Responding with Care to Students Facing Trauma

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Many K–12 students are experiencing ongoing life stresses. Recognizing this can help educators respond effectively to their needs.

Those of us in caregiving fields have long recognized that trauma is toxic to students' brains and spirits as well as their bodies. Most researchers now view trauma as resulting not only from catastrophic events, but also from ongoing stressors like divorce or mental illness within the family. Research by Felitti and his colleagues in the late 1990s1 explored how 10 "adverse childhood experiences" (ACEs) affected people's health as adults and found that almost 25 percent of their original sample experienced two or more adverse experiences as children (Felitti et al., 1998).

Looking at Felitti and colleagues' list of adverse events (which includes experiences like a parent going to jail, the death of a loved one, or substance misuse in the home), teachers will likely realize how prevalent traumatic experiences are among today's students. The ACEs study has been replicated over time and has since included looking at the impact of ACEs on children.2 As education professionals, we can no longer ignore this issue and its impact on student learning.

Recognizing the trauma woven into some students' lives is part of educating for the whole child.3 Caring educators know that understanding and responding to what's causing distress at home is part of keeping each young person healthy, safe, engaged, supported, and challenged (ASCD's Whole Child tenets).

Yet, as I've discovered in my work consulting with schools on the impact of trauma on student learning, for many teachers, being sensitive to students affected by stress remains a huge challenge. We get mired down in the wreckage of the behavior a child is showing—or the bullet point we're trying to cover in the instruction plan. We quickly lose sight of who we're working with and what we're ultimately trying to achieve.

How can we maintain a thriving learning environment and respond to students who are experiencing ongoing trauma or short-term distress in ways that recognize their emotional needs?

Stepping Back and Standing Together
A mentor of mine always encouraged me to look from the 10,000-foot view. He meant it's easy to get sucked into details that are disconnected from our ultimate goal. We might, for instance, take the behaviors of others personally (especially when we're attempting to help) or get bogged down by the minutia and challenges of the situation. Such tendencies are certainly true when we're responding to students who we know are facing trauma, but who right now are sowing chaos. We need to keep the ultimate goal in mind and make sure everyone involved understands and agrees with that goal.

Take a moment right now to reflect on a difficult situation you're currently experiencing with a student. Step back from the mess and ask yourself, "What am I ultimately trying to achieve with this person or situation? What outcome am I hoping for?" Next, ask yourself, "Is what I'm hoping to achieve realistic? Is this person aware of the goal I have and does he or she want the same outcome?" Ask yourself whether this student understands your goal and trusts that you have their best interests at heart. Connecting to these broader questions might help you find a less oppositional way to talk with this student. It will likely renew your commitment and patience. It will certainly remind you about the bigger picture and encourage you to not get lost in the issue of the moment.

Mutual support is also important. Many of us feel overwhelmed by the expectations put upon us and discouraged in helping students who face dire life situations. We know many of our students and their families would benefit from additional support, yet there aren't enough resources to meet their legitimate needs. We can get caught up in bemoaning this lack of resources and the fact that we don't know what else to "do" with a hurting student. This can lead us to feeling hopeless. It can make us wish there were an island where we could send those students and families we find most difficult to work with.

I'm here to tell you that there is no island, but that educators and others involved with our "tough nuggets" can find ways to come together and collectively address the challenges. We need to support one another in creating and sustaining a positive mindset, a belief that our students can achieve success regardless of what they're experiencing in and out of school. And we need to equip ourselves with the skillset necessary to understand what's happening in front of us when a student's behavior becomes an obstacle to learning and he or she doesn't respond to our usual strategies.

When a student is operating from a state of stress, he or she is unable to access higher functioning aspects of the brain that allow people to think and reason. When students are stressed, they are dysregulated and operating from the survival part of the brain, also known as flight, fight, or freeze. When a student is dysregulated, he or she is not learning-ready, and our jobs as educators are affected.
Six Ways to Reach Your Students

Besides keeping your ultimate goal in mind and getting support, try these approaches to reach students facing or recovering from trauma.

*Identify what need a behavior is expressing.* We all express our needs in ways that were taught or modeled for us. If the choices a person is making to express their needs are ineffective, it's up to us to partner with them to find alternative ways of communicating what they want. Remember to focus on what a student is really asking for versus how he or she is asking.

I was once asked to observe a student who was struggling with behavior issues. It became evident that any time there was a transition, this student would act out. He would climb on chairs or attempt to engage classmates in "naughty" behavior. The teacher was frustrated and discouraged; she felt like there was nothing she could do to get him to do what was expected.

I wondered if transitions triggered this child's need for predictability and control. When he didn't know what was happening next, he would resort to his own devices in attempts to gain control and predictability—even if that meant receiving a consequence for his misbehavior. The teacher and I brainstormed how she could set up each transition to a new activity in a way that met his need for predictability. She opted to engage him before each transition; she gave him a task to do during each transition time, such as passing out papers or taking a message to the office, so he had both a sense of knowing what to expect and something to keep himself focused. Ultimately, this worked.

We must also pay attention to our own needs in such situations. Identify and seek out what you need to keep going and feel successful when you're struggling, whether it's staff and leadership support, opportunities for breaks, or teammates who will provide a "buddy room" to use for tough nuggets on occasion.

*See the worth in each student and build from his or her strengths.* When we give ourselves permission to identify a strength, we invite hope. Teachers might try an activity I often use during trainings. Take a moment to think about your current "tough nugget." What do you know about him or her? What are his or her strengths, skills, hobbies, interests, goals, and successes? What does she or he need? Who is this student's champion? If you don't know the answers to these questions, here is your chance to learn. List these things on a notecard and in tough moments where you find yourself moving away from your own regulation, look at the list. Use this list when designing interventions and support plans for your student. It will provide inspiration and opportunities for connection.
Remember, kids can't learn if they don't feel safe. We all need to feel safe and supported in our environment. If we aren't regulated, we aren't learning—and if we don't feel safe, we aren't regulating. We can do a few simple things to help students who've experienced trauma feel safe in their classrooms. One is to greet our students every day (and staff and families when we have a chance) with a personal welcome and a smile. Pete Hall, co-author of our book *Fostering Resilient Learners*, likes to call it hugs, high fives, and handshakes. The power of connection helps foster a sense of safety.

I consulted in a school where there was no whole-school welcoming or exiting ritual in place. Each staff member started and ended the day as she or he pleased. Most teachers expected their students to enter the classroom quietly each morning, turn in the homework, go to their desks, and get started on their entry tasks. The end of the day was similar. Teachers often hurried most students out the door as they tried to quickly help those kids who were having difficulty with the work.

During a whole-staff meeting, we talked about the idea of welcoming and exiting and what it could look like if everyone greeted and sent students home with a smile, hug, high five, or handshake. Staff members—who were invested in changing the school culture from a lethargic, negative culture to a positive, safe, and inviting one—agreed to commit to a whole-school welcome and exit each day. They created a morning ritual in which every staff member greeted every student in their classroom with a welcoming smile and gave the student an opportunity to let the adult know how things were going. They created a mantra that every class would chant at the start of every morning and set a daily goal for each class to strive for.

At the day's end, each class engaged in a goodbye ritual that involved a review of the daily goal and a wish for the evening. These predictable, safe, and friendly routines provided students with the support they needed to start the day strong. This enhanced the school's unity and provided the sense of predictability that students need to help them with regulation and learning capability. Within two weeks, there was a drastic change in the school environment. Staff and students were smiling more, and parents were more engaged.

Work from a team perspective. Maintain the attitude that "These are our students, not his, her, or my students." When I work in schools and districts I always use the term team. Education can feel lonely and isolating, feelings that aren't helpful in trying to connect to and teach kids who are troubled. It's so much easier—for staff members and students—to come to work when you have a supportive team waiting for you.

I once consulted with a team of elementary teachers who'd been assigned a class of students that was notorious for being difficult. The team decided their goal for the year was to "make every
They came up with a grade-level theme and agreed to go to one another for support whenever necessary. They set up a system for engaging with caregivers positively through communications home; found ways to positively recognize students; and even identified a need in their community and worked to build empathy among students and find ways to support that need. These teachers set up check-ins for their tough nugget students, arranged for older students to mentor some of their kids, and used one another for "buddy room" support whenever a student needed to "reset." Not only did this prevent burnout among these individuals, but it also promoted a sense of teamwork that the building grew from.

Consider whether a basic need isn't being met. Sometimes kids are acting out not because of the effects of trauma, but from a more immediate need. Before you move to intervention, "HALT," and ask yourself whether this child might need something relatively simple and easily provided. People can't learn or focus if they're hungry, anxious, lonely, or tired. When we slow down and look at the bigger picture, we might discover that a student just needs a snack, a break, or a hug and relational reassurance.

In one school, the principal noticed a spike in office referrals around 10 a.m. She implemented a morning snack program, and those referrals stopped. Kids, especially those who struggle with self-regulation, burn through calories very fast. They often need fuel to remain focused and sustained. And if we give them the opportunity to ask in a safe way, students will tell us what they need.

Give students grace. We all need a little grace. Sometimes the need to be right or to prove that a wrong occurred is less important—and effective—than extending grace. By grace I mean forgiveness, a second chance, or a "free pass," quite possibly unwarranted.

Sometimes adults believe that giving grace means allowing misbehavior and letting a student avoid accountability. But I've seen countless times when a teacher's need to hold a student accountable proved more harmful than forgiveness would have been. We don't always know what our students and their families are experiencing. There are times when plates are full and patience and careful thought are hard to access. By giving grace, we acknowledge that life is messy, that there are situations when it's OK to "let this one go." When you find yourself in a situation that involves a strained relationship or a power struggle with a student over an infraction, ask yourself, would this be a good opportunity for grace? Will giving a "free pass" get me farther in the long run?

Remembering the Big Picture
I truly believe we all want what's best for our students, including the most vulnerable. Yet we can all get lost in the mess of the day. We find ourselves caught up in the turbulent behavior of the moment, or distracted by worries about the dreaded call we must later make to a family. It can be very hard to focus on responding caringly to a hurting student.

When we feel tired and discouraged, it’s important to step back from a situation and remember the bigger picture. What got you into education? Why do you stay? What do you truly want for all your students, and how best can you achieve that? Remember, every student deserves to learn, and you’re the key to that opportunity. You set the tone for how each day will go. You model for students and families how best to achieve their goals. Your courage and strength matter.