Teaching in a Trauma-Sensitive Classroom

What Educators Can Do to Support Students

By Patricia A. Jennings

The first step in providing support to children and teens exposed to trauma and adversity is helping them to feel safe at school and demonstrating alternative working models of relationships. By spending time in a supportive classroom, students can learn that school can be a safe place, and that teachers and peers can be caring, thoughtful people who are supportive and have their best interests at heart. Under these conditions, the school and the people in the school can serve as alternative attachment figures. This is not to say that teachers become their surrogate parents and that their peers become surrogate siblings. Teacher-student and student-peer relationships are different from family relationships, but they can serve a similar function by helping trauma-exposed kids develop new models of relationships and new models of the self in relation to others.

As human beings, the most important factor for our survival has been supportive relationships. We are strongly motivated to be accepted as part of a community that recognizes our value and provides opportunities to contribute and receive. We evolved to be part of families and communities composed of individuals who care for one another. Without these bonds, human beings would not have survived or flourished as we have. However, today we are losing touch with these bonds. Trauma and adversity disrupt the development of attachment bonds that children need to develop their full potential. Our families and communities are fragmented. It's harder for children and teens to find alternative attachment figures to connect with, leaving many kids unmoored. There are growing numbers of children left without homes and caregivers due to the opioid crisis.[1] Furthermore, large numbers of refugee children and teens fleeing from severe hardship and war are entering our schools with special needs; many of them arrive unaccompanied by parents and require foster care.[2]

In this article, which is excerpted from my book *The Trauma-Sensitive Classroom: Building Resilience with Compassionate Teaching*, we'll explore how to build caring relationships with trauma-exposed students and how to help them build positive relationships with their peers. Admittedly, this is no easy task. Trauma-exposed students may interfere with classroom learning, which can be frustrating. Helping them can be particularly challenging because they may have difficulty trusting peers and adults, especially authority figures. They may be overly defensive, anticipating adult criticism, or defiant, as a way to assert control. Because trauma interferes with the development of relationship skills and emotion

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regulation, they often find themselves in conflict with peers, either victims or perpetrators of bullying. Educators also need to be aware of children who tend to dissociate and become invisible as a way to cope in social situations, leading to social isolation.

How Teachers Help Build Resilience

Clearly, traumatized students can behave in ways that may disrupt and interfere with teaching and learning. However, when we realize that their behavior—especially, lack of self-control—is a symptom of the trauma, we can begin to understand them and provide them with the support they need.

What can we, as their teachers, do? In 1998, two researchers of child development published a landmark review article of studies of children exposed to trauma and adversity.[3] They wanted to better understand why so many children develop competency despite exposure to adverse conditions. They found three important factors associated with resilience among all children and teens, both those normally developing and those considered at risk. The factors are:

- A strong parent-child relationship, or a strong relationship with a surrogate caregiver who serves as a mentor if a parent is unavailable;
- Good cognitive skills, which are predictors of academic success and lead to prosocial behavior; and
- The ability to self-regulate emotions, attention, and behaviors.

While exposure to trauma and adversity can impair these three factors, bolstering them can help students become successful. This is why it is so important to help these children and teens acquire the underlying skills they need to function in school. Doing so will not only help them perform better academically, it will also help them heal from the effects of trauma and adversity.

Teachers and other school staff are well positioned to support these children and teens.* If the extended periods of time students spend in school take place in a safe, calm, and predictable learning environment, with adults and peers who show care and respect toward them, we can help them heal. We can recognize and focus on areas of strength and build upon them. We can partner with families to strengthen students' relationships with their caregivers and promote self-regulation skills so they can achieve their academic potential.

In order to be an effective teacher for these students, a *mind shift* is needed. When a student exhibits difficulties, the tendency is to ask, "What's wrong with him?" When you find yourself doing this, shift the question to: "What happened to him and how did he learn to adapt to it?" This will help you understand where he is coming from and how best to help him. One thing not to do is to ask him to explain himself by asking, "Why did you do that?" His behavior is likely as perplexing to him as it may be to you!

The Importance of Teacher Support

Years of research have shown that a connection with a sensitive teacher can shape the healthy working relationships children normally acquire in their relationships with loving and consistent caregivers, especially for students exposed to multiple risk factors.[4] Social learning theory, which proposes that people learn from one

*For more on the importance of connecting with students, see "It's About Relationships" in the Winter 2015–2016 issue of *American Educator*, available at www.aft.org/ae/winter2015-2016/ashley.

> By spending time in a supportive classroom, students can learn that school can be a safe place.

another by observation, imitation, and modeling, has been applied to understanding how teachers' emotional support can have positive impacts on older students.[5] Teachers become role models of healthy social and emotional behavior for teens to emulate. In this way, a teacher's social support can promote healthy emotional skills, healthy relationships, and motivation to learn.

Research has found three crucial dimensions of teacher-student relationships among elementary-aged students: *closeness*, *conflict*, and *dependency*.[6] Closeness refers to the degree of positive emotion and warmth the teacher and student express to one another and is associated with positive academic and behavioral outcomes. Conflict refers to the expressions of negative emotion and lack of rapport between the teacher and student and is associated with poor academic and behavioral outcomes. Dependency refers to the extent the student clings to the teacher or demonstrates possessiveness, also associated with poor outcomes. Dependency has also been associated with attachment disorders and requires extra sensitivity from the teacher for the child to engage in meaningful learning activities.[7]

The critical dimensions of teacher-student relationships at the higher grades are *perceived support, utilization,* and *a sense of relatedness*.[8] Perceived support is the students' perception that the teacher is sensitive to their needs and supportive. Utilization is reflected in the willingness of students to rely on the teacher for help. A sense of relatedness is reflected in the extent to which students feel successful in their bids for belonging and acceptance. All three are associated with desirable academic and behavioral outcomes in adolescence. Similar to healthy attachment relationships between children and parents, these relational dimensions between teachers and students give students a sense of security and the safety to explore and engage in learning, which can involve risks.

While there is evidence that children who enter school with insecure attachments have difficulty in their relationships with teachers, this is likely only true in cases where teachers are not highly sensitive. Researchers found that when teachers were highly sensitive, children with less secure attachments were not at risk for developing less close relationships with teachers.[9] Unfortunately, exposure to a less sensitive teacher in the early years can lead to years of relationship problems with teachers, as the quality of teacher-student relationships seems to be fairly stable. In other words, if a child has a difficult relationship with his kindergarten teacher, he is more likely to continue to have difficult relationships with future teachers.[10] This research points to the critical importance of the quality of teacher-student relationships in early childhood.

Responding to Students' Stress and Trauma

A Q&A with Barbara Outten

For 20 years, Barbara Outten taught third- and fourth-graders in East St. Louis School District 189 in Illinois. Now in her second year as an instructional coach, she is also an officer with her local union, the East St. Louis Federation of Teachers. In February 2018, she attended a three-day training, the Union Response to Students' Stress and Trauma, designed to instruct teachers, paraprofessionals, school support staff, social workers, coaches, principals, and others in how to build trauma-informed and responsive school communities. Developed by the AFT and the Illinois Federation of Teachers, this training was implemented across the district in collaboration with the East St. Louis Federation of Teachers and a community initiative called

East Side Aligned.* Below, Outten shares her experience with bringing this training to her colleagues at James Avant Elementary School this past school year.

—EDITORS

Q How did your district learn about this training?

A The Illinois Federation of Teachers presented it to our union. I knew right away it was something that would help our school district. So we took it to the district's administrators and convinced them that this was a training all our educators and staff members needed. We wanted everyone who comes in contact with our students to be trained.

After the district signed on, a labor-management team made up of three union members and an administrator was established for each school building. Each team would attend the training, and then team members would conduct trainings for their building.

Q What did the training entail?

A Because I attended the initial training last February to become a trainer myself, I was involved in rolling out the training both in our district and in my particular school. The first thing we did was to define trauma as a response to an experience that is so stressful that it

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*For more on East Side Aligned, see www.eastside aligned.org.

overwhelms a person's ability to cope. Then we discussed how trauma can manifest in students and possible long-term effects. We explained how trauma affects brain development in children and how it can result in physical and psychological health issues. We shared how it can prevent children from being able to form healthy relationships, and how it can impair their learning.

We emphasized that children who experience trauma are not damaged. They can heal from this. That healing starts with everyday gestures that we can make to celebrate them. Compliment them on a daily basis, if possible. Comfort them. Stay calm. Be present. Educators need to listen to children and show that we're really interested in them. And then we should try to inspire them. These are protective actions that can help offset the trauma they've experienced and how the trauma affects them.

Q Why is there a need for such training in your district?

A In East St. Louis, we have around 5,700 students enrolled in 10 public schools. We have a 73 percent graduation rate, a 17 percent mobility rate, and an 82 percent chronic absenteeism rate, which is the percentage of students who miss 10 percent or more of school days per year. Our district's chronic absenteeism rate is much higher than the state average of 17 percent. Roughly 83 percent of students come from low-income families, and 6 percent are homeless.

What Is Emotional Support?

An important predictor of positive teacher-student relationships is teachers' emotional supportiveness. What does this look like in the classroom and how can we cultivate it in our relationships with our students? Bob Pianta, dean of the Curry School of Education, where I work, was one of the first to study teacher-student relationships and interactions. He developed an observational measure called the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS), which is now a widely used and well-validated rating scale designed for applied research on teacher-student interactions.[11] This measure is organized according to three latent categories of teacher-student interactions: class organization, instructional support, and emotional support. Classroom organization focuses on interactions associated with classroom management. Instructional support focuses on interactions that support academic instruction. In the box on page 17, I focus on the emotional support domain, which is composed of four dimensions: Positive Climate, Negative Climate, Teacher Sensitivity, and Regard for Student Perspectives. A classroom rated high on the domain of emotional support would score high on Positive Climate, Teacher Sensitivity, and Regard for Student Perspectives, and low on Negative Climate.

How Teachers Can Build Caring Relationships

As the teacher, you are the social leader of the classroom, and your students will follow your lead when it comes to relating to other students in the classroom. This is why it's very important to model the kinds of interpersonal interactions you want them to engage in. I spent 15 years supervising student teachers enrolled in a teacher education

> ## Those kinds of positive home-school connections didn't happen before.

Many children come from single-parent homes. We have a large population of students who are being raised by grandparents. We have many students with an incarcerated parent. Some of our children have even witnessed violent crimes.

Such factors are considered adverse childhood experiences (for more on this, see the article on page 8). Because these experiences are traumatic, they can contribute to challenging behaviors in school. Those behaviors can make it difficult to teach lessons on a daily basis. As a teacher, it sometimes feels like you're putting out one fire, and then you turn around and another one is just starting. A teacher might say to herself, "If only I could just teach." Our school district needed training around trauma so that we could learn how to help our students and also teach our subject matter, without burning out from our work.

Speaking of burnout, another lesson from the training was on the importance of self-care. You have got to take care of yourself in order to do what we do here. The training included information about 50 different types of self-care, whether it's reading a book for a set number of minutes per day or walking your dog or doing yoga. The training highlighted not only the need to come up with your own plan for self-care, but also the importance

of finding somebody to hold you accountable for adhering to that plan.

As a result of the training, everyone in our district agreed to be part of a system we call Check and Connect. All students in our schools select an adult to call upon to help calm and assist them if they ever experience a meltdown or have some kind of outburst at school. Students can choose a classroom teacher, a paraprofessional, a custodian, anyone who works in the building. Classroom teachers have access to a list of adults each student has chosen so that they can contact them when necessary.

Once contacted, the adult might take the child for a walk to help him or her calm down from the trigger. This is a step that did not happen before. It's a change in mindset. When an outburst happens, our teachers are now recognizing that they haven't done anything wrong to make that child angry. And they're working on not taking any outburst personally. Instead, they're giving the child a chance to talk it out with an adult of his or her choice.

Now, every child has a dedicated adult in the school building to talk with when he or she needs help. Students know they can trust an adult in the building and tell that person what's bothering them and it will be OK.

Not all schools in our district have certified social workers. There isn't enough funding for that. But the state does allow schools to hire noncertified social workers who have completed a certain amount of coursework, and our school has one. He's very passionate about what he does, and he was a member of our train-the-trainers team.

Q What else is your school doing differently in terms of supporting students?

A Besides the Check and Connect system, classrooms engage in restorative circles. In these circles, teachers help students to resolve conflicts with peers and head off disruptive behavior. We're catching things before they happen because educators are taking the time to listen. Students are watching. They're seeing. And classroom referrals for behavior are way down from even just a year ago.

But teachers aren't just engaging with students and parents when something is wrong. The other day, a physical education teacher walked by and said, "Ms. Outten, you're going to be so proud of me." And I said, "Why? What's up?" And he said, "I called a parent today to say how great of a day a student was having."

Those kinds of positive home-school connections didn't happen before.

program. During this time, I learned much about how teachers' classroom behavior can build or impair relationships with their students. No teacher intentionally sets out to create negative relationships with students; it happens unintentionally. However, once a teacher and student have begun to engage in a coercive cycle of negative interactions, it becomes a model for the other students to follow.

Model Respectful Interactions

In one classroom I visited, Ms. Rohan was introducing her fifth-grade students to a new novel. As she gave them an overview of the author and the background of the story, she noticed that Joey was fiddling with a piece of paper on his desk. She became visibly annoyed and sharply told him to stop. It was obvious that there was already tension between the two of them, and I could see that Joey was not going to stop, primarily because she had called him out so publicly, and he was embarrassed. I was right: he kept fiddling, and Ms. Rohan became more frustrated. Finally, she went up to his desk, grabbed the piece of paper he was fiddling with, and threw it in the garbage.

This is an example of a power struggle. Ms. Rohan's relationship with Joey was already strained, and she was primed to overreact. What he was doing wasn't really a big deal, and when it started out, it wasn't an intentional attempt to disrupt class and make Ms. Rohan unhappy. But because of her preconceived idea, she assumed that his behavior was intentional, which increased her frustration and triggered her overreaction. When she told him to stop, she publicly shamed him, which made him want to dig in his heels to save face. She finally took the upper hand by grabbing

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the paper on his desk and throwing it away.

If a student had grabbed a piece of paper from another student and thrown it away, what would we think? That she was a bully? That she was invading his space and taking something that didn't belong to her? When we act as if the rules don't apply to us, we send the message to students that *might makes right*; we are basically modeling bullying behavior. When students observe teachers treating a fellow student this way, two things can happen. First, the students learn that the fellow student doesn't deserve their respect. If the teacher doesn't respect him, why should they? They will begin to treat the student the same way as the teacher, possibly taking things, too, and being overly critical and judgmental of him. The second thing that happens is that the students learn not to trust the teacher, thinking, "If she does that to Joey, she might do it to me, too." Students who already feel less than safe feel frightened.

As you interact with your students, make sure you follow your own rules. Treat each student with respect and kindness. If you find yourself becoming annoyed, work to calm yourself down so that you don't unintentionally rupture a relationship and trigger a power struggle.

Cultivate Supportive Peer Relationships

Besides serving as a model of social behavior, teachers influence classroom social dynamics directly and indirectly. They can take actions to manage or change the social network patterns of their classrooms, or they can indirectly affect the network patterns through general teaching practices. New research has shown that teachers can affect a classroom's social status patterns, such as peer norms and status hierarchies, and social affiliation patterns, such as informal peer groups and friendships, which can dramatically affect the classroom climate.[12] In fact, just being more aware of the social networks can have a positive effect on your classroom. For example, peer norms against aggressive behavior are stronger when teachers' reports of their classroom peer networks are more accurate.[13]

You can tune in to your class as a social group by occasionally stepping back and mindfully observing during a time when your students have some choice about their social dynamics directly and indirectly. Imagine you are observing this group of students for the first time. How are they grouping themselves? Who's being victimized by whom? Who's left out? Who is leading the pack?

In a large longitudinal study of elementary classrooms, researchers examined peer networks and teachers' attunement with their classrooms' peer networks.[14] They also asked the teachers what active measures they took to manage the friendships, aggression, and social hierarchies in their classrooms. The researchers classified these measures as follows: mitigating status extremes, supporting isolated children, managing aggression, and promoting positive behavior. Finally, they observed the teachers' classroom interactions and rated them using the CLASS measure described above.

They found that teachers who use "more active" strategies to manage friendships, aggression, and hierarchies have students who show "more positive" patterns in their social behavior and their academic adjustment across the school year. These effects were stronger if the teacher was also rated as "more responsive" and found to be "more attuned" to the social network dynamics of her or his classroom. Generally, teachers in this study reported working

to reduce the status extremes in their classrooms by providing many alternatives for obtaining status, such as creating opportunities for low-status children to receive recognition, or by reducing the importance of status altogether. The more teachers reported taking active measures, the more their students reported feeling a stronger sense of peer community, higher levels of bonding with the school community, and enjoyment of learning by the end of the school year. One notable finding was that teachers who worked to support friendships, especially for children who seemed isolated, had students who reported a stronger sense of peer community. This research provides us with clear evidence that the active measures we take to improve classroom climate can be very effective and can support our trauma-exposed students. □

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> The active measures we take to improve classroom climate can be very effective and can support our trauma-exposed students.

Understanding Emotional Support

Positive Climate reflects the strong emotional connection between the teacher and students and among students in the classroom, and the warmth, respect, and enjoyment communicated by verbal and nonverbal interactions. In a classroom rated high on Positive Climate, students appear comfortable to seek the physical proximity of the teacher, and the teacher and students share moments of positive emotions and show enjoyment of shared activities. Students are helpful to one another and engage in social conversation. The teacher and students express affection to one another through verbal and physical gestures and show respect through eye contact, warm and calm voices, respectful language, and cooperation.

Negative Climate, by contrast, reflects the general level of expressed negativity in the classroom and the frequency, quality, and intensity of teacher and peer negativity. In a classroom rated high on Negative Climate, the teacher and students may appear irritable, angry, and aggressive. There is a tendency for the teacher to engage in punitive control strategies such as yelling, making threats, and issuing harsh punishments. The teacher and students may engage in sarcastic and disrespectful communication, including teasing and humiliation. In extreme cases, one may observe victimization, bullying, and physical punishment.

Teacher Sensitivity captures the teacher's awareness of and responsiveness to students' academic and emotional needs. In a classroom rated high on Teacher Sensitivity, one would observe a teacher who is proactive. She anticipates problems and plans accordingly and notices when students lack understanding or are having difficulty with an assignment. She recognizes and acknowledges the students' emotions and provides comfort and individual support when needed. Students seek support when they need it and are willing to take risks in the learning process.

Regard for Student Perspectives reflects the degree to which the teacher-student interactions and classroom activities focus on students' needs, interests, motivations, and points of view and encourage student responsibility and autonomy. In a classroom rated high on Regard for Student Perspectives, the teacher shows flexibility, follows the students' lead, and incorporates students' ideas in her lessons. She supports student autonomy and independence by allowing some choice and giving students classroom responsibilities. She encourages student expression and elicits their ideas and perspectives. She allows freedom of movement in the classroom and allows students to save face when there's a conflict.

–P.A.J.

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