

National Youth-At-Risk Journal

Volume 4 | Issue 1

Article 7

August 2020

Educated: A Memoir and the Impact on Teacher Preparation Programs

Beth Lilly Gregory

Graceland University - Lamoni

Jen Botello

Missouri Western State University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/nyar>

Recommended Citation

Gregory, B. L., & Botello, J. (2020). Educated: A Memoir and the Impact on Teacher Preparation Programs. *National Youth-At-Risk Journal*, 4(1). <https://doi.org/10.20429/nyarj.2020.040107>

This book review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Digital Commons@Georgia Southern. It has been accepted for inclusion in National Youth-At-Risk Journal by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons@Georgia Southern. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@georgiasouthern.edu.

Educated: A Memoir and the Impact on Teacher Preparation Programs

Keywords

trauma, teacher education, book review

“Educated: A Memoir and the Impact on Teacher Preparation Programs”

The National Center for Children in Poverty (2019) identified that 21% of all children in the United States live in families below the poverty threshold and more than two thirds of children reported experiencing at least one traumatic event before the age of 16 (Walsh, 2015). Are teachers trained to work with students who have endured trauma and live in poverty? How are we training them effectively in teacher preparation programs? This book review will summarize the book *Educated: A Memoir* in three themes and then gives further recommendations for teacher education preparation programs to prepare teachers for the children in today’s classrooms.

Tara Westover, author of *Educated: A Memoir*, understands the struggles of at-risk youth, more than the majority of adults in their early-30s. She spent her entire childhood living in her parent’s home, which was filled with violence, trauma, abuse, and neglect. Consequently, she spent her teenage years and adulthood trying to understand her past, receive a quality education, and learn how to address her complicated life as a child with no formal education; raised working in an Idaho junkyard; and a college scholar attending some of the best universities in the world. She wrote the book *Educated: A Memoir* about her experiences as a child and her resiliency to overcome her past.

This review explores the struggles of a child who was at-risk and the lessons learned by the author of the memoir and the general audience. It is imperative for teachers, social workers, and other youth interventionists to note that Tara is not alone. Many children and adolescents live a life of trauma, violence, or neglect, similar to Tara, and are too afraid to seek assistance or are waiting for an adult to identify the characteristics of an at-risk child and reach out to help them. This book serves as a reminder to those working with youth, to be aware and vigilant. The book also addresses those who have lived a life similar to Tara’s and shows that overcoming one’s past is possible, however, not without the possibility of obstacles and heartache.

Using memoirs, like *Educated*, in teacher preparation programs can be a powerful learning experience for future educators. When teacher preparation programs encourage pre-service teachers to read about experiences others have encountered, it allows the future educators to potentially learn about the vast backgrounds and expansive diversity of their future students.

Three major themes emerged from *Educated: A Memoir*: trauma, trust and education. The three themes interweave, and at times, it is even difficult to discriminate between themes. Each of the themes impacts and influences the other.

THEME 1: TRAUMA

Tara experienced extreme trauma, violence, and neglect in her childhood home. She grew up in a large family with six siblings at the base of Buck's Peak in southeastern Idaho. She grew up in a survivalist family who were also Doomsday Preppers, always preparing for the end of the world. Tara's father owned and operated a junkyard and was a scrapper; her mother was an herbalist and midwife serving the local community.

Tara's father placed her in dangerous situations working in the family's junkyard; however, he also controlled her thoughts about government entities, schools, clothing, and much more. Massive injuries including burns and gashes, along with horrific vehicle accidents occurred during the years due to neglect and carelessness, usually on the father's behalf. Instead of using modern medical facilities and medications, the injuries were treated with oils created by Tara's mother and special tinctures.

As the book continued, one of Tara's older brothers, Shawn, took the spotlight, becoming physically and emotionally violent against Tara and other family members and acquaintances. Tara became quite frightened of Shawn and his actions when he would snap in fits of anger and target her. She even installed a heavy-duty steel lock on her door to protect herself from him at home. At one point, while Tara was overseas and talking to Shawn on the phone, after a previous conflict, this powerful exchange happens:

"I can't decide," he said. He paused, and I thought perhaps the connection had failed. "Whether I should kill you, myself, or hire an assassin." There was a static-filled silence. "It might be cheaper to hire someone, when you figure in the cost of the flight." (Westover, 2018, p. 291).

Violence and the trauma associated with it became a central theme of the book and happened in a vicious circle. According to the World Health Organization, "Youth violence has a serious, often lifelong, impact on a person's psychological and social functioning" (2014, para. 1). This was evident in the book as Tara struggled to free herself from her family and continued to return to the familiarity that included her home life, which was filled with abuse.

Childhood trauma is becoming more common. "Exposure to traumatic experiences in childhood is more frequent than uncommon and can have a significant impact on the development and social-emotional health of children and adolescents" (Diamanduros, Tysinger, & Tysinger, 2018, p. 1). Tara is not alone. Twenty-six percent of children will have experienced or witnessed trauma before the age of four (Briggs-Gowan, Ford, Fraleigh, McCarthy, & Carter, 2010).

Teachers and other youth interventionists need to find techniques to help promote resiliency in children dealing with violence, and help children persevere through difficult situations.

Children who have been subjected repeatedly to trauma suffer from other social, psychological, cognitive, and biological issues, including difficulty regulating their emotions, paying attention, and forming good relationships—all of which make it very difficult for a child to succeed. (Dorado & Zakrzewski, 2013, para. 3)

In recent years, trauma has started to become a focus for educators. Thus, more content about trauma is being added into teacher preparation programs. Now, pre-service teachers have the opportunity to learn about trauma before encountering it as a first-year teacher. Using memoirs such as *Educated* allow future teachers to see the impact that trauma can have on a student's life and their schooling.

THEME 2: TRUST

Tara grew up in an environment where trust was a concern. Her father was paranoid and did not trust the federal government, hospitals, medications, and schools. He was a devout Mormon and his trust only aligned with the Bible, Book of Mormon, and the speeches of Joseph Smith and Brigham Young. His paranoia impacted the Westover children who grew up differently from many others.

Luke was born, at home, delivered by a midwife. Dad decided not to file for a birth certificate, a decision he repeated with Audrey, Richard and me. A few years later, around the time he turned thirty, Dad pulled my brothers out of school. I don't remember it, because it was before I was born, but I wonder if perhaps that was a turning point. In the four years that followed, Dad got rid of the telephone and chose not to renew his license to drive. He stopped registering and insuring the family car. Then he began to hoard food. (Westover, 2018, p. 29)

Tara eventually received a delayed birth certificate, at the age of 9, after a debacle trying to determine her real birthday. Consequently, because of her father's lack of trust, Tara struggled to trust others. She hid her childhood life from friends and the men she dated. She did not tell others, including roommates and professors, that she lacked a formal education. She held everything inside. Researchers support Tara's actions.

When a child experiences a trauma that teaches him that he cannot trust or rely on that caregiver, however, he's likely to believe that the world around him is a scary place and all adults are dangerous—and that makes it incredibly difficult to form relationships throughout their childhood, including with peers their own age, and into the adult years. (Morin, 2019, para. 23)

Preservice teachers need to realize that trust is an important part of being a teacher. A student needs to be able to trust their teacher, as a teacher may be the only individual that they can trust in their life. A trusting relationship allows students to engage in assignments and projects that may otherwise be difficult for the student. Additionally, a positive relationship

that involves trust allows teachers to model good relationship skills which are beneficial for students to learn.

THEME 3: EDUCATION

Education is a central theme of the memoir. Tara did not receive a formal education until she turned 17 and enrolled herself at Brigham Young University. Prior to this time, she was not enrolled in a public school, nor did she receive schooling at home. Occasionally, her mother would have the children find books and they would “do school” (Westover, 2018, p. 46), however, those occasions were rare. Tara spent her days in the family’s junkyard working and playing on the mountain near their home.

Grandma though we should be in school and not, as she put it “roaming the mountain like savages.” Dad said public school was a ploy by the Government to lead children away from God. “I may as well surrender my kids to the devil himself,” he said, “as send them down the road to that school” (Westover, 2018, p. 5).

Enrolling in college brought challenges as Tara struggled to understand roommates, exams, studying, and professors. Through all of her challenges, she became an accomplished scholar, receiving her B.A. from Brigham Young University, an M.Phil. from Trinity College, Cambridge, was a visiting fellow at Harvard University, and was awarded a PhD from Cambridge.

Along with the book title, the last chapter of her book is entitled “Educated.” Tara believes the decisions she made changed herself into a new person. Her last sentence credits the reason for the change, “I call it an education” (Westover, 2018, p. 329).

Tara’s journey is similar to that of inspirational speaker Liz Murray and the movie *Homeless to Harvard*. Liz is noted for being accepted to Harvard despite being homeless. Liz said, “Instead, what I was beginning to understand was that however things unfolded from here on, whatever the next chapter was, my life could never be the sum of one circumstance” (Murphy, 2011, p. 321).

Pre-service teachers need to understand that education can change a student’s trajectory in life. Education is often referred to as an equalizer, allowing a pathway to open the doors for jobs, resources, and skills. Education is a life-changer to many students.

IMPACT ON TEACHER EDUCATION:

Teachers and other youth interventionists need to understand poverty, trauma, and their monumental impact on students. Teachers “require an understanding of how trauma affects their students, and a skillset that allows them to support and respond effectively to these students” (Hobbs et al, 2019). Usually, teachers and other educator specialists have good intentions working with youth raised in poverty and who have undergone trauma, but often fail to meet the needs of students (Milner & Laughter, 2014). This failure could be contributed to

the fact, “multiple studies have found that teachers feel that they have not received sufficient training, and subsequently feel inadequately equipped to meet the needs of trauma-affected students in their classrooms” (Hobbs et al, 2019).

For teachers to be adequately prepared it begins with preparing pre-service teachers to work with children from a variety of backgrounds. These preparations begin in college classes prior to being placed in classroom with youth. According to Sato & Lesmire (2009), “Preparing teachers to support students who live in poverty begins by helping teachers understand how their own values and experiences might differ from their students” (p.365). Pre-service teachers need to view the world through a different lens. Future teachers will experience students who are very dissimilar to themselves, but also students who are similar. As pre-service teachers they should look through a lens that mirrors their life and also look through a lens that is dissimilar to their life. Bishop (1990) coined the phrases “mirror” and “window.” Mirrors are looking at a life similar to your own, while windows are looking into a life dissimilar to your own.

A variety of projects can help pre-service teachers become more aware of lives that are unlike their own. Poverty simulations, literature circles using memoirs of authors from a variety of backgrounds (such as *Educated: A Memoir*), and educational documentaries are a few ways for future teachers to gain experience and knowledge. These projects can help students understand what they may encounter as they enter the classroom as a first-year teacher while they are still in the college setting.

Although teacher preparation programs may never be able to fully prepare pre-service teachers for working with the wide variety of situations they will encounter during their career, it is hopeful that teacher education programs can continue to adjust their curriculum to meet the ever-changing needs to be a classroom teacher. Educational preparation programs need to re-examine their programs and practices to meet the needs of the changing society. Continuing to train teachers to understand students who have experienced trauma in their classrooms and give them tools to work with these students is important (Hobbs et al, 2019, Clark & Newberry, 2018).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, many young people grow up in poverty or face trauma. Teachers and other youth interventionists need to be prepared to work with youth facing a wide variety of traumatic situations.

Educated: A Memoir, is an emotive story of a young girl who had a difficult childhood; however, she used education to help face and address her difficult past. The author overcame her background to become an accomplished college graduate.

Tara’s story is repeated throughout history and persists today. Many young people grow up in homes where they experience challenges. This memoir can be used in a variety of ways to

help pre-service teachers and youth interventionists recognize the circumstances facing some of today's youth.

REFERENCES

- Bishop, R.S. (1990). Mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors. *Perspectives: Choosing and using books for the classroom*, 6(3). <https://scenicregional.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Mirrors-Windows-and-Sliding-Glass-Doors.pdf>
- Briggs-Gowan, M. J., Ford, J. D., Fraleigh, L., McCarthy, K., & Carter, A. S. (2010). Prevalence of exposure to potentially traumatic events in a healthy birth cohort of very young children in the northeastern United States. *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 23, 725–733. <http://doi:10.1002/jts.20593>
- Clark, S., & Newberry, M. (2018). Are we building preservice teacher self-efficacy? A large scale study examining teacher education experiences. *Asia Pacific Journal of Teacher Education*, 47(1), 32-47.
- Diamanduros, T. D., Tysinger, P. D., & Tysinger, J. C (2018). Trauma and its impact on children. *Communique*, 46(6), 1, 24–25. Available from ERIC database. (EJ1172551)
- Dorado, J., & Zakrzewski, V. (2013, October 23). How to help a traumatized child in the classroom: Exposure to chronic trauma is having tragic effects on some of our students. How can educators help? *Greater Good Magazine*. Retrieved from https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/the_silent_epidemic_in_our_classrooms
- Hobbs, C., Paulsen, D., & Thomas, J. (2019). Trauma-informed practice for pre-service teachers. *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Education*. doi:10.1093/acrefore/9780190264093.013.1435.
- Milner, H.R. & Laughter, J.C. (2014). But good intentions are not enough: Preparing teachers to center race and poverty. *The Urban Review*, 47(2), 341-363. Doi: 10.1007/s11256-014-0285-4.
- Morin, A. (2019, March 17). *The effects of childhood trauma*. Retrieved from <https://www.verywellmind.com/what-are-the-effects-of-childhood-trauma-4147640>
- Murphy, L. (2011). *Breaking night: A memoir of forgiveness, survival, and my journey from homelessness to Harvard*. New York, NY: Hachette Books.
- National Center for Children in Poverty: Child Poverty (2019). Retrieved from <http://nccp.org/topics/childpoverty.html>.
- Sato, M. & Lensmire, T.J. (2009). Poverty and Payne supporting teachers to work with children of poverty. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 90(5), 365-370. Doi: 10.1177/003172170909000512.
- Walsh, L. (2015). Understanding child trauma: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. Retrieved from <https://www.samhsa.gov/child-trauma/understanding-child-trauma>
- Westover, T. (2018). *Educated: A memoir*. New York, NY: Penguin Random House.

World Health Organization. (2016, September 30). *Youth violence*. Retrieved from <https://www.who.int/en/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/youth-violence>