

SEL Essentials: We Need To Be Different: Supporting Students Who Are Dealing with Trauma

By Peter Brunn | Categories: Social-Emotional Learning, Classroom Community, Technology & Remote Learning

When I woke up on August 24, I checked Twitter like I normally do. I scrolled through my news feed and was immediately hit with the disturbing video of Jacob Blake being shot seven times in the back by a police officer, while his children watched, in Kenosha, Wisconsin. I was left mute and immediately put the phone down, wishing I had only read about it and not seen it. The image, coupled with the recent killings of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, and Breonna Taylor, were enough to sicken and anger me.

The video lingered in my mind, but, as is often true for people like me who hold white privilege, I went to the kitchen and made my coffee, and it will surprise no one that my day of Zoom meetings proceeded unencumbered, without the shooting of Jacob Blake ever mentioned by anyone that day.

Today, as I sit in my home office trying to write a blog on trauma, the video and all it represents continues to hurt. But the truly haunting image I have is one of my Black friends, colleagues, and neighbors emotionally bracing themselves as they are forced to tell their children, "It happened again." These terrible events are traumatic in and of themselves, but what about the pain caused from having to look a partner, a child, a friend in the eye and try to explain and discuss all of this?

In writing this, I tried to keep this context front and center as I shared my thinking on how we might support students this year. Between these shootings, the pandemic, food insecurity, and parental job loss, our students will be carrying a heavy emotional load when they enter our classrooms this year. As teachers, we can't afford to go through our day (either on Zoom or in person) and not address the impact of these experiences.

Trauma and Children

In our previous blog post, Kristy and I observed how the list of challenges teachers, students and families face already seems so big—almost insurmountable this school year. With a global pandemic, crushing job losses, and racial unrest, 2020 might go down in the history books as one unrivaled by the trauma experienced by both children and adults.

But what is trauma?

The American Psychological Association defines trauma as "an emotional response to a terrible event." The term Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) is a more precise definition used to describe trauma in children. According to Kaiser Permanente, "ACEs are traumatic childhood events that occur before the age of 18 across multiple categories, including abuse, neglect, household dysfunction, systemic racism, and living in a high crime neighborhood. Experiencing multiple ACEs can be associated with a long-lasting exaggerated stress response that has been linked to risky health behaviors and chronic health conditions. Previous studies have indicated that those with 4 or more ACEs are 12 times more likely to attempt suicide and those with 6 or more ACEs have a 20-year shorter life expectancy."

A study by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation found that “38 percent of children in every state have had at least one Adverse Childhood Experience or ACE, such as the death or incarceration of a parent, witnessing or being a victim of violence, or living with someone who has been suicidal or had a drug or alcohol problem. In 16 states, at least 25 percent of children have had two or more ACEs.” It’s sobering to consider that this data was collected *before* the pandemic.

As educators, it is incumbent on us to remember that our students’ trauma will be exacerbated by the pandemic. According to a recent study, children’s ACEs will worsen during the pandemic and this will especially impact low-income families and communities of color.

Practices We Prioritize to Support Students Impacted by Trauma

There is a great deal of research readily available on what we can do to support students who have experienced trauma as well as a variety of practical approaches and strategies for trauma-informed instruction. The Department of Health and Human Services has a summary of some strategies as well as tips for preventing ACEs.

While we are not experts on trauma, as educators we—like many of you—have read the research and looked for ways in our own teaching to incorporate this research into our classrooms.

What we have come to believe is that we shouldn’t have a separate set of trauma-informed practices that we roll out for one group of kids. Instead, these essential and important practices should be part of the fabric of our teaching. The practices are simply good teaching—good for all kids but especially for students who have experienced trauma. We have learned that developing relationships, being responsive to the individual needs of our students, and being patient and flexible—while providing a clear, organized, and challenging curriculum—ensures that all classrooms are not only trauma-informed, but also engaging and caring places for students to learn and grow.

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So as we look at the practices we have found most helpful, we first want to underscore that a cookie cutter one-size-fits-all approach does not exist. Students react to trauma in many different ways. They might for example become irritable and difficult to soothe. They may be anxious or seem withdrawn. They may be sad or show signs of depression. Trauma manifests itself in many ways and therefore requires flexible and supportive responses to the pain and suffering. Below are some practices you can prioritize to support students.

Building, Deepening, and Repairing Relationships

All of the articles linked above indicate that what kids who have experienced trauma need most are deep and meaningful relationships in safe and supportive classrooms. It’s critical that we begin with the fundamental understanding that relationships are central to healthy prosocial development and essential to teaching and learning.

Schools need to be intentional about building and maintaining these relationships both between students and between students and adults. As we plan our instruction, we must prioritize the daily, ongoing work of building, deepening, and, when need be, repairing relationships and fostering a strong sense of school community within our students. This work cannot be left to chance. It must be purposely woven into the fabric of every day.

Establish Predictable, Safe, and Supportive Learning Environments

Creating calm, well-organized, and safe learning environments—whether virtual or in-person—is a crucial goal for every teacher.

School days can sometimes feel hectic or frenetic, but when we have consistent and predictable routines within a calm and caring environment, we can support kids when they encounter any unplanned or unexpected situations or issues.

In our Reconnecting and Rebuilding Toolkit, we offer several community chats/class meetings teachers can use to help students reconnect and establish the safe and supportive learning context in which to continue to grow and develop. Topics include managing difficult emotions, handling loss, and responding to tragedy.

Avoid the Deficit Mindset While Developing New Skills

All students come to school possessing skills they have learned in order to navigate relationships at home and in their communities. Students don't come with a skill "deficit."

Rather, because school is a unique environment, students need support to be flexible and resilient in the face of the challenges they face in the school setting.

We want to add new and enhanced skills to their current repertoire that help them reflect on their relationships and interactions with others, ask for help when needed, share work fairly, monitor their attention, and refocus when necessary. We want to help them develop empathy and compassion for fellow classmates.

We also support all students—not just those who have experienced trauma—in learning strategies to regain calmness, resolve conflicts, and take responsibility for their learning and behavior.

Support a Teaching and Learning Approach to Discipline

You can't have a one-size-fits-all discipline system and expect it to be fair and equitable. Punitive rewards-based discipline systems work against students who need patience, flexibility, and support to help them learn to control certain aspects of their behavior. In our evidence-based Caring School Community program, we work with teachers to help students acquire self-discipline: that is, to build self-control, conscience, and a sense of responsibility from within.

We do this by encouraging teachers to treat students with respect at all times and to address behavior mistakes as they would academic mistakes. We suggest adopting a teaching and learning stance that empowers students to learn from mistakes and guides teachers to not see misbehavior as a character flaw, but instead as a challenge in a specific context that requires time and effort to address.

We don't see behavior as something to track with points or to reward or to punish. We see behavior as something that we work on all of the time; it is something that students eventually need to own and not have managed for them.

We guide teachers to de-escalate situations and focus on what students can do to repair any damage they may have caused and what they might do differently in the future, rather than make students feel guilty or ashamed. We don't see behavior as something to track with points or to reward or to punish. We see behavior as something that we work on all of the time; it is something that students eventually need to own and not have managed for them.

We Must Be Different

As students return to school and we open our classrooms either virtually or in-person, we can't do what we've always done. We must step out of our routine, out of our comfort zone, and change. We must be different.

What does "being different" mean in practice? That might mean reexamining our priorities during the school day to ensure that listening to and caring for students is at the forefront of everything we do. It will mean not quickly jumping to conclusions when students are struggling (academically or behaviorally).

It will also mean making sure not to ignore the context of what is happening in our world today. The morning I found out about the shooting of Jacob Blake, I still went through my day of meetings, feeling grieved and numb, but not changing my behavior in a meaningful way. If I am going to be different, I can't continue to do that. I can't pretend that everything is okay. I must ask more questions, listen with greater care and, finally, I must stop passively ignoring the broader context in which our schools operate.

While some of us are experiencing things more acutely, all of us are experiencing events that will potentially cause trauma. We need to check in on each other, our students, and our families and make sure that we put each other at the top of our ever-expanding to-do lists. We must create the spaces where we can be honest with each other, where we listen to each other, and where we care for each other, ensuring that the web this weaves is strong enough to hold us together.

In case you missed it, read the Introduction to this four-part blog series, SEL Essentials: Reimagining Our Social and Emotional Learning Priorities.

Resources for Further Learning

Two Education Week articles on trauma in schools:

<https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2018/02/26/student-trauma-is-widespread-schools-dont-have-to-go-alone.html>

<https://www.edweek.org/tm/articles/2017/11/22/the-transformative-power-of-trauma-informed-teaching.html?r=471701300>

Robert Wood Johnson Foundation study on ACEs:

<https://www.rwjf.org/en/library/articles-and-news/2017/10/traumatic-experiences-widespread-among-u-s-youth-new-data-show.html>

"The Transformative Power of Trauma-Informed Teaching," by Lauren Dotson:

<https://www.edweek.org/tm/articles/2017/11/22/the-transformative-power-of-trauma-informed-teaching.html?r=471701300>

"The How and Why of Trauma-Informed Teaching," by Alex Shevrin Venet:

<https://www.edutopia.org/article/how-and-why-trauma-informed-teaching>

"How childhood trauma affects health across a lifetime," a Ted Talk by Dr. Nadine Burke Harris:

<https://youtu.be/95ovlJ3dsNk>

Adverse Childhood Experiences study:

<https://www.kvc.org/blog/the-adverse-childhood-experiences-ace-study/>