Using Trauma-Informed Pedagogy to Make Literacy and Learning Relevant and Engaging for Students of Poverty

Neva V. Cramer, Ph.D.
Schreiner University

Abstract

Many students in American schools are facing educational limitations due to the effects of poverty and homelessness. Educator preparation programs must address the needs of this special population of poverty by providing training in trauma-informed pedagogy. The goal is to make teachers more aware of the effects of poverty and provide additional tools to reach and successfully teach students by developing relationships and creating safe learning environments that acknowledge and address the emotional states of students who face chronic stress from poverty. The use of aesthetic strategies for literacy and learning will also make school more meaningful and relevant for students with learned hopelessness. This article addressed trauma-informed pedagogy for literacy and learning through action steps and examples designed by pre-service teachers in training.

Keywords: *literacy, the arts, poverty, trauma-informed pedagogy*

Introduction

While it is true that students live in a global society with unlimited opportunities for learning and access to information, there is a population of students who are educationally limited by the consequences of an ever-increasing state of poverty. Eric Jenson (2009) offered an excellent foundation for understanding the new role of education and our future teachers in his book *Teaching with Poverty in Mind*. Educator preparation programs must address the needs of this special population of poverty by providing pre-service teachers with training in trauma-informed pedagogy. By doing so, future teachers will be prepared for the changing role of professional educators and have new ways to engage students who have been impacted by the effects of chronic stress from poverty.

According to Dr. Vicky Dill (2015), there are "new ways to teach and grow [and] whole-school professional development in gentle teaching and in pedagogical approaches informed by insights on trauma" (p 46). Through research available from The National Alliance to End Homelessness (2012), Dr. Dill (2015) made the case that students dealing with poverty and/or homelessness likely experience post-traumatic stress due to traumatic events, such as eviction, foreclosure, domestic violence, unstable living environments, or the incarceration of a parent or other family

Texas Association for Literacy Education Yearbook, Volume 5:
Connections in the Community: Fostering Partnerships through Literacy

ISSN: 2374-0590 online

member. Dr. Dill served for years as the senior program coordinator for the Texas Homeless Education Office located at the Charles A. Dana Center at the University of Texas at Austin. She personally trained many of the students involved in this project by providing yearly seminars on the rights of the homeless which was expanded into a pre-service teacher candidate project using trauma-informed pedagogy to create a framework for enhancing literacy and learning at schools with high poverty student populations throughout the involvement of faculty, students, families, and community members. The purpose of this project was to raise awareness for the effects of homelessness and poverty on student performance and provide training to prepare pre-service teachers to use the following approaches as part of a trauma-informed pedagogy:

- Develop relationships, trust, and safe learning environments;
- Acknowledge and address the emotional states of students who face chronic stress from poverty to avoid labeling inappropriate school behaviors;
- Increase engagement by using the arts as a familiar and safe medium to build academic confidence and critical and creative thinking skills necessary for academic success in learning (Cramer, 2014); and
- Use aesthetic strategies for literacy and learning that make school more meaningful and relevant for students with learned hopelessness (Cramer, Ortlieb, & Cheek, 2008).

Teachers are the single greatest difference makers in student success. Implementing a trauma-informed pedagogy has the potential to change resistant student mindsets about school and learning. Teachers often encounter concerns with students that require trauma-informed pedagogy training based on the foundational work of Eric Jensen (2009) and the research of Dr. Vicky Dill (2015). The purpose of this paper was to describe common concerns that teachers face and provide suggested action steps. Example activities from trauma-informed pedagogy training held among current pre-service teachers were also provided.

Safe Learning Environments and Personal Mentoring Relationship with Teachers

> Homeless students need a personal mentoring relationship with educators to develop the self-regulation all students need to succeed. A teacher or mentor who provides appropriate guidance sees the need for order and calm in the classroom, predictable routines and fair rules, the provision of basic needs, and an understanding ear. These are universal needs of students under stress. (Dill, 2015, p. 47)

In order to teach students who have experienced poverty-related trauma, teachers must know how to recognize trauma-related behaviors, such as depression, anger, inappropriate responses, and difficulty managing emotions or realizing the consequences of behavior (McInnes, Diamond, & Whitington, 2014). Without the benefit of growing up with strong and secure relationships, students of poverty develop methods of defense to deal with school frustration. These students often do not know how to collaborate and exchange information. Jensen (2009) explained why teachers who lack a trauma-informed pedagogy may misunderstand undesirable student behaviors:

> Some teachers may interpret students' emotional and social deficits as a lack of respect or manners, but it is more accurate and helpful to understand that the students come to school with a narrower range of appropriate emotional responses than we expect. The truth is that many children simply don't have the repertoire of necessary responses. It is as though their brains' emotional keyboards play only a few notes. (p.18)

ISSN: 2374-0590 online

Suggested Action Step

Teachers can develop trust and relationships early on in their classrooms by allowing time for students to share information about themselves through the same methods they would use in social media, such as visuals and music. As an introduction, students would choose an image that represents them. Convenient resources include calendars, internet images, and art cards from bookstores. Students could also choose a stanza from a favorite song that they feel represents their life, a personal experience, or their personality. This is easily resourced from music videos and lyrics online. Eisner (2002) claimed that the arts help us create our lives by "expanding our consciousness, shaping our dispositions, satisfying our quest for meaning, establishing contact with others, and sharing a culture" (p. 4). Teaching appropriate responses can begin with modeling how to greet students when they enter the classroom. Appropriate responses can also be taught through role-playing procedures, school routines, or confrontational situations and having students act out the appropriate response.

Example Activity

During trauma-informed pedagogy training, pre-service teachers first created an awareness checklist. The awareness checklist was based on Souers' (2018) six recommendations of ways to recognize the emotional needs of students and avoid judgment based on student responses who are experiencing ongoing trauma:

1. Identify what need a behavior is expressing.
2. See the worth in each student and build from his or 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. (pp.33-35)

Next, pre-service teachers learned an activity that helps develop relationships with their students: the Art Card Representation. For this activity, pre-service teachers chose their own art card that somehow represented them in their own way (see Figure 1). For example, one pre-service teacher said that the wind blowing the leaves away represented "me being free on my own." The Art Card Representation activity provides students with the opportunity to express themselves through art and creates connections among students as they share.

Cognitive Lags and Lack of Engagement Due to Chronic Stress

> Are children from poverty more likely to struggle with engagement in school? The answer is yes. Seven differences between middle-class and low-income students show up at school. By understanding those differences and how to address them, teachers can help mitigate some of the negative effects of poverty. (Jensen, 2013, p. 24)

According to Gottfried, Gottfried, Bathurst, Guerin, & Parramore (2003), chronic stress, which is situationally associated with poverty, can create symptoms of lower cognitive ability and performance with memory, retention, and literacy. In order to enhance engagement for students who may be struggling to concentrate due to chronic stress, teachers must focus on developing thinking and study skills to help students feel more confident. This process requires much encouragement, creativity, and the ability to make thinking seem relevant and natural. Jensen (2013) noted that problem solving skills, working memory skills, and limitations with vocabulary can be deterrents for students. In order to teach basic skills that promote cognitive skill development and lead to higher order thinking, teachers can use the arts as a covert action strategy. In the current social media culture, students are familiar with and comfortable using images, video, and music as a means of communication.

ISSN: 2374-0590 online

Figure 1. Example of an art card representation.

Suggested Action Step

As students think aloud, mediate ideas and interpretations of images, share explanations, and perform their understandings, thinking becomes visible. For a term or concept to be meaningful, students must form a personal image or icon for that term. Once the image is in the imagination, it can be recalled and imaginatively manipulated (Eisner, 1991). Perhaps the best explanation of the beneficial relationship between literacy and the arts comes from Perkins (1994) who explored looking at works of arts as a means of learning to think. The thinking skills addressed though this action step come from The Framework for 21st Century Learning, which was developed as a school/community effort to define and illustrate the skills and knowledge students need to succeed in work, life, and citizenship (Trilling & Fadel, 2012). These skills include:

- Critical Thinking – Use art to spur students into real-world situation solving.
- Communication – Words are not our first language. Art can help us communicate in new and exciting ways.
- Collaboration – Students have many unique artistic abilities that have the potential to mesh wonderfully.
- Creativity and Innovation – Everything we see and understand, we experience through the lens of experiences. Through art, we can layer all these experiences and understandings together to create one beautiful masterpiece of learning.

Using thinking routines developed by Wolberg and Goff (2012), students can use the visual arts as a catalyst for covertly learning to think in a nonthreatening format. Introducing new texts and concepts with visual images, followed by a negotiation of meaning through discussion, leads to stronger personal connections to the learning experience (Rowsell, McLean, & Hamilton, 2012). Jensen (2001) asserted "the arts enhance the process of learning by nourishing the sensory, attentional,

ISSN: 2374-0590 online

cognitive, emotional, and motor capabilities systems connected to learning" (p. 2).

Example Activity

During trauma-informed pedagogy training, pre-service teachers selected a piece of artwork or an image and created a journal entry describing what they see, think, and wonder about (Project Zero, n.d.). Through these actions, students make their own detailed observations and develop their own interpretations. This activity also encourages curiosity as students ask questions and wonder. Figure 2 shows an example from a pre-service teacher's journal of their observations and interpretations of an image portraying Times Square in New York City, New York.

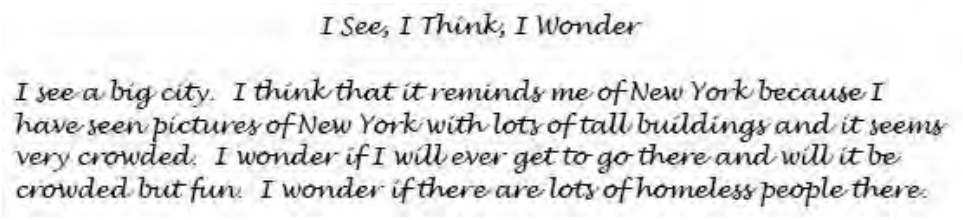

Figure 2. Example of journal entry from See/Think/Wonder Activity

Create Family, School, and Community Collaboration for Success

> [Educators and family] can find ways to come together and collectively address the challenges. We need to support one another in creating and sustaining a positive mindset, a belief that our students can achieve success regardless of what they're experiencing in and out of school. (Souers, 2017, p. 33)

It is of utmost importance that teachers involve parents and community members to help students of poverty succeed in school. Milne and Plourde (as cited in Jensen, 2009) studied six 2nd grade students who lived in poverty and experiencing high levels of student success. Milne and Plourde discovered that the parents of these students "provided educational materials, implemented and engaged in structured reading and study time, limited television viewing, and emphasized the importance of education" (p.39). However, schools must be more creative and positive in their methods used to communicate with families and community members. Kraft (2017) recommended using more technology-based communication, as well as personal communication that includes positive feedback with a plan for student success. Creating a collaborative plan involving students, faculty, parents, and community members will make collaboration a priority and offer a variety of strategies that distribute responsibility instead of overloading and overwhelming the teacher with sole responsibility for the success of the students.

Suggested Action Step

The National Network of Partnership Schools developed the Six Keys to Success framework that applies research-based approaches to organize and sustain excellent programs of family and community involvement to increase student success (Sanders & Epstein, 2000). The key areas are parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making, and collaborating with the community. Schools should design an action

ISSN: 2374-0590 online

plan with strategies for each key area with the intent of involving teachers, families, and community members in a collaborative effort to enhance literacy skills among students who live in poverty.

Example Activity

During trauma-informed pedagogy training, pre-service teachers were provided with class e-newsletters. These newsletters were available in English, as well as other languages that may be represented in their future classroom. Within the newsletters were examples of questions for current classroom reading selections to boost reading comprehension and family involvement. Moreover, the newsletters provided an example of one way to establish effective communication between teacher and parents.

Conclusion

Using a trauma-informed pedagogy has the potential to transform learning and help students who are at-risk and live in poverty. Through these action steps and example activities, this paper demonstrated how teachers might develop 21st century thinking dispositions among all students by making literacy and learning interactive and relevant. In order to enhance learning among all students, teachers must be training in how to implement a trauma-informed pedagogy to develop relationships, trust, and create safe learning environments. By using arts-related strategies to enhance critical and creative thinking among students, teachers also remove potential barriers for cultural and experiential differences.

Helpful Websites

1. Artful Thinking: http://www.pzartfulthinking.org/index.php

The goal of the Artful Thinking program is to help students develop thinking dispositions that support thoughtful learning in the arts, and across school subjects. The program is one of several programs at Project Zero linked by the theme "Visible Thinking." Artful Thinking has six interrelated components: The Artful Thinking Palette (the six thinking dispositions at the heart of the program), thinking routines, works of art, curricular connections, visible thinking, and teacher study groups.

2. Crayola for Educators: http://www.crayola.com/education/index

Crayola opens a world of imagination, inspiration, and ideas for educators to support creative teaching and learning. This website offers information for lesson plans, grant programs, and new professional learning opportunities.

3. Kennedy Center for the Arts: http://artsedge.kennedy-center.org/educators.aspx

The Kennedy Center instituted ARTSEDGE as a way to support arts-based student learning. Information on this website includes ways to implement innovative teaching with the arts, including creative uses of technology in the classroom.

4. National Network of Partnership Schools: http://nnps.jhucsos.com/

The National Network of Partnership Schools offers a collaborative platform for governmental bodies, organizations, and school entities. Resources include research-based approaches to develop and sustain exceptional partnership programs to increase student success in school.

5. Partnership for 21st Century Learning (P21): http://www.p21.org/

P21's mission is to support 21st century learning in the classroom through collaborative partnerships. This website offers a framework for 21st century teaching and learning, as well as a multitude of resources to support 21st century readiness.

ISSN: 2374-0590 online

6. Jensen Learning: http://www.jensenlearning.com/

Jensen Learning integrates neuroscience with practical classroom strategies. Information on this website supports school personnel with overcoming common challenges, such as cognitive lags, poverty, student misbehaviors, teacher attrition, and weak school cultures.

References

Cramer, N. (2014). Supporting literacy through the visual and communicative arts: Building momentum in literacy for 21st century digital learners. *Texas Association for Literacy Education Yearbook: Building Momentum, 2*, 62-77.

Cramer, N., Ortlieb, E., & Cheek, E. (2008). Changing our students' perception about reading. *Academic Exchange Quarterly, 12*(1), 29.

Dill, V. (2015). Homeless--and doubled up. *Educational Leadership, 72*(6), 42-47.

Eisner, E. W. (2002). *The arts and the creation of mind*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Gottfried, A. W., Gottfried, A. E., Bathurst, K., Guerin, D. W., & Parramore, M. M. (2003). Socioeconomic status in children's development and family environment: Infancy through adolescence. In M. H. Bornstein & R. H. Bradley (Eds.), *Monographs in parenting series. Socioeconomic status, parenting, and child development* (pp. 189-207). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers.

Jensen, E. (2001). *Arts with the brain in mind*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.

Jensen, E. (2009). *Teaching with poverty in mind*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.

Jensen, E. (2013). How poverty affects classroom engagement. *Educational Leadership, 70*(8), 24-30.

Kraft, M. A. (2017). Engaging parents through better communication systems. *Educational Leadership, 75*(1), 58-62.

McInnes, E., Diamond, A., & Whitington, V. (2014). Developing trauma-informed pedagogy in a year 2–3 classroom. In Mark Callaghan (Ed.), *How trauma resonates: Art, literature and theoretical practice* (pp. 127–138). Oxford, UK: Inter-Disciplinary Press.

National Alliance to End Homelessness. (2012). Addressing post-traumatic stress disorder caused by homelessness. Retrieved from http://b.3cdn.net/naeh/973478e833747853ce_a1m6bx81p.pdf

Perkins, D. N. (1994). *The intelligent eye: Learning to think by looking at art*. Los Angeles, CA: Getty Publications.

Project Zero. (n.d.). *See/think/wonder*. Retrieved from http://pzartfulthinking.org/?p=81

Rowsell, J., McLean, C., & Hamilton, M. (2012). Visual literacy as a classroom approach. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy, 55*, 444-447.

Sanders, M. G., & Epstein, J. L. (2000). The national network of partnership schools: How research influences educational practice. *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk (JESPAR), 5*(1-2), 61-76.

Souers, K. (2018). Responding with care to students facing trauma. *Educational Leadership, 75*(4), 32-36.

Trilling, B., & Fadel, C. (2012). *21st century skills: Learning for life in our times*. San Francisco, CA: John Wiley & Sons.

Wolberg, R. I., & Goff, A. (2012). Thinking routines: Replicating classroom practices within museum settings. *Journal of Museum Education, 37*(1), 59-68.

ISSN: 2374-0590 online