

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 2 of the special issue.

Summary of Papers in Part 2

In their paper “School Social Workers in the Milieu: Ubuntu as a Social Justice Imperative”, Lim and colleagues explore the concept of the milieu and the South African value of *Ubuntu*, linking these to school social work practice. The authors

argue the milieu is “a humanistic principle in which the community works together to support each other”, while *Ubuntu* is seen as “the essence of being human and promoting our interconnectedness, as a person is a person through other people”. The authors identify how these concepts can work together to support community resilience and trauma-informed education, with reference to school-based examples across the United States and in South Africa. Recommendations are proposed for school social workers using these practices in their schools.

In their paper “Social Justice and Trauma-Informed Care in Schools”, Lorig and colleagues are concerned with the ways that trauma disproportionately affects young people from marginalized communities, arguing that this requires particular recognition in schools. Building on Graybill and colleagues’ (2018) definition of social justice as the elimination of systemic oppression and institutional barriers to equity, the authors argue schools can ensure inclusion of diverse experiences by recognizing trauma as both individual and systemic.

In their paper “The Importance of Trauma-Informed Approaches in Education – The Impact of Implementing a Brain-Based Approach to Supporting Learners Across a Scottish Local Authority”, authors Taylor and Barrett analyze the impact of a small-scale project involving 4/5-year-olds which used the Readiness for Learning (R4L) approach. R4L encourages BALTIC practice – Brain-Based, Attachment-Led, Trauma-Informed and Community-based. Situating their argument within a wider socio-political understanding of childhood adversity, the authors conclude by discussing the need for trauma-informed approaches in schools, and the conditions that need to be in place for these approaches to be successful.

In the paper “When Trauma Comes to School: Toward a Socially Just Trauma-Informed Praxis”, O’Toole examines current conceptualizations of adversity, trauma, and trauma-informed practice. The argument is that current approaches are dominated by a deficit-based medical model, which sees emotional distress as symptoms of disorder rather than reasonable survival strategies. The Power Threat Meaning Framework (PTMF) is offered as an alternative approach. PTMF is discussed as a way of understanding emotional and psychological distress in the context of power and inequality. Drawing on the anti-oppression educational theory of Paulo Freire, O’Toole concludes that trauma-informed praxis, guided by PTMF, can help redress the dominant medical model in schools.

In the paper “The Healing Power of Teacher-Student Relationships in Repairing Childhood Abuse: Commonalities and Differences with Clinical Social Work Practice”, Jamil examines the therapeutic relationship and the extent to which it overlaps with relationships in education involving students with histories of trauma. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a clinical social worker who has post-secondary teaching experience, while the student perspectives were revealed by means of researcher self-study with the author as participant. Safety, empathy and student empowerment, when found within therapeutic and teacher-student relationships, helped to correct and repair some of the damage of childhood abuse.

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.

Gary Walsh, October 2021

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