Just Trauma-Informed Schools: Theoretical Gaps, Practice Considerations, and New Directions

Trauma-informed approaches in schools represent an increasingly significant domain of education policy and practice in kindergarten to 12th grade (k-12) schools. Stemming from dissemination of research documenting the impact of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) (Felitti et al., 1998) and the subsequent application of trauma-informed frameworks to a range of human service providers in the United States, these approaches have also gained attention in a global context, especially given their potential to support immigrant and refugee populations (Tweedie et al., 2017), and respond to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic (Phelps & Sperry, 2020; Zhou, 2020). Ostensibly, the theory of impact behind trauma-informed approaches in schools is supported by research and aligns with long-held practice wisdom: Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), childhood trauma, and chronic stress can negatively affect student development, social-emotional functioning, learning, and ultimately, school success (Blodgett & Lanigan, 2018). Integrating this knowledge with data documenting the disproportional impact of childhood trauma on marginalized communities including low-income communities, communities of color, sexual and gender minorities, and immigrants, trauma-informed practices have widely been framed as a *social justice imperative* (Ridgard et al., 2015).

Despite this framing, trauma-informed approaches that have proliferated throughout k-12 education in the United States focus heavily on raising awareness of trauma and its impact without fully addressing the social context of trauma (Gherardi et al., 2020; White et al., 2019). Evidence of outcomes is also limited. While some studies show improvement in proximal outcomes such as reduced suspensions or referrals (Dorado et al., 2016; Stevens, 2012; Stevens, 2013), there is limited evidence documenting more widespread positive effects or effects on issues of educational equity (Gherardi et al., 2020; Maynard et al., 2019). This discrepancy between optimism and outcomes in positing trauma-informed practices as social justice initiatives requires researchers and practitioners ask deeper questions about the *whys* and *hows* of trauma-informed education.

This article seeks to apply a social justice lens to analyzing the current state of literature in trauma-informed education (much of it based in U.S. public education), identifying gaps in the theoretical foundations of this field, and describing how these gaps manifest in practice. The authors provide a synthesis of current literature, describing how the relationship between trauma-informed practices and social justice has been theorized, researched, and evidenced. This synthesis provides the basis for the identification of four theoretical gaps described by the authors. The authors then identify critical considerations for socially just practice in trauma-informed schools that have not been fully considered in the literature, but which stem from their experiences over the last three years training and supporting educators in the Southwest United States. This article seeks to raise critical awareness of the intersections of social justice and trauma among school

social workers and others who support these initiatives, to advance practice in trauma-informed education, and to better align this field with the social justice concerns it seeks to respond to.

Synthesis of Research

We are only beginning to fully theorize and evaluate trauma-informed care in educational settings. A systematic review of the literature related to trauma-informed practices illuminates the newness of this field. Using the terms "trauma-informed education," "trauma-informed schools," and "trauma-sensitive schools," a search across four education and social science databases including ERIC (Education Resources Information Center), Education Research Complete, PsychInfo, and Social Work Abstracts found 351 articles dating back to 2004, although 298 (84%) of these articles were published in 2016 or later. Because research in trauma-informed practices in education explicitly is recent, the peer reviewed literature is limited and much of the most widely cited research comes from earlier reports or other sources. As such, this search included peer-reviewed articles as well as published reports and magazine articles. Early research in this area relied heavily on broader evidence about the impact of trauma on school functioning and the positive effects of trauma-informed care in other settings to describe trauma-sensitive schools as evidence based (Overstreet & Chafouleas, 2016; Plumb et al., 2016). Since then, research evaluating emerging frameworks has lagged, and the field has been characterized as lacking a coherent practice model (Thomas et al., 2019).

This section synthesizes three key areas of literature addressing or assessing trauma-informed practices in education. First, we present a brief summary of the historical and theoretical evolution of trauma-informed education in the United States, which provides important context for understanding the implied relationship between trauma-informed practices and social justice. Subsequently, we synthesize findings from systematic reviews of outcomes in order to summarize the documented impact of trauma-informed practices to date. Finally, we synthesize the body of peer-reviewed research in trauma-informed education, which included the phrase "social justice" in its subject terms, in order to assess the relationship between the implied and documented relationship between trauma-informed practices and social justice.

Historical Foundations and Theory of Impact

The proliferation of trauma-informed education in the United States reflects the confluence of several issues which emerged in the 1990's and early 2000's. Publication of the seminal ACEs study (Felitti et al., 1998) directed significant attention to the long term-impacts of childhood adversity, providing empirical support to existing frameworks like the Sanctuary Model (Bloom, 1995). In the same period, increasing incidences of school violence spurred a wave of "zero tolerance" policies which incurred disproportionate harm on students of color and

low-income students in the coming years (Skiba & Peterson, 2000). Research linking early trauma with student likelihood of receiving punitive discipline (Fabelo et al., 2011; Zeng et al., 2019) served to strengthen the theoretical connections between identity-based social inequities, trauma, and negative school outcomes.

These connections have led scholars and practitioners alike to frame the adoption of trauma-informed practices in schools as a "social justice imperative" (Ridgard et al., 2015). Despite this framing, research and practice in trauma-informed education has failed to fully address the underlying social conditions that create such disproportionate experiences of adversity (Gherardi et al., 2020), calling into question the social justice goals of trauma-informed education. The following sections more fully explore the current evidence base for trauma-informed education in light of its theorized promise for responding to social justice issues in schools.

Outcomes in Trauma-Informed Education

In order to summarize key conclusions from existing research into outcomes in trauma-informed education, we present key conclusions from five recent systematic reviews of this field, each of which provide important insight into strengths and limitations of the evidence base for trauma-informed practices in schools. Broadly, these surveys of the literature describing outcomes for trauma-informed approaches in education suggest there is strong evidence supporting the application of trauma-specific interventions (such as Trauma-Focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy) in schools (Fondren et al., 2020; Yohannan & Carlson, 2019). However, evidence describing outcomes from systematic or multi-tiered approaches is scarce (Berger, 2019) and lacks the use of standardized outcome measures or more rigorous designs for evaluation (Maynard et al., 2019).

Fondren et al. (2020) presented data from a systematic review that included peer-reviewed studies reporting empirical evaluations of trauma-informed intervention programs. Importantly, they only included studies documenting trauma-specific Tier 2 or 3 interventions (therapeutic interventions provided to specific students or student groups in schools). Their review yielded 62 studies, of which 22 were from the United States and addressed multiple types of trauma. The other studies described interventions from across the globe, many of which focused on trauma from war or political violence. They concluded there is strong evidence documenting efficacy for specific prevention and intervention approaches, although they suggest the integration of these approaches at the systems level represents an important next step in this field. Similarly, Yohannan and Carlson (2019) conducted a systematic review of articles documenting outcomes from trauma-informed Tier 3 interventions that were peer-reviewed and published in English. They concluded a majority of studies found positive effects for these interventions although rates of feasibility and acceptability were unclear in many. Beyond this, they noted limited generalizability for many studies, especially when considering application to diverse student populations.

Subsequent reviews have sought to assess the impact of trauma-informed approaches that go beyond trauma-specific interventions for impacted students. Herrenkol et al (2019) reviewed 30 articles (in English only) that were determined to report efficacy of trauma-informed school based interventions. They identified fourteen individual or group interventions, four classroom interventions, and 12 school-wide interventions. They, like Fondren et al. (2020) and Yohannan and Carlson (2019) described strong evidence for individual and group-based interventions. They also noted the promise of school-wide and classroom-based interventions, but identify lack of consistency in frameworks for these approaches and limited evaluation outcomes as barriers to determining their efficacy at present (Herrenkol et al., 2019). Berger (2019) used a systematic review to describe literature evaluating the application of trauma-informed practices within a Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) framework which includes *both* systemic (Tier 1) and targeted (Tier 2 and 3) approaches. Berger's (2019) review found 13 published and unpublished studies, most of which described positive impacts on academic achievement, student behavior, symptoms of depression, and symptoms of PTSD. However, Berger (2019) noted these conclusions were based largely on the use of non-standardized instruments or qualitative data, and only one study utilized a randomized control trial (Berger, 2019), concluding that preliminary positive outcomes have been documented but more rigorous evaluation is needed. Maynard et al. (2019) used a narrow process for systematic review which limited articles to randomized control trials or quasi-experimental designs that evaluated at least one student-level outcome associated with implementation of a *systematic* (versus trauma-specific) trauma-informed approach. Given the strict limitations for inclusion in this review, Maynard and colleagues (2019) found no publications that met their criteria. They concluded school leaders and policy makers should employ caution in adopting systematic trauma-informed practices given the limited body of empirical evidence documenting outcomes (Maynard, 2019, p.5).

Social Justice Implications

Seeking to support the theorized connection between social justice and trauma-informed practices, some studies have started to explore the ways trauma-informed practices specifically impact marginalized populations. Davila et al. (2020) explored preventative multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) and Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) as foundations for trauma-informed practice that could be culturally adapted (Davila, 2020). McIntosh (2019) magnified the necessity of employing intersectional frameworks for understanding the needs of students in low-performing schools, suggesting that inequity and institutionalized discrimination *within* schools must be addressed in order to offer trauma-informed care. Despite such calls, there is not substantial evidence to date documenting the positive impact of trauma-informed practices on the very students who are often presented as the primary beneficiaries of such approaches.

Beyond this, some have been openly critical of these frameworks, questioning the strength of the proposed relationship between trauma-informed

practices and social justice (Gherardi et al., 2020) or suggesting these frameworks themselves may serve to further marginalize some groups of students and families (Mayor, 2018; Vericat Rocha & Ruitenberg, 2019). To assess this potential contradiction and the evidence base linking trauma-informed practices to social justice, we narrowed the 351 articles initially identified in the literature search to those which also included "social justice" in their subject terms, abstract, or title. This yielded 72 articles; this was then limited to the 47 articles that were peer-reviewed. After screening to ensure their relevance to K-12 (primary and secondary) school settings, 18 articles emerged for final review. Within these 18 articles, only two reported student-level *outcomes* from trauma-informed approaches. Two addressed practices for *assessing* the prevalence and impact of trauma. Two offered *critiques* of trauma-informed practices from a social justice perspective. Five reported on data relating to *implementation* processes or intermediary outcomes for trauma-informed approaches, and seven were *conceptual* articles.

While these articles emerged using social justice as a search term, it is important to note that few explicitly centered their framework or analysis in this area. We identified five articles as seeking to do so, and three of these were critiques. Table 1 lists articles that came from this review, classifying them by type and whether their discussion of the relationship between social justice was explicit or implicit.

Table 1

Articles Identifying Social Justice in Search Terms

Citation	Article Type	Focus on Social Justice
Crosby (2015)	Conceptual	Implicit
Blitz et al. (2015)	Implementation	Explicit
Biddle & Brown (2020)	Implementation	Implicit
Fondren et al. (2020)	Outcomes	Implicit
Walkley & Cox (2013)	Conceptual	Implicit
Shamblin et al. (2016)	Outcomes	Implicit
Dutil (2020)	Conceptual	Explicit
Pataky et al. (2019).	Assessment	Implicit
Brunzell et al. (2019).	Implementation	Implicit
Paiva, (2019)	Conceptual	Implicit

Loomis (2018)	Conceptual	Implicit
Frydman & Mayor (2017)	Implementation	Implicit
Brunzell et al. (2016)	Conceptual	Implicit
Wiest-Stevenson & Lee (2016).	Conceptual	Implicit
Lai et al. (2018)	Assessment	Implied
Luthar & Mendes (2020).	Implementation	Implied
Gherardi et al. (2020)	Critique	Explicit
Mayor (2018)	Critique	Explicit

Given only a small segment of the research into trauma-informed practices centers social justice in their frameworks or analysis while many more rely on an implied relationship between the two in their background or introductions, we suggest that current evidence describing the outcomes of trauma-informed practices in schools has only a circumstantial link with efforts to build socially just and equitable schools. This is not to say that trauma-informed practices cannot or do not promote social justice. Rather, this synthesis of the literature suggests there is a disconnect between the theory of impact, current formulations of what it means to implement trauma-informed education and current evidence in this area, especially in evaluating its relationship to social justice concerns.

Theoretical Gaps

In exploring this disconnect we revisited the previously described literature documenting outcomes (including but not limited to articles that included social justice as a subject) to identify common challenges to defining, replicating, and measuring trauma-informed practices. In exploring these challenges, we suggest that gaps in the way we define trauma (and trauma-informed practices) as well as gaps between trauma-informed practices and existing student support initiatives represent key theoretical barriers that limit the potential for trauma-informed practices as drivers of social justice. In addition to this analysis of outcomes research, we revisited the articles reflecting critical perspectives on the implied relationship between trauma-informed education and social justice (Gherardi et al., 2020; Mayor, 2018; Vericat Rocha & Ruitenberg, 2019) to highlight common themes which might illuminate other theoretical gaps. These included challenges with balancing risk and resilience in trauma-informed frameworks and the tendency decontextualizing (and depoliticize) trauma. In what follows, we describe these gaps in detail and propose how the intentional application of a social justice lens to each might reshape research and practice.

Decontextualizing Trauma

Gherardi et. al. (2020) describe the ways in which the application of trauma-informed care in schools has failed to fully incorporate the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) (SAMHSA, 2014a) model for trauma-informed care, one which represents the standard for evidence-based trauma-informed practices in the United States. This model is built upon a "socioecological model for understanding trauma and its effects" (p.15), highlighting the ways in which culture and developmental factors as well as factors at the individual, interpersonal, communal, societal, and time in history intersect with trauma responses. In describing the six principles of trauma-informed care (SAMHSA, 2014b, p.10), the importance of social context in experiences of trauma is clearly evident. The principles - Safety, Trustworthiness and Transparency, Peer Support, Collaboration and Mutuality, Empowerment Voice and Choice, and Cultural, Historical, and Gender Issues - are deeply focused on the social context within which trauma is experienced and the necessity of reforming the context within which healing occurs.

This framework is important, although not fully evident in many current resources related to trauma-informed education. Whereas SAMHSA (2014) suggests trauma-informed systems *realize, recognize, respond, and resist re-traumatization*, recent reviews of trauma-informed education frameworks have highlighted the ways in which frameworks for trauma-informed education are heavily weighted toward helping school staff *realize and recognize* in ways that separate experiences of trauma from their social contexts and fail to fully present the need to respond and resist re-traumatization (Thomas et al., 2019). McEwen and Gregorson (2019) explore the ways in which understanding of ACEs, in particular, has been misapplied, noting that the concept, "fail[s] to include many dimensions of childhood adversity derived from social inequalities" (p.790). In addition, critical analyses have questioned the degree to which models for trauma-informed practices in schools have neglected the principles of Cultural, Historical and Gender Issues, Trustworthiness and Transparency, and Peer Support (Gherardi et al., 2020).

The New Orleans Trauma-Informed Schools Learning Collaborative has taken steps in this direction. Their model for trauma-informed schools has shifted to include cultural humility (New Orleans Trauma-Informed Schools Learning Collaborative, 2020) as their foundation and fully integrate SAMHSA's principles into a model for trauma-informed education. Similarly, the HEARTS model (Dorado, 2019) identifies Cultural Humility and Equity as a guiding principle, providing another potential example to counter omissions in earlier models. Such grounding in a socio-ecological model of trauma that fully understands and responds to the social context of traumatic experiences and student responses is a critical next step in aligning the theory of impact for trauma-informed education with current practices.

The application of a social justice lens to current models for trauma-informed education would center the social context within which trauma occurs and is experienced. This would include explicit efforts to explore the intersections of specific traumatic experiences with social injustice including experiences of identity-based marginalization, inequitable distribution of social resources, as well as political and historical injustice. This would also include explicit and significant focus on the ways in which schools can respond to these and resist re-traumatization in addition to efforts which focus on helping schools to realize and recognize the impact of trauma.

Balancing Risk and Resilience

The failure to fully integrate the socioecological context of trauma into existing models has led to a largely risk-oriented application of trauma-informed practices in schools (Gherardi et al., 2020). The strong emphasis on understanding and recognizing the deleterious impact of childhood adversity has not been countered by equal attention to understanding, recognizing, and strategically building factors that promote resilience. McEwen and Gregerson (2019) suggest a reliance on ACEs as a framework for social interventions is problematic due to its focus "solely on adversities—a deficit model—and fails to include assets such as protective factors" (p. 790). This is especially problematic because the very notion that schools could intervene to support students impacted by trauma is rooted in resilience literature, which documents the restorative impact of positive relationships and experiences in schools (Gilligan, 2000; Kuperminc et al. 2020; Noble & McGrath, 2012; Ungar et al., 2019). Interestingly, these bodies of literature (resilience-oriented work and trauma-informed work) reflect little cross-referencing, reflecting oversight of a significant body of literature which provides powerful insight into what these schools should be *doing.*

Where resilience is the focus (i.e. Souers & Hall, 2016), emphasis is placed on resilience at the individual level. Gherardi and colleagues (2020) suggest that discourse around resilience in trauma-informed schools fails to explore strategies for helping to build resilient families or communities; instead, the focus tends to be on how schools can help children succeed *despite* their families (Gherardi et al., 2020), failing to consider the ways in which the community school framework could build partnerships that might begin to address some of the root causes of trauma.

In applying a social justice lens to trauma-informed education, building resilience would take precedence over identifying risk. This does not require that we minimize the real and detrimental impact of trauma. However, it does require we ensure that trauma-informed frameworks go beyond helping schools to recognize this impact. The phrase, "forever changed not forever damaged" (Souers & Hall, 2016, p.137) can provide a simple way to convey the real impact of trauma without adopting a deficit orientation. Beyond this, social justice-oriented

frameworks for trauma-informed education would help schools to recognize and build upon existing strengths and resources in order to build resilience.

Socially just trauma-informed schools would commit to a holistic model of resilience. While supportive services at school are valuable, decisions about resources would be guided by the principle that the best way to build resilient students is to support resilient families. As such, schools that apply a social justice lens to trauma-informed practice would engage in intentional efforts to connect with families and communities, support family and community needs, and engage in advocacy to leverage other resources in this effort.

Defining Trauma

One area in which theory, practice, and research in trauma-informed education appear to lack alignment is in the definition of trauma itself. Articles and resources reviewed tend to conflate formal definitions of trauma with definitions of toxic stress (Shonkoff et al., 2012) and Adverse Childhood Experiences (Felitti et al., 1998) as they articulate the case for trauma-informed education. While an expansive definition of trauma makes sense given the real ways in which specific traumatic events *as well as* toxic stress or the compounding of adversity can impact students and require supportive responses in school. Even this expansive conception of trauma has often neglected emerging research documenting the significant impact of social experiences like racism and poverty (Hatch & Dohrenwend, 2007; Mersky et al., 2017) or the implications of historical and cultural trauma (Brave Heart, 1998; Brave Heart et. al, 2011).

Beyond this, definitions of trauma have largely overlooked the ways in which schools themselves are sources of trauma (McIntosh, 2019). Such definitions have also tended to conflate social conditions, like growing up in poverty, with specific traumatic experiences. While there is evidence low-income students are more likely to experience trauma or adversity in childhood and the stress of living in poverty itself can have adverse effects (Merrick et al., 2018; Metzler et al., 2017; Nikulina, 2011), this does not and should not imply all low-income students are *"traumatized."* Becker-Blease (2017) explores the challenges with conflating these definitions:

> Because trauma is inextricably linked to systems of power and oppression, history tells us to pay particular attention to how trauma is defined, who is and who is not defining trauma, and how victims/survivors are affected by those definitions… (pp. 131-132).

Paraphrasing the definition of trauma presenting by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), we propose a new way to define trauma in trauma-informed practices that would respond to these challenges by integrating a social justice lens:

> *In schools committed to social justice, trauma-informed practices refer to practices that are supportive of the range of potential student responses to a range of adverse experiences. These experiences may be harmful or frightening things that happen to students, or things they witness or hear about happening to those around them. They may occur once and be severe or more moderate and ongoing. They may be caused by unmet needs in their household or by unjust practices at school. They may also be caused by social injustice - current or historical - that impacts their family, community, or cultural group. Importantly, responses to adverse events vary depending on the way they are experienced by children and supports in place when they are experienced. As a result, trauma-informed responses are focused on building supports and increasing resilience and not only on identifying adverse experiences (adapted from SAMHSA, 2014, p.7).*

Integration with Existing Initiatives

One final theoretical gap in current research and theory for trauma-informed education comes in the failure to integrate trauma-informed practices with existing initiatives designed to promote social justice and responsiveness to student and community needs. Without meaningful dialogue with existing frameworks and practices, trauma-informed practices are likely to become one more thing that comes and goes in education (Payne, 2008). McIntyre et al. (2019) describe the importance of alignment between existing school norms or practices and the new information or practices school staff learn over the course of training in trauma-informed approaches. Given the ways in which trauma-informed practices are framed as social justice initiatives, alignment between these practices and existing initiatives that seek to remedy issues of injustice or marginalization in education such as Social Justice Education (SJE) (Gherardi et al., 2020) and Culturally Responsive/ Culturally Sustaining Education, and Restorative Practices are warranted. And, given the ways in which trauma-informed practice models strongly align with existing models for holistic student supports such as Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS), Social Emotional Learning (SEL), and Community Schools, research that explicitly connects the dots between these frameworks is needed.

Applying a social justice lens to implementation of trauma-informed practices would allow researchers and educators to make direct connections to existing initiatives already working toward the creation of classrooms and schools that are student and community centered, responsive, and committed to social justice. Socially just trauma-sensitive schools would commit to the pillars of social justice education asking not only how we can respond to the impacts of trauma but how we can use schools to promote Equity, Activism, and Social Literacy broadly (Ayers et al., 2009, p. xiv). They would ask schools to consider the ways in which Culturally Responsive or Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy can serve to reduce experiences of curricular trauma or the marginalization of students of color in schools (Blitz et al., 2016). They would explore how existing efforts to reduce

disproportionality in discipline like Positive Behavior Supports and Interventions (McIntosh et al., 2019) could be bolstered by infusing trauma awareness. They would highlight the need for Social Emotional Learning as a core tool to develop student emotional skills and utilize Restorative Practices in response to situations that require disciplinary intervention. Finally, they would consider the ways in which a Community School model could increase capacity to meet student non-academic needs in order to reduce the impact of trauma in schools. While the reality is that frameworks for trauma-informed approaches often recommend the same practices these initiatives have been using, they fail to utilize existing language or resources. In doing so, they overlook the progress and wisdom of many who have long been working to promote more socially just schools.

Practice Considerations

While the gaps described highlight spaces that theory and research in trauma-informed education has overlooked other existing theory or research, additional barriers to impact exist. The authors have spent the last three years working with diverse schools to implement trauma-informed practices that are rooted in concerns for social justice. In doing this work, educators have informed our understanding of the ways in which practical considerations are essential to effective implementation; these considerations share connections with the theoretical gaps identified above but also reflect ways in which the realities of implementation can pose challenges for even the most *theoretically sound* approaches to trauma-informed care in schools. Key lessons learned are described below, encapsulated by the "Three C's": Culture, Capacity, and Compassion Fatigue. In what follows, we incorporate the voices of educators who we have worked with in implementing trauma-informed approaches in schools. Their words and experiences illuminate the importance of addressing the three C's as we seek to implement trauma-informed practices that are centered on social justice. We propose key questions for administrators, educators, and school social workers to ask as they begin to more fully consider the three C's in their implementation of trauma-informed practices.

Culture

> *We don't want to be victims. We don't want them to be victims. I'm not going to pretend like history doesn't matter... But we're tired of being victims (Diné high school teacher, 2018).*

The quote above is a composite of sentiments shared with us over the course of a training partnership with a residential high school serving Native American (primarily *Diné* or Navajo) youth run by the Bureau of Indian Education. Their responses to efforts to implement trauma-informed practices in a context that was culturally distinct from those in which most of the models have been designed or evaluated highlighted powerful ways in which culture mediates experiences of trauma and conceptions of trauma-informed practice. The pervasive impact of

historical trauma coupled with a deep need to counter the deficit-oriented messages called for a significant remaking of typical professional development and implementation strategies. Such cultural responsiveness is critical to the success of trauma-informed practices but has not been a salient feature of their implementation to date.

While cultural, historical, and gender issues are identified as a guiding principle in SAMSHA's (2014) model for trauma-informed care, they are implemented through a one-dimensional lens of cultural competency. At some point in time, the mere acceptance that diverse groups existed and brought value to education was sufficient enough to be seen as "trauma informed." While there may be an acknowledgement of the need and value for a diverse student base, there can be a disconnect with actions to embed culturally responsive practices that will help these groups thrive.

In taking a socially just perspective to trauma-informed education, there must be further exploration of the varying presentations of culture and move towards embedding cultural humility in education. Culture is ingrained in both conscious and unconscious behaviors, patterns of thinking, and expressive communication. External presentations are typically the introduction to someone's culture; this introduction serves as a window of opportunity to expand on the unconscious ways that culture is carried internally, the wounds attached, and the inherent cultural resilience. The challenge that many systems face is moving past the external presentation and utilizing other aspects of culture to modify educational practices.

In building trauma-informed approaches rooted in social justice, we are called to consider and respond to the hidden presentations of culture by reflecting on the complex histories of marginalized groups. The histories of marginalized cultures are rooted in trauma and oppression due to colonization, imperialism, and forced acculturation. While some students may not be explicitly aware of these realities, the implications of this history are still present. Ancestral wounds of trauma are passed down through parenting practices, survival methods, and outlooks on life (Brave Heart et al., 2011). For some, this form of cultural trauma is especially salient at present due to current social issues and political landscape (Sondel et al., 2018). Regardless of the level of consciousness around cultural trauma, this directly impacts a student's ability to engage in an academic setting as well as other domains of functioning.

Schools that neglect to identify the painful histories of cultural and historical trauma in marginalized communities can reinforce mechanisms of oppression and contribute to re-traumatization. This oversight might present itself in the form of micro-aggressions against certain groups or erasure of cultural differences in policies, relationship building, strict power structures, and biased curriculum material.

The identity-mediated barriers students encounter are the results of limited access to resources due to inequitable distribution of funds, poor support from key decision makers, and individual hesitations on accepting social positioning and proximity to oppression. Therefore, a socially just trauma-informed approach in

schools calls for a commitment to go beyond cultural competency and center the practice of cultural humility. Cultural humility directs us to focus on the other person's experience, commit to constant reflection and critique of our biases, privilege, and power structures, and using those critiques to improve our relationships and advocacy efforts (Waters & Asbill, 2013). To take cultural humility a step further, we identify the post traumatic growth (cultural resilience) present within marginalized communities and incorporate those strengths into educational processes.

These shifts require schools must go beyond talking about trauma and might be best served by beginning their work to address trauma by having hard conversations about marginalization and privilege, history and power. Importantly, schools that do this have the power not only to improve school outcomes but to address some key impacts of intergenerational trauma (Bisonette & Shebby, 2017). On the journey to expanding cultural humility within education and integrating a socially just trauma-informed lens, the following questions can be utilized to reflect. 1) How are we acknowledging the cultural trauma that marginalized communities have experienced (or are experiencing)? Are we talking about these issues with each other, students, families? If not, what can we do to learn more and name these injustices? 2) What is my position in the unjust social hierarchy? How do I actively work to give more power to students whose cultural group has had power taken from them to counter trauma responses? If from the same group, how do I model post traumatic growth and resilience? 3) Can I identify at least two strengths in a cultural group? Once identified, how can those strengths be used to foster a positive educational experience? 4) Do policies contribute to re-traumatization by reinforcing oppressive practices historically used against a cultural group? (i.e., segregating students, public shaming etc.). If not, how can we include students and caregivers from marginalized communities to give feedback around the impacts of these policies?

Capacity

> *We've changed a lot of what we do...but it's not enough...I'm not a therapist...I can't do the work his family might benefit from...but the only way to get more help around here is through special education (Urban 4th grade teacher, 2019).*

As we seek to build schools that integrate a culturally humble approach to trauma-informed practice, we cannot ignore the real and profound ways that trauma impacts some students and groups of students. While schools play a role in perpetuating trauma, they are not the sole source of these experiences and efforts to change schools will not, itself, alleviate the need for more expansive trauma-specific supports. When we look beyond issues of universal supports and approaches, questions about the capacity of schools, school systems, and their surrounding community to meaningfully respond to trauma-specific need to come into play. Our work in schools brings into sharp focus the ways in which capacity (or lack of capacity) at the school, district, and community level can severely limit these efforts.

Models have worked to challenge schools to integrate trauma-informed practices across tiers of intervention using the Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS). What this means, in practical terms, is the understanding there are school-wide practices that can provide a foundation for support to all students while we *simultaneously* work to ensure access to trauma-specific supports and higher levels of care. Schools we have worked with have been able to reform their discipline practices and to implement school-wide systems and practices to build relationships and support regulation. These gains have produced real and measurable progress in transforming the general environment of the school and improving outcomes for many students. Despite these gains, the challenges posed by some students with higher needs often overwhelmed staff, overshadowed their success, and threatened their commitment to persevere.

Without undermining the very real and very significant ways in which schools can contribute to student challenges by responding inappropriately to student trauma or re-traumatizing students, a social justice lens also calls us to understand the reality that not all student experiences are equal. While we must be careful not to pathologize students, the integration of a social justice lens into trauma-informed schools also requires commitment to the provision of necessary services to support students who may have unique mental and behavioral health needs as a result of trauma. Trauma-informed supports must be *a part of* and exist *apart from* special education services. Importantly, these supports must exist as a part of inclusive approaches to special education services, avoiding unnecessary stigmatization, exclusion, or segregation of students with trauma-related behavioral health needs. Beyond this, these supports should also be accessible to students who do not qualify for special education but who are impacted by trauma. As such, building capacity to support these needs at schools should be a central feature of trauma-sensitive schools.

Our experience suggests that if there is nothing *more* for students who have high needs, identifying and empathizing with those needs feels like an exercise in futility. This has to do with school and district-wide supports that exist (or don't exist). In schools we have worked with, students were largely unable to access supports from school social workers or counselors on any systemic basis without being diagnosed with having an emotional disability. It is easy to suggest the problem lies with teachers. It is hard to build systems with the necessary capacity to respond to a range of student needs. Part of this challenge comes from the ways in which educational systems are constructed. While the capacity to change some practices lies at the school level, the capacity to increase supports (mental/behavioral health, social services like case management or access to basic needs) often lies at the district or state level. This suggests that truly trauma-informed schools must be nested within large trauma-informed systems of education that can reinforce trauma-informed policies and practices while working toward more equitable delegation of resources to respond to the varied needs of students impacted by trauma.

Applying a social justice lens to trauma-informed practices in schools requires us to balance the imperative to recognize strengths and promote resilience with the imperative to ensure equitable access to care, including mental health care, for all students (McGee & Stovall, 2015). As schools seek to build the capacity needed to build and sustain socially just trauma-informed practices across all levels of support, they can ask themselves: 1) Do all students have access to basic frameworks for positive/restorative discipline and social-emotional support? If not, how can we get there? 2) In addition to universal supports, what exists for students who are more acutely impacted by trauma? Does it meet the needs of our students? Is it accessible to students with and without disabilities? Is it accessible based on identified needs rather than externally imposed numbers? 3) Do system-wide practices, policies, or models for resource distribution align with what we know is best for and needed by our students? If not, how can we effectively advocate and mobilize for changes to build capacity?

Compassion Fatigue

> *I was…trying to figure out if things are really "that bad" or it's all in my head. I've been teaching for 4 years, and in that time I've gone through 4 or 5 suicides, confiscating drugs, gangs, and breaking up fights in my classroom... The homicide that was committed last year was one of my students. This is in addition to the other more day-to-day stuff... I suppose there's a good chunk of trauma there too (Urban high school teacher, 2020).*

Compassion fatigue (CF), for teachers in particular, is a significant barrier to implementation in trauma-informed schools. This is well reflected in the literature (Berger et al, 2016; Bontrager et al., 2012; Lawson et al., 2019) but remains a significant challenge in practice. Given most school staff and educators are not trained as helping professionals, they are often ill equipped to anticipate and respond to these symptoms of CF or Secondary Traumatic Stress (STS). While teachers readily describe the emotional labor that pervades their work, most report their training (both pre and in-service) focuses largely on pedagogy and subject-matter (Center on Education Policy, 2016). This gap between what they see as the most challenging aspects of their work and those for which they receive support for can be striking, making the school environment one in which adults are likely to experience significant adverse personal effects, which can negatively impact students and the entire school system.

As Bloom and Farragher (2010) remind us, systems supporting individuals impacted by trauma often experience a "parallel process"; not only can providers in those systems be impacted by STS, but the entire system can be re-organized by trauma to reflect the same relational, emotional, and regulatory challenges trauma causes for individuals. Those of us who have spent time in schools that serve student populations with high exposure to trauma and toxic stress are likely to have witnessed this phenomenon. If intentional focus on staff well-being is absent, adults report feeling unsafe and overwhelmed. In response, they can appear disengaged,

reactive, or inclined toward punitive approaches to education; those who don't, often leave, contributing to high turnover rates in schools that serve some of our most vulnerable students (Simon & Johnson, 2015).

Self-care and mindfulness practices can be effective at combatting the impact of compassion fatigue and secondary traumatic stress in schools (Greenberg et al., 2016) and many models for trauma-informed education place self-care for staff as a central pillar of these practices (Milwaukee Public Schools, n.d.). However, our experiences suggest these practices are likely to be insufficient if the underlying environment and conditions of work in schools do not change. Applying our understanding of trauma and toxic stress to adults in schools reminds us that they too need to feel safe and supported and the demands of their work must be reasonable. Applying a social justice lens in trauma-informed schools allows us to see staff and educators as impacted by the same forces that impact students and asks us to work to change their conditions as part of the work we do to change conditions for students.

Some of this work can occur at the school level. We have found opportunities to voice these challenges in an intentionally supportive environment can be powerful opportunities for mutual self-help and peer support. Quite often, our "trainings" more closely resemble support groups that allow staff to process what they are learning while honestly expressing feelings about the challenges of implementation. In addition to support and validation, teachers need to experience congruence (McIntyre et al., 2019). They are likely to respond with defensiveness when asked to increase their empathy and understanding for students or to prioritize student well-being over achievement, but are not offered the same by the structures within which they work.

Beyond this, teachers and other school-based providers are not immune from the impact of trauma and toxic stress stemming from the same types of identity-based discrimination, community marginalization, cultural, or historical trauma that can impact students. Socially just trauma-informed schools recognize these broad sources of trauma impact people at all levels and take actions to reduce their impact within the school and prevent their perpetuation beyond the school walls. As schools seek to build socially just trauma-informed systems that consider the needs of adults providing care and instruction, they can ask themselves: 1) Do we actively demonstrate the ways in which we value the well-being of members of our school community, including adults? 2) Do we provide adequate support to adults as we ask them to support students? Are demands placed upon them reasonable? Are the supports provided sufficient? If not, what can we change? 3) Do we actively recognize the ways in which social injustice impacts all members of our school community, including adults, and take steps to mitigate this impact where we can and advocate for change where we can't?

Just Trauma-Informed Schools: Integrating Evidence, Theory, and Practice

The proliferation and development of trauma-informed practices in schools represents a significant opportunity for school social work and the advancement of frameworks for schooling which place the holistic needs of students at their center. These models also hold promise as one potential way we can address the unjust and disproportionate impact of trauma on students of color, sexual and gender minority students, students living in poverty, and other marginalized student groups. While the promise is real, research has yet to fully support the assumption that trauma-informed schools are, indeed, a social justice-centered strategy.

We described four gaps in the current theoretical base for trauma-informed education including muddled definitions of trauma, decontextualized understandings of trauma, minimization of resilience, and lack of integration with existing initiatives; each of which poses a significant threat to the development of socially just trauma-informed schools if not addressed. Researchers and leaders working to develop, implement, and evaluate models for trauma-informed education would be wise to pay attention to and address these gaps as they advance the field. In the last year, several new theoretical articles echoing similar calls have come out (Gherardi et al., 2020; McIntosh, 2019; Vericat-Rocha & Ruitenberg, 2019; Zakszeski et al., 2017). What remains is the work that responds to these critical calls via the implementation and evaluation of models that alleviate these gaps and explicitly center social justice. This work is necessary in order to move the relationship between trauma-informed practices and social justice from a *theory of impact* to meaningful change for students.

We also described three considerations for practice - culture, capacity, and compassion fatigue - that have emerged from our work with schools, each of which has the potential to undermine the social justice aims of trauma-informed education. While these considerations are beginning to be integrated into research and emerging models, conditions on the ground in many schools and school districts present barriers to meaningfully incorporating these considerations. Here, coalitions of leaders - school social workers, administrators, counselors, teachers, and others - can work to advance systems of schooling which support culturally sustaining schools with the capacity to respond to the range of needs resulting from trauma exposure that also provide a foundation which supports the well-being of adults in order to ensure sustainable practices. These considerations reflect the spaces in which our articulated desire (address the disproportionate impact of trauma) meet our resources and practices. Significant work must occur in schools to more fully align the principles they espouse in adopting trauma-informed models with the ways they engage with communities, allocate resources, and provide supports.

The integration of trauma-informed practices and the application of a trauma-sensitive lens to education is clearly warranted. The impact of trauma and its disproportionate impact on already marginalized students can be seen as a

primary barrier to school success, making efforts to address these barriers a logical step in movements toward educational and social justice. And yet, trauma is not simply the accumulation of adverse experiences that happen within the family. It is inextricably linked to history, context, and policy. In order for schools to become Just Trauma-Informed Schools, they must seek to integrate a socio-ecological model of trauma (SAMHSA, 2014) into their existing work, ensuring they apply this model to their understanding of families and staff as well as students, in order for the promise of these approaches to be fulfilled.

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