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How can professional development for early childhood educators on trauma-informed practices help support whole child development?

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ED 590 Research and Capstone Complete

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Abstract

Research findings have indicated that early childhood educators are requiring additional knowledge and skills than what is currently provided to better support the development of young children after they have experienced a traumatic event (Alisic, 2012; Kim et al., 2021; Loomis & Felt, 2020). Approximately one in four children have experienced a traumatic event by the time they turn two years old (Loomis & Felt, 2020). This paper examined the impact of professional development opportunities for early childhood educators on trauma-informed practices to better support the whole child. In addition to professional development opportunities, the research suggested that curriculum enrichment and family engagement practices should be implemented, as well. The studies in this paper commonly showed that trauma-informed training and curriculum can boost teacher confidence (Shamblin et al., 2016), have long-term academic impacts on young children (Sanders et al., 2020), and create a sense of community for caregivers and parents (Eismann et al., 2019).

Keywords: adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), early childhood education (ECE), professional development, trauma, trauma-informed practices

Chapter One: Introduction

Research on young children and trauma has indicated that experiencing a traumatic event can have adverse effects on young children. For young children, a traumatic experience may include general grief or the loss of a loved one, community violence, abuse, homelessness, illness, changes in family structure, and more. Young children are susceptible to being exposed to traumatic events. Research on early childhood trauma has determined that approximately one in four children have been exposed to a traumatic event by the age of two years old (Loomis & Felt, 2020). The need for understanding the developmental implications of trauma experienced during early childhood and the need for trauma-informed professionals to better support young children in the early childhood field has not only proven to be important, but essential. This paper examined the literature that was currently available on how professional development for teachers, curriculum enrichment, and intentional parent involvement practices, concerning early childhood trauma and trauma-informed practices, can help meet the developmental needs of the whole child.

Importance to Early Childhood Education

Researchers thus far have agreed that young children can show an array of different signs, behaviors, and indicators after experiencing an adverse event (Eismann et al., 2019; Cummings et al., 2017; De Young et al., 2011). According to Statman-Weil (2015), young children often look to trusted adults, such as parents and teachers, to help facilitate and model healthy relationships and trust. A range of knowledge is required to best support young children and families who have experienced traumatic events, yet early childhood educators often receive limited training on this topic (Cummings et al., 2017; Alisic, 2012). Without the necessary awareness, teachers may inadvertently trigger stress reactions in young children that may

provoke difficult or challenging behaviors, which in turn can create teacher burnout and higher levels of stress (Kim et al., 2021). High levels of teacher stress, resulting from disruptive behaviors, may also negatively impact the classroom environment. These concerns have been shown to directly impact the classroom setting and field of early childhood education as it relates to the teachers, students, and families. The research suggested that, through trauma-informed training, it is possible to address the ways that teachers perceive different behaviors in the classroom, especially when linked to traumatic events that a child has been exposed to, such as violence or maltreatment (Loomis & Felt, 2020). Not only is it necessary to implement professional development on the topic of trauma for early childhood educators, but the specific topics covered within the training were found to be just as important as the training itself (Loomis & Felt, 2020). Overall, most researchers agreed that the impact that traumatic experiences can have on young children can be detrimental to overall child growth and development. It is the responsibility of educators to ensure that the implemented teaching practices are supporting the whole child through the use of teaching practices, curriculum, and family involvement.

Scope and Purpose of the Research

The purpose of this research was to explore the ways that early childhood educators can promote intervention strategies in the classroom and overall trauma-informed practices to better serve the needs of the children and families. This paper examined a variety of quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-method studies from the past ten years, with a focus on preschool and early childhood care settings. The scope of the research included how professional development for teachers, curriculum enrichment, and intentional parent involvement practices, concerning

early childhood trauma and trauma-informed practices, can help meet the developmental needs of the whole child.

Definition of Terms

Adverse childhood experiences (ACE or ACEs) are broadly considered life events, such as emotional, sexual, and/or physical abuse, domestic violence, parental separation, mental illness, substance use in the household, criminal affiliation, emotional and physical neglect, school, community, and/or political violence, and natural disasters (Rishel et al., 2019).

Trauma-informed care is the overall approach that an organization uses to guide the programs and services that are provided, with an understanding of the impact that trauma has on individuals (Rishel et al., 2019).

Conclusion

The research shared in this paper has strongly indicated that to acknowledge best practices and current research as the field moves forward in the future, it is essential for the early childhood field to recognize the need for trauma-informed practices in future programming. This capstone has examined research on professional development opportunities for early childhood staff and has attempted to answer the question of “How can professional development for early childhood educators on trauma-informed practices help support whole child development?” The research assessed the benefits, impacts, and delivery methods that have been previously researched and utilized within the field, as well as ways to extend the practices beyond the classroom and into the home. The examination of research is concluded with a discussion of the previously completed research that has unveiled opportunities for applications, future studies, and ways to continue the conversation of bringing trauma-informed practices into early childhood classrooms.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Trauma-informed practice is broadly described as the strategies and responses that are implemented when trauma has occurred. Professional development opportunities, such as workshops and specialized courses that emphasized trauma-informed practices have repeatedly demonstrated that implementing trauma-sensitive teaching practices and curriculum enrichment have had positive impacts on whole child development, which included academic success and achievement (Loomis & Felt, 2020). By implementing trauma-informed practices and curriculum, researchers have found that students were more likely to improve in multiple developmental areas, including social-emotional (Tucker et al., 2017). Improvements in behavior and self-regulation were also attributed to trauma-informed practices (Holmes et al., 2015). The reviewed literature also determined that targeted family engagement using trauma-informed practices was impactful. Parents were found to enjoy and request additional parent learning opportunities to create continuity between the school practices and home practices (Eismann et al., 2019). The purpose of this literature review was to explore the previously completed studies on the need, and influence, of professional development opportunities for teachers on trauma-informed practices.

Role of Early Childhood

To determine the best ways early childhood educators can support young children who have experienced a traumatic event, researchers have studied the role of the early childhood professional. Eismann et al. (2019) described an early childhood caregiver's role as being an integral part of a child's development and well-being. With many children attending childcare, or other early childhood care programs, during the early years of life, teachers are well-positioned to build relationships with families and provide interventions (Douglass et al., 2021; Lipscomb et

al., 2019). As a result of these relationships, Eismann et al. (2019) believed that early childhood caregivers had a unique opportunity to be one of the first to know if there is a specific stressor within a child's family and to help provide resources. Statman-Weil (2015) also shared that is necessary for teachers to know the importance of attachment to better support a child's positive impression of school and learning. In a qualitative study, Alisic (2012) interviewed 21 elementary school teachers to understand the teachers' perspectives on trauma-informed practices. The questions included experience and strategies, school protocols, collaboration with colleagues, and identified needs (Alisic, 2012). The survey revealed that many of the teachers indicated a lack of knowledge regarding trauma and had an unclear understanding of the specific roles that were required of the teacher versus a specialist, such as a therapist or a school counselor. Additionally, Alisic (2012) discovered that some of the teachers desired trauma-informed courses and learning opportunities to avoid feeling overwhelmed and "thrown into the deep end" (p. 55). Many educators are likely to work with students that have had a traumatic experience and should have general knowledge of how to support those students (Alisic, 2012; Parker et al., 2020). It has also been suggested that support methods may be universally beneficial to all students in the classroom, regardless of whether the child had a known history of an identified traumatic event or not (Cummings et al., 2017).

Trauma-Informed Professional Development

A range of knowledge is required to best support young children who have experienced traumatic events, yet researchers have noted that early childhood educators often receive limited training on this topic (Cummings et al., 2017; Lipscomb et al., 2019). Without the necessary awareness, it is believed that teachers may inadvertently trigger stress reactions in young children that may provoke difficult or challenging behaviors (Kim et al., 2021). The research

examined in this paper uncovered that through trauma-informed training, it may be possible to address the ways that teachers perceive different behaviors in the classroom, especially when those behaviors are linked to traumatic events a child has been exposed to, such as violence or maltreatment (Loomis & Felt, 2020).

The shift in mindset, as well as knowledge and skills, had also been shown to alleviate some of the high levels of teacher stress that resulted from disruptive behaviors in the classroom, often linked to trauma that the students had experienced (Cummings et al. 2017; Kim et al. 2021). Research findings also indicated that while it is necessary to implement trauma-informed training for early childhood educators, the specific topics covered within the professional development were found to be just as important as the training itself (Douglass et al, 2021; Holmes et al. 2015; Loomis & Felt, 2020).

Gaps in Available Training for Educators

A review of research on trauma-informed professional development has suggested that there is a notable gap between the need for professional development, including teacher training on trauma-informed practices, and what is available, especially for the early childhood community (Cummings et al., 2017; Holmes et al., 2015; Loomis & Felt, 2020). The research has indicated that by educating early childhood teachers on the appropriate ways to support children who have experienced one or more adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), teachers will be able to cultivate environments that help render positive results, such as improved behaviors and academic success.

Cummings et al. (2017), conducted a qualitative study including 13 female professionals and one male professional that had worked with, or on behalf of, young children that had been exposed to traumatic events. The participants included professionals from the fields of social

work, education, human development, and family studies. The study used questionnaire data and interview answers regarding the participant's perspectives on the skills and knowledge that early childhood educators should have to best support children and families that have experienced traumatic events. The findings of the study indicated four major themes: 1) realizing the existence and impact of trauma among young children, 2) recognizing reactions to trauma, 3) responding to trauma; promotive approaches and strategies, and 4) resisting re-traumatization (Cummings et al., 2017). Additionally, the participants noted that it was possible that the behaviors exhibited by young children can vary based on the type of traumatic event that was experienced, among other contributing factors, and require a range of knowledge to provide support (Cummings et al., 2017). Participants of the study were asked to recommend topics that should be included in professional development opportunities for teachers. Cummings et al. (2017) reported recommendations to include having a safe place for children to calm down, teaching breathing techniques, taking sensitive approaches to families, establishing routines, and environmental considerations. However, Cummings et al. (2017) did note that the ease of implementing some of these suggestions may vary based on the participant's lack of experience in actual classrooms.

Though some methods may be implemented the best in one-on-one scenarios with students, it is possible to implement classroom-wide measures that can help support all of the children (Loomis & Felt, 2020). Loomis & Felt (2020) further supported the idea of a classroom-wide model by discussing that improved teacher practices via professional development, in general, may help support the well-being of all of the children in the classroom. It is suggested that trauma-informed practices and understanding may be universally beneficial in all early childhood classrooms (Loomis & Felt, 2020; Douglass et al., 2021).

Training Content

It has been found that not all professional development training is created equal in terms of its efficacy and impact on teacher, student, and classroom improvement. In a quantitative study conducted by Loomis & Felt (2020), the relationship between the content of trauma-informed training and the trauma-informed attitudes of teachers was examined. It was determined that the content of trauma-informed training makes a difference when measuring the competency and trauma-informed attitudes of educators. In the study, Loomis & Felt (2020) recruited 125 Head Start staff that taught at four different locations. The demographics of the staff included 97% female teachers with varying levels of education. The children in the study were mostly male students (66.7%) with a range of ethnic backgrounds, including White (44.1%), Black (8.1%), Hispanic/Latino (28.8%), and other (13.5%) (Loomis & Felt, 2020). The measure used for the study was the Attitudes Related to Trauma-Informed Care (ARTIC) scale. Loomis & Felt (2021) surveyed staff members to understand each teacher's previous training, skills, and knowledge of trauma-informed practices. The amount of previous training was compared with the classroom-related stress that each teacher reported. The study found that teachers who had received training beyond the general knowledge of trauma and had been trained on trauma-informed skills, in addition to knowledge of trauma, were less likely to report classroom-related stress. However, the researchers noted that the study was limited by the reliability of the self-reporting measures (Loomis & Felt, 2020). In a related study on teacher stress and burnout, Kim et al. (2021) concluded that teacher stress was also attributed to a negative impact on the level of job satisfaction that a teacher had and the willingness to remain in the field of education. Loomis & Felt (2020) also believed that the content of the training that teachers receive can make a difference in the overall competence of trauma-informed practices in the classroom. However,

because this study relied on self-reported scoring, it is necessary to continue the study of content and competency in future studies (Loomis & Felt, 2020).

To further assess the importance of the content and delivery of trauma-informed training, as well as the implementation of the skills learned, Douglass et al. (2021) examined the relationship between program improvement and the use of the Breakthrough Series Collaborative (BSC). BSC is a methodology that is widely accepted in the healthcare field as a way of creating sustainable improvement in a program by implementing supports and structures that are organization-wide versus individual efforts (Douglass et al., 2021). This study was one of the first attempts to implement the strategy in the field of early childhood education. Douglass et al. (2021) collected qualitative data from five different early childhood programs via interviews and observations that helped researchers determine how the content of training on trauma-informed practice can influence the quality of an early childhood program. The researchers studied the impact of implementing the BSC, the changes that occurred to improve trauma-informed practices, and the scope of the organizational change. All of the programs served children under the age of six years old, had indicated a prevalence of students that were exposed to trauma, and had a demographic of mostly African American and Latino families, as well as immigrant families who did not have English as a primary language (Douglass et al., 2021). Douglass et al. (2021) determined that collaborative learning within a program was more impactful than independent learning completed by educators. By including all members of the program, as well as administrators, the programs that attended the coaching sessions and training were able to create more continuity throughout the early childhood program (Douglass et al., 2021). The study results suggested that programs that attend training together and implemented program-wide change could create environments that are more supportive and encourage more positive

mindsets about working with children that have experienced a traumatic event (Douglass et al., 2021).

Impact of Professional Development on Teachers

The term “burnout” is used in the field of education to describe a teacher who has become emotionally exhausted, with some teachers even leaving the field (Kim et al., 2021). Challenging behaviors in the classroom and the lack of understanding and support for these behaviors may create stress for a teacher that could ultimately lead to burnout (Kim et al., 2021, Loomis & Felt, 2020). According to Loomis & Felt (2020), teacher stress levels can negatively influence the classroom environment.

In a mixed-methods study, Kim et al. (2021) recruited early childhood educators in Ontario, Canada to participate in a study that sought to compare the stress levels and burnout rate of groups that participated in the MindUP trauma-informed curriculum training versus a comparison group. Similar to the study conducted by Loomis & Felt (2020), ARTIC scores were gathered, in addition to focus-group responses. In total, 112 educators were recruited to participate in the three-year study. Most of the participants were Caucasian women, with varying levels of education and income. For the study, the participants were asked to take part in trauma-informed training, which included the impact of trauma, the neurobiology of toxic stress, behaviors that may present in the classroom, classroom management techniques, and overall wellness. Additionally, the staff was provided with the tools to implement the MindUP curriculum into the classrooms, a mindfulness-based approach that targets social-emotional wellbeing through various techniques and strategies. According to Shamblin et al. (2016), teachers that promoted emotional regulation were more equipped to help children learn to control behavior impulses. Kim et al. (2021) shared that the qualitative findings of the study indicated

that teachers who participated in the training showed significant ARTIC score improvement compared to the comparison group. Likewise, the focus group responses showed significant growth for the participants on trauma-informed attitudes versus the comparison group.

In 2019, Lipscomb et al. published the results of a mixed-methods study on the impact that trauma-informed training had on educators after participating in a program known as the Roots of Resilience. Measures from the study included both qualitative and quantitative data from surveys, quizzes, discussion board entries, coaching, observations, and more (Lipscomb et al. 2019). The participants included 17 early childhood teachers and staff from different early childhood programs (Lipscomb et al., 2019). After being assigned to a pilot group, the teachers participated in either the professional development course or the course and coaching. The entire program was available online and included 1:1 video coaching. The participants were asked to respond to open-ended workbook questions, join in community conversation via discussion boards, and complete quizzes on the training content (Lipscomb et al., 2019). The open-ended questions were used to understand the impact that the training had on each participant (Lipscomb et al., 2019). The study analyzed the data to determine the efficacy of the program. It was determined that the Roots of Resilience model was an acceptable and feasible method for improving the skill sets of early childhood teachers on trauma-informed practices and that teachers improved their knowledge and understanding of trauma-informed practices based on the positive outcomes from the quantitative and qualitative data (Lipscomb et al., 2019). The researchers noted that due to the limited scale of the initial study, it would be necessary to test the model on a larger scale (Lipscomb et al., 2019) The study results suggested that increasing teacher confidence regarding trauma-related behaviors and what may influence those behaviors, it is possible to further meet the needs of young children. Trauma-informed training has the

potential to reduce teacher stress, consequently creating a positive effect on students, the classroom environment, and the perceptions teachers have on different behaviors (Loomis & Felt, 2020).

Classroom Results of Trauma-Informed Training Implementation

In addition to positive effects on teachers' trauma-informed attitudes, which benefit students, measurable improvements can be seen in young children in classrooms where teachers take part in professional development tailored to supporting young children who have experienced a traumatic event. If the trauma that a young child has experienced involves, or is led by, a person considered a trusted adult, it has been known to have an adverse effect on the child's ability to form relationships and may lead to interactions with adults being a stressful situation for a child (Statman-Weil, 2015; Wright 2014; Lieberman et al., 2011). Statman-Weil (2015) suggested that a lack of healthy attachments and quality relationships can make it difficult for children to regulate emotions and reactions to different life events. Young children can develop specific behaviors after a traumatic event, which may or may not be universally identifiable, meaning that not all children develop the same responses (De Young et al., 2011; Jimenez et al., 2016, Wright, 2014). These factors may impact a child's ability to reach higher levels of academic success.

Academic Achievement

There have been several studies conducted on the relationship between the impact on academic achievement of young children who have experienced a traumatic event and received support and intervention during preschool versus students who did not. The examined research by Holmes et al. (2015), Sanders et al. (2020), Rishel (2019), and Shamblin et al. (2016) on the impact of teacher preparedness and the use of trauma-informed practices all showed similar

results that these factors do impact student achievement. In another study, young children who had experienced an adverse or traumatic experience were specifically found to be less prepared for kindergarten than children who did not have a known history of a traumatic experience (Jimenez et al., 2016). In addition to a lack of school readiness, students are often reported by teachers as having social problems, aggression, and a higher risk for poor achievement in school. In some situations, aggression and social problems may lead to the expulsion of the child. Furthermore, students that are at a higher risk for poor achievement in school were also more likely to have poor overall health.

Holmes et al. (2015), reported data collected from three different Head Start programs located in the Midwest, which serve a very diverse demographic of students, many of whom have experienced one or more traumatic events. The study found that both identification of traumatic behaviors and intervention are key factors for student success. For the study, Head Start Trauma Smart (HSTS) training was provided to teachers and other staff that interact with the children. The training consisted of ten two-hour-long training sessions on the attachment, self-regulation, and competency (ARC) model, as it applies to trauma-related behaviors, such as feelings and emotions. In addition to the staff's training, the children were provided trauma-focused intervention in the classroom. Improvements in internalized behavior, externalized behavior, attention span, hyperactivity, defiance, and more were reported. Similar results were reported from the study conducted by Kim et al. (2021), which noted that children's social-emotional skills improved and became less disruptive after participating in the MindUP curriculum. Holmes et al. (2015), concluded that the study indicated that there is a clear need for trauma-informed training and evidence-based interventions in the classroom to meet the needs of young children.

Trauma-informed elementary schools (TIES) is a program that is intended to utilize trauma-sensitive approaches in early elementary classrooms (Rishel et al., 2019). Similar to the approach taken by Holmes et al. (2015), the TIES model is based on the framework of the ARC model. To better understand how the TIES program could benefit early elementary classrooms, Rishel et al. (2019) completed a qualitative study in 51 classrooms, including, pre-K, kindergarten, and first grade, located in West Virginia, over two years during 2015-2017. Out of the 51 classrooms, 39 participated in the TIES program and 12 were considered in the comparison group (Rishel et al., 2019). To measure the efficacy of the TIES program, Rishel et al. (2019) used the CLASS observation scale to assess multiple areas of classroom quality, including emotional support, classroom organization, and instructional support. The CLASS assessment was completed both before the study started (baseline) and at the conclusion (results). The results indicated that the TIES program had a significant positive impact on the emotional support and classroom organization in the participating classrooms versus those that did not use the program. No significant differences were observed in the instructional support. In a longitudinal study, Sanders et al. (2020) concluded that social-emotional improvements made during preschool/pre-k can have significant long-term benefits for students. Wesley & Buysse (2003) would agree with the importance of social-emotional development and believed it leads to better academic achievement (as cited by Cummings, 2017). Rishel et al., (2019) suggested that the TIES study be further explored on a larger scale, in the future.

In a similar study on the impact of trauma-informed teacher-preparedness on student achievement, Shamblin et al. (2016), conducted a mixed-methods study to determine the efficacy of a program in rural Appalachia, USA. The program, known as Project LAUNCH, combines trauma-informed teacher training, team building, wellness activities, and modeling strategies for

teachers. The team then compared the social and emotional scores of students along with teacher interviews, from the beginning and end of the school year (Shamblin et al., 2016). The study concluded that children who were in classrooms where Project LAUNCH was implemented demonstrated higher resilience scores than children in the comparison groups. Shamblin et al. (2016) discussed that preschool teachers have the potential to help buffer and balance the adversity that children may face at home by integrating positive social-emotional techniques, and teacher understanding, into the classrooms. The research of Loomis & Felt (2020) agreed with this finding and suggested that teachers who can foster a healthy classroom relationship may help buffer the influence of variables within the home. Shamblin et al. (2016) found that the teachers felt more confident and competent with managing challenging behaviors and students who have been exposed to trauma. However, the study was limited to small, community preschools and Shamblin et al. (2016) suggested the program should be tested on a larger scale to help further support these findings.

Beyond Preschool

Research has indicated that students who have faced traumatic events during early childhood may experience academic challenges beyond preschool (Jimenez et al., 2016). Further, it has been indicated that children who received interventions during preschool were more successful in school and had greater developmental outcomes than students who did not (Sanders et al., 2020). In one study, Jimenez et al. (2017) analyzed secondary data from a birth cohort that focused on known early childhood ACEs and the relationship to the academic skills of the same children in kindergarten. In addition to the initial data from birth on the children's known ACEs, qualitative data, provided by kindergarten teachers, on students' behaviors in the classroom and data collected from the children's families on known ACEs were used in the comparison

analysis. The study included data for 1007 children, with 45% having no known ACE, 27% having one ACE, 16% having 2 ACEs, and 12% having three or more ACEs (Jimenez et al., 2017). The data suggested that students who had one or more ACEs were more likely to have behavior problems in kindergarten than those who did not. The analysis pointed to a pattern of less academic skills, including literacy, math, and overall behavior, for students with a higher number of ACEs. Jimenez et al. (2017) believed this discovery demonstrated a distinct need for intervention during early childhood to promote academic success in young children. It was suggested that interventions during early childhood may help mitigate these vulnerabilities.

Implementation Practices

According to Loomis (2018), only 2.5% of children that need trauma support receive mental health services, yet, on average, 48% of three and four-year-old children attend some sort of preschool in the United States. Additionally, mental health providers that specialize in young children under the age of five are scarcer than those that treat adults, creating another obstacle (Lieberman et al., 2011). Studies have suggested that implementing intervention strategies into the preschool curriculum could be a natural way to provide students with needed mental health support in response to ACEs (Loomis, 2018; Lipscomb et al., 2019). One of the common findings that were repeated in the examined literature was the benefit of integrating trauma-informed approaches into the classroom curriculum, for both the students and the teachers.

Classroom Intervention Strategies

The Sunshine Circles (SC) model, as shared by Tucker et al. (2017), is described as an intervention strategy developed by the Theraplay Institute that can be implemented within different preschool and early childhood curriculums. The model involves integrating play-based groups that are teacher-led. The study included groups of preschool students that attended Head

Start programs and were the highest at risk for adverse childhood experiences based on social status, economic status, race, and more (Tuckers et al., 2017). Tucker et al. (2017) reported that 100% of the students were from families that were below the poverty level, which is often associated with a greater likelihood to have had an adverse experience. Glackin et al. (2019) agreed with this and stated, “Moreover, children from low-income families are two to three times more likely to develop psychopathology as compared with more socioeconomically advantaged peers; this income-related risk is observed internationally across both high- and low-income countries” (p. 172).

At the conclusion of the study, Tucker et al. (2017) indicated that children who received intervention services from the teacher scored higher on the Preschool Behavior Questionnaire (PBQ) assessment in four out of the five scored subject areas than the students that were assigned to the control group. The improved areas included fine motor, problem-solving, personal-social, and social-emotional (Tucker et al., 2017). Holmes et al. (2015) also determined that curriculum adjustments may have a positive impact on a child’s ability to pay attention and self-manage challenging behaviors. Tucker et al. (2017) described the intervention methods that were implemented during the study to include check-in activities that promoted empathy and positive child-teacher relationships, classroom games that promoted skills such as mindfulness and self-control, as well as a snack time that encouraged an emotional bond with the child’s teacher and increased attachment to the caregiver. Although the overall impact on children’s reduction of stress levels could not be measured, Porges (2004, 2011) believed that the children were more relaxed and felt safer than the comparison group based on the improvement of fine motor skills and behavior, which cannot be effectively assessed when a child is under high levels of stress (as cited by Tucker et al., 2017). Van der Kolk (2004) described a child’s stress response system as

being “hardwired to respond to trauma in one of three ways—fighting, freezing, or fleeing” (as cited in Wright, 2014, p. 89). Children that are under stress from trauma are more likely to be unable to focus, have difficulty thinking, fight with the teacher/students, or run from the classroom (Wright, 2014).

In a similar study, Sanders et al. (2020) examined a model of intervention that targeted social-emotional learning, known as Preschool PATHS (Promoting Alternative THinking Strategies). This teacher-led model focused on weekly lessons that included friendship skills, emotional regulation, role-playing, specially chosen books, and crafting to support the behaviors of children who have had one or more ACEs (Sanders et al., 2020). The study took place in Head Start preschool programs, with children who were identified by a parent or guardian as having had a known ACE. The children were divided into two groups: an intervention group and a control group. Following the study, Sanders et al. (2019) assessed the children’s social and emotional well-being. A follow-up with the same families was conducted when the children reached both the seventh grade and ninth grades. The qualitative results indicated that the children who received intervention strategies as a preschooler had a higher social-emotional score at the later assessment date than the children who did not participate in the PATHS program (Sanders et al., 2020). However, Sanders et al. (2020) mentioned that the study relied solely on self-reporting measures that were parent-reported during the preschool phase, and student-reported during the adolescent phase. Sanders et al. (2020) added that the researchers believed the adolescent-reported measures may be a more accurate representation of the child’s social-emotional wellbeing, as a firsthand account. The findings of this research supported the secondary analysis completed by Jimenez et al. (2017) that concluded early intervention is important for sustainable results to be seen in subsequent grades.

Curriculum Enrichment

In a different curriculum approach, Razza et al. (2020) explored the ways that adding yoga into an existing curriculum could promote mindfulness and social-emotional learning for preschoolers living in communities with high reports of trauma. For the study, Razza et al. (2020) compared the behavioral and attention regulation changes of students who participated in eight weeks of mindful yoga versus the control group. The analysis showed that the children who participated in the yoga and mindfulness programming had significantly increased behavioral and attention regulation.

Additional research reviewed by Razza et al. (2020) uncovered many benefits of implementing yoga, meditation, and breathing exercises in early childhood programs. In addition to general social-emotional growth, previous studies have attributed mindfulness exercises to include self-regulation improvement, reduced stress, increased attention, reduced challenging behaviors, and reinforcement of brain-body connection (Razza et al., 2020). “Thus, these programs may be particularly powerful for children with a history of chronic stress or trauma, as [the children] are at increased risk for deficits in executive function, as well as compromised physiological functioning” (Blair & Raver, 2012; Evans & Kim, 2013; Miller et al., 2011; Telles et al., 2012; as cited in Razza et al., 2020, p. 83).

The study conducted by Kim et al. (2021) echoed the findings of Razza et al. (2020). Kim et al. (2021) reported similar results were found when using the MindUP program, a mindfulness-based social-emotional learning (SEL) program. Though the study was directed at teacher benefits, the results also included reduced student behavioral symptoms and executive functioning deficits, as well as improved children’s adaptive skills (Kim et al., 2021). Similarly,

Meiklejohn et al. (2012) identified indirect benefits of a mindfulness-based curriculum to include teachers practicing and modeling the skills to the students (as cited in Kim et al., 2021).

Both Tucker et al. (2017) and Sanders et al. (2020) demonstrated the impact of providing intervention within preschool curriculums and noted the interventions as being cost-effective, feasible, and cable to be implemented in a widespread manner. Loomis (2018) also suggested that intervention strategies should be implemented universally and school-wide, in addition to targeted services, which Eismann et al. (2019) also deemed to be a feasible option. Wright (2014) agreed with the theme of curriculum enhancement by suggesting that young children who have experienced trauma may come from homes that do not have clear rules and expectations. It was suggested that teachers can add strategies to the classroom, such as, frequently discussing the rules, avoiding intimidation and/or threats, continuously showing that the classroom is a safe space, and teaching the children basic skills on conflict resolution to help minimize stress responses in children who have been traumatized (Wright, 2014). In addition to curriculum enhancement, many researchers also note that family engagement is a key element of creating, and sustaining, trauma-informed early childhood classrooms.

Parent and Family Engagement

Another factor identified as being important for supporting the whole child when a traumatic event has occurred is by creating a partnership with the family. In the study conducted by Cummings et al. (2017), the 14 community service providers that were interviewed weighed in on the importance of family involvement and collaboration. Cummings et al. (2017) reported that a participant believed that involving the parents allows the teacher an opportunity to get to know even more about the children. Another participant shared that when parents are believed to feel distrustful of teachers it is the role of the teacher to build that relationship and allow the

parent to feel more comfortable being involved (Cummings et al., 2017). “Ultimately, a school’s connection to parents may also serve as a point of prevention of future maltreatment, through enhanced parent capacity and reductions in parenting stress” (Loomis, 2018, p. 141). The research conducted by Douglass et al. (2021) on the impact of the program-wide implementation of trauma-informed training found that the teachers had improved communication practices after having attended the training and BSC program. The programs that implemented trauma-informed practices were found to be more open-minded, more attentive to the specific needs of families, and more likely to listen to families versus making assumptions (Douglass et al., 2021). Fox and Hemmeter (2009) believe that “Family involvement is a vital component of program-wide efforts to promote children’s social-emotional development in early childhood settings” (as cited in Cummings, 2017). Additionally, it is believed that family involvement can help reduce persistent behavior problems in young children and build a base for further communication with the family (Cummings, 2017).

In a study conducted by Cummings (2017), the findings of an initiative that promoted parent engagement and program implementation as part of a school effort to provide interventions for challenging behavior were shared. The study sought to explore how parents could support program-wide intervention implementation and how well-informed the parents felt. Cummings (2017) contacted schools in North Carolina that were using the Pyramid model, an initiative that is used as a guide to reduce challenging behaviors in young children. The model was focused on social-emotional teaching strategies, relationship building, and individualized intervention (Cummings, 2017). For the study, seven parents were invited to answer interview questions about their perception and knowledge of the Pyramid model. Cummings (2017) shared the themes that emerged during the study as parents finding the model useful, especially verbal

and visual cues, and as a model that most parents had tried to implement at home. All 7 of the parents indicated that their child's teacher had shared the model with them and that parent workshops could be useful for further implementing the model at home (Cummings, 2017). Though the study was limited by the small group size, the findings supported a need, and parental desire, for integrating parent involvement into intervention strategies.

To examine the effectiveness of incorporating targeted interventions, such as parent workshops, into family and childcare programs, Eismann et al. (2019) studied the Strengthening Families Southwest Ohio program. The study, referred to as the feasibility project, was performed in ten childcare programs to assess a caregiver's prior adversity exposure and current risk factors in the home. Eismann et al. (2019) stated that all of the parents were invited to take part in six parent cafes and five parenting workshops throughout the year, with pre- and post-surveys, conducted to determine if the resources were helpful. According to Eismann et al. (2019), workshops for parents can create social connections, promote resiliency, and create a support system for caregivers. After the survey, 97 caregivers were invited to participate in the specifically targeted resources, such as mental health services, housing assistance, food services, referrals, and additional parent events, based on risk factors (Eismann et al., 2019). Staff at the included childcare programs were also invited to take part in professional development opportunities on ACEs and trauma. The study concluded that both targeted and universal services can be beneficial, feasible, and welcomed by caregivers and teachers (Eismann et al., 2019). Although it is generally agreed upon that parent involvement is a key element in early childhood, more research needs to be completed to analyze the long-term impact of including parenting skills and parent support in the trauma-informed approach (Loomis, 2018).

Conclusion/Summary

The studies examined in this literature review on trauma-informed professional development have attempted to answer the research question of “How can professional development for early childhood educators on trauma-informed practices help support whole child development?” The research has suggested that there is a notable gap in the training that early childhood professionals need, and require, versus what is available regarding classroom teaching strategies. Many teachers and educators have reported feeling underprepared and have pointed to a lack of training provided on the subject of trauma (Cummings et al., 2017; Alisic, 2012). Through the research, it has been established that the need for understanding the developmental implications of trauma experienced during early childhood and the need for trauma-informed professionals in the early childhood field has not only proven to be important, but essential. Repeatedly, the research highlighted the positive impact that trauma-informed practices could have on young children, such as improvements in behavior, developmental growth, improvements in the ability to focus, and overall general academic progress (Holmes et al., 2015; Tucker et al., 2017; Loomis & Felt, 2020). Further, teachers were found to feel a reduction in work-related stress as the behaviors in the classroom became more managed, leading to greater teacher satisfaction (Kim et al., 2021). Lastly, researchers have discovered that including the children’s parents in training opportunities was a feasible and beneficial model for further implementing trauma-informed practices (Eismann et al., 2019). The findings have suggested that future work should be done to continue understanding and refining the way that trauma-informed practices are best blended into early childhood settings. Overall, trauma-informed professional development, curriculum enrichment, and parent mentoring have been shown to be effective ways to support young children during early childhood.

Chapter Three: Discussion, Applications, and Future Studies

To date, the current research supports, and recommends, the integration of trauma-informed professional development and implementation within early childhood communities. Professional development for early childhood teachers on trauma and trauma-informed practices can help meet the developmental needs of young children by ensuring that the staff is adequately prepared to provide relational protective factors that may not exist in a child's home environment (Shamblin, 2016). By making small changes to the training content that teachers receive, especially as it pertains to trauma, the future of early childhood can be further prepared to support all children. The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the research findings and the ways that they can be applied to current early childhood practice, as well as suggestions for future research and focus.

Discussion and Applications

Studies such as the ones conducted by Holmes et al. (2016) and Kim et al. (2021) have shown that the teaching strategies that are gained via professional development can increase children's learning, behaviors, and relationships with teachers. Through intentional teaching strategies and intervention methods, teachers can have a positive impact on students who have experienced traumatic events. Additionally, the research has revealed that challenging student behaviors are often a contributing factor to teacher stress, which may ultimately lead to teachers leaving the field of education (Kim et al., 2021). To help mitigate this problem and retain educators in the field, it is becoming more apparent that the field must find ways to better support the teachers so that, in turn, teachers are more equipped to support the students. Evidence from previous studies, such as Cummings et al. (2017) has indicated that trauma-informed teaching practices are important for whole child development by providing classroom

environments that are safe and responsive, leading to greater developmental and academic success. The research also supports the need for institutions to recognize the benefit of program-wide implementation. Aside from students who have known ACEs, trauma-informed teaching practices are likely to boast positive impacts on all students in the classroom (Loomis & Felt, 2020). This research suggests that all early childhood programs could benefit from implementing curriculum enrichment and staff professional development opportunities across the nation.

Based on the available research, it is evident that there is a growing, and necessary, need for access to professional development about early childhood trauma. In addition to access to professional development opportunities and courses, administrators need to evaluate the policies and procedures that are in place within their educational setting to determine how well they are supporting a trauma-informed curriculum. It is also critical to the health and wellness of future teaching generations to equip them with the most recent research and findings that are available. This will help reduce the stress of challenging behaviors that may result from traumatic experiences.

To best meet the needs of young children, educators must be equipped with the knowledge and skills that can allow them to recognize signs of trauma in young children and implement strategies that can reduce the negative effects and promote healthy growth and development. Professional development is a solution that may be more cost-effective for many settings yet produce the best results by changing the way that teachers feel about their competence on the subject. The research findings of previously conducted studies indicate improvements such as providing training to staff members in all roles on trauma, making the training mandatory for all staff to ensure that programs have continuity between classrooms, and checking in with staff regularly to collaborate and assess any areas that are successful or

struggling would benefit the field in the future. By making these changes within a program and providing additional professional development to educators on early childhood trauma, students will benefit from the increased awareness and sensitivity, social and emotional development will benefit from regulation, the teachers may feel a reduction of teaching-related stress, challenging behaviors in the classroom may see a reduction, and family partnerships may grow.

Future Studies

Despite the amount of trauma-informed practice research that focuses on the early childhood phase, most of the research specifically targets the preschool age group. The currently available research lacks information regarding trauma-informed support for infants and toddlers that attend early childhood programming. Based on the importance of trauma-informed practices, professional development, and curriculum that has been demonstrated at the preschool level, it is recommended that the research be extended to assess the impact of providing interventions to children attending early childhood programming from birth to three years of age. Further research on the benefits of early intervention for children ages birth to age 3 could be useful in determining the outcomes of providing intervention earlier than preschool, when applicable.

Based on the currently available research, another suggestion for future studies would involve a deeper understanding of the role that parent-teacher relationships have on the impact of trauma-informed practice. Previous studies have uncovered that many parents have shown interest in being included in workshops or studies that can mentor parents on strategies to implement at home (Eismann et al., 2019). It is recommended that future studies further investigate the impact that parent-teacher relationships and continuity between home and school strategies can have on young children's developmental and academic outcomes.

Additionally, it is suggested that future studies investigate the relationship between professional development learning opportunities and the retention of qualified early childhood educators. Based on the findings of Kim et al. (2019) that professional development can reduce teacher stress, it would be useful to the field to understand how meaningful professional development can help promote teacher retention. Future studies could examine whether or not training quality and quantity on trauma-related topics can help teachers regulate classroom behaviors in a way that reduces teachers leaving the field of early childhood education.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the unique role that teachers have in young children's lives is something that should be fully acknowledged, especially when it comes to supporting young children who have experienced trauma. It is evident that previous studies have uncovered a clear need for teachers to understand early childhood trauma and be equipped to provide interventions to promote greater success (Holmes et al., 2015). By promoting and providing teachers with professional development opportunities that include teaching strategies, curriculum enrichment suggestions, and parent involvement strategies, teachers will feel more confident, and students will see developmental growth that they may not have otherwise had. To date, professional development and curriculum adjustments have proven to be impactful, and cost-effective, methods (Tucker et al., 2017). The field of early childhood needs to continue researching and investigating ways that professional development opportunities can help support teachers and students when traumatic experiences have occurred. Through additional investigation, the research question of "How can professional development for early childhood educators on trauma-informed practices help support whole child development?" will continue to develop and support the future of early childhood education.

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