

The Extent of Vicarious Trauma among Teachers Working in Educational Assessment and Resource Centers in Kenya

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Abstract: *In Kenya, basic education is free and compulsory and necessary efforts are employed to ensure compliance. Towards this end, the government has established educational assessment and resource centers (EARCs) across the country to support children with disabilities access education. However, Secondary exposure such as vicarious trauma (VT) among teachers working in EARCs may limit their capacity for quality assessment hence need for study. This study utilized a cross-sectional descriptive research design where the two-stage cluster sampling was used to select assessment centers and representative teachers. The Vicarious Traumatization Scale (VTS) by Middleton (2011) was used to gather data from one hundred and seven teachers. The scale is designed to detect disruptions in the cognitive schemas of the caregiver's identity and belief system. The study revealed that all teachers in EARCs experienced VT to some extent with 41.25% at a low level and 48.3% at a moderate. This is indicative that VT was a real threat to the teachers and is likely to interfere with their capacity to deliver quality assessment outcomes. This study was conducted in EARCs and the findings may not be generalizable to other professionals working with children with disabilities. Nevertheless, it may be replicated for comparative purposes. Identifying the extent of VT among different professionals who work with children with disabilities may provide useful information on how to support them improve the quality of services and consequently enhance access to education.*

Keywords: Disability, assessment, vicarious trauma, interventions.

1. Introduction

Primary education in Kenya is free and compulsory hence all necessary efforts are put in place to ensure that every child has equitable access (Orodho, Waweru, Ndichu & Nthingur, 2013). However, children with disabilities experience developmental difficulties which limit their chances to access primary education and get sustained until successful completion (Orodho, 2014). In this respect, assessment becomes an indisputable enabler by identifying the nature of disability for assigning appropriate placement and designing suitable interventions. In Kenya, this important function is conducted in Educational Assessment and Resource centers (EARCs) which are government offices distributed across the country (Emmy, 2020; Owen, 2018). Through assessment parents and teachers among other service providers get credible information about the developmental strengths and needs of the children which include psychological, emotional, physical, and behavioral (Barber, 2021; Gilmour, Fuchs & Wehby, 2019). The process of assessment involves observing the child as well as administering tests, and interviewing the parents/ guardians. Additionally, assessment reveals developmental, environmental and educational gaps which need to be addressed to facilitate effective learning. However, the interrelations between these children and their parents/guardians are likely to predispose the teachers to secondary trauma such as vicarious trauma (Lykins, Seroka, Mayor, Seng, Higgins & Okoli, 2021; Morabito, Pattavina & Williams, 2021). Vicarious trauma is a condition whereby the professionals working with traumatized clients experience the same effects as the clients, (Pearlman & Mac Ian, 1995).

2. Literature Survey

Vicarious trauma was first designated by McCann and Pearlman (1990), as the negative cognitive changes that befall therapists who frequently treat traumatized clients. They developed the Constructivist Self-development Theory (CSDT) to support their argument. The theory proposes that human beings hypothesize their unique realism about the selves, their environment, and others through cognitive schemas (McCann & Pearlman, 1990). They further speculated that the effects of VT interrupt one's cognitive schemas concerning safety, dependency/ trust, independence, power, esteem, frame of reference and intimacy (McCann & Pearlman, 1990) hence affecting the professionals in many ways. Cognitive schemas are utilities in the brain that play crucial roles in information processing, (Gu, Yao, Chen, Ding, Zhao, Liu & Li, . 2022; Dozois & Beck, (2008). Some of these roles include; distinguishing between related and unrelated information, permitting grasp of main ideas for appropriate understanding, positioning systematized examination for novel data, serving to analyze the information gathered and facilitating the kickoff to rebuilding of mislaid information, (Rek, Kappelmann, Zimmermann, Rein, Egli & Kopf-Beck, 2022; Lee & Liao, 2022; Hu & Guan, 2022, June; Alghadari, Yundayani & Geng, 2022).

More importantly, frame of reference encompasses self-capacities, ego capitals, and are important in safeguarding the professionals to remain valuable not only in good health but also productive in their work. Professionals exposed to VT are likely to get their basis of beliefs, through which they understand experiences get disturbed by the continual exposure to the upsetting stories and images. McCann and Pearlman (1990) further emphasize that VT is unescapable

because it may possibly affect all dominions of the professional. Additionally, it is snowballing because each patient's story or image may reinforce the professionals' suffering. Furthermore, VT may be permanent, where support for the affected professionals is not timely provided (McCann & Pearlman, 1990).

The effects of VT may cause positive or negative changes in the cognitive schema of the professionals and consequently alter the way they perceive themselves and their environment (Kang, Fang, Liu, Zhao, Feng & Li, 2018; Konistan, 2017). The positive effects may include; enhanced self-esteem, improved appreciation of life, better social relations, and transformed strength in service to humanity (Killian, Hernandez-Wolfe, Engstrom & Gangsei 2017). The negative effects are likely to include; frequent incidents of exhaustion, anger, indecisiveness, loneliness, and heightened feelings of inadequacy, (Hallinan, Shiyko, Volpe & Molnar, 2020; Foli & Thompson, 2019). More importantly, the effects of VT may be more pronounced in the psychological, emotional, physical, and behavioral domains of the teachers.

The psychological domain is important in performing cognitive functions such as reasoning and decision-making. This brainpower gear is equally crucial in the assessment of children with a disability because accurate diagnosis and interventions are key in designing meaningful intervention programs. Some studies reported of intrusive thoughts as major disturbance among professionals who worked with traumatized clients (Aafjes-van Doorn, Békés, Prout & Hoffman, (2020). The intrusive thoughts could be about their clients and weird memories of the horrified state of their relatives. They additionally concurred that the intrusive thoughts and memories hampered their ability to diagnose and make appropriate decisions on required support. The aforementioned experiences if witnessed by the assessment teachers are likely to derail not only the assessment process but also the capacity to design appropriate interventions.

Pirelli, Formon, & Maloney, (2020) explored the emotional status of humanitarian aid workers in Canada. They revealed that the aid workers reported of having negative emotional experiences similar to those of the population they served. These included perceiving the world as unsafe and increased distrust of others. The study argued that the homeless population had experienced much suffering in process of becoming homeless or even prior to their current status. These unfortunate conditions were likely to have influenced their current perception of an unsafe world and reduced trust in others. However, the aid workers were probably sharing the same symptoms by association and likely through the process of empathy, (Rodriguez, & Mccorkle, (2020). This subjective perception of an unsafe world is likely to invoke emotional feelings of fear, mistrust, and solitude which have been associated with VT (Branson, (2019); Molnar, Sprang, Killian, Gottfried, Emery & Bride, 2017). When the subjective view sets in, the assessment teachers is likely to view the workplace as unsafe and consequently transfer the same to other aspects of their lives hence affecting their entire worldview. This may eventually weaken the teachers' competency to assess and therefore children with disability miss opportunities to access education.

The effects of VT may also be evidenced in the physical domain of the teachers, (Konistan, 2017). This domain concerns itself with the provision of stamina and energy required by the body in order to undertake activities. In assessment. However, studies have reported that VT is likely to drain physical energy and thereby weaken the ability to pursue demanding activities, (Khamisa, Peltzer, Ilic & Oldenburg, 2017). Levkovich & Gada (2020) in their study, evaluated perceptions of compassion fatigue among preschool teachers in Israel. These scholars reported that when professionals become physically drained, they experience prolonged episodes of tiredness which limits their ability to work for long hours. The failure to work for long hours may imply that it may be difficult for them to engage in multiple demanding tasks as may be required for assessment assignments.

Teachers in EARCs may also experience the effects of VT in the behavioral domain, (Burruss, Holt & Wall-Parker, 2018). This domain is about how people interact in the environment. Interaction is an important aspect of assessment because it offers opportunities for collegial support besides being an avenue for general socialization, (McIntyre & Brown, 2018). Some studies have demonstrated that professionals are likely to benefit from social support which comes via the behavioral domain. For example, (Wilson-Mendenhall, Dunne & Davidson, 2022; Riggs, 2021 McIntyre & Brown 2018; Stubin; 2018), reported that, working for/with children predisposed professionals to the risk of experiencing VT but the effects were moderated by sharing experiences. . In assessment constant interaction characterize the process and as such teachers experience different levels of VT (Shiyko, Volpe & Molnar, 2020; Foli & Thompson, 2019).

3. Problem Definition

Assessment of children with disability is crucial because it guides the process of designing appropriate intervention programs to facilitate optimal growth, development and learning to enhanced livelihoods. However, experiencing VT may compromise the teachers' capacity to conduct efficient assessments hence minimizing the children's opportunity to access appropriate education and related services. Identifying the extent of VT may provide useful information on how to support these professionals to continue serving their clients competently. Improved assessment is likely to improve educational opportunities for children with disability and gradually improve their standards of living.

4. Methodology

The study utilized a cross-sectional descriptive research design. The two-stage cluster sampling was used to select assessment centers and representative teachers. The Vicarious Traumatization Scale (VTS) by Middleton (2011) was used to gather data from one hundred and seven teachers working in EARCs in Kenya. The scale is designed to detect disruptions in the cognitive schemas of the caregiver's identity and belief system. The tool was adapted to conform to the aspects related to the assessment of children with disability. It is a 6-point rating scale with response options ranging from 1 = Strongly Disagree to 6 = Strongly Agree. Higher scores on this scale represent a greater extent

of VT. The total score is obtained by summing up scores of each item. The scores are grouped in mean ranges as follows: 34 to 68 – extremely low VT, 69 to 102 – Low VT, 103 to 136 – Moderate VT, 137 to 170 – High VT, and 171 to 204 – extremely High VT.

5. Findings and Discussion

Table: Levels of Vicarious Trauma among Teachers in EARCs

Level of VT	Frequency	Percentage
Low	44	41.2
Moderate	41	38.3
High	20	18.7
Extremely High	1	0.9
Extremely Low	1	0.9
Total	107	100

The data in above table indicate that all teachers in EARCs experienced VT at various levels with some, 41.2% experiencing low level of VT, 18.7% experiencing a high level of VT, and 38.3% reporting a moderate level of VT. The finding of the current study resonates positively with other studies which have reported the presence of VT in all the respondents working with traumatized clients, (Edwards & Miller (2019); McDonald, Middleton, Bassett & Harris, (2017); Miller, Flores & Pitcher, (2010); Halevi & Idisis (2018). The different levels of VT among the EARC teachers revealed in this study are in line with the subjective nature of VT as hypothesized by constructivist self-development theory, (McCann & Pearlman, 1990). Each teacher could have viewed the VT experience in own unique way and constructed their unique realities on themselves, others and worldview. It is also possible to observe that the different levels of VT could have been moderated by the teachers' personal traits such as history, caseload, professional experience, work environment among other factors, (Lawson, Caringi, Gottfried, Bride &Hydon, (2019); Halevi & Idisis, (2018).

Furthermore, the findings seems to concur with evidence from the literature that working with the traumatized populace has a probability of predisposing professionals to VT, Pirelli, Formon, & Maloney, (2020; McIntyre& Brown, (2018); Burruss, Holt & Wall-Parker, 2018; Butler, Carello & Maguin, 2017). Experiencing VT may imply that the teachers' cognitive capacity is interrupted and may cause difficulties in executing its functions as expected. Such functions may include reasoning, memory and problem solving among others. It's unlikely that a teacher whose mental functions have been compromised is competent enough to provide quality services. Probably, this is what guided McCann & Pearlman, 1990to propose that effects of VT permeate several aspects of the professional's life including their essential worldview. Such effects are likely to erode the teachers' capacity to guard themselves against the corrosive nature of VT.

6. Conclusions

This study revealed that all teachers in EARCs experienced VT at variant levels. This is indicative that VT was a real threat

among the teachers in EARCs and it's likely to interfere with their capacity to deliver quality assessment outcomes.

7. Future Scope

This study mainly focused on the extent of VT among teachers in EARCs in Kenya. However, there are other staff in other special education institutions and there is a need to replicate this study for comparative purposes. The educational assessment and resource service has undergone changes in the recent past which include staff and resource rationalization. There is therefore, need to conduct a study to establish the current status of services in these centers and how it affects the quality of services and staff welfare.

This study was conducted in EARCs in Kenya however, assessment of children with disability is also carried out in hospitals and rehabilitation centers. There is therefore a likelihood of limitations in applying the findings to such staff. Identifying the extent of VT among different professionals who work with children with disability may provide useful information on how to support them to continue offering quality services.

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