Elementary Teachers' Experiences with Trauma-Informed Practice

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Abstract

This qualitative study used in-depth interviews to understand teacher experiences implementing trauma informed practice (TIP) at an elementary school in the Midwestern U.S. School leaders had implemented a large-scale TIP effort a few years prior to the study. The study found that the interviewees supported and implemented TIP and perceived that most other teachers in the school did too. Interviewees also believed that although it was diminishing, resistance to TIP still existed among staff. Study findings indicate that social interaction among staff around TIP was important for its spread. Finally, because many of the instructional practices that make up TIP are not new, but rather practices already known in the field to be effective, our findings shed light on how repackaging and reframing instructional practices may help in instructional reform.

Keywords:

Trauma-informed Practice, Teachers, Elementary School, Diffusion of Innovation Theory

Introduction

The principal of Mills Elementary School needed a more effective way to reduce chronic misbehavior. Teachers were sending students to the Assistant Principal (AP) when they misbehaved. The AP, trained in behavior disorders, would talk to the students about the problem, sometimes give them a mild consequence, and send them back to the classroom. Not only did this approach fail to reduce the number of times some students were sent to the AP, a vocal group of teachers was calling for the students to be punished. They felt that the students continued to misbehave because they were not receiving negative consequences for their misbehavior. The principal did not believe harsher punishment was the answer, but she needed to find a solution. Her subsequent search led her to trauma-informed practice.

Behavior problems in school are a common consequence of trauma, and research shows that 1 in 4 children in the US has experienced trauma, with higher rates for children of color (McConnico et al, 2016). Trauma impacts brain development, leading to cognitive difficulties as well as difficulties with self-regulation and relationships (Brunzell et al., 2018; Keown et al, 2020). Students who have experienced trauma often have difficulty with learning and behavior in school, and are at risk of lower achievement and dropout (McConnico et al., 2016; Crosby, 2015; Yohannan & Carlson, 2019). Traditional approaches to student discipline can re-

traumatize a child and are ineffective (McConnico et al, 2016).

In recent years, many schools and districts across the U.S. have implemented trauma-informed practices (TIP) to meet the needs of children who have experienced trauma. Such practices focus on understanding effects of trauma on people and their behavior and providing stability and safety along with the self-regulatory and relationship skills that help students heal and thrive socially and academically (Brunzell et al, 2018; Carello & Butler, 2015). Implementation of TIP in schools can reduce behavior problems, increase achievement, and keep students in school, especially for children who are already harmed due to racial and socio-economic oppression (Crosby, 2015). It also increases teacher satisfaction and reduces teacher stress. However, implementation of TIP at the school and teacher level is complex and challenging (Alisic, 2012; Blitz et al, 2016).

This study used interviews to examine teacher and other staff members' experiences with and perceptions about implementing trauma informed practice (TIP) at Mills[1] Elementary School, a large P-5 school in the Midwestern US. Interviewees supported TIP and reported that though some members of the teaching staff remained resistant to it, trauma-informed approaches had been fairly widely adopted at the school. The data also indicate that social interaction among staff around TIP was important for its spread. Finally, because many of the instructional practices that make up TIP are not new, but rather practices already known in the field to be effective, our findings shed light on how repackaging and reframing instructional practices can help in instructional reform.

Trauma and Trauma-informed Practice

Trauma is an event or series of events that cause enduring emotional or physical harm. Trauma can lead to chronic stress, which is long-term activation of the body's stress response. When that happens, it affects brain development and is linked to a variety of difficulties with memory, language, attention, impulse control, and learning (McConnico et al, 2016; Perry & Daniels, 2016; Thomas et al, 2019). Trauma can also lead to aggression, difficulty with trust, and difficulty in social relationships (McConnico et al, 2016; Schnyder et al, 2021). Children who have experienced trauma tend to have more behavior problems, lower achievement, lower GPA, and higher risk of dropout (Crosby, 2015; Yohannan & Carlson, 2019). Such children are more likely to be labeled unruly or unmotivated in school and experience chronic absenteeism; they often get misdiagnosed as having oppositional defiant disorder, ADHD, and learning disabilities (Gubi et al, 2019; Perry & Daniels, 2016).

Trauma informed means understanding effects of trauma on people and their behavior and knowing how to provide services that take trauma into account and help people heal (Carello & Butler, 2015). The goal of TIP is to enable trauma-impacted children to have access to the school curriculum (McConnico et al., 2015). This requires increasing teacher understanding of the trauma children face and its effects on student behavior, development, and school performance; providing teachers with strategies and interventions for dealing with behavior difficulties; making students feel safe, empowered, and trusting (Carello & Butler, 2015; McConnico et al., 2015; Schnyder et al., 2021). TIP includes a range of activities and skills, such as teachers being attuned to children's states and knowing when they need a break, providing such breaks, building good relationships with and showing positive regard for all children, helping children to control their actions and emotions when they act out rather than punishing them, developing self-regulation skills, helping students develop relationships with other children, and providing a calm environment with a predictable structure (Crosby, 2015; Thomas et al, 2019; Von der Embse et al., 2019). In addition to changes in classroom management practices, specific trauma-sensitive practices include mindfulness, which develops self-regulation skills; social-emotional learning, which helps with relationship development; calm rooms and/or calm spaces; and many others. Several trauma-informed models exist for schools to choose from, with overlap among the strategies and practices (Thomas et al., 2019). Successful programs tend to include: cross-service collaboration (whereby mental health services outside of the school collaborate with the school); buy-in from staff; professional development; changes in teaching practice and in behavior management practice; policy changes; and change in institutional climate (Crosby, 2015; Thomas et al., 2019).

Implementation of trauma-informed practice can be challenging for practitioners as it often requires a change in mindset and development of new skills. First, teachers need to hold all students in unconditional positive regard (Thomas et al., 2019). They also need to prioritize social-emotional needs of students over academics, understanding that students cannot learn academics unless their socio-emotional needs are met (Alisic, 2012). Third, handling instances of student misbehavior requires a move away from punitive approaches. Faced with sometimes hostile and menacing behaviors of trauma-impacted children, teachers must replace the question "What is wrong with you?" with "What is happening with you?" and seek to empower rather than disempower the student (Thomas et al., 2019). Doing so requires that teachers view the situation from an objective stance and that they carefully regulate and monitor their own responses (Craig, 2016).

Theoretical Framework

We grounded this study in the belief that the current predominant approach to discipline in schools of punishing minor infractions and using segregation and separation (e.g., detention, alternative schools) for more serious infractions is antithetical to the attainment of the educative goals of schooling (Warnick & Scribner, 2020). Punishment and separation do not serve developmental or educative purposes because they do not lead to student reflection or understanding of their actions, to taking responsibility for one's actions, to empathy, or to increased self-regulation skills. Instead, they are damaging for students' education and growth in several ways. First, the threat of punishment increases the stress response of dysregulated children, making it even harder for them to meet school expectations (Ablon & Pollastri, 2018). Second, punishment and separation take away opportunities for academic and socio-emotional learning - the links between punitive and exclusionary discipline and student dropout, low achievement, incarceration, lower economic outcomes and other negative consequences are well-documented (Dutil, 2020; Jean-Pierre & Parris, 2018; Lamboy & Thompson, 2020). Finally, the system exacerbates existing inequalities, as punishment and segregation are unequally and unfairly applied. The damage occurs disproportionately to students who are the least advantaged to begin with, leading still further to a lack of legitimacy and trust in schools by families and communities (Warnick & Scribner, 2020).

We also believe that the majority of student behavior problems, especially the chronic ones, are not a motivational issue but rather due to neurocognitive skills deficits (Ablon & Pollastri, 2018, p. 4), often caused by trauma (Van der Kolk, 2014). For example, many children who have been abused see danger in the most benign of situations, such that the world is full of triggers. Their experiences have led to changes in their self-regulation, thinking, and emotions (Van der Kolk, 2014). Thus their actions make sense for their experience and their brains; they cannot act otherwise. Punishing students for behaviors beyond their control is unjust and ineffective, as well as damaging (Lamboy & Thompson, 2020). Punishing trauma-impacted students is often retraumatizing (McConnico et al., 2016).

To understand factors influencing teacher decisions about whether to adopt TIP we also use Diffusion of Innovation Theory, which explains how and why a new practice spreads through a social system (Rogers, 2003). Attributes of an innovation, in interaction with social factors, influence diffusion. Among the most commonly studied attributes are relative advantage and compatibility. Relative advantage refers to how much better the innovation is perceived to be than the practice(s) it is replacing (Rogers, 2003). Compatibility is the extent to which the innovation is consistent with one's values, pre-existing beliefs, and perceived needs. Importantly, although effectiveness and compatibility matter, social issues are more important influences on adoption, with what other people say and do holding a tremendous influence (Rogers, 2003).

A Note on Terminology

In this article the terms trauma-informed practice (TIP) and trauma-sensitive practice are used interchangeably to refer to school practices that fit the definition of trauma informed. We use the term trauma-informed even though at the time of data collection Mills School leaders often used different terminology (such as "building resilience in students") when communicating with staff, and even though not all study participants used the term for practices that nevertheless fit the definition of TIP.

Methods

This qualitative interview study sought to understand teacher and other staff members' experiences implementing trauma informed practice (TIP) at Mills Elementary School. The question we addressed was: How do faculty, staff, and administrators at the school experience the use of trauma-informed practice?

Context and Setting

The setting for this study was Mills Elementary School which serves approximately 700 students in grades Pre-K through 5th. It is one of four elementary schools in a large district in the US Midwest. The student body is over 90% white and the staff of about 45 teachers plus 35 support staff members is almost 100% white. Socio-economic diversity is greater than racial diversity, with approximately 25 percent of students categorized as low-income.

In 2018 the school implemented a targeted TIP program called Advance. A trauma-informed team of 12 teachers and 1 interventionist was created. The team participated in training and implemented a set of trauma-informed strategies in their classrooms. The team identified 31 trauma-impacted students to participate for the 2018-2019 school year. These students were placed in team members' classrooms. The main components of the program were use of trauma-sensitive language, use of comfort corners, understanding each student's triggers, daily check-in and check-out, daily classroom meetings, flexible seating, and restorative practice discipline. Each student participant was also assigned an adult mentor in the school and a specific leadership position. The program also involved collaboration with outside agencies to help students and their families as appropriate.

During Summer 2018, in preparation for the launch of Advance, the Advance team members participated in TIP training provided by the district and other sources. In October, the principal also started a book study focused on TIP, open to all instructional staff. The 13 members of the Advance team plus 12 other teachers participated. The book study involved monthly collaborative meetings to discuss the book and TIP strategies and approaches in general. In November the school set up opportunities for teachers who were not on the Advance team to observe teachers on the team using TIP in their classrooms.

Advance continued in the first part of the 2019-2020 school year in a similar manner, including a new book study. However, at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in spring 2020 Advance was put on hold as lockdown, virtual schooling, and in-person schooling under COVID conditions made it too challenging to continue the program. At the beginning of the 2021-2022 school year, TIP resumed but in a much less resource intensive manner. Specifically, at the time of the study the principal was using a more subtle and much less resource-intense approach of trying to infuse what she called a "culture and philosophy" of trauma-informed practice throughout the school. She indicated in an interview that without explicitly requiring all teachers to use TIP, she focused on teachers "building the relationships and rapport with the kids, making sure that they feel safe and comfortable" and socially and emotionally healthy "knowing that you need to have that in place if you want those academic gains." Her strategy involved encouraging and providing resources for (but not requiring) a set of practices to be implemented in all classrooms for all students. These practices included using a specific social-emotional learning program, development of good relationships with children via morning meetings, use of a calm area, restorative approaches to behavior problems, and prioritizing social-emotional needs of students. Importantly, the principal did not use the term "trauma" when describing this approach to staff, as she felt that some in the school community perceived that term to be too negative. Instead, she described the strategies as a way to "build resilience" in students.

Participants

For the initial step in recruitment, the first author contacted the school principal and asked her whether she would be interested in the study taking place at Mills Elementary. The principal was excited about the offer and also agreed to be interviewed as part of the study. To recruit the rest of the interviewees, the principal sent out an email to staff providing a brief description of the study and asking for interview volunteers. Interview participants received a $40 gift card after the interview.

The 17 interview participants comprised 2 administrators, 14 certified teachers and 1 aide. All were white and all but one was female. The certified teachers represented all grade levels in the school and included 10 general education teachers, 3 special education teachers, and 1 specialist teacher. The non-administrator staff participants had between 1 and 31 years of experience in education, with a mean of 13 years. They had worked at the school between a few months and 13 years, with a mean of 5 years. Ten of the certified teachers had master's degrees and 4 had bachelor's degrees. As will be seen in the Findings, the participants varied in knowledge of and experience with trauma-informed practice.

The administrators comprised the principal and assistant principal. The principal had a doctorate and 31 years of experience in the field; she had been principal of the school for 12 years. The assistant principal had a master's degree and 19 years of experience in the field and had been at the school for 11 years.

Data Sources and Data Analysis

The first data source was 18 semi-structured interviews, which included 2 interviews with the principal and 1 interview with each of the rest of the participants. The interviews took place August through November 2021 and were between 34 and 71 minutes long, with an average of 53 minutes. Eight of the interviews took place via Zoom, and 10 were in person, most at the school. The first author conducted 10 of the interviews and the second author conducted eight. The interviews were recorded using audio-recording and speech-to-text software. The first author then listened to each recording and corrected the transcripts.

The second data source was observation of two virtual staff meetings at the school. The first author attended the meetings which took place after school in late August and early December 2021. They were each about an hour in length. The principal led the meetings which were attended by about 45 certified staff members. The researchers had university Institutional Review Board approval for the research.

We analyzed the data using thematic analysis to seek categories, patterns, and themes (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Esterberg, 2002; Glesne, 2011), with the aid of the qualitative data analysis software Dedoose. We began by reading and re-reading each interview and writing memos to document our initial thoughts. We then did open coding, applying category names to bits of text (Esterberg, 2002; Glesne, 2011). The long list of initial codes included such items as School Culture, Punishment, Effects of TIP, Definition of Trauma, Socio-emotional Needs, and Self-regulation. After open coding was complete, we reworked the codes in conjunction with our research questions, and then

refined and collapsed the codes to a smaller set of focused codes (Esterberg, 2002) that included categories such as Resistance to TIP, Relationships, and Impact of COVID. We then conducted focused coding with this substantially reduced set of codes, refining even further until we had a final set of themes.

Findings

Theme 1: Interviewees Support and Implement TIP and Perceive That Most of Their Colleagues Do Too

All of the interviewees expressed support for TIP and described using a wide range of practices consistent with it. For example, 9 participants mentioned using a calm space or calming activity for students when needed, 8 mentioned practicing mindfulness, and 7 used a specific social-emotional development program that was available at the school. In terms of TIP-consistent beliefs, most participants mentioned or discussed the need to prioritize relationships and socio-emotional health over academics both because socio-emotional health is extremely important in its own right and also because students cannot learn when social-emotional needs are not met. For example, Ms. Eberhardt said: "…[If] we need to take an extra 45 minutes for morning meeting because kids are really needing to talk, then we're gonna do that, and grammar is going to go for the day."

A salient finding in this theme is the importance the interviewees placed on finding out background information about trauma-impacted students and having compassion and empathy for them. Almost all interviewees described using approaches to misbehavior that are consistent with TIP. Key for interviewees was understanding why students behave inappropriately, using strategies aimed at de-escalating the situation, providing choices for students, and empowering them rather than punishing them. Ms. Davis talked about questioning students with empathy, to find out the root cause of misbehavior:

> It's very easy to think "well they're just misbehaving", but I've got one little guy in here this year who he's a very difficult student to get through to. And he shows a lot of behaviors, but he finally opened up just last week, and you know kind of spilled his guts to me about what was going on at home. And then I was thinking, "Well, my gosh, what I'm dealing with here at school is nothing compared to what he's dealing with on a daily basis and no wonder why he can't focus and concentrate when he's constantly thinking about everything that goes on in the home life."…Nobody wants to act out, nobody wants to misbehave, there's a reason why it's happening.

The quote shows Ms. Davis emphasis on developing relationships with students, which several others spoke of as well. Ms. McDonald described dealing with student behavior problems in a way that provides students a "bridge" to solving problems on their own, essentially describing self-regulation training without using that term:

> And it's like a stair step…You see them handling [a difficult situation] and be like, "hey, last time we talked, this is what we're gonna do so let's practice together", and then you're slowly releasing that responsibility back to them, so that eventually you're hoping that they identify when they start to lose it…that they can stop themselves and go "okay I need to count to five".

Several teachers described how their own mindset and teaching strategies had changed since learning about TIP. In terms of mindset, for example, Ms. Richards talked about shifting from a focus on moving through the material at a specific pace to thinking more about solving students' deeper socio-emotional problems:

> [Prior to TIP training] I was always like, "Well, they have to be doing the same thing." "I'm gonna have to figure out a way to get them to do the homework" or whatever, and just realizing that everyone doesn't go home to the same house, that we can still get these kids to learn, but it's just not one size fits all.

Additional specific strategies that teachers described implementing in the initial years of TIP at Mills demonstrate teacher initiative in instituting a variety of different practices as part of their TIP approach. For example, one teacher used art therapy with trauma-impacted students in her classroom, while another implemented a cross-age peer tutoring program whereby trauma-impacted students tutored younger children in math or reading.

Several interviewees brought up the self-reinforcing characteristic of trauma-informed practice, which likely helps with the spread of TIP. Specifically, 9 participants described positive effects of TIP that they had experienced. Ms. Richards, for example, talked about how teachers "find success in [TIP] so quickly… It's a good feeling whenever your kids are engaged and you're able to talk to them about those things and then it just trickles down through their whole day." Ms. Davis said it had been "very hard" to switch from blaming the difficult students to asking oneself and the student "what's going on today?", but then went on to talk about the reward:

> Eventually you do get through to them…The one student in particular this year came up and was like "you're the only teacher that's ever taken time to really care about me, and not just my behavior." So it's those things and I'm like, it's definitely 100% worth it.

Finally, in addition to supporting and using TIP themselves, the interviewees believed that most other teachers in the school use TIP. Estimates of current buy-in varied, but they were fairly high. Ten interviewees provided estimates, ranging from a low outlier of 60-70% to a high of 100%, cited by a few teachers. Two teachers mentioned that their entire grade level was on board. Teachers who had been at the school for more than a few years indicated that numbers had been increasing over time, mentioning factors such as training and book clubs as influential factors.

Theme 2: Participants Highly Value TIP-related Communication and Collaboration With Other Educators

Almost every participant discussed the importance and value for them of discussing trauma informed teaching strategies with others in the school. Teachers felt that they received helpful ideas from their peers in meetings and during one-on-one conversations. Six teachers mentioned the book studies that had occurred during Advance, which they found valuable and enjoyable. Several discussed communication with and support from the administrators related to specific trauma-impacted students. Ms. Faber said that she and her fellow teachers shared websites and books with each other, and she was one of three teachers who said they had liked the opportunity to observe in other teachers' classrooms during Advance.

One important form of communication came from school leaders. Specifically, several interviewees mentioned that the weekly emails from the principal, an important part of her new school philosophy strategy, were helpful reminders for teachers to take students' sometimes challenging home lives into consideration. Most of these interviewees brought up the emails spontaneously, as with Ms. Sommers, who said:

> My principal is very, very, very good about getting out messages like, "if one of your kiddos looks like they're having a rough day"...We get a lot of good ideas and support from our principal in this area as well. For example a few weeks ago she sent out an email and it was a really great idea. It was "send a letter home to your parents", and..., [the letter to parents] said, "I know some days might be rough, you know some days might be a little tougher than others. And you don't have to tell us what's going on at home. But if there's something we can do, all you have to do is write it on a little note, 'Handle with care,' when they come in the next day. So we know to give them extra love and extra support, no matter what's going on if you write those words, like we'll know what to do". So, I mean I thought that was a beautiful message. I sent that home to my parents as soon as she sent that.

Along similar lines, also unprompted, Ms. Davis said:

> [Principal]'s very good about, on Monday morning she sends out little messages or memes to the staff just reminding us like, "Hey remember Johnny might not have had a good weekend at home you know he just doesn't come from a supportive environment so just make sure you reconnect with him on Monday and he feels safe coming here."...You know, sometimes the busyness of a Monday morning you forget that maybe one or two students didn't have the best weekend at home.

These various forms of collaboration and consultation were a very important means of learning about TIP for participants. Interestingly, though most teachers (11 of 15) had also had TIP-related training either within or outside of the district, four interviewees, all hired within the past 4 years, had not had TIP training. They

seemed to have learned about TIP almost exclusively by connecting with and observing others at Mills. One example of learning via observation is Ms. Mitchell, a member of the instructional support staff who had not received TIP training. Excerpts from her interview show how what other teachers are doing can change the behavior of individual educators. In the following excerpt she explains one way she learned to change her practice:

> And all I saw [before] was, okay, these are the kids who are fine; these are the kids who give me trouble. And I didn't really have the brain tools to do anything with that information. I just knew these kids always behaved badly. And I didn't know what to do with them. But as I've worked there and as I have connected more with individual kids, and I also kind of sat down with myself and said okay, "what can I do differently because obviously there's something that I'm not doing right in my job, because I'm watching these other teachers able to handle the situation and I'm not, so what can I do differently." So I just, I took different pieces of what other teachers were doing. And that helped me a lot, and that in turn helped me help the kids.

Ten interviewees felt that more opportunities for collaboration focused on trauma-impacted students were needed. This is not surprising since the data clearly show that the onset of the pandemic had greatly reduced opportunities for collaboration and discussion among peers around TIP, while at the same time increasing the number of students impacted by trauma.

Theme 3: Participants See Resistance to TIP in Others

Most participants, including both administrators, believed that although resistance was diminishing, some members of the teaching staff still did not practice TIP. Ms. Anderson, for example, stated that some teachers simply are not motivated to attend training: "We can always have more training, but then you also have the teachers complaining, 'all I want to do is work in my classroom'." Similarly, Ms. Davis also described lack of interest in learning about TIP:

> Some teachers view [trainings] as a waste of time like, "I've been teaching for so long I already know this". Or they're just "education comes full circle" is what I hear a lot of the older teachers saying, like, "Oh, we did that when we were first starting out."

Several interviewees believed that some teachers' lack of TIP use was due to the teachers holding beliefs inconsistent with TIP. For example, four participants reported that some teachers believe in a punitive approach to misbehavior. Ms. Baker said: "It's difficult to get all staff on board. It's very difficult [for some] to see the value of it, and not necessarily viewing it as students getting the easy way out or not getting punished enough." Ms. Eberhardt felt that most of the resistant teachers have shifted since the implementation of the Advance program, but she raised punishment as an early point of contention:

So the original program I do feel was successful. I do know that there was some teachers who did not feel that way because they felt that the children were not being reprimanded the way that they felt that the children should be reprimanded, such as... suspensions and things like that...

Views about punishment are closely related to other beliefs inconsistent with TIP that were held or believed to be held by some teachers, including beliefs about reasons students misbehave, beliefs about trauma, and beliefs about the role of the teacher. In terms of the first of these, as pointed out earlier, shifting one's understanding of why students misbehave from a choice or motivational view of misbehavior to a cognitive skills deficit view is key, but some teachers had not shifted in this direction. Ms. Johnson said: "I think a lot of teachers always view any acting out or not completing work or stuff, as just being difficult." Further, one participant believed some resistors felt that using a trauma-sensitive approach was unfair to the children who behave well. This perspective is consistent with the misguided idea that how students behave in school is a function of the choices they make, and that students who misbehave are roughly equally capable of appropriate and inappropriate behavior but they choose inappropriate behavior. The perspective that TIP is unfair to students who behave well also falsely assumes that the students who behave well actually want to behave badly and only behave well because otherwise they would get in trouble.

Related to beliefs about reasons students misbehave is resistance to TIP linked to the definition of "trauma." Ms. Davis and Ms. Johnson reported that some teachers perceived that the word "trauma" should not be applied to students at Mills because Mills students have not actually experienced trauma. Ms. Davis said: "I do think a lot of teachers in our area get very turned off by the word trauma because...you don't associate trauma with our clientele here." She believed further that convincing teachers that there are trauma-impacted students at Mills would help with TIP buy-in. Similarly, Ms. Johnson felt that some teachers who support TIP in general believe that some students should not be included in the trauma impacted category: "I don't know that anyone's against [TIP]. I think there are people that don't necessarily always agree with who's put in or what things are being passed as trauma."

Interestingly, three interviewees themselves appeared to believe that the word "trauma" is overused at the school. One interviewee, for example, stressed in her interview that students at Mills do not experience the kinds of real trauma that students in other communities experience. She said "I don't consider a bad divorce a trauma situation". She also indicated that de-escalating techniques that are used with students who are truly trauma-impacted should not be used with other students, implying that this sometimes happened at Mills and that such students who misbehave need actual punitive consequences. Another teacher similarly felt that some Mills students are designated trauma-impacted for minor difficulties that do not constitute trauma, which leads TIP to be used inappropriately for those students. She believes students who misbehave and are not trauma-impacted should sometimes be removed from the classroom, but that "some of the kids are just excused" and not held accountable. In her view, that leads to "Some of the kids that are smart enough to see that in play, then become manipulative about it." A third teacher who was a very strong proponent of TIP emphasized that she feels consequences for negative behavior are necessary for all students, and that the school does not do this. Like the previous teacher, she feels bad behavior is sometimes rewarded in the school:

Not that I want anyone to be punished like in a horrible way, I just want them to know, there are logical consequences that we all face. And so, I don't want them to get out of that, or I don't want them to go to the middle school or high school or go out in life and have a consequence that's extreme and they're like, "what, how, why am I getting this?"

Beliefs related to the role of the teacher also emerged from the interviews as a source of resistance. Interviewees reported that some teachers believe it is the role of parents, not teachers, to deal with students' psychological problems. Further, two participants discussed the problem of teachers who believe their role is to focus on academics rather than socio-emotional skill development. For example, in the following quote a participant describes how some teachers have an efficiency mindset focused on academics which makes them hesitant to spend time on social-emotional skills:

Some people are very "Ooh I'm farther behind than my neighbor in math," or "I'm farther behind in reading." Maybe. But did you make a better connection with the kid, did you make that kid's life better? ...Most kids will catch up with that math...

A final factor believed to impact teacher buy-in to TIP was social standing, especially social proximity to the principal. For example, some interviewees mentioned that they think teachers who were socially closer to and liked by the administrators were more likely to incorporate TIP, and that staff who do not feel included or valued by the administrators were demotivated to implement TIP. This perception is consistent with one interviewee's observation that the very first staff members that the administrators approached when they decided to implement TIP were usually "the younger teachers or the teachers that [the two leaders] had close relationships with that knew how [the leaders] operated more..."

Theme 4: Implementation of TIP is Difficult

A factor that that came up in several interviews is how difficult it is to apply trauma-informed approaches when students behave inappropriately. Four teachers and the administrators talked about this. Ms. McDonald said: "It takes a lot of patience. Yeah, it takes a lot of patience and a lot of work." Ms. Davis spoke about how challenging it had been to change her strategy:

> So just approaching them and questioning them differently, "what's going on today...is there something that happened at home last night or this morning that you want to talk about, is there anything that you want to talk about", being more sympathetic with them and not so much "what's wrong with you." So, those kinds of techniques definitely came from the training.
>
> Was that hard to switch?
>
> Yeah, yeah, it was very hard.

The assistant principal also talked about some teachers' difficulty with this transition:

> It was tough trying to find the balance. You had some teachers that went maybe an inch into it, just put their toe in the water. And then you had some teachers that wholeheartedly embraced it and jumped in feet first, head first, and ran the mile, but then they kind of threw all [behavior management] out the window, and...they were like, "oh I've let this go too far."

Ms. Baker, who came to Mills with a lot of TIP training under her belt, was asked directly by the interviewer how hard it had been to implement a trauma informed approach when a specific child misbehaved. She said:

> It was awkward, to be honest. I remember not knowing what to do - because in the moment – you know you read all of these things and all of these things you can do and these different discussions and you know, everything. But in the moment, it can be hard...

Implementation of trauma-sensitive behavior management strategies is not only difficult from a skills perspective, it is also taxing. Five teachers discussed how difficult it was to handle such students. Ms. Faber, for example, said that having two Advance students in her classroom "was definitely challenging for me, I mean those two students alone were, you know, challenging, very different backgrounds. A lot of trauma. A lot of things going on. A lot of things that I hadn't dealt with..."

Unsurprisingly, data from interviews and staff meetings indicated that the COVID-19 pandemic made implementation of TIP even more challenging, for two reasons. First, administrators and teaching staff at the school felt that the COVID-19 pandemic had had a negative effect on student development. Several participants talked in interviews about learning loss and weak social-emotional skills of students due to COVID isolation and the conditions of COVID schooling. Ms. Faber, for example, said:

> I think the learning loss for the kids, I think the maturity level for the kids. I mean we feel like what we're seeing this year, that kids are about two years behind maturity wise, which makes sense because they were basically not in their typical school setting environment for a year and a half, you know or longer, so that's kind of why this year I think, is more challenging just because all those things are kind of adding up together and now we're having to deal with it.

Second, although the weaker social-emotional skills in students and the trauma many had experienced due to COVID increased the need for TIP, the pandemic had severely curtailed the trauma-informed practices that the school and teachers were able to implement. Participants mentioned many TIP practices that had been part of Advance that the school was no longer able to do, including calm rooms, the presence of a TIP interventionist, a mentoring system for trauma-impacted students, TIP training, staff wellness activities, among others. The principal mentioned that during Advance, if a teacher needed help with a particular student, the practice had been for one of the administrators to take over the class while the teacher took the student to a calm room to talk to the student to find out what was going on. Time and space restrictions meant that she and the assistant principal could not do that anymore.

However, even if school leaders had been able to prioritize TIP training and other aspects of the Advance program, the data indicate that teachers were so stressed and stretched in Fall 2021 due to COVID circumstances, many would not have been able to handle pressure from the administration to adopt new TIP practices. The following quote from Ms. Hansen supports the notion that the principal was wise to take a gentle, non-coercive approach to TIP during the 2021-22 school year. When asked about the principal's decision to focus more on school philosophy and culture rather than a stronger approach, she said:

> I think the hurdle that you would have at this moment is that people feel like they're still drowning under COVID. And I think that although this is probably the time that our kids need it the most, I think it'd be split in half. Half the teachers would be like, absolutely we need to do something, and the other half just have their own weight on them because they're struggling. I think we all are struggling in some way...So yes I think it's needed more than any time that I've ever taught, but I think you would struggle, because they [teachers] would view it as one more thing.

Theme 5: The Pandemic Facilitated Movement to a School-wide Approach to TIP

The tragedy of the pandemic has been enormous and should not be minimized. Yet, study data indicate that the COVID-19 pandemic facilitated or perhaps accelerated the use of TIP as a universal or schoolwide approach. As indicated earlier, Advance, which targeted the students most in need of trauma-sensitive attention, had been put on hold during COVID due to resource restrictions. Thus in 2021-2022

leaders focused on creation of a trauma-informed philosophy and culture in the school as a whole. Ten interviewees alluded to the whole class or schoolwide approach, some indicating that it was an important shift. For example, Ms. Lowell acknowledged that while the newer approach did not meet the "deep needs" of trauma-informed students as effectively as the Advance program had, the reach was wider:

> I think that the addressing since COVID...is reaching more students...[Advance] was intended for students that were trauma, and...it met their needs...but I think that where we're at now is more school based. It's not just those students, it's school based. So [a schoolwide philosophy approach] is trying to [address] those students that are trauma but also any students that are struggling.

Further, some participants felt that the pandemic-related socio-emotional deficits teachers were seeing in so many of their students would lead to greater use of trauma informed strategies aimed at the whole class, such as SEL and mindfulness. For example, similar to Ms. Lowell, Ms. Eberhardt felt that more teachers were seeing the need for and using such strategies because of COVID:

> I feel like the problem is it's not just a set of kids at this point, it's the main population of children that need these trauma informed practices because they just feel that this pandemic has been that traumatic for kids. So I feel like teachers...who didn't feel comfortable, even like last year, this year they're like, "How do you, where's that workbook you have [on mindfulness or SEL]".

She supported this expansion, as she felt TIP should be a "universal intervention education reform." In another example, Ms. Hansen herself felt that seeing the social emotional issues in students this year has led her to consider incorporating class wide trauma-sensitive strategies, such as Second Step.

Once the difficulties associated with COVID were over, the principal intended to re-instate Advance. Although it was not yet the case at Mills, it is worth noting that a combination of Advance with a schoolwide approach would fit with many experts' beliefs that TIP should be a multi-tiered system of support, involving a set of universal supports, a set of extra resources for students at a higher level of need, and individualized supports to a few students with the highest level of need (Gubi et al, 2019; Hoover, 2019; Keown et al, 2020; Von der Embse et al, 2019). Ms. McDonald specifically referenced such an approach:

> I think it should be more of a leveled system...I think that people don't realize how...much trauma that you actually could bring with you. And how much of these kids do possibly have slight doses of it, so that's where...maybe there's a leveling, like... in RTI...Like these are our Tier Ones that would be the general population; you have the Tier Twos that they've experienced things but they had to have support but they might still need something; and then you have like your Threes or something where you're like, these

> [need] strong interventions. It almost to me seems like it should be something like that.

Discussion

Findings from the study indicate that interviewees support TIP and perceive that it is fairly widely practiced across the school. They also describe some challenges with implementing TIP, some of which were exacerbated by the COVID pandemic. Cutting across the themes that emerged from the interviews are two significant takeaways: the importance of relationships in the spread of teaching practices and beliefs; and the potential significance of the packaging or repackaging of reform.

Importance of Relationships

One of the key findings in this study is the importance of both teacher-student and teacher-peer relationships in the success of TIP. In terms of the former, the interviews indicate that one reason many teachers supported and used TIP despite the challenges is that it led to enhanced relationships with students. Most teachers want good relationships with students, but not all teachers have the skills to develop them (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). SEL curricula and other practices consistent with TIP have been found to provide teachers with motivation and guidance for developing better teacher-student relationships (Ablon & Pollastri, 2018; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Keown et al, 2020; Noyes, 2020; Schnyder et al, 2021). In turn, enhanced relationships with students, especially with trauma-impacted students, may provide rewards for teachers that mitigate the challenges of dealing with the difficult behaviors of trauma-impacted students in the classroom. Indeed, Brunzell et al (2018) found that although teachers can get compassion fatigue when working with trauma-impacted students, they also get "compassion satisfaction" when working with the students is invigorating and satisfying. These rewards provided by the enhanced teacher-student relationship resulting from TIP can be seen as part of the "relative advantage" of the intervention, or how much better the intervention is perceived to be than the practice it is replacing (Dingfelder & Mandell, 2011; Rogers, 2003). According to Diffusion of Innovation theory, relative advantage is an important factor in the dissemination of a new intervention.

Relatedly, the study also found that relationships with school colleagues and leaders around TIP were very important to the participants, who highly valued the communication and collaborative opportunities that enabled them to talk about and compare TIP practices with those they worked with. These findings are consistent with research on spread of interventions like TIP showing that social networks and relational ties are often more important influences on adoption of an innovation than the effectiveness of the intervention

or a person's knowledge of it (Rogers, 2003; Dingfelder & Mandell, 2011; Woodland & Mazur, 2019). One reason, of course, is that teachers who work in a collaborative atmosphere are likely to be more effective as they are able to get ideas from others and share problems and brainstorm solutions. They also get emotional support from each other, and compassion satisfaction, mentioned above, is more likely to occur when teachers feel supported and have the opportunity to share ideas with others (Brunzell et al, 2018).

Another reason that collaboration among peers might positively effect adoption of TIP is that social status and prestige influence people's perceptions of relative advantage (Rogers, 2003). Some of the interviewees alluded to in-group/out-group status having an impact on teacher views about TIP, and some advocates of TIP indicated they were friends with the principal and/or greatly respected the principal. Since the principal was encouraging TIP in the school, for these teachers an added advantage of using TIP practices might have been pleasing their friend and/or boss.

This dynamic is one reason that teachers who have closer relationships with and more in common with well-networked personnel and school leaders may be more likely to use TIP than those who are less well networked. Another reason relates to a theory called Strength-of-Weak-Ties. Research shows that, unsurprisingly, in social networks ideas get exchanged most often between people with strong ties; people with such ties communicate with each other frequently and tend to be similar in terms of things like education level, SES, and values (Rogers, 2003). However, important information travels between people who have weak ties with each other, not strong ties, because your close ties rarely have information that you do not already know (Rogers, 2003). Thus for a new practice to spread widely, there have to be mechanisms within the organization for people with weak social ties and who are dissimilar to have face-to-face interaction (Rogers, 2003).

TIP as a New Package for Old Practices

This study's findings also highlight the significance of the packaging and framing of instructional reform. An irony inherent in teacher or school adoption of TIP is that many of the practices included in TIP are not new. Rather, TIP comprises to a large degree evidence-based instructional practices and skills have that been known for many years but are not generally applied. These include using democratic and restorative approaches to dealing with students who chronically misbehave, providing mental health support, and building good relationships with all students (John-Pierre & Parris; Pearson, 2019; Warnick & Scribner, 2020). These approaches are not widely used despite decades of solid evidence mainly because the dominant ideology of behaviorism and meritocracy in

the U.S. makes it difficult for institutions and individuals to move away from punitive approaches (Pearson, 2019; Warnick & Scribner, 2020).

Our data indicate that some people at Mills needed only a nudge to move to TIP. For these teachers training plus administrative and peer support was enough to shift their mindset toward a realization that students' socio-emotional needs need to be met before they can learn, and that punitive approaches do not address those needs. A nudge was not sufficient for all teachers, however, and we speculate that two features of TIP helped teachers who had more trouble letting go of punitive approaches move to at least partial acceptance of TIP. First, some of the relatively new trauma-specific information in TIP about how trauma can cause neurocognitive skills deficits in children appears to have helped teachers move away from the dominant view by providing an adequately compelling rationale for negative behavior not being the fault of the child. In other words, TIP-related approaches to instruction and behavior management are effective and developmentally appropriate for all children, but the ideology of behaviorism and meritocracy is so pervasive in the US that unless you give teachers an explicit reason why students' challenging behavior is beyond the students' control, they will not move away from punitive approaches. TIP provides that reason by showing how the brains of some children have been damaged in a manner that is outside of the child's control, leading to problems in self-regulation, relationships, and other areas.

The second feature of TIP that may have helped some teachers move away from punitive approaches is flexibility, a characteristic that Diffusion of Innovation Theory research has shown increases chances of adoption. The original Advance program was flexible in that although the program required a specific set of classroom practices, these could be implemented in varying ways and to varying degrees. For example, practices such as morning circles and comfort corners, to name just two of the Advance TIP practices, can take many different forms and still be effective. The school culture and philosophy approach of the 2021-22 school year seems even more flexible: school leaders encouraged a set of trauma-sensitive practices, and made available a set of resources to help teachers with implementation, but teachers could try out selected practices as they desired without being required to adopt the whole set.

The flexibility of TIP implementation at Mills likely enhanced adoption of it, for a few reasons. First, TIP resembles what Dearing (2009) refers to as an intervention cluster, or a logically-related set of interventions that complement each other and/or are interchangeable with each other. Clusters allow people to select pieces of an intervention that seem

less complex and more compatible with current beliefs. Taking the first step is the biggest barrier for adoption of an innovation, after which the threshold is lower. So adoption of one practice in a cluster makes it more likely a person will adopt other practices as well. Clustering also provides people with choices, which enhances autonomy and sense of empowerment. Flexibility in an innovation is also helpful because it allows re-invention, or customization to one's own situation (Rogers, 2003). Interventions that can be re-invented are more quickly adopted and better sustained than inflexible ones that need to be implemented with fidelity as they increase compatibility by allowing people to better align the intervention to their pre-existing beliefs and values.

Interview and meeting data show that teacher re-invention of TIP at Mills was evident, as individual teachers spoke of specific ways they or their grade-level groups had decided to implement mindfulness, morning meetings, and other trauma-sensitive practices. The data also indicate that flexibility may have helped some teachers who were not ready to entirely abandon punitive approaches to at least use TIP in some cases. For example, the data indicate that some teachers perceived that at Mills non-punitive trauma-sensitive approaches to misbehavior were sometimes used with non-trauma-impacted students who do not "deserve" it and who need traditional punishment. Such teachers appear to still view some students as needing punishment, but at least accept use of non-punitive approaches with students they perceive to have experienced trauma. The flexibility in this case may allow a way in, because it makes a way for TIP to be more compatible with their beliefs. It also shows how putting old practices in a new package may help facilitate instructional reform.

Conclusion

TIP is an extremely important evidence-based reform that both helps heal students who have experienced trauma outside of the school and prevents additional trauma from occurring in the school setting. Implementation of TIP in schools can reduce behavior problems, increase achievement, and keep students in school, especially in the case of children who are already experiencing racial and socio-economic oppression (Crosby, 2015). It also increases teacher satisfaction and reduces teacher stress (Crosby, 2015). However, implementation of complex interventions like TIP is challenging (Alisic, 2012; Blitz et al, 2016). The study findings highlight the importance of collaboration and social relationships in school reform as well as the challenging and delicate task of shifting entrenched damaging and counterproductive beliefs and practices of members of the teaching profession toward practices and beliefs that are more developmentally appropriate, ethical, and equitable.

Footnotes

[1]Names of individuals, programs, and institutions have been changed.

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