Implementing Trauma-informed School Practices

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The evolving needs of one student, Mia, offer an opportunity to explore how disability and trauma interact with a transition to a new school. As Mia's behavior becomes increasingly worrisome within months of starting middle school, her teachers, one-to-one paraprofessional, and school leadership team face several dilemmas in the early stages of creating a trauma-informed school. The focus of this case is on three key elements: the degree to which Mia's team understood her needs and proactively prepared for her transition; the role of Mia's paraprofessional prior to, throughout, and after the transition; and the readiness of the school leadership team to address necessary systemic changes for the school to implement trauma-informed multi-tiered systems of support.

INTRODUCTION

Research has found that trauma and adversity are inadequately addressed in school systems, underscoring the importance of focusing on school-related factors for students with disabilities who may have experienced trauma and adversity during their childhood (Frank, 2020). Students exposed to trauma and adverse experiences, such as abuse, neglect, or poverty, are more likely to have negative school experiences,

poor social-emotional development, and display challenging behavior. These negative school experiences are often associated with suspensions and alternative placements such as residential facilities or juvenile detention centers (Day et al., 2017; Williamson, 2021). Worse yet, school dropout becomes more likely when negative school experiences are not addressed, especially for students experiencing symptoms of trauma (Day et al., 2017; Williamson, 2021). School discipline practices, such as suspensions or physical restraints, do little to foster students' success in general education classroom settings and can have serious adverse effects on students' mental health, all of which are exacerbated for students with disabilities (Blodgett & Lanigan, 2018; Brewin et al., 2019; Dery et al., 2004; Williamson, 2021). Approximately 12% of the student population consists of students with disabilities. However, an alarming statistic reveals that students with disabilities make up more than two-thirds of those subjected to physical restraint or seclusion (Williamson, 2021).

Research shows that students with disabilities are at a higher risk of experiencing trauma and adversity compared to their peers without disabilities. Harsh disciplinary practices like restraint and seclusion can further hinder their relationship skills and worsen emotional dysregulation, distress, and aggression (Williamson, 2021).

School leaders and teachers can help reduce the negative impact of trauma on their students by promoting trauma-informed practices in schools (Masten et al., 2022). Trauma-informed schools have several layers. In preparation for implementing trauma-informed practices, developing a shared understanding of several important concepts is essential. The National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN) (2017) defines 'trauma-informed' schools as:

One in which all parties recognize and respond to the impact of traumatic stress on those who have contact with the system, including children, caregivers, staff, and service providers. Programs and agencies within such a system infuse and sustain trauma awareness, knowledge, and skills into their organizational cultures, practices, and policies. They collaborate with all those involved with the child, using the best available science, to maximize physical and psychological safety, facilitate the recovery or adjustment of the child and family, and support their ability to thrive. (p. 2)

A 'trauma lens,' or a 'trauma-informed lens,' is a heightened awareness of traumatic exposure and symptoms. Practitioners who adopt a trauma lens or follow a trauma-informed approach understand that everyone holds their perceptions, interpretations, emotional reactions, and behaviors that could be related to a traumatic event or experience (Berger & Quiros, 2014). A traumatic event is a subjective concept highly dependent on an individual's unique perception of their abilities to function in the world (Bandura, 1989; Benight & Bandura, 2004). In addition to how researchers

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