Trauma-Informed Teaching in Low-Income Schools

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Introduction

I was twenty-two years old when I became a middle school teacher. It was my first year teaching full-time, and I was also getting school credit for "student-teaching" in my own classroom, without the benefit of a mentor or lead teacher. Because of these circumstances, I did not have much support in my first year of teaching. I was thrown into the deep end of teaching public school, and my inexperience showed. I remember the first time I took my mask off in front of my class to eat, and one of my students shouted, "Ms. Schulz, why do you look like you're sixteen?!" Talk about humbling. A couple of months into the school year, I mentioned that I was taking college classes in the evenings. My kids looked surprised, and I reminded them that I was only twenty-two. "Oh," my student Kassandra[1] said sagely, "Is that why you're so, like, awkward?" She looked embarrassed as soon as she said it, so I laughed it off. "I mean, sure, kind of, but I'm also just like that."

My first year was rough. I was working at a woefully underfunded public city school, and much of the student body lived in low-income households. When I was teaching eighth grade in a public city school, one of my students, Gabriel, was shot in the face. I received an email letting me know during lunch period, while I had children in my classroom. I was instructed to not answer any questions about it or let students talk about what happened to Gabriel. It was incredibly difficult to teach and dodge questions about the well-being of their friend.

It was 11:12 AM on a Monday in mid-March. I received an email informing me that one of my students had been in an accident.

> Good morning,
>
> There was an accident over the weekend. (student initials and student number) was shot in the face on Saturday. He is at UVA. The bullet was removed successfully and he was

[1] Student names have been changed throughout for privacy.

awake for a little bit today, which is a very good thing. He will be having reconstructive surgery soon. I will keep you posted as I am able to.

Please do not share this information with your other students. If they ask questions about it, redirect back to the course material and tell them you have no information to share.

Thanks!

(School Guidance Counselor)

My stomach dropped, and I frantically searched up the student number to see which student the email was referring to—I had three different students with those same initials. With the shock of receiving this news, I was not able to even think about eating my lunch. This was my only "break" in the eight-hour school day, and because of COVID-19 regulations on how many students are allowed in the cafeteria at once, I had a room full of eighth graders eating in my classroom.

Fourteen-year-olds are observant; immediately, one of my students asked me if I was alright. My hands and voice were shaking. My voice didn't sound like me when I answered, "Yes."

The bell rang, and I watched as my third period students filed in, minus Gabriel. His absence was immediately felt. Gabriel was one of my students who showed up every single day without fail. He almost never did his work, but he was always there, messing around with his friends in the back of the classroom.

Gabriel was what many teachers considered a "problem student." I had personally called his mother before to let her know that her son had after-school detention. It rang so long I thought she wouldn't pick up. When she did, I informed her of when and why her son had detention. My spiel was met with an unenthusiastic response that caught me off guard. "Okay. Why are you telling me this?" I explained that it was standard procedure to call the parents when

a student was assigned detention. Again, she gave a noncommittal “Okay. Is that all?” Shocked, I said, “Yes ma’am.” She hung up.

At that point in the spring semester, the students and I were preparing for their SOL testing. There are three SOL tests for English in eighth grade: an essay, writing multiple-choice test, and reading test. Because we were in full swing of preparing for SOL’s, and Gabriel was absent for the very first time, his classmates immediately jumped to conclusions and started gossiping. The longer he was absent, the wilder the talk got.

“I bet he’s not even sick. He probably just doesn’t want to take the SOL’s.”

“I hope he is sick. I hope he dies.”

“Dude, why would you say that?”

“He’s mean! He pushes me around all the time. I’m glad he’s gone.”

These comments sound extreme, but the students knew nothing about his accident. They didn’t have enough information to be tactful or sympathetic to Gabriel’s circumstances. All they knew was that Gabriel was always here, that he didn’t do his work when he was here, and then they did not see him again.

I did not get any further information on Gabriel’s injury or recovery from the school. I ended up scouring local news sources, looking for anything about a child who was shot on that day. I paid a fee to access an article that was behind a paywall because the basic information matched up. Here is what I found:

> The (city name) Police Department reported earlier that the juvenile was shot in the head. According to the search warrants, the shooting victim’s mother had gone to (street name) on March 12th to pick up her son. When she arrived, she was told he’d been injured playing a game of tag.

> However, after the mother took her son to Augusta Health in Fishersville, it was discovered the boy had been shot.
>
> …
>
> When police spoke to witnesses at the home in question, the affidavit stated that they were "not forthcoming with information."
>
> Police obtained a search warrant for the home, where multiple tooth fragments and suspected blood DNA were found.
>
> Two witnesses told police that a person living at the home was holding a pistol when it fired and struck the victim.
>
> Gunshot residue was also found inside the residence, according to a second search warrant.

It was starting to make sense why Gabriel showed up to school every single day, regardless of clearly not caring about the work. School can provide a sense of structure and stability at best. If nothing else, it was at least a change from being home.

Ultimately, I tell the story of Gabriel's shooting because it affected my entire classroom community, including Gabriel, my other students in my third period class, and myself. The focus on redirecting back to the course material, rather than actually talking about and processing this tragedy as a community, is dehumanizing. Valuing SOL scores over classroom community and student well-being is wrong.

In addition, if *I* was struggling to process the complex emotions of Gabriel's injury, I know the other students were struggling too. There was no support for me as a teacher, and I was essentially discouraged from providing support or a space to talk about the crisis.

I tell this story because I feel like it illustrates well where the school system is failing in its approach to kids in crisis. This thesis is about the reality of trauma-informed pedagogy in

today's underfunded public schools. I will provide my own experience in low-income schools, and then I will analyze these instances through a trauma-informed lens. Finally, I will end with an example of the first-year composition course I have taught at UVA this year, and I will explain my pedagogical choices in the context of trauma-informed education.

The effects of trauma on learning is a topic that I have personal stake in—I grew up in poverty and was shuffled through the public education system with limited success. Further, I have been diagnosed with both acute and complex Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, and my PTSD symptoms have drastically affected me both in school and in my life as a whole.

When I was assaulted in high school, my performance at school tanked. I couldn't sleep. I couldn't eat. I couldn't learn anything. Instead of being met with support and understanding, I was labeled a "problem student." I came into my eleventh-grade year checked out and dysregulated. I was running on a severe sleep deficit because I could not sleep at night. I was having panic attacks regularly, which would leave me hiding in the bathroom or a stairwell to calm my racing heart and gasping lungs. My muscles would lock up, and I could only rock back and forth while I waited it out. I did not speak much unless spoken to, so my teachers had assumed I was just skipping class, showing blatant disrespect by disappearing daily without warning. But it's very hard to think straight through the fog of dissociation, and constant rushes of adrenaline are not conducive to making socially responsible decisions.

My academic ability was severely impaired by acute trauma. During the year after my assault, I could not think clearly, my reading comprehension was significantly lower, and my writing became nearly incomprehensible. I was so exhausted and on-edge all the time that I could not pay attention, and my recent memory was hazy. What's more, I had always placed my self-worth on my academic achievement. I remember berating myself because I just wasn't smart anymore. I couldn't understand what was wrong with me. As an adult, I know now that those are

the effects of trauma on the brain. When a person is in survival mode, higher brain functions are impaired—all the body's resources go to the alarm system. This means that "children who experience trauma often have to work harder to show their full cognitive and academic potential because they tend to direct most of their mental energy on continually surveilling the environment for their physical and emotional safety and preparing for immediate action" (Cruz 124).

I am no outlier, either. Many of our children in poverty are faced with chronic trauma because of the instability and unsafety of poverty. PTSD is far more common in high-poverty areas than in wealthier neighborhoods. Traumatic poverty is a massive issue facing a growing number of children in the American public school system.

The school system is not built to recognize trauma and provide support. Too often, the students who are in crisis are treated with contempt and impatience. We are labeled as "difficult" or "problems" to be shuffled off into remedial classes, alternative schools, suspension, or even expulsion. We are seen as bad influences, bad kids, and then bad people. Over time, this influences the way these kids see themselves, too.

In this thesis, I will explore how trauma affects students in crisis through real classroom examples. I aim to show the experiences of the kids who are often written off, the bad influences, the low achievers. I see them all. Next, I will do a cursory overview of the current literature on trauma and how this affects teaching to give readers a sense of where the field is now. Then, I will explain where I am coming into the conversation, delineating some key features of trauma-informed pedagogy. I will give examples of some of my classroom experiences with my eighth graders that have informed each aspect of my teaching philosophy.

Critical Literature Review

The field of trauma-informed pedagogy is multidisciplinary, drawing on education, psychology, and other related fields. Adverse Childhood Experiences, or ACEs, are a measure of traumatic stress experienced before the age of eighteen. The ACE score measure comes from a CDC study in the 1990's that focused on the effects of childhood trauma on physical health.

One of the major theorists that forms the foundation of my understanding of trauma is Bessel van der Kolk. He is a Dutch psychiatrist who studies the effects of chronic developmental trauma. His book, *The Body Keeps the Score*, was published in 2014. It provides an essential foundation for understanding trauma's effects on the body and mind. He looks at a wide variety of traumatic experiences, from war veterans, to sexual abuse survivors, to survivors of car crashes, natural disasters, or other traumatic events. Van der Kolk's research was especially groundbreaking in his focus on the body. Previously, PTSD had largely been theorized as a mental disorder only, discounting the clear physical effects from trauma. However, fear is biological as much as it is mental, and the long-term effects of survival mode physically affect brain structure and bodily systems. Studying the physical as well as the mental effects can help broaden our understanding and help us understand what is actually happening to survivors of traumatic stress.

Van der Kolk explains how the stress hormone system should work, providing "a lightning-fast response to threat, but then quickly return us to equilibrium" (31). However, in individuals with PTSD, "the stress hormone system fails at this balancing act. Fight/flight/freeze signals continue after the danger is over, and… do not return to normal. Instead, the continued secretion of stress hormones is expressed as agitation and panic, and, in the long term, wreaks havoc with their health" (Van der Kolk 31). Van der Kolk reiterates the conclusions found by the CDC's ACE score study; chronic trauma has devastating effects on physical health over time. Stress on the mind is hard to separate from stress on the body.

These observations bring more clarity to many troubling student behaviors. For example, students under long-term stress are easily agitated, appearing defiant. On the other hand, mental stress is physically taxing on the body. This explains student "disinterest" behaviors, such as falling asleep in class and general low energy. It also can help explain what is happening with the kids who are constantly going to the nurse's office for headaches, stomachaches, or other ailments. Teachers who are unaware of the lasting physical symptoms of stress are likely to see this as simple avoidance, faking ailments to get out of class time. However, showing students that we trust their experience can go a long way in building relationships and creating a sense of safety.

Another observation Bessel van der Kolk draws attention to is the impact of agency during a traumatic event. When in danger, the body enacts these normal stress responses. If your stress response is successful—you are able to run away and escape harm, you successfully fight off the attacker, etc.—then the stress response was successful, and the body and brain will quickly return to the baseline state. However, if the stress response is unsuccessful, "for example, when people are held down, trapped, or otherwise prevented from taking effective action, be it in a war zone, a car accident, domestic violence, or a rape—the brain keeps secreting stress chemicals, and the brain's electrical circuits continue to fire in vain" (Van der Kolk 55). The stress response continues "long after the actual event has passed," and "the brain may keep sending signals to the body to escape a threat that no longer exists" (van der Kolk 55).

The brain mechanics during acute PTSD episodes show what is physically happening when the fight/flight/freeze response is triggered. Flashbacks are experienced only in the right hemisphere of the brain, and the effects of this are clear: "Deactivation of the left hemisphere has a direct impact on the capacity to organize experience into logical sequences and to translate our shifting feelings into words… Without sequencing we can't identify cause and effect, grasp the

long-term effects of our actions, or create coherent plans for the future… In technical terms they are experiencing the loss of executive functioning." (Van der Kolk 46). This finding shows why there is a loss of higher brain functioning during a flashback or an acute PTSD episode, which clearly affects academic performance.

Essentially, "trauma survivors are prone to 'continue the action, or rather the (futile) attempt at action, which began when the thing happened.' Being able to move and *do* something to protect oneself is a critical factor in determining whether or not a horrible experience will leave long-lasting scars." (Van der Kolk 55) This has vital implications about the effects of traumatic experiences on children. Children are small, weak, and rely on the adults around them to keep them safe. When the adults *are* the danger, they have very little power or agency to fight against the danger, or even to escape. Instead, many children start to dissociate as a defense mechanism. If you are too small and weak to escape, all you can do is make yourself as quiet and still as possible and wait for your surroundings to be safer.

Another influential writer in the field is Bruce Perry. In 2006, Perry published *The Boy Who was Raised as a Dog: And Other Stories from a Child Psychiatrist's Notebook -- What Traumatized Children Can Teach Us About Loss, Love, and Healing.* This book is a collection of case studies from Perry's experience as a child psychiatrist. Perry explains how, when he started medical school in the 1980's, little attention was paid to the long-term effects of trauma; "even less consideration was given to how trauma might affect children," because children were generally considered "to be naturally 'resilient,' with an innate ability to 'bounce back'" (Perry 10).

Perry questioned this assumption: "as a young researcher, I began to observe in the lab that stressful experience—particularly in early life—could change the brains of young animals. Numerous animal studies showed that even seemingly minor stress during infancy could have a

permanent impact on the architecture and the chemistry of the brain, and therefore, on behavior. I thought: why wouldn't the same be true for humans?" (10). Over time, his experiences working as a child psychiatrist with "troubled children" showed extensive trauma histories behind these children's difficult behaviors and struggles.

Perry found that a healing environment promoted safety through consistency, routine, and familiarity. He noted that his breakthrough moments with trauma affected children happened through the informal, everyday relationships between them and the other people around them. When they were able to feel safe and seen enough to participate in everyday human relationships, that was when progress was seen: "In fact, the research on the most effective treatments to help child trauma victims might be accurately summed up this way: what works best is anything that increases the quality and number of relationships in the child's life" (Perry 85).

Safety is essential, and this also means that children must have a sense of agency in their own recovery. Perry emphasizes that you must "provide a supportive but not intrusive presence" (69). Structure is helpful for traumatized children because then the expectations are clear; ideally, the classroom should be a safe, supportive, and structured environment to promote the best learning outcomes for all children, but especially for children dealing with trauma. Predictable environments feel the safest because children are not caught up in the uncertainty of what happens next. However, Perry also recognizes that too much structure can have the opposite effect; the goal is "structure, but not rigidity" (78). This means that there is enough flexibility that children have a level of control over their surroundings. The environment most conducive to trauma recovery is predictable, but not stifling. Perry explains what why agency is central to helping traumatized children feel safe:

> Because trauma—including that caused by neglect, whether deliberate or inadvertent—causes an overload of the stress response systems, which is marked by a loss of control, treatment for traumatized children must start by creating an atmosphere of safety. This is done most easily and effectively in the context of a predictable, respectful relationship. From this nurturing 'home base,' maltreated children can begin to create a sense of competence and mastery. To recover they must feel safe and in control. Consequently, the last thing you want to do is force treatment on these children or use any kind of coercive tactics. (Perry 154)

Another observation Perry makes that informed my research is about the dysregulation of adults. Children pick up on relational cues, looking to the adults around them to model how they should be reacting and responding to a variety of day-to-day experiences:

> Recognizing the power of relationships and relational cues is essential to effective therapeutic work and, indeed, to effective parenting, caregiving, teaching and just about any other human endeavor. This would turn out to be a major challenge as we started working with the Davidian children. Because, as I soon discovered, the CPS workers, law enforcement officers and mental health workers involved in trying to help the children were all overwhelmed, stressed out and in a state of alarm themselves. (Perry 74)

When we don't support teachers, parents, social workers, or anyone else who routinely works with children, we risk modeling dysregulated patterns. We are unintentionally showing children to work past the point of burnout and push their own needs to the side as we do ourselves.

More recently, collections about trauma in kids and how best to educate them continue to come out. One of these collections relevant to my research is Daniel Cruz's collection called *Developmental Trauma: Theory, Research and Practice.* This builds on previous work about developmental trauma, influenced by Bessel van der Kolk and Bruce Perry. This work was

published in 2023. Cruz discusses developmental trauma disorder (DTD), which is also known as complex post-traumatic stress disorder. Specifically, developmental trauma disorder is a term used to describe the effects of chronic trauma experienced throughout the formative years, since this affects brain structure, attachment, physical health, and mental health outcomes throughout the lifespan. Cruz has a chapter titled "Developmental Trauma in Schools: Educational Assessment and Intervention" that most closely aligns with my own education-based research. In this chapter, Cruz explains how DTD often results in "punitive, often exclusionary consequences" in response to the severity of disruptive behaviors in the classroom (Cruz 123). Most teachers do not know how to recognize that these behaviors are rooted in trauma. Instead, they are seen as expressions of defiance, aggression, and disinterest in learning. Teachers see these kids as needing "discipline," but this only further makes these traumatized students feel unsafe, dysregulated, and isolated.

To better inform my research, I looked through sources across age ranges and in a variety of academic settings. Specifically, Ernest Stromberg's *Trauma-Informed Pedagogy in Higher Education: A Faculty Guide for Teaching and Learning* was a resource I found useful applying these concepts to higher education as well. This resource compiles chapters written by a variety of educators. Published in 2023, it gives a thorough and recent overview of how trauma-informed pedagogy can be employed in college classrooms. Some topics covered in the included essays consider topics such as "how to create institutional structures to support trauma-informed pedagogies, how to teach traumatic materials ethically and effectively, how to employ reading and writing to support recovery and healing from trauma, and the use of inclusive pedagogies responsive to systemically inflicted trauma" (Stromberg 6).

There are several essays within this collection that I found particularly valuable. Firstly, Angela Moore wrote a chapter titled "Examining Authority Through Trauma: Reflections from

Student to Teacher." In this essay, Moore explains how her own negative experiences with authority figures made her feel unsafe in institutional settings such as school growing up. Further, after becoming a teacher, she struggled with the concept of projecting authority. She discusses the types of academic "lore" on authority: discussions about how to project authority in the classroom, how to keep control and order, and how to ensure compliance from students. Moore explains how these approaches are harmful to students who have experienced oppression or abuse at the hands of authorities of many types (police officers, teachers, parents). She offers instead modes of understanding that focus on unconditional positive regard, inclusivity, and understanding. Further, she offers ideas of how teachers can acknowledge the harms that authority can perpetuate. This shows students that it is safe to question power structures when they are causing harm, which can help influence positive future change.

Christine Valdez's work on her first-year seminar course has some valuable insights on teaching college students about trauma. Her chapter is titled "Considerations for Developing a First-Year Seminar on Psychological Trauma." I find her suggestions of body-positioning in the classroom particularly intriguing; Valdez suggests being "mindful of body positioning in relation to students that can contribute to power differentials" to avoid making students feel othered in the classroom (Valdez 18). I have started to employ this practice in my own classroom, experimenting with sitting at the table with my students while I teach, and I do feel that it contributes to our sense of classroom community and equality.

In addition, Valdez suggests that teachers "identify ways to anchor students positively in one's own mind to create unconditional positive regard and more tolerance when responding to challenging student behaviors" (Valdez 18). Once again, unconditional positive regard is referenced as an essential piece of the puzzle for making school into a safe and productive environment where students are viewed positively. I find it helpful that Valdez keeps the focus

on the teacher's end of this dynamic; the question is how to consider your students in a positive light, which will show through in your behavior.

Of course, to be applicable to all students, I made sure to read works that specifically address problems faced by students of color. Theodore S. Ransaw and Richard Majors published *Teaching to Close the Achievement Gap for Students of Color: Understanding the Impact of Factors Outside the Classroom.* This is essential reading for understanding how external factors such as race, poverty, and community violence affect student learning, development, and behavior. Published in 2021, this collection emphasizes the importance of teacher education for diverse classrooms.

The second half of this book, "Acknowledging the Impact of Student Life Beyond the Classroom," contains many insights that inform my own teaching practices. In the chapter, "Trauma Informed Teacher Training: The Impact of Trauma on Minority Student School Success" by Angela M. Proctor, Thomas R. Brooks, and Mark J. Reid, they specifically discuss the experience of minority students undergoing trauma. They found that "minoritized children may be at a much higher risk of both experiencing trauma, as well as having it interfere with their education due to structural problems both in the school system and the counseling system" (Ransaw and Majors 42). This sums up findings reproduced across a multitude of studies—not only are minority students more likely to experience trauma (and systemic racism is its own prevalent cause of trauma in the United States), but these children are also less likely to receive supports that benefit their outcomes.

Teaching Resilience and Mental Health Across the Curriculum: A Guide for High School and College Teachers is another helpful resource I came across. This book by Linda Yaron-Weston discusses trauma-sensitive instruction and its importance for marginalized students. Published in 2023, it tells Yaron-Weston's experience as a teacher working with students who

struggle with mental health in a variety of ways. She emphasizes the importance of teaching resilience and helping students develop emotional skills. Yaron-Weston argues that emotional literacy is constantly tested at school, but it is not explicitly taught: “They are often asked or expected to leave the outside world at the classroom door, but they need tools in how to do this in a healthy way that honors their experience, and at the same time holds them accountable to the professional space they’re in” (74). Expecting students to compartmentalize without giving them the tools to properly process and deal with their emotions in appropriate ways is a recipe for mental health struggles.

Lastly, the book *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis* by Robert Putnam is a source I read during my undergraduate career. Putnam specifically focuses on systemic issues of poverty, child abuse, and neglect in the United States. I had seen many examples of the systemic inequality in the United States during my own childhood and my time teaching, but seeing the data behind these individual examples is particularly effective in understanding how prevalent of a problem developmental trauma is in our society. Child abuse and neglect is common, and poverty itself is, in many ways, inherently traumatic. For example, food insecurity and housing insecurity have a huge impact on children. Their most basic needs are not consistently being met, which over time leads them to believe that the world (and adults) can not reliably provide for them.

This body of literature has impacted my own teaching philosophy by helping me understand the processes behind disruptive behaviors in the classroom. If teachers can understand what is going on behind the scenes for students during and after trauma, it is easier for teachers to respond with tolerance and patience. In turn, there is less risk of retraumatizing or triggering a student if educators are aware of the effects of trauma.

Key Features of Trauma-Informed Pedagogy

Next, I will give an overview of some key features of trauma-informed pedagogy. The key features I outline here are emotional vulnerability, adrenaline responses, dissociation responses, authority and power structures, student choice and agency, and cultural sensitivity and responsiveness. My goal is that, through consideration of all of these factors, educators will be able to approach students in crisis from a place of understanding and compassion. Further, if educators are able to understand what needs students are trying to satisfy, teachers can more effectively meet those needs without exacerbating the profound struggles these students are already dealing with.

Emotional Vulnerability

It's important to model emotional vulnerability to students. Especially at a time as hectic as eighth grade, students are dealing with new relationships, major transitions in their lives, and other crises. It's important to show that it is rational and normal to struggle. I tried my best to hide these emotions as a first-year teacher, but ultimately, I found that some of my most teachable moments came from times when I couldn't fully mask my feelings. They saw me as a person; and I showed them that it was safe and normal for them to be people, too. The classroom should be a place of community, and if we are trying to model positive behaviors, that includes modeling emotional reactions and responses. Community must go both ways. Students learn to support others as they learn that their community will support them back.

If students never see their teachers react, then this creates a barrier between how they see themselves and how they see adults. If we hide our emotions, we are sending the message that feelings are unprofessional and inappropriate, which is not true or healthy. I often received this

message myself as a student growing up in the public school system. I thought that I alone was struggling as much as I did. I had panic attacks on a near-daily basis, but I hid them from the people around me as best I could. Traumatized students are often taught, directly or indirectly, that the classroom is not the place for their struggles. However, emotional struggles are inevitable in the classroom; learning is vulnerable, and we must invite and address the emotions that come up in the process.

The most vital step we can take to break down this shame is being open to share and model vulnerability ourselves: "When we normalize experiences and emotions with activities like sharing personal stories and asking questions like 'how many of you have ever felt…?' then we can start to lessen the grip of shame" (Yaron-Weston 70). We need to actively learn to dismantle the shame-based response we give to emotional expressions in the classroom that feel "extreme." For example, crying in the classroom is a mortifying experience to most people, especially by the time they reach eighth grade.

I have cried in front of my eighth graders. It's important to model what it looks like to feel strong emotions without volatility. This models the process of emotional regulation, which we cannot assume these kids already are taught at home. Now, showing emotion in the classroom does *not* mean relying on students for emotional support. The purpose is *self*-regulation on the part of the adult and communicating these emotions clearly. There is a balancing act that teachers (and parents, for that matter) should try their best to maintain. This balance includes both empathy and boundaries. Students should not, at any point, be made to feel responsible for an adult's feelings. In *Equity-Centered Trauma-Informed Education,* Shevrin Venet offers some reflective questions for educators to identify these emotional boundaries: "When it comes to talking about emotions and life experiences, what's safe and authentic for my role as an educator? What feels safe and enjoyable to share with my students, and for my

students to share with me? What feels like it crosses a line?" (Shevrin Venet 118). These questions prompt us as educators to listen to our gut feeling regarding "what feels like it crosses a line?" I also appreciate how these questions address both the teacher and student side of the relationship. Building connections with the class should benefit both students and teachers, and ultimately model positive relationships with appropriate boundaries beyond the classroom as well.

It's completely normal, expected, and healthy to cry during stressful situations. Crying has physical benefits, such as lowering cortisol in the body. It also helps them learn empathy and compassion. I cry when I am angry, too. And there are times when anger is appropriate in the classroom. For example, I was angry on behalf of a student when their well-being was threatened. In cases where safety is concerned, allowing yourself to show your emotions can show students that you deeply care for them. In turn, they feel valued, and the relationship moves toward a place of trust and cooperation.

Fight or Flight

Nervous system regulation is a vital piece of the puzzle for how students learn. Adequate learning cannot happen if your nervous system is dysregulated. Fight-or-flight mode makes us stupid. Higher processes shut down, and the body directs its energy to pumping blood to the muscles to ready for action. In this reactive mode, you cannot be accurately reflective or thoughtful. Impulse control becomes more difficult because of adrenaline, and critical thinking becomes nearly impossible. Even sitting still in a seat becomes nearly impossible. Teachers need to be able to grasp that the nervous system is different after trauma: "the survivor's energy now becomes focused on suppressing inner chaos, at the expense of spontaneous involvement in their life… it's critical for trauma treatment to engage the entire organism, body, mind, and brain"

(Van der Kolk 54). To meet the body's needs after stress, school must engage students on a mental and physical level. Having breaks for movement can help redirect this energy and regulate students' nervous systems so that they are better able to learn.

When in fight-or-flight mode, students should have access to a physical outlet to get them back to a state of calm and regulate their nervous system. This could look like taking a lap around the hallways, being able to stand next to a desk and do a quick dance or jog in place, doing some isometric exercises or stretching, breathing exercises, or even access to a full sensory room or swing. Teachers could also provide some simple "heavy work" options such as delivering heavy books to another classroom or carrying a large watering can to water classroom plants. Giving students the option to choose their own physical outlets to let off some steam can help them regain their emotional control, or even better can help them maintain emotional regulation in the first place. Students should be taught coping skills and a way to identify their feelings, along with healthy options for dealing with feelings when they are overwhelmed. Having pre-taught options so that students can choose their own tools for sensory and emotional regulations can give students a sense of control and serves to reinforce their overall sense of well-being and "felt safety."

The most vital piece for educators to understand about behavior as it relates to emotional regulation and trauma responses is the involuntary nature of trauma responses. Traumatized students are not typically being intentionally defiant; the brain's alarm system "automatically triggers preprogrammed physical escape plans in the oldest parts of the brain… By the time we are fully aware of our situation, our body may already be on the move" (Van der Kolk 55). By understanding and accepting this, and especially helping students to understand the nature of trauma responses as well, educators can hold space for these bodily responses, instead of punishing students for reactions outside of their control.

Dissociation (Freeze Response)

Another possible effect of trauma is chronic dissociation. Students who are dissociating are completely disengaged. They don't seek out information, they are not motivated to learn—they are just trying to fly under the radar and not be noticed. They are often isolated as well, since they are not connecting with others socially, asking for help, or forging relationships. As van der Kolk explains it, "Numbing is the other side of the coin in PTSD… While reliving trauma is dramatic, frightening, and potentially self-destructive, over time a lack of presence can be even more damaging. This is a particular problem with traumatized children. The acting-out kids tend to get attention; the blanked-out ones don't bother anybody and are left to lose their future bit by bit." (Van der Kolk 74). This highlights where the education system falls short. When the school system does intervene for kids in crisis, it is typically for the ones who act-out. In contrast, the kids who have the opposite response to trauma tend to be ignored since they are not being disruptive.

I have deep empathy for students dealing with dissociation. Overwhelmed by problems outside their control, these students seem to shut down completely. School is not these kids' main concern, especially if they are unsafe at home. There is a huge difference between students with functional and healthy families and those who do not. The students who have supportive parents and a safe and stable home environment with enough food, quality rest, and clean well-fitting seasonally-appropriate clothing can come to school rested, fed, and ready to learn. These students are able to decompress, process, and relax at home, so they are ready to work at school. Students from insecure, struggling, or dysfunctional homes, on the other hand, come to school tired, hungry, unable to focus, or worried about all of the things going on in their life outside of school. These students also often struggle with truancy, with ill-fitting or out-of-season clothing,

and cleanliness. These factors may also lead to even more isolation or bullying situations at school. If school, as opposed to home, is a student's safe place or most stable and peaceful environment, then this mental rest is going to happen in the more secure environment of school instead of in their chaotic home life.

To educators who are not familiar with the dissociation response to stress, these dissociated, checked-out children appear to be lazy, defiant, and unmotivated. Educators tend to respond differently to this behavior depending on where they assume it comes from. If the teacher is aware that this behavior is an unconscious stress response, they are more likely to respond with compassion and understanding. In contrast, if the teacher assumes that the behavior is a show of defiance and disrespect, they are more likely to respond with anger or punitive measures. Punitive measures such as yelling at a student who is experiencing a trauma response is only going to dysregulate and marginalize the student more. In most cases, the individual does not understand *why* they are unable to engage meaningfully or get work done, and this can reinforce negative self-beliefs about the child's demeanor, personality, and capabilities. Eventually, students who are repeatedly written off come to believe that they are simply not meant to succeed, or that they are inherently missing what makes people hard-working, curious, and ultimately, valuable to society.

Authority / Power Structures

In the pursuit of a trauma-informed teaching approach, it's crucial to scrutinize the dynamics of power and authority within the classroom. Perry's observations underscore how seemingly minor interactions can foster therapeutic connections, highlighting the significance of a supportive environment where students have agency in their interactions with caring adults: "our staff had a variety of strengths—some were very touchy-feely and nurturing, others were

humorous, still others good listeners or sources of information—the children could seek out what they needed, when they needed it. This created a powerful therapeutic web" (Perry 78). Perry's emphasis on supportive relationships with adults, especially when children are given the agency to seek out the type of support they need at any given time, shows the importance of having as many adults available as part of a team of support. To create this environment effectively, teachers and school staff must be paid better and treated better to promote better teacher retention rates. As it stands, most underfunded schools are understaffed, and the staff that is there are overworked and stretched thin.

A trauma-informed teaching approach must involve an interrogation of power and authority. School as an institutional environment can be especially stressful and triggering to students who have a history of negative experiences with authority. Often, being in an institution (such as public school) in itself is stifling. Students' behavior is controlled, their time is structured by outside forces, and they are being supervised and judged at all times. Hypervigilance is a main symptom of PTSD, and a student who is constantly aware of being watched and controlled has little attention left to devote to the academic and social demands of school.

In addition, many students have negative views of authority figures. Angela Moore discusses how her experience with authority-related trauma affected her own experience as a student and later a teacher. She explains that her trauma led her "to associate the concept of authority with things like 'rejection' and 'danger'" in a way that continuously informed her subconscious responses to authority (Moore 101). Moore shares that she carried the assumption that all authority figures would look down on her, since that had been her experience in the past. This distrust of authority figures is not uncommon in students affected by abuses of power from parents, teachers, police officers, or others in an official capacity. The core belief becomes that

authority figures do not have your best interest in mind, or that they view you with suspicion, ready to catch you making a mistake. One could see how this would contribute to conflict between teachers and students. Students are wary and distrustful, and many teachers, especially those who are not trauma informed, react defensively to disrespect, desperate to retain order in the classroom.

I absolutely viewed this dynamic in my own classroom. Many students feel unsafe around authority, and this can come out as aggression, defiance, and general frustration and exhaustion. I had a student named McKenna who had an Individualized Education Program for her emotional disorder and had a diagnosis of Oppositional Defiant Disorder. McKenna made it clear to me that she hated me right off the bat, and over time I realized that this was her gut reaction to all authority figures. I represented authority to her, and her experience with adults in power is that they don't listen to her, and they don't care about how she is feeling or thinking; they just care about her compliance.

When taking into account McKenna's adverse childhood experiences, it is very clear why and how she maintains this deep distrust of authority figures. McKenna has been let down by every single adult in her young life. It is no wonder that she views authority figures with great suspicion and defiance. If she trusts no one, she will not be disappointed. This student had been through the foster care system, alternative schools, girls' homes, and had been kicked out of each one for being "difficult and unmanageable." How must that feel, to be removed from your home for your safety, but to be treated as a problem and a liability in every alternative "home"? How can we blame these kids for being jaded and noncompliant?

These experiences raise fundamental questions about the purpose of public education. What kinds of community members are we trying to raise? Is the main goal to create compliant individuals who don't question authority, who don't question the system, who "respect"

authority figures without receiving the same respect in return? Is that really the ideal we are raising them for? The prevailing culture of mistrust and antagonism between students and authority figures calls for a reevaluation of our approach to classroom management.

The solution is not to double down on our authority. It is not to crack down on disrespect. Their genuine life experiences have taught these kids that adults do not care about them, do not respect them, do not like them. Their life experiences have taught these kids that adults are not safe. Their life experiences have taught them that adults are bigger, stronger, louder, and more important than they are.

We have to break down the divide between authority figure and student, and between adult and child. We need to meet students on an individual-to-individual level. The solution is to model respect in all settings, to treat students with the same dignity, compassion, and respect with which we treat colleagues, parents, and community members. We must see the students as the complex and valuable people they really are and build a nurturing learning environment where students can feel seen and heard, understood and valued. Moore talks about her experience becoming a teacher as an individual with a history of authority-related trauma. First, she explains what helped her through these struggles as a student. One of her biggest takeaways was the impact of unconditional positive regard.

At its best, school can be a source of safety, community, meaningful human interaction, adults modeling positive behaviors and emotional regulation, kindness, compassion, and understanding. School can be an escape, a genuine intervention for kids surviving abuse. It can be a source of other safe adults who listen and care, when the adults at home are not providing that. These supports can counterbalance the adversities they face outside the classroom. However, when schools replicate the same oppressive dynamics students encounter elsewhere, they fail to fulfill their potential as spaces of healing and growth.

At its worst, school can be just as stifling and unsafe as a lot of these kids' home lives are. If students do not feel valued and respected, they will never let their guards down enough to learn and grow and to reach their full potential. By empowering students to overcome their trauma and to control their own destinies by applying themselves and connecting with others, we are building the next generation of functional adults who are able to contribute to society and eventually to make their own home lives safe and healthy as well.

In reimagining the role of education, we must prioritize creating environments where students feel seen, heard, and respected. By dismantling traditional power structures and embracing a more egalitarian approach, we can empower students to reclaim their agency and engage meaningfully in their own learning journey.

Student Choice and Agency

Now that the physical effects of trauma on individuals are clear, it's important to consider what role teachers can play to make sure that student needs are being met. This section explores how power dynamics influence students' sense of safety, trust, and empowerment, all of which are essential components of trauma-informed pedagogy. Bruce Perry observed that "To develop a self one must exercise choice and learn from the consequences of those choices; if the only thing you are taught is to comply, you have little way of knowing what you like and want" (Perry 76). This puts into perspective what the *purpose* of education is; are we trying to raise children to be compliant, or are we trying to raise them to be independent thinkers and community members?

The importance of student choice is that when students have control over the topics they are covering or the subjects of the narratives they are producing, their level of engagement tends to be much higher. For students to get the most out of writing practice, they should be interested

in and invested in the stories they are trying to tell. Traumatized students (and even non-traumatized kids) are not inherently interested in or invested in writing about random, academic prompts. Giving them a degree of choice in topic increases engagement and empowers students to take control of their writing and the ways in which they choose to share their knowledge, opinions, and ideas. This is particularly vital to individuals who have experienced trauma, as people with significant trauma histories have historically been marginalized and powerless.

For example, the students in the eighth-grade language arts class I taught had been prompted to write a personal essay connecting their own personality traits with the traits and experiences of a specific character in the novel we had read, S.E. Hinton's coming-of-age novel *The Outsiders*. One student, Oscar, did not care at all about this assignment. Oscar was a bright young man who had done fewer and fewer assignments as he progressed through middle school. Oscar was disengaged and defiant much of the time, skipping classes, crumpling up and throwing away papers, and when not actually arguing with staff members and other students he was skilled at looking as bored as possible, barely glancing at his teachers and they gave instruction or passed out papers. Oscar had naturally assumed that he wouldn't be allowed to write about the personal experiences he wanted to write about, since this had been his experience so far.

Oscar sat focused more on sawing through the back of his desk chair with the elastic strap of the required mask he wore dangling with his bandana. I walked over to him and pointed to his name on his paper, saying that I was looking forward to reading his essay since I knew he had a lot of good ideas. He rolled his eyes, but I sat with him and reviewed the directions, then asked him which character he related to the most. This clearly piqued his interest, and he paused and gave it some thought. Eventually he said the character he most identified with was Dally, who is the "tough guy" who tends to get himself into trouble, but ultimately cares deeply about his

friends. I was surprised by the seriousness with which he pondered the question. I could see that his level of engagement was much higher when he began to see the characters as complicated individuals and could clearly begin to connect their experiences with his own. As we began the discussion, he seemed almost hesitant to give an opinion—and possibly hesitant to show that he was interested in the assignment or the book at all. When he identified Dally as the character he related to the most, his voice rose at the end as though he was asking a question, and he hesitated and stumbled over his words as he spoke.

I asked him if he could think of an experience he had had or a personal story that showed the connection between his own life and Dally's. He seemed caught off guard, and his eyes widened as though he was sure that there must be a catch, asking, "Are you sure I can write about that?" Oscar seemed very wary of the assignment, and he spoke slowly and cautiously at first. His story related a pivotal moment in his own life when he was caught and arrested and nearly ended up incarcerated in a Juvenile Detention facility after setting a porta-potty on fire.

I listened, I took his story seriously, and I helped him structure these thoughts into an essay that connected his experiences back to the events of the book and the prompt. As Oscar relayed the story, his confidence increased, and he spoke with more energy and enthusiasm. I felt that I was getting to know him and his thoughts on a much more personal level. He gave more details, and his face and voice became much more animated, and I felt I was seeing a different side of him. For the first time, I felt I was getting a sense of the real Oscar who was hiding behind the bravado of his "bad boy" image.

I don't think he had ever had an adult really take him seriously when talking about stuff like that. Oscar seemed to think of his own life as inherently non-academic and completely inappropriate for school writing. Oscar was not connecting to writing for school the way he connected to expressing himself through vandalism of school property. But why should "school

writing" be any different than any other writing? Why should academic writing have to be different than me sitting there with Oscar, with him telling me stories about things that have happened to him? Writing is communicating, after all, and each individual brings a unique perspective and something of value to share. When Oscar was able to communicate about his own life, he was empowered. Someone was listening. His opinion and his point of view mattered. Writing is a powerful tool for the traumatized and marginalized to take control of their own narratives instead of merely being written about.

Cultural Sensitivity and Responsiveness – Punitive Measures as Opposed to Attempts to Understand and Support

Culturally responsive curriculum development must include awareness of trauma histories and the impact of adverse childhood experiences. It is imperative that educators have awareness of poverty, abuse, neglect, the foster care system, and how these impact student learning engagement and achievement. Often the focus is on knowing how and when to report suspected abuse or neglect, but not how the school community should respond to and support families in crisis. Reporting suspected abuse or neglect is clearly imperative, but in almost every case of prolonged unsafe childhoods, there were many opportunities for teachers and other community members to realize that something was amiss in a student's home life and to respond with compassion and support, potentially changing the outcomes.

One particularly high-profile example of the failure of a public school system to support a child in crisis is the case of a black child growing up in poverty in Metro Atlanta at the turn of the Millenium. Shéyaa Bin Abraham-Joseph was brought to the United States from the United Kingdom as a young child. He had a difficult life by anyone's standards, ultimately facing homelessness, food insecurity, abuse, poverty, and violence as an undocumented student

growing up in some of metro Atlanta's most notorious neighborhoods. Shéyaa, whose family had moved repeatedly in search of security and safety, grew up one of eleven children born to his single mother. There were numerous incidents throughout his childhood which involved law enforcement, and the family often stayed on the move, making tracking and support difficult. Multiple violent conflicts happened to and around Shéyaa and his family, including the death, by gun violence, of Shéyaa's brother, Quantivayus.

By middle school, Shéyaa had a reputation as a "bad kid" and was constantly in trouble with school officials and the police. In seventh grade, Shéyaa was placed on probation for possessing a gun. In eighth grade, Shéyaa was expelled and banned from every public school in the DeKalb County Public School District, one of the largest districts in Georgia, for violating his probation (Abraham-Joseph).

It was easy to see Shéyaa as just another violent troublemaker. If Shéyaa hadn't found a voice and way to tell his story, we might have never known anything about him except brief facts if he ended up murdered or as a criminal on the FBI's Most-Wanted list. The murder of Quantivayus had a profound impact on the remaining ten siblings, one more of whom would also go on to be murdered. How many societal failures and adverse childhood experiences led to this child feeling that the only way he could feel safe and empowered was to carry a loaded gun? How many laws had been broken by adults which ultimately led to a twelve-year-old being able to obtain a handgun and ammunition? What choices were there for Shéyaa, a disenfranchised and disillusioned youth who had no reason at all to trust the system to help him or to keep him safe? Every single adult in his life had let him down. The school district's response was expulsion. Shéyaa, like his murdered brother Quantivayus, was no longer their problem.

While it could certainly be argued that Shéyaa's expulsion made the school safer for other students, how did this help Shéyaa himself? Why would the solution be cutting the child

off from a chance at an education? Is this the failure of the student, or is the failure of the entire system?

Despite being given up on by his school system and even shot nine times on his twenty-first birthday, Shéyaa grew up to find fame as the rapper and lyrical poet known as 21 Savage, recounting the traumas of his childhood and his yearning to find his place in the world and keep others from experiencing what he faced as a child. 21 Savage, one of the best-known rappers of his generation, finally found his voice.

Even in my very first year as an educator, I was aware of students facing incredible hardships. I was also aware, as a member of a therapeutic foster family for much of my own childhood, how little outsiders truly know about any child who is experiencing trauma. Halfway through my first school year as a teacher, a group email from the school social worker alerted teachers to the fact that my student Emily was homeless—a fact that school administrators discovered when her school-issued laptops kept disappearing, and it was brought to their attention that Emily's mother was, in fact, selling them. Emily had also been labeled as "difficult" and a "problem student." Now I understood why. She showed up to school very occasionally, which of course made it difficult to engage her in class when she was there, since I could not focus on any longer-term projects with her—any longer than a day or two, and she would not be there to get anything out of the work. Emily was incredibly disruptive in class whenever she was there, which made me (and I suspect, many of her classmates) feel relieved in many ways when she was absent yet again. I felt powerless to do anything to help, and I felt guilty for the palpable relief when her chair remained empty. Her brief and occasional presence had a profound effect on my educational philosophy, nonetheless.

Emily was a self-harmer as well. I noticed the cuts up and down her arms and felt a wave of angst as I realized what was going on and my duty to report it. As a mandated reporter, I had

to report the rows of fresh cuts on her wrists. My heart ached for her. I pulled her aside, explained to her what I had seen and that I cared about her, and told her that I was legally required to report this to the guidance counselor. She pushed back, insisting that telling the counselor would not help, as all they were going to do would be to tell her parents. Ultimately, Emily was right. They called her parents, who did not care, and Emily disappeared again. Eventually, her name disappeared from my online class list, and I never saw her again.

Educators struggle to find ways to handle situations like Shéyaa's and Emily's. I cannot be certain of the best approach in this situation, but I do know that I wish I had been able to choose a different option besides simply emailing the school counselor and having no way to show my concern or my support for this student ever again. I certainly would have loved to have been able to take a more personal and private approach while still alerting appropriate authorities. I felt that I had failed her. I wanted to talk to her about how I was there for her, how I understood.

Sending a student to the guidance office often feels to them like a disciplinary process. After all, it goes like this: students are sent to the office, they are sternly reprimanded and told that they shouldn't do whatever they are doing, and then their parents are called so that it can be dealt with at home, in addition to following whatever disciplinary procedures have been set forth for them to follow. This is exactly how the process works when students are sent to the office for acting out. In so many cases, the response of the school feels punitive to the student. Students who are having difficulty coping with unimaginable home or personal situations are met with hard-and-fast rules which do not take into account all of the pieces of the puzzle over which the student has no control at all. Imagine how that would feel, to be essentially punished for struggling with mental health.

My ENWR class as a model for applying this to a specific course

At this point in my career, I am instructing first-year college students. The course I'm teaching is an introductory writing class—the topic is Writing About Bodies. My philosophy in teaching this course is to allow students to practice their writing in a way that will further their social and emotional development. In addition, readings and class discussions focus on the body, so students are encouraged to make connections between mental and physical processes. My goal is to increase their understanding of how we interact with our bodies to construct identity. To encourage my students to consider different facets of the diverse human experience, we discuss a variety of topics, such as race, sex and gender, sexuality, disability, and age.

Of course, UVA students tend to come from families with higher-than-average incomes, and this thesis does primarily focus on trauma-informed teaching as it relates to high-poverty areas. However, here at UVA is where I have been given this opportunity to construct and teach my own course curriculum, and my teaching methods are all informed by my previous experiences in low-income schools. My experience working with students in poverty, as well as growing up in poverty and being part of a therapeutic foster family has made me a more compassionate and understanding teacher. My teaching philosophy is ultimately founded on compassion and collaboration. I know personally how it feels for people to assume the worst of you as a student who is struggling, and I strive to assume the best of each and every one of my students, and then we work together to strengthen their writing skills.

In addition, there are a surprising number of similarities between teaching middle schoolers and college first years. Thirteen-year-olds and eighteen-year-olds are both going through significant life transitions, and crises in their personal lives inevitably affect their performance in school. Many of my first-years are living away from their parents for the first time, and many of them are completely surrounded by new people. In addition, they suddenly have a lot more freedom than they have ever had before. This is a huge stressor, even though it

comes with many benefits as well. I make an intentional effort to model emotional vulnerability and openness in my own college writing classroom. The first year in a new place can be incredibly isolating and lonely, and having real conversations in the classroom are a huge step toward making students feel seen and supported.

The topic I chose to teach is one that I feel contributes to this vulnerability. We all have a body, and our own relationships with our body is a highly personal topic. Students' weekly writing assignments are done discussion board style, but I ask questions that skirt the personal. Since they can see each other's responses, they get to see a variety of perspectives and experiences represented in the classroom. The questions are intentionally a bit open-ended, so that there are a variety of ways that one can approach their response. For example, when the class was examining the ways emotions affect the body, this was the discussion board prompt I gave them for the week:

> "How do you feel your emotions? Do they happen in your body, or in your mind, or both? Are they disjointed or connected? Do we all feel emotions differently? Does it matter how we label feelings?
>
> *You do not have to answer every single one of these questions! I give a lot of related questions to help prompt your thinking. You can answer whichever parts you want to write about.*"

I require responses to be 200-300 words long for full credit, which encourages students to develop their answers, regardless of which part of the prompt they choose to answer. If they choose to, they may write about their own personal experience with emotions, but they do not have to tell personal stories. If they prefer, they can write about how they have observed emotions in others around them. For example, I had one student choose to compare how two of

her siblings expressed their emotions differently. This was a way for her to engage personally with the prompt without necessarily having to share vulnerable memories about herself.

In talking about the body, we discuss bodily stress responses at length. Helping students understand the physical processes beneath the surface helps build understanding of the self, empathy and understanding of others, and compassion for the animals of our bodies. I aim to give my students the knowledge base to recognize why certain behaviors happen, including the effects of chronic stress and trauma.

I particularly enjoy the student and instructor dynamic at the college level. The relationship is inherently different from K-12 teaching, since college students are there by choice, and they have more independence than younger students. I have my students call me by my first name, and I know all of my students' names. In addition, I purposely play with authority in the classroom. I like to sit when I teach, and I've noticed increased responsiveness and engagement of my students when I sit at the table with them as I teach.

I've touched on the importance of student choice and agency in the classroom in order to increase student engagement so they can be invested in their learning as much as possible. Each of the three major assignments in my writing course has as much student choice and control as possible. The first major assignment is a personal essay. It is vital to establish a sense of community and openness right off the bat when creating a new learning environment. Writing about the self puts one in a very vulnerable position, whether or not the themes and topics covered are private matters. Ultimately the self is private, and this is especially true for those living with trauma. When writing about one's own past, context inevitably comes through, and in this sense, all writing is personal.

One reason I chose to start the course with a personal essay is that most students are not particularly comfortable or confident writing about themselves for school. Many class

discussions focus on what is and isn't writing, and my aim is to broaden students' concepts of what writing is. At its core, writing is communicating. Texting is writing. Posting on any kind of media, recording one's dreams in a notes app, ranting in a voice message to a friend; all of this is writing in different forms. Listening to an audiobook is absolutely still considered reading, so why shouldn't this apply to our understanding of writing? Helping students to understand that they already write every day for a variety of different modes and audiences can help tremendously to boost their confidence in their own writing skills.

Employing the strategies of universal design for learning is also important. Having supports and strategies in place for all students means that no one is singled out for "special" supports– they are already available to everyone. I also encourage students to use voice-to-text assistive technologies if that helps them. Some people feel more confident in their speaking skills than writing skills, especially students who do not consider themselves to be "good at school."

Some of these students may have attention-deficit disorder or other learning disabilities– some detected, and others undetected. Encouraging the use of assistive technology in the classroom should be open to everyone. If it helps, it helps, and voice dictation helps many people for many different reasons. Universal supports for learning should be made available to every student, whether or not they have a documented disability through the school's disability department. If supports are always available to everyone, those who need them will get them without any additional allowances being made. A concrete, real-world example of this is a ramp instead of stairs. Students who walk and students who use wheelchairs can all use ramps, so when ramps are in place no one needs special supports. This is the opposite when only stairs are provided. When stairs are in place instead of ramps, wheelchair-users are left out unless ramps are provided alongside those stairs. It is fine for steps to be provided as long as ramps are also in

place. By the same token, closed-captioning can benefit people who are deaf without impeding anyone else, just as ramps do not impede those who can walk.

The second major assignment in my course is an inquiry-based research paper on a subject of each student's choice relating to the body. The choice aspect of this is essential. I want my students to truly, deeply engage with their research, so we spend time exploring different possible topics as a class to find what sparks their interest. I'm delighted by the level of enthusiasm with which they discuss their research in class with their peers. I have students writing on a wide variety of topics, from the long-term effects of incarceration, to food deserts, to the rise of cosmetic surgeries such as the "Brazilian Butt Lifts" made popular by so-called reality-television stars the Kardashians. Overall, bringing in student interest makes our class more diverse, comprehensive, and personally tailored to the interests of my current students.

Their third and final project of the course I am teaching is a creative, multimodal project: a media study where students are asked to analyze a specific piece of media and interrogate how it presents the body. Their response can be a mix of writing, collaged images, other sources (with written explanations for the synthesis), drawings, or other content that will add to their media analysis. Once again, they have a choice of topic in this assignment. This helps ensure that it will be a project they are invested in, and hopefully allow them to analyze a familiar favorite through a new perspective.

Though I am not currently teaching in a low-income environment, it's still central to my teaching philosophy to be open, sensitive, and responsive to the diverse cultural backgrounds and experiences of my students. As the Center for Disease Control's Adverse Childhood Experience score study shows, the experience of adverse childhood experiences such as abuse and neglect are common in the United States, even in upper-middle class white demographics.

Teaching University of Virginia students brings its own cultural challenges. Many of these students have been held to very high standards, in high pressure environments where burnout is encouraged, and boundaries are not always discussed. These high-pressure environments often lead to different types of trauma than the traumas of poverty, but the effects of external pressures show in many of my students. One of the biggest challenges I've found with these higher-income students is the level of perfectionism and decision-paralysis.

The students in my course are all generally high-achieving students, as I would expect from the University, but many of the students are afraid of failure. By extension, these students may be afraid to take risks in their work, and they have no confidence in their writing skills. To help build their confidence in writing, I give as much positive feedback as possible. I make my comments as specific as possible to help them identify what rhetorical moves they are already making in their writing. In addition, there are many low stakes writing assignments on a weekly basis. These prompts give them a chance to write on a variety of topics, and it is a place where they can use a more informal tone. I assign informal writing assignments to help bridge the mental gap between what students consider "real" writing. They are practicing clarity, development of ideas, and personal voice.

Through all of these tactics, I end up building a sense of community and mutual respect and support in the classroom. This helps to build a positive and nurturing learning environment for all.

Conclusion

My hope is that educators will find this study of Trauma-Informed Teaching practices to be informative and practical. My English Writing and Composition class can be used as a model of ways that trauma-informed principles can make the classroom a more supportive, engaging, and safe environment for students who are affected by trauma, since students who have experienced trauma can be found in every classroom environment, whether in traditionally marginalized communities or not.

Teachers' understanding of trauma-informed teaching practices is especially vital in low-income schools, where much of the student body is often multiply-marginalized. In addition, poverty itself is traumatic, so teaching survivors of poverty must be based in an understanding of their lived realities. Trauma makes physical and emotional changes in children which have long-lasting effects on their ability to learn and process new information, make social connections, and maintain emotional regulation. Without supports in place in every classroom to help all students deal with the effects of trauma, those with higher-than-usual numbers of adverse childhood experiences and those living in insecure or dysfunctional homes will become more and more isolated and fall farther and farther behind their peers. An understanding of the effects of trauma is critical for teachers who want all of their students to be engaged and connected, not just to the curriculum, but also to the learning community.

It's important to me to be the educator who I needed when I was a child going through heavy experiences. Students cannot check their past experiences at the door to maximize learning; their trauma is in the room whether or not it is acknowledged. Teachers who are armed with knowledge and compassion can create respectful, inclusive, and nurturing learning communities where all students are valued and can make meaningful contributions and connections to the curriculum, to their peers, and to themselves. This, in turn, can empower students to be agents of change in their own lives and the lives of others. Educators have a

unique opportunity to guide and nurture the next generation. By acknowledging the effects of trauma and educating students to understand their own trauma, teachers can empower students to be agents of change who can overcome their adverse childhood experiences and control their own destinies.

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