

2019

Teachers' Experiences in Responding to Students' Exposure to Domestic Violence

Samantha Davies

Monash University, sdav0009@student.monash.edu

Emily Berger

Monash University, emily.berger@monash.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.ecu.edu.au/ajte>



Part of the [Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Davies, S., & Berger, E. (2019). Teachers' Experiences in Responding to Students' Exposure to Domestic Violence. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 44(11).
<http://dx.doi.org/10.14221/ajte.2019v44.n11.6>

This Journal Article is posted at Research Online.
<https://ro.ecu.edu.au/ajte/vol44/iss11/6>

Teachers' Experiences in Responding to Students' Exposure to Domestic Violence

Samantha Davies
Emily Berger
Monash University

Abstract: Exposure to domestic violence in childhood can have long-term negative impacts on the social and emotional functioning and educational outcomes of children and adolescents. This study is the first known Australian research to examine teachers' experiences of supporting students exposed to domestic violence. Interviews with eleven primary and secondary school teachers revealed the substantial impact of students' domestic violence exposure on teachers, the need for support from other school staff, and the benefits of targeted professional development. Results suggest that there is a need for teacher training in relation to supporting students with exposure to domestic violence, better recognition of the impacts of students' exposure to domestic violence on teachers, changes to the way information is communicated with teachers, and improved protocols and policies to support teachers. Outcomes of this study can be used to inform future training and supports for teachers.

Key words: domestic violence, trauma, children, teachers, schools, qualitative

Teachers' Experiences in Responding to Students' Exposure to Domestic Violence

Childhood abuse, neglect, exposure to domestic violence and parental mental illness, death of a caregiver, experiences of disasters and war, and other traumatic events of childhood are significantly correlated with negative outcomes in childhood and lasting through to adulthood (Boullier & Blair, 2018; Plumb, Bush, & Kersevich, 2016). Repeated experiencing of childhood traumas has been shown to adversely affect the long-term physical and functional development of the brain (Anda et al., 2006; Boullier & Blair, 2018), increasing the risk of childhood mental ill-health, behavioural issues, learning disorders, social difficulties, physical health issues, risky coping behaviours, and the dysregulation and exacerbation of stress response hormones (Anda et al., 2006; Balistreri & Alvira-Hammond, 2016; Burke, Hellman, Scott, Weems, & Carrion, 2011; De Bellis & Zisk, 2014; Hughes et al., 2017; Kliethermes, Schacht, & Drewry, 2014; Plumb et al., 2016).

Given that most children attend formal schooling, schools would appear to be a potentially valuable source of support and intervention for children exposed to traumas such as domestic violence (Livny & Katz, 2018; Mazzer & Rickwood, 2015). It has been suggested that schools may provide a protective environment to buffer against the relative dysfunctions associated with domestic violence at home (Byrne & Taylor, 2007). There is developing international awareness of the benefits of systemic and structured support for those who have experienced repeated traumas, known as trauma informed practice (Howard, 2018). In schools, these are policies and frameworks that ensure that all staff understand,

recognise and respond to the impacts that trauma may have on students' well-being and behaviour. Trauma-informed practices include the promotion of positive and respectful relationships, the development of self-regulation skills, fostering of students' self-efficacy and the use of positive reinforcement (Chafouleas, Johnson, Overstreet, & Santos, 2016). Berger's (2019) systematic review of studies internationally, found that the implementation of trauma-informed care in schools lead to improvements in the behaviour and academic achievement levels of students, reductions in mental health concerns such as depression and PTSD, and greater staff confidence and knowledge. Research has also demonstrated improvements to teachers' feelings of efficacy in responding to traumatised students when implementing trauma-informed practices in their classrooms (Brunzell, Stokes, & Waters, 2019).

Despite growing evidence for the efficacy of trauma-informed schools, it is unclear whether teachers are well-prepared to identify and support children with trauma backgrounds. Teachers in the Netherlands have reported being under-prepared to manage and respond to traumatised students, with trauma-informed training and support for teachers' well-being identified as needs (Alisic, 2012). Teachers in Australia have identified the considerable impacts of domestic violence exposure on their students' behaviour and academic performance. However, they have also reported a lack of confidence in dealing with these students (Graham, Phelps, Maddison, & Fitzgerald, 2011). Costigan (2016) found that while pre-service teachers would also like to be more prepared to respond to trauma and domestic violence exposure among students, they reported not being adequately prepared to identify, manage and support these students. In the Republic of Ireland, domestic violence-affected students have reported a need for teachers to reach out to them more, and their tendency to disengage when teachers did not have the time to support them (Buckley, Holt, & Whelan, 2007).

Associated with teachers becoming disengaged from the issues of domestic violence exposed students, recent research has found higher rates of teacher absenteeism and impacts on emotional well-being in an Australian school exposed to a disaster event (Berger, Carroll, Maybery, & Harrison, 2018). School staff responding to traumatised students have discussed feeling "unsafe, overwhelmed, under-appreciated", "helpless" and "not equipped to work with these students", leading to job dissatisfaction and impacts on well-being (Howard, 2018, p. 14). Teachers require more training to identify children at risk, and understand their roles and responsibilities around mandatory reporting and notifying authorities about a student's exposure to violence in the home (Falkiner, Thomson, & Day, 2017; Kenny, 2001, 2004; Martin, Cromer, & Freyd, 2010). In addition, early evaluations of school-based programs targeting domestic violence have found that it can trigger student disclosures of violence, yet school staff are inadequately trained or prepared for this (Ollis, 2014; State of Victoria, 2016).

This qualitative study aimed to explore teachers' experiences of responding to children who have been exposed to domestic violence, using a semi-structured interview approach. The study examined ways in which teachers have responded to affected students, the availability of domestic violence-related resources and supports, the barriers to responding effectively to students, impacts on teacher well-being, and any relevant training undertaken by teachers. Teachers' interviews were sampled to answer research questions around the unique training pathways of teachers, experiences managing students' needs in conjunction with their teaching roles in classrooms, and the competing demands on their time and resources. Results of this study will increase awareness around the impacts on teachers who support students exposed to domestic violence, and may lead to improvements in the focus and delivery of teacher resources and training. In turn, this may ultimately lead to

improvements in teacher and student well-being, with better learning outcomes for students, and higher levels of teacher satisfaction.

Method

Participants

This study used data obtained for a research project focussing on school staff and their experiences of students' exposure to domestic violence. This project recruited 11 primary and secondary school teachers in Victoria, Australia. Overall, 10 females and one male participated in the study and they ranged in age from 24 to 53 years ($M = 39.7$, $SD = 10.1$). Teaching experience ranged from two to 31 years ($M = 13.3$, $SD = 9.0$). There were seven primary school teachers (students aged between approximately 5 and 12 years), and four secondary school teachers (students aged between approximately 12 and 18 years). Data collection occurred in late 2018.

Materials

Qualitative interviews were conducted, exploring teachers' experiences in responding to students who have been exposed to domestic violence. The interview schedule was developed within a semi-structured interview framework and to address the aims and research questions of this research. Open-ended questions related to how teachers have responded to these students, domestic violence-related resources and supports available to teachers, barriers to responding effectively to students, and any training undertaken in this area. The following questions represent the initial open questions asked of participants, followed by probing questions (not listed here) which varied and were asked based on the responses of participants. Initial open questions included:

- Tell me about your experiences with regard to students and domestic violence, if any?
- What are some of the barriers/what more could be done in schools when responding to students who have experienced domestic violence, if anything?
- Tell me about whether your school has a protocol/referral sources with regard to students and domestic violence?
- Can you describe your understanding of trauma-informed practices in schools, if any?
- How do you talk to colleagues/who do you go to for help regarding the topic of students and domestic violence, if at all?
- What can you tell me about your experience of parents or families who may have experienced domestic violence, if any?
- Tell me about any training that you have undertaken/would like to undertake regarding students and domestic violence, if any?

Procedure

Approval was obtained from the Monash University Human Research Ethical Committee (project number 7983), the Victorian Department of Education and Training, the Catholic Education Office of Melbourne, and school principals. School principals who consented for their school to participate shared a weblink with staff at their school. Staff were invited to complete an online questionnaire about their experiences and training needs regarding student trauma and domestic violence. After completion of the questionnaire,

school staff were invited to consent to participate in an interview. Semi-structured interviews were conducted over the phone with those who consented to an interview, with duration ranging from 40 to 60 minutes. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed by a professional transcription company, with completed transcripts sent to participants for member checking. Participants were given two weeks to review and provide any feedback or additional information on their transcript. No participant responded with amendments or feedback.

Data Analysis

The semi-structured qualitative interviews were analysed using a thematic analysis approach, which allowed for exploration of teachers' experiences in an area of research that has not yet been well explored. As this is an emerging and largely atheoretical area of research, the aim of this study was to replicate previous international studies on teachers' experiences with students exposed to trauma (Alisic, 2012; Alisic, Bus, Dulack, Pennings, & Splinter, 2012). Similar to this earlier research, the study design for this research was exploratory. The exploratory and atheoretical nature of this research made it appropriate for thematic analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2013). The thematic analysis approach involved multiple read-throughs of transcripts, mind-mapping interview data, and an iterative process to identify, refine and name themes and subthemes (Clarke & Braun, 2013). The final set of themes and subthemes were developed collaboratively by the authors of this research. Twenty percent of the transcripts were then analysed by an independent researcher. A meeting between the independent researcher and authors of this paper revealed no additional themes that had not already been identified and included.

Results

The main themes that emerged from analysis of the experiences of teachers, were: (1) Impacts of domestic violence exposure; (2) Resources for teachers; (3) Limitations to supporting students; and (4) Future needs for teachers. Within these themes, a further fourteen sub-themes emerged, and are elaborated further below. Quotes have been provided within each subtheme, along with the gender and age of the quoted participants (listed as F for female and M for male).

Impacts of Domestic Violence Exposure

Teachers discussed the considerable impacts that domestic violence has, with the following subthemes emerging: (a) Impacts on students; (b) Impacts on teachers; and (c) Impacts on families and communities.

Impacts on Students

Teachers described a range of impacts on students, with behaviours including: anxiety, withdrawal, self-soothing behaviours, agitation and aggressive outbursts; difficulties concentrating and learning; generally lower academic achievement and engagement; difficulties developing healthy peer relationships; a lack of trust; low self-esteem; inability to problem-solve; and a fear of failure. For example: 'Most of them tend to be doing poorly at

school... [believing] they're stupid and they're useless' (F39); 'Very distracted in class... they've got so much racing through their mind (F29)'; and 'Very quiet, will hardly make eye contact, but... if something goes wrong, so he gets very, very aggressive' (F48). Even getting to school was an achievement for some students: 'They don't have that same support level at home... they have to get themselves and their three siblings to school' (F42).

Impacts on Teachers

The impacts on teachers related to managing classroom behaviours and self-regulation in students; modifying the curriculum or teaching; liaising with families, well-being teams or external agencies; or supplying food and clothing: 'We'd sort of give them some time out... try some meditation or they'd have fidget toys or do you need to go and sit in a bean bag' (F53); 'I'd often have to modify the planning for them or shorten tasks if they were traumatised' (F50); 'Every week there was always something, court cases, there was always intervention orders, attempted kidnapping cases... it's pretty fully on' (F42); and 'Everyday I'd pack an extra apple in my lunch box because he sometimes he wouldn't have food' (F32).

Teachers spoke of feeling helpless or hopeless, with limits to their feelings of efficacy: 'I kind of feel hopeless too, like what can I do?' (F42); and 'The whole system is heartbreaking... you can't help feeling despair' (F53). There were impacts on their mental and physical health. For example: 'It took about six months to... not be having it really, really drag me down and just, and not... fantasise about adopting all these kids' (F53); and 'The first 6 weeks I didn't sleep... I would go home from school a mess' (F42). Despite the difficulties there were also rewards: 'I like working at the school because we work really hard to support families and students and to be really a voice for the kids' (F53); and 'That's the rewarding side of it, that you're having such a big impact on these children' (F42).

Impacts on Families and Communities

Teachers noted the intergenerational cycle of domestic violence: 'The parents are often trauma themselves, they're just generational problems... It's very sad' (F42). They also discussed the silence and shame, and the difficulties families face in coping with domestic violence: 'We've also seen like the families that just often just won't say anything... a lot of shame is involved' (F27); and 'They're completely defeated and they feel that they have a complete lack of control' (F48).

Finally, teachers spoke about domestic violence in respect to the community, within which few supports were available to families: 'Being in a small community, they can sort of be cut off pretty quickly' (F29); and 'I think people turn a blind eye' (F42).

Resources for Teachers

Teachers discussed utilising a variety of personal and structural supports within the following themes: (a) Policies and Procedures; (b) School-wide supports and programs; (c) Support of colleagues and well-being team; (d) Targeted professional development; and (e) External agencies.

Policies and Procedures

Teachers varied in their understanding of school protocols for domestic violence, yet felt supported to follow-up their concerns with their leadership and/or well-being team: 'I'd probably just turn to ... our Welfare AP [Assistant Principal]' (M39); 'There are certainly policies in place that assist us when dealing with those sorts of situations' (F29); and 'Lots of policies, lots of procedures on just every aspect' (F42). Only one teacher felt that in her school, the reporting process was not well-managed: 'It was rubbish... the assistant principal didn't have the right skills basically' (F53).

Teachers were also certain of their roles as mandatory reporters, as uncomfortable as it may be: 'I mean with mandatory reporting I have to... just that sort of conversation I think would be awkward' (F39); and 'So we'd have a discussion... I would have to go to the principal as well so you don't just willy-nilly go off and report' (F53).

School-Wide Supports and Programs

Teachers were positive when discussing a variety of school-wide programs and supports for students: 'We try and do what we can here... we run a Respectful Relationship program... more of that kind of program needs to be done' (F50); and 'We have a homework club program... it's a nice excuse not to have to go straight home after school' (F48). Extending program information to parents was also helpful: 'Opening more conversations at home, I think has sort of shifted the way parents are sort of realising that it is affecting their children' (F29). Only one participant expressed a negative opinion of programs, describing a specific program as fake, yet acknowledging the need for such programs: 'We've just done this thing called Respectful Relationships... it's kind of fake... I guess it's trying to start working on this stuff' (F42).

Importantly, one teacher noted that when implementing a new program, extra support had to be made available: 'It was just raising issues for students that you didn't even know had experienced anything and they rushed out' (F32). In schools without a socio-emotional curriculum, teachers expressed a need for such programs: 'Anything really that can help them identify an unsafe situation and a safe situation and how to deal with those things appropriately would be helpful' (F27).

Understanding of trauma informed practice also varied, for example: 'I've never really heard of the terminology' (F42); but those teachers with experience of trauma informed practice were very supportive: 'It can affect kids in so many different ways and so you kind of need to have a basic understanding of that [trauma informed practice]' (F53); and 'I think it [trauma informed practice] needs at the base level from teacher education ... I think having a worker at the school... really helps staff maintain an understanding' (F50).

Support of Colleagues and Well-Being Team

Teachers discussed the importance of receiving and providing support for one another: 'We feel pretty comfortable in the way that we support each other, because we know that our principal, our leadership, certainly has our back' (F29); and 'We debriefed regularly, like every Friday pretty much, we all just collapsed together... you've got to have that self-care' (F42). However sometimes teachers did not feel their support needs were well-managed: 'I'd like to be given more time to cope' (F50); and 'It was highly, highly stressful on everyone... we couldn't always support each other' (F53).

Another vital support was the guidance provided by the well-being team: 'They would provide the support in every aspect for the teacher and the student' (F53); and 'Well-being staff do a great job of informing of us not who necessarily but just giving us context to our students' experience... here's some things that might help' (F32). Well-being teams also supported staff in debriefing, and disconnecting from students' experiences: 'You needed somewhere to put it and share... quite frightening information that you just didn't know what to do with' (F32); and 'Head of Well-being... I did talk to him a lot about trying to create a disconnection... you do have to put up a barrier around yourself otherwise you'd, I think I would burn out' (F32).

Targeted Professional Development

Teachers spoke positively of professional development training: 'I wish I had done it years ago... it's an extremely important thing to be trained on... if they [students] are not regulated they are not ready to learn' (F53); 'It's more prevalent than I realised' (F29); and 'We also need to have that [trauma-informed practice] as a background, because it certainly is something that's affected us in dealing with parent dynamics, as well as students' (F29). The one teacher who did not feel the extra training had changed her practice noted that this was a result of her previous experience: 'It didn't really change what I already knew' (F50).

With the one exception as above, teachers who had undertaken targeted professional development reported tangible benefits. Among those teachers without any specific domestic violence training, there was a range of opinions. For example: 'As a professional, you always want to improve, so I would happily be exposed to more information' (M39); 'I don't know if any extra information can change what the outcome is' (F48); and 'I don't feel like I need much more... I do have the resource of the counsellor' (F39).

External Agencies

Referring families to external agencies for support and intervention was generally identified as a role for well-being teams, and teachers had varying amounts of experience, for example: 'The well-being person, she would organise that... that was sort of not under my job description' (F53); and 'We're fortunate in that we have really good connections with our local services, they often reach out to us to let us know of programs' (F29). Overall it was apparent that teachers valued the role of external agencies as a support option for their students, with the exception of the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS): 'We may help with phone calls to the Department of Human Services... and we know... the child is in the same ... space again' (F50).

Limitations to Supporting Students

There were a number of perceived barriers to the support teachers could provide to students, with limitations relating to the following subthemes: (a) Preparedness for students' experiences; (b) Privacy and confidentiality; (c) Teachers' roles; (d) Families and agencies.

Preparedness for Students' Experiences

Teachers felt unprepared to support students exposed to domestic violence, for multiple reasons including a lack of training and experience: 'In my teacher training I can't remember anything, doing anything' (F53); '[I felt] extremely unexperienced, I had not much idea apart from personal experience' (M39); and 'The other teachers all handled it – they just had the experience... I was just so not prepared' (F42).

Teachers also reflected on finding it difficult to identify students who had been exposed to domestic violence: 'You know statistically there'd be kids in every school, but I don't think teachers... they wouldn't know how to identify it ... which is quite scary' (F42). Behaviour monitoring was often the only indicator of distress: 'You're constantly monitoring their behaviour and trying to analyse why there's been a change... And so that's a really tricky kind of thing to try and work out' (F53).

Teachers felt unprepared to respond to student disclosures: 'I haven't ever had a student come up to me and "Can I confide in you"... I'm not 100% sure how I would deal' (F39); 'I was just full of anxiety about saying the wrong thing, doing the wrong thing... a lot of the time I felt so far out of my depth. Can I actually help?' (F32). Student disclosures also tended to only happen in the context of established caring relationships: 'It's all about relationships... every now and again a kid will gravitate towards a particular teacher and tell them' (F32).

Overall, confidence responding to student disclosures and supporting students really only came from previous work or life experience: 'Reasonably, because my previous role in human services was actually dealing with families that had...trauma or incidence of family and domestic violence' (F29); and 'I suppose I didn't feel unconfident, I suppose because I'm older and I've got my own kids' (F53).

Privacy and Confidentiality

Teachers reported finding it challenging when student information was withheld from them: 'I wasn't really privy to much information to start with, which I found very difficult' (M39); and 'You might find out later and ugh well I had have known that that makes perfect sense now, but you just weren't allowed to know' (F53). In contrast however, there were teachers who felt the communication provided met their needs: 'They don't necessarily tell me everything... they just give me the most important information that's going to affect teaching and learning' (F50).

In some instances, rights to privacy were negated when there were risk issues, 'It could put our life in danger if we didn't know about a kid from another grade whose father had attempted to kidnap... we needed to know about that so we could be prepared' (F42).

There was a range of communication practices across schools, potentially impacting on teacher well-being: 'I don't [talk to colleagues] because we're not allowed to' (F48); 'I will just go privately to a colleague to talk about it, and get their feedback' (F24); and 'We debriefed regularly... you just feel so much more supported when you know that others have got your back and they're checking in on you' (F42).

Teachers' Roles

Teachers sometimes struggled with containing their roles: 'You just want to save them... I just want to protect them and look after them but it's, it's not my role. What I'm meant to be doing is upskilling them' (F32). When boundaries became unavoidably blurred, this was

difficult: 'I think that Child Services had been called to the house as a result of my call and that affected... my relationship with this boy's sister... she just didn't want to speak to me' (F53).

Teachers discussed needing to reframe their expectations or scope of their roles in order to feel more effective: 'Sometimes just having a child in your classroom, just attending school was a win... once I took that on board, I felt a lot better because I kind of felt like we were just getting nowhere' (F53); and 'The only thing I can do in my job is to make sure that we can provide a safe place at school because what's going on at home is out of our control' (F48). Even teaching was difficult at times though: 'Teachers are at school to teach children an academic outcome... to be able to actually teach these kids is a miracle' (F42).

Teachers discussed needing to have multiple roles when supporting domestic violence exposed students: 'Us teachers are their safety people. So that's the rewarding side of it, that you're having such a big impact' (F42); and 'You're also building their capacity to cope with all of the stuff that happens as part of their day to day' (F32). In this context, teachers still appeared comfortable leaving primary responsibility for well-being to others. For example: 'I look at my job as mostly academic... I do my best for the pastoral care of the students, but I do feel very comfortable in passing particularly tricky problems up' (F39).

Families and Agencies

Teachers reported some difficulty engaging with families of domestic violence: 'The biggest problem is the communication between the parents and the school is quite low... they just don't want to come to the school' (F42); and 'Some parents are very open to help and some parents try to hide it and they're denying that things are happening... [they] just avoid coming to see the teacher' (F50). It was noted that domestic violence is often surrounded by silence and lies: 'I just wish that his carers had been a lot more open with the school to let us know more about his situation' (M39); and 'Domestic violence is surrounded by a whole lot of lies' (F48).

Assisting families to engage with supports could also prove difficult: 'Some are really good, some will just not do it' (F27); and 'It's just so hard... it's kind of sad. How can you help people that don't want to be helped?' (F42). There were also difficulties supporting families while performing dual roles: 'It's horrible that they're confiding stuff... and then they get angry because we've reported it' (F42); and 'We sort of become a bit of a mediator, and that... can sometimes distract from the actual goal of making that student feel safe and supported at school' (F29).

There were limitations to any change teachers could effect for students, through services: 'You're getting a child on track, the interventions are in place, all of a sudden there's been a huge blowout... and the cycle happens again... there's not a lot of satisfaction' (F48); and 'It's a little bit hard to get a lot of the resources that we might need' (F27).

Future Needs for Teachers

Alongside the limitations that teachers experience, were suggestions of future needs to address some of these difficulties, summarised by two subthemes: (a) Protocols; and (b) Future Training.

Protocols

Teachers described wanting better protocols and guidelines around their responsibilities: 'I would hate for someone to slip through the cracks... some clarity around yeah are you overstepping the mark or is that something you'd be responsible for' (F32). They also discussed the need for clearer protocols in relation to difficult situations: 'We don't have a strong protocol about that, about an angry parent arrives... we don't have anything' (F48).

A further identified need was to improve the way information is communicated within-schools: 'The only issue is sometimes information doesn't get passed on... as effectively as it could' (F39); and 'I'd like to ... know whether they were being helped once they handballed it higher up the chain of responsibility' (F50). Communication with external agencies was another area identified: 'We don't have a protocol, which I think we should, for that to come back into the classroom... if a neighbour's called or the police have called and that's gone straight to well-being, me, as a leading teacher, won't be looped in' (F48).

Future Training Needs

Teachers suggested areas of additional training, such as: identifying domestic violence; having people available to advise on how to manage different situations; more regular contact with services; further targeted training sessions; and regular, ongoing training to maintain a knowledge base. For example: 'Identification is an issue if there are signs,' (F39); 'The more you can open up the discussion the more, yeah the more equipped you are to deal with it' (F32); and 'I've got prior experience and I've had some professional development too. But I feel like it's sort of never enough... it's something that should always be a part of the conversation in schools, and... more regular contact with services' (F29). Professional development opportunities that are delivered in person, was also generally preferred over online modules: 'People don't learn just by reading, they learn by actually understanding and being part of it' (F42).

Despite the above, there were teachers who expressed doubts about the utility of more training: 'Teachers are expected to deal with such a wide variety of different circumstances... I don't know that extra training would necessarily improve my ability to deal with it' (F39).

Discussion

This study explored teachers' experiences in relation to supporting students who have been exposed to domestic violence, including available supports, barriers to effectively responding, training undertaken and teachers' perceived needs. Teachers discussed the significant impacts of domestic violence exposure on students, families and themselves. They described a range of resources and supports that assist them when responding to students, such as targeted professional development, the support of colleagues and collegial debriefing, and school-wide programs, with varied effectiveness. Finally, they discussed limitations to their support of students and had suggestions for further training, improved communications, better role-definition, and improved school protocols. These findings are discussed in more detail.

Teachers disclosed substantial impacts on their welfare, with reduced feelings of efficacy and experiences of helplessness and emotional distress in response to students exposed to domestic violence. They discussed the value of talking to colleagues and more experienced senior staff for emotional support and practical strategies in managing student

distress, and for guidance and advice regarding supporting students exposed to domestic violence. Despite the difficulties, teachers also acknowledged that providing a sense of safety for their students, supporting students and their families, and helping to build a student's capacity to cope with their traumatic experiences, were all rewarding aspects of their jobs. An important consideration for this research is that role ambiguity, role stress and role conflict have been associated with greater burnout among teachers (Graham et al., 2011). Findings of the current study show that teachers are at times dissatisfied with school mental health programs and feel burdened by the lack of policies addressing the roles of staff in relation to recognising, responding to, and supporting students impacted by domestic violence.

Teachers who had been trained in trauma-informed practice discussed the importance of understanding the impacts of trauma and receiving training in how best to support traumatised students. However, teachers felt more could be done to implement and support the establishment of socio-emotional and trauma-informed programs in schools, which aligns with the growing research and policy interest in such programs. It is clear that as interest in trauma-informed approaches grows in schools, more needs to be done to understand the baseline and continued knowledge and skills challenges for staff involved in these programs. Prior research evaluating mandatory reporting of child abuse and neglect among teachers has shown that training needs to be in place and continually evaluated for the effects of such training to be shown and felt among teachers (Falkiner et al., 2017).

Teachers also acknowledged that their university programs or pre-employment training lacked any education in relation to trauma or domestic violence. Many suggested that this should be included in future workforce training programs so as to improve teachers' preparedness, their ability to identify affected students, and increase the effectiveness of teachers' responses and support for students. Currently it is not known how much education early career teachers receive in this area and other areas of childhood trauma. The teachers who expressed any confidence in dealing with student disclosures of domestic violence, and in supporting students' challenging behaviours, acknowledged that it was only their previous work, training or life experience, or having the opportunity to consult with other and more senior staff, that enabled this perceived efficacy. This has implications for practicing but also pre-service educators who are likely to require significant support from colleagues in this area. Evident from this research and earlier research is that access to supportive and knowledgeable colleagues varies across schools.

In addition, teachers suggested that limited feedback and communication with colleagues impacted their ability to support and teach students exposed to domestic violence effectively, with corresponding feelings of reduced efficacy. Trauma informed practices are clear in proposing that teachers need to understand a child and their experiences in order to best support that student (Downey, 2007). Berger's (2019) multi-tiered and systematic approach to teacher training, consultation between teachers and school well-being teams, and engagement between school well-being teams and external agencies could address some of the training and communication issues raised by teachers in this study. This model recognises the different roles and areas of expertise of staff in schools and acknowledges that while teachers desire training to address domestic violence and child abuse, additional tiers of support for students, staff consultation and referral sources (such as access to school mental health staff and school crisis teams) are required in schools.

Implications

Results of this study suggest that more could be done to improve teacher training in relation to student exposure to domestic violence. This is particularly in light of the increasing

emphasis for trauma informed practices to be implemented in schools and the increased likelihood that students will disclose experiences of family violence to trusted teachers. There is a need to better prepare teachers for the likelihood of providing support to domestic violence exposed students, along with training around how best to provide such support, as well as policies and training outlining the role of teachers in relation to responding to this issue in schools. Teachers need to receive this training earlier in their careers or within their pre-service training, as well as receiving ongoing consultation and support in relation to the identification of domestic violence exposure. They need to understand how to respond to and manage these students, how to safely and respectfully communicate with colleagues and parents around this issue, how to create boundaries around the role of teachers and the teacher-student relationship following disclosures, and how to access appropriate support and referral options for students and their families. The need to protect teachers from the impacts of secondary trauma is also evident, and better strategies to address teacher well-being are required. Suggestions include greater acknowledgment of the potential impact on teachers' emotional health and well-being, better promotion of informal debriefing and counselling, and training in self-care strategies.

Limitations

This study was a broad examination of teachers' experiences of supporting students with domestic violence exposure, providing new insights in an emerging area of research. Being broad in scope, this study was unable to examine more deeply the specific aspects of this experience and future studies should explore each of the identified themes in more detail. The study focussed narrowly on the experiences of primary and secondary school teachers, strengthening the applicability of the findings to the experiences of teachers, but weakening the ability to more broadly correlate the results to the experiences of other school staff. Future work to come out of this research project will assist to fill this gap by examining the experiences of principals and school counsellors to better understand the impact of students' exposure to domestic violence on school-wide systems. Replication of this research with pre-service teachers is also warranted given the link between teacher experience and confidence when responding to domestic violence exposure in schools. In addition, as school principals self-selected for their school to be involved in the project, it is possible that this study sample was also biased towards schools that were more trauma informed and trauma aware than other schools. As the literature in this area develops, larger quantitative studies could be carried out to depict the wider support needs, training experiences and overall burden of domestic violence exposure in students on teachers and school staff. However, while quantitative research is needed, this research supports the findings of earlier research and underlines the specific training and resource needs of educators regarding students' experiences of domestic violence.

Conclusion

This study provided an understanding of the experiences of teachers who support students exposed to domestic violence. The demands of their role, impacts on their well-being, and own needs for support are evidence that schools' responses to student exposure to domestic violence is an area that deserves further exploration. Teachers need earlier and more comprehensive training around trauma and domestic violence, better systems to support them, communication that is more effective and inclusive of information around students'

trauma backgrounds, and clearer protocols and policies. This study indicates that more research is warranted to effect the training, structural and policy changes that will ultimately better support teachers to manage the demands of their roles.

References

- Alisic, E. (2012). Teachers' perspectives on providing support to children after trauma: A qualitative study. *School Psychology Quarterly*, 27(1), 51-59. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0028590>
- Alisic, E., Bus, M., Dulack, W., Pennings, L., & Splinter, J. (2012). Teachers' experiences supporting children after traumatic exposure. *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 25, 98-101. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jts.20709>
- Anda, R. F., Felitti, V. J., Bremner, J. D., Walker, J. D., Whitfield, C., Perry, B. D., . . . Giles, W. H. (2006). The enduring effects of abuse and related adverse experiences in childhood: A convergence of evidence from neurobiology and epidemiology. *European Archives of Psychiatry & Clinical Neuroscience*, 256(3), 174-186. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00406-005-0624-4>
- Balistreri, K. S., & Alvira-Hammond, M. (2016). Adverse childhood experiences, family functioning and adolescent health and emotional well-being. *Public Health*, 132, 72-78. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.puhe.2015.10.034>
- Berger, E. (2019). Multi-tiered approaches to trauma-informed care in schools: A systematic review. *School Mental Health*, 1-15. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12310-019-09326-0>
- Berger, E., Carroll, M., Maybery, D., & Harrison, D. (2018). Disaster impacts on students and staff from a specialist, trauma-informed Australian school. *Journal of Child and Adolescent Trauma*, 11(4), 521-530. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40653-018-0228-6>
- Boullier, M., & Blair, M. (2018). Adverse childhood experiences. *Paediatrics and Child Health*, 28(3), 132-137. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paed.2017.12.008>
- Brunzell, T., Stokes, H., & Waters, L. E. (2019). Shifting teacher practice in trauma-affected classrooms: Practice pedagogy strategies within a trauma-informed positive education model. *School Mental Health*, 11, 600-614. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12310-018-09308-8>
- Buckley, H., Holt, S., & Whelan, S. (2007). Listen to Me! Children's experiences of domestic violence. *Child Abuse Review*, 16(5), 296-310. <https://doi.org/10.1002/car.995>
- Burke, N. J., Hellman, J. L., Scott, B. G., Weems, C. F., & Carrion, V. G. (2011). The impact of adverse childhood experiences on an urban pediatric population. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 35(6), 408-413. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2011.02.006>
- Byrne, D., & Taylor, B. (2007). Children at risk from domestic violence and their educational attainment: Perspectives of education welfare officers, social workers and teachers. *Child Care in Practice*, 13(3), 185-201. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13575270701353465>
- Chafouleas, S. M., Johnson, A. H., Overstreet, S., & Santos, N. M. (2016). Toward a blueprint for trauma-informed service delivery in schools. *School Mental Health*, 8, 144-162. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12310-015-9166-8>
- Clarke, V., & Braun, V. (2013). Teaching thematic analysis: Overcoming challenges and developing strategies for effective learning. *The Psychologist*, 26(2), 120-123.
- Costigan, B.-J. (2016). Perceptions of fourth-year pre-service teachers in regards to their preparation to domestic violence and its associated trauma. *Theses Bachelor Honours*, 22.

- De Bellis, M. D., & Zisk, A. (2014). The biological effects of childhood trauma. *Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Clinics of North America*, 23(2), 185-222. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chc.2014.01.002>
- Downey, L. (2007). *Calmer classrooms: A guide to working with traumatised children*. Melbourne: Australia: Child Safety Commissioner.
- Falkiner, M., Thomson, D., & Day, A. (2017). Teachers' understanding and practice of mandatory reporting of child maltreatment. *Children Australia*, 42(1), 38-48. <https://doi.org/10.1017/cha.2016.53>
- Graham, A., Phelps, R., Maddison, C., & Fitzgerald, R. (2011). Supporting children's mental health in schools: Teacher views. *Teachers and Teaching*, 17(4), 479-496. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13540602.2011.580525>
- Howard, J. A. (2018). A systematic framework for trauma-informed schooling: Complex but necessary! *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment and Trauma*, 1-21. doi:10.1080/10926711.2018.1479323
- Hughes, K., Bellis, M. A., Hardcastle, K. A., Sethi, D., Butchart, A., Mikton, C., . . . Dunne, M. P. (2017). The effect of multiple adverse childhood experiences on health: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Lancet Public Health*, 2, 356-366. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2468-2667\(17\)30118-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2468-2667(17)30118-4)
- Kenny, M. C. (2001). Child abuse reporting: Teachers' perceived deterrents. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 25, 81-92. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0145-2134\(00\)00218-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0145-2134(00)00218-0)
- Kenny, M. C. (2004). Teachers' attitudes toward and knowledge of child maltreatment. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 28, 1311-1319. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2004.06.010>
- Kliethermes, M., Schacht, M., & Drewry, K. (2014). Complex Trauma. *Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Clinics of North America*, 23(2), 339-361. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chc.2013.12.009>
- Livny, K. A., & Katz, C. (2018). Schools, families, and the prevention of child maltreatment: Lessons that can be learned from a literature review. *Trauma, Violence & Abuse*, 19(2), 148-158. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1524838016650186>
- Martin, C. G., Cromer, L. D., & Freyd, J. J. (2010). Teachers' beliefs about maltreatment effects on student learning and classroom behavior. *Journal of Child and Adolescent Trauma*, 3, 245-254. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19361521.2010.523061>
- Mazzer, K. R., & Rickwood, D. J. (2015). Teachers' role breadth and perceived efficacy in supporting student mental health. *Advances in School Mental Health Promotion*, 8(1), 29-41. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1754730X.2014.978119>
- Ollis, D. (2014). The role of teachers in delivering education about respectful relationships: Exploring teacher and student perspectives. *Health Education Research*, 29(4), 702-713. <https://doi.org/10.1093/her/cyu032>
- Plumb, J. L., Bush, K. A., & Kersevich, S. E. (2016). Trauma-sensitive schools: An evidence-based approach. *School Social Work Journal*, 40(2), 37-60.
- State of Victoria. (2016). *Royal Commission into Family Violence: Summary and Recommendations*. (Parliamentary Paper no. 132). Retrieved from <http://www.rcfv.com.au/Report-Recommendations>.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to acknowledge the work of Dylan George and Jessica Tsoutsoulis who conducted the interviews and the Victorian Department of Education and Training and the Catholic Education Office of Melbourne for consenting to this project.