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TRAUMA-INFORMED APPROACH INCREASE THE PARTICIPATION OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN THE SOCIETY

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1 INTRODUCTION

Many children and young people struggle with mental health challenges and trauma background that impact their participation in society (US department of education, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, 2021). A safe environment, mental and social support are important for children and young people suffering trauma background (World Health Organization, 2018). This article seeks to explore a trauma-informed approach and how it can increase the engagement and participation of children and young people in society. The article is based on the international literatures within the trauma topic, developing questions concerning trauma concept and the project itself “Encountering trauma in the social, health and education services – coping in the midst of trauma in Southern Ostrobothnia” (Seinäjoen ammattikorkeakoulu (SeAMK), n.d.). The TRAKON project concentrates on the relationship between a trauma-informed approach and the participation of various professionals working with children and young people with trauma background in the fields of education, social and health care. By exploring this relationship, the project aims to inform policies and practices that support trauma-informed care and improve the outcomes for those children affected by trauma and increase

participation. To do so, it is imperative to understand the concepts of trauma, trauma-informed approach and participation of different stakeholders at diverse levels within society.

The primary aim of the current article is to seek answers to the question of how a trauma-informed approach can increase the engagement and participation of children and young people in society. The article presents how trauma is defined and how the trauma-informed approach is implemented in various settings to improve the participation of children and young people affected by trauma. The article furthermore presents the key components of a trauma-informed approach that promotes engagement and participation of children and young people in school and social and health care services. The major results of the primary survey taken under the TRAKON project will then be discussed, highlighting the important findings and their implications for the broader field of trauma-informed approach in society.

2 TRAUMA CONCEPT AND TRAUMA-INFORMED APPROACH

Trauma can significantly affect a child or young person's capacity to engage in activities, relationships, education, social and health care services, and other facets of daily life. According to Grossman et al. (2021) people can experience trauma on individual, interpersonal or collective levels. These levels do not always happen separately though; they often occur as intersectional and dynamic layers within the life stages of the person. Understanding the possible impacts of trauma and taking a sensitive approach to interactions and interventions are key components of the trauma-informed care approach (Cutuli et al., 2019). Previous research has shown that trauma-informed approaches significantly influence the engagement and participation young people affected by trauma. The traumatic experience can create barriers to developing relationships and feeling comfortable, leading to a range of negative outcomes, such as social isolation, lack of sense of belongingness, and low self-esteem (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMSHA), 2014). Hence, a trauma-informed strategy, which incorporates specialist knowledge about

trauma, trauma assessment, and trauma-informed policy, is beneficial in implementing services to build a trauma-informed social system (Conradi & Wilson, 2010). In Finland, the trauma-informed approach is developed on the basis SAMHSA model (Sarvela, 2023, 152).

The Trauma and Justice Strategic Initiative of SAMHSA also states that “trauma results from an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that are perceived by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or threatening and that have long-lasting adverse effects on the individual’s functioning and physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being” (SAMHSA, 2014, p. 7-8). Anybody can be impacted by trauma, regardless of their colour, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, gender, psychological background, or location. A single incident, a string of incidents, or a persistent disease can all constitute a traumatic experience (e.g., childhood neglect, domestic violence). Traumas can impact people individually, as well as in families, groups, communities, and across the generations.

The children and young people who have experienced trauma frequently suffer with emotional control, social isolation, and physical health issues (Ford et al., 2015). Studies have repeatedly demonstrated that being exposed to maltreatment, neglect, prejudice, violence, and other unfavorable events can have substantial and enduring effects on health outcomes throughout the course of one’s lifetime (Menschner & Maul, 2016). Srivastav et al. (2020) in their study also mentioned that adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) stemmed from trauma can raise the likelihood of engaging in hazardous habits such as smoking tobaccos and using e-cigarette.

On the other hand, the protective factors such as safe, stable, and nurturing relationships support children’s resilience. However more research is needed in this area, but using a trauma-informed strategy can aid in addressing these problems and encourage young people’s engagement and participation in society.

A trauma-informed approach widely integrates knowledge of trauma and its influence on all aspects of organizational functioning (Berliner

& Kolko, 2016). Trauma-informed approach is an umbrella concept for different trauma related concepts and approaches. Trauma-informed care is used especially in the context of health care. It involves approaches, interactions, and interventions in a sensitive and supportive way that creates a safe and trusting environment. Such approaches have been shown to improve engagement, participation and outcomes for individuals affected by trauma (Levenson, 2017). Recognizing and understanding the link between participation and a trauma-informed approach helps guide the development of policies and practice that supports trauma-informed contexts such as early education, teaching, healthcare, and others, ultimately enhancing the resilience (Menschner & Maul, 2016).

Levenson's definition of trauma-informed care approach recognizes the prevalence of early adversity in the lives of clients, views presenting problems as symptoms of maladaptive coping (Levenson, 2017). Additionally, it acknowledges how early trauma shapes a client's fundamental beliefs about the world and affects his or her psychosocial functioning and well-being across the life span.

Trauma-informed approach encourage involvement, participation, and empowerment by fostering a safe and supportive environment, which can enhance the outcomes for children and young people who have experienced trauma (US department of education, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, 2021). This calls for a departure from conventional strategies that could stigmatize or assign blame to those who have experienced trauma and towards an approach that recognizes the complex nature of trauma and its impact on development, relationship, and behaviors. Repeated, ongoing trauma survivors display strong symptoms and effects such as substance abuse, mental health problems and other health issues related to that. Hence, trauma therefore, has a substantial impact on how a person interacts with the important domains of life (Center for Substance Abuse Treatment, 2014) and trauma-informed approach is needed to understand these impacts during the early developmental phase of the children and young people.

Recognizing how socioeconomic determinants of health, such as racism, social isolation, and poverty, affect health outcomes is another crucial component of a trauma-informed approach (Center for Substance Abuse Treatment, 2014). These difficulties may be more common for young people who have suffered trauma, which may further reduce their prospects for involvement and participation from early childhood. Policymakers and practitioners may contribute to the creation of more fair and inclusive societies that encourage the engagement of all young people by tackling these socioeconomic determinants.

Through the trauma-informed approach, a child or young person can recognize their own strengths and skills. This, in turn, strengthens their self-esteem and belief in their own abilities, which is important in promoting inclusion. A trauma-informed approach also emphasizes the importance of the safety of the child or young person, which is a key factor in promoting inclusion. When the child or young person feels safe, they dare to express themselves and participate in social activities. Hence, trauma-informed practice involves recognizing trauma's impact on children's learning, development, and well-being, creating safe, supportive environments, and helping them develop capacity for emotional regulation (Australian Government Department of Education (AGDE), 2022).

3 PARTICIPATION AND WELL-BEING

Participation entails a person's ability to impact both their personal life and the society in which they live (Schuring et al., 2011). Participation is also considered a determinant of health and well-being. Hammel's (2008) study defines participation as a set of values including active engagement, choice, control, access, personal and societal duties, influence, social connection, inclusion, and membership. Hence, participation involves a diversity of subdomains, which varies between individuals and stages of life (de Wind et al., 2019).

Children and young people's participation is particularly crucial for their development and well-being from an early age. Their sense of self-worth and independence are enhanced by participation, which

promotes academic performance (AGDE, 2022). A sense of belonging is crucial for human survival, forming identities through trustworthy connections and validating experiences. Children come from diverse families, communities, and neighborhoods, and being and becoming are intertwined, shaping a child's identity and potential. The rapid and significant change in children's identities, knowledge, and relationships during childhood requires collaboration between educators, families, and children to enhance their connections and active participation (AGDE, 2022). The necessity for developing trauma-informed strategies enhances participation and is highlighted by the fact that stress related to trauma can make it harder for children and young people to participate.

Creating a secure and encouraging environment that encourages recovery and healing is crucial when working with children and young people who have experienced trauma. This may entail employing techniques like fostering trusting relationships, offering chances for self-expression, giving people choices and empowerment, and fostering a sense of safety and predictability (Choitz & Wagner, n.d.). Children and young people who have suffered trauma can be seen, heard, and valued by using a trauma-informed approach (Martin et al., 2023).

It is important to know how children and young people experience the situations that cause traumas and may hinder their participation. Experiential knowledge is needed when the goal is to enhance understanding of trauma. The clients who are educated experts-by-experience can inform carers about trauma background and what trauma means for children and young. Experts-by-experience can also tell their trauma stories and enhance to develop trauma sensitive approach. At same time it is important to take account ethics, how experiential knowledge is used and what kind of position experts-by-experience have in the social and health care system (Kiili & Itäpuisto, 2022).

Happell et al. (2022) addressed the valuable roles of experts by experience in promoting the trauma-informed approach using their expertise in the academic sector. From a trauma-informed perspective, it recognizes the significance of positive attitudes and relationships

when working with students and other service users who may have experienced trauma. Experts by experience bring unique perspectives to the educational environment, fostering more collegial and empathetic relationships between students and service users. Trauma-informed practice emphasizes creating safe and inclusive spaces, and this can extend to academic settings where students affected by trauma and their lived experience can contribute meaningfully.

4 ENHANCING TRAUMA-INFORMED APPROACH VIA PROJECT TRAKON

The TRAKON project, which is scheduled from February 2023 to February 2026 aims to address trauma-informed approaches in social, health, and educational services in the Southern Ostrobothnia region (SeAMK, n.d.). The primary goal of the project is to enhance the professionals' understanding of various traumas, their effects, and the integration of trauma knowledge into counseling and support systems. As planned previously, the project will feature lecture series, supervision, technique training, mentorship, and peer support, encouraging resilience in work teams.

The development of a digital toolbox will focus on trauma-informed strategies and provide guidance on how they can be applied practically in daily work-life contexts (SeAMK, n.d.). The project will improve the integration of trauma-informed methods across the South Ostrobothnia region and create a network of professionals committed to trauma-informed practices, further facilitated by the collaborative development of a vision paper.

TRAKON project will further explore the key components of trauma-informed methods and their potential to support the healing and well-being of young people, as well as investigate how policymakers, practitioners, and educators can better integrate trauma-informed approaches into social and community programs to increase the participation and inclusion (SeAMK, n.d.).

5 RESULTS OF THE TRAKON PRIMARY SURVEY

The primary survey questionnaires of the TRAKON project focused on the various aspects of trauma, and its impact on children, youth, and families as well as the professionals dealing with individuals having trauma backgrounds in the social, health, and educational sectors. A Webropol survey was chosen as the primary data collection tool due to its accessibility and user-friendly interface. The initial survey questionnaire consisted of a combination of closed and open-ended questions, altogether thirteen questions. These questionnaires were formulated by the TRAKON Project members to gather respondents' experience and initial knowledge on trauma, the utilization of trauma-informed approaches in their professional roles and other trauma themes related to the objectives of the TRAKON Project. The survey targeted professionals working in the social, health, and educational sectors within the South Ostrobothnia region. A purposive sampling method was employed to ensure representation from diverse roles within these sectors. 67 professionals answered the survey which was conducted in June 2023 (Hautamäki et al., 2023).

Survey questions regarding the capacity and skills in responding to the challenges of trauma, almost all respondents have encountered traumatized children and young people in their work lives at some form, and they recognize the long-lasting impact of trauma on children and youth. Trauma-informed approach knowledge is poorly known among 20% of the respondents while 8% of the respondents have good knowledge of the trauma-informed approach. Only 28% of the respondents utilize the trauma-informed approach at work. One of the survey questionnaires was aimed at understanding the perspectives, challenges, and professional development in meeting client needs with trauma. Almost half of the respondents (n=29) cited lack of training and knowledge, lack of time, and resources as challenges in adopting a trauma-informed approach in their respective workplaces.

From the survey, it was noted that trauma has significant effects on the growth and development of children and youth. Young children are

particularly vulnerable to the impacts of trauma whereas adolescents may exhibit various behavioral changes and challenges due to the trauma they experienced during their growth and developmental phase. On the question regarding well-being and psychological impact, the overwhelming majority of the respondents (n=63) reported that trauma can lead to a range of psychological symptoms affecting emotional regulation and mental health. Sleep disturbances and somatic symptoms are common among those with trauma backgrounds which could affect daily life and interpersonal relationships.

Most of the respondents (n=49) reported that the manifestations of trauma can vary and include aggression, withdrawal from social interaction as well as other behavioral problems. These behaviors influence how they interact with peers and authoritative adults, progress, and perform in school activities. Trauma significantly impacts a child's learning experience, necessitating special help in education and schooling system. It also affects school environments, students' overall well-being, and occasionally increases absent rates.

Interestingly, some of the respondents (n=12) observed the significant impact of trauma on both parenting and family relationships. According to them, parents who have experienced trauma in the past may find it difficult to cope, which affects how well their kids behave and function in general. This interaction between trauma and family dynamics emphasizes the value of a comprehensive strategy for dealing with its repercussions.

Other respondents also cited the effects of trauma seen in early education settings however only two respondents (n=2) explicitly described the situations including domestic violence, escapes from conflict zones or loss. Safety, active listening, and support are of the utmost importance in these situations. Professionals encountering in this sector may also suffer from secondary traumatic stress because of their profession, emphasizing the significance of self-care and coping mechanisms. Hence, the identification of trauma-related symptoms among children and youths is crucial for effective treatment since comprehensive trauma care has far-reaching effects on psychological

assessments and diagnosis. Almost all respondents emphasize the constant need to enhance their competence in adopting trauma-informed approaches.

Taken together, these results suggest that a trauma-informed approach is deemed essential for improving the well-being of children, youth, and families as well as for professionals. Professionals with the capacity to be empathic, solution-oriented, and professionally competent in trauma-related topics can support children and young people. Professional development, application of trauma knowledge, effective networking in family services, good practice, and shared reflection can lead to growth and improved outcomes while working with children having trauma backgrounds. The survey also resonated the need for coaching and well-being support for employees and front-line workers.

6 CONCLUSIONS

The results of the primary survey conducted by the TRAKON project, hence unequivocally support the notion that adopting a trauma-informed approach is essential to achieving the goal of a diverse society in which every child and young person may actively participate, learn, and grow regardless of their prior traumatic experiences. By providing the professionals with knowledge, tools, and resources to implement the trauma-informed approach, they establish a safe and inclusive space. This is about creating a society where each person has the chance to realize their full potential, not merely about enhancing mental health and well-being.

In conclusion, the TRAKON project's survey provided an important insight into the crucial facet of trauma, trauma-informed care and the involvement and well-being of children and young people. The knowledge gained through the preliminary survey highlighted the tremendous effects of trauma on people's life from early childhood to maturity and emphasizes significances of utilizing a trauma-informed approach in a variety of professional settings. The trauma-informed approach has proven to improve the engagement and participation

of people affected by trauma by including them in decision-making processes and initiatives that have an impact on their lives. Socially inclusive youth participation thus can be developed and provided in ways that cater to the needs and preferences of young people who have experienced trauma. This in the long run will result in greater activity engagement, enhanced social and emotional growth, and improved overall well-being. Once again, the survey results demonstrated how critical it is for the social, health and educational sectors to implement a trauma-informed approach. The possibility for positive transformation in the lives of persons impacted by trauma is highlighted by professionals' acknowledgment of the lasting effects of trauma and their motivation to improve their trauma-informed knowledge and competence in this area.

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