

Working with traumatized students: A preliminary study of measures to assess school staff

Shantel D. Crosby
Wayne State University

Cheryl L. Somers
Wayne State University

Angelique G. Day
Wayne State University

Beverly A. Baroni
Clara B. Ford Academy

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Abstract

This preliminary research focuses on the perceptions of academic staff working in residential settings with youth who have experienced psychological trauma. The article provides the psychometric properties of three instruments that assess academic staff perceptions of student behavior (TPSB), awareness of trauma (TTS), and responses to student behavior (TRSB). These measures can be used to assess academic staff readiness in working with traumatized students. Measurement validity/reliability were established using a sample of 26 academic staff whose school was affiliated with a publically funded residential treatment center. Factor analyses indicated that scales were comprised of questions that were adequately correlated; each scale reliably measured its own individual construct (i.e., staff perceptions, awareness, responses). Cronbach's alpha internal consistency coefficient demonstrated that scales were reliable for measuring each construct, where the TPSB resulted in $\alpha = 0.83$ for its "acting out" and "shutting down" subscales, the TTS had $\alpha = 0.91$, the TRSB resulted in $\alpha = 0.79$ for the "acting out" subscale, and $\alpha = 0.81$ for the "shutting down" subscale. These instruments may be useful for teachers and academic staff working with traumatized students, particularly in residential treatment settings.

Keywords: residential treatment, trauma, measurement validity, measurement reliability, academic staff

Working with traumatized students: A preliminary study of measures to assess school staff perceptions, awareness, and instructional responses

In the United States, more than 25% of children experience physical, sexual, or emotional abuse, or witness violence in their home (Duke, Pettingell, McMorris, & Borowsky, 2010). The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration describe trauma as the product of one or more events that are potentially damaging to one's physical or emotional health with a persistent negative impact on functioning (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2012). Teachers in residential programs often have contact with students who have endured traumatic experiences (Abram, et al., 2004; Salazar, Keller, Gowen, & Courtney, 2012). Such trauma can negatively impact youth functioning in several areas including affect regulation and behavioral control (Cook et al., 2005), which requires teachers to manage social, emotional, and behavioral issues in the classroom in addition to working toward academic goals (Zetlin, MacLeod, & Kimm 2012).

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School Staff Perception, Awareness, and Response to Trauma

Childhood trauma can impact the way in which youth view the world as well as how the child is perceived by others (Social Work Policy Institute, 2010). Therefore, academic staff may face the possibility of making erroneous assumptions about students through their perception of student behavior. Cox, Visker, & Hartman (2011) found that teachers in a juvenile justice treatment facility perceived students as being uninterested in their class work. However, student disengagement might actually be a display of trauma symptoms, as students manage the distraction of environmental triggers and other common features of dealing with trauma. Similar perceptions may also exist in youth treatment facilities and other residential settings, where youth are not able to adequately communicate their feelings or motives for behavior due to trauma. This can lead school staff to misinterpret their behavior, resulting in students being mislabeled or misdiagnosed with oppositional behavior and other mental health disorders (Cole et al., 2005; Cook et al., 2005).

Teachers and school staff can face significant uncertainty when attempting to educate students who have experienced trauma (Alisic, 2012). They may experience ambiguity about their roles and how to meet the needs of every student in the classroom. They may also need greater support from program directors as well as additional knowledge and skills in managing classrooms where traumatized students are present (Alisic, 2012). Research with foster care students in residential programs is informative in this regard. Such research found that behavioral problems were among the most challenging of issues reported by first and second year teachers (Zetlin, MacLeod, & Kimm 2012). Additionally, staff reported a need for training to improve awareness of ways to address these behavioral issues. Such perceptions of students and uncertainty of how to engage them can have a potentially negative impact on how teachers respond to students (Cole et al., 2005). Some traditional academic staff responses to traumatized students, such as punitive interventions, can exacerbate trauma symptoms and further impair learning (Wolpow, Johnson, Hertel, & Kincaid, 2009). Individual perceptions, including biased thinking, and lack of knowledge and awareness can impact teachers' responses to students, and their subsequent student outcomes (Cole et al., 2005; Wolpow, Johnson, Hertel, & Kincaid, 2009). When academic staff responses are guided by attachment and trauma knowledge, rather than authoritarian methods, the academic environment is more conducive to student learning and personal growth (Moore, Marlene, & Holland, 1997). Therefore, collective assessment of academic staff perceptions of, awareness of, and responses to students' behavior may be warranted in residential programs to help identify ways that academic staff skills can be strengthened to help them better engage with traumatized students.

Current Measures

Current measures to assess academic staff readiness in working with students living with psychological trauma are lacking. There are numerous existing tools that are non-specific to trauma that broadly examine school climate, including instruments from the National School Climate Center (2014) as well as Welcoming Schools through the Human Rights Campaign Foundation (2012). Other measures have assessed teacher use of power in the classroom (McCroskey & Richmond, 1983), and school counselors have qualitatively reported their perceptions of vicarious or secondary trauma (Parker & Henfield, 2012). However, staff perceptions on how comfortable they are in dealing with first-hand trauma of students have not been widely explored (Crosby, Day, Baroni, & Somers, 2015). Also, the views and attitudes of non-mental health personnel in schools, such as teachers, paraprofessionals, and administrative staff are lacking on this issue. Teachers and administrative staff may have views that vary significantly from those of mental health professionals in residential settings, as they generally receive less overall exposure to trauma knowledge and training in their fields of study.

Present Study

To address the lack of assessment tools, three complimentary measures have been developed to evaluate academic staff on their readiness to work with traumatized students. The Teacher Perceptions of Student Behavior scale (TPSB) measures academic staff perceptions of student behavior, the Teaching Traumatized Students scale (TTS) measures academic staff overall awareness of trauma and its impact on learning, and the Teacher Responses to Student Behavior scale (TRSB) measures academic staff instructional responses to such behavior. These measures can be used to assess the trauma knowledge of teachers in juvenile residential facilities, residential treatment programs, and therapeutic schools that serve high numbers of youth who have experienced trauma. The purpose of this study is to report on the preliminary psychometric properties of the aforementioned scales.

Method

Participants & Procedure

All participants were teachers and school staff, employed between September 2012 and June 2013 at a public charter school, located on campus with a large child welfare placement agency for female youth in a Midwestern city in the United States. The school exclusively provides middle school and high school level education to female, court-involved students, who have been placed in a residential treatment facility as a result of a child welfare or juvenile justice court petition. The majority of these students have experienced trauma, abuse, and neglect. Study participants (N=26) ranged in years of employment experience in school settings from less than one year to more than five years. Most participants were Caucasian (n=17, 65%), with 27% being African American (n=7), 8% being multiracial or of another racial background (n=2). The sample consisted of 77% (n=20) female staff and 23% (n=6) were males. Additionally, 58% (n=15) were certified teachers and 42% (n=11) were school support staff. All participants provided informed consent to participate in the survey and completed the questionnaires on school grounds. The Institutional review board at Wayne State University approved the study.

Scale Development

Initial development of these measures began with a thorough review of the literature on childhood trauma, its impact on educational wellbeing, and educational responses to traumatized students. This resulted in a list of concepts related to the target constructs of school staff perceptions of, awareness of, and responses to student trauma. To ensure content validity, the research team enhanced this list of concepts using the knowledge of trauma-trained experts in child welfare and school psychology, as well as the expertise of school administrators. These administrators included the school principal who participated on behalf of the school staff, contributing feedback and relevant teacher experiences. The research team saw a need to understand teachers' perceptions of and reactions to both the internalizing and externalizing behaviors as different phenomena. Specifically, students who "shut down" in class and do not respond are, for the purposes of this research, considered "internalizing" and those who "act out" in class are considered "externalizing". Indeed, teachers do report different perceptions of and responses to each behavior set, and thus, we developed measures accordingly using two independent subscales. The aforementioned concepts were used to create scales for school staff perceptions, awareness, and instructional responses.

The TPSB scale focuses on school staff assumptions about student behavior and student motives for behavior. This construct consists of one set of 9 questions and one set of 7 questions, based on "acting out" (e.g., being disruptive, loud, argumentative, threatening) and "shutting down" (e.g., being nonresponsive to prompting, withdrawn, putting head down). Participants reported how often they perceived particular motives for student acting out and shutting down behavior using a five-point scale, 1=never, 2=sometime/less than half of the time, 3=often/about half of the time, 4=most of the time/more than half of the time, 5=always. Responses of each subscale are summed individually. For interpretation, higher scores on each subscale represent greater sensitivity to trauma in staff perception of students, where staff were more likely to attribute student behavior to trauma-related factors. See Appendix A for the full scale.

The TTS scale included both internalizing and externalizing student behaviors and is made up of 9 questions focusing on the actions of school staff that display overall knowledge and efficacy with traumatized youth. Participants reported using a five-point scale, 1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=neutral, 4=agree, 5=strongly agree. Responses were summed, with higher scores representing greater overall awareness of student trauma and trauma-related educational needs. See Appendix B for full scale.

The TRSB scale consists of two sets of 8 questions based on student "acting out" and "shutting down", similar to the student behaviors as defined in the TPSB scale. This construct focuses on the instructional and teaching responses of academic staff when students are demonstrating such behaviors. Participants reported how often they utilize particular responses to students acting out and shutting down behavior using a five-point scale, 1=never, 2=sometime/less than half of the time, 3=often/about half of the time, 4=most of the time/more than half of the time, 5=always. Responses of each subscale are summed individually, with higher scores representing greater usage of trauma-sensitive instructional practices with students. See Appendix C for full scale.

Data Analysis

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Survey and demographic data were entered into SPSS statistical software and explored using frequencies and descriptive statistics. Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) without rotation was used to analyze the survey data. This analytic method is often used to examine the number of factors present among a group of variables (Child, 1990). It is also useful for uncovering the basic structure of these variables, providing an otherwise indirectly measured construct. Eigenvalues were calculated and examined to determine which factors (survey questions) were well-aligned enough to be included in each scale. During EFA, variables that did not show sufficient eigenvalues of greater than 0.3 were excluded in order to create scales.

Results

For the TPSB, two separate exploratory factor analyses were conducted, one for the originally designed acting out items and one for the shutting down items. For the acting out items, 9 out of the original 17 questions reached eigenvalues of greater than 0.30 and were therefore included in the scale. Next, a Cronbach's alpha internal consistency coefficient was computed for those 9 items and resulted in $\alpha = 0.83$. For the shutting down items, 7 out of the original 17 questions reached eigenvalues of greater than 0.30, and the Cronbach's alpha internal consistency coefficient for the 7 items resulted in $\alpha = 0.83$. See Table 1 for the final scale items with eigenvalues, and scale means, standard deviations, and alphas. The TTS construct was best measured by a single set of items, rather than two separate subscales for "acting out" and "shutting down" behaviors. More specifically, questions on this scale were not originally designed to differentiate between awareness based on students acting out or shutting down. Therefore, this scale measures the construct of overall awareness of student trauma. An EFA was conducted for the originally designed items, with 9 out of the original 10 questions reaching eigenvalues of greater than 0.30. A Cronbach's alpha internal consistency coefficient was computed for the 9 items, resulting in $\alpha = 0.91$. See Table 2 for the final scale items with eigenvalues, and scale means, standard deviations, and alphas.

For the TRSB, two separate EFAs were conducted, one for the originally designed acting out items and one for the shutting down items. For the acting out items, 8 out of the original 23 questions reached eigenvalues of greater than 0.30 and were therefore included in the scale. Next, a Cronbach's alpha internal consistency coefficient was computed for those 8 items and resulted in $\alpha = 0.79$. For the shutting down items, 8 out of the original 23 questions reached eigenvalues of greater than 0.30, and the Cronbach's alpha internal consistency coefficient for the 8 items resulted in $\alpha = 0.81$. See Table 3 for the final scale items with eigenvalues, and scale means, standard deviations, and alphas.

Finally, a Cronbach's alpha internal consistency coefficient was computed across all scales to determine inter-scale correlation, and resulted in $\alpha = 0.66$. The TPSB subscales were positively correlated with each other at $\alpha = 0.62$, and the TRSB subscales were highly, positively correlated with each other at $\alpha = 0.92$. However, the TPSB subscales were not found to be correlated with the TRSB subscales. The TTS scale was not correlated to the TPSB subscales, but was positively correlated to the TRSB subscales at $\alpha = 0.63$. See Table 4 for full inter-scale correlation alphas. These correlations are in the moderate range suggesting that, while there is some overlap in constructs being measured by these scales, there is reasonable distinction between and unique construct measurement of each.

Discussion

This preliminary study examines and provides the psychometric properties for three new measures that evaluate academic staff in relation to student trauma. Designed using academic staff participants from a publically-funded residential school environment, these measures can be used in similar settings and other alternative schools that serve traumatized students. It is imperative that educational settings become trauma-informed in order to improve the educational wellbeing of traumatized students and to reduce the disproportionate negative academic outcomes experienced by this student population (Crosby, Day, Baroni, & Somers, 2015; Cole et al., 2005; Wolpov, Johnson, Hertel, & Kincaid, 2009). Unfortunately, academic staff rarely receive training on how to work effectively with traumatized youth (Ko et al., 2008).

Improving education for students in residential and alternative settings requires not only staff professional development (Cox, Visker, & Hartman, 2011), but also more trauma-specific assessment of academic staff. Mathur & Schoenfeld (2010) suggest that schools serving court-involved youth implement evidence-based practices and training, as well as a system with tools to evaluate such

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practices. Such practices, training, and evaluation may also be useful in other residential treatment settings for youth. The development of such tools carries significant implications for academic staff in these environments. Assessing staff perceptions of student behavior, awareness of trauma knowledge, and staff responses to students allows academic staff to individually self-examine their trauma-sensitivity and to collectively gauge the overall trauma-related climate of their school. This can provide important information regarding gaps in training knowledge and resources that teaching and support staff may need to improve their work. It can also be used to subsequently evaluate the effectiveness of such trauma-informed training and resources.

Due to the current lack of similar measurement tools, the criterion validity of these scales could not be established with evidence of concurrent, convergent, or discriminant validity. Also, the sample size is generally small for employing factor analysis. Still, this exploratory approach preliminarily identified subscales based on internal consistency reliability coefficients for each scale. This pilot research demonstrates statistical promise for future exploration. Further research should explore the psychometric properties of this tool when used with larger populations. Research should also include traditional school settings and those that serve co-ed student populations. Additionally, research should explore further test-retest reliability and predictive validity through replication of the study, testing to determine group differences between the original and replicated samples, and assessment of concurrent, convergent, and discriminant validity as other related measures become available.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to report on the preliminary psychometric properties of three instruments, the TPSB, TTS, and TRSB. These measures assess academic staff perceptions of student behavior, instructional responses to behavior, and overall awareness of trauma and its impact on learning. The findings demonstrate adequate psychometric properties, indicating that these measures may be potentially useful for helping researchers, program directors, and academic personnel gain greater understanding of the school environment for traumatized students. These instruments may provide useful insight into areas where further trauma-informed professional development is needed, making the academic environment a more comfortable and inclusive space for this student population.

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Table 1. Teacher Perceptions of Student Behavior scale (TPSB) Factor Analysis Eigenvalues

Scale Items for “Acting Out” Subscale	Eigenvalues
1. responding to change or transition	0.5
2. seeking attention	0.6
3. not feeling well physically (i.e., stomach ache, headache)	0.3
4. reacting to something from their past	0.8
5. feeling like the work is too difficult for them	0.6
6. reacting to a court decision	0.8
7. fearing failure	0.7
8. reacting from a parental or other family visit	0.8
9. reacting to something that happened in their current living environment	0.8
Scale Items for “Shutting Down” Subscale	Eigenvalues
1. responding to change or transition	0.7
2. reacting to something from their past	0.7
3. feeling like the work is too difficult for them	0.5
4. reacting to a court decision	0.8
5. fearing failure	0.6
6. reacting from a parental or other family visit	0.9
7. reacting to something that happened in their current living environment	0.8

Acting Out Subscale: $\alpha = 0.83$; $M = 3.22$; $SD = 0.56$
 Shutting Down Subscale: $\alpha = 0.83$; $M = 3.04$; $SD = 0.57$

Table 2. Teaching Traumatized Students scale (TTS) Factor Analysis Eigenvalues

Scale Items	Eigenvalues
1. Rewarding students helps change problematic behavior	0.3
2. I am aware of the effects of trauma on the behavior of students in my classroom	0.9
3. I consider my students’ experiences with trauma as I design strategies to engage students in learning	0.8
4. I can identify traumatic responses in students	0.9
5. I am aware of aspects of the school environment that may trigger trauma reactions in students	0.9
6. I know how to handle difficult behavior related to traumatic reactions in students	0.8
7. I understand how the brain is affected by trauma	0.9
8. I am mindful on how my verbal expressions (tone, language, sarcasm) impact a traumatized child	0.8
9. I am mindful of the way my body language and nonverbal expression impact a traumatized child	0.7

Scale $\alpha = 0.91$; Scale = 3.62; Scale SD= 0.81

Table 3. Teacher Responses to Student Behavior scale (TRSB) Factor Analysis Eigenvalues

Scale Items for “Acting Out” Subscale		Eigenvalues
1.	I use frequent breaks	0.5
2.	I deliberately use wait time (i.e. pauses) after giving a direction	0.5
3.	I have sensory outlets available in the classroom (i.e. stress balls, play dough, etc.)	0.7
4.	I use repetition and compromises in my interactions with students	0.5
5.	I use structured, interactive, and interpersonal games in the classroom setting (music, ball toss, string game, etc.)	0.9
6.	I provide students access to a safety zone when needed	0.8
7.	I adjust lessons in ways to accommodate	0.8
8.	I have physically rearranged the classroom as a method to address student behaviors	0.6
Scale Items for “Shutting Down” Subscale		Eigenvalues
1.	I use frequent breaks	0.5
2.	I deliberately use wait time (i.e. pauses) after giving a direction	0.7
3.	I have sensory outlets available in the classroom (i.e. stress balls, play dough, etc.)	0.8
4.	I use repetition and compromises in my interactions with students	0.5
5.	I use structured, interactive, and interpersonal games in the classroom setting (music, ball toss, string game, etc.)	0.8
6.	I provide students access to a safety zone when needed	0.7
7.	I adjust lessons in ways to accommodate	0.8
8.	I have physically rearranged the classroom as a method to address student behaviors	0.6

Acting Out Subscale: $\alpha = 0.79$; $M = 3.41$; $SD = 0.71$
 Shutting Down Subscale: $\alpha = 0.81$; $M = 3.49$; $SD = 0.76$

Table 4. Inter-scale Correlation

	TPSB-Acting Out	TPSB-Shutting Down	TTS	TRSB-Acting Out	TRSB-Shutting Down
TPSB-Acting Out	1.00	0.62	-0.09	-0.29	-0.20
TPSB-Shutting Down	0.62	1.00	0.12	0.07	0.07
TTS	-0.09	0.12	1.00	0.63	0.63
TRSB-Acting Out	-0.29	0.07	0.63	1.00	0.92
TRSB-Shutting Down	-0.20	0.07	0.63	0.92	1.00
Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.66$					

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Appendix A: Teacher Perceptions of Student Behavior scale

Rate how often you believe that each of the following is happening.	Never	Sometimes/ Less than half of the time	Often/ About half of the time	Most of the time/ More than half of the time	Always
Students who ACT OUT in class are....					
1. responding to change or transition	1	2	3	4	5
2. seeking attention	1	2	3	4	5
3. not feeling well physically (i.e., stomach ache, headache)	1	2	3	4	5
4. reacting to something from their past	1	2	3	4	5
5. feeling like the work is too difficult for them	1	2	3	4	5
6. reacting to a court decision	1	2	3	4	5
7. fearing failure	1	2	3	4	5
8. reacting from a parental or other family visit	1	2	3	4	5
9. reacting to something that happened in their current living environment	1	2	3	4	5
Students who SHUT DOWN in class are...					
	Never	Sometimes/ Less than half of the time	Often/ About half of the time	Most of the time/ More than half of the time	Always
1. responding to change or transition	1	2	3	4	5
2. reacting to something from their past	1	2	3	4	5
3. feeling like the work is too difficult for them	1	2	3	4	5
4. reacting to a court decision	1	2	3	4	5
5. fearing failure	1	2	3	4	5
6. reacting from a parental or other family visit	1	2	3	4	5
7. reacting to something that happened in their current living environment	1	2	3	4	5

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Appendix B: Teaching Traumatized Students scale

Please circle the most appropriate number.		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1.	Rewarding students helps change problematic behavior	1	2	3	4	5
2.	I am aware of the effects of trauma on the behavior of students in my classroom	1	2	3	4	5
3.	I consider my students' experiences with trauma as I design strategies to engage students in learning	1	2	3	4	5
4.	I can identify traumatic responses in students	1	2	3	4	5
5.	I am aware of aspects of the school environment that may trigger trauma reactions in students	1	2	3	4	5
6.	I know how to handle difficult behavior related to traumatic reactions in students	1	2	3	4	5
7.	I understand how the brain is affected by trauma	1	2	3	4	5
8.	I am mindful on how my verbal expressions (tone, language, sarcasm) impact a traumatized child	1	2	3	4	5
9.	I am mindful of the way my body language and non-verbal expression impact a traumatized child	1	2	3	4	5

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Appendix C: Teacher Responses to Student Behavior scale

How much do you use the following teaching strategies with students who ACT OUT?		Never	Sometimes/ Less than half of the time	Often/ About half of the time	Most of the time/ More than half of the time	Always
1.	I use frequent breaks	1	2	3	4	5
2.	I deliberately use wait time (i.e. pauses) after giving a direction	1	2	3	4	5
3.	I have sensory outlets available in the classroom (i.e. stress balls, play dough, etc.)	1	2	3	4	5
4.	I use repetition and compromises in my interactions with students	1	2	3	4	5
5.	I use structured, interactive, and interpersonal games in the classroom setting (music, ball toss, string game, etc.)	1	2	3	4	5
6.	I provide students access to a safety zone when needed	1	2	3	4	5
7.	I adjust lessons in ways to accommodate	1	2	3	4	5
8.	I have physically rearranged the classroom as a method to address student behaviors	1	2	3	4	5

How much do you use the following teaching strategies with students who SHUT DOWN?		Never	Sometimes/ Less than half of the time	Often/ About half of the time	Most of the time/ More than half of the time	Always
1.	I use frequent breaks	1	2	3	4	5
2.	I deliberately use wait time (i.e. pauses) after giving a direction	1	2	3	4	5
3.	I have sensory outlets available in the classroom (i.e. stress balls, play dough, etc.)	1	2	3	4	5
4.	I use repetition and compromises in my interactions with students	1	2	3	4	5
5.	I use structured, interactive, and interpersonal games in the classroom setting (music, ball toss, string game, etc.)	1	2	3	4	5
6.	I provide students access to a safety zone when needed	1	2	3	4	5
7.	I adjust lessons in ways to accommodate	1	2	3	4	5
8.	I have physically rearranged the classroom as a method to address student behaviors	1	2	3	4	5