

How Trauma-Informed Are We, Really?

Paul Gorski

To fully support students, schools must attend to the trauma that occurs within their own institutional cultures.

"I have a story for you," Shari said as she jogged toward me.

I had spent the day with her high school's administrative team discussing an equity assessment they hoped to conduct.

A major challenge at this school, as in many schools, was the leadership team's habit of embracing shiny new program after shiny new program rather than addressing deep institutional problems. Their latest shiny new program was trauma-informed education. That August, teachers attended two days of trauma-informed training. Counselors learned to identify students who carry the impact of trauma to school. It was a core focus for the school year.

"I'm a queer Black woman. Transgender," Shari said. As far as she knew, she was the only out transgender student at her school.

Several weeks prior, Shari explained, her counselor administered a survey to her. "He asked personal questions about my life, what I've experienced at home. It was intrusive," she said.

After the survey, Shari had asked more about it. "He called it ACEs," she shared, "for adverse childhood experiences."

"Here's what I want you to know," she told me now. "By a huge margin, the most adverse experiences in my life have happened here. My biggest source of trauma is how I'm treated at this school. That's what I told my counselor."

"How did he respond?"

"He said there was nothing on the ACEs questionnaire about that."

Shari described unrelenting transphobic and racist bullying, teachers refusing to use her preferred pronouns or her name, her absolute invisibility in health and other curricula, and other conditions that made school the bane of her well-being.

Is *this* what a trauma-informed school looks like?

All in on Trauma-Informed Education

When I share Shari's story, some educators assume I'm a critic of trauma-informed education. It's true, I am concerned about schools taking what I call the *shiny new thing* equity detour (Gorski, 2019)—embracing a program to solve institutional problems that a program, however popular, can't possibly solve.

But I'm also a champion of trauma-informed education, something I came by through experience. As an elementary-aged child, I was sexually abused repeatedly by an older boy who lived in my neighborhood. I know something of trauma.

I carried that trauma everywhere: soccer practice, the dinner table, school. And I behaved in perfectly reasonable ways for a sexually abused child to behave (Everstine & Everstine, 2015). I was restless. I passionately resisted being in confined spaces with adults.

Teachers called this "acting up." They punished me for little behaviors that I now know were proportionate to my trauma (as, really, any behavior is for a sexually abused child). Then, because I received poor behavior assessments, I was punished at home. I can't recall anyone being curious about why I behaved the way I did. There was no root cause behavior analysis, just reactive rule-flinging.

So, I'm all in on trauma-informed education—by which I mean I'm all in on what it *can* be if we commit to applying it mindfully and equitably.

Three Transformative Commitments

A few years ago, I shared my story with an elementary principal who was rolling out trauma-informed education in his school. He asked, "How would your teachers know what you were experiencing if you didn't tell them?" I thought, *Is that the sort of question his trauma-informed training prepared him to ask? Does he really believe it was my responsibility to report something I didn't understand to adults I didn't trust?*

I thought about Shari and other students drowning in traumas *within* trauma-informed schools. This principal's ideological blockage caused him to retraumatize me during a conversation about my trauma. No combination of trauma-informed practices would make him trauma-informed if he didn't work through that blockage.

The trouble surfaces when we apply trauma-informed education in ways that risk reproducing trauma or that ignore significant sources of trauma. It is in response to that trouble that I share *three transformative commitments* for trauma-informed education. My hope is that, by embracing these commitments, we might maximize the transformative potential of trauma-informed education rather than just layering it onto our program pile.

Commitment 1

Attend to the practices, policies, and aspects of institutional culture that traumatize children *at school*

My biggest source of trauma is how I'm treated here. In every school, the first trauma-informed step should be mapping out all the ways students, families, and even we, as educators, experience trauma *at school*. When we skip this step, we render the entire trauma-informed effort a hypocrisy.

It's important to understand that these traumas are not always—perhaps not even *usually*—associated with big, obvious traumatic *events*, although of course such events do happen, for example when a white referee requires a Black student-athlete to cut off his dreadlocks (Carey, 2019) or when school leaders refuse to take seriously the claims of sexual assault survivors (Green, 2019).

These causes of trauma aren't as rare as they ought to be, but they may be rarer than what Nadal (2018) calls *microaggressive trauma*: the accumulative impact of insidious, grinding traumatic experiences. Generally, individual experiences that accumulate into microaggressive trauma aren't recognized as traumatic by those of us who don't experience them; we tend to see them as isolated events, not building blocks of traumatic stress. One incident of ableist bullying or one instance of LGBTQI+ invisibility in sex education would not be classified as trauma by most technical definitions (Nadal, 2018). That's a problem.

But more to the point, these incidents *rarely* happen in isolation. They usually are parts of traumatizing patterns. It's the constant stream of transphobic bullying, *plus* our failure to address it as an institutional responsibility rather than a matter of individual behavior, *plus* curricular erasure, *plus, plus, plus*.

So, as we map potential causes of trauma within our schools, it's important to dig beneath incidents. How do we account for the damaging belief systems behind LGBTQI+ people's erasure from sex education curricula? What other policies and practices were informed by those belief systems? According to GLSEN (2017), 42 percent of transgender and gender-nonconforming students have been prevented from using their correct name or pronoun *at school*; 46 percent have been forced to use the incorrect bathroom *at school*. What is it about the institutional culture of a school that allows this to happen? What other traumas do we perpetuate by allowing heterosexist, transphobic cultures to persist? The same question applies to other belief systems liable to produce traumatizing patterns in schools, such as racism and ableism. If we don't address that underlying stuff, we're more trauma-avoidant than trauma-informed.

Commitment 2

We must infuse trauma-informed education with a robust understanding of, and responsiveness to, the traumas of systemic oppression

Shari associated her trauma with racism and transphobia at school. Her story is a critical lesson on why we should shake free from the deficit-oriented view that traumas are mostly the result of students' home lives. This view obscures the traumatizing impacts of systemic oppression. If we're not responsive to these impacts, we're enacting a privilege-laden version of trauma-informed education.

For decades, researchers have shown how racial and other oppressions can be traumatizing. They link traumatic stress and related symptoms like depression, anxiety, and even internalized oppression to racism (Carter, Kirkinis, & Johnson, 2020), heterosexism (Straub, McConnell, & Messman-Moore, 2018), Islamophobia (Samari, Alcalá, & Sharif, 2018), and other forms of systemic injustice. Consider that reality next to findings from a recent study in which researchers (English et al., 2020) followed 101 Black adolescents to identify how often they experienced racism. Turns out they experienced discernible racist acts more than five times per day. That's just discernible racist acts. They did not record insidious systemic racism. How are we accounting for that in trauma-informed schools?

Goldin and Khasnabis (2020) warn that, when we fail to incorporate systemic oppression into trauma-informed education, we risk "draw[ing] teachers' attention to the trauma behaviors students exhibit, potentially pathologizing children ... and then blaming their families for their trauma" (p. 10). This is deficit ideology. It can retraumatize students.

With a deeper trauma-informed vision, we recognize that many students of color experience the ravages of racism; that students experiencing poverty contend with brutal economic injustice. The issues to be addressed are the racism and the injustice. The best trauma-informed practices are rooted in anti-racism, and anti-oppression more broadly, not just in helping students cope with the impact of isolated traumatic events, and not just in assuming that a student whose family is experiencing poverty must be experiencing some sort of abuse at home. If I am not actively anti-racist, I am not trauma-informed.

As described in Commitment 1, the first step is refusing to recreate oppressive conditions in schools. The second step is collaborating with community organizations that fight conditions—police brutality, the scarcity of living wage work, environmental injustice—that threaten the well-being of students, families, and us. If you hire somebody to lead trauma-informed training, ask what the latest research shows about the relationship between racism or ableism and traumatic stress. If they don't have an answer, they are not trauma-informed and can't prepare you to be trauma-informed.

Commitment 3

Dislodge hyper-punitive cultures and ideologies

Bad ideologies are harder to break than bad practices. This might be why, in my experience, the hardest transition for most schools adopting trauma-informed education involves dislodging hyper-punitive educator ideologies and school cultures. Perhaps philosophically we recognize that avoiding reactive rule-flinging and responding to the root causes of student behavior is a trauma-informed practice. But to what extent do we apply this in practice? Hyper-punitive ideologies remain an education epidemic, even in supposedly trauma-informed schools.

I'm reminded of Carter, a high school student whose story illustrates the incompatibility of trauma-informed education and the mindless application of rules. After I delivered a brief presentation to his class, Carter pulled me aside, whispering, "I'm in a predicament."

Carter was gay but not out. He feared his parents would kick him out of the house if they discovered the truth. Still, classmates often presumed he was gay, calling him names or worse. Things were especially dire between fourth and fifth period, when a group of boys repeatedly assaulted him in an unsupervised stretch of hallway.

Carter worried for his physical safety. He also worried about the three tardies he had accrued during that grading period. He had found a nook where he sometimes hid until his tormenters passed, but that meant being 10 seconds late to class. The fourth tardy would mean a call home. That terrified him.

He had considered confiding in his fifth period teacher, but recently she shamed him in front of the class: *Everyone seems capable of getting here on time, so what's your issue?*

Curious after my conversation with Carter, I reviewed his school's student conduct handbook, which included big sections extolling the virtues of social-emotional learning and trauma-informed education. About halfway through the handbook I found a series of charts preassigning punishments for nearly every imaginable behavior. The biggest distinction was among various levels of *major* and *minor* infractions. And there it was under minor infractions: three tardies means a warning. Four, a call home. A few more, and Carter risked in-school suspension. He was on track to miss an entire day of instruction for missing less than two minutes of fifth period.

Most educators, I believe, would eventually ask Carter what the heck was going on. But Carter had reasons to be reluctant to respond even if asked.

From a trauma-informed perspective, I wondered about two things. First, if the school intended to shift ideologies and institutional cultures to avoid reactive rule-flinging and to respond, instead, to behaviors' underlying causes (which may be linked to trauma), why predetermine punishments? Second, why use presumptuous language like "infractions" at all? Is Carter the infractor or the infractee in this scenario?

Nothing is simple, I know. It's hard to expect a school to address a specific string of incidents no adult knows is happening. But we should know if we work in schools that heterosexism, racism, and other oppressions are happening all the time. If we're sitting around waiting for students to report it, we're missing most of it. That's trauma-passive.

Being trauma-informed means consciously cultivating space in our mental models so that, even if we know nothing about a particular set of circumstances, we avoid the temptation to mindlessly apply rules. Carter was about to be punished harshly due to the school's failure to protect him from heterosexism. Again, perhaps no adult knew he was being targeted, although in a way that's hard to believe; generally, we know who's being targeted even if it's not happening in front of us. But if we're trauma-aware, we realize that the burden can't be on people—on *children*—experiencing trauma to educate those who created the institutional culture in which the trauma is happening. That expectation is, itself, potentially traumatizing.

If a child accrues a bunch of tardies, we must withhold judgment and show concern. If a child comes to school high, we must withhold judgement and show concern. Whatever a child does, the trauma-informed response is first to make sure everybody is safe, then withhold judgment and show concern.

When I make this point to groups of educators, inevitably a few argue *accountability*. "We have to hold students accountable or how will they learn responsibility?" This illustrates, for me, an ideological trap that is incompatible with trauma-informed education.

How does irresponsibly holding Carter or 7-year-old me accountable for the failures of adults and institutions in our lives teach us responsibility? In any case, when we abolish the hyper-punitive culture, we're not saying nobody should be held accountable for their behavior. Instead, we're acknowledging that no child should be held accountable for the ways *we* fail them. We're saying, hey, there are more humane, trauma-informed, and *effective* ways to engage with young people. We're acknowledging that trauma-informed education cannot live where hyper-punitive ideologies and institutional cultures are allowed to live.

Triumph and Transformation

As a final commitment, let's take trauma-informed care of ourselves, the community of educators. We are not immune to the effects of trauma. In a study about educator burnout, for example, Cher Chen and I (2015) found that educators of

color who speak up about racial justice in their schools often face harsh and traumatizing repercussions, sometimes from their own colleagues.

I want to emphasize, again, the importance of trauma-informed education. The trick is striving for what it *can* be if we embrace it—not as a set of practices we apply selectively, but rather as a reimagining of how we relate with students and one another. When we apply it with its full robustness, it has the power to transform classrooms and schools. When we don't, it has the power to reproduce the harm it was designed to redress. Let's choose the former.

Reflect & Discuss

- The first trauma-informed step, according to Gorski, is to map out all the ways students, families, and staff experience trauma at school. In what ways have you seen this happen?
- Is systemic oppression incorporated into your school's approach to trauma-informed education? Why or why not?
- Rather than "mindless[ly] applying rules" in response to student behavior, how could you "withhold judgment and show concern"?

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Paul Gorski is the founder of the [Equity Literacy Institute](#), a longtime teacher educator, and the author of several books, including *Reaching and Teaching Students in Poverty: Strategies for Erasing the Opportunity Gap* (Teachers College Press, 2013). Follow him on [Twitter](#).