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Brian Gibbs

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Kristin Papoi

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

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Threading the Needle: On Balancing Trauma and Critical Teaching

Brian Gibbs and Kristin Papoi

Introduction

“I used to teach a six-week unit on slavery,” a friend of mine, Ms. Jane,¹ told me. “It was the only unit during the entire year in which my students were visible,” she continued. “I didn’t realize,” she confessed, “that I did more damage with that unit than the racism they experienced in the real world.” Tears were streaming from her red eyes down her long cheeks. “I’ve only recently realized... I never taught resistance. In the absence of resistance... all they learned is that their ancestors were oppressed and destroyed.”

Ms. Jane was describing her teaching in a high school in South Central Los Angeles in the mid 1990s. All her students were Black, but the curriculum was decidedly Eurocentric. Feeling pressure to conform to a United States history curriculum that largely provided a narrative of American triumphalism (Epstein, 2009), she attempted to apply a critical lens by expanding a unit on slavery in the American South. The unit, as she told me, was in-depth and brutal. She wanted her students to know the truth in all its unvarnished horror. Ms. Jane felt it was her duty to help students come to understand some of the foundational elements of racial violence in the United States, and slavery was the vehicle for developing that knowledge.

Still a teacher and still teaching in a predominantly Black community, Ms. Jane continues to address the histories of racial violence and slavery, but now with a significant difference. She also strives to apply the lessons of the past to the racism that continues today. Rather than solely focusing on the horror of slavery, she also thoroughly teaches the resistance to it, what actions resisters took, and what more could have been done. “It is still difficult... it’s hard going, students wrestle with the content, get emotional. They need to know this information, they need to know about racism and violence, but they need examples of how to not take it, how to fight back. *It’s a difficult needle to thread* and I don’t know if I’m doing it.”

By threading the needle in this way, Ms. Jane’s goal is to enable students to know and understand the history of slavery, including the resistance to it, and to gain agency from those stories (Gillen, 2014) while simultaneously protecting her students from socio-emotional trauma or damage. Nonetheless, according to the trauma-informed framework adopted by her school, as translated by her principal, she is harming her students emotionally, and she is therefore encouraged to reformulate her instructional unit. Ms. Jane fears that in doing so, much would be lost, and that her students would continue to experience trauma without being able to name it, or that they would learn about slavery in greater detail later in life and be alone, without support, when they experience the resulting pain.

Driven by the question, “How can teachers thread the needle, balancing between critical teaching and trauma-informed teaching?,” this article explores the challenges and complexity of teaching difficult and often ugly histories dealing with issues of race, class, power, gender, sexuality, and resistance within a trauma-informed framework. The data from which the findings in this paper are based emerge from three qualitative studies about three seemingly divergent topics—teaching for social justice in unjust school spaces, teaching about war to the children of soldiers, and teaching about lynching in schools near historic lynching sites. The studies, conducted independently of one another by Gibbs, coalesced around the overarching theme, identified by both authors, that threading the needle of teaching hard histories is made more difficult by an overly generalized definition of trauma-informed teaching, shortsighted professional development on

1 Pseudonym

the topic, and too little direction on trauma-informed pedagogy.

Theoretical Framework

Critical pedagogy assumes that racism, classism, homophobia, and misogyny not only exist but are also part of the fabric of schools and classrooms (Anyon, 1981; Apple, 2014; Au, 2008; Blackburn, 2013; Delgado & Stefancic, 2000; Giroux, 1988). Critical pedagogy argues that it is the role of the classroom teacher not only to understand this but also to help students understand it, and perhaps most importantly, to help students learn how to resist and push against these societal phenomena. Freire (1970) argues that a critical stance begins with love; poet, scholar, and feminist Audre Lorde argues that self-love is a political act (Duncan-Andrade, 2007; Shor, 1992). Love is an important part of both teaching and learning—the love of self and the love of others. Educating children to look more critically at their community and their world promotes a love of others, and the resulting agency they uncover through understanding how their contributions matter to the world fosters a love of self. Simultaneously, we understand a trauma-informed framework to hinge on the idea of care. Thus, if we engage our students in ways that foster the love of others as they uncover ways to love themselves, critical pedagogy can be a useful lens through which to better understand how to teach critically within a trauma-informed framework.

Methodology

This article draws data from three qualitative case studies (Gibbs, 2018, 2019, 2019, 2020, forthcoming) (see Table 1), which engaged social studies teachers in semi-structured interviews (Merriam, 1998; Yin, 1989) and classroom observations. While in two of these studies—the teaching of war to the children of soldiers and the teaching of lynching at schools near historic lynching sites—students participated in focus-group interviews (Morgan, 2002) and wrote journal entries in response to specific prompts about their learning, the data from which this paper emerges draws mostly on the voices and perceptions of teachers as they engaged in the teaching of difficult histories. Findings from teacher data from all three studies were triangulated with reports that students in the war study made about the teaching they experienced, what if any changes they thought should be made to the instruction, and what they believed the importance of specific content and the role of the school in making the world a more just place to be (Miles & Huberman, 1994). For each study, field notes, a methodological journal, and analytical memos were created throughout the data-collection process. Data across the three studies were analyzed by both authors of this article through multiple rounds of coding, using elemental coding methods (Saldaña, 2013), including initial coding, in vivo coding, process coding, and values coding; these were helpful to the authors in “reviewing the corpus [to] build a foundation for future coding cycles” (Saldaña, 2013, p. 83). The themes discussed in this paper emerged from this process.

Table 1: Studies from which data for this article is drawn

Topic	Teacher Interviews	Classroom Observations	Student Focus Group
5-year examination of teaching for social justice in unjust school spaces	9 teachers interviewed twice each year for 5 years for between 90 and 120 minutes each	2 each year for each teacher	Not conducted

Topic	Teacher Interviews	Classroom Observations	Student Focus Group
1-year examination of how war is taught to the children of soldiers	9 teachers interviewed twice over one year for between 60 and 90 minutes each	5 teachers observed teaching war between 5 and 12 times over the course of one year	6 whole-class focus group interviews with 3 separate groups of students (each group of students interviewed twice)
An ongoing examination of how lynching is taught in schools near historic lynching sites	11 teachers interviewed twice for between 60 and 120 minutes	2 teachers observed, one for 3 days, the other for 5 days (the length of their instructional units on lynching)	2 whole class focus group interviews with two groups of students

Trauma-Informed Instructional Practice (TIIP)

Trauma-informed instructional practice (TIIP) is a broad and quite generalized term. Falling within the scope of TIIP are such diverse practices as restorative justice (Winn, 2018); developing classrooms as safe and empowering spaces (Carello & Butler, 2015); creating schools that are aware of the trauma students have faced and are responsive to student needs (Overstreet & Chafouleas, 2016); teachers and schools developing empathy for students and devoting attention to the need to develop resiliency and grit in students (Zakszeski, Bentresco, & Jaffe, 2017). Venet (2019) offers a concise description of trauma-informed teaching: know your students and know the support systems a school can provide. Much of the literature on trauma-informed pedagogy is important and, at the same time, so general as to not be actionable by practitioners. For example, a guide from Concordia University in Portland, Oregon, advises teachers to look beyond behavior, build relationships, create a safe environment, meet students where they are, and be predictable (The Room 241 Team, 2018), all of which is excellent advice, but also quite vague. A recent interdisciplinary review of the past two decades of research around school approaches to trauma-informed practices (Thomas, Crosby, & Vanderhaar, 2019) confirms that research on those practices has only more recently been taken up by educators. Thus the studies that do exist, grounded in other disciplines, often lack both the specificity needed by teachers and the perspective of student experiences. Several participants in the three studies featured in this article also note the dearth of research by educators for educators, stating that while the existing information on TIIP is useful in that it focuses on student trauma, it does not offer specific strategies for teaching difficult and messy history to students who have had traumatic experiences.

Looking more closely at Thomas, Crosby, and Vanderhaar's (2019) review of research about school-based approaches to trauma-informed practices does, however, provide some insight into trauma-related resources which educators may engage and consider while teaching difficult history. Specifically, those who teach children affected by trauma and/or who may experience secondary traumatic stress themselves can rely upon *building knowledge* on the nature and impacts of trauma; *shifting perspectives* to build emotionally healthy school cultures; and *engaging in self-care* (Thomas, Crosby, & Vanderhaar, 2019, pp. 426–428).

Critical Teaching and TIIP

Like many concepts, critical teaching has been known by other names, social justice teaching foremost among them (North, 2009; Sleeter, 2014; Swalwell, 2013). Sleeter (2014) provides four central tenets of

social justice teaching: situate families and communities in structural analysis; develop relationships with students, families, and communities; have high academic expectations; and teach an inclusive curriculum. We argue that critical teaching moves beyond this in two specific ways. First, critical teaching pushes back overtly or covertly against a standards-based, testing-focused curriculum that deprives students of a more robust learning experience. Second, critical teaching employs a discussion-oriented inquiry-based pedagogy that directly examines issues of race, class, power, gender, sex, and resistance and works at growing students' sense of critical agency (Gillen, 2014). Social justice teaching has been reduced too often in school sites to attention to equity and access rather than being practiced as an intentionally engaged pedagogy to develop and deliberately build the skills of dangerous citizenship (Ross & Vinson, 2010). Dangerous citizenship creates students who not only understand content through a critical lens but also learn how to advocate for themselves, their community, and others. This, we believe, is where critical teaching intersects with the resources for engaging TIIP—specifically, how critical social studies teachers *build knowledge* about messy histories, *shift perspectives* to consider the assets of students rather than trauma-based deficits, and encourage both students and themselves to *engage in self-care* when confronting trauma that emerges from a critical approach to teaching and learning about hard history (Thomas, Crosby, & Vanderhaar, 2019).

Quandaries and Contradictions of TIIP Roll Out

In all three studies, teachers reported myriad ways in which trauma-informed instructional practices were rolled out poorly in their schools. Almost universally, TIIP was presented to teachers in a one-day workshop as a narrow set of checklists to be used for planning and instruction, with some focus on the trauma and social-emotional damage that students endure in schools and classrooms and in the world in general. Universally, the teachers involved in all three studies felt that TIIP is needed, and they had a deep sense that their students were suffering. The teachers also indicated that at the end of the workshop, they were left feeling unsure about how to implement TIIP in any meaningful way. One teacher said that TIIP “is a bit like culturally relevant pedagogy in that it’s all inclusive. I mean, it’s how you relate to students, how you connect to them, how well you know them... but that’s what I do already ... so have I been doing TIIP and I just didn’t know it?” Ladson-Billings (1995) notes that the response when she initially made presentations on culturally relevant pedagogy was similar; she often received the critique that what she described was “just good teaching.” Her response was that it was just good teaching—and more. The more, however, seems to be the complicated part about TIIP that wasn’t being adequately presented to the teachers in these three studies.

For example, the TIIP professional development presentation at one school included excerpts of a TEDx Talk (TEDx GoldenGateED, 2011) in which scholar Jeff Duncan-Andrade argues that the children in East Oakland have seen as much violence and endured as much trauma as soldiers serving in Iraq and Afghanistan. The school where this professional development took place is in an urban area in Southern California and serves a mostly Latinx population. Though the school isn’t in East Oakland, the students similarly experienced violence, racism, and fear on a daily basis. The teachers we spoke with self-identified as critical educators, several of whom had developed a required 9th grade ethnic studies course (Acosta & Mir, 2012; Takaki, 2008; Tintiangco-Cubales et al., 2014) that engaged many of the elements of TIIP. The course connected directly to the history of the community in which the school is situated, worked at honoring the students’ ethnic and cultural heritage, and highlighted the greatness within the neighborhood, while also teaching students the skills and enactments of agency required to create change (Gillen, 2014).

After reviewing key elements of TIIP and showing excerpts of Duncan-Andrade’s TEDx Talk, district and school leaders explained that TIIP was the “new push” that year and would be taken into consideration in the teachers’ annual reviews and evaluations. Evidence of TIIP for that purpose would come from observations of instruction. The key elements of TIIP that the administration was looking for were that, as one teacher

related: “classroom is a supportive and nurturing environment”; “instruction is culturally relevant”; “instructor demonstrates understanding of students and their environment”; and “[classroom] shows evidence of a healing environment.”

Teachers were left with several quandaries as they wrestled through what they identified as contradictions. They worried aloud about the tensions between teaching more critically and practicing TIIP, which (as defined by their school) didn’t support critical teaching. One teacher said:

The question I asked myself after the professional development was, “Doesn’t the truth heal?” I mean, can’t it? I mean that’s the crux of my pedagogy and curriculum... the old biblical saying, right, “you shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free”? That’s what I thought TIIP was going in but now... I don’t know.

The belief that a thoughtful teacher with a strong connection to students, who knows who they are and where they are from, can lead them successfully through learning hard history (Costello, 2017) and help them come to deep understandings was in direct conflict with the TIIP framework that the school leadership expected teachers to engage.

In their analysis of this contradiction, several participants referenced a recent report by the Southern Poverty Law Center’s (SPLC) Teaching Tolerance division that indicates that students generally learn very little about slavery, and that what they do learn is narrow, incomplete, and often so general as to be meaningless (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2018). A strong thread throughout the report is that the truth about slavery, its connection to a White supremacist ideology, and its echoes in the epidemic of police violence against Black men, can lead to a deeper understanding of our present-day dilemmas and can aid in healing. This is, of course, if the teaching about slavery is done right—that is, using a TIIP framework. As the report by the SPLC points out, too often “simulations” that are poorly thought through, rather than well-facilitated discussions, examinations of documents, or historical investigation, are used in teaching about slavery (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2018).

Several teachers worried that the students would inevitably later discover the difficult truths about slavery, which could lead to bitterness and anger not only at the historical reality they would uncover but at the school system and their class that helped perpetuate a lie through omission. The teachers indicated that students currently experienced trauma, as defined in the professional development sessions, through physical abuse, the opioid epidemic, racism, misogyny, and homophobia in their neighborhood, home, or school. However, students did not experience the historical trauma of slavery. Thus, the key contradictions and quandaries that teachers surfaced were: *Can the historical truth be healing if taught correctly? Does helping students understand and unpack the ramifications of historical traumas constitute a trauma-informed pedagogical approach?* The answer that the teachers were getting to both questions was “no.” This meant that they needed to choose either to teach critically, presenting students with thoughtfully created instruction on difficult topics, or to avoid controversial topics (Hess, 2009) altogether.

This focus on TIIP coincided with a conservative turn in the ideology and politics of the United States with the election of Donald Trump in 2016. Several studies have indicated that in the run-up to the presidential election and since then, schools and classrooms became incredibly tense spaces where women, ethnic and racial minorities, and LGBTQIA students and faculty have been attacked and undermined (Costello, 2017; Rogers et al., 2017). As a result, Sondel, Baggett, and Dunn (2018) have advocated for a pedagogy of trauma to help support students as they make their way through these difficult times and have demonstrated how social justice teaching has decreased under the increasingly conservative national and local landscape. For the teachers in the three studies, the advent of TIIP, together with the country’s turn to the right—or at least

to a more aggressive conservatism—have conspired to create pressure against teaching critically. As one teacher explained:

I mean it's like threading a needle... there's so much to think about. There always was. I always thought about my students [and their trauma] and how to support them, I think all good teachers do. But now ... with trauma defined in particular ways... and since Trump, I mean it's just all complicated. Threading a needle, like I said, and sometimes I feel like I'm doing that in the dark and that's not good for kids.

The following sections take a closer look at what threading the needle looks like when teaching not just about American slavery, but about other traumas such as war and lynching, especially to descendants and peers of descendants of those who originally experienced those traumas.

Teaching War to the Children of Soldiers. Teachers who taught the children of soldiers about war consistently indicated that they feared traumatizing their students. As one teacher replied when I asked why he didn't teach war more critically, "Why would I do that? That's just dangerous. Aren't these students going through enough?" She was referring to the anxiety students felt over parents often rotating to frontline positions (the study took place near a special forces military base) and the possibility of them being injured or killed. Teachers who did teach war critically still worried about inflicting trauma, and as one teacher said, "pull[ed] their punches." He told me:

I had a whole lesson planned out, we were going to explore the Battle of Pointe du Hoc on D-Day, part of [a] larger thread of troubling the typical notion of sacrifice. But when the students came in that day, I got nervous. I sensed something in them, that they were troubled. So I taught the lesson from a 50,000-foot view. Same lesson, few details, they seemed largely disinterested. There were no discussions, no examination of hard and interesting questions. I found later nothing had happened. I worried something had happened to [a] parent that I hadn't heard about. A student told me it was just a case of 'the Mondays,' and here I was worried about trauma.

Teachers who taught war critically as well as those who didn't were surprised by what students said during the group interviews (Morgan, 2002). The teachers shared that the students didn't talk about war at home in any specific or meaningful way; as one student said, "the war is just like a cloud, not a black cloud exactly, but maybe a gray one, that just kind of hangs over our heads at home." Several students agreed with this assessment. They said they've learned not to ask questions and that their parents have learned to talk about deployments in very general and oblique ways. "I talked about my dad's last tour when he came home last time for a couple of hours, but he didn't say anything. I still don't know what happened or what he did or anything," a student shared. What was most provocative and important about students' commentary was that they almost universally agreed that they wanted to learn more about war. As one student said:

I don't want to be told what to think about it, but I want to know more. I'm kind of realizing this right now... so I'm kind of thinking out loud, but I've had history for three years now and I don't think I've ever thought about war or what it means, or when we should go, or why, or what a just war is, or how to fight it, or whether it's worth it... I like just learned it. I copied it down, I memorized it, I passed the test and I'm an A student. But there's so much about war that I just haven't thought about and I realize I want to.

The one caveat students had regarding learning about war was that they also wanted their parents presented in, as one student put it, "a good light." He continued, "If your parents, served just know they did their job. They were ordered to do something ugly and they did it. No one should be able to see what they have to do."

This student raised a challenging contradiction and a needle needed to be threaded by teachers. He was an advocate for more critical teaching, but at the same time he also wanted to ensure that his and other students' parents "came off" as another student said, "looking good." Accomplishing both is quite complicated, but necessary. Interestingly, though the school that these children attended advocated TIIP instruction, it didn't have a forward-leaning support system for students whose family members deploy overseas. As the principal explained, "We wait for them and follow the student." The principal, who is married to a soldier and who has taught on or near 11 military bases over her 38-year career, continued, "If we go to them, we could trigger something... we don't want to cause harm... we want to support them when they are harmed." So until a crisis arises, the trauma-informed work is done in classrooms through pedagogical and relational choices between students and teachers, rather than as a whole-school effort.

Teaching Lynching in Schools Near Historic Lynching Sites. Teachers in schools near historic lynching sites either avoided teaching lynching at all, taught it as minimally as possible, or taught it completely without shying away from the violence of the history. Those who avoided it did so for several reasons that might be best summed up by one teacher's comment:

[Lynching is] the third rail... I mean it's everything we're not supposed to teach, sex, unfounded accusations of rape, extrajudicial violence, police complicity, public murder and then often a public celebration. How can students get their heads around that? I can't even. And then the photographs... they just demonstrate the absolute depravity and horror.

This teacher, like many, taught lynching, as he said, "softly"—that is, just so students knew what it was—because he was convinced that teaching an in-depth, more truthful history of lynching could cause trauma.

The study focused on lynching examined the teaching practices in mostly rural Southern communities within 20 miles of a historic lynching site. The fear of causing trauma was particularly acute in schools that were racially mixed. Teachers indicated that teaching lynching "would just make it worse," in the words of one, referring to the inherent racial tension that existed in the school and the community. Teachers who avoided teaching lynching said that TIIP as defined at their schools meant developing a supportive, nurturing environment and empathy. Many teachers indicated that teaching lynching in depth would take their classroom to the brink of irreversible division. As one teacher said, "I fear we would never recover from that conversation." The teacher felt strongly that irreparable damage would be done to the classroom community, which would be so frayed that his White students and Black students wouldn't be able to remain connected. These teachers believed that silence about some topics was necessary. As one said, "We teach about race and class and gender, but we have to have limits."

Those who taught lynching in depth, on the other hand, did so thoroughly and, in most cases, with no holds barred. Graphic photographs of lynching were used to "demonstrate the horror of the racial violence at that time," one teacher said. He continued:

Look, kids today are strapped to their phones and see violent images all the time. The violence they see is completely unfiltered. I have to use everything at my disposal to get their attention, keep their attention and make them understand... they're so desensitized to violence. So, do I have to use the lynching photographs? Yeah, I have to use everything that I have.

Teachers who taught lynching in all its horror and anguish supported their approach with arguments similar to those from critical race theory (CRT) (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000; Taylor, Gilborn, & Ladson-Billings, 2009) and culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP) (Paris & Alim, 2017). As CRT does, the teachers argued that racism exists and is common throughout the history of the United States, but that if it is taught truthfully and

well (that is, in accordance with CSP), it can lead to a type of healing through empathy and understanding. The teachers who taught lynching this way worked in schools using TIIP and felt that teaching hard history thoughtfully (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2018), though it may be painful, was consistent with a trauma-informed pedagogy. However, they all acknowledged that in most cases, they were teaching at the edges of their school's definition of TIIP, if not outside those bounds.

At all the schools featured in this essay, the definition of TIIP was reductive and too general, and did not fully engage the affordances of trauma-related resources—building knowledge, shifting perspectives, and self-care (Thomas, Crosby, & Vanderhaar, 2019). TIIP, as it was defined for these teachers in these contexts, supported the choice of avoiding difficult topics; it offered no guidance on how to both teach critically and engage in trauma-informed practice. Perhaps more problematically, not being provided any professional development on pedagogy nor any definitional guidance signaled to these teachers that they were outside the norm of their school. They assumed, possibly correctly, that they would be punished if they were caught teaching lynching critically; they therefore did so surreptitiously and didn't reach out to colleagues or community members for support and guidance. Teaching critically is always difficult, but doing so alone and covertly can be costly for students and teachers. It can go wrong and in myriad ways. A student could be triggered by discussions of race, abuse, poverty, gender, or homophobia in ways they themselves wouldn't have anticipated. A teacher may be unprepared to manage the emotional response they receive from students and the teacher is unable to support them. A class discussion on a difficult topic could be interpreted by students as an invitation to air racist, homophobic, or misogynistic views that could inflict harm on other students. Teaching critically and through a trauma informed pedagogy is a difficult task.

Discussion and Recommendations

Threading the needle between TIIP and critical teaching (Duncan-Andrade, 2007) is difficult. This is particularly true when school systems and individual schools offer a generalized definition of TIIP, limited professional development, and few trauma-related resources—particularly resources for building knowledge, shifting perspectives, and engaging in self-care when working with students with trauma (Thomas, Crosby, & Vanderhaar, 2019). The teachers who participated in our studies, while excited that their schools were turning an eye toward supporting their students through TIIP, felt largely adrift and unsupported in their efforts to engage in trauma-informed critical teaching of difficult history. Teachers reported that their schools' choices regarding TIIP signaled that engaging in TIIP meant not teaching critically. For several teachers, that was unfathomable. They felt that a crucial part of their job was to guide students through painful content, particularly content that their students were personally connected to. The way TIIP was presented to them, or at least as they interpreted it, left these teachers few options for enacting it within their classrooms with a critical lens.

In response to the tension described above, we offer several recommendations for teachers and schools who teach difficult history using a critical pedagogical approach and TIIP. We frame these suggestions according to the trauma-related resources of building knowledge, shifting perspectives, and engaging in self-care (Thomas, Crosby, & Vanderhaar, 2019). Furthermore, we call for more focused research by educational researchers on these practices. Our recommendations are to:

1. Offer more robust professional development around TIIP (Building Knowledge)

The teachers in all three studies indicated that they were in favor of trauma-informed schools, particularly with regard to pedagogy. They generally disagreed about what that meant. They received less than a day of professional development which, as described by the teachers, offered general

guidelines for what constitutes a trauma-informed school and what resources were available, but little about pedagogy and teaching.

2. Contextualize TIIP within lived experiences in the classroom, school, and community to best address students' reactions to hard history (Shifting Perspectives)

We argue that what happens in classrooms is the most important aspect of schools and accordingly contend that much time must be devoted to explaining what trauma-informed instructional practices are, what they look like, and what they are not. We would recommend a series of professional development sessions on how to do TIIP well, with continuing facilitated discussions in departments or grade levels. This could lead to organic agreements about what teaching critically with a trauma-informed lens looks like.

3. Be explicit and provide examples about how teaching critically works with TIIP (Building Knowledge)

This could be part of what we describe in our second recommendation, but we argue that it needs its own emphasis in professional development. Some, perhaps many, teachers may be unfamiliar with teaching with a critical lens, so more time may be needed for them to familiarize themselves with this concept and then work at connecting it to TIIP. At least part of this time should be used to surface and discuss specific issues that might be considered controversial within the specific context of the school (i.e., teaching war to the children of soldiers and teaching lynching in schools near historic lynching sites). This will give teachers a clear signal about what can be taught, and how.

4. Take the long view when threading the needle (Self-Care)

We recommend that TIIP become an embedded part of professional development for an entire year, if not longer. Teachers need to be able to take time to get used to this difficult work, fully understand the impact it has on their students and themselves as teachers, have practice implementing it and reflecting upon the practice, and be observed and receive feedback from administration and colleagues. This embedded professional development means that TIIP will be a topic that is returned to again and again in deeper and more complex and reflexive ways.

We are living in an ever more violent and complicated world. Children are seeing and experiencing violence at an unprecedented rate as television, social media, and other outlets bring the world to them, even if they themselves are not experiencing trauma. The school is the first line of defense—and in too many cases, the only line of defense—against this barrage. We must create trauma-informed schools and trauma-informed instructional practices. We must, however, make certain that trauma-informed instruction does not mean avoiding, simplifying, or simply not teaching difficult content with a critical lens. Trauma-informed instructional practices ought to provide guidance about how to teach critically while doing no harm to students or their community. However, history must be taught honestly, or the trauma from the past will continue to haunt students as they move into their future. Teachers need to continue to seek out ways to better thread the needle between critical teaching and trauma-informed instructional practice.

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About the Authors



Brian Gibbs taught social studies in East Los Angeles, California for 16 years. He is currently a faculty member in the Department of Education at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He studies the limits and possibilities of critical pedagogy in complex social contexts and its implications for teacher education.



Kristin Papoi is a faculty member in the School of Education and program director of the Master of Arts in Teaching Program at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Her research on teacher education and the impact of arts-based teaching methods on second language acquisition is grounded in her work as a grade 3-5 teacher in Southeast Los Angeles, California.