Compassion Satisfaction as a Protective Factor Among Teachers Working with Children Impacted by Trauma

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Introduction

- Childhood trauma is pervasive and has been described as a “public health epidemic” (Baker et al., 2015) that is associated with poor physical and mental health as well as negative behavioral and academic outcomes (Baker et al., 2015; Blodgett & Harrington, 2010).
- The implementation of trauma-informed care (TIC) in schools is a promising approach to mitigating the negative consequences associated with childhood trauma.
- TIC may also help address high rates of burnout and secondary traumatic stress among school staff serving children impacted by trauma (Abraham-Cooker, 2012; Carangi et al., 2015).
- Research is lacking on TIC in schools, particularly regarding the potential protective role of staff compassion satisfaction, or positive feelings related to one’s helping profession (Martin-Cuellar et al., 2018).
- In the present study, we explored the relationship between compassion satisfaction and self-efficacy in working with children who have a history of trauma, perceived effectiveness of TIC, burnout, secondary traumatic stress, and intent to leave the field of education among school staff at high-needs elementary schools.

Methods

Participants:
327 elementary school staff (teachers, aids, administrative assistants; M = 41.7, SD = 11, Range 20-75 years; 86% female) in an underserved, economically disadvantaged school district in the Pacific Northwest with a high percentage of Latinx students (40%).

Procedure:
School staff at high-needs elementary schools in a district serving a high percentage of Latinx students of low socioeconomic status (SES) were invited to complete an anonymous online survey, which included the Trauma-Informed Care Survey and ProQOL 5.

Measures:
Trauma-Informed Care Survey: The TIC Survey was developed for the present study and includes 12 Likert-scale items. Seven items related to perceived effectiveness of TIC were summed to create a TIC “buy-in” variable, 5 items related to self-efficacy in working with children who have a history of trauma were summed to create a self-efficacy variable, and 2 items regarding intent to leave the field of education were summed.

Professional Quality of Life Scale-Version 5 (ProQOL 5; Stamm, 2010). The ProQOL 5 is 30-item, Likert-scale self-report measure that assesses negative and positive effects of helping others who experience suffering and trauma. The ProQOL 5 has three subscales: Compassion Satisfaction (α = .88), Burnout (α =.75), and Secondary Traumatic Stress (α = .81).

Results

- Compassion satisfaction was positively and significantly related to self-efficacy in working with children who have a history of trauma and perceived effectiveness of TIC among school staff.
- There was also a significant and negative association between compassion satisfaction and burnout, secondary traumatic stress, and intent to leave the field of education.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Burnout</th>
<th>Secondary Traumatic Stress</th>
<th>Self-Efficacy</th>
<th>Turnover Intent</th>
<th>TIC “Buy-In”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Compassion Satisfaction</td>
<td>-.529**</td>
<td>-.415**</td>
<td>.393**</td>
<td>-.464**</td>
<td>.321**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Summary of intercorrelations between study variables.

Discussion

- Staff who reported high levels of compassion satisfaction were more likely to view TIC positively, which suggests bolstering staff’s sense of satisfaction in their work could improve their “buy-in” and adoption of TIC practices.
- Staff with higher compassion satisfaction were also less likely to report burnout, secondary traumatic stress, and intent to leave the field of education.
- Overall, results suggest that compassion satisfaction may be a potent protective factor against poor quality of life among school staff serving children of low SES from underrepresented groups and turnover from education.
- Limitations of the current study include the potential for response and selection bias on measures. Additionally, the Trauma-Informed Care Survey was created for this specific study, and, thus, is not a validated measure. Finally, the present study examined one school district and results may not be reflective of the general population.
- Future research should explore how to best bolster compassion satisfaction among staff as a means of improving retention, quality of life, and commitment to TIC among staff in underserved, high-needs school districts.