



From “What’s Wrong with You?” to “What Happened to You?” Trauma-Informed Care Training and Implementation Experiences of School Personnel

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Abstract

Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) can influence physical, cognitive and social development, impacting life outcomes including the child’s capacity to learn and become socially integrated. While steady relations to reliable, understanding adults may enhance child resilience and mitigate long-term effects on well-being, the difficulties of children with ACEs pose a challenge for school personnel. Psychoeducational trauma-informed care (TIC) interventions at school may strengthen teacher preparation and buffer the deleterious outcomes of ACEs, but the evidence base for these interventions is limited. Thus, the current study qualitatively acquired school personnel’s (N=48) experiences and reflections on a TIC training-and-implementation intervention, and its day-to-day utility in a school context. Thematic analysis revealed three main themes, labeled “*knowledge that transformed perceptions*”, “*the resource that makes a difference*”, and “*the spectrum of capacity*”. Knowledge gains, changed practices, and motivation boosts were discussed, along with mixed attitudes toward TIC applicability, frustration from having limited information regarding individual students’ circumstances, and a need of more follow-up support to practicing TIC. Importantly, our analysis revealed several challenges to implementation, attributed mainly to organizational and structural factors, including conflicting tasks and goals, time pressure, lack of prioritization, and compassion fatigue. Thus, along with what seems to be much needed organizational adjustments and prioritizations, supporting a sense of agency in school personnel appears central for TIC implementation. Future research should explore individual beliefs about mechanisms of change and long-term outcomes of the training program, for teachers and children.

Keywords Trauma · Mental health · Trauma-informed care · School personnel · Implementation · Childhood adversity

Introduction

Trauma-informed care (TIC) psychoeducational interventions at school aim to foster child resilience and healing in the face of childhood adversity, by empowering educators’ capacity to create strong, supportive relationships and safe, nurturing environments that support student well-being. While interventions to enhance TIC school practices are increasingly common, the evidence base for whether and how they affect teacher attitudes and behavior is still limited.

The present study explores how school personnel perceive and implement a relatively comprehensive, whole-school TIC intervention in Sweden.

Adversity during childhood has a profound, far-reaching impact on child development and health, leading to increased risk of mental and physical illness, unemployment, poverty, and criminality later in life (Bellis et al., 2019; Davidson et al., 2010). Prevalent forms of adversity in the seminal Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) study (Felitti et al., 1998) included abuse, neglect, or inadequate caregiving due to domestic violence, substance abuse, mental health problems, criminality, or parental absence. Childhood adversity may also be related to economic vulnerability, frequent or abrupt relocations, loss of loved ones, peer rejection, and bullying (Bernard et al., 2021). Notwithstanding individual differences in how such experiences are perceived, ACEs often result in traumatic stress reactions (Felitti et al., 1998; Oral et al., 2015) and trauma, if the individual perceives the

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event(s) or circumstances as harmful or threatening (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration/SAMHSA, 2024).

Crucially, ACEs and trauma can affect the development of neurocognitive abilities that are decisive for children's academic and social trajectories, including attention, executive function, evaluation, and processing of information, thereby also impacting threat perception, decision making, emotion regulation, communication, and motivation (Cicchetti, 2013; Cook et al., 2005; Perry et al., 1995; Siegel, 2012; Teicher et al., 2003; van der Kolk, 2003, 2014). These impairments result in cognitive and social difficulties that increase the risk of difficult behaviors toward adult caregivers. In the absence of supportive adults, ACEs may lead to general perceptions of adults as threatening, impeding the youth's ability to form healthy relationships (Pickens & Tschopp, 2017). Consequently, in the school context, students with ACEs are more prone to conflictual interactions with teachers (Fazel et al., 2014) and at increased risk of low academic achievement, irregular attendance, early drop-out, or expulsion (Bellis et al., 2019; Cook et al., 2005; Ford et al., 2006; Jackson et al., 2021; Porche et al., 2016).

Importantly, parental caregivers and other important adults, including teachers, can mitigate the negative consequences of ACEs on further development (Cook et al., 2005; Verschueren & Koomen, 2012). However, difficult student behaviors can be challenging for teachers, and many may feel unprepared to manage them. This is reflected in the high number of teachers who cite handling students with behavioral issues as their main reason for leaving the profession within four years (Madigan & Kim, 2021; Sims & Jerrim, 2020; Williams et al., 2021). Furthermore, teachers with their own ACEs and trauma risk re-traumatization from interactions with traumatized students (Fazel et al., 2014). Indeed, high levels of stress and emotional strain are reported among teachers, impacting both their performance and relationships with students (Montgomery & Rupp, 2005; Wentzel, 2010). Conversely, teachers who feel more confident in managing classroom behaviors report better teacher–student relationships, student academic results, and own well-being (Han & Weiss, 2005).

Addressing the Impacts of ACEs Through Trauma-Informed Care in the School Setting

For interventions to be effective, they must be feasible in real-world settings, integrating therapeutic features into children's day-to-day contexts (Longhi et al., 2021; Middleton et al., 2019). While clinical interventions targeting youth with ACEs show promise within mental health systems, they often fail to reach the large groups of children in need (Beidas et al., 2015; Saxe & Acri, 2017). In contrast, preschools and schools are more widely accessible to children, who

spend large parts of their day there, interacting with educators and other school staff—‘significant adults’ with central roles in the lives of children and adolescents. Indeed, there is comprehensive evidence that programs aimed at improving students' socioemotional skills and reducing emotional distress also contribute to enhanced academic performance (Durlak et al., 2011). Such evidence underscores the interconnected nature of student mental and academic achievement. Schools, therefore, are increasingly recognized as essential environments for supporting student well-being (Berger, 2019; Ponsford et al., 2024; Wall, 2020).

Thus, in addition to their educational responsibilities, teachers play a crucial role in ensuring students' safety and caring for them. Evidently, the quality of teacher–student relationships significantly impacts both academic and behavioral student outcomes. For instance, preschool teachers' perceptions of their relationships to specific children as characterized by high conflict or overdependency negatively predict academic and behavioral outcomes as late as the 8th grade (Birch & Ladd, 1997; Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Pianta & Nimetz, 1991), while teacher perceptions of relational quality at primary school predict students' engagement and trust in their academic abilities in years to come (e.g., Hughes, 2011; Thornberg et al., 2020). Notably, such relationships are particularly important for students with previous adverse experiences, as safe and supportive teacher–student connections foster trust in adults, improve self-regulation, and enhance academic engagement, thereby strengthening resilience (Thomas et al., 2019; Wall, 2020). Given this transformative potential of the teacher–student relationship in promoting healing, schools are critical arenas for interventions aimed at mitigating the effects of ACEs (Berger, 2019; Chudzik et al., 2023; Loomis, 2018; Thomas et al., 2019; Wall, 2020).

Trauma-informed care (TIC) aims at strengthening child resilience after adversity, by influencing the child's caregiving environment, to increase access to trusting and reliable adults and peers (Bath & Seita, 2019). TIC builds on the idea that caregivers should promote *safety*—physical, emotional, relational, and cultural (Bath & Seita, 2019). Thus, caregivers should initiate positive interactions and sensitively respond to the child's attempts at contact, to build trusting, safe, and predictable *connections* that counter the sense of abandonment and isolation frequently experienced by traumatized individuals (van der Kolk, 2014). They should also help the child develop adaptive *coping* strategies through co-regulation of external circumstances and inner emotions (Bath & Seita, 2019). In an international context, caregivers report, after TIC training, increased knowledge and competence in supporting youth, although evaluations often lack long-term follow-up and control groups (Fondren et al., 2020; Hanson & Lang, 2016). TIC training in Sweden, within the context of foster care, has demonstrated improved

self-reported parental efficacy and greater tolerance of challenging child behaviors compared to a control group; however, these effects were short-lived (Angelöw et al., 2023).

TIC training is increasingly offered within schools, as part of professional development aiming to educate teachers and other school staff about the consequences of potentially traumatic ACEs and provide strategies for building stable, trusting teacher–child relationships (reviews: Avery et al., 2021; Bartlett & Smith, 2019; Chudzik et al., 2023; Thomas et al., 2019; Wall, 2020; Yohannan & Carlson, 2019). TIC trainings in a school context vary considerably, ranging from short workshops to comprehensive interventions (Avery et al., 2021). Independently of their duration or structure, these trainings emphasize the importance of significant adults for children’s healing and underscore the notion of behaviors as expressions of underlying emotional needs, past trauma, or survival responses (Bath et al., 2018). Overall, while there is some evidence supporting the benefits of TIC training—particularly increased teacher knowledge about trauma (e.g., McIntyre et al., 2019), and a more positive attitude toward trauma-informed approaches (e.g., Parker et al., 2020; Stipp & Kilpatrick, 2021)—studies also report challenges in sustaining these changes over time, and discuss concerns about long-term implementation and teacher well-being. In addition, despite the growing implementation of trauma-informed interventions at schools, recent reviews note variability in practices and underscore a lack of standardized frameworks, and methodologically robust evaluations (Avery et al., 2021; Fondren et al., 2020; Maynard et al., 2019; Thomas et al., 2019; Yohannan & Carlson, 2019). Importantly, these evaluations often fail to adopt a teacher-inclusive and context-sensitive approach (Berger, 2019; Thomas et al., 2019), with teachers positioned as secondary actors in trauma-informed systems (Thomas et al., 2019).

Whole-School TIC Interventions

Whole-school TIC interventions, which engage the entire school staff, remain relatively rare and under-researched (Avery et al., 2021; Fondren et al., 2020). To our knowledge, three evaluations have examined whole-school TIC interventions (Barton et al., 2018; Gherardi & Stoner, 2024; MacLochlainn et al., 2022), all providing some evidence that teachers and school staff experienced the training as useful and reported changed attitudes. Barriers to sustainable implementation were also identified, concerning teacher perceptions of time constraints, unclear training scope, but also policy and structural barriers such as incompatibility of the TIC approach with the common sole emphasis on academic outcomes and limited adaptability for secondary schools (Barton et al., 2018).

Notwithstanding the value of this first evidence, all these studies concerned short (two-day, six-hour, and three-day, respectively) interventions. Furthermore, despite methodological strengths, such as mixed methods approaches and input from both teachers and school staff, the studies’ external validity was constrained by their UK-specific (Wales and Northern Ireland) and USA-specific contexts, and the influence of local educational policies and school environments. In addition, while one targeted school included students of different backgrounds (Gherardi & Stoner, 2024), it is unclear to what extent other targeted schools included students of different cultural backgrounds. Notably, a recent systematic review of whole-school interventions with different aims and designs found substantial effect- and impact variations among partially overlapping interventions (Ponsford et al., 2024). This highlights the need for repeated, context-sensitive evaluations of widely implemented interventions across diverse contexts and settings.

The Present Study

In Sweden, a more extensive, 5-day TIC training and implementation intervention is offered to schools by Save the Children (Rädda Barnen, 2018) in collaboration with the National Agency for Education. The first two days of the intervention focus on introducing the TIC theoretical framework through lectures and practical exercises based on case descriptions. The remaining three days, spread throughout one semester, focus on the implementation of TIC practices in the school setting, including an extensive psychoeducational workshop addressing compassion fatigue. Additionally, school leadership and personnel responsible for TIC coordination attend a follow-up “booster” session six months later.

The content and structural features of this more extensive, whole-school TIC intervention have the potential to ensure not only increased theoretical knowledge and improved skills among school staff, but also ongoing support tailored to the specific school context, enhancing the likelihood of sustainable implementation. However, despite its widespread application, the intervention lacks empirical scrutiny. Therefore, as a first step in evaluating its potential, we explored school staff members’ perceptions and experiences of the training and its utility. Aiming to understand teachers’ experiences and perspectives, we conducted a qualitative analysis of data from interviews with a large and diverse group of teachers (and school staff), across various schools and levels.

Three research questions were addressed: (1) In what ways do teachers perceive that TIC training contributes to altered strategies and behaviors when interacting with potentially traumatized students? (2) What are teachers’ perceptions regarding the utility of the TIC training? (3) What are the teachers’ reflections regarding implementing TIC?

The study was carried out in Sweden, where education is compulsory from primary school through to high school. In a recent Swedish report, 57% among 9th-grade students disclosed exposure to some form of violence during childhood (Jernbro et al., 2023).

Method

The study was part of a larger project evaluating TIC interventions across various contexts, incorporating the perspectives of both the adults receiving the training and the children in their care (<https://psy.lu.se/tmo> $\leq$ blinded for review $\geq$).

Design

To enable a detailed, in-depth understanding of the school staff's experiences and reflections regarding TIC training and implementation, we adopted a qualitative design (Braun & Clarke, 2006). As school staff is a social normative group with considerable internal variability, we conducted focus group interviews (Bloor, et al., 2001), facilitating discussions to resemble natural conversation between the participants and stimulating joint reflection (Kidd & Parshall, 2000). Conversation with fellow colleagues allows for rich nuances and perspectives that are difficult to obtain from individual interviews (Krueger & Casey, 2009).

Participants and Recruitment

The schools that request TIC training are typically located in lower socioeconomic status areas, and those that receive the training have high proportions of students with a refugee background or placed in out-of-home care (<https://www.skolverket.se/skolutveckling/inspiration-och-stod-i-arbetet/inspiration-och-reportage/verktyg-for-att-mota-barn-och-unga-som-har-genomgatt-trauma---tmo>). The eight schools that received TIC training during 2023 in municipalities within the same region as the University were contacted with details about the study background, aims, and procedures. Five schools declined participation claiming high workload and time-related constraints among teachers. Three schools agreed to participate: two elementary and middle schools and one secondary school. Eight focus groups were formed (5–8 participants each), totally including $N=48$ participants. A majority (75%, $n=36$) were teachers, and the remaining ($n=12$) were teacher assistants, student health personnel, or school principals. Work experience was 2 to 30 years ($M=13.6$ years, $SD=8.5$). All participants gave informed consent prior to participation. Inclusion criterion for participation was to have completed the TIC training, yet one participant revealed after the interview that they had not

participated. After discussion, this focus group was included in the analysis, in favor of the other participants' experiences and thoughts.

Procedures

The interviews were conducted at the schools, with the help of a semi-structured interview guide structured around two overarching topics: (1) Utility of TIC training, through questions such as, "What do you regard as important concerning knowledge and skills in encounters of potentially traumatized children?", "How does one know about what works?"; (2) Thoughts regarding implementation of TIC (e.g., "How does the TIC training fit into the methods and general work structure of your school?", "Did the TIC training have an impact on the day-to-day work?"). There were four facilitators, all with occupational background in psychology, two with extensive experience in conducting focus groups. Prior to delving into the main topics, a round of introductions and casual conversation were used to establish a comfortable atmosphere. When participants felt uneasy, facilitators clarified that the goal was to gather their experiences and perspectives—not to assess their knowledge—which seemed to ease their concerns. The final part of the interview invited reflections, or anything omitted from the discussion. Interviews lasted 60–90 min, were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

The Swedish Ethical Review Authority had no objections to the study. Since we encouraged participants to scrutinize their working manner, introducing some risk of discomfort from hyper-focus on work performance or of stirring up negative memories of traumatized students, we offered contact routes for supportive counseling by a clinical psychologist.

Data Analysis

Given our aim to understand the subjective views of school personnel, we adopted a critical-realist epistemological stance to describe the experiences of the school personnel and what they consider to be useful and memorable components of the training program in question. Critical realism is based on the view that the generated data are not a direct image of reality but needs to be interpreted to generate knowledge and understanding. We employed thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2022) six steps. Initial coding and thematization (steps 1–3) were carried out by the second and third authors: Four interview transcriptions were coded by each author separately, with common standpoint established through discussion. The four remaining interviews were coded based on existing codes, ending up with 40 codes. For the last three steps, the first and last authors joined the process, questioning the coherence of, and reasoning about, the coding, to enhance the intended

interpretative depth of the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Guided by charts where themes and subthemes were grouped together, the analysis ended in identification of three main themes. Selected quotes to illustrate subthemes were fine-tuned for language to increase readability.

To ensure transparency during the analysis, we regularly reflected on our preconceptions and motives and how they might influence the analysis. The diverse backgrounds of the authors—expertise in child development and the transactional influences between children and their contexts; experience in implementation with an organizational and structural perspective; background in sociology with emphasis on intersectionality; care of children with challenging behaviors—likely enhanced different perspectives and contributed to a balanced interpretation of the data. To ensure reflexivity, we additionally recorded all related feelings and thoughts in diaries which we shared and discussed regularly. For instance, we discussed how our different perspectives could explain the different affective responses that we noted we had in response to persistent teacher statements that all difficult student behaviors are always handled effectively.

Results

Three main themes, with three subthemes each (Fig. 1), reflected the interviews' content, organized around essential implementation dimensions: *“knowledge that transformed perceptions,” “each interaction matters but hard to keep up,”* and *“(lacking) conditions for motivation.”* While distinct, the themes are also related to and impact one another.

Knowledge that Transformed Perceptions

The theme gathered interpersonal and intrapersonal transformative perceptions: changed views of others and oneself

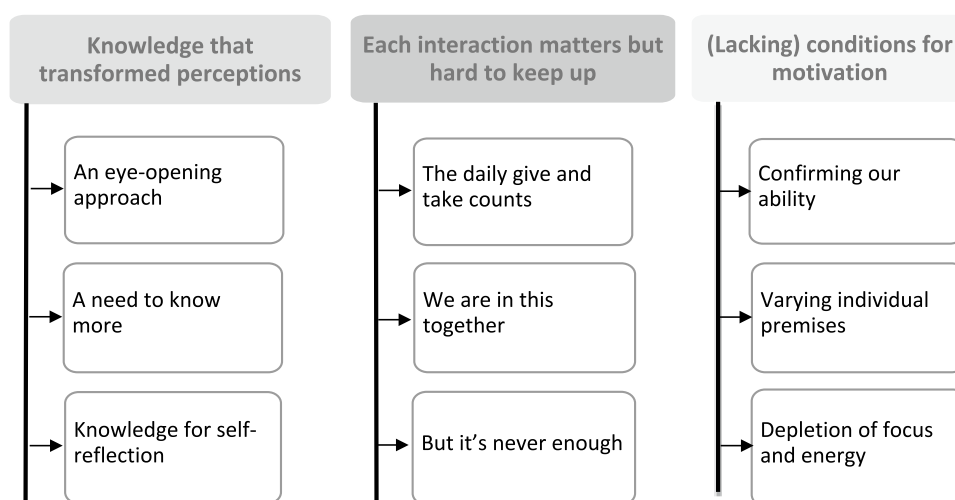
because of training in TIC, also reflecting what participants learned during the training, but also what they wished they had more information about.

An Eye-Opening Approach (Knowing the Power of Relating)

Participants in several focus groups described acquiring knowledge and a new understanding of childhood adversity, including that it can cause difficult behaviors such as inattention and aggression: “Trauma has become an alternative explanation to why it looks the way it does for some students.” They also described marked curiosity and desire to determine how they can support children rather than assign them to neuropsychiatric disorder diagnoses (NPD): “It has created an understanding of the student’s behavior beyond the NPD-box that you otherwise would have put them in.” TIC was perceived as useful also in managing NPD-related behavior, through connectedness with the child: “Perhaps putting up screens or distributing earplugs is not the most important thing, but rather being the adult who listens, who’s there and is responsive. That’s how my approach has changed.”

Several participants described novel ways of thinking: “The child was annoying, and you walked around thinking ‘why are you so damn annoying’ (laughs). But thinking about what may be underneath—to understand it in a different way.” Another participant elaborated: “Instead of ‘what’s wrong with you?’ you think ‘what have you been through?’” Some participants reported increased attentiveness, “that you perceive those small signals, that they might want to say something and hesitate, that you give them time once they grope their way forward—to seize the moment” and increased openness, “You are more responsive to the children when they show problematic behavior (...) more investigative (...) what have they been through, what experiences they bring with them.” Finally,

Fig. 1 Main themes and sub-themes



many discussions concerned a shift of perspective from a sole focus on teaching to creating a safe place for the students:

(...) our first mission is to teach, but somewhere you must understand that the student won't be able to learn when there is chaos inside them. Some days it is enough that you're here, I'm glad you're here, today is not the day where learning happens, today is the day where we make this a safe place.

Need to Know More (Knowing the Individual Student)

Very often, discussions expressed frustration from not knowing enough about the students' adversities. Participants discussed, "...children come, who you know have been harmed, but you don't know how. I find it very difficult to deal with. Has the child experienced sexual abuse, violence? I want to know more to (...) It annoys, frustrates me." Another participant added, "We don't know whether it's dyslexia, multilingualism since the parents come from different countries, whether it's fleeing war, trauma before that, trauma on the way here, we don't know!" Many participants underscored that more information would help them understand the child's needs better. One participant said, "I respect confidentiality, but if they opened the channels a bit, if we knew what the trauma consisted of, I believe we could make more progress." Some participants shared a concern of saying or doing things they should not, because of not knowing the child's ACEs.

On the other hand, several participants declared that "You actually don't need to know what the trauma is, you don't need to know in order to listen, respond with warmth, curiosity, empathy." Several concluded that teachers must anyway try different tools and strategies with different students, and background information would not help much:

I need to interact with each child differently, everyone is unique. With a child without trauma but perhaps other difficulties, I need to experiment to make things work. With a child with a traumatic background, if one approach doesn't work, I must try another.

In summary, confidence about one's skills, not needing background information about the individual student, was contrasted by frustration over feeling restricted by lacking information. Overall, teachers seemed to find it more difficult to maintain empathy in daily encounters with students in the face of no information, and discussions concluded that knowing more about the students' background could facilitate the teachers' own emotion regulation and therefore bolster their patience and empathy.

Knowledge for Self-reflection (Knowing Oneself)

Participants described that the training resulted in further understanding of themselves, their own traumas and triggers, and of the importance of their own personal development: "I think it is important that you process your own... make it visible... why some kids trigger me... you have to work on yourself, face your own little ghosts, look at them and... blow them away." This development was described to also alter a general attitude toward colleagues: "You don't clash with people as much, there are explanations behind different behaviors. Taking a step back and thinking 'what triggered this' instead of getting worked up, it makes you calmer and more secure in your work." Finally, acquiring knowledge about compassion fatigue provided an insight into the importance of self-compassion:

You become more self-aware knowing about compassion fatigue, how important it is to take care of yourself to be able to persevere, stay in the relationship, because these students are testing my patience. I need this to be able to cope in the long run.

Each Interaction Matters but It's Hard to Keep Up

The theme gathered participants' perceptions of the importance of collective contribution and unified action, facilitating change and implementation, but also perceptions of insufficiency leading to amotivation and hopelessness.

Daily Give-and-Take That Counts

The TIC training inspired and strengthened a feeling of agency grounded in awareness that relating to students has effect: "I don't think we've been aware of how important we are, just being here every day, meeting the children, relating, listening. It's not necessary to provide individual therapy to be meaningful, what we do every day makes a big difference." The specific tools proposed by TIC contributed to this sense of agency: "It was relevant and truly useful here at the school, TIC is something we can really work with, this really depends on us." Noticing positive outcomes seemed to boost motivation: "When teachers just said, 'Nice to see you today!' That helped! The boy grew, the bad behaviors became more seldom when everyone saw him and acknowledged him. We learnt from that and have done so with other students too."

Having an alternative to relying on other interventions fostered a sense of hope and engagement, as it alleviated the feeling that nothing is within one's control. Referring to the TIC training's most important outcome, one participant said: "I will stay on, I will not betray any more children, I will hold my position. I feel like I stand a little taller too, I

will fight for the children, for their well-being, that's what it gave." A colleague added:

Many children with difficult experiences have told me things, and oftentimes I feel that I can't bear more, and then I think that I have to be the one who dares to see them. I can't close my eyes. The teacher must be the one who dares.

We are in this Together

Discussions often concerned strengthened collaboration following the TIC training, "It's no longer one's own burden, we can help each other, everyone contributes a bit, and that's a relief." The effect was attributed specifically to the training. One participant explained:

Something happened when we did the training. We started speaking the same language, confessing about 'this is what I struggle with', helping each other in a completely different way than before. It led to good cooperation, perhaps changed our relationships with each other as we opened up.

Participants also described a humbled culture in the workplace, "It is fine if my colleague has a better relationship with the child, that I don't confront this child, I pass it on. Otherwise, as adults, we become a bit... competitive or pretentious." This culture resulted in a more systematic way of working, allowing prioritization and shared focus: "Now we focus on this student, then another—we look at who they are, what they need, help each other. It has generated results." Overall, the collaborative environment promotes a sense of unity, reduces individual burdens, and allows for effective support of both staff members and students.

But It's Never Enough

A feeling of not sufficing was constantly present, connected to caring about students with difficulties and wanting them to feel and fare well. Many participants felt frustrated by an inability to help and support students adequately: "I can be a secure adult and that surely matters, but I'm not satisfied, I can't give more than that, and I believe that these children are entitled to so much more." Witnessing the continuing struggle and difficulties of students contributed to feelings of hopelessness or powerlessness: "That's the difficult part, I don't see what effect the little I've done has had... it's not measurable, and the kid still struggles." Somewhat paradoxically, the TIC training both contributed to and helped balance these feelings. One participant explained:

The training gave me... you know, you want to do the best, the absolute best, for the children who are struggling, but I bring with me now an understanding

that, what I can do right now is create security for the child, I have control over this present moment (...) and I believe that it has some positive effect somewhere in the child's life, you know, but I'm never satisfied, it's not enough, I want all of them to be okay. Now I tell myself 'at least you have provided them with a safe moment.'

(Lacking) Conditions for Motivation

The theme gathered perceptions of individual, (school) contextual, and structural factors perceived to affect the capacity to implement TIC in day-to-day practice.

Confirming Our Ability

In several discussions, teachers described positive feelings of affirmation from the TIC training. As two participants discussed, "For many of us, what was brought up was, like, 'yes! That's what I'm doing', a confirmation that okay, I am doing the right thing." Another continued, "It's just framed in a new way, but sure, we're doing it already." Many acknowledged increased practical ability to apply TIC after the training:

... a student stands and yells at me, and I say, 'when you act like this, say this to me in that tone, it makes me sad'. And the student stops pretty much right away and apologizes. Perhaps I brought it with me from TIC, it proves that the low-affect approach works.

Some participants emphasized the ability to enhance safety by giving peers the opportunity to help each other: "We're imagining that it's always adults who should help traumatized children. But imagine someone being abused by an adult, then it might be easier to talk to a friend. Feeling safe among peers is important," and several discussions concerned fostering relations and safety in the class through common classroom rules and values to promote a cohesive community and predictability and help traumatized children feel safe among peers. Concrete strategies included playing calming music throughout the day or providing opportunity for one-on-one interaction with teachers through designated drop-in sessions. Key values highlighted included fostering an inclusive environment, embracing diversity, encouraging open communication, and promoting a culture of inquiry. One teacher explained:

We emphasized from the start that if the children saw a classmate sitting alone, they should invite them to play. This has brought children together; it is almost never a problem to join in. And when an issue arises, you don't scold them but instead ask, 'What could you

have done differently?’ ‘What will you do next time?’
It has benefited our class greatly.

Finally, some participants expressed impenetrable confidence in their a priori ability: “We’re actually already doing all this and are pretty good at it” and described the training as unnecessary: “TIC has not given anything to this organization. It sounds terrible but my way of working hasn’t changed. I sat there and thought that all this was obvious.” There were also views that ability to relate is a disposition that cannot be trained: “No education can change this, some of us will always be the person to go to, and some you will never feel you can turn to.”

Varying Individual Premises

Individual background factors were highlighted as important for the ability to implement TIC. Gender emerged as most central for successful student–teacher relationships: “A structural factor affects the most actually. Unfortunately, boys resort to men and girls to women.” Cultural background was also discussed:

It is an affinity. I’m from (country) and some students feel like, wow! cultural closeness. It’s easy to talk about everyday things – upbringing, food, holidays – then it becomes easier to talk about other stuff, too, the student opens up in a different way, you go into deeper things, you find out much more than a colleague with a different cultural background would.

Not least, participants discussed individual life situation as important for the ability to approach the students: One teacher pointed out, “We are at different life stages, we have been through different things, we may have different trainings, and also taken different aspects to heart because of different interests,” and a colleague filled in, “It matters. What kind of family you come from, if you were traumatized... perhaps I bear trauma, or maybe my workload is too high, meaning that I see what’s happening but don’t have the energy to address it.” Own difficulties were discussed as limiting: “For some, the TIC training was very tough to go through because of own baggage one was not prepared or able to unpack. It affected some colleagues very much.”

In fact, compassion fatigue and exhaustion were thought to limit individual ability, “you meet so many students and problems, it is hard to delve into each student’s troubles. If you go too deep, you’ll drown, you have no energy.” Bringing feelings of worry and guilt into one’s personal life was also discussed, for instance, “I’m celebrating with my family, and I know there is a child who is alone and sad. And that’s all I’m thinking about.” Related to that, some stressed the need to protect themselves: “It is important to be able to close the door behind you.”

Depletion of Focus and Energy

All discussions elaborated on school organization and structural factors that stood in the way of implementing TIC. Some participants discussed lack of time, that “fighting for time at the school is difficult, everyone has too little, so it is important to assert oneself and prioritize so that TIC comes on the agenda.” Other participants talked of too many threads to keep track of, “More and more is added, we should be superhuman if you think about it, it is not reasonable.” Class size was also discussed: “I believe, regardless of whether students have trauma or not, class size matters. If there are many students in a class and, in many cases, only one teacher, it is not enough.” Finally, the lack of continuity in TIC training was repeatedly discussed: “We have quite a turnover of staff so it would be good if everyone understood what it’s all about.”

In some discussions, ‘hard’ guidelines and goals of school organization were perceived as obstructing the ‘soft’ relational TIC approach: “The school ends up focusing on budgets, knowledge requirements, exams, these hard values, because that’s what is being measured. Somewhere, you need to focus on the other aspects.” In several discussions, teachers in particular expressed difficulty integrating TIC with pedagogical work, describing a gap between the TIC rationale and day-to-day reality:

It is a group, a class, all the time, not just one student. You can’t talk to one student, there is no chance, I honestly have no time to sit down for five minutes with one student, unless someone else comes and takes the class.

Not least, all discussions touched upon lack of long-term strategy and prioritization in the school, resulting in continuously being asked to attend to something new: “It’s like, we’re doing this course for two days, then a few days later there is a new training, and there’s no follow-up, to sustain something a little longer.” Several discussions groups asserted that school boards must focus on further anchoring the training into daily practice:

We need a counterinvestment from the school boards, to show that time will be allocated to TIC, that it is not just training and then done. The follow-up, I believe, is crucial. It is not just about getting us trained, but how – and when! – to implement the training.

Discussion

To our knowledge, this is one of very few studies on experiences of whole-school personnel participating in TIC training, with a potential to further illustrate positive outcomes

but also difficulties to implementing TIC in a school context. Results indicate that TIC training is perceived to convey important knowledge concerning links between difficult student behaviors and ACEs, promoting a changed view of the students but also a changed view of oneself as a teacher. This creates a sense of meaningfulness, increasing the awareness of how embedding trauma-informed practices in daily education practices can make a difference for the students and in the interaction with colleagues. However, this awareness is often also accompanied by a deeper understanding of the sheer magnitude of students' needs, and the limitations in one's ability to do enough. Moreover, in the larger scheme of everyday school reality, TIC may become one of many interventions that are perceived as relevant, but then fade away. An obvious risk with lacking support in implementation is that the teachers' initial enthusiasm is replaced by feelings of discouragement. Importantly, several school organizational and structural factors of great impact for the utility and applicability of TIC are highlighted, which may overshadow the influence of the training program itself. Together, our thematic analysis identifies factors that facilitate and hinder TIC implementation, organized within key spheres critical for successful implementation: knowledge, motivation, and ability, aligning with findings from previous research (Avery et al., 2021; Barton et al., 2018; Chudzik et al., 2023).

Knowledge of the Power of Relating

Our findings suggest that TIC training influences teachers' thoughts, feelings and behaviors in relation to students, facilitating an understanding of the students' perspective, in line with previous findings (Barton et al., 2018; MacLochlainn et al., 2022). Teachers described a shift to trauma-informed thinking, moving from wondering "what's wrong with this child?" to "what happened to this child?", permeated by curiosity, understanding, patience, and warmth. This shift was also reflected in behaviors and practices more in tune with students' needs. This is in line with evidence that, when evaluated based on teacher reports, TIC school-based interventions seem to have a positive effect on teacher behaviors and classroom practices (Avery et al., 2021; Barton et al., 2018; Berger, 2019; Thomas et al., 2019).

Our results further suggest teachers appreciated most the directly applicable, concrete tools taught during the TIC training. This highlights a need for more comprehensive practical training on collaboratively addressing real-life scenarios, but also a need for practical tools for promoting classroom relatedness and safety. Such tools may provide tangible strategies for creating supportive environments to meet the diverse needs of students.

Notably, beyond confirming previous findings (MacLochlainn et al., 2022), teachers in the present study did not solely describe a positive shift in relation to students

but also a positive effect on attitudes and behaviors toward colleagues. This boost in collegial collaboration is mediated by a common language, perceptions of collective responsibility, and increased ability to support both the students and each other. Thus, the shift toward more emphasis on small daily actions and relationship building appears to enhance a more open and compassionate view and understanding of each other.

Motivation Promotors and Inhibitors

Participants consistently expressed a desire for more information about the background of their students with challenging behaviors. Empathy, the ability to understand and relate to others' emotions and behaviors, plays a crucial role in cultivating relationship satisfaction (Kimmes et al., 2014), and having more background information about the child has the potential to influence the support provided, promoting a greater emphasis on fostering the child's abilities (Graham et al., 2011). Consistently, participants conveyed that more information would deepen their empathy and understanding, ultimately facilitating patience and better practices in their interactions with students. Notably, other research suggests that knowing more about the single student's adversities may lower teacher expectations, at length negatively impacting the student (Bertrand & Marsh, 2015).

Notwithstanding these empirical inconsistencies regarding the utility of knowing about the individual child's adversity, this information is perceived by teachers as crucial, and its lack as a source of frustration that comes in the way of applying TIC. Therefore, it cannot be excluded that the frustration stemming from insufficient knowledge about the child's background and experiences may hinder the effective application of the TIC approach, consuming energy and focus. At the same time, the high prevalence of children and youth with adverse experiences exposes school staff to ongoing trauma narratives (i.e., vicarious trauma), heightening the risk of compassion fatigue (see also MacLochlainn et al., 2022). Emphasizing that the TIC approach is applicable and useful regardless of the kind of trauma and circumstances could help increase the sense of agency and self-efficacy among school staff and lower this sense of frustration. Given their centrality among school staff, TIC training programs and their evaluations ought to address these thoughts and worries further.

Participants' experiences of struggling with large numbers of students with difficult behaviors were associated with more positive attitudes toward TIC and increased motivation for its implementation, similar to previous findings (Papan-drea & Winefield, 2011). Beliefs of a need of additional tools, or a new approach, for addressing students with difficult behaviors was thus associated with a more positive experience of the TIC training. By contrast, some teachers

perceived the TIC training as redundant or in conflict with their pedagogical goals and day-to-day reality, often coinciding with beliefs that students with difficulties were being helped adequately already. With inspiration in Festinger's (1957) theory of cognitive dissonance, this is an expected finding. Perceiving a need of change of approach or additional tools to address difficulties is likely to be associated with openness to the new input of the TIC training and its content. The lack of dissonance contributes to openness. By contrast, perceptions of having adequate tools and already handling difficulties sufficiently, are in dissonance with further investment of time and resources to adopt new approaches. Since learning and implementing TIC requires additional time and effort, such convictions of adequacy may divert focus away from the training (see also Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980).

Since our analysis revealed barriers to implementation such as compassion fatigue, time pressure, and work-stress, negative perceptions of the TIC training may also reflect depleted individual resources due to personal or work-related circumstances, in line with previous findings (MacLochlainn et al., 2022). The TIC training delivered reassurance that being the “safe adult” may be “good enough” is to some extent stress-relieving but also hard to live by. Thus, school staff with adequate personal resources, professional self-efficacy and emotional stability may be more adequately prepared to welcome a potential for growth and learning, and maintain motivation to work with the TIC approach (Barton et al., 2018; Rothmann & Cooper, 2008). As the training appears to additionally contribute to increased self-reflection and self-compassion, it is possible that it also mitigates the risk of compassion fatigue, consistent with other findings (MacLochlainn et al., 2022). Finally, depending on levels of existing knowledge, it cannot be excluded that TIC may for some be obsolete. A step prior to initiating TIC training could involve assessing existing knowledge of teachers and schools, leveraging the strengths of individuals, groups, and organizations.

The Organization as Obstacle

Results highlight several hurdles related to organizational and structural factors within schools, with organizational factors perceived as having a considerable impact on TIC implementation. This aligns with previous findings (Barton et al., 2018; Fondren et al., 2020; MacLochlainn et al., 2022), despite the distinct dedication of the present TIC intervention to supporting implementation in each specific school context. Current conceptualizations of schooling, including large class sizes, curriculum and other academic pressures, is not conducive to a relational pedagogical approach as the foundation for successful implementation of TIC. Furthermore, when the school board was perceived

as supporting TIC implementation, through allocating resources and time in scheduled activity and following up on progress, school personnel were more likely to express determination to integrate the approach in everyday work. Where TIC training was quickly succeeded by another training, school staff experiences were less positive and perceived utility low. Unclear goals and directions from school leaderships appeared to give rise to uncertainty how to prioritize, highlighting the need of a paradigm shift toward a systemic approach to the TIC intervention, one that even more extensively combines therapeutic with contextual, organizational components. Thus, there seems to be agreement that school organization and structural factors have substantial impact on the utility and applicability of TIC. A clearer focus on integrating organizational and structural changes within the TIC training program may be central to facilitating its implementation (Chudzik et al., 2023; Fondren et al., 2020; Hanson & Lang, 2016).

The emphasis on organizational and structural obstacles may also partly reflect individual resistance to workplace changes that require adjustments in competency or practice (Dawson, 2003), as the TIC approach makes demands on time, expertise, and skills. Resistance to change may not always manifest as outright opposition (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2008) but as ambivalence, if, for instance, one's previous practices have been distinctively different from the newly required ones. Moreover, skepticism and disillusionment because of previous failed attempts to change may lead to cynicism and amotivation. Acknowledging these potential sources of resistance may be necessary to foster a supportive environment for implementation that mitigates internal resistance. Further research is necessary to explore school staff's comfort levels with changing their practices, with research approaches that create a safe and supportive environment, enabling staff to respond openly and honestly.

Implications for Implementation

Our results highlight the value of integrating processes for organizational and structural change within the whole-school TIC training intervention, to facilitate its sustainable implementation. Fundamental to this end is a need for organizations to allocate sufficient time and resources to sustain transformative change post-implementation. Regardless of a trauma-informed intervention's initial success or effectiveness among school staff, its long-term impact is contingent upon local structures and policies that might facilitate or jeopardize its continuity. Without such intervention-scaffolding and supportive frameworks, interventions are at risk of being short-lived; to paraphrase one of the participants “It is not just about getting us trained, but how—and when!—to implement the training.” The lack of continuous support and follow-ups may not only undermine the effectiveness of

the intervention but also contribute to a depletion of focus and energy among staff, a combination that can exacerbate compassion fatigue and increase the risk of burnout. Moreover, instead of solely attributing challenges to individuals or organizations, it is crucial to recognize the need for systemic adjustments to support the successful adoption of innovative practices, as well as the motivation and willingness of the participants to change.

Our results highlight the importance of acknowledging individual social identities in the design and implementation of trauma-informed care programs within school settings. Building meaningful relationships with students was perceived as more attainable when teachers shared, and understood, students' cultural backgrounds and the specific challenges associated with them. Given the growing cultural diversity in contemporary societies, it is therefore crucial to consider how cultural identities intersect with the implementation of TIC programs. Our findings underscore the need to conceptualize and implement culturally sensitive trauma-informed approaches, in line with previous recommendations (Bernard et al., 2021). Future evaluations of TIC training programs that address social hierarchies and cultural power dynamics within the school context could yield valuable insights into the nuanced challenges and opportunities of implementing TIC in culturally diverse educational settings.

Finally, an organizational and systematic support of TIC may require structural shifts nationwide, rather than exclusively within a few schools (see also Fondren et al., 2020; Middleton et al., 2019), such as integrating fundamental components of TIC into all teaching education programs, to better prepare teachers and other school personnel for the challenging environments they most likely will encounter and facilitate for more comprehensive and specialized TIC interventions later in their professional life.

Limitations

Several school principals declined their schools' participation to the study based on a conviction that participation would overburden the school personnel. Thus, the potential effect of self-selection bias of participants acquired from TIC-enthusiastic schools cannot be disregarded. Also within participating schools, some school personnel may have been more inclined to participate than others. At the same time, our data revealed very diverse perspectives and insights from school personnel, suggesting that the effects of selection bias may be minimal. Furthermore, although the focus group interviews gave access to a width of experiences, opinions, perspectives, and nuances, it cannot be excluded that other experiences and reflections were missed. While this type of group interview reproduces natural conversation patterns, it cannot guarantee that all participants contribute equally to

the conversation. Nor can it be guaranteed that all perspectives and opinions were shared uninhibitedly, as different formal and informal hierarchies and power dynamics may influence whether the participant adopts an active or a more passive, listening role (Krueger & Casey, 2009), but also whether they feel safe to share their perspectives truthfully. Finally, given the documented tendency of focus group participants to respond in socially desirable ways (Krueger & Casey, 2009), we anticipated that significant internal disagreement might discourage them from expressing their true opinions. However, the very diverse perspectives and opinions expressed speak against this threat.

While our procedures established consensus-coding of the material, this is not the major indicator of analytical quality in reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022). To enhance quality, we discussed extensively the process of thematization, using our disagreements to inform and enrich the process (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Intersubjective exchange between us researchers and the subject of investigation was indeed used as a methodological tool (Haavind, 2000), and continuous reflection on this matter has strengthened the quality of our analysis process (Elliott et al., 1999).

In line with the principle of transparency (e.g., Elliott et al., 1999), we tried to describe our coding procedures in detail. However, while our critical-realistic epistemology supports a belief in the value of our results as representative of an empirical reality, we acknowledge that their transferability largely depends on whether they are perceived as trustworthy and relevant enough to inspire further knowledge production or practices related to TIC training and implementation in a school context (Haavind, 2000). Quantitative research looking into measurable change in both school personnel and students may help identify whether TIC training is impactful in practice and leading to positive outcomes. However, the more unexpected types of influence described and discussed by participants in the focus groups, such as a shift toward more compassionate perceptions of colleagues, may be difficult to capture by commonly used quantitative measures and approaches. A further understanding of beliefs and other individual characteristics important for implementing (or not implementing) TIC after training would contribute with further knowledge on improvements to facilitate its application at school. Finally, despite its potential contribution, the student perspective is still missing in research on school-based trauma-informed interventions.

Conclusion

Participants' attitudes toward TIC varied and our study highlights that schools grappling with student behavior issues tend to embrace TIC more readily, highlighting the importance of contextual factors. Differences in attitude

could also reflect individual differences in personal circumstances or professional self-efficacy (Rothmann & Cooper, 2008). Understanding these variations can inform tailored approaches to training and implementation of TIC. Instead of attributing barriers to either individuals or organizations, a systemic analysis of the school context may identify aspects of organizational support to effectively manage demands associated with openness to novelty, maintenance of motivation, and willingness to change, leveraging the strengths of individuals, groups, and organizations (Kirchner et al., 2020). Notwithstanding potential negativity and hurdles in implementing TIC, the goal is for school personnel to maintain motivation even when the organization is not functioning optimally, and for the organization to take responsibility for its employees and their working conditions, ultimately benefiting the students.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors have no financial or non-financial conflict of interests to disclose.

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