

Leadership and Trauma Informed Schools

The demands associated with educational leadership in urban schools continue to become more complex and multi-faceted. Leaders of urban schools recognize the need for significant long-term change and understand that when it comes to meeting students' needs when you get to the heart of it, leadership is servitude. The current global pandemic associated with COVID 19, coupled with the racial tensions that have brought the inequities of racial injustice that Black people experience in America, have gained support and made headlines worldwide. The attention has served to solidify just how much our students today are subjected to outside factors that, if not addressed, have the potential of negatively impacting their academic success. The demands are high, educational funding and resources are depleting fast, and educational policymakers today, like the United States Secretary of Education, Betsy DeVos, have never taught or taken the time to hear the voices of those students who are disregarded and unheard in our public education system.

When I began teaching years ago, I quickly understood just how important it was to build trusting, positive relationships with my students. I also entered the profession with the hope of igniting change and touching the lives of those students who would be written off by society as a statistic. No doubt about it, our current educational system is in desperate need of major reconstruction. Anderson (2016) points out that "school leaders must equip themselves with the skills to lead schools where many children have experienced trauma and be prepared to develop solutions" (p. 20). Understanding the effects of trauma in an educational system already designed for failure is crucial to ensuring and promoting all students' academic success, especially

students of color. Leaders must understand trauma to identify it and be prepared to counteract it by weaving supports into everyday interactions with students.

Trauma Statistics

Bücker et al. (2012) report, "there is a high prevalence of subsyndromal symptoms in school-aged children with trauma and attention impairment, which may contribute to cumulative deficit early in cognitive development' (p.756). Those students who have experienced trauma during the early stages of brain development and growth may not gain as much from learning in a typical classroom setting as their peers who did not experience trauma. Possibly, impacting how they acquire and process new information. Trauma can negatively impact children's brain development, interact with others, and feel about themselves. "For school-aged children, the detrimental effects of stress are formidable, impeding their physical, social, emotional, and academic development" (Terrasi & Crain de Galarce, 2017, p. 35). In fact, according to The National Child Traumatic Stress Network, one out of four children in school performance is impacted by an experienced traumatic event (2008). The low number of child abuse cases reported while schools were closed during the COVID 19 global pandemic is especially cause for concern.

Consequently, school leaders must; (1) understand trauma, (2) recognize the prevalence of exposure to trauma, and (3) understand how trauma impacts academic success and behavior. Only then can school leaders pave the way for trauma-informed schools. The challenge is educating students while simultaneously providing them with the mental, physical, and emotional support they need to feel supported and successful.

School shootings, suicides, poverty, and overexposure to traumatic events have forced concerned educators to look at teaching and learning through a different lens. To increase the success of students, mental health must be acknowledged and addressed during the school day.

Trauma Defined

There is trauma, and there is also complex trauma. Emotional and psychological trauma can include complex experiences of abuse, maltreatment, neglect, illness, death of a loved one, domestic violence, and even bullying. "Children who live in a consistently dysfunctional environment often manifest symptoms of what is known as complex trauma, which is the cumulative effect of traumatic experiences that are repeated or prolonged over time" (Terrasi & Crain de Galarce, 2017, p. 36). Both types of trauma can damage the brain due to a profoundly distressing event that causes stress. Trauma is not discriminatory. Students from urban, rural, and suburban schools have experienced trauma. However, "schools in high-poverty communities are more likely to serve families that have experienced trauma" (Anderson, 2016, p. 20).

That is because, "lifetime prevalence of having witnessed violence is higher among African American (57.2%) and Hispanic (50.0%) youth than Caucasian (34.3%) youth" (Rigard, Laracy, Dupaul, Shapiro, and Power, 2015, p. 11). Also, "given that trauma is determined by how one responds to an event rather than the details of the event itself, it is important to keep in mind that what may be traumatic to one child may not be traumatizing to another" (Wright, 2017, p. 142).

According to Farrell & Taylor, 2017, psychological trauma results from four forms of violence; cultural trauma, including racism, gender inequality, discrimination; structural trauma, including poverty, unemployment, hunger, and disability; direct trauma, includes war, gender-based

violence, child abuse and neglect, displacement, criminal activity, human trafficking; and political power, natural trauma caused by natural disasters(P. 63).

During COVID 19 and the Black Lives Matter Movement, with all of the racial tension across the United States that students have witnessed and protested against, it is very likely that students of color are exposed to cultural, structural, and direct trauma. Leaders are tasked with equipping teachers and school staff with the supports needed to address those three acts of violence with their students by focusing on Social Emotional Learning for the first three weeks of the school year before instruction.

ACES or adverse childhood experiences was a research study conducted by the American health maintenance organization Kaiser Permanente and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention from 1995-1997. ACE's "explored the exposure to childhood maltreatment and family dysfunction and its subsequent impact on health outcomes" into adulthood (p. 64). There are three types of ACE's; abuse, neglect, and household dysfunction. Abuse includes physical, emotional, and sexual abuse. Neglect includes physical and emotional neglect. Household dysfunction includes mental illness, substance abuse, divorce, an incarcerated relative, and a mother treated violently. An ACE score depends on a tally of the three different types of abuse, and a high score indicates a higher risk for adulthood health problems. Such health problems could include but are not limited to; smoking, alcoholism, drug use, depression, cancer, stroke, severe obesity, and suicide attempts. "Economic hardship is the most common adverse childhood experience (ACE) reported nationally and in almost all states, followed by divorce or separation of a parent or guardian" (Sacks, Murphey, and Moore, 2014). The four most common ACE's

found in New York State among children ages birth through seventeen, as reported by Sacks, Murphey, and Moore (2014), included; (1) economic hardship, (2) divorce, (3) violence, and (4) domestic violence.

The Impact of Trauma on Schooling

The impact of trauma varies and is extensive. "Traumatized children are likely to frighten easily, experience anxiety in unfamiliar situations, be clingy, difficult to soothe, aggressive, and impulsive" (Wright, 2017, p. 143). They may also experience a loss in developmental skills, display immature behaviors, and lack energy (pp. 143 - 144). Educators must understand that these behaviors are out of their students' control. More importantly, when children operate in overwhelming states of stress, the stress response system may become the standard mode of functioning" (p. 144). In other words, children who have experienced trauma are always in survival mode, operating in a state of hyperarousal. Therefore, Children who have experienced trauma may react differently to incidents, situations, or events in school than children who have not experienced trauma. For example, a traumatized student may experience more outbursts in class because they deem everyone else a potential threat, which is why establishing relationships is essential. "Broadly speaking, the problem is that when stress hormones repeatedly flood the brain, they harm a range of executive functions, weakening children's concentration, language processing, sequencing of the information, decision making, and memory" (Terrasi & Crain de Galarce, 2017, p. 20).

If teachers are unaware of the impacts of trauma on students, their unwanted behaviors may be taken at face value when displayed. "To compound the problem, teachers who are unaware of the

dynamics of complex trauma can easily mistake its manifestations as willful disobedience, defiance, or inattention, leading them to respond to it as though it were mere "misbehavior. When students struggle to focus on tasks or complete assignments, teachers might interpret it as laziness or lack of motivation" (Terrasi & Crain de Galarce, 2017, p. 20). Both situations are problematic because they have the potential of negatively impacting academic functioning. For example, a student who has experienced trauma may have an outburst in class when simply being redirected in front of their peers by the teacher. If the teacher does not have a relationship with the student and he or she is unaware of the trauma that the child experienced, they are most likely going to make a split-second decision to have the child removed from class. If not addressed appropriately, students are most likely to receive punitive consequences, which may result in a negative attitude toward school and staff. Schools should serve as a safe space for students. When a child's behavior due to trauma is misunderstood and handled inappropriately, students are not successful. Even worse, they fall victim to the school to prison pipeline. For students to feel safe and learn, they have also to be given opportunities to reflect on their behavior in order to address and correct it.

Trauma-Informed care

Trauma-informed care allows educators to provide care for and better understand students who have experienced trauma. According to the University of Maryland School of medicine in Baltimore, trauma-informed care involves three E's; events, experiences, and effects. The events that caused trauma must be recognized, the trauma account from individualized experience must

be acknowledged, and the effects of trauma on mental health must be considered. There are six principles of trauma-informed care according to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration; (1) safety, (2) trustworthiness and transparency, (3) peer support and mutual self-help, (4) collaboration and mutuality, (5) empowerment, voice, and choice, (6) cultural, historical, and gender issues. Trauma-informed care can be delivered school-wide through MTSS, multi-tiered support systems that address both academic and behavioral needs. MTSS is a systemic, continuous improvement framework in which data-based problem-solving and decision-making are practiced across all educational system levels for supporting students. Having systems in place to provide trauma-informed care is especially important in urban settings "because students from racial/ethnic minority and low socioeconomic backgrounds may disproportionately experience some potentially traumatic events, provisions of trauma-informed care in schools may maximize disparities in academic, behavioral, and psychosocial outcomes related to the experiences of trauma" (Ridgard et al., 2015, p. 12).

Positive Relationships

As an educator with over fifteen years of experience working with students of color, I have learned that relationships matter. As an educational leader, I recognize the importance of Social-emotional learning (SEL) being woven into everyday instructional practices. It has been my experience that students do not gain as much from a learning environment with a teacher that they do not have a positive, respectful relationship with. Giving students opportunities to address, understand, and manage their emotions through the responsible decision making and corrective consequences is crucial throughout the school day. Without these opportunities, our

students would not be able to reach their full potential. Understanding and addressing trauma in schools requires a shift in perspective. For example, "rather than viewing traumatized children as "at-risk" or labeling their responses to trauma as behavioral challenges, it is important to recognize that these adaptations may be keeping children safe in other, scarier parts of their lives" (p. 145). As an educational leader, I also stress that our students are resilient; they have already demonstrated the ability to recover quickly from difficulties and are therefore more than capable of achieving success if given the right supports. Educators must realize and understand that resilience is not a weakness. It is, in fact, a strength. Davidson & McEwen (2012) believe that when students who have experienced trauma are "given the right environmental conditions and appropriate interventions, the severity of trauma symptoms can be reduced (as cited in Terrasi & Crain de Galarce, 2017). Therefore, expectations should not be lowered, as educators, we may not be able to undo trauma, but we can help children heal.

Teacher Role

Teachers bear the challenge of educating children and addressing outside factors that may negatively affect their academic success. "In order to be successful in the classroom, teachers must be able to build relationships with their students, especially those who have experienced trauma. "As children who have experienced trauma become more trusting, they frequently become more outwardly focused, less temperamental, and demonstrate more positive emotions" (Wright, 2017, p. 145). Simple strategies that could help teachers build positive relationships with students who have experienced trauma include being proactive and asking questions about their well-being, interests, and feelings rather than waiting on an unwanted behavior to occur

first. It is also essential to remain positive in stressful situations, to allow students to correct their behavior and provide positive feedback. As a rule of thumb, I ask my teachers to maintain a 3:1 ratio of positive to negative statements regarding student behavior in the classroom. Also, it is not always what you say but how you say that makes the difference. For example, instead of asking, "what is wrong with you?" teachers should ask, "how can I help you?" Students may also benefit from a quiet space away from their peers to reflect on their behavior. Reflection centers with fidget toys and reflection sheets that provide students with think time are also adequate resources. Our teachers also provide opportunities for students to discuss their behavior, and they help them create goals that will allow them to address them. Without this crucial conversation piece, students will more than likely repeat the behavior. Likewise, Souers (2018) recommends six strategies that can be used to help reach students who have experienced trauma:

1. Identify what behavior is expressing.
2. See worth from each student and build on his/her strengths.
3. Remember, kids, can't learn if they don't feel safe.
4. Work from a team perspective.
5. Consider whether a basic need isn't being met.
6. Give students grace.

As a leader, it is also equally important to recognize how important it is that teachers practice self-care to prevent burn out. It takes a lot of work and dedication to educating our youth, especially considering all the outside factors that must be addressed in the classroom for learning actually to occur. When working with students who have experienced trauma, there must be organizational structures to address the whole child, and teachers cannot do it alone. Educational

leaders must also remember that during the current pandemic, teachers have also experienced trauma. My teachers were asked to transition from brick and mortar to online learning in a matter of two weeks while still supporting their children and families during COVID 19. They were expected to continue to engage students and support parents during the process, with only the available resources. They were looked upon as heroes who rose to the occasion; however, as the time comes for school to begin next month, as educators, in regards to reopening, we are forced to consider the stability of the economy before our safety and well-being. Teachers play an essential role in addressing trauma in their students' lives; however, they must be recognized and supported in the classroom for doing the work needed to make change happen in America's educational system.

Trauma-Informed Leadership

Schools are like a second home to students, and school-age children are typically in school for six to seven hours a day, Monday through Friday. "Because children spend so much time at school, they have many opportunities to learn and practice the given social, emotional, and behavioral skills" needed for students who have experienced trauma to thriving. School leaders can ensure that their schools are trauma-informed by replicating trauma support systems (Anderson, 2016).

Anderson (2016) suggests several steps that educational leaders should take to create trauma-informed schools;

1. Get to know the community and schools you serve.
2. Build teacher and parent capacity for understanding the effects of trauma.

3. Use data to drive interventions.
4. Engage community partnerships.
5. Make space and time for well-being.

School leaders must play a direct role in implementing trauma-informed schools by setting realistic, practical goals for their organization(s). Teachers also benefit from the professional development necessary to help them develop a better understanding of trauma and offer practical behavioral management strategies that can better address the needs of students in the classroom who have experienced trauma. It is necessary for leaders to identify the additional people, resources, and supports needed for consistent school-wide implementation. School-wide strategies that address the academic and behavioral needs of students are also crucial. Leaders should engage the families of those students who have experienced trauma. Go the extra mile and provide opportunities for healing with willing family members as well. It is important to note that although strategies can be adopted, there is no one size fits all models currently available. Different schools have different populations that they serve and, therefore, will have other areas of needs. Implementation models must fit the needs of students who have experienced trauma. The students should not be expected to fit into a model. Flexibility and accountability are a must. Creating a trauma-informed school is an ongoing process, and teachers should understand that the implementation of strategies inside the classroom must be consistent and are not optional. Leaders must be visible and offer a direct line of ongoing support to implement the methods listed above.

Trauma-Informed Schools

According to the Treatment and Services Adoption Center (TSA), in order to create a trauma-informed school, all staff members must be proactive in their ability to recognize and respond to the needs of students who have experienced stress from trauma. The school culture must be positive, clear expectations must be communicated, and students need to be provided with the support necessary to meet those expectations. TSA recognizes that strategic planning is crucial to building knowledge and communication in the following areas;

- Impact of trauma on students
- Trauma services in school
- Threat assessment
- Student behavior
- Secondary traumatic stress
- Bullying and cyberbullying

Student behavior, in particular, is an area that schools struggle to address. Most schools have a student advocacy team or task force that assists with school-wide behavior. The SAT supports teachers, students, and families in dealing with academic and behavioral deficits in school.

Discipline policies and behavioral expectations must be communicated clearly and consistently implemented. For example, a code of conduct that families sign off on at the beginning of the year, school-wide expectations, corrective consequences, and students' opportunities to be acknowledged for positive behavior works. However, when behavioral issues arise, the SAT or task force may need to look into the situation on a case by case basis. Often, there are outside factors that must be considered and addressed, if possible. Although sometimes expulsion is necessary, there must be other options available, like check-in/check-out, behavioral plans,

circles, counseling, and additional instructional support. This is because sometimes, sending a student home only makes the behavioral problem worse when they return. It has been my experience working with students and families that sometimes the direct or indirect cause of misconduct is the home environment. According to TSA, expulsion should only be considered if the safety of others is at risk.

Positive Behavioral Intervention Systems and Supports (PBIS) is a behavioral intervention strategy that recognizes positive behavior and can be implemented under MTSS. Students receive rewards and recognition for meeting school-wide expectations. When PBIS is implemented correctly through research-based behavioral strategies, misconduct and unwanted behaviors begin to decrease. Behaving appropriately becomes the norm, and misbehaving is looked upon as abnormal behavior in positive school cultures.

Summary

Trauma is an area of deep concern to me because most of the students I serve have experienced trauma. While some districts are celebrating academic success, as a leader in an urban school, I am worried about my students' physical safety and emotional well-being outside of school. As an educator, I have learned that relationships are essential to organizational success and educational leadership. A leader sets the example, models the standard, and assists their organization(s) in being the example. Even during global pandemics, a leader assures their staff that during racial unrest and injustice, despite the trauma they have experienced by being exposed to the news and hearing that another Black life was taken unjustly, they are the difference needed to make change happen. Until we understand trauma and provide the supports for us to either heal or understand

why healing is necessary, students of color, particularly, will continue to face obstacles in being successful. My job, as a leader, is to leaders and agents of change.

"Be the change you wish to see in the world"

~ Mahatma Gandhi