Introduction to the Special Issue

The purpose of this special issue is to apply a social justice lens to the question of how education practitioners operating within primary and secondary school contexts around the world are thinking about trauma-informed education and care. Papers explore what school social workers and other educators are doing to address these issues in schools and consider the broader implications of a global shift towards trauma-informed approaches in education.

Trauma-informed approaches to childhood care and education have become increasingly widespread during recent years. The popularization of the "ACEs" model (Adverse Childhood Experiences; Felitti et al., 1998) has contributed significantly to this process and has led to the adoption of trauma-informed approaches in education, even though the ACEs model and subsequent (mis)uses of it have come under recent criticism (Vericat Rocha & Ruitenberg, 2019). The model is criticized for not acknowledging the structural causes of trauma, focusing instead on individual family traumatic events to the exclusion of other factors that create traumatic conditions such as poverty, environmental pollution, community violence and racism (Lewer et al., 2019; McEwen & Gregerson, 2019). Others have argued that the ACEs model is a "chaotic concept" that should not be used to determine treatments and social policy, especially given the limitations of the initial study and the difficulty in measuring and assessing trauma (White et al., 2019), and that the popularization of the ACEs model makes it vulnerable to heuristic thinking and the distorting political effects of policy entrepreneurship (Walsh, 2020).

It is undeniable that trauma is a serious problem for many youth and their families. While some strong evidence-based interventions exist to treat traumatized youth (e.g. TF-CBT, CBITS), what is less clear is how effective trauma-informed approaches are at a school level, given the paucity of evidence available (Maynard et al., 2019). Some scholars point to evidence that addressing structural root causes of trauma in communities (housing, income inequality, violence) can reduce the prevalence of ACEs (Blair et al., 2019; Courtin et al., 2019). This raises further questions about how much burden can be sensibly put on schools to address trauma when so many other factors contribute to traumatic conditions for youth. Moreover, with the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement in the past few years, scholars have questioned how trauma informed a school community can claim to be if they employ police and engage in oppressive practices towards Black and Brown youth (Gorski & Swalwell, 2015; Kelly, 2019).

This special issue, the first one for IJSSW, features 10 papers from diverse fields (social work, education, psychology). Due to the amount of interest and papers received, the special issue is split into two parts: Part 1 (October 2021) and Part 2 (December 2021). All of the papers reflect on how trauma-informed practices in schools can be enhanced and understood through the lens of social justice frameworks, and how this can inform further practice and research. In the next section, we briefly introduce the papers published in Part 1 of the special issue.

Summary of papers in Part 1

In their paper "Just Trauma-Informed Schools: Theoretical Gaps, Practice Considerations and New Directions", Gherardi and colleagues assess the proposed relationship between trauma-informed practice and social justice, with reference to theory and empirical work. Their conclusion is this link is not supported by evidence. The authors discuss these theoretical gaps in detail before proposing some strategies for addressing these gaps in practice, for the development of "socially just trauma-sensitive schools".

In their paper "Integrating Social Justice Practices into Graduate Training: Collaborating with Stakeholders to Adapt Professional Development in Puerto Rico", Kurtz and colleagues draw on their work at a school and community center in San Juan, Puerto Rico, which involved delivering training in trauma-informed practices for staff. Their paper discusses the "cultural adaptation of trauma-informed practices" and the need for "creating safety" in these practices. By way of conclusion, the authors propose some recommendations for graduate training programs, with specific attention to mental health and working with marginalized groups.

In their paper "'Trauma-Informed' Ideas in English Education: Discussing the Scientific Evidence Base and Exploring the Discursive and Practice Effects", authors Storey and Neaum discuss the "scientific evidence-base for trauma-informed education" and the "discursive effects" of these ideas in practice. They argue that trauma-informed practices in English education lack clear commitments to this agenda such as an overall strategy, policy and allocation of funding. The authors argue that, as a result, trauma-informed education does not improve outcomes for students experiencing material disadvantage or trauma.

In the paper "Trauma-Informed Practices in Education and Social Justice: Towards a Critical Orientation", Boylan develops a framework for the analysis of trauma-informed education from the perspective of dispositional orientations to social justice. Boylan argues the application of this framework indicates that trauma-informed education tends to have "either a conservative or a socially-liberal social justice orientation". In response to this, Boylan proposes a critical orientation that is cognizant of the cultural, structural and relational contexts of trauma and adversity in childhood. This is situated within a broader project of "activist professionalism" in education.

In the paper "Exploration of Implementation Variables Impacting Trauma Informed Practices in Schools: A Narrative Review", Parker identifies 25 trauma-informed "practice implementation variables" using a process of thematic analysis. The review suggests that effective trauma-informed approaches can be developed in schools when the right input and conditions are in place. Parker argues further that when practitioners are supported to fill the gaps in their knowledge and develop trauma-informed pedagogy, they are able to create a healthy and safe environment, in which students can be successfully engaged and supported.

Editorial remarks and note of thanks

This special issue drew submissions from a variety of disciplines and international settings. This was done in the hope that such an approach might help shed some light on the complex issues involved in making schools trauma informed while delivering the most effective services to all members of the school community. The special issue has been a journey of over 18 months, most of it through the global COVID-19 pandemic, and along with the 10 article authors, we are grateful to SSWAA and the journal editorial team for all their support, and to all the reviewers who made it possible.

Dedication

I wish to pay tribute and dedicate this work to my co-editor, Dr. Michael Kelly, who tragically passed away in September 2021, shortly before the publication of this special issue. I remain extremely grateful to him for asking me to be involved. Mike was an inspiration to work with throughout the process and, in the short time I knew him, we became colleagues and friends.

<div align="right">Gary Walsh, October 2021</div>

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