The Compassionate School Model: Creating Trauma Sensitive Schools

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Abstract

Children who are victims of adverse childhood experiences may display behaviors in school that hinder their ability to develop socially and academically. The purpose of this research study was to determine the potential effectiveness of the Compassionate School training model. This study was a program evaluation that examined staff training focused on childhood trauma and its effects on staff members’ perceptions, behaviors, actions and attitudes toward traumatized children in two urban school districts. Phase I included four urban schools that participated in 2008 in the pilot program and Phase II included 10 additional schools in 2009-2010 that participated in the training. The ex-post facto research design utilized a mixed methods approach. The data collected was pre-and post-surveys and climate surveys. Analyses involved descriptive and inferential statistics and content analysis (coding). Phase I results indicated that there was significant difference in the pre-attitude scores and post-attitude scores. The results suggest that the training on trauma does have an effect on teachers’ attitudes. The content analysis results on the narrative responses indicated that there was a significant change in teacher’s actions and behaviors toward traumatized children. The key areas such as gaining more knowledge and interest were not significant, which may be due to some extraneous variables. In addition to the pre-and post-surveys, Phase II used a district staff climate survey to measure results in five areas: feeling of safety, effective communication, student learning, high expectations and support for diversity. Three of the five areas, effective communication, student learning, expectations and support for diversity were significant.
The purpose of this program evaluation is to examine the potential impact training focused on childhood trauma had on teachers’ perception and attitudes. In addition, this study will examine the possible changes in teachers’ behaviors and actions towards traumatized children. The goal is to investigate whether intensive teacher training in: 1) Adverse Childhood Experiences, 2) calming curriculum, and 3) compassion fatigue affected teacher knowledge regarding students who experience adverse childhood experiences and equipped them with strategies to assist students to be academically and socially competent. The researcher selected these three training components because they offer an awareness level of trauma and its symptoms in the classroom and provided school personnel strategies to assist students who display academic and behavioral issues due to exposure to trauma.

Furthermore, school personnel who work in schools with high levels of trauma due to abject poverty, violence or neglect in the student’s home can lead to some workplace problems. By identifying these stressors through training on compassion fatigue, school staff are provided with awareness and strategies to deal with emotional distress when dealing with trauma and vicarious (secondary) trauma. Therefore, the purpose of this research study is to determine the potential effectiveness of the training in the Compassionate School Model. The next sections will be a description of the six research questions, potential contributions, and terms and definitions that will be utilized in this study.