



TRAUMA-INFORMED STRATEGIES TO SUPPORT STUDENTS DURING THE PANDEMIC

By Pamela Kramer Ertel

When I learned that I would have to move my university-based courses to remote instruction for the remainder of the semester due to the pandemic, I was heartbroken. I grieved for my teacher candidates who were not going to get to do their second placement in their pre-student teaching residency experience. I grieved for all the missed learning opportunities and celebrations that would typically happen on campus.

I didn't have much time to grieve these losses, because I knew I had to quickly switch gears and create the best possible learning experiences for my students. I recognized that we were all experiencing some sort of trauma and stress in dealing with the pandemic. Although my students are not children, I knew the impact of stress and trauma could still

seriously impact their ability to learn. I decided to use what I knew about trauma-informed care to help my students learn more effectively.

Pillar 1: Connection

Bath (2008) identified three pillars of trauma-informed care. One of the most important pillars is connection. "If children feel safe and connected to their teachers, they will be able to learn" (Call et al., 2014, p. 6). This is as true in elementary classrooms as it was for my more mature students. Strategies that can help children (and adults) feel safe include having a warm, welcoming voice, a positive greeting, and "soft eyes." One of the reasons I opted to conduct my class using live Zoom sessions is that I wanted to be able to connect with my students, see their faces, read their emotions, and be able to respond to them on the spot.

I started each Zoom session with some calm, encouraging music videos. I used songs such as "It's Going to Be Alright," by Sara Groves; "Shower the People," by James Taylor; and "Be a Light," by Thomas Rhett. I selected these specific songs and videos because of their calming melodies and

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upbeat messages. I wanted to create a comfortable environment that was welcoming and supportive for students who were faced with uncertainty.

Pillar 2: Safety

The second pillar is safety. Bath (2008, p. 19) defines safety with characteristics such as “Consistency, reliability, predictability, availability, honesty, and transparency.” I tried to use a consistent, predictable format for each session. I started with a warm welcome and music, then presented the day’s “road map,” which included the objectives and the agenda for the session. I also allowed time for students to ask questions about anything. In the daily road map, I also posted a funny picture or cartoon to lighten the mood as we started each session.

Pillar 3: Emotional Regulation

The third pillar identified by Bath is emotional regulation. I know many of my students were feeling like they had no control over any aspect of their lives, and this is often even more acute with young learners. I tried to allow time for them to check in and share how they were feeling by using the poll feature on Zoom. I reminded them that we were going to get through this together. I knew that it was essential that I remain calm and compassionate, no matter how stressed I was feeling. In addition, I presented a clear outline of all course adjustments, which had been modified to meet their needs, so all expectations were transparent.

I also made myself vulnerable to my students by being honest about the things I did not know. For example, I had never even used Zoom before, so I willingly admitted that this was a new learning experience for me, too, as I modeled how to persevere in challenging teaching experiences, often through trial and error. I believe these actions helped my students better control their own emotions—something even more important for young students.

Additional Course Adjustments

Since my students were not able to do about half of their typical fieldwork, I searched to find the best possible videos to showcase actual classroom experiences. I found excellent videos on YouTube, The Teaching Channel, and Edutopia to help support their learning as they featured best teaching

practices. We would then discuss the videos and applications to classroom practices.

Concluding Thoughts

I certainly did not have all the answers as I navigated the challenges presented by the pandemic. I am thankful that I was able to use what I knew about trauma-informed classrooms to help support my students during a particularly challenging time in our educational experience. I believe these three pillars of trauma-informed care can support learners of all ages. 🍏

References

- Bath, H. (2008). The three pillars of trauma-informed care. *Reclaiming Children & Youth, 17*(3), 17–21.
- Call, C., Purvis, K., Parris, S. R., & Cross, D. (2014). Creating trauma-informed classrooms. *Adoption Advocate, 75*, 1–9.



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