

Chapter 12

Posttraumatic Growth: Educators and School Social Workers Taking Lemons and Making Lemonade

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this chapter is to provide the reader with an understanding of how trauma can set up challenges and obstacles to student academic success and realistic responses by educators and schools to assist students. The chapter begins with an overview of the adverse childhood experiences (ACE) study by Felitti et al. and explores the correlations between experienced childhood trauma and negative medical and social problems. The chapter will discuss the neurologic changes that can occur from childhood trauma and/or toxic stress and the common behavioral manifestations that create educational problems for students. The chapter will discuss the need for school social workers, as they can provide significant benefits to struggling students, educators, and school administrators. Additionally, the use of posttraumatic growth techniques to increase efficiency in classroom behavior, curriculum mastery, and lifelong coping will be discussed with final ideas proposing future research needs.

INTRODUCTION

More schools are striving to be trauma-informed, which means that educators, staff, and administrators are trained to appreciate the negative fallout of childhood trauma and how it might create educational challenges (National Education Association, 2021). As a result, these schools have adopted school-wide initiatives to assist students with moving past their trauma and learning positive skills to decrease future negative consequences of trauma. Being a trauma-informed school offers an additional layer of social services that educational systems are increasingly asked to provide to their student body. When compulsory education for all children slowly became law by individual states, beginning with Massachusetts in 1852 and ending with Mississippi in 1917 (FindLaw, 2016), the focus of education was to provide basic curriculum to students to increase literacy rates, employable skills, and fair wage payments. With

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basic math skills, workers could count their money and not be taken advantage of by corrupt bosses. An additional latent function of education was socialization of appropriate behavior, values of the day, and increased social control, as children were in school rather than loitering about and committing petty theft and other misdemeanors (Schaefer, 2018).

Today's schools, however, have taken on an increasing responsibility for the holistic health and wellbeing of students. School systems commonly provide breakfast and lunch for students to help offset malnutrition and assist with healthy growth and development. Schools often provide daily take-home snack bags and weekend food backpacks for students identified as struggling with food securities (Fletcher & Frisvold, 2017). During the COVID-19 pandemic when students were unable to attend school face to face, school programs went to great lengths to ensure their at-risk students and families had needed food rations (Benevenuto de Amorim et al., 2020). Additionally, schools commonly provide clothing, school supplies, and mental health services for students to help ensure their basic needs are met so they can learn (Reinbergs & Fefer, 2018). Some schools have established on-site medical clinics to provide students with numerous medical services needed, including basic medical care, reproductive health counseling, ongoing professional mental health services, treatment groups, substance use disorder services, and access to psychotropic medications at free or reduced costs (Jackson, 2019; McCalman et al., 2019).

Providing an increase of social services through school programs has shown to be highly successful in increasing student retention, educational levels, and standardized test results (Baez et al., 2019; Naik, 2019). However, this creates considerable demands on the faculty. Additionally, research indicates that once school systems start to provide additional social services to their student body, the need quickly exceeds the services provided (Shultz, 2020). The presence of need is constant, with community and nation-wide events increasing the need. Nationwide recession, the COVID-19 pandemic, and resulting unemployment have caused more and more students to request services from schools, and schools struggle to keep up with the demand (Prothero, 2020). Research indicates that the prolonged duration of COVID-19 has increased mental health issues in school age children (Henderson, 2020). Due to on-going shutdowns and limitations in educational and face to face services, provisions for mental health issues are lacking. This gap is likely to continue to grow. Educators will be compelled to address these issues in the coming years, along with the educational deficits that have resulted from the lack of structured education. Consequently, it is vital that educators have additional help with mental health issues and the potential unresolved issues from the trauma COVID-19 has left in its wake, so they can focus on helping students gain the knowledge they may have missed during the COVID-19 pandemic.

As need for mental health services increases in a school system, so do the negative behaviors that educators must navigate while continuing to provide learning for all students in their classrooms. School systems desire to address the multiple and complex needs of their students, yet they are often understaffed to do so effectively. Educators need to appreciate the sequela of trauma and the aftermath that may present in classrooms; however, educators cannot be expected to provide mental health services and individual interventions for struggling students (Green et al., 2016). School social workers are uniquely trained to intervene on an individual, group, and community level to assist educators with these issues; however, schools often do not have enough school social workers to adequately address the need (Naik, 2019).

Accordingly, a multi-faced approach is recommended. Educators' appreciation of childhood trauma, toxic stress, and resulting behaviors they might encounter in the classroom is needed, while using school social workers to provide student-specific interventions to decrease behavioral and emotional difficulties. Additionally, educators should be encouraged to provide resiliency activities as part of the classroom community to assist all students with learning more effective ways to cope with difficult life

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