

PROJECT NEWS

Vicarious Trauma in the Classroom

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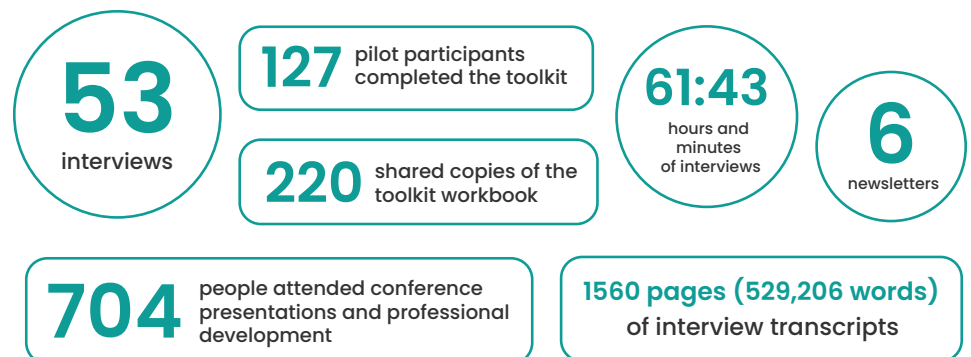
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Wrapping up this work

Since our last newsletter, we piloted the Vicarious Trauma Instructor Toolkit nationally, with language instructors and supervisors across Canada. With the support of our national partners, we engaged over 100 pilot participants in this final phase. They worked through the materials and shared their feedback in surveys, emails, in-person and online focus groups, and some interviews. We are grateful to each and every one of them for offering their time and thoughts. We have now applied that feedback and finalized the toolkit, which will become freely available later this spring. Stay tuned for that announcement.

As this project draws to a close, we are reflecting on the last three years. The Vicarious Trauma in the Classroom project was conceptualized prior to COVID-19. We launched the project during the early days of the pandemic, and we found ourselves navigating entirely new ways of doing research. We also found that our project had become even more topical. In fact, as the project progressed in these last three years, we became aware of the increasing relevance of this work. Disruptions in work and study, uncertainty, and loss can contribute to trauma and vicarious trauma; with COVID, many instructors and learners were experiencing those things. As we piloted the Vicarious Trauma Instructor Toolkit in 2021 and again in 2022, we heard from pilot participants that this work was timely and relevant. We are thrilled to have been able to support instructors to learn trauma informed approaches for themselves and their students.

Our Project, By the Numbers



*This project is funded by the Government of Canada,
 Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada.*

Policy Recommendations

As we spoke with instructors and stakeholders during the research phase in interviews, they shared with us barriers they faced that led to empathy-based stresses, like vicarious trauma, burnout, and compassion fatigue. Many of them told us that organizational policies and procedures were often at odds with their needs and the needs of their learners when it comes to dealing with trauma and vicarious trauma in language classrooms. For example, instructors spoke of heavy administrative loads, increasing class sizes, job precarity, and the emotional demands of learners with trauma-related needs. Likewise, many of the almost 150 pilot participants echoed these sentiments. Because of this, we sought to understand if and how policies in language programs are trauma-informed. Members of our research team did a review of many publicly available policy documents in educational institutions and found a dearth of trauma-informed policies. Our team found that the onus was often on individual instructors to take a proactive approach to self-care, while organizational approaches would be more effective and help to support instructors through trauma-informed policy. As such, our team recommends organizations that offer language programming to newcomers, especially refugees, consider trauma-informed organizational models such as the Sanctuary Model (Esaki, et al 2013) or the Missouri Model (MO Dept. of Mental Health & Partners, 2014). To read more about this, please refer to our team's recently published paper in the Canadian Journal of Educational Administration and Policy.

Although our toolkit helps individual instructors, we recognize the limits of this resource. We hope that our findings can inspire trauma-informed structural and policy changes that support instructors and learners. Given Canada's commitment to welcome approximately 225,000 refugees in the next three years, this is especially timely.

Key Concept: Instructor Well-being

According to the Global Wellness Institute, wellness is the active pursuit of activities, choices, and lifestyles that lead to a state of holistic health. To attain wellness, an instructor needs to consider how they care for themselves. The National Institute of Mental Health defines self-care as taking the time to do things that help you live well and improve both your physical and mental health. Self-care helps to manage stress, lower risk of illness, and increase energy.

As we wrap up this project, we want to end where we began: with instructors. In this project, it was apparent that the nature of instructors' jobs makes them susceptible to compassion fatigue, burnout, and vicarious trauma. Some instructors are at greater risk: high workloads, insufficient pay, unrealistic demands, inflexible work schedules, and unsupportive working environments are risk factors for burnout.

The Vicarious Trauma Instructor Toolkit provides awareness of how instructors can minimize the negative impacts of burnout, compassion fatigue, and vicarious trauma. Our toolkit provides information about how instructors can improve their self-care by setting boundaries and practicing self-awareness exercises such as leaving work rituals, grounding techniques, and box breathing. It also outlines how instructors can create a peer support network, recognize their limitations when trying to help learners, set boundaries, and advocate for themselves and their learners.

The benefits of self-care and focusing on your own well-being may not be felt immediately, and sometimes may even feel like a waste of time. However, by prioritizing personal and professional well-being, instructors can thrive while still supporting learners and maintaining good physical and mental health.

References:

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