The Impact of Trauma on Children's Mental Health and School Performance: A Case Study of the Beirut Blast

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Abstract

Schools in Lebanon face challenges in supporting students' mental health, especially after traumatic events like the Beirut Explosion on August 4th. Many students struggle with unhealed trauma, which affects their academic performance. This study highlights that schools are not adequately equipped or trained to handle students with trauma, partly due to a lack of research on children's mental health in Lebanon. This qualitative multiple case study explores the impact of trauma on middle school students' performance, teachers' experiences with these students, the effect of teachers' preparedness on students' school performance, and the overall impact of the explosion on students' mental health. The theoretical framework used for this study is based on 1) Maslow's (1943) theory of motivation, (2) Vygotsky's (1978) social learning theory, (3) Piaget's cognitive development theory, and (4) Machover's (1949) psychoanalytic theory. Moreover, a conceptual framework was also formulated as an extension of the theoretical lens. Data collection was done among 10 students in middle school, between the ages of 11 and 14. The instruments used to collect data were the Three Pictures Test, semi-structured interviews, and the Academic Performance Questionnaire. Data analysis was based on Grounded Theory Analysis employing open and axial coding. The study implies that inadequately trained school staff can negatively impact traumatized students academically, socially, behaviorally, and emotionally. The results suggest that implementing trauma-informed school strategies and training will help instructors feel more confident in supporting students with trauma, creating a safer school environment, and improving students' academic performance.

Keywords: trauma, Beirut explosion, education, psychological impact, academic performance

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Introduction

After the Beirut explosion on August 4th, many children were left traumatized and untreated. For some children, thriving in school after this traumatic event is challenging. Children who have been exposed to this trauma display a variety of reactions that include problems in memory, attention, self-regulation, and impulse control (Ardino, 2011; Maschi et al., 2009; Simpson et al., 2011). Moreover, students exposed to trauma have needs that the school faculty and staff may not be able to meet without proper training. As a result, these students will be more subject to suspension or failure, or they may even have lower achievement scores and language delays. (Brunzell et al., 2015). However, the Lebanese curriculum focuses solely on the cognitive development of the children, and excludes the emotional and mental development. For this reason, this qualitative case study will highlight the academic difficulties that Lebanese children with trauma are facing after the Beirut explosion, and will call for the need to integrate trauma-informed school strategies in the Lebanese curriculum to increase student achievement.

Background

Numerous national and cross-national studies published on childhood trauma and its cognitive and academic effect. The reported cross-national rate of childhood adversities is 38.8%, and that of lifetime traumatic events in European countries is 64% (Kessler et al., 2010; Darves-Bornoz et al., 2008). However, there were no studies published on childhood trauma on a national level, in Lebanon and all the Arab world. Also, several studies have documented exposure of Lebanese youth to war trauma (Chimienti et al., 1989; Cordahi et al., 2002; Karam et al., 2007; Karam et al., 2008; Karam et al., 1996; Saigh, 1991), and very few to childhood adversities (Usta & Farver, 2010). Another national study by done in 2014, entitled “Childhood Adversities and Traumata in Lebanon: A National Study” (Itani et al., 2014) studied four types of trauma: neglect and abuse, parental loss, parent psychopathology, and other types of trauma that involve the family and the economic situation. The sample in the study targeted Lebanese adults. Results of the study showed that more than a quarter of Lebanese adults experienced a childhood adversity and almost half (47.3%) of them experienced a traumatic event before the age of 18 (Itani et al., 2014).

Significance

The acquired knowledge of the results of this research raises big questions about the current situation of the Lebanese curriculum and the projection of students dealing with trauma and mental health problems. Generation of talent and creativity could be missed due to the scarcity of proper knowledge and training in the field of children trauma that would help these children reach their goals.

This study is beneficial to all schools, teachers, parents, caregivers, and schools in early childhood settings. Parents and caregivers will benefit from these strategies and will apply them in their homes to help their children heal and grow. The results of the study might also motivate curriculum developers to integrate concepts of trauma-informed teaching and for school principals to train their teachers on how to deal with traumatized children.

Theoretical Framework

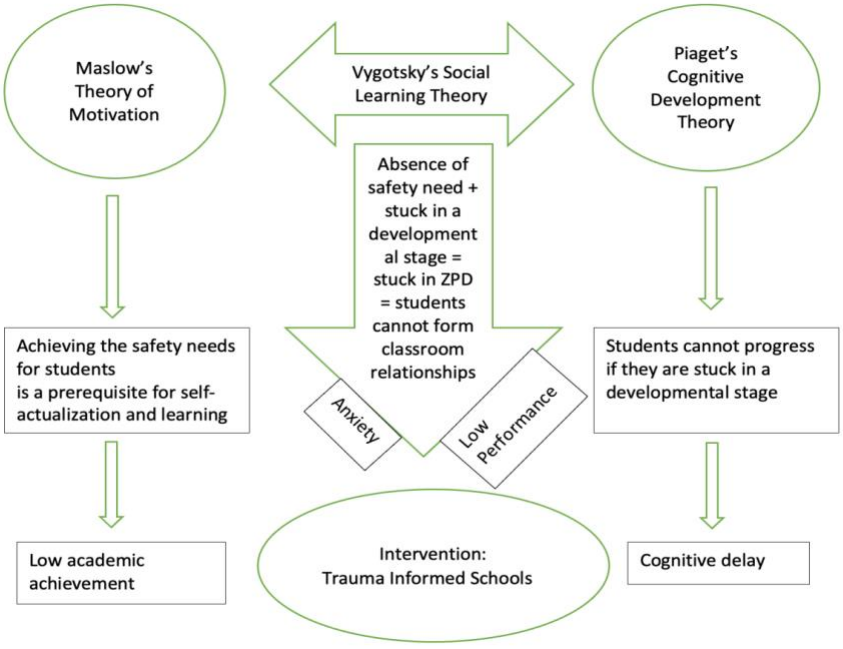
Four theories serve as a premise of this study: (1) Maslow's (1943) theory of motivation, (2) Vygotsky's (1978) social learning theory, (3) Piaget's cognitive development theory, and (4) Machover's (1949) psychoanalytic theory. These theories reinforce the objective of this study that children must feel physiologically and mentally safe in order to achieve educational and developmental milestones.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this study is rooted in Maslow's (1943) theory of motivation, which includes a hierarchy of five basic types of need: physical needs, security needs, social needs, esteem needs, and self-actualization needs. According to Maslow, if the basic needs are not met, higher needs won't be attained. These students will zone out during class because of their constant feeling of insecurity and uncertainty, which negatively affects their academic performance.

Moreover, Piaget's (1936) Cognitive Development Theory explains that students cannot progress if they are stuck in a developmental stage. This will also lead to cognitive delay which affects academic achievement. The association between Maslow's Theory and Piaget's is developed by Vygotsky's (1978) Social Learning Theory. If students are not feeling safe in their classroom and they are not developmentally progressing, then they will also be stuck in the zone of proximal development (ZPD).

Figure 1
Conceptual Framework



Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study is to describe the school experience of ten to fifteen children experiencing trauma or mental health problems after the explosion. The study aims to analyze how the concept of childhood trauma and mental health affect the academic

performance, and recommends the implementation of trauma-informed school principles in the Lebanese curriculum.

Research Questions

This study aims to collect data from participants to answer the following questions:

RQ1: How are traumatized middle school students who survived the Beirut explosion performing in school?

RQ2: What are teachers' experiences with middle school students post Beirut explosion?

Sub-question: To what extent teachers' preparedness in teaching students with mental problems affect the traumatized students' school performance?

RQ3: What is the effect of the Beirut explosion on the students' mental health?

Limitations

This research was limited by factors of the study design. Since this dissertation took a qualitative study design approach, there is a limitation based on the interpretation of the answers of the participants. Moreover, another limitation is the number of participants in the study. The researcher could not have a larger pool of participants due to the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown. Most importantly, many parents did not want their kids to participate claiming that the Beirut explosion had no effect on their kid's mental health and that their kids are fine. Additionally, another limitation of the study is the teacher interviews that were conducted online. It would have been optimal for the interviews to be conducted face-to-face so that the researcher can interpret body language. Moreover, another limitation is having only female teacher participants and only one male student participant. This was also due to the belief of the parents that girls are more sensitive to these issues than boys, which limited my number of male participants. Finally, there is a limitation in using projective drawing as a tool in detecting trauma since there was one participant who displayed trauma indicators in the interview but not in the drawings.

Delimitations

Delimitations are the choices the researcher takes that sets the boundaries for the research study (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2018). The first delimitation of this research study is the chosen age group for the students to participate. The researcher chose this age group after reading several studies that targeted other age groups and after concluding that this age groups is more sensitive to trauma. Another delimitation is the chosen geographical location for the study. The researcher targeted the closest areas to the explosion to provide richness for the data collected. Moreover, sampling remained open among teachers until saturation was reached.

Literature Review

This literature review will provide an understanding of how childhood trauma inflicted by the Beirut explosion on August 4th affects the process of learning and how a curriculum intervention in Lebanese schools based on the idea of trauma-informed schools helps children cope, learn, and decrease their mental and physical damages.

Mental Health in Children

Studies done in Lebanon about mental health in children reveal concerning numbers. These studies show that approximately 25% of children are living with at least one mental disorder, with only 6% of those affected having ever sought professional mental health help (Maalouf et al., 2016). This study was confirmed in 2020 when results revealed that 94% of children have not received any treatment (Maalouf et al., 2020). Moreover, Embrace, a non-profit organization (NGO), which works on raising awareness about mental health in Lebanon, conducted a study after the Beirut explosion. This study collected data from 701 individuals (age group 24-45) and the results were that 77% of these individuals were feeling anxious and stressed after one week of the explosion. These people were surveyed again after one month of the explosion using Maysay App for data collection. Shockingly, 80% of them still experienced symptoms of anxiety and developed post -traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Embrace, 2020).

Childhood Trauma

Darine Al Masri, president of Kidproof Safety, explains in her guide that supports Lebanese educators in times of trauma, pandemic, and e-learning, that any situation that leaves a person overwhelmed and isolated can result in trauma, adding that, "it is not the objective circumstances that determine whether an event is traumatic, but your subjective emotional experience of it" (Al Masri, 2020, p.7). That being said, not all children were traumatized by the blast because trauma is personal; it affects people differently. Further additional research shows that children who experienced trauma have higher rates of mental health disorders and behavioral challenges than children without these traumatic experiences (Holmes et al., 2015; Layne et al., 2011; Mendelson et al., 2015; Perfect et al., 2016).

Effect of Trauma on School Students

Students' social emotional well-being is directly linked to academic achievement (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014). Recent studies on trauma revealed that students exposed to traumatic incidents exhibit misconduct and disobedience that are mostly perceived in the classroom; teachers and students complain about them the most and they are usually called the "class clowns" (Perfect et al., 2016; Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014). Moreover, students with trauma are usually labeled as students with attention- deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), oppositional defiance disorder, acute stress disorder, conduct disorder, reactive attachment, and disinhibited social engagement (Blodgett & Lanigan, 2018; Brunzell et al., 2015).

Trauma-Informed Schools

In the book *Creating Trauma-Informed Schools,* Dombo, E.A., and Sabatino, C.A. (2019) explain that "for a school to be considered trauma-informed, the services and care must be provided in the context of an organization-wide approach grounded in an understanding of trauma and its consequences, with a focus on strengths, healing, and resilience" (p. 58). To achieve this, there should be a change in the manner of the questions or statements targeted at students, either from staff or faculty. Al Masri (2020) suggested in her guide *"*A Walk in Your Shoes*"* that school leadership can integrate Socio-Emotional Learning (SEL) programs and prioritize it in a school's curriculum, like Kidproof's Protect Ed program.

Teacher's Readiness With Children Trauma

Students who have been exposed to trauma have a hard time reaching age-appropriate milestones, especially in areas of academics and communication, which often labels them as children with ADHD or special needs (Statman-Weil, 2015). For this reason, teachers treat them using synonymous strategies because both types of children can be unmanageable in a classroom setting (Esturgó-Deu & Sala-Roca, 2010; Ford et al., 2009; Pritchard et al., 2009). For this reason, teachers must be trained using trauma-informed teaching strategies to teach students from a traumatic background.

Use of Art in Trauma and Mental Health

Studies have provided evidence for the importance of projective drawings in assessing trauma, PTSD, or any other mental health difficulty. One of the projective drawing techniques, The Three Pictures Test: Past, Present, and Future, was administered on 14 children who survived an earthquake that took place on April 6, 2009, in the region of Abruzzi, Italy (Giordano, 2017). This test was developed by the psychiatrist Crocq (1999), and is meant to be administered on children who survived any kind of natural or environmental catastrophe.

Research Design

The choice of paradigm in this study is a qualitative multiple case study as it allows me to connect with my participants openly and develop trustful relationships. Yin (2018) explained that multiple case studies is a "set of case studies with exemplary outcomes in relation to some evaluation question" (p. 59), adding that multiple case studies allow more rigorous, meaningful, and thorough information about each participant (Yin, 2009). For these reasons, the multiple case study approach seems to be the best application that will give voice to many traumatized children.

Study Participants

The sample will be drawn from a population of 10 to 15 children in middle school, equally divided between males and females. These children will have to possess three criteria to participate in this study: (1) living in near proximity to the explosion cite like the districts of Beirut port, Gemmayze, Mar Mkhael, or Ashrafeye, (2) enrolled in a private educational institution, and (3) between the ages of eleven and fourteen. Moreover, this specific age group was chosen based on studies done which concluded that this age group is very sensitive in terms of emotional, cognitive, and endocrinological development (Charmandari et al., 2003).

The sampling method that will be used to select participants is convenient sampling based on a database of families affected by the explosion.

Instrumentation

The specific method to be used is based on a Projective drawing tool, "Three Pictures Test: Past, Present, and Future," followed by semi-structured interviews with them and their teachers, and an Academic Performance Questionnaire. These three methods will be used to produce generalizability and allow for triangulation, which adds to the study's credibility.

Academic Performance Questionnaire

This questionnaire is composed of ten items to measure the past and present performance of students in academics. Syed et al. (2017) conducted a study, "The Effect of Terrorist Attack of December 16, 2014 on Academic Performance of School Children of Peshawar" which showed that the alpha reliability of the scale retrospectively was .77 whereas the alpha reliability of the academic performance after the traumatic event was .74.

Semi-structured Interviews

Semi-structured interview approach will be adopted with children after I conduct the "Three Pictures Test tool" and with their teachers in order to check the reliability of the Academic Performance Questionnaire. An IRB approval will be given from the Lebanese International University, IRB board. Also, participation in this research will have implied consent. Also, issues of confidentiality will be discussed with the parents, children, and teachers. The interviews will be taped, transcribed, and noted.

Data Collection

The study will use the database of the NGO, Partnership with Resource Development (PRD), to contact families previously visited and introduced to their children. Due to COVID-19, communication will be via phone. After obtaining the children's consent, a projective drawing tool will be sent by email for participants to complete and return. Following this, the children will be contacted again for a semi-structured interview and to complete an Academic Performance Questionnaire, which has been validated through alignment tables. Once the data is collected, the children will be asked to connect with one of their teachers for a further semi-structured interview via phone or online platforms. The validity of the Academic Performance Questionnaire will be tested by aligning it with the research questions.

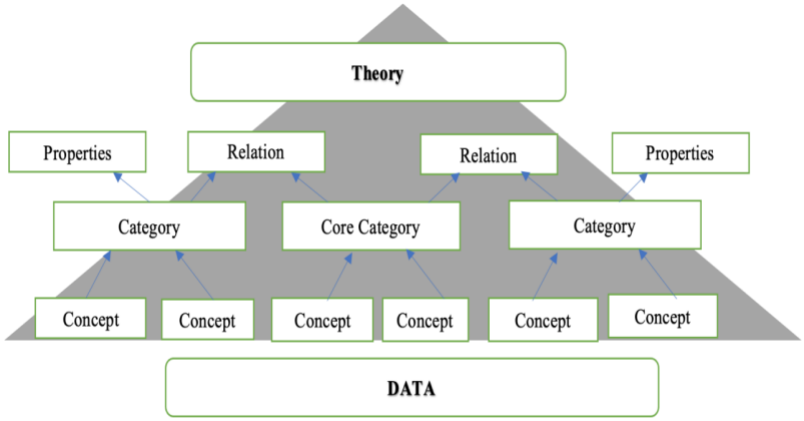
Data Analysis

Data will be analyzed built on Grounded Theory Analysis with open and axial coding. Children's drawings will be analyzed based on four broad categories: (1) Negative/ mixed affected quality as rated by the expressions of faces, (2) Estrangement from the rest of the family, (3) strong contrasting colors and (4) incomplete figures.

Constant Comparative Methods

There will be constant comparison between the data to come up with concepts that eventually lead to a theory (Creswell, 2013). I will stop comparing data and deriving concepts when theoretical saturation is reached and a theory is developed.

Figure 2
Data Analysis Process



Ethical Considerations

Prior to the study implementation, the researcher sought approval from the Lebanese International University Review Board (IRB) to ensure ethical treatment of participants and research design.

Findings

This qualitative study aimed to explore the school experience of children affected by trauma following the Beirut explosion and its impact on academic performance. Due to limitations, only five participants were interviewed, along with five teachers from different school districts. The findings highlighted five themes regarding post-explosion teaching challenges, including disrupted behavior, delayed assignments, failure to complete tests, panic attacks, and silence during sessions, possibly linked to depression or sadness.

Setting

This study took place in a community setting, allowing individual interactions with participants. Children spent 20-30 minutes drawing their house before, during, and after the explosion, followed by interviews in their rooms to express emotions. However, in two cases, parental presence during interviews appeared to make the children anxious, possibly impacting the authenticity of their answers and drawings.

Participants

There were five willing children that participated in this research. Although this number is much lower than expected due to unexpected circumstances, their contributions and efforts were remarkable. Moreover, five teachers who taught these individuals were interviewed over different online platforms.

Demographics

The student participants included four females and one male. Their age ranged from 11 to 14 years with an average age of 12.5 years old. All students were Lebanese. Moreover, the demographics of the teachers included gender, age, years of experience, subject taught, and

level of education. All teachers were female. Their ages ranged from 28 to 53 years making the average age of participants 39.4 years old. All the participants for this study were given pseudonyms to protect their identity.

Data Collection

The data collection process began with demographic information and the Three Pictures Test, followed by interviews with participants, recorded with their consent, lasting 20–40 minutes each. After that, a debriefing process was done and I provided mental health resources, like the NGO Embrace located in Beirut. After data collection, student drawings were combined into a collage, analyzed, and categorized using Grounded Theory. The interviews were then linked to the drawings to identify themes and patterns, which were organized into tables for further analysis.

Data collection from teachers was conducted virtually using Google Meet and WhatsApp due to challenges like long distance, lockdown, and the fuel crisis. Interviews were conducted, lasting up to 40 minutes, and included the Academic Performance Questionnaire.

Data Analysis

Data analysis is based on Grounded Theory analysis followed by open and axial coding.

Trauma indicators that were employed include the following: (1) Symbols of death and destruction, (2) Absence of people, (3) Blurred drawings, (4) Absence of colors, (5) Missing or injured body part, (6) Strong color contrast, (7) Dark colors. Based on these trauma indicators, drawings were labeled as high trauma-load and low-trauma load (Baráth, Á., 2019). The table below shows the trauma indicators revealed in the drawings of the participants.

Table 1
Trauma Indicators in Children's Drawings

Name/ Trauma Indicator	Adam	Sara	Rana	Maria	Nisrine
Symbols of death or destruction	1	1	1	1	1
Absence of people	1	0	1	0	0
Blurred drawings	0	0	1	1	1
Absence of colors	0	0	0	0	1
Missing/ Injured body parts	0	1	0	1	0
Strong color contrast	0	0	1	1	0
Dark color	0	0	0	1	0
Results	2	2	4	5	3

The results of the study done by Baráth (2019) and Giordano (2017) show that semantic differential is a practical and realistic method in detecting trauma in children wartime drawings and that there is a correlation between trauma indicators in children's drawings and the degree that a child developed psychological trauma. Based on these studies, I have developed a scale (1-5) and associated the presence of trauma with (1) and the absence of trauma with (0). This table helped me in classifying the drawings into two categories: the high trauma-load (> 3) and low trauma load (< 3) (Baráth, Á, 2019).

Table 2

Detailed Drawing Comparison

Members	**Adam** -12 years -Lives in Zak Blat -Goes to NPC (Kfarshima)	**Sara** -11 years -Lives in Ashrafeye -Goes to College du Sacre Coeur (Gemayzeh)	**Rana** -14 years -Lives in Ashrafeye -Goes to College du Sacre Coeur (Gemayzeh)	**Maria** -13 years -Lives in Mar Mekhael -Goes to Grand Lycee Ashrafeye	**Nisrine** -14 years -Lives in Gemayzeh -Goes to St.George School (Hadath)
House Drawings **before** the Explosion	-Use of colors -No members visible -Closed window and door	-Use of colors - Six members - Car outside the house with a closed window/door.	-Use of colors - No members visible -Closed window/door	- Use of one color - Two members - Drawing focused on inside of the house and not outside with little details → Display of insecurities/depression	- No colors used - Several Members in the building - Two trees
House Drawings **during** the Explosion	-Use of colors -No members - House collapse	- No colors -Two members= Decrease in the members - Blood on floor - Emptiness	- One color: Red -No members - Vague drawing→ Instability	- Color Black → Fear - Two members -Blood	-No photo provided
House Drawings **after** the Explosion	-Grey Background -Destruction -No members -Shovel on floor	-Simple colors -Bigger house- → Help by NGOS - Four members → Loss since she started with 6 members	- Colorful - Bigger house → Help by NGOS -No members	- Red color→ Fear/Stuck in event -Emptiness -Two members - No expressions	- No colors → Fear - Cracked Building with " For Rent" Sign - One member→ Loss

Figure 3

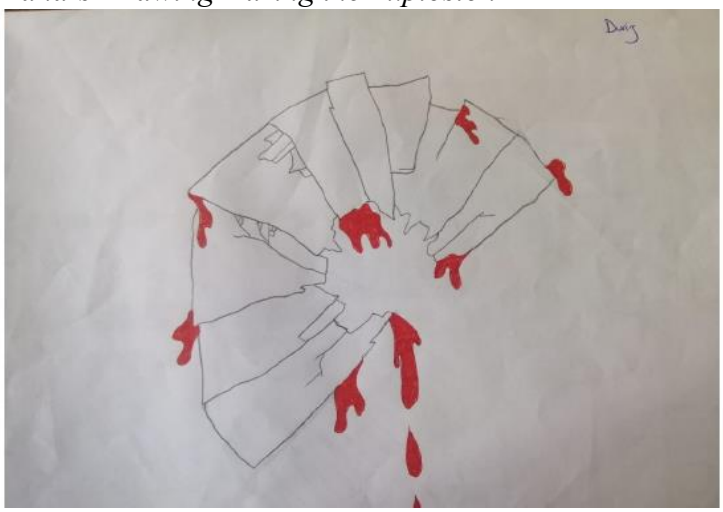
Sara's Drawing: Before, During, and After the Explosion

Sara, who had a low trauma score of 2, shared that an NGO rebuilt her house into her "dream house," acting as a protective factor against psychological trauma despite losing two family members in the explosion. Having her own room for the first time positively impacted Sara's emotional well-being and academic performance. Her teacher, Ms. Rola, noted that Sara became more engaged in online sessions and excelled in school, aided by the comfort of her own space.

Rana, a classmate of Sara, also received support from an NGO, but she displayed higher trauma indicators and was classified as having a high trauma load. Her drawings lacked family members, highlighting a key difference from Sara's experience. In her interview, Rana tearfully shared that her family was dismissive of her feelings, neglecting her emotional and academic well-being. This lack of support, coupled with her mother's disbelief in mental health importance, significantly contributed to her increased trauma. Despite being offered resources for free mental health clinics, her mother declined help, forcing Rana to rely on harmful coping mechanisms. Her shared information was kept confidential. The picture below demonstrated Rana's drawing during the explosion.

Figure 4

Rana's Drawing During the Explosion



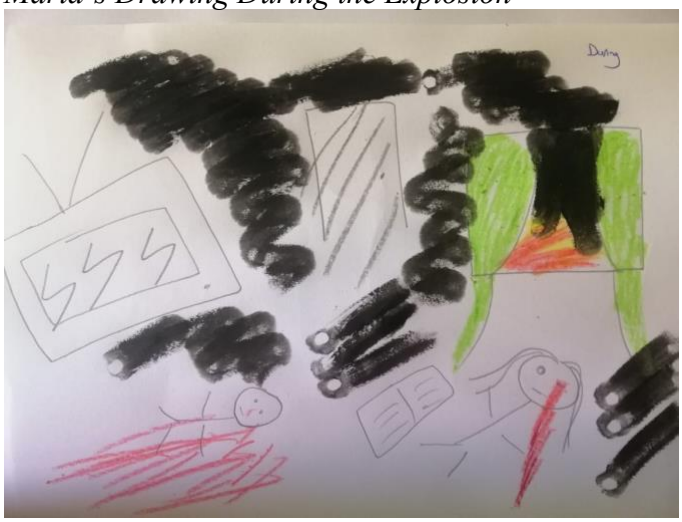
Burns (1982) specified several variables that suggest the psychopathology or emotional disturbance on the person who drew the projective drawing such as compartmentalization (exclusion of members and isolation of the self) and the vagueness of the image which is sometimes an indicator of emotional instability. Moreover, Giordano (2017) explained in her study about detecting psychological trauma in children that empty space is an indication of how the past memory is inaccessible. Along this line of thought, Rana's drawing before the explosion had closed doors and windows which reinforces the idea of the "lack of access" (Giordano, 2017, p. 47).

Rana's Math teacher, Ms. Rita, explained in the interview how she realized a sudden drop in Rana's academic performance. When asked about the classroom strategies used to manage the students; Ms. Rita replied that there are no specific strategies because everything was online, noting that if she was to teach this year face-to-face, she would have been more compassionate. Ms. Rita believes that there should be a teachers preparedness program where teachers are given the right strategies to deal with such incidents.

Rana scored very closely in the trauma-indicators table to Maria, which appeared to have a high-trauma load. Maria's drawings were striking. They were so simple, yet so expressive. She lives with her younger brother and parents in Mar Mekhayel, which is a few kilometers away from the explosion site.

Figure 5

Maria's Drawing During the Explosion

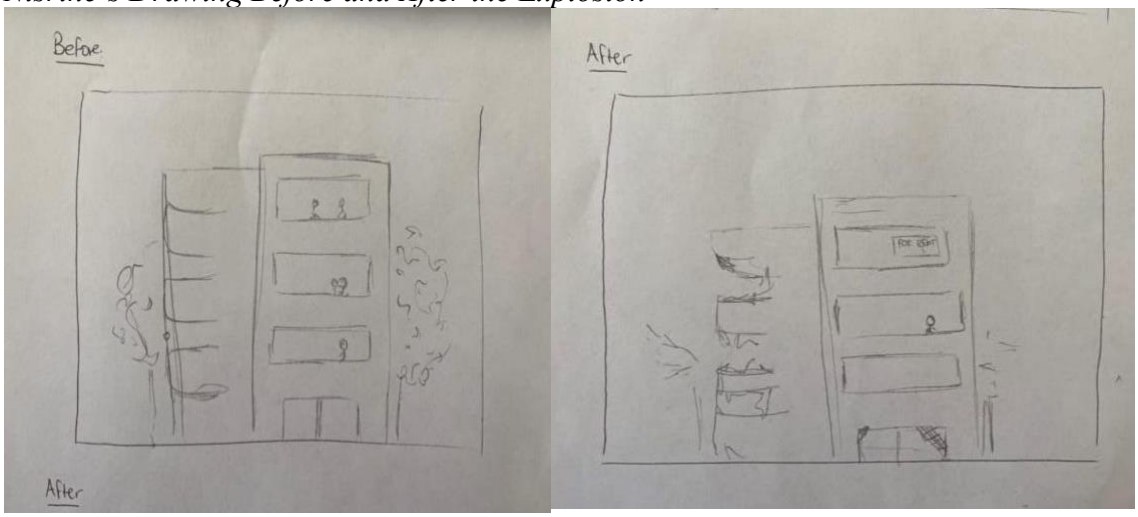


Maria's drawing during the explosion is notable for its striking use of black and red, which are often associated with trauma. Previous research suggests that elements like a dark background, sharp contrasts, and jagged lines can indicate distress (Baráth, Á, 2019). However, these signs should not be examined in isolation. Amod et al. (2013) emphasizes the importance of a holistic approach in interpreting projective drawings, integrating multiple sources such as background history, clinical interviews, and input from significant individuals like parents and teachers (p. 379).

Maria's drastic decline in academic performance and her interview answers were alarming. Her teacher, Ms. Celia, stated in the interview that "teaching students with trauma is tough especially because we have a curriculum to finish. Living in Lebanon, teachers are not taught to be emotionally invested in their students and we are not taught how to display emotional intelligence towards them. In addition, the curriculum here has too much focus on the cognitive aspect of the students so we tend to treat them like machines, disregarding their feelings".

Maria drawings are similar to Nisrine's in two ways: they both have symbols of death or destruction and they both display blurred drawings. Nisrine scored three in the trauma indicators table; however, looking at her results in a holistic context raises a lot of questions. To begin with, Nisrine did not use any color at all and her drawings were not very clear. In both of the pictures below, Nisrine only used a pencil to scribble a building with few people inside and a tree.

Figure 6
Nisrine's Drawing Before and After the Explosion



What is striking about the Nisrine's drawings is that she did not draw a picture during the explosion. The lack of the second drawing can be due to the fixation on the traumatic event which causes the children to be stuck in that event and unable to express it. In the interview, Nisrine stated that she is seeing a therapist and her therapist assessed her as having developed PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder). Shockingly, Nisrine's academic performance did not decline. She was following her therapist's advice on keeping herself occupied.

Even though Nisrine had an average score of 3 in the trauma indicators, the interview with her proved that she has a high trauma load. Nisrine's case indicates a limitation to the projective drawing as a method for indicating trauma as not every child can express his/her self in drawing.

Evaluation of the Findings

Codes were developed from the interview transcripts and from the projective drawings. After identifying certain codes, patterns were discovered and grouped into categories. The categories were (1) creating a safe learning environment, (2) communication with teachers, (3) pedagogical practices, (4) trauma informed training needed, (5) self-efficacy, and (6) teachers' experience and degree achieved.

Next, the researcher developed themes from the categories that answer the research questions. The three major themes were:

(1) Constructing a Positive Classroom Environment Built on Trust and Communication.
(2) Improving the Learner's Performance and Conduct by Applying Trauma-Informed Practices.
(3) Teachers' Educational Experience, Skills, and Background Knowledge.

Research Question 1.

The theme that aligned with this research question is "Improving the learner's Performance and Conduct by Applying Trauma-Informed Practices". All five teachers observed a decline in some students' academic engagement, with signs ranging from inattentiveness and silence to misbehavior aimed at gaining attention.

The categories that aligned to this theme are: pedagogical practices, trauma-informed training, self-efficacy, teachers' experience and degree achieved. The pedagogical practices include the teachers' approach and their methods in the classroom. If teachers were given trauma-informed practices in a teacher prep program or in their years of studying or if they have encountered children with trauma in their teaching experience, this would have had a good effect on the students' self-efficacy.

Research Question 2.

The theme that aligned with this question is "Teachers' Educational Experience, Skills, and Background Knowledge". The findings indicate that educators should be equipped with trauma-informed trainings to create a safe learning environment (Maslow). The data suggests that students with younger teachers tend to have a more positive classroom experience compared to those with older teachers.

Research Question 3.

The theme that aligned with this research question is also "Teachers' Educational Experience, Skills, and Background Knowledge" with the category of pedagogical practices, trauma-informed training, and creating a safe learning environment. The findings indicate that educators should be equipped with trauma-informed trainings in order to help their students improve in their overall school performance. Teachers should establish routines, ensure smooth transitions between activities, and offer students choices to enhance engagement (Dombo & Sabatino, 2019).

Research Question 4.

One theme emerged from this research question that is "Constructing a Positive Classroom Environment Built on Trust and Communication". Teachers play a crucial role in constructing a positive classroom environment that will help the student's mental health. Some of these strategies are listed in Creating Trauma-Informed Schools: A Guide for School Social Workers and Educators (Dombo & Sabatino, 2019).

Implications

The implications of teachers and schools not meeting their students' security and emotional needs because of the lack of trauma-informed training can lead to continual emotional, mental, and academic regression. The exposure of trauma in childhood increases the likelihood of developing mental health disorders if not well-treated. Previous studies explain that these students are at a great risk of indulging in drinking, smoking, drugs, and sexual behaviors when they reach adolescence (Shin et al., 2009).

Recommendations for Practice

Some recommendations for practice based on these themes from the book *Creating Trauma-Informed Schools* include:

1) Establishing Connection: Children who experienced trauma will learn that some adults cannot be trusted or counted on, especially children who are being exposed to a new teacher in class or to a new classroom setting. These children will start to look

for indicators to test if the adult can be trusted or not, so sometimes they are labeled as “hypervigilance” (Bath, 2008).

2) Regulation: Children who tend to have a lot of breakdowns in class are those who find it difficult to control their emotions. Teachers can help in this process by:
    - Identifying and naming the behavior that the child is doing.
    - Creating behavior charts and hanging them on classroom walls (Dombo & Sabatino, 2019).
    - Creating activities that encourage emotional expression like writing or drawing (Wolpow et al., 2016).
    - Approaching the child in a calm manner by focusing on their emotions instead of behavior (Bath, 2008).
    - Educating children about how their brain works so that can better understand what emotional dysregulation is like (Dombo & Sabatino, 2019).
3) Safety: Classrooms should feel safe for children who experienced a traumatic event.

Safety can be achieved by sticking to routines, giving children choices, and having teachers who are aware of traumatic triggers.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future researchers could conduct this study using a quantitative design, which may yield different results in terms of the relationship between student’s academic performance and teachers’ preparedness in teaching kids with trauma. Moreover, due to COVID-19 and lockdown, this study was also limited to conducting interviews with the teachers online instead of face-to-face. Future research could conduct interviews face to-face and read body language. Furthermore, all teacher participants were female, which is a limitation since male teachers might have given different answers and offered a different perspective, and that could have affected the results of the study.

Conclusion

This qualitative study aims to explore the school experiences of children affected by trauma following an explosion and examine the link between trauma and academic performance. After analyzing the experiences of five children from different schools and locations, findings reveal a lack of mental health awareness in schools and an absence of trauma-informed teacher training. The study aligns with its theoretical and conceptual framework, reinforcing the need for schools to implement trauma-informed practices to enhance the educational experience of affected children.

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