the mindset that teachers can save their students, and it is adapted from systems of racism in which white people feel tasked with saving the less fortunate person of color. As Venet argues, saviorism shouldn’t have any place in child-teacher relationships and trauma informed education. To work against this, examining culture, equity, and social justice efforts should be a part of both trauma-informed education training as well as child-teacher relationship training. Venet then outlines strategies to help educators form healthy relationships and trauma-informed practices that are rooted in equity and culture-informed approaches.

Lastly, it is important to address educators' willingness to engage with this part of child-teacher relationships and trauma-informed education. While studies like that from Opiola, Alston, and Copeland-Kamp state the importance and integration of social justice within training, this study and others show the lack of impact social justice training has on educators. They also do not account for how culture or implicit bias may have influenced their study. For example, in the study by Opiola, Alston, and Copeland-Kamp, the research acknowledges that all teachers in the study were white females. Still, it also shows that two of the white females choose white, female students experiencing challenges to be the students they wanted to focus on building a relationship with (2020). The study recognizes this and hypothesizes why; however, there is room for that correlation to be explored more.

Additionally, the study done by Carrie Wall, "Relationship over reproach: Fostering resilience by embracing a trauma-informed approach to elementary education," mentions how teachers are encouraged to shift their mindset to a growth mindset; however, it does not mention implicit bias (2021). The study also does not address directly the role of culture and ethnicity in trauma-informed approaches and relationship building. This is despite the fact that it appears as a part of the context of the study since the majority of students served are latinx and the majority of the teachers are white females. These two studies give insight into how research surrounding relationships in trauma-informed education has room to recognize and explore the roles that bias and equity play within both research processes and results surrounding trauma-informed education and teacher-child relationships.

The one study I came across that did measure and take into consideration the importance of social justice and equity to teachers in CTRT training was by Post, Grybush, Flowers, and Elmadani. Here they found that CTRT had no effect on teacher's attitudes about social justice;

however, they also note that this is the first time that a CTRT had elements incorporated to increase a teachers' awareness of social justice. It is unclear why the teacher's attitudes did not change. Still, it draws attention to how more research regarding the roles that equity, culture, and social justice play within child-teacher relationships and trauma-informed practices. Are teachers engaging in equitable forms of child-teacher relationships and trauma-informed education? Is training that includes equity-centered curriculums effective?

In short, studies have shown the importance of equity and culture within child-teacher relationships as well as trauma-informed care, yet there still needs to be more research on how to engage educators in equitable and culturally informed practices within their approach to relationship building and trauma-informed education.

Conclusion

The objective of this paper has been to review contemporary literature regarding the role of child-teacher relationships within trauma-informed education. It first discussed and defined terminology surrounding child-teacher relationships and trauma-informed education. Here, it examined the points of contention and change as different views of trauma and trauma-informed education came to view. While some scholars defined trauma in a traditional fashion, focusing on adverse childhood experiences and changes in the child's brain, others saw trauma to include not only individuals and experiences, but also to include communities, living conditions, and systems of oppression. Still, from analyzing the literature three themes emerged.

First, child-teacher relationships offer a foundation for implementing and assessing trauma-informed education. There is a consensus that trauma-informed education offers children connection, and it is beneficial to the child's emotional wellbeing to have a relationship with a

stable, predictable adult. In trauma-informed education, the teacher would both offer the child empathy and connection as well as stability and predictability. As Venet points out, the teacher would also support the child in developing healthy connections with others as well.

The second theme that was present within research on the role of child-teacher relationship within trauma-informed education focused on the role of the teacher. It highlighted contributing factors to why teachers may not engage in trauma-informed education or child-teacher relationship training. This includes feelings of low self-efficacy, compassion satisfaction, levels of burn-out, or experiences of secondary traumatic stress. The literature also discusses strategies to aid teachers who do not practice trauma-informed education and focus on how to build positive child-teacher relationships with their students. Sources also show the importance for teachers to build relationships with each other and the school community as well. Lastly, the literature also expressed positive outcomes for teachers' emotional and mental wellbeing, as well as classroom environment, when they participated in trauma-informed approaches and child-teacher relationship training.

The third and final theme of this literature review was the role of culture and equity when discussing child-teacher relationships and trauma-informed education. This theme was the most inconsistent and the least readily agreed upon. While some sources focused on the role of equity and culture within trauma-informed education (Venet, 2021), others briefly acknowledge the importance without giving weight to how culture and ethnicity impacted their study (Opiola et al., 2020). Still, there seems to be a shift within the conversations surrounding child-teacher relationships to consider the roles that culture, race, and equity play. Additionally, there is a shift within conversations regarding trauma-informed education about the essential nature of including equity and social justice.

There are, however, still gaps left in the research about how child-teacher relationships exist within the web of relationships for both the teacher and the child within trauma-informed education. For example, it is unclear how trauma-informed education is impacted by the child-parent relationship or the parent-teacher relationship. Additionally, it is also unclear how child-teacher relationships and the effectiveness of trauma-informed approaches are impacted by differences in race, ethnicity, gender, age, and ability. As some of the sources alluded to, we cannot see relationships in a vacuum. Additionally, we cannot see approaches to education, like TIE, without considering how education is impacted by society or systemic issues of racism and other structures of inequality.

Moving forward, there is room for literature and studies on the role of child-teacher relationships within trauma-informed education to examine these gaps further. There is, however, enough evidence to support a deeper look into how education policy can be contributing to the disconnection that child-teacher relationships and trauma-informed education seek to fix. I am eager to see the ways that conversations around child-teacher relationships and trauma-informed education will continue to dig deeper and inform practice as well as change.

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