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How to teach in these troubled times: A trauma expert's advice for educators

By **Valerie Strauss**

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With the 2020-21 school year set to start within weeks nationwide, teachers will be — either in person or virtually — trying to teach students who have been traumatized by the consequences of the coronavirus pandemic.

Teachers can't go back to doing exactly what they used to do before the crisis or, even, during this past spring, when schools nationwide shut down. That's the advice of Elizabeth Dutro, an expert on trauma and learning and a fellow at the National Education Policy Center at the University of Colorado at Boulder.

In this post, she answers questions about how teachers can address the students' trauma — even as they themselves are dealing with some of the same things. She is a professor of education at the university and the author of "The Vulnerable Heart of Literacy: Centering Trauma as Powerful Pedagogy."

She is collaborating with children and teachers to examine what trauma means and how it functions in classrooms. Her other research interests include teachers' opportunities to learn together in the context of their daily work and relationships with children, as well as the role of teacher education in critical and effective teaching.

This Q & A appeared in a newsletter of the National Education Policy Center, and I have permission to publish it.

Q: The coronavirus pandemic has obviously led to a lot of trauma in people's lives. How might teachers think about trauma in the lives of their students right now?

A: It certainly is a traumatic time, on so many fronts. As the pandemic continues, all of us as educators can reflect on the complexity of what trauma means and the forms it takes for children and youth. For instance, it is important to consider how this time in history is collective and specific as a source of trauma for children and youth. The virus is certainly saturated with pain, loss, and fear on a global, national, state and community level. Almost all children and youth are experiencing loss of the physical presence of some of their family members, as well as friends, teachers, mentors, coaches. Physical proximity matters in relationships. They are also missing many of the routines and structures of life that can provide a sense of order and security. Many students have had to process the cancellation of significant events, from high school graduations to summer camps, sporting events to theater performances, *quinceañeras* to Pride festivities. And, of course, the images and headlines are full of the despair and uncertainty of the crisis. Those aspects of the pandemic are shared.

However, the traumas embedded in the experience of the pandemic are also highly specific—to individual children and youth, but also to particular communities. Some children are mourning loved ones who have died of covid-19 or are grappling with the fear that an ill family member may not get well. Many have seen one or both parents lose their jobs and felt the impact of compounded economic hardship.

Further, we know that none of these impacts have been equally distributed. Communities of color are disproportionately taking the brunt of this pandemic in the United States, for reasons embedded in centuries of systemic oppression. The pain and grief that students of color are carrying as we move through these months, particularly black students, is further magnified by the ongoing murders of black people that are fueling crucial recent protests against police violence and amplified movements for anti-racism and systemic change. Black parents, families and communities are wrapping children and youth in support. But, as we approach fall and the transition back to school, in whatever forms that takes, teachers who do not share students' racial identities and the trauma of racism — white teachers like me — must commit to anti-racism so we can bring awareness, advocacy and the keenest compassion to supporting students.

Q: Your work contains many examples of teachers and students exploring trauma together in the classroom. During this period of school closures, what are some suggestions for teachers addressing trauma with their students even as those teachers may themselves be experiencing

adverse situations in their personal lives?

A: It is significant that students and teachers are all navigating this pandemic, even as the impacts certainly vary. Teachers' experiences of the crisis are a central resource for connecting with students, demonstrating value of students' lives and knowledge, and supporting them in learning in the midst of this challenging time.

In our research, teacher colleagues and I found that when educators shared stories from their own lives in classrooms, students were much more likely to draw on life experiences as a resource for their learning. Too often, considerations of trauma in schools position teachers as healers, and students as wounded and in need of healing. That is of course a false distinction and, frankly, fuels the false and harmful idea that can be perpetuated by some trauma-informed approaches: that children and youth are damaged.

However, when teachers allow children and youth to witness their struggles, humanity and vulnerabilities, students are positioned as active participants in a reciprocal process of being present as witnesses for one

another. In addition, teachers' sharing helps to demonstrate to students that all aspects of life belong in school, that they are seen, heard and valued in the classroom, and that their experiences matter as a source of knowledge. This will matter all the more, given the experiences that will accumulate for students and their teachers during this crisis. And, this can occur online, in written messages, recorded videos and synchronous interactions.

How can teachers do this? Sharing our own stories can be woven into many aspects of day-to-day life and instruction in classrooms. It can be through voicing connections with a character in a text, using a story of vulnerability or loss when modeling writing, acknowledging to students when it is hard to focus or concentrate because of what we're feeling, starting the day or a class period with even a small snippet of a teacher's life or feeling and an invitation (never a requirement) to check in. This has to be genuine, of course — we have to trust students enough to be vulnerable with them, as well as listen to students with love and hold ourselves accountable to learn from their experiences. And, inviting students' hard stories as a valued source of

connection in school has to be joined with commitments to advocate for students' humanity in schools and communities. These commitments are always crucial in classrooms, but they are all the more essential as we look toward fall.

Q: Your work focuses mainly on elementary school teachers and students. Do your suggestions differ for teachers of elementary and secondary grade levels? Do you have any suggestions for how secondary teachers might sensitively and effectively address trauma with their students, especially if they teach subjects like math that are sometimes seen as being detached from emotional experiences?

A: The principles of recognizing and turning toward difficult experiences as an important aspect of pedagogy cross all grade levels and subject areas. Teaching and learning are emotional and relational across the board. We have to challenge the idea that only certain content areas demand those investments. What our teacher team and many other researchers have found in secondary classrooms is that, no matter the content, students feel most valued and supported when teachers demonstrate trust, invest in relationships, position students as knowledgeable, and advocate for them in the school. Those qualities of teaching are central within the ideas and actions related to the trauma of the pandemic and the trauma of racism I discussed above.

Q: How would you recommend that educators respond right now regarding students they know or suspect are experiencing trauma, particularly if those students stop logging in, reaching out or otherwise being readily available for communication? In what situations, if any, would it be better to step back and not engage or interfere? In what situations would it be better to persist in reaching out?

A: For many teachers, I know losing touch with some students was the hardest part of the sudden move to online in spring. Given well-documented disparities in access to digital tools and WiFi (even when districts are trying to provide them), challenges in connecting with some students are going to be inevitable. It can feel heartbreaking to lose those connections. However, teachers can persist, even as we have to accept that there is no perfect path. Of course, if a teacher has serious concerns about a child's safety, based on evidence and not assumptions, they'll follow the law on mandated reporting in their state. Most of the time that is not the case, though, and it's crucial to ensure we're reaching out with care and compassion, and not blame.

So, for example, very often parents can be contacted on cellphones and, even if online learning access is limited, conversations with a student on the phone might be possible. A teacher can leave supportive, caring messages for students in whatever ways possible. Some schools are also finding ways to support teachers and other school staff members to connect with students and families in person in safe ways and are partnering

with community organizations, located in students' neighborhoods, to support families in accessing resources they need.

But, of course, if families are experiencing illness or loss of loved ones, it makes sense for them to need space. And, given the economic impact of the pandemic, some families will be under a lot of additional stress, which may mean that responding to a teacher simply cannot be their top priority.

There is nothing easy about this crisis and its inequitable impacts on people, including students. Teachers can put care at the center while, at the same time, accepting the limits of their role and what is possible.

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