

WHY TEACHER EDUCATION PROGRAMS SHOULD TAKE A TRAUMA-INFORMED APPROACH

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Childhood trauma can have important impacts on students' ability to learn and socialize in the classroom. The term "trauma" is used to describe experiences or events a person perceives as harmful or detrimental to their well-being. Because trauma is a subjective response, people are affected differently by stressful events in their lives. Students affected by trauma have always attended school. However, until recently, little information about trauma was available to educators. Educators and others working in schools need to understand the prevalence of trauma, its effect on learning and student performance, and how social systems, including schools, can support students who have experienced trauma and draw from their strengths and resiliency. As this information has become more widely available, a variety of discussions have emerged about teaching practices, school climate, and trauma-related teacher education.

Trauma-informed care, also known as trauma-informed practices, arose from the medical and mental health service professions. Trauma-informed care aims to tailor services in ways that attend to the specific needs of those with a history of trauma. As awareness grows among educators, school communities are becoming more likely to integrate trauma-informed systems of care. Though the level of trauma awareness has increased in schools and among teaching staff, very little research has been done on how best to prepare aspiring teachers with trauma-informed teaching skills and where that preparation should happen. Because teachers often develop their philosophies and beliefs about students during their preparation and early field experiences, teacher preparation programs should be a central focus for systems of care.

What do future teachers, also known as teacher candidates, need to know about trauma-informed care that will allow them to build expertise as they gain increasing levels of responsibility in the classroom? Should this information be provided in an existing education courses or through auxiliary workshops? How should trauma-informed care be connected to other topics and clinical experiences in teacher preparation? And how should teacher candidates be integrated into trauma-informed trainings outside their universities, in schools and districts?

TRAUMA-INFORMED TEACHING IN TEACHER PREPARATION

Susan Craig, a leading scholar in the field of trauma-informed teaching, provides a detailed plan for the creation of trauma-sensitive schools. She offers a framework and concepts that introduce future teachers to the effects of trauma on children's and adolescent learning and behavior at various points throughout teacher preparation programs.

Teacher candidates are already required to learn a great deal about the various stages of child development. Paired with this knowledge, aspiring teachers learn best practices for managing classrooms and encouraging learning at the various stages of development. Craig's framework serves as a springboard for the integration of trauma-sensitive lenses into existing teacher preparation program curricula. Integrating this learning into existing programs equips teacher candidates with a wide range of trauma-informed practices to complement the other skills and ways of thinking about students and learning that teacher candidates are required to receive before certification.

Specifically, preparation programs should encourage teacher candidates to consider trauma-informed approaches to student learning and development, methods for building classroom community and classroom management, and subject matter content and instruction. By integrating trauma-informed practices into each of these areas, future teachers develop mindsets and teaching practices that enable them, from the onset of their careers, to create classrooms that are trauma-informed. This can help them hit stride in schools with established trauma-informed programs, or help champion such practices in schools that lack this vital awareness.

In addition to Susan Craig’s framework, the following resources for schools and the teachers in them provide useful information and direction for teacher preparation around trauma-informed practices.

- [Compassionate Schools](#) – created by The Washington State Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction to help public schools in Washington integrate trauma-informed care into their teaching and other services.
- [ACEs Too High](#) – compiles research and news about “adverse childhood trauma” as it relates to educational trauma-informed care and other related topics.
- [The Trauma and Learning Policy Initiative \(TLPI\)](#) - created by the Massachusetts Advocates for Children provides supports to schools as well as advocating for research and policy around trauma-sensitive approaches.

WAYS FORWARD

Building off of the above resources, teachers, school administrators, and other educational leaders should ensure that aspiring teachers and practicing teachers alike can identify the types of traumatic experiences that affect students and recognize how these traumatic events affect the brain, learning, and school performance.

Further, teachers should be equipped with information and educational resources that help them think about how they can integrate trauma-informed practice into their teaching to improve student success and well-being. Perhaps most vitally, educators should work to increase awareness about the prevalence of trauma and spread the use of non-judgmental, trauma-informed perspectives on discipline.

Given these directions forward for schools and practicing teachers, preparation programs should explicitly address trauma-informed perspectives throughout their programs. Future teachers need information and opportunities to integrate what they learn about trauma-informed practices during their courses and clinical experiences where candidates’ developing perspectives and proficiencies can be assessed as components of classroom management and lesson planning, for example. By embedding trauma-informed practices strategically within and across the teacher preparation curricula, programs can ensure that future teachers develop competency and efficacy.

Alongside this content, educators should be given professional development resources that foster discussions among fellow teachers and in their classrooms about the impacts of structural issues including marginalization, racism, community violence, the experiences of undocumented immigrants and refugees, and the effects of natural or human-made disasters.

Importantly, while addressing the challenges that these communities face, it is imperative that teachers, from the time they are in their preparation programs, acknowledge and draw on the assets and resiliency of the students and families affected. A strengths-based approach ensures that, throughout their work with students and families, educators recognize that those with traumatic experiences are more than what has happened to them.