TEACHING TOLERANCE

MAGAZINE FEATURE

When Schools Cause Trauma

Trauma-sensitive and trauma-informed schools are spreading around the country. But if they don't start with how schools themselves can induce trauma, they won't work.

By Carrie Gaffney |Issue 62, Summer 2019

Illustration by Matt Saunders

Increasingly, we are seeing pushes for trauma-sensitive and trauma-informed schools. We know that traumatic stress can have long-term health effects on developing brains and, in response, districts across the United States are acknowledging the role that trauma plays in students' achievement opportunities. But how well are districts defining trauma? And how well do educators understand what it really means to practice trauma-informed pedagogy?

What Do We Mean When We Talk About Trauma?

According to a report from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), individual trauma is best understood as the result of "an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life threatening and that has lasting adverse effects."

Building on this definition, SAMHSA describes a trauma-informed practice as one that meets four requirements. A trauma-informed organization "**realizes** the widespread impact of trauma and understands potential paths for recovery; **recognizes** the signs and symptoms of trauma in clients, families, staff, and others involved with the system; and **responds** by fully integrating knowledge about trauma into policies, procedures, and practices, and seeks to actively resist **re-traumatization**."

One tool that schools and public agencies often use to recognize trauma in children is the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) score. In the initial, landmark ACE study of more than 17,000 HMO members from 1995 to 1997, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and Kaiser Permanente researchers found that two-thirds of the respondents had had at least one adverse childhood experience. They also found that the higher a person's ACE score, the greater the likelihood of poor physical and mental health, risky health behaviors, and diminished educational, occupational and income opportunities.

Researchers divided adverse childhood experiences into 10 discrete types, applied to either the child or the household. ACEs centered on the child include physical, emotional or sexual abuse and physical or emotional neglect. ACEs centered on the household include the presence of mental illness, violence or substance abuse, and instances of divorce or incarceration.

While the ACE score has provided researchers a useful way to measure childhood trauma, it is also limited.

When Schools Fall Short

A 2018 study shows that children living in poverty, children of color and LGBTQ children tend to have more child- and household-centered ACEs. But childhood trauma resulting specifically from racism, homophobia or other systemic injustices that weren't articulated when the 10 ACEs were established more than 20 years ago still go uncounted in a student's ACE score. The next logical step—ACEs centered on society—was never established.

The common disconnect between, say, a student's ACE score and that student's lived experiences outside and *inside* a school is vast. This is where trauma-informed work in schools can become a problem.

When Arlène Casimir-Siar began teaching at a primary school in New Orleans in 2011, for example, more than 90 percent of her students had at least one family member who was incarcerated. For some students—if that family member had been living in their household—this might count

an example: "I often hear from students who are learning about racism in the past tense," he says. "For instance, they are reading *To Kill a Mockingbird* and learning about what it was like for people of color 'back then.' At the same time, they are experiencing racism in school and in their communities in the present tense."

This kind of erasure—an implicit suggestion that the racism students live with is either imagined or exaggerated—can compound the trauma of experiencing that racism. Gorski explains, "It's disorienting and damaging when students aren't given the opportunity to explore these injustices in their present communities."

The same is true of assignments and activities that force students to write about or act out traumatizing experiences, like simulations. Regardless of the intention behind them, such activities can be more hurtful than helpful.

Outside of individual lessons, other curricular structures can harm students. Kass Minor, a consultant with the Teachers College Inclusive Classrooms Project, says one common policy that does real harm is tracking—the practice of sorting and separating students based on perceived academic ability. Although tracking may be intended to offer extra support for students who need it, the messages it sends are anything but supportive.

In general, even what is not explicitly stated about tracking and similar structures speaks volumes. For students who are struggling to build positive self-identity in the face of traumatizing, dehumanizing systems like racism or poverty, school should be a place where their identity is affirmed, not called into question. "When students are labeled 'not smart,'" Minor says as an example, "we send them a message that they are not full human beings."

Trauma in Policies

Policies that regulate students' behavior are another way schools may be traumatizing students. Particularly insidious are rigid behavioral or disciplinary policies that cloak their own inflexibility as a lesson in responsibility.

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Such a focus on responsibility is "code language," Gorski says, "and it minimizes people who are marginalized not just in schools, but outside of schools as well."

He explains, "When [educators] are worried about teaching kids 'responsibility' without mention of the systemic challenges and barriers they experience, it is a deficit mindset." Based on the idea that it's the students who need fixing rather than the systems, policies that focus disproportionately on student responsibility often sustain the same unjust structures that create trauma in the first place.

Even so, Minor says, rigid school policies often go unchecked: "It's really difficult to convince school leaders that these normative practices are hindering the growth of students, not just inside the school building but also in their outside communities."

Cornelius Minor, lead staff developer with the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project at Columbia University (and Kass Minor's husband), agrees. For evidence, he points to a few of the many well-intentioned traditions teachers aren't willing to question.

"Things like homework and walking in a straight line or talking in the hallway are traditions teachers hold on to. I've seen children being embarrassed by the adults in their schools for not turning in homework or for talking too loudly in the hallway. That is violence toward kids." It also reinforces the kind of dehumanizing treatment that many students receive from unjust structures out in the world—just for existing.

Minor is confident that teachers can find ways to collect homework in ways that don't embarrass students who don't have theirs—and ways for students to walk down the hall "without being in lock-step."

He argues that it's not just the policies but the attitudes behind them that let traumatizing practices go unchecked. "There are two notions in school I find incredibly problematic," he says. "One is the notion of deservedness, and one is the notion of gratitude. There's a lot of traumatizing behavior that occurs under those two umbrellas."

He cites such examples as teachers offering to help a student make up a quiz and expecting the student to show gratitude for the teacher's sacrifice. He also points to the practice of dividing students into those who are deemed deserving of field trips and those who aren't. Such practices, he says, assume that the relationship between teacher and student is transactional rather than relational. A transactional mindset can warp educators' approach to students—and students' sense of their own value.

"As teachers, we do things for kids because they are human," he insists, "not because they will thank us or because we caught them being 'good.'"

Toward Schools as Healing Spaces

Once schools have begun to question their curricula, policies and practices that might be traumatizing or retraumatizing their students, they can take steps toward healing. But experts agree that even if educators can't make immediate changes across their school, they can still make a difference in their own classrooms.

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For example, teachers might consider how they structure their class periods. "The daily pressure of accomplishing these really heavy learning objectives in multiple classes in a 45-minute period of time is a challenge for *any* person," Kass Minor points out. "When we ask children who have come to us in the morning hungry, sleep-deprived or worse to accomplish the same learning objectives in the same amount of time as a child who comes to school with every advantage, we set them up for failure."

She recommends "just giving students space to process and deal with themselves." That, she says, "is a humanizing practice we need to do more of."

Cornelius Minor encourages teachers to consider adapting the content of classes, as well as their structure. He suggests a curriculum organized around helping students navigate the issues they are facing in their communities. Doing so, he says, is a powerful way for students to explore their own lived experiences through a lens of curiosity and critical inquiry.

This approach ties to another popular but critical concept: student voice. Looking back on her work with the New Orleans Trauma-Informed Schools Learning Collaborative, Arlène Casimir-Siar reflected, "The experience allowed me to really think through how to center student voice and promote structures of well-being." This speaks directly to individual classroom practice.

Change Can Start Small

School-wide change has to begin with individuals, Gorski says. "It might start with two teachers finding each other," he explains. "What goes on in

their classrooms won't eliminate global injustices, but it is a foundation on which the work can grow."

Cornelius Minor agrees. "You really don't need a ton of people to create change; you just need four homies. If you and your department enact a new policy on homework, that is radical change."

Gaffney is a teacher and writer based in Indianapolis, Indiana.

Suggested Reading

"Avoiding Racial Equity Detours"
Paul C. Gorski

Case Studies on Diversity and Social Justice Education
Paul C. Gorski and Seema G. Pothini

Condition Critical: Key Principles for Equitable and Inclusive Education
Diana Lawrence-Brown and Mara Sapon-Shevin

The Deepest Well: Healing the Long-Term Effects of Childhood Adversity
Nadine Burke Harris

It Didn't Start With You: How Inherited Family Trauma Shapes Who We Are and How to End the Cycle
Mark Wolynn

Troublemakers: Lessons in Freedom From Young Children at School
Carla Shalaby

We Got This: Equity, Access, and the Quest to Be Who Our Students Need Us to Be
Cornelius Minor

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