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# Trauma-Informed Educational Practices: Perceptions of Undergraduate Communication Sciences and Disorders Students

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***Trauma-Informed Educational Practices: Perceptions of Undergraduate  
Communication Sciences and Disorders Students***

An Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Honors in the  
Department of Clinical Sciences

By

Lindsey J. Knussmann

Under the mentorship of Dr. April W. Garrity

**ABSTRACT**

Trauma is a prevalent issue among college students, with lasting negative effects on mental health, physical well-being, and academic performance. Despite this, literature exploring the application of trauma-informed education practices (TIEPs), specifically within the field of communication sciences and disorders (CSD), is limited. The purpose of this study was to address this literature gap by exploring which TIEPs CSD students find most beneficial.

Undergraduate students majoring in CSD participated in this research, rating the helpfulness of 12 TIEPs. Most participants reported perceiving all TIEPs as at least “very helpful”. These data represent a step toward improved understanding of the effects of TIEPs on CSD students’ academic experiences. The intentional integration of trauma-informed practices in CSD classrooms holds promise for enhancing learning experiences and fostering supportive environments.

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## **Introduction**

Evidence suggests that university students have elevated levels of anxiety, depression, and stress (Davies et al., 2022). For many students, entering college is the first time they must leave their families and enter a new and unfamiliar environment (Pedrelli et al., 2015). This may introduce students to stressors and responsibilities they have not yet experienced, potentially causing an increase in levels of anxiety, depression, and stress. Research has found traumatic events may contribute to the mental health disorders being experienced among college students (Karatekin, 2017). In a study with first-year college students, Arnekrans et al. (2018) found 73.4% of their participants reported having experienced at least one traumatic event. Trauma is defined by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration as

“An event or circumstance resulting in physical harm, emotional harm, and/or life-threatening harm. The event or circumstance has lasting adverse effects on the individual’s mental health, physical health, emotional health, social well-being, and/or spiritual well-being”  
(SAMHSA, 2022).

Trauma may take a variety of forms and can occur at any point in someone’s life. The following literature review will describe what current evidence suggests about how trauma affects college students.

## **Literature Review**

Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) are traumatic events that happened to an individual before 18 and may include physical, emotional, verbal, and sexual abuse (Grigsby et al., 2020). Grigsby and colleagues (2020) examined the relationship between

ACE-related health issues and the developmental timing of those health issues in college students between the ages of 18 and 29. They found that 51.67% of the participants reported experiencing an ACE. In addition, the results revealed that young adults attending college report more symptoms of depression and substance use behaviors compared to young adults who do not attend college. For the participants in that study, ACEs increased the chances of an individual having attempted suicide, having suicidal thoughts, self-harming, or being diagnosed with depression by two to three times over peers who did not report ACEs (Grigsby et al., 2020).

ACEs also are associated with diminished academic performance (Arnekrans et al., 2018; Davies et al., 2022). Graham's (2021) study examined the perceptions of high school seniors and first-year college students on the effects of trauma on academic achievement, support from instructors regarding their trauma, and whether the students felt adequately served. Graham's (2021) findings revealed that 46% of the respondents reported experiencing trauma. In addition, 67% of participants felt teachers were unprepared to support the emotional needs of students who had experienced trauma. Further, the study revealed that students with trauma histories had difficulty trusting others and forming relationships, in addition to having mental health issues.

Aside from ACEs and other significant traumatic events, individuals can also develop trauma from cumulative negative experiences such as those involving bullying, stigma, marginalization, and microaggression (Matheson et al., 2019; Nadal, 2018; Zapolski et al., 2021). Communication sciences and disorders (CSD) programs are comprised primarily of students of a certain demographic profile: White, U.S. citizens, middle-class, Christian, heterosexual, cisgender, able-bodied, and traditional college-age

females. CSD students from backgrounds that are not consistent with this profile may experience microaggressions in their academic programs (Abdelaziz et al., 2021).

In their study of 155 underrepresented CSD students, Abdelaziz and colleagues (2021) found themes of feeling as others, damaging generalizations, maltreatment from their peers, and maltreatment from faculty. Underrepresented students reported experiences of microaggressions including feeling like they had to prove themselves and the quality of their work to their White classmates and being asked to represent entire ethnic and racial groups during discussions. Experiences of microaggressions and maltreatment compound stressors in a population already facing pressures from academic demands, financial concerns, and the competitive nature of CSD graduate school program admissions (Roos & Schreck, 2019). Roos and Schreck's (2019) study of 172 undergraduate CSD students found that 83.9% of students felt stressed fairly or very often. The main stressors found in the study were academic pressures and deadlines, financial concerns, and worrying about admission to graduate school. Students reported experiencing physical changes related to their stress including sleep and eating habits, and emotional changes (Roos & Schreck, 2019).

Trauma-informed principles (TIPS) were proposed by Carello (2020) to be applied in educational settings to avoid retraumatization and create safe environments in which students can learn. Trauma-informed teaching and learning are based on the five principles of trauma-informed care: ensuring safety; establishing trustworthiness; maximizing choice; maximizing collaboration; and prioritizing empowerment (Fallot & Harris, 2009, as cited in Carello & Butler, 2015, p. 264). Carello's (2020) seven principles of trauma-informed teaching and learning include: physical, emotional, social,

and academic safety; trustworthiness and transparency; support and connection; collaboration and mutuality; empowerment, voice, and choice; social justice; and resilience, growth, and change. Because instructors do not necessarily know if a student has experienced trauma, these principles should be implemented for all students (Bosse et al., 2021).

A limited number of studies have attempted to determine the effects of trauma-informed practices in health professions education. Bosse et al. (2021) implemented trauma-informed educational practices (TIEPs) in two undergraduate mental health nursing courses. The study participants were 87 undergraduate nursing students. The TIEPs were incorporated into the courses by focusing on clear expectations, classroom procedures, and student-centered policies. Information about policies, procedures, and the content that would be covered was included in the syllabus. The syllabus also included information about the possibility of retraumatization from the content and ways to practice self-care. A total of 59 participants submitted qualitative feedback about their experiences during the course. Out of those participants, 42% of them reported feelings of social, emotional, and academic safety because of the policies and delivery of content and 39.3% of the participants reported feeling the course instructors sincerely cared about the students and their mental health (Bosse et al., 2021). These results suggest that instructors have a role in improving students' safety and mental health through intentional implementation of TIEPs and the cultivation of a safe classroom environment (Carello & Butler, 2015; Bosse et al., 2021).

In their study of 43 graduate CSD students at three different CSD programs, Joseph (2023) examined the effects of a TIEP educational session and graduate student

attitudes toward trauma-informed care. The pre-test/post-test design provided educational sessions about TIEPs as an intervention. Post-tests revealed themes of felt-safety, application, coping, relationship development, and felt-need. These themes address how an individual feels about their safety in an environment or situation, their perception of need, how these students found they could apply trauma-informed care (TIC), the desire for more information about coping, and the importance of the relationships developed with clients. Students reported positive changes in client interactions and expressed feeling more prepared to meet client needs after the educational session (Joseph, 2023).

Research on TIEPs in health professions education, specifically in CSD, is lacking, but the limited research we do have in this area suggests that TIEPs are helpful for students (Bosse et al., 2021; Joseph, 2023). The purpose of this study is to address this gap in the literature by examining which specific TIEP strategies are perceived as the most helpful by CSD undergraduate students.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

This study was approved by the Georgia Southern University Institutional Review Board (Protocol H22376). The participants included 24 undergraduate CSD students enrolled in a CSD course at a public university in Southeast Georgia. Students enrolled in the course were invited to participate and sent the survey link via the learning management system. All participants self-reported identifying as female (N=25). Most of the participants, 83.3% (N=20) self-reported identifying as White, while 20.8% (N=5) self-reported identifying as Black or African American. Although 25 participants started the survey

and completed the consent form, only 24 participants completed the survey. Extra course credit was offered for participating in the study.

## **Materials**

This study employed a cross-sectional non-experimental design. Participants were invited to complete a Qualtrics survey to rate their opinion of the relative helpfulness of 12 specific TIEPs being implemented by their course instructor. Participants were asked to rate the degree of helpfulness of specific TIEPs that had been implemented by the course instructor. Response choices were based on a 5-point Likert scale and included: ‘I don’t know/Not applicable’, ‘Not helpful at all’, ‘Slightly helpful’, ‘Moderately helpful’, ‘Very helpful’, and ‘Extremely helpful’.

## **Results**

Table 1 provides the list of 12 TIEPs and participants’ ratings for each. The following four TIEPs were rated most highly with the largest proportion of participants rating them as ‘Extremely helpful’ (70.8%,  $n = 17$  participants): maintaining open communication, providing supports/templates for students to monitor their own academic progress, being transparent in assignment instructions, and responding consistently to students within a reasonable time frame. Ceiling effects were noted across all TIEPs, with a range of 79.2% ( $n = 19$  participants) to 100% ( $n = 24$  participants) for ratings of “Very helpful” or “Extremely helpful”.

**Table 1.**  
*Perceived Helpfulness of Implemented TIEPs*

	I don't know/Not applicable	Not helpful at all	Slightly helpful	Moderately helpful	Very helpful	Extremely helpful
Trauma-Informed Educational Practice	% (n)	% (n)	% (n)	% (n)	%(n)	% (n)
Using authoritative teaching style	0	4.2 (1)	4.2 (1)	12.5 (3)	41.7 (10)	37.5 (9)
Talking with students about teaching approaches used in the course	4.2 (1)	0	4.2 (1)	8.3 (2)	41.7 (10)	41.7 (10)
Maintaining open communication	0	0	0	4.2 (1)	25.0 (5)	70.8 (17)
Offering student support regarding frustrating learning experiences/difficult concepts	0	0	0	0	37.5 (9)	62.5 (15)
Facilitating self-reflection	4.2 (1)	0	8.3 (2)	8.3 (2)	33.3 (8)	45.8 (11)
Providing supports/templates for students to monitor their own academic progress	4.2 (1)	0	0	0	25.0 (6)	70.8 (17)

Being transparent in assignment instructions	0	0	0	0	29.2 (7)	70.8 (17)
Responding consistently to students within a reasonable time frame	0	0	0	4.2 (1)	25.0 (6)	70.8 (17)
Facilitating self-differentiation	0	0	0	8.3 (2)	25.0 (6)	66.7 (16)
Creating an environment/activities that facilitate engagement and active learning	0	0	0	0	37.5 (9)	62.5 (15)
Learning and honoring students' pronouns/identities/expressions	8.3 (2)	0	4.2 (1)	4.2 (1)	20.8 (5)	62.5 (15)
Allowing for late assignments or grace days without penalty	4.2 (1)	0	0	16.7 (4)	25.0 (6)	54.2 (13)

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## Discussion

This study aimed to explore the perceptions of undergraduate CSD students about the helpfulness of TIEPs in educational settings. TIEPs were designed based on trauma-informed care principles to create a supportive and safe learning environment while mitigating the risk of re-traumatization for students. The results of this study indicate that the participants, a small sample of undergraduate CSD students, find TIEPs to be helpful teaching strategies. All the TIEPs examined in this study were perceived as at least “very helpful” by a majority of the participants. No strategies were self-reported as being perceived as less or more effective than others.

The current study serves as an early step toward experimental research with larger sample sizes, which are needed to answer more complex and nuanced questions about the implementation of TIEPs in CSD classrooms. CSD educators could benefit from learning which TIEPs may be most beneficial for students with specific types of trauma histories or students who have marginalized or minoritized identities. Consistent with the findings of Bosse et al. (2021), the current study revealed high levels of perceived helpfulness of deliberate TIEP implementation for all students regardless of trauma history. Such agreement in perception may serve as an endorsement for the continued implementation of these teaching strategies in educational settings, reinforcing their potential to enhance learning experiences and foster supportive environments for all students.

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