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Trauma-informed education for wholeness: Strategies for faculty & advisors

Mays Imad

Biology Department, Connecticut College and Pima Community College

Correspondence
Mays Imad, Connecticut College, 270 Mohegan Avenue, New London, CT 06320.
Email: mimad@conncoll.edu

Abstract
The purpose of this article is to reflect upon how a trauma-informed education is intimately connected with equity and justice. I will briefly describe the impacts of trauma on students, specifically on their sense of safety and belonging, and by extension, their ability to engage and learn. I will then offer suggestions for how we, as educators, can help mitigate the effects of such traumatic stress. I will use trauma-informed principles to guide my recommendations.

INTRODUCTION

I remember back in 2007 when I learned about the Nisour Square massacre in Iraq.[1] I was directly affected when a family member was murdered. I, along with Iraqis around the world, felt the jolting trauma and helplessness of witnessing the continued injustice against Iraq and innocent Iraqi civilians. The morning after I heard the news, I opened my eyes and felt a sense of disappointment that I was alive—that I had to endure another day. The thought of hope irritated me. After years of witnessing the destruction of my former homeland and my people, it seemed like I was collapsing under the weight of injustice. I am not sure what was more traumatic, the massacre itself or the deafening silence around me about that event. I remember wondering: "Does justice apply to Iraq and Iraqis?" and "Does anyone care?" I would find myself asking that question ("Does anyone care?") on so many occasions: the days after Eric Garner[2] was murdered; the days after the Muslim ban[3]; the day after DACA[4] was rescinded, and so on. Each time I ask those questions and do not have answers, I experience a sense of wounding exile.

BELONGING, UNCERTAINTY, TRAUMA, AND LEARNING

We are social creatures and we are wired to seek belonging and connections. When we experience social rejection, real or perceived, it puts stress on the brain (Bjornsson et al., 2020; Reinhard et al., 2019). Our brain is continually scanning and sampling its immediate environment, gaining access to fragments of the world to make predictions related to safety or danger, reward or punishment. In a sense, our brains act like sophisticated simulation or

statistical programs that process and integrate incoming data, and then extrapolate what the greater world outside is like and what it is likely to become in the future (Friston, 2010; Ortega & Braun, 2010). When the brain encounters any changes in the external environment, it will ask the question: "What strategy should I select to protect my overall well-being?" When we do not have an answer, it is very stressful. We experience trauma when we are placed in a position where we feel threatened and our capacity to respond is overwhelmed. Questions such as, "Do I matter?", "Do my people and community matter?", and "Will the world around me come to my rescue?" all connect to our sense of safety and integration in the world.

These questions challenge a person's assumptions about their basic safety and wellbeing. Professor Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela explains that: "Trauma shatters the assumptions that we have about our environment—what we know and trust to be true" (Omega Institute for Holistic Studies, 2016). Shattered assumptions theory postulates that when we experience traumatic events, our view of ourselves and the world is challenged. We question and re-examine our assumptions about the benevolence of the world, the meaningfulness of the world, and our sense of self and self-worth (Janoff-Bulman, 1989). Hence, each time we are put in a position where we have to question the goodness of the world, the support we and our community members have, and our sense of belonging and safety, and we do not have reassuring answers, we experience a sense of loss and betrayal which can often become overwhelming.

When our nervous system feels overwhelmed, it becomes difficult for us to regulate our response to stress which in turn leads to more stress. Leading psychiatrist and trauma researcher Bessel van der Kolk (2005) states that "at the core of traumatic stress is the breakdown in the capacity to regulate internal states" (p. 403). Traumatic stress, thus, has extremely negative effects on various aspects of human functioning, from basic physiological measures of health and immune system function to abilities to learn and process complex information (Kagias et al., 2012; Maté, 2008; van der Kolk, 2015; Yaribeygi et al., 2017; Yehuda & Lehrner, 2018).

Each time the nervous system encounters a stressful situation it will expend energy in an attempt to "resolve" the situation. If the stress persists and we continue to feel uncertain about our survival and well-being, our brain stem ("survival" brain) and limbic system ("emotional" brain) will increase their activity and will activate our brain's alarm system, the fight-or-flight response (van der Kolk, 2015). It should be noted that our physiologic alarm system might more accurately be called *Fight-or-Flight-or-Freeze-or-Fawn* (Schmidt et al., 2008; Walker, 2013) Reactions to any perceived harmful or threatening situation are physiological, automatically engaging behavioral systems of avoidance (flight), confrontation (fight), freezing in place, or placating the perceived threat source (fawn). While our biological alarm system (fight-or-flight) attempts to safeguard our future physical, mental, and social well-being against perceived threats, the behaviors it elicits are not conducive to detailed, stable, and long-term learning. In other words, the brain prioritizes safety and survival over learning (de Quervain et al., 1998; Bangasser & Shors, 2010; Kagias et al., 2012; Kuhlmann, 2005).

When stress persists, energy expenditure continues, and the recovery or replenishment of energy becomes increasingly difficult. Thus, the brain is focused on the stress responses and much less on learning and problem-solving. As noted by Stuart Shanker (2020) in his book *Reframed: Self-Reg for a Just Society*, when such stress reaches a point where we can no longer cope our "limbic brakes" (p. 40) kick in, and the amygdala acts as a "veto center" to silence our prefrontal cortex (the region of the brain concerned with executive function skills such as attention, motivation, decision-making, and problem solving). In other words, when our amygdala gets overactive because of a perceived threat, it prevents

sensory information from going to the prefrontal cortex, hence putting a brake on sensory processing.

MASLOW BEFORE BLOOM

There are three preconditions for every human being to engage, learn, and thrive in life: feeling safe, feeling meaningfully connected, and having support and resources. Simply put, our basic needs come before our ability to learn, and hence the phrase "Maslow before Bloom" (Berger, 2020, para. 1). Safety is more than physical. It encompasses the emotional, cognitive, and interpersonal domains. We are genetically wired to be social creatures. We want to belong and connect and feel that we matter. When we are not sure whether we belong or if we (and by extension, our community) matter, that uncertainty makes us feel unsafe and can be very stressful on our brains. Again, we are not talking about typical stress but toxic or traumatic stress—the type of stress that results in depletion of our energy and negatively impacts our physiology.

Trauma is individually based and can be carried through generations genetically, socially, and culturally. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (2014) locates trauma as the result of "an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual's functioning and physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being" (p. 7). It is key to remember that trauma could be caused by a single event (e.g., a car accident), recurring events accumulated over a generation (e.g., poverty, childhood adversity), and recurring events accumulated over generations (e.g., racism, war, violence) (Blair & Raver, 2016; Lehrner & Yehuda, 2018; Luby et al., 2013; Sangalang & Vang, 2016; Yehuda & Lehrner, 2018).

TRAUMA COMPOUNDED

It is important to note that trauma does not have to be physically violent or overtly abusive; it can be insidious. Being in combat or getting into an accident can be traumatic. But, trauma can also be caused by ongoing subtle or overt transgression against individuals or groups. The invasion of Iraq and subsequent killings of innocent civilians; the murder of unarmed Black citizens; the historical erasure of Indigenous knowledge, values, and ways of being; the separation of children from their parents at the U.S.-Mexico Border; the normalization of violence inflicted upon marginalized communities by dehumanizing their members[5]; are all examples of trauma experienced by individuals and groups and are less often talked about.

Members of these groups, including our students, witness violence and injustice and daily dehumanization and are often left wondering: "How long will this injustice continue to go on?" or "Why aren't more people outraged?" or "When will these daily indignities and injustices end?" Such unanswered questions leave the brain perpetually wondering: "Do I matter? Does my community matter?" and such uncertainties exacerbate, and/or trigger traumas both new and old, resolved and unresolved, conscious and unconscious, thereby, compounding the trauma.

It is also important to note that the daily experiences of students who are on the margins can also be traumatic because of experiencing further marginalization and ongoing microaggressions (Nadal, 2018). Sue (2010) reminds us, "It is clear that racial, gender, and sexual-orientation microaggressions, far from being benign forms of small,

trivial, and innocent slights and insults, represent major stressors for marginalized groups. . . . Microaggressions have been found to affect the biological, emotional, cognitive, and behavioral well-being of marginalized groups" (p. 105). Like the trauma caused by witnessing violence and injustice, these traumas have very real physiological impacts. Consequently, understanding trauma and using trauma-informed approaches will help reduce toxic stress, cultivate a nurturing learning sanctuary, advance racial equity, and promote resilience and healing.

TRAUMA-INFORMED EDUCATION

The trauma-informed lens as it relates to education is about recognizing that traumatic stress is prevalent and pervasive and impacts students' abilities to engage with academic materials, learn, and retain information. In a trauma-informed education setting, the instructor or advisor intentionally promotes safe environments that cultivate connectedness and empowerment, acting as an "amygdala whisperer" (Baylin, 2016). An amygdala whisperer is someone who intentionally behaves in a way that helps calm down the nervous system of those around them by helping others feel safe, connected, and seen. A trauma-informed approach to education enables us to recognize that our students may have difficulty completing basic tasks they usually could, feeling motivated to study or even to show up, prioritizing assignments, managing their time, or simply persisting. Admittedly, we cannot take away students' challenges nor resolve their burdens. We can, however, help build a "learning sanctuary" (Imad, 2020) within our classes that can offer a retreat for students to connect, belong, engage, and learn.

It is important to remember that trauma-informed education is not about pathologizing students; rather, trauma-informed education is about recognizing that when a student experiences racism or eviction or loses a parent or immigrates to a foreign country, all of those events could negatively impact their well-being and how they show up. There is nothing "wrong" with the student who is experiencing traumatic stress, but something happened to them that is impacting their ability to thrive.

A trauma-informed approach is not about going easy on students or promoting an anything goes climate. Instead, it allows us to challenge students to learn to their fullest potential. Trauma-informed education is about cultivating the space where students can relax into learning. It is about helping students feel safe and empowered so when they are challenged academically, they continue to seek support to learn and thrive. Thus, trauma-informed education is about seeing the humanity and complexity of students, and at the same time, revealing our humanity to our students to show them that we are on their side, that we have their backs, that we see them and validate their struggles and that they matter. Trauma-informed education means we recognize that as educators and leaders we have the ability and the positional authority in higher education to create and advocate for a critical educational praxis.

TRAUMA-INFORMED EDUCATION IN PRACTICE

My framework (Figure 1) for trauma-informed education is based upon the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020) guidelines for trauma-informed care. Those guidelines encourage us to ground all of our work in cultural humility, paying attention to historical, racial, and gender issues and identities. We start with the awareness that trauma-informed education requires

FIGURE 1 Framework for trauma-informed education

that we commit to learning and critically reflecting. Our ultimate purpose is to transform systems and organizations in order to place justice and healing at the root of our work.

Upon that foundation we cultivate ***safe learning environments*** by building trusting and transparent relationships with and among our students (Imad, 2020) instead of leading with assumptions. We are intentional to see them and communicate to them that we see them. We ***empower our students*** by providing them choices and encouraging them to use their voices. We remind them that when they come to our classes, they bring with them a wealth of experiences which enhance the learning experience of everyone. We ***build a classroom community*** by encouraging students to collaborate and co-create knowledge and bring their rich life experiences to the learning environment. We ***construct meaning*** by reminding students that it is their lived experiences that will help us process, understand, or make sense of life events and relationships. We help them identify short-term and long-term personal goals that impact their lives and the world around them.

In addition to fostering a safe environment for students and helping them cultivate community and create meaning, it is also important to empower them by teaching them about stress, trauma, and learning. I focus on faculty members or advisors because I recognize that faculty and advisors are on the educational front lines and occupy a proximal interface with students. Although in what follows I offer suggestions for faculty and advisors' direct interactions with students, it is also important to remember that we need to consider how we can simultaneously advocate at the institutional level for policy changes that prioritize proactive holistic mental health and center the wellbeing of our students. Listed below are five concrete approaches faculty and advisors can implement to better support our students and educate them about the brain and learning, normalize the fact that trauma impacts learning, share coping strategies to mitigate the impact of traumatic stress, and provide contextualized mental health preventions and interventions:

1. **Make your first interaction with students inviting and consider how you might communicate to them that you prioritize mental health**. For example, consider adding a statement in your syllabus or email signature that lets them know that you care about their learning and about their health, safety, and wellbeing. Invite students to ask for

help if they are struggling and let them know that if you cannot help them directly, you will connect them with resources on campus. The more we communicate with students and invite communication, the more we are able to learn about their struggles and advocate for them.

2. **Share an article with your students about the social and emotional elements of learning** and how emotions and how we feel impact our ability to learn. When we center our students and their wellbeing, we invest time and effort to help them understand the complexity of learning. That includes empowering them to learn about how our brains react to stress and trauma, so they can better understand that "limbic brake" (i.e., when the limbic systems is overactive and puts a brake on other non-emotional activities such as problem solving within the prefrontal cortex; Shanker 2017, 2020) and "amygdala hijack" (i.e., oftentimes the amygdala brake is mediated by the over-activities of the amygdala which acts to hijack sensory information away from the prefrontal cortex and keep the sensory information within the limbic system; Goleman, 1995) can literally block our ability to reason and make decisions. Such understanding will guard against assuming a self-deficit model (e.g., "I failed the exam because I am dealing with a significant level of stress and wasn't able to study effectively," versus "I failed the exam because I'm not a math person").
3. **Articulate to students that when they come into your class or the institution, they bring with them past experiences, language, and cultural assets**, which can serve to enable meaningful learning for themselves and the rest of the classroom and college community. Reinforce the message that we are relational beings and that the brain is a social-emotional organ, influenced by its surroundings (Rendon, 1994). For example, discuss with your students the power of positive resonance (i.e., an interpersonal connection we experience when our emotions come into sync; when our mutual care is being reflected and reinforced in one another) and ask them to notice and document what in their surroundings helps their nervous system calm down and feel connected (Brown et al., 2021). Discuss and help students to become mindful of balance, expectations of learning, and what they are experiencing in the present moment. Engaging in these discussions at the beginning and during the semester will not only help students feel comfortable about asking for help, but also aid them in developing strategies to feel and stay well and understand their limits.
4. **Remind your students that learning involves a complex series of events that change the structure of the brain.** Learning is a journey and struggle is part of that journey (Cajete, 2000. Failure to understand the materials the first time around is part of the learning. For example, it isimportant to remember that when the semester begins, students will likely have retained less information than you expect. It is critical to reassure them that they are not "behind" and that you will devote time to review and bring everyone up to speed. We have to balance content with grace and be mindful not to overwhelm our students with a sense of urgency to "catch up."
5. **Discuss with students the research on microaggressions and how that impacts our overall wellbeing, especially for marginalized groups** (Sue et al., 2007). Invite your students to learn about their implicit biases and how to ensure that we preemptively mitigate their impact. You have an opportunity to address topics of equity and justice beyond declarative statements by reminding your students of Desmond Tutu's teaching that: "[M]y humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up, in yours. We belong in a bundle of life. We say a person is a person through other persons." Invite students to reflect how they might help those around them feel safe, seen, connected, and supported.

Trauma-informed education, while it may be a current buzzword, is not merely a passing trend. It is about wanting to disrupt educational systems that too often prioritize knowing over caring, competition over collaboration, intervention over prevention, and individuals over community. It is about restoration, and healing past injustices at the individual and community levels. It is about revealing our humanity to our students to show them that we are on their side, that we have their backs, that we see them, and that they matter.

ENDNOTES

[1] On September 16, 2007, while escorting a U.S. embassy convoy, employees of the private military Blackwater Security Consulting shot at Iraqi civilians, killing 17 and injuring 20 in Nisour Square, Baghdad. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nisour_Square_massacre

[2] On July 17, 2014, Eric Garner was killed by the New York City Police Department (NYPD) officer who placed Garner in a prohibited chokehold while arresting him. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Killing_of_Eric_Garner

[3] Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States, otherwise known as the Muslim Ban is a travel ban that was put forth as an executive order on January 2017. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Executive_Order_13769

[4] The expansion of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) was rescinded in June 2017 and in September 2017 the Trump Administration announced a plan to phase out DACA. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deferred_Action_for_Childhood_Arrivals

[5] In the 1980s, the Los Angeles police and law enforcements used the acronym "NHI" to informally classify cases involving the murder of sex workers, drug users, gang members, or homeless persons, the majority of those from Black and Brown populations. Those cases were given low or no priority because victims were regarded as having a low or no social status. NHI which stands for "No Human Involved" is a way to normalize the violence inflicted upon marginalized communities by dehumanizing their members. For more on this, see Wynter, S. (1994).

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Mays Imad is a neuroscientist, an educator, and a faculty educational developer who currently teaches at Connecticut College.

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