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Mary S. Thomas

*University of Louisville*, [shelley.thomas@louisville.edu](mailto:shelley.thomas@louisville.edu)

Penny B. Howell

*University of Louisville*, [penny.howell@louisville.edu](mailto:penny.howell@louisville.edu)

Shantel Crosby

*University of Louisville*, [shantel.crosby@louisville.edu](mailto:shantel.crosby@louisville.edu)

Elmedina Brkic

*University of Louisville*, [elmedina.brkic@louisville.edu](mailto:elmedina.brkic@louisville.edu)

Kaleb Clemons

*University of Louisville*, [kaleb.clemons@louisville.edu](mailto:kaleb.clemons@louisville.edu)

*See next page for additional authors*

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# Teacher Candidates' Emerging Perspectives on Trauma Informed Teaching

## **Abstract**

A transdisciplinary team of candidates with teacher and social work educators describe their perspectives of trauma-informed teaching and intentions to use evidence-based practices in classrooms. We studied classroom management from a trauma-informed perspective in the first course in the program, then reflected back on these through a professional learning community created to intentionally focus on trauma informed teaching. We highlight findings around candidates' perspectives and specific actions they attended to in order to incorporate those practices.

## **Keywords**

Trauma-informed teaching, teacher preparation, classroom management

## **Cover Page Footnote**

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## **Authors**

Mary S. Thomas, Penny B. Howell, Shantel Crosby, Elmedina Brkic, Kaleb Clemons, Lydia McKinley, and Sedekia Peter

We explore teacher candidates' emerging perspectives on trauma-informed teaching through action research to address the need for intentional, culturally responsive trauma-informed teacher preparation. Trauma-informed teaching, based on trauma-informed approaches, includes a framework of "four assumptions and six key principles" (SAMHSA NCTIC, 2014, p. 9). For this work, we focused on the four assumptions: (a) realization of the impact of trauma and understanding that individuals can recover; (b) recognition of the prevalence, impact, signs, and symptoms of trauma; (b) responding with policies and practices that are trauma-sensitive; and (c) avoiding re-traumatization (SAMHSA NCTIC, 2014) and how teachers operationalize these at the classroom level. Classrooms should be places where students, including those who are different from their teachers and those affected by trauma, feel safe and supported (Crosby, Howell, & Thomas, 2018). Trauma-informed practices enacted in classrooms improve opportunities for classroom management to be inclusive and supportive of all students (Wolpow, Johnson, Hertel, & Kincaid, 2016). Trauma-informed teaching and classroom management assume that teachers are informed about how trauma affects student learning and behavior along with the subsequent integration of that knowledge into instructional and management decisions.

Educator preparation programs (EPP), however, historically rely on approaches to classroom management that ignore race and racism (Raible & Irizarry, 2010), are ineffective in diverse classrooms (Weinstein, Curran, & Tomlinson-Clarke, 2004), and do not adequately consider trauma (Rossen & Hull, 2013). Furthermore, by disregarding the "discipline gap" (Monroe, 2006, p. 164), the trend of disproportionately referring and punishing African American students compared to their White peers for the same behaviors, EPP and their graduates play a role in perpetuating the school-to-prison pipeline because they do not address the causes of the discipline gap explicitly to ameliorate it (Milner, Cunningham, Delale-O'Connor, & Kestenberg, 2019). In response to the critiques of classroom management in EPP and the dearth of opportunities for candidates to be trauma-informed, a team of teacher educators and a social work educator initiated a transdisciplinary approach to classroom management that is intersectional, humanistic, supportive, community-based, and, importantly, trauma-informed.

Candidates were introduced to trauma-informed practices in a classroom management class during the first semester of an EPP. The approach also included a professional learning community (PLC) the semester afterward that served as a place to reconnect and revisit the topics from the course, including classrooms as communities, racial equity, and trauma-informed teaching. This action research study draws from those to better understand how candidates conceptualize trauma-informed practices. Two questions guided the study (a) How can candidates learn to create a classroom environment where all students

feel supported, represented, and safe to speak and be heard? (b) How can candidates learn to be trauma informed within their teaching?

### **Methodology**

Our participatory action research was informed by Staples' et al. (2016) call "for teacher educators to design and implement, with preservice teachers, theoretically informed methods for solving problems in daily living with self and others in diverse contexts" (p. 320). Further, this work is grounded in a transformative theoretical perspective (Mertens, 2010) to improve practice and create supportive learning communities for students who have experienced trauma.

### **Participants**

As mentioned, we are a team of two teacher educators, a social work educator, and four teacher candidates seeking certification in middle and secondary education. Our multi-racial and multi-lingual team includes a Black male born in East Africa who speaks Swahili as his first language; a White female born in the United States with English as a first language; a biracial male born in the United States with English as a first language; and a White female born in Bosnia and Herzegovina who learned multiple languages, including English. The instructors include a Black female social work educator and two White female teacher educators. All instructors are English speakers from the United States, and everyone on the team is cis-gender.

### **Data Sources and Analysis**

Using stimulated recall (Heikonen, Toom, Pyhäntö, Pietarinen, & Soini, 2017), candidates reflected on qualitative evidence from three class assignments (Philosophy of Education, Philosophy of Education Action Plan, Classroom Management Plan and Analysis) and responded to both written and verbal prompts. Data were analyzed through summative content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) using categories developed through a prior study (Thomas et al., 2019).

### **Findings**

In response to the first research question, how can candidates learn to create a classroom environment where all students feel supported, represented, and safe to speak and be heard, we identified practices for candidates to learn through readings, reflection, and revisiting the topics (a) increasing awareness of trauma; and (b) relationship building that is explicit about working with students who have experienced trauma. For the second research question, how can candidates learn to be trauma informed within their teaching, we describe two additional practices (c) adding teaching moves; and (d) reframing teacher behaviors. Across both questions, candidates reiterated that creating supportive classrooms and trauma informed teaching needs to include connections among those concepts as well as knowing their own backgrounds and biases,

understanding racial and ethnic differences and racial equity, and engaging in self-care.

### **Awareness of Trauma**

Candidates named specific actions they will take to continue to learn about trauma. Below is an excerpt from a candidate's reflection on actions they will take.

(I will) educate myself on the different traumas and their (sic) signs, giving my support to every student ... Observing and supporting students with trauma must be a continuous thing ... teachers must "continuously observe students living with trauma, violence, and chronic stress through and asset-based lens..." (Zacarian, Alvarez-Ortiz, & Haynes, 2016, p. 56).

They also stressed the importance of understanding structural issues such as rising levels of income inequality and the sociohistorical contexts for marginalized groups including Native Americans, African Americans, immigrants and refugees as these all contribute to students' experiences with trauma. Further, candidates shared that awareness leads to actions, specifically connecting with others involved in trauma-informed care.

### **Relationship Building**

Candidates framed relationship-building from a trauma-informed perspective by unpacking what the process may entail with students who have experienced trauma. The excerpt below from an assignment illustrates the candidate's ability to connect the concepts of trauma sensitive practices to what they are experiencing in the classroom.

...as class ends is to open the door for the students. This way, their routine is the same for both at the beginning and ending of class. Cole et al., (2005) states that, "[s]chool is a place where it is possible for traumatized children to forge strong relationships with caring adults and learn in a supportive, predictable, and safe environment." She explains the correlation between childhood trauma and an inability to regulate emotions. This illuminates the importance of creating a safe and welcoming environment in the classroom... I understand it will not happen overnight, it is a process.

Candidates also recognized the necessity of self-awareness of their own biases and privileges as these contribute to the capacity of teachers to build relationships. Each also emphasized that teachers respect students' experiences, particularly when those are different from their own or from their classmates, and to have empathy in order to truly create a classroom that is safe for all.

### **Teacher Actions**

Candidates began to consider how typical instructional strategies, such as writing reflections in English or maintaining routines, can be trauma-informed. As part of their classroom management plan, one explained, "I will have students

write a reflection...for the last five minutes of class and if they don't want me to look at something, they will know to put 'don't look' or 'for my eyes only' at the top." Though writing reflections is a common teacher action the candidate recognized that, by being intentional about their teaching, they are creating trauma-informed instructional practices.

### **Reframing Teacher Behaviors**

Candidates acknowledged that trauma-informed classroom management requires that teachers reconsider their own experiences and how those might influence their behaviors. To reframe typical teacher behaviors, they posed alternative reactions based on trauma-informed practices.

If I notice that a student is acting out, I may try to redirect them...I'll sit down and talk to the student. This conference won't be disciplinary.

Rather, I'll ask the student if he/she needs something different from me, and how I can help him/her succeed.

Additionally, they reframed understandings of twenty-first century classroom confrontations and reframed how they intended to respond to such challenges.

...Not argue with the student by reassuring that I will return their cellphone at the end of the class period. Wolpow et al., (2016) explains "Students affected by trauma often compete with their teachers for power. This is because they believe that controlling their environment is the way to achieve safety" (p. 72). ...students who do not have control over many aspects in their lives...(may) try to hold-on to the very little power that they have. Power can include possession and/or use of a cellular device. I will also avoid sarcasm, yelling, and threats as I explain as to why I am taking away their possession temporarily.

The candidate reframed the initial response to the cell-phone confrontation by understanding why a student affected by trauma may respond as they do. Further, the candidate describes the intentionality behind the tone of their response.

Candidates learned about trauma-informed practices as they processed what one referred to as a myth, "Trying to be a trauma-informed teacher adds just one more thing for me to worry about." Instead, he replaced this myth with his perspective of a more accurate take, "Once you begin thinking and teaching with a trauma-informed view; you will find that it not only becomes habit, but also enhances your lessons, your student connections, and your classroom environment." Through reading, reflection, and engagement in action research with the explicit intent to change their teaching, candidates scaffolded their emerging perspectives. Understanding their development within each category (a) increasing awareness of trauma; (b) relationship building; (c) adding teacher moves; (d) reframing teacher behaviors; demonstrated the multifaceted and nature of that process as well as the salience of particular concepts.

### **Discussion and Implications**

By engaging together to design and implement empirical study of trauma-informed practices (Staples et. al, 2016), we learned how to better develop those practices throughout our EPP. Specifically, by utilizing stimulated recall, we learned over time and through continuing discussions connecting explicitly to other concepts.

#### **Implications for Teacher Candidates**

To prepare to create learning communities and engage in teaching practices that are trauma-informed, candidates can frame their work around several fundamental notions. They should know that not every student has the same experiences as them or other students, and to respect those differences. They should also be cognizant of the varied ways in which students may respond to the trauma that they have experienced (e.g., some students internalize or shut down while others externalize and act out). Candidates' self-reflection on their own experiences, biases, and assumptions are a great start to creating change in classrooms. As affirmed by one candidate, “When the course is over, those self-reflections are memorable.”

That said, candidates need to know that conversations about trauma-informed care may be sensitive at times. They must go into the classroom expecting to be challenged and to learn different behaviors and signs of trauma exposure. Additionally, self-care is a critical piece because candidates may themselves have experiences with trauma.

#### **Implications for Teacher Educators**

Given the importance of self-care for candidates, we emphasize important steps to that end. When introducing trauma-informed teaching, give candidates time to mentally prepare for the topic. Some candidates may be aware of the topic personally and need time. Provide tips on self-care in the beginning, during, and toward the end of trauma-informed teaching instruction. Activities outside of the classroom setting about trauma can make the class more in-depth.

Given the gaps in their own background knowledge about the histories and experiences of oppression, enhancing candidates' knowledge of various groups (e.g., Native Americans, African Americans, immigrants, refugees, LGBTQ+, etc.) can be helpful. Similarly, acknowledgement of rising wealth and income inequality and the subsequent increasing gap in power and standard of living reframe understandings of the experiences of those living in poverty. Though the literature is replete with examples of candidates pushing back against issues because of “ignorance and resistance” (Garrett & Segall, 2013, p. 1), helping them understand what one referred to as “personal bias and the power of group think” as attribution theory and confirmation bias enabled some to reconsider typical reactions and replace these with strengths-based approaches (Alvarez, 2017; Ginwright, 2018).

Additionally, as instructors, we continue to revisit the content and structure of the course based on action research and professional learning (e.g., Crosby, Howell, & Thomas, 2018; Thomas et al., 2019) as well as support from school counseling (e.g., Howell, Thomas, Sweeney, & Vanderhaar, 2019). While we resist prescriptive solutions, we have found that providing specific content that explicitly addresses the following three assumptions from SAMHSA mentioned previously (a) realization of the impact of trauma/understanding individuals can recover; (b) recognizing prevalence, impact, signs, and symptoms; and (c) avoiding re-traumatization (SAMHSA NCTIC, 2014). For the fourth assumption, responding with policies and practices that are trauma-sensitive, candidates read, discuss, and engage with resources (see Appendix A) while considering the elements of classroom management.

### **Limitations**

Constraints to this study included the small sample size of four candidates. This number of participant researchers resulted in a significantly smaller data set. Consequently, fewer participants meant that data was derived from a less diverse group, making program-wide improvement challenging. We also experienced limitations in setting up the PLC due to candidates' scheduling. To resolve, we used both face-to-face and online formats.

### **Conclusion**

Over the last two decades, research on trauma-informed systems of care, a system that includes schools, has expanded across methods and disciplines (Thomas, Crosby, & Vanderhaar 2019). However, research on trauma-informed teacher preparation is much less developed (Rossen, & Hull, 2013). For schools to move forward with implementation of trauma-informed practices and the creation of school climates that support students affected by trauma, EPPs must engage candidates in the work prior to program completion. Candidates who begin to understand trauma and its impact on students and learning prior to teaching have an opportunity to contribute to their schools' roles in trauma-informed systems of care, particularly as they gain experience and expertise.

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## Appendix A

### **Textbook**

Smith, D., Fisher, D., & Frey, N. (2015). *Better than Carrots or Sticks: Restorative Practices for Positive Classroom Management*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD

### **Supplemental Readings**

#### Trauma Informed Teaching

Cole, S., Greenwald O'Brien, J., & Gadd, M. G., Ristuccia, J., Wallace, D. L., & Gregory, M. (2005). *Helping traumatized children learn: Supportive school environments for children traumatized by family violence*. Boston, MA: Advocates for Children.

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Zacarian, D., Alvarez-Ortiz, L., & Haynes, J. (2017). *Teaching to strengths: Supporting students living with trauma, violence, and chronic stress*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.

#### Racial and Gender Equity

Pollock, M. (2017). *Schooltalk: Rethinking what we say about and to students every day*. New York, NY: The New Press.

#### School to Prison Pipeline

Chiariello, E. (2013). A Teacher's Guide to Rerouting the Pipeline. *Teaching Tolerance*, 52(43), 41-43.