

Secondary traumatic stress and burnout among school personnel serving children with adverse experiences – a case study of three schools

By

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Abstract

Background/Context:

Secondary traumatic stress is a physiological condition similar to Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). It can be experienced by those working closely with traumatized individuals including educators dealing with children with adverse experiences. Consistent exposure to such stress can lead to teacher burnout, which has been a major concern in teacher attrition. Literature on secondary traumatic stress among educators is sparse with most of it being qualitative. This paper for the first time explores this phenomenon among educators from a public charter school. To our knowledge this is also the first paper to use social network information on the topic. Social support systems are known to help cope better with stressful situations. Understanding secondary traumatic stress is essential in urban education systems as an increasing number of adolescents and youth are experience trauma through adverse childhood experiences. The literature needs more empirical work on the issue due to the increasing concern towards teacher stress in urban education systems.

Purpose/Objective/Research Question:

The paper explores two primary questions:

- (i) Do secondary traumatic stress and subsequent burnout levels reported systematically vary based on individual demographic characteristics?*
- (ii) Do secondary traumatic stress and subsequent burnout levels reported systematically vary based on the degree of social support an educator has within the school?*

Setting:

The research is based on data collected from three public charter schools from an urban location in Midwestern USA. The schools are run by a family foundation with the explicit mission to serve children who have been unable to succeed in conventional public-school system. The city where the schools are located is badly affected by the opioid crisis. Therefore, many students have had episodic or in some cases chronic exposure to trauma. This in turn exposes the teachers and related educators to secondary traumatic stress which is scientifically similar to PTSD. The researchers ran a training program to teach trauma responsive education practices to the educators in these schools during the academic year of 2018-2019.

Population/Participants/Subjects:

The data was collected from personnel in the three schools – elementary-middle, high school (regular) and early-high (early college high school). In this sample there are 104 individuals in 2018 and 86 in 2019. In 2018 and 2019, 43.2 and 43 percent came from the elementary-middle school, 25 and 28 percent from the early college high school, 20 and 27 percent from regular high school and the remaining are common staff to all the schools.

Table 1 School-wise characteristics in 2018

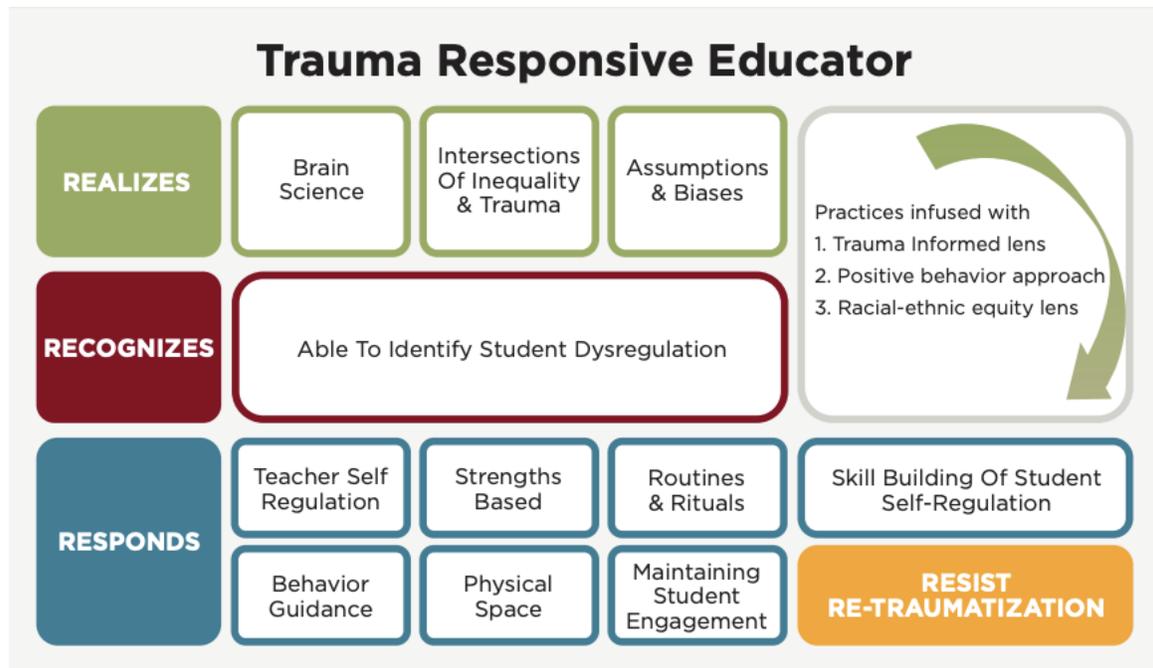
Mean (sd)	Gender (%)	Education (%)	Avg. teaching experience	Average STS	Average Burnout	Teachers in workforce (%)
Elementary-middle	82 (F) 18 (M)	51 (Bach.) 40 (Mast.)	6.84 (4.62)	2.09 (1.15)	2.04 (1.20)	58
Regular HS	67 (F) 33 (M)	33 (Bach.) 40 (Mast.)	7.5 (3.9)	2.33 (0.83)	2.17 (0.9)	40
Early-HS	77 (F) 23 (M)	38 (Bach.) 50 (Mast.)	6.2 (3.7)	2.29 (1.25)	2.44 (1.42)	54

Table 2 School-wise characteristics in 2019

Mean (sd)	Gender (%)	Education (%)	Avg. teaching experience	Average STS	Average Burnout	Teachers in workforce (%)
Elem-middle	81 (F) 19 (M)	46 (Bach.) 51 (Mast.)	7.4 (5.3)	2.30 (1.17)	2.11 (1.26)	60
Regular HS	70 (F) 30 (M)	30 (Bach.) 70 (Mast.)	6.5 (4.3)	2.14 (1.05)	2.03 (1.24)	48
Early-HS	54 (F) 42 (M)	33 (Bach.) 67 (Mast.)	8.1 (5.9)	2.14 (1.08)	1.93 (1.04)	58

Intervention/Program/Practice:

The Trauma Responsive Education Practices (TREP) training module was delivered over the academic year of 2018-2019. The basic schema of the module is provided below.



Research Design:

This paper is a descriptive case study of the distribution of secondary traumatic stress and burnout, before and after a relevant training program. The pre and post data collection offers a chance to observe the cross-sectional distribution of change in stress and burnout across various personal and social characteristics. Due to the lack of any empirical modeling or causal investigations, sources of bias have not deemed as a major concern.

Data Collection and Analysis:

Data was collected in two waves, baseline and endline of the training module by graduate students from my university. Surveys were conducted in person on-site during June 2018 and June 2019. Collected data included personal characteristics, secondary traumatic stress, emotional burnout, socioemotional learning and social network information on how the educators seek or provide advice on subject instruction and classroom management amongst themselves.

Findings/Results:

We find that the average reported stress and burnout levels decreased in two of the three schools over the academic year. The secondary traumatic stress and consequential burnout varied based on certain background characteristics in the baseline but not in the endline. Degree of closeness to others or number of peers available for support did not have monotonic relationship with changes in the reported levels of secondary traumatic stress and burnout, between baseline and endline. Further investigation is required to understand if teacher characteristics moderate the coping effects of peer support and organizational factors, and if the training program had positive impact under certain circumstances.

Conclusions:

We have found that an educator can experience highly varying levels of STS and burnout based on some of their personal characteristics and the nature of social support available to them. But these relationships are not always monotonic. Based on the endline data, while a good training module for traumatic stress management could reduce the magnitude and variation of stress and burnout among groups, the mediating role of social networks needs to be better understood based on the nature of goals and relationship in these networks.