



PROJECT NEWS

Vicarious Trauma in the Classroom

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Vicarious Trauma in the Language Classroom The Research Plan

The first eight months of the *Vicarious trauma in the classroom: Exploring language instructor experiences* project saw the team gathering data about vicarious trauma as an adverse impact on the mental health of people who work with survivors of traumatic events, specifically English language instructors. We've made significant progress; we have started analysing the data gathered (see page two) and have successfully finished phase one of our research plan.

In phase two, the project continues to be guided by a participatory, mixed-methods approach. Additionally, the research plan is built to include co-creation teams of language instructors and language learners. Alongside our colleagues at Mount Royal University and CIWA, as well as team of student research assistants, this team is now undertaking the work that will create a suite of resources for immigrant serving agencies and community organizations providing English language learning programs.

An early example of the participatory and collaborative nature of the project is the development process for the interview transcript code book. With the interviews complete, team members transcribed individual interviews independently and then reviewed them with the team, working together to identify and discuss emerging themes. The School of Global Access researchers and language instructor then established an initial set of codes and code descriptions. A draft shared with team members who used it to code their initial interview again, to ensure that the codebook was consistent and reliable. During this process, additional codes emerged and descriptions on how to code certain information was clarified. On the team members' recommendations additional codes were added and the codebook was then finalized.

With phase two now underway, the co-creation teams consisting School of Global Access English language instructors and students have been successfully recruited. Going forward these groups will contribute to the design and implementation of all phases of the project collaboratively – from data analysis, resource design, and implementation. Our future newsletters this year will share this work as well as profile how the work is done and who is contributing to it.

Project Progress

We closed out the year on track with our original timeline and concluded phase one of the research plan. From April to December 2020, we conducted 42 interviews with English language instructors, across five provinces, who work with newcomers that have experienced trauma and who expressed concern about how learners' traumatic experiences might affect instructor wellbeing. The interviews saw our research team conduct semi-structured interviews that explored instructors' experience, both in and outside the classroom, with learners who have experienced trauma. In addition to talking to language instructors, we also interviewed 10 subject matter experts.

The resource co-creation in phase two, which takes place January through June 2021, remains guided by the project's overarching research questions:

- What risks are associated with vicarious trauma among English language instructors? How can organizations and individuals address and mitigate the risks associated with vicarious trauma experienced by instructors?
- How can the data collected and the knowledge it yields lead to systemic changes?
- How will the knowledge gained through data collection, analysis, co-creation, piloting, and evaluation contribute to a greater understanding of vicarious trauma in the classroom?

The research and co-creation teams are now working toward two main objectives: 1) coding and analyzing the data and 2) employing the emerging themes and trends to begin creating the suite of resources to support language instructors.

Emerging Themes

After conducting 52 interviews with instructors and subject matter experts several themes have consistently come up. This demonstrates that there are shared experiences of instructors who work with learners who have experienced trauma. Time and again, interviewees shared examples and stories of balancing the need to build a community in the classroom with their own personal and professional boundaries. Interviews also revealed instructors' uncertainty about best practices for working with learners who have experienced trauma, a desire to help learners, and the need to put aside feelings of distress over hearing disturbing stories to be able to teach a class. These themes, along with others, are helping the research team build tailored resources for instructors.

Key Concept: Boundaries

The theme of boundaries is consistent across interviews. Many instructors reported having questions and concerns about boundaries between themselves and their learners. The kinds of boundaries instructors set varied greatly. Creating a community built on trust and communication is a key part of a language classroom. However, it can also lead students to disclose trauma to instructors both in and outside of class. Instructors may then find themselves reactively or inconsistently setting boundaries about sharing personal information with students or about how involved to be in their learners' personal lives. The research team is exploring how established guidelines might support how to proactively set intentional professional and personal boundaries so that instructors can consider scenarios when those boundaries can be more permeable and how to respond appropriately to learner revelations of trauma. Intentional boundaries can protect learner and instructor wellbeing.