

Trauma Affects Us All

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Background That Led to Your Inquiry:

The needs of our younger students are changing every year. As an elementary principal I am finding our incoming students are not prepared with the skills to allow them to be successful in school. We are also seeing students throughout the grade levels that have an increased frustration level, they often lack the communication skills necessary to meet their most basic needs or use coping skills when they encounter a frustrating situation. Couple those lagging skills with the academic demands of school and we have a recipe that leads to frustration and failure for all stakeholders..

As an educator with 20 plus years experience I was finding my bag of tricks and strategies to be unsuccessful. Our students are coming to the table with changing needs and I did not feel prepared to adequately meet their needs. My teachers were exhausted and stressed finding themselves dealing with behaviors at an intensity and frequency they have never seen before. Therefore, the purpose of my action research project was to build my own tool belt of trauma and trauma informed practices to better support my students, staff and decrease my own stress.

Statement of Your Wondering:

With this purpose, I wondered is there a systematic approach to helping students who have experienced trauma be more successful in the school environment.

What new knowledge or understandings do I need to explore to help me better support my students and staff, thus being less stressed myself.

Methods/Procedures:

To gain insights into my wondering, I knew I would need to research the topic and document my findings. I chose journaling as my method of data collection. I began talking with colleagues and researching trauma and trauma informed practices. I compiled a list of resources which including: experts on the topic, articles, books, video research, podcasts, websites and current programs in practice.

I reviewed content on the subject approximately every week and a half. I reviewed articles by five different experts in the field, did a site visit to see a program in action, listened to 3 podcasts, viewed 18 youtube presentations, 2 Tedtalks and read 3 books.. After each consumption of content on the topic I journaled about key takeaways, strategies or ahaha I had about the content. In combination I reflected on these specific strategies and new learnings in relation to four really challenging students I was working with on a daily basis. I used an app called One Day, an electronic Journal to document my reflections.

In regards to changes in my administrative practice, I noticed almost immediately my lense was changing, my approach was more patient, I found myself calmer, and trying to find what the student needed at that particular time. What historically would have been a suspension became time out of the classroom, time to

regulate and restore the relationship before returning. Due to qualitative data collection, my analysis was looking for trends, commonalities and strategies across the variety of authors.

Stating Your Learning and Supporting it with Data:

As a result of analyzing my data, two important things I learned include: 1) trauma impacts brain development at a neurological level, causing students to have significantly different brain structures than a child who has not experienced trauma. 2) creating caring supportive relationships with children and explicitly teaching a child how to appropriately respond when they encounter frustrating situations can restore a child's ability to regulate appropriately and get their needs met in an appropriate manner.

Trauma impacts brain development at a neurological level, causing student to have significantly different brain structures than a child who has not experienced trauma. "Early trauma and stress can have a lasting effect on development, triggering delays in social competence (Becker-Weidman, 2009), development of dysfunctional coping behaviors, and significantly altering a child's brain chemistry, particularly when the adverse condition is chronic and there is a lack of nurturing support (Bremner, 2003; Carrion, 2006)"

Understanding the aspects of brain development and the amygdala response to fight or flight gives context to a behavior. It helps the adult in the situation maintain relational detachment understanding that this behavior is not about them, but rather an expression of need from an overdeveloped amygdala. By understanding the brain development we are better able to reflect and respond to the needs of our students. What is it they may need in that intense moment of physical or verbal expression.

Creating caring supportive relationships with children and explicitly teaching a child how to appropriately respond when they encounter frustrating situations can restore a child's ability to regulate appropriately and get their needs met in an appropriate manner. "In particular it has been noted that relationship-based trauma can only be resolved through loving, stable relationships, such as can be offered by nurturing caregivers." Some of the research I did focused on Trust Based Relationship Interventions (TBRI), this work was done by Karen Purvis and originally came about through her work with foster children and adoption. "TBRI proactive strategies are designed as preventative teaching measures, and consist of verbal reminders, behavioral rehearsals, role play with others or with puppets, teaching life value terms, and demonstrations of rule-following or socially appropriate behaviors that are presented in settings where problem behavior is likely. For example, role-playing involves practicing a "script" between caregiver and child to allow the child to practice appropriate responses to frustrations he or she may encounter."

By creating systemic structures of support that repair and empower students to feel safe, loved, and cared for we are able to give students the tools and strategies to self regulate and get their needs met in an appropriate manner. The core of supporting students is in the relationship. So how do we maximize and prioritize relationships in our daily work in order to support our students to be successful. I feel this is a priority as we do the work of teaching and learning.

Providing Concluding Thoughts:

As I reflect on the action research process I found it to be very fulfilling. The process itself allowed me to stay focused on the goal and articulate my learning through the process. I felt focused and could look at hard data. The process itself allowed for a great deal of self reflection of my current beliefs and approach to difficult behaviors. Reflection allowed me to understand that I was approaching behaviors in a reactive manner, rather

than a proactive manner. I also learned that this is a process, a shift in philosophy, throughout the timeline my understanding deepened with each bit of new knowledge that was affirmed by something I had read or heard. The complexity of my own schema was increasing daily as I saw in the application while working with my most challenging students. I found myself grappling with new understandings and shifting my approach on a daily basis, however what I failed to address was as my understanding and philosophies were shifting there was a disconnect between my approach and understanding and what my staff expected. I found staff was looking for a punitive approach to student behaviors, however research states “you can not punish a behavior away.”

In regards to direction in the future, I realized the immediate need to build my staffs understanding of trauma and trauma informed care. I need to give them a structure to build their schema and understanding so that we may create a unified understanding and consistent approach to supporting challenging situations. Another ahah that surfaced throughout this process that this is not only about the student, it is about the adult in the situation as well. We have all experienced trauma of different degrees throughout our lives and those experiences have shaped us and given us a filter in which we approach our life. So how do we create structures that allow all students and adults to build caring, trusting relationships in order to function successfully in the academic setting. A quotes from Heather Forbes work is one I continually share with others as I find myself looking at children through a different lense. “Children’s behaviors are a cry for regulation-a cry for relationship, not a cry for punishment and consequences.” (Forbes) You can’t punish a behavior away, so we must look at other ways to better meet our students needs.

References:

Forbes, Heather (2008) Going Beyond the Behaviors: How to heal from the impact of early trauma. Adoption Now

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