**PAPER NUMBER #441**

**Effects of trauma-informed approaches in schools: A systematic review**

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**Objectives/aims**

Exposure to different types of trauma have been associated with varying types and complexity of adverse outcomes, including adverse effects on cognitive functioning, attention, memory, academic performance and school-related behaviors. Given the growing research on trauma and increased knowledge about the prevalence, consequences and costs associated with trauma, there have been increased efforts at the local, state and federal levels in the U.S. to make systems “trauma-informed”. At least 17 states are supporting some form of trauma-informed approaches (TIA) in schools. While the intent of creating TIA in schools is a noble one, relatively little is known about the benefits, costs, and how trauma-informed approaches are being defined and evaluated. Adopting a TIA in a complex system such as a school building or district is a time consuming and potentially costly endeavour and thus it is important to assess the effects of this approach to inform policy and practice.

The aim of this systematic review was to identify, describe and synthesize the evidence of effects of trauma-informed approaches in schools to provide guidance for policymakers and educators and to identify important gaps in the evidence base. Specifically, the objectives of this review were to examine the available evidence on TIA in schools, describe the study, intervention and participant characteristics of studies evaluating TIA in schools, and assess the effects of TIA in schools on trauma symptoms, mental health, academic performance, behavior and socioemotional functioning. Trauma-informed approaches include programs, organizations, or systems that realize the impact of trauma, recognize the symptoms of trauma, respond by integrating knowledge about trauma policies and practices, and seeks to reduce re-traumatization. At least two of the three key elements of a trauma-informed approach must have been present: workforce development, trauma-focused services, and organizational environment and practices, which differ from trauma-specific interventions designed to treat or otherwise address the impact/symptoms of trauma and facilitate healing.

**Methods**

Systematic review methods, following Campbell Collaboration guidelines/standards, were used to search, retrieve, select and assess randomized and quasi-experimental studies examining effects of trauma-informed approach in schools with children and youth on trauma symptoms and mental health outcomes, academic performance, behavior, and socio-emotional outcomes. The search strategy included nine electronic databases, research registers and websites, gray literature sources, reference lists of related reviews and primary studies and contacts with researchers. Published or unpublished studies conducted through May 2017 were eligible for this review. Two authors independently screened and coded all studies. Meta-analytic methods were planned to quantitatively synthesize effects across studies.

**Main findings**

A total of 9,102 references from all searches were imported to Covidence for screening. After removal of 1,929 duplicates, 7,173 titles/abstracts were screened by two reviewers. At the title and abstract screening stage, 7,106 studies were excluded, leaving 67 studies assessed for full-text eligibility. All 67 studies were excluded: 49 were neither an RCT nor QED; 12 did not examine effects of a trauma-informed approach; 5 examined only one aspect of a trauma-informed approach (only workforce OR organizational OR practice changes); one was not a school-based intervention. Some studies may have been excluded for multiple reasons; however, only the first (primary) reason for exclusion was recorded.

Despite our extensive search for studies, we found no studies that met criteria for inclusion in this review. While there are a number of publications that describe trauma-informed approaches, advocate for the need for trauma-informed approaches, and discuss the potential benefits of adopting such an approach in schools, there have been no rigorous evaluations of trauma-informed approaches in schools that we could find. While the paucity of rigorous research in this area is disappointing, it is not altogether surprising. The adoption of a trauma-informed approach is relatively new and it is likely that there has not been sufficient time for the research to catch up to the enthusiasm for this approach in schools. Furthermore, conducting rigorous research on multi-component and multi-tiered approaches can be complex and expensive, often requiring large grants to help fund the research, which can also delay the conduct of rigorous research.

This empty review provides an important contribution to the field at this point in time, as our findings clearly point to a lack of evidence to support the widespread adoption of trauma-informed approaches in schools. We simply do not yet have the evidence (yet) to know if TIA works, the costs, or potential negative consequences/adverse outcomes for traumitized youth and school communities. That said, calling for caution in adopting TIA in schools does not preclude schools from continuing to implement efforts to improve school response to trauma, or to implement TIA. We suggest that schools evaluate their interventions and share the results with the education and research community. This review also points to the persisent problem of scale and diffusion of innovative practices in education, and sheds some light on how this may be playing out with the trauma-informed approaches movement in schools.