Role-Clarity and Boundaries for Trauma-Informed Teachers

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What is a teacher's role in the life of a student? While a seemingly straightforward question, we may each answer this differently based on our values and our experiences. The question becomes more complex when we also consider the current trauma-informed education movement. Should a teacher focus on content, or on social-emotional learning, or both? Does trauma-informed education mean that teachers become counselors?

As trauma-informed practices spread from specialized programs to the educational mainstream, we must explore these questions so we can proceed with clarity of purpose.

Role Clarity

A crucial aspect of trauma-informed work is providing a caring, safe environment that supports all students, regardless of our knowledge about each student's history. As teachers seek to increase their awareness and sensitivity to trauma in the lives of their students, we should be clear about what our role is, and is not.

Role clarity is the process of defining the scope and goals of our relationships with students, and then maintaining boundaries that allow us to focus on that scope. This is especially important when we consider students' mental health needs. When we develop strong relationships with students, it's normal that mental health will come up in conversations and interactions. In a trusting relationship, students will share how they feel. They look to us, the trusted adult, for support and perspective. We should encourage the development of this relationship, while recognizing that our role as teachers is not to guide a student's mental health treatment.

The behavior of trauma-affected children can be confusing, due to the many impacts trauma can have on healthy brain development. I remember meeting with a student who was new to my school, which was an alternative placement for students struggling with social-emotional challenges. Within the first fifteen minutes of meeting this student, she shared incredibly personal details about previous traumatic events with no prompting or invitation from me to do so. This is not uncommon: trauma which disrupts healthy attachment to caregivers can cause youth to "bond too easily with anyone who shows a passing interest in them" (Craig 2017, 59). Inconsistent or harmful relationships with caregivers can cause children to internalize unhealthy, confused or risky beliefs about who to trust. These children need the adults in their lives to model and teach how to be in relationship with peers and adults.

We can expect that students impacted by trauma will struggle to clearly identify and respect the role of different adults in their lives. If we can know that these students will have difficulty

establishing and maintaining healthy boundaries, it becomes all the more pressing for teachers to proactively develop and communicate role clarity. As the adults, it is our responsibility to establish, maintain, teach, and model how healthy boundaries operate in a student-teacher relationship. This clarity of role is helpful not only to our students with a trauma history, but to all of our students, who learn social and emotional skills through their time at school.

Information with Intention

A common misconception about trauma-informed education is that we need to know which students have experienced trauma and that we must know details about the trauma they experienced. When I taught at a therapeutic school where the majority of students had experienced some type of trauma, I often found myself anxious when new students were set to begin with our program. I wanted to know all of the information that I could get my hands on in advance of meeting the student. Maybe if I knew the trauma they had experienced, the adverse circumstances, and the family makeup, I could avoid unintentional triggers and create a safe environment. Our clinical director, John Grimm, would remind me that I didn't need all of that information to provide quality care: "The frames can guide the work with anyone."

The frames he referred to were the larger ideas that drove our work: unconditional positive regard for each and every student; restorative approaches to discipline, rooted in relationship; an orientation toward slowing down and considering student motivation; skill and capacity when designing learning experiences. When using these overarching approaches to our work with students, we create safe and caring environments for all students, regardless of the details. I need not be a "trauma detective" to do my job effectively.

This is not to say that a student's social worker never shared details of a student's experience. Rather, the clinical staff intentionly chose what to share, when to share it, and with whom to share it. In some instances, it was necessary to let all staff know a student had a particular trigger or challenge so all teachers could share a common understanding. In other cases, a social worker might share the broad brushes of a situation while respecting the student's privacy: "Carla had a tough night last night, and she's thinking a lot about her childhood. If she starts to bring up some challenging memories, it's helpful to redirect her to coping strategies and invite her to reach out to me for a check-in." Often, students and families collaborated with their social workers to guide the information-sharing process.

Teachers should avoid questioning students about the details of their traumatic experiences, either directly or as prompts in writing or other class activities (this can happen unintentionally when teachers ask students to write about past experiences). Without therapeutic support, students may experience distress in reflecting on trauma in the classroom. Even in a counseling setting, some studies have found that asking children to directly discuss traumatic experiences

makes them more likely to develop symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (Perry and Szalavitz 2017). Child trauma expert Bruce Perry summarizes: "people's individual needs vary, and no one should be pushed to discuss trauma if they do not wish to do so" (Perry and Szalavitz 2017, 183). This is true in the clinical context in which Perry works and even more so in an educational setting. A predictable school environment for trauma-affected students includes the knowledge that children can guide their own information-sharing and disclosure.

Well-developed trauma-informed practices are universal and benefit all students. The frames described above help teachers create school environment that students experience as a safe, caring, and predictable place in which to learn. Teachers seeking to become trauma-informed can focus on developing these universal supports without seeking details about a particular student's trauma.

Finding the Boundary

While teachers play many roles in students' lives, psychologist should not be one of them. This is for the benefit of students and teachers alike. For students, school needs to be a place of safety and predictability. Clear boundaries and roles help students establish a sense of safety in relationships. If we dig too deeply into explorations of trauma with students, at best we create a confusing dynamic. At worst, we can impede a student's healing journey by providing uninformed counsel or treatment.

For teachers, boundaries can be life-saving. Vicarious trauma, sometimes called "the cost of caring," develops from witnessing the impacts of trauma on those we are close to. Teachers experiencing vicarious trauma may experience hopelessness, interruptions in sleep, guilt, or anger (National Child Traumatic Stress Network 2011). One of the ways to buffer ourselves from the impacts of vicarious trauma is to maintain healthy boundaries with those we are helping. Yet this isn't always so simple. How should we determine when supportive relationship with students ends, and a clinical exploration of their trauma begins?

Unfortunately, there is no easy answer to this question. Healthy boundaries require constant attention and adjustment. Teachers need time to process and reflect in order to maintain them. As teachers reflect on their relationships with students, they can consider these questions as a guide:

- What is the purpose of my conversations with this student about their mental health, trauma, or struggles?
- How do these conversations support or detract from the academic purpose of our time together?
- Am I the only caring adult this student has identified? Who else could I connect them with?

- Is the student's trauma bringing up anything for me? Am I identifying strongly with them? Am I feeling the need to "save" them?
- Am I attending to my own mental health needs?

John Grimm, the clinical director at Centerpoint School in Winooski, Vermont, developed a meaningful metaphor for finding the boundary in our work. Picture yourself as a homeowner. You need to do some repairs on your house. As you assess the situation, you'll reflect on your skills and expertise, the nature of the repair, and then make an informed decision about how to proceed. For example, if I needed to change a lightbulb in my lamp, I could do so safely with no additional training or support. However, if I needed to rewire the electrical outlet, I would call in a professional. I have no training or experience with electrical wiring and I'm likely to burn down my own house if I attempted to repair it on my own! To safely proceed, I need help. Alternatively, I might take a course or apprentice with a more experienced person so that I can learn the skills myself.

Just as we need to self-assess our skills for safely tackling a home project, so too do we need to self-assess our ability to support a student in processing their trauma. Most teachers can and should support students who are struggling to self-regulate on a tough day, feeling sad or angry, or feeling challenged to relate to peers. These are low-level problems, and we can use our authentic relationships and social-emotional teaching strategies to guide our work.

So when do we need assistance? Usually, teachers are not the appropriate people to process traumatic memories in depth or provide acute care during a mental health crisis. We need skills, training, and the right tools in order to effectively support a trauma-affected student. At worst, I may do harm to my student if I proceed in advising them on their mental health treatment without consulting a mental health professional. If we do not have the appropriate knowledge in order to do the work safely, there is no shame in relying on the skills and training of an expert.

Teachers need time and space to reflect on their relationships with students. Administrators can support this work by devoting a portion of faculty meetings to gathering teachers in small groups to reflect on the social-emotional experience of their work.

Teacher as a Connector

If our role is not to dig deeply into students' trauma, what should our role be? I propose that trauma-informed teachers should see themselves primarily as facilitators of connection. In this role, teachers build bridges, remove barriers, and view themselves as clearing the path between students and supports.

Traumatic events often isolate children. The impacts of trauma may cause family conflict or separations, relocation, financial hardship, and involvement with the justice system. The mental health impacts of trauma can be devastating and children may struggle with maintaining healthy social relationships. Students may also mistrust adults, and with good reason: many forms of child trauma are perpetrated by adults who were supposed to be trusted members of a child's community.

Given all of this disconnection, an essential aspect of healing from trauma is reintegration into the community and the creation of strong, lasting relationships with people who care about the child's well-being. Trauma-affected children need support to develop connections with their peers, with mental health providers, with role models and mentors, and with their families and caregivers. Teachers can play a role in facilitating these connections.

Letting Go of Savior Mentality. First, it's necessary to leave behind a savior mentality. It's common for teachers to work alone, relatively isolated themselves from coworkers throughout the school day. We can hear from our students: "You're my favorite teacher. You're the only one I can talk to." Rather than taking these comments as compliments, they should serve as immediate red flags. If I hear this from a student, my first step is to look at who else this student regularly interacts with and question why they don't feel safe connecting with those adults. This requires me to get out of my teaching bubble and forge relationships with others, and to drop any feeling I may have that "I am the only one who can help."

The connection-making beyond the "favorite teacher" is especially important when we consider that in the typical structure of most American schools, students end their relationship with teachers after one year. It's common for students to stay in touch with favorite teachers, but teachers must focus on their current set of students. In an ideal trauma-informed environment, schools would restructure to create multi-year teacher-student relationships, but in our current system, it's our responsibility to help students find other sources of support so that when the year ends, they are not left without help.

It is equally important for the student's well-being and the teacher's to expand beyond the favorite teacher. If I develop the feeling that I am alone in my work to support a trauma-affected student, I have no community to help me with the impacts of vicarious trauma or burnout. With the weight of the world on my shoulders, I cannot do my best for my students. This is another reason that hearing "you're the only one who can help" should catalyze me to reach out to others immediately.

Compassionate and Transparent Boundaries. Knowing that trauma-affected students struggle with identifying and maintaining boundaries, teachers must compassionately and clearly teach them. It is common for students to test the boundary of a teacher-student relationship by saying

things like, “You’re more like my friend than my teacher,” or “I wish you were my mom,” or “I would talk to my therapist more if she was like you.” We should take these comments as a signal that the student needs clarification on the role of a teacher. I can acknowledge that the student is looking to connect with me while maintaining my role: “Hey, I really like you too! But I’m not your friend, I’m your teacher. I’m here to help you become the great writer I know you can be.” In this scenario, I acknowledge the emotional truth behind the student’s words—that they feel connected to me—while affirming that our relationship is connected to the task at hand. In these interactions, we should center our care for the student while minimizing role confusion.

Redirecting struggling students is an exercise in kindness and in humbling ourselves. If a student approaches me and begins to talk at length about challenges at home, I first empathetically listen, and then, recognizing my role, gently redirect. I might say something like, “Thank you so much for sharing this with me. I’m so sorry you’re having a hard time. I’m always here to listen. You know what, though? I’m not trained as a counselor, and I think that you could really benefit from talking to someone who is. Would you like to walk down to the counseling office with me and I can introduce you to my friend Ms. Jones who works there?”

In this example, I affirm that I care about the student and that I am available to him. This helps the student internalize the positive connection that’s possible when he opens up to a caring adult. Then, I gently redirect him to a person whose role involves working through the challenges he has shared. Ideally, I will follow up the next day or the next week to reaffirm my genuine interest in how he is doing and ensure that he has access and information to get any help he wants or needs.

Bridge to Supports and Services. To be a bridge to supportive resources, we need to be knowledgeable about what’s out there. It is part of our responsibility as teachers to familiarize ourselves with the resources inside and around our schools and build our own connections with these resources. If we are to refer students to counseling services, for example, it helps to be familiar with and able to authentically engage students around what these services entail. A teacher who has not done this work may simply say to a student or their caregiver, “You could call the counseling service, their number is…” A teacher who has done some research and bridge-building might be able to say, “Sometimes people find the counseling service helpful. Did you know they have a therapy dog right in the waiting room? I also found out, when I talked to one of their counselors, that students who go there can do things like play basketball or make art during their sessions—it’s not just sitting in a room talking.”

This type of bridge-building can make all the difference for a student and their family in accessing the long-term supports they need. Children and families facing mental health challenges often encounter barriers to treatment, not the least of which is societal stigma. An encouraging teacher can provide hopeful, specific direction. Teachers can develop these

connections with a quick phone call or email to local service providers, and teachers can pool information to create institutional knowledge of resources. Administrators can support this effort through dedicating one hour of inservice or faculty meeting time and maintaining a list of people, places, and opportunities for community support.

Teachers can also use a bridge-building mentality when connecting with their students' parents and caregivers. Families facing adversities may view schools as uncaring institutions or may struggle with school engagement while also addressing more immediate needs. Teachers can proactively connect with caregivers and establish caring relationships that humanize the face of school. Using the same approach as we do with students, teachers can also recommend supports to family members.

Connectivity in Our Pedagogical Choices

Finally, we should look at our classroom structures and practices through a lens of connectivity. Building connections isn't just for after-class conversations; we can incorporate connection into our academic content.

One way to develop these connections through curriculum is to create authentic opportunities for presentation of learning. A group of students in a Vermont town completed a project in which they researched whether their town should consider hosting the Olympics. They presented their findings to the town selectboard (Phillips 2018). This activity helped students see themselves as connected to their local community, offering something of value. The same can be achieved through smaller curricular pieces, such as regularly examining local media, visits to the community library, or hosting guest speakers or teachers from the community.

We can help build connections inside the classroom, as well. Group work can focus on relationship-building, and students can directly examine what it means to establish a healthy co-working relationship. Restorative circles provide a structure for elevating the voices of each person in the room. In my community college courses, I start each day with a quick "rose/thorn" check-in, in which students can share one thing that's going well for them that week (a "rose") and one thing that's not going so well (a "thorn"). This five-minute investment in checking in helps to establish a tone of mutual care in the classroom. If a student shares a particularly meaningful rose or thorn, it's common for her classmates to follow up and offer their support.

Schools don't need to purchase a special curriculum to infuse their academics with connection. Administrators can support teachers to reflect on the opportunities for connection-building that exist already within their content, and then provide time and resources to develop on these ideas. As New York-based shelter educator Dulce-Marie Flecha puts it, "Trauma-informed is not a

content but a way to teach content" (Torres 2018). Using a trauma-informed lens and an intentional role of a connector, teachers can create the conditions for student healing and success.

Strong Boundaries, Flourishing Relationships

Trauma-informed educational practices are a paradigm shift. To maintain the healthy boundaries described here, teachers need resources that may be scarce in some school systems. They need time and space to reflect on their relationships with students. They need administrators who recognize the nuance and complexity of this work and provide a safe professional environment in which to grow. Teachers need guidance from emotionally intelligent leaders. They need to be able to consult with mental health professionals who share relationships with their students. Finally, they need to be able to trust that referrals to mental health services and agencies will result in beneficial interventions for students and their families.

As a community, we need to advocate for these conditions so that teachers can be fully supported to create trauma-informed learning environments. This requires advocacy on many levels: personal and political, local and national. We cannot place the responsibility of trauma-informed practices solely on teachers, ignoring the systemic reasons that so many children experience trauma in the first place.

Yet, even with the scale of the problem and the work we need to do, teachers can build momentum and hope within their locus of control: the classroom. When we develop and maintain caring relationships within the clarity of our role, trauma-affected students can flourish. When we envision ourselves as facilitators of connection, we can create communities in which students learn to "gain competence in caring" (Noddings). We also protect our own longevity in the work, allowing us to make a difference in the lives of many rather than burning out with the intensity of our connections.

The more I learn about the connections between learning and emotional well-being, the more that my definition of "teacher" expands beyond one who imparts content knowledge. This expansion can be overwhelming at times. Boundaries help me stay focused on my role. I am one caring adult in the life of my students; I can help them become confident readers and writers. Within these boundaries, our relationships can flourish and grow. Within these boundaries, I recognize myself as one small part of a network of care, the village within which my students can thrive.

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