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EXPLORING EQUITY ISSUES

Introduction to Trauma-Informed Classrooms: Inclusive Learning Strategies for Educators

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PART I: BACKGROUND



The Basics of Trauma

Trauma is a psychological and physiological response to any event that overwhelms a person's coping resources. It is an unconscious process: the fear centers of our brains assess a situation and flood our bodies with stress hormones that trigger a physiological response, often before we realize what's going on. It is commonly called the fight or flight response. If you have ever had to suddenly slam on your brakes or pull a child away from a hot stove, you have felt this stress response before. But when a threat is so intense that it prevents a person from viewing their world as fundamentally safe and predictable, the stress response does not always dissipate. This is when we say a

student has been traumatized (Van Der Kolk, 2003).

An early attempt to acknowledge, define, and measure the effects of trauma began more than 20 years ago. From 1995 to 1997, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)-Kaiser Permanente Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study collected and analyzed data from over 17,000 adults about their childhood experiences and current health status and behaviors. The CDC identified a number of common stressors called Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) that interfered with child neurodevelopment. These included abuse, neglect, and household challenges like family violence, mental illness, or incarceration. The rates of trauma found were staggering: 64% had experienced at least one ACE, and more than 20% had experienced three or more (Felitti et al., 1998).

There has been a recent push to expand the ACE study to also recognize the trauma that comes from systemic oppression and other community-level stressors but "it may be challenging to accurately assess something with such pervasive (and historically embedded) effects that it may not even be remarked upon"

(Sacks and Murphey, 2018). Nevertheless, these factors must also be considered as they can affect the health and sense of safety of a child.

Trauma is an issue of equity: it impedes educational attainment on its own, and disproportionately targets students of color, students with disabilities, those living in poverty, LGBTQ+ students, and others who experience marginalization (Ellis, 2018; Office for Victims of Crime, 2014; YWCA, 2017). Supporting young people's right to full learning requires a foundational shift in the way we view difficult classroom behaviors and learning struggles.

Student Trauma

Classroom behaviors associated with trauma often cluster into two observable patterns: hyperarousal and disassociation (Frewen, 2006). Students who exhibit hyperarousal are physiologically always at the ready to fight a threat or escape from it. They are hypervigilant against perceived threats, and may misinterpret tone of voice or physical cues, responding with tantrums or outbursts. Students exhibiting hyperarousal may have an exaggerated startle response, and struggle to adjust to even minor changes in their daily routine. Disassociation, on the other hand, appears in students whose nervous systems are effectively worn out. These students may present as apathetic or overly suggestible, and may struggle to make independent decisions or retain information.

The same stress hormones that reshape a child's classroom behavior can also suppress development in the parts of the brain

responsible for logic and learning (Sitler, 2009). Students who experience trauma often show diminished interest and capacity for processing new information. When presented with new material they may become easily overwhelmed, have difficulty organizing information in a coherent way, and struggle with memory consolidation in ways that impede academic achievement.

Without intervention, trauma can have a significant impact on life outcomes for students. Even one Adverse Childhood Experience has been shown to decrease postsecondary educational achievement by 20% (Otero, 2018). The same causes of poor academic performance can lead to lifelong patterns of poor work performance and chronic financial stress. In addition, the physical and emotional toll of trauma can steer many young people towards alcohol and drug use, risky sexual behaviors, and suicidal thoughts or behaviors. All of these can have negative health outcomes across their lifespans (Dube et al. 2003; Hillis et al. 2001; Strine et al. 2012).

Educators must be careful they don't add to a student's trauma. School policies, including academic (e.g., tracking) and behavior (e.g., discipline), can carry implicit bias that can retraumatize a student. A trauma-informed approach encourages educators to recognize resilience in their students and continue to build on that resilience in the classroom. Rather than ask "What is wrong with you?" we can ask "What has happened to you—and how can I help?"

PART II: WHAT CAN WE DO?



In trauma-informed teaching, safety is the foundation for student success. Educators can use the following everyday practices to create safe and predictable learning environments. It is important to note, however, that multiple approaches will be needed due to the variety of traumatic experiences that student's face. As this is only an introduction, please refer to the resources listed at the end for more extensive strategies.

MODIFY INSTRUCTION TO PROMOTE SUCCESS

Every student deserves a chance to gain mastery over new content. Administrators can support trauma-informed teaching practices in their schools, for example, on how to modify curriculum or classroom management techniques to address the needs of students. Bite-sized learning opportunities with frequent breaks can minimize feelings of anxiety, even if this means tackling math worksheets three problems at a time. For students who struggle to make choices, presenting a limited range of 2 to 3 options can help retrain their brains toward independent decision-making. Just as a

child's brain can be altered by trauma, it can be rewired by positive classroom experiences, and creating small opportunities where students succeed increases the likelihood of continued success (Southwick and Charney, 2012).

TRAIN STAFF

Positive social support is the top predictor of resilience in the aftermath of trauma (Ozbay et al. 2007). Asking a student directly "how can I help?" communicates that you hold space for their needs, even in their most difficult behavioral moments. Educators can foster positive relationships through classroom activities. Building laughter and sensory stimulation into the school day is proven to de-escalate stress responses (Sharma, 2018). Check-in buddies or other peer supports provide students with connections on difficult days. We don't always know which students have survived trauma; incorporating resilience-based practices into everyday routines allows educators to support students without requiring any disclosure of their history.

Educators may sometimes be on the receiving end of disclosures. In those moments, there are three basic phrases that can help support any student:

- Thank you for telling me.
- I'm sorry this happened.
- How can I help?

School districts can take additional steps to prepare school staff for disclosures, such as school-wide trainings to help adults recognize the signs and symptoms of trauma, and

investing in Mandated Reporter Training from a local Domestic Violence or Sexual Assault Center. Districts can also provide training for counselors in trauma screening and treatment modalities to ensure targeted support for students in need.

ENGAGE COMMUNITY SUPPORT SYSTEMS

Wrap-around support for children should include partnerships with extracurricular organizations, health service providers, and community non-profits. Such partnerships ensure a holistic approach to student wellness, and prevent school staff from burning out or operating outside of their training. School districts should also consider revisiting disciplinary policies with a trauma-informed lens. Trauma can produce many difficult-to-manage classroom behaviors, but most of them come from a place of feeling threatened. With partnerships in place, students with recognized trauma can be directed toward counseling and community services and it may keep a larger number of them in school.

ADOPT STRONG POLICIES

Apply school-wide trauma-informed best practices. Consistent routines, especially in the morning and during transitions, help students feel prepared to navigate the school day. Self-regulation strategies, like deep breathing and mindfulness, help teachers and students alike in dealing with the added stressors trauma brings to the classroom. Rewards-based classroom management systems, such as Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) and Positive Behavior

Intervention Supports (PBIS), can eliminate fears of retribution for students who have experienced discipline in extreme or unpredictable ways. Using a school-wide collaborative approach to deal with problems when they arise builds predictability and security for students across school settings.

Final Thoughts

Trauma is pervasive in our schools and threatens the young people we work with, affecting their school performance and opportunities for lifelong success. But it isn't a threat we are powerless to fight. With everyday classroom management, social support, well-trained staff, and trauma-informed discipline policies, schools can prevent children from being defined by their adverse life experiences and promote healthy, lifelong learning and achievement.

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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

CDC-Kaiser Permanente Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study

<https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/childabuseandneglect/acestudy/about.html>

National Association of School Psychologists, Trauma Sensitive Schools

<http://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources/mental-health/trauma-sensitive-schools>

National Child Traumatic Stress Network, Child Trauma Toolkit for Educators

<https://www.nctsn.org/resources/child-trauma-toolkit-educators>

School Leaders Now, 9 Key Resources on Trauma-Informed Schools

<https://schoolleadersnow.weareteachers.com/9-resources-for-trauma-informed-school/>

Teaching Tolerance, When Schools Cause Trauma

<https://www.tolerance.org/magazine/summer-2019/when-schools-cause-trauma>

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