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Kai Hollander
Sarah Lawrence College

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Educating for a Recovering World
Developing Trauma-Sensitive Teaching Models in Response to COVID-19

Kai Hollander
Art of Teaching
Sarah Lawrence College

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Abstract

In recent years, a number of schools and districts across America have begun implementing trauma-sensitive classroom models. However, the current reality of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the traumatic stress of the 2020 incidents of police violence and domestic terrorism necessitate further exploration of this work. My inquiry explores the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on children's learning and development. Taking a trauma-sensitive lens, I examine how trauma manifests in the elementary classroom, review the literature on COVID-19 collective trauma, and propose a model for trauma-sensitive teaching in pandemic and post-pandemic times. I make an argument for teachers to structure their classrooms and curricula to be trauma-sensitive through a focus on play, relationship-building, and student agency, given the new reality in which we all reside.

Keywords: COVID-19, trauma, children

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And finally, to my mother, for always supporting me behind the scenes, encouraging me to take on any and all projects and challenges, engaging me in lengthy discussions of theory and ideology, and for homeschooling me early on so that I could later become a licensed classroom teacher.

Outline

- I. **Opening:** Educating for a recovering world: Developing Trauma-sensitive teaching models in response to COVID-19.
 - A. Setting the stage:
 1. Images: The events of the last year: A snapshot of what children have been exposed to
 - a) Content warning
 - b) Images of 2020 events
 2. Lisa Delpit's memories of school in the sixties:
 - a) "I remember sixth grade. I remember sitting in front of the family television mesmerized and terrified by the newscasts showing Bull Connor's snarling police dogs attacking young black teenagers...I remember the day that JFK was shot...I remember watching long lists of names of young men who had been killed in the Vietnam war...and the drills in school where we huddled under our desks with our hands over our heads..." (Delpit, 2019, pp. xi).
- II. **Necessity of a Trauma-Sensitive Approach**
 - A. A trauma-sensitive approach to teaching is necessitated by the events of the past year because:
 1. Children are entering school as always with a multitude of individual and collective experiences.
 2. The CDC estimates trauma occurring at a prevalence of 70% of school-aged children. (CITE)
 3. The pandemic isn't the only source of traumatic stress, we must also consider:
 - a) The white supremacist attacks and severe police violence
 - b) Global climate disasters including wildfires
 4. Children are exposed to violence, fear, conflict in media and by the adults in their lives. They are not oblivious or immune to these occurrences.
 5. COVID-19 has quickly come to the forefront as one of the most major global events of the twenty-first century. Currently, in April 2021, we are more than a year into this unprecedented global tragedy. I argue that the effect on children cannot be ignored or underrepresented.
- III. **My Inquiry**
 - A. COVID-19 stands to become one of the primary traumatic events of the younger generation.
 - B. The two primary questions I am posing at this time are:
 1. How has the pandemic affected children thus far?
 2. How does this effect show up in the childhood classroom?
 - C. Demonstration of the issue at hand:
 1. Video of child speaking to mayor
 2. Child letter 1
 3. Sarah Sparks from education week on the data reviewed thus far: "Since the pandemic began, children and adolescents have higher rates of anxiety, depression, and stress, and even more specific issues such as addictive internet behaviors" (Sparks, 2021).
 4. Child letter 2
 5. Jack Shonkoff, pediatrician and founder of Harvard's *Center on the Developing Child*, speaks on COVID-19 and its impact on children in an

interview with NPR.

- a) Emphasis on the uncertainty of when the pandemic will end
- b) Argument for constructivist thinking: Everything is influenced by an interaction between the environment and how we interact with it.

IV. How Trauma Impacts Children's Functioning

- A. Cook, Spinazzola, and colleagues published their article, "Complex Trauma in Children and Adolescents" in 2005, building on the preliminary understanding of trauma established by the ACE studies in the 1990's. In their article, they identify,
 - 1. "...seven primary domains of impairment observed in exposed children: Attachment, biology, affect regulation, dissociation, behavioral regulation, cognition, and self-concept." (Cook, et. al., 2005, pp. 392).
 - 2. They assert that it is reasonable to assume and expect that impairment in any of these domains would and *does* have an impact on children's learning, behavior, and overall experience in and of school.

V. Can Teachers Help?

- A. What can teachers do to create trauma-sensitive classrooms during COVID and beyond?
 - 1. Resilience factors for mediating the impact of traumatic stress (Cook and Spinazzola)
 - a) Positive attachment and relationships to emotionally supportive adults in the child's immediate environment
 - b) Development of Self-regulatory abilities
 - c) Positive self-concept
 - d) Motivation to act positively and appropriately in one's environment
 - 2. "Fear and anxiety about the pandemic—coupled with uncertainty about the future—can be disruptive to a student's ability to come to school ready to learn."
 - a) "...Teachers can act as a powerful buffer against the adverse effects of trauma by helping to establish a safe and supportive environment for learning." - Youki Terada, Edutopia, 2020

VI. A Supportive Model: Play, Relationship, & Agency

- A. Referring back to John Shonkoff's interview, children's development and learning develops in interaction with their environment. This means that school can provide a unique opportunity to support children through traumatic events and beyond.
- B. Building on the work of schools and theorists who have designed, implemented, and studied trauma sensitivity in schools and classrooms, I propose three essential elements of a trauma-sensitive classroom:
 - 1. Play
 - a) Why make space for play in the childhood classroom?
 - Play facilitates socioemotional, physical, cognitive, and motor development in the early grades
 - Play can provide children with a mode of processing and working through traumatic events such as the enduring COVID-19 pandemic
 - Play has emerged as a demonstrated therapeutic modality for children who have experienced trauma

- b) Getting Concrete: Incorporating trauma-sensitive play in the elementary classroom looks like:
 - Adequate provisioning of time to allow children to self-direct
 - Provisioning of materials that facilitate play and exploration (loose parts)
 - Creating ‘private spaces’ where children can play and work away from adult interference
 - Encouraging children to posit, dream, imagine, and process through play
 - 2. Relationship
 - a) The value of positive teacher-student relationships
 - “Kids who grow up in trauma need to start the process of healing by being able to build healthy, trusting relationships with adults” - Melissa Cole, Edutopia
 - b) Safe and generative teacher to student relationships are fostered through:
 - Established and predictable structure, routine, and classroom protocols
 - A clear precedent for open, non judgemental classroom talk and discussion
 - Classroom culture that is warm, respectful, and mimics a family-like atmosphere
 - Strong school-home connections
 - 3. Agency
 - a) “...agency is a universal human endowment and an essential power, and self-education is consequential precisely because it requires and represents the exercise of agency.” William Ayers
 - b) Examples of student agency in the elementary classroom
 - Students send teachers emails directly
 - Manage their own online seesaw accounts
 - Co-create rules and are expected to uphold the values
 - Have roles in the classroom

VII. My Trauma-Sensitive Classroom

- A. Private spaces for children
- B. Loose parts and other generative play materials
- C. One-on-one conversations with students
- D. Predictable and dependable protocols for classroom management
- E. Established discussion times and protocols for students to share
- F. Classroom rules as produced by myself and the students
- G. Talk protocols for mediating conflict
- H. Classroom jobs and roles for all students
- I. Flexible deadlines where possible
- J. Breaks throughout the day for movement and mindful activity
- K. Appropriate talk and discussion permitted during the majority of the day’s activities
- L. Flexible assessments which emphasize specifics domains of progress

VIII. Conclusion

- A. We must *advocate* for children in the aftermath of this massive collective trauma by designing and sustaining safe and supportive environments for children to

learn, grow, and recover.

- B. There is a lot to be learned from past collective experiences of trauma and violence across the globe, and now is the time to learn from the models that have been developed in response.
- C. By implementing time and space for play, fostering attitudes of hope, and upholding reliable structure in the classroom, we can begin to detangle the web of experiences that will be re-entering school in the coming months and years.
- D. And as always, we can return to the roots of the art of teaching: the value of knowing children deeply and holding space for all individuals to enter and grow in the classroom safely and with support.

Quotations

“I remember sixth grade. I remember sitting in front of the family television mesmerized and terrified by the newscasts showing Bull Connor’s snarling police dogs attacking young black teenagers...I remember the day that JFK was shot...I remember watching long lists of names of young men who had been killed in the Vietnam war...and the drills in school where we huddled under our desks with our hands over our heads...” (Delpit, 2019, pp. xi).

“Since the pandemic began, children and adolescents have higher rates of anxiety, depression, and stress, and even more specific issues such as addictive internet behaviors” (Sparks, 2021).

“...seven primary domains of impairment observed in exposed children: Attachment, biology, affect regulation, dissociation, behavioral regulation, cognition, and self-concept.” (Cook & Spinazzola, 2005, pp. 392).

“Fear and anxiety about the pandemic—coupled with uncertainty about the future—can be disruptive to a student’s ability to come to school ready to learn. Teachers can act as a powerful buffer against the adverse effects of trauma by helping to establish a safe and supportive environment for learning.” (Terada, 2020).

“Kids who grow up in trauma need to start the process of healing by being able to build healthy, trusting relationships with adults” (Cole, 2020).

“...agency is a universal human endowment and an essential power, and self-education is consequential precisely because it requires and represents the exercise of agency.” (Ayers, 2019, pp. 13).

“Through their empathy, and their ability to interpret the children’s play cues effectively, the playworkers were able to create strong trusting relationships, which in turn helps to enhance the children’s self-esteem.” (Brown, 214, 486).

“Play and connection activate the social-engagement system and are healing.” (Fagell, 2021).

“One of the functions that play serves for kids is it allows them to approach something that might be frightening in a way that makes it less frightening and more understandable” (Aronson, 2020).

“Soon after the Oklahoma City bombing, in 1995, children in a nearby kindergarten started playing dead. Over and over, they toppled towers of blocks and lay motionless on the floor. When their teacher asked them to tell her about what was happening in their play, the students informed her that they had all been killed by terrorists.” (Kaplan, 2020).

“Imaginative play not only enables children to better understand reality—by helping them to inhabit the perspectives of, say, both a doll patient and a stuffed animal doctor—but also to quickly change the narrative when the reality becomes too much to bear.” (Kaplan, 2020).

“Research has shown that absence of connection can cause distress and disease. Social connection is the antidote and is increasingly seen as a core human need. Getting to know your

students and having them get to know each other in meaningful ways is key, especially now.” (Van Woerkom, 2020).

“Rather than telling students what to do and how to do it, we should support them in cultivating the ideas, skills, and practices they find useful. That way, they learn to make their own choices about how to be their best selves.” (Van Woerkom, 2020)

“To teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin.” (Hooks, 1994, pp. 13).

“The COVID-19 pandemic may worsen existing mental health problems and lead to more cases among children and adolescents because of the unique combination of the public health crisis, social isolation, and economic recession.” (Golberstein, 2020, pp. 819).

“The consequences of traumatic exposure can be serious and long lasting. Most children experience distress in the first few weeks after the event; they may feel scared, experience concentration difficulties, try to avoid reminders of what happened, lose interest in social activities, or show regressive behavior.” (Kaminer, Seedat, & Stein, 2005; Winston et al., 2002).

“Trauma is consensually defined as an overwhelming experience that undermines the individual’s belief that the world is good and safe (Berry Street Victoria, 2013). The American Psychiatric Association (APA; 2013) advises that directly experiencing, witnessing, or learning about trauma can lead to trauma- and stress-related disorders.” (Brunzell, 2016, pp. 219).

“The classroom is sometimes the most consistent and stable place in a trauma-affected student’s world and must be seen as a therapeutic milieu wherein the structured environment itself is the most consistent and effective intervention.” (Brunzell, 2016, pp. 220).

Process Paper

This project represents the culmination of my persistent efforts to concretize my thinking about teaching and learning by applying my theoretical knowledge to classroom practice. When I first entered the Art of Teaching program, I did so with a strong background in child development theory. Since then, I have been consistently encouraged by my professors, Rue Beckerman and Patricia Virella, to translate this knowledge to concrete applications to classroom practice. The general topic of my Master's inquiry, trauma in the classroom, has been a focus of mine since I began conducting qualitative research and literature reviews as an undergraduate at Sarah Lawrence College under the careful guidance of my don, Barbara Schecter. I held this topic in mind throughout my first year in the Art of Teaching.

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit the United States in March of 2020 I, along with everyone else, was thrown suddenly into 'quarantine' and online teaching and learning. As time in quarantine progressed, I slowly came to consider the need to pivot my intention for this project. I began to focus more specifically on the implications of the pandemic on children's socioemotional functioning and work in the classroom. As a new teacher entering the field at this time, the effect of COVID-19 pandemic is, to me, an unavoidable topic when we consider the implications of teaching from here on out. I felt called to write, research, and speak about this topic as a way to concretize my own plans for teaching in the field throughout this coming school year and beyond.

In the early stages of my inquiry, I reviewed and re-read piles of class papers and conference work on a variety of topics. I found that my work generally followed a clear thread of interest. There was a strong emphasis on children's wellbeing in the classroom, the relevance of understanding and accounting for childhood adversity in school, and the integration of child development research and the major social issues of the American education system. As I embarked on this project, my aim was to build on my existing knowledge of these themes and to gain a greater understanding of the recent research on the pandemic and children's wellbeing.

I developed the three tenets of my trauma-sensitive teaching model - *play*, *relationship*, and *agency* - by integrating my years of research and academic exploration with experiences with children in varying developmentally-sensitive contexts. I first encountered what would eventually form the basis of my trauma-sensitive model in my junior year through Barbara Schechter's *Play in Developmental and Cultural Context* course. Since then, I have engaged in a rigorous and committed relationship with the intersection of child developmental concerns and the educational climate of this country. When I entered the Art of Teaching program at the end of my undergraduate career, a deep interest and immersion in the practice and learning experience of the childhood classroom joined the relationship.

My hope with this project was to develop a deeper understanding of the current circumstance. I wanted to know what kind of research teachers and researchers were conducting on the effects of the pandemic. I was curious whether other scholars had looked to past incidents of collective trauma for a resource on developing trauma-sensitivity in response to COVID-19. As I gathered sources, both old and new, I found that what the field already understands about children and traumatic stress still stands true, just in a new context. I was surprised to see how many teachers had already written articles suggesting that play, agency, and relationship in the classroom would be healing factors during the pandemic. My aim was to synthesize the work that has been done by others on the topic into a simple, concrete application to classroom practice.

Now, as I prepare to enter the teaching field during a challenging time, I carry with me a confident, enthusiastic drive to build and sustain safe spaces for exploration and growth in the classroom context. I hope to build my career in collaborative contexts in which my work in the Art of Teaching will be welcomed and valued. I feel strongly that engaging in a constant process of self-reflection throughout the past two years has been essential in preparing me to enter teaching. This work has led me to look at children from an expanded, inquisitive perspective, as

well as to examine my own self, my teaching, interests, biases, and experiences and how they show up in the classroom.

Sincerely,

Kai Hollander

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