

THE EXPERIENCES OF ELEMENTARY
GENERAL EDUCATION TEACHING
STUDENTS WITH MENTAL HEALTH DEFICITS:
A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

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Purpose Statement

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to describe the lived experiences of elementary general education teachers with students manifesting mental health concerns in the classroom. For this study, trauma was defined as, “Events including, but not limited to, abuse, domestic violence, accidents, witness to homicide, divorce and separation, disasters, war, gender reversals, etc.” (Steele & Malchiodi, 2012, p. 32). For the purpose of this study, mental health needs were defined as children identifying with at least one of the following: “1) depression; 2) anxiety problems; 3) behavioral or conduct problems, such as ODD or conduct disorder; 4) autism, Asperger’s disorder, pervasive developmental disorder, or other ASDs; 5) developmental delay; 6) Tourette syndrome; and 7) ADD/ADHD” (Avenevoli et al., 2013, p. 5). This study was grounded in Maslow’s (1943) Hierarchy of Needs and Trauma Theory (Caruth, 1995). Together, they provide a holistic framework for examining teachers’ experiences with students manifesting mental health concerns.

Research Questions

Central Question: What are general education teachers' lived experiences addressing the mental health needs of students in their classroom?

Sub-Question 1: What experiences shape general education teachers perceived self-efficacy toward meeting the mental health needs of students in their classroom?

Sub-Question 2: How do general education teachers' experiences with students with mental health needs inform preservice and in-service teacher training?

Setting & Participants

- Eastern Virginia
- Johnsonville School District
 - 10 participants
- Purposive & Snowball Sampling

Methods of Data Collection

- Survey/Questionnaire
 - Interviews
 - Focus Groups

Participant Background Information

Table 1

Participant Background Information

| Pseudonym | Ethnicity | Grade | YOE | Average TSES Score |
|-----------|------------------|-----------------|-----|--------------------|
| Annalise | White | 5 th | 17 | Above |
| Brianna | White | 1 st | 3 | Below |
| Brielle | White | 5 th | 7.5 | Below |
| Clara | White | K | 18 | Below |
| Emilia | Asian America | 5 th | 7 | Above |
| June | White | 5 th | 8 | Below |
| Kenzie | African American | 5 th | 30 | Above |
| Lennon | White | 1 st | 25 | Below |
| Luna | White | 4 th | 1.5 | Above |
| Serentiy | White | 4 th | 15 | Above |

Theoretical Framework

- Maslow's (1943) Hierarchy of Needs



- Trauma Theory (Caruth, 1995)

Literature Review

- The Impacts of Trauma on Academics
- Factors Impacting Trauma
 - Poverty
 - Native American (Ethnicity)
 - Foster Care Placement
 - Family Structures
- Mental Health Training
- Relationships
 - Teacher to Student
 - Teacher to Colleague
 - Teacher to Self
- Self-Efficacy
- Compassion Fatigue

Need for the Study

Data Synthesis/Analysis

- Triangulation- comparison of the data continued until all transcending ideas and commonalities or differences were realized and saturation occurred.
 - Google Sheets for organizing data from survey/questionnaire
 - Horizontalizing
- Microsoft Word (comments feature) to code for significant words/statements to support possible themes
 - Chart made in Microsoft word to separate themes & subthemes with supporting quotes from interviews and focus groups

Themes and Subthemes

Table 3

Themes and Subthemes Derived from Data

| Theme | Subthemes |
|---|--|
| Challenges of Job Success | Wearing Multiple Hats Lack of Resources/Supports Available Resources/Supports Insufficient Time |
| Predictors/Indicators of Poor Mental Health | Family Dynamics Negative Impacts of social media Emotional Expression Physical Expression COVID-19 |
| Building Relationships | Relationship with Students Relationship with Colleagues Relationship with Self Relationship with Parent Student Relationships |
| Experience is the Best Teacher | Teacher Inadequacy & Self-Efficacy It Starts at the Top Pre-service Training Experiences In-service Training Experiences Requested Future Training |

TSES Data

Table 5

Participant TSES Assessment Results

| Pseudonym | Engagement | Instruction | Classroom Management | Overall |
|-----------|------------|-------------|----------------------|---------|
| Annalise | 7.9 | 8.5 | 8.5 | above |
| Serenity | 7.1 | 7.5 | 7.9 | above |
| Brianna | 6.9 | 7 | 6.6 | below |
| Brielle | 6.3 | 6.4 | 6.4 | below |
| Kenzie | 7.8 | 8.3 | 8.5 | above |
| Lennon | 6.5 | 8.1 | 5.9 | below |
| Clara | 7 | 6.3 | 7.5 | below |
| June | 4.9 | 4.9 | 4.9 | below |
| Luna | 7.8 | 8 | 8.4 | above |
| Emilia | 8 | 7.1 | 6.8 | above |

Findings

- When participants completed the researcher generated questions specific to levels of self-efficacy in the area of addressing the mental health needs of students, 20% of participants scores in the high-range leaving 80% to score in the mild range. However, participants expressed less confidence verbally through interviews and focus groups in their ability to support the mental health needs of students.
- The years of experience in education or highest level of degree achieved notated in the survey/questionnaire for each participant had very little to do with participants perceived self-efficacy levels.
- Diversified family structures and homelessness were referenced by participants as being confirmed predictors or poor mental health in students.
- Participants expressed the challenges of being a 21st century educator, noting that the resources they need are not always provided or easily accessible. They especially reported lacking the resource of time.
- Participants extensively discussed the importance of building strong relationships with students early on in the school year to establish trust.
- Building positive relationships proved to be beneficial for not only teachers and students, but also for teachers and colleagues, teachers and parents, among students, as well as intrapersonal.
- Participants' stories confirmed that the best way to learn how to navigate the ever-changing circumstances of helping to support students with mental health deficits was to experience it for themselves.

Implications

Empirical

- Policy
- Practice

-Implications for Teachers

-Implications for Administrators

-Implications for Universities

Theoretical

- Maslow's (1943) Hierarchy of Needs- many teachers don't feel safe in their own classrooms
- Trauma Theory (Caruth, 1995)- Trauma's impact on participant who shared Smartwatch alert and bodily functions story.

Limitations/Delimitations

- All participants were women
- All participants were general elementary education teachers
- All participants worked in the same public school district
- 80% of participants were White
- 70% of participants were upper-elementary teachers (4th & 5th grade)

Recommendations for Future Research

- The study should be conducted at the secondary education level.
- The study should include male participants.
- The location of the study could be more generalized, taking place across states or even internationally.
- Another area of potential future research inspired by this study is to examine the perceived roles of educators by various stakeholders.

References

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