

The How and Why of Trauma-Informed Teaching

In an extraordinary Twitter chat, educators discuss building trauma-informed social and emotional learning environments.

By *Alex Shevrin Venet*

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Working with trauma-affected students is a difficult balancing act.

We acknowledge the harmful impacts of the past, and hold out hope for a future of healing. We create a safe environment for students to share their lives, yet maintain professional boundaries. We provide our caring and our help to others, but have to pay attention to our own well-being, too. We work in our classrooms but depend on the support of our community.

These were the clear takeaways for teachers who participated in Edutopia's recent Twitter chat on the topic of trauma and social and emotional learning (SEL). Two parallel ideas emerged in the back and forth. First, as teachers we need to focus on the individual student and the strong, one-to-one relationships that support our trauma-affected kids. And second, creating these bonds requires a broader cultural adjustment and reprioritization, where the whole community works together to cultivate a space in which students, educators, and staff members thrive.

What about classrooms without a lot of trauma? It's risky to assume that our students haven't experienced trauma—according to a *seminal study* from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, childhood trauma is far more pervasive than previously believed and is often invisible. And chat participants asserted that trauma-informed and SEL practices benefit all children, building critical skills like self-awareness, self-regulation, empathy, and an openness to teamwork and cooperation. Adopt a “universal approach,” suggested the nonprofit Zero to Three, and “assume all children are trauma-affected and need social and emotional learning instruction and support.”

An emerging body of research backs that stance. A 2017 *metastudy* of over 97,000 K–12 students, for example, found that SEL practices boost academic success, decrease disruptive behavior, and reduce emotional distress in the long term.

So how do we balance the individual focus with a community commitment to trauma-informed SEL? Luckily, our Twitter chat participants had some great advice to share.

KNOW YOUR STUDENTS

To support students who have experienced trauma, start by flipping the traditional classroom paradigm: Relationships have to come before content, insisted dozens of educators.

It's a simple enough rule, but it runs against the grain and needs to be constantly reinforced: "If you're not addressing the trauma, and the students are distracted, checked out, and falling increasingly behind, even the best curriculum won't matter," explained Wendy Clark, reflecting on the order of events that drive real learning. If that point wasn't a settled matter by the end of the thread, Bill Waychunas cut straight to the heart of the issue by inverting the original proposition entirely: "Better question," he wrote, turning Edutopia's opening salvo around: "How do you teach academics WITHOUT having SEL embedded throughout your teaching and classroom?"

Excellent question. Wish we'd thought of it.

Still, if teachers agreed that one-to-one relationships were the critical building blocks of good SEL—and good trauma-informed practice—how can that effort be scaled to 20 or 30 unique students, each of whom experiences trauma differently? The good news is that it's not all on the individual teacher; system-wide supports are required to distribute the work and create a broader culture of belonging and mutual support (more on that below). Within that context, though, all educators need to row in the same direction: The trick, according to Mathew Portell, principal of the trauma-informed school *Fall-Hamilton Elementary* in Nashville, is to never lose sight of the individual student: "Trauma affects children in so many different ways. Some kids are reactive while others are reserved. It is key to know the students' stories in order to know how to support them."

With so much pain in the classroom, educators should be mindful that traumatic life experiences can sometimes emerge as behaviors that we might otherwise label as challenging. "Trauma can manifest in so many behaviors! Hypervigilance can masquerade as hyperactivity," offered Sarah MacLaughlin, recasting a child's nervous disposition as a possible response to a difficult home environment. "Fear can look like aggression: flight, freeze, or fight."

And it's not just very young children whose behavior may mask an underlying challenge. Math teacher Kareem Farah sees a connection between anger and trauma in his high school kids: "Students in poverty have been conditioned to suppress their pain. It often manifests as anger. It is critical to recognize that frustrated students are often those that have experienced the highest levels of trauma and need the most loving attention."

That's not easy.

THE WHOLE SCHOOL MODEL

So relationship-building in the classroom is essential—the one-to-one with students is indispensable—but the impact of the work is amplified and reinforced only when it occurs within the broader contexts of the school and

community.

Many teachers in the chat highlighted the need for a consistent, team-based approach. As Carmen Zeisler put it, “Being trauma-informed is not a checklist, but a mindset change. It is critical that everyone in the building is working towards being trauma-informed.” Other educators agreed, adding that administration and school board support is needed to sustain these changes.

Teachers recommended ways to develop staff buy-in: Sarah Giddings shared that colleagues at her school meet in small groups to stay accountable to one another, and that extends to support staff like computer technicians. Lindsey Mattingly’s school, Valor Collegiate in Nashville, engages all staff in *restorative circles* so teachers get firsthand experience of the social and emotional skills required of students in that model—with powerful results: “When teachers fully understand trauma and its manifestations, the mindset will shift from one more thing to do to THE thing we must do.”

Understandably, there’s bound to be pushback. Acknowledging that there is sometimes skepticism about broad, new programs is helpful—teachers and administrators won’t all jump onboard enthusiastically. Several educators recommended connecting trauma-informed practices to the existing compassion and empathy among teachers: “You show them what they are already doing. Then they realize they are already partly there,” says English teacher Alison Killy. And Joe LaCasse agreed that the foundations of trauma-informed practices were already embedded in many classrooms, and it was really a matter of emphasis: “Deep down, all teachers care about kids. So, this really gets at the core of being a teacher. It’s not just something ‘extra.’”

WHAT ABOUT ME?

Well exactly. What about you?

The teaching profession is intellectually and emotionally challenging. Many educators in the chat recognized that the social and emotional work has to start with themselves. Educators who see the value of a practice in their own lives are more likely to be passionate advocates, and the learning ecosystem is only truly healthy when all members of the community are thriving. In other words, helping teachers feel emotionally grounded and supported is helping students, too. “Don’t forget that teachers have SEL needs! Concentrate on teacher well-being and empower them to address their own needs,” suggested the organization Move This World. In a school culture that focuses on wellness for all, teachers can practice and then model positive social and emotional skills for their students more authentically.

Social and emotional support for teachers also helps buffer the effects of secondary traumatic stress and vicarious trauma—when teachers experience symptoms similar to post-traumatic stress disorder because of the *stress of bearing witness to others’ trauma*. Supportive peer connections are an important part of that

prevention: “Don’t let teachers with struggling students feel alone,” recommended Rosa Derricott. “It should be a school-wide approach where everyone’s supporting each other.”

In the end, of course, we can’t rely on our schools alone to address systemic issues of poverty, violence, or drug addiction. The net of responsibility must be cast more widely. “A trauma-informed approach to social emotional learning requires partnership between counselors, teachers, parents, and other trusted adults to help guide students through short and long-term challenge,” suggested the chat participant Mom of All Capes. Not to put too fine a point on it, but perhaps it was user Belinda Talonia who said it all most succinctly: “SEL belongs to all of us.”