

Transforming Learning Communities Through a Transdisciplinary, Trauma-Informed Approach to Classrooms as Communities

M. Shelley Thomas, Penny B. Howell, Shantel Crosby, & Khirsten L. Scott

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Teacher Education

Teacher Preparation

Trauma-informed Practices



We describe an intentional, long-term approach to community building from a trauma-informed perspective and evidence from an action research study on this approach. As the instructors and as members of a transdisciplinary team, including social work, English and rhetoric, and teacher education, we reframed a first-semester course on building classroom communities for undergraduate middle and secondary teacher certification candidates to include explicit attention to trauma-informed practices. Following the course, we facilitated a Professional Learning Community (PLC) during subsequent semesters to engage candidates in ongoing discussions around trauma-informed practices as they continued with their program. We examined data collected across the course and the PLC meetings to understand how candidates' thinking shifted around trauma-informed practice. Findings show that teacher candidates felt more knowledgeable about childhood trauma as well as how to incorporate this knowledge into their learning communities, yet they struggled with some aspects of the shift from the theoretical to the practical.

Introduction

How can teacher educators design instruction around trauma-informed teaching? We draw on the literature on trauma-informed practices (TIP) in teaching and more specifically in teacher preparation to describe an intentional approach to classroom community building from a trauma-informed perspective and evidence from an action research study on this approach. As the instructors and as members of a transdisciplinary team, including social work, English and rhetoric, and teacher education, we reframed a first-semester course on building classroom community, or as candidates refer to it, the classroom management course, for undergraduate middle and secondary teacher certification candidates. The course includes explicit, foundational attention to trauma-informed practices. Following the course, we facilitated a

Professional Learning Community (PLC) during subsequent semesters to engage candidates in ongoing discussions around trauma-informed practices as they continued with their program.

In this work, we invoke the term community to refer to specific constructs depending on contexts. First, as part of course design, individual classrooms are described as learning communities. This intentional language usage reflects ongoing concerns around the reductionist nature of classroom management. Second, the phrase building learning communities refers to the intentional processes teachers use to create safe, inclusive, supportive, and affirming environments that support all students' learning. It is also in the name of the course. Finally, professional learning communities (PLCs) refer to Stoll et al.'s (2006) notion of PLCs as

... an inclusive group of people, motivated by a shared learning vision, who support and work with each other, finding ways, inside and outside their immediate community, to enquire on their practice and together learn new and better approaches that will enhance all pupils' learning. (p. 1)

We examined data collected across the course and the PLC meetings to understand how candidates' thinking shifted around trauma-informed practice. Findings showed teacher candidates felt more knowledgeable about childhood trauma as well as how to incorporate this knowledge into their learning communities, yet they struggled with some aspects of the shift from the theoretical to the practical. Findings identified gaps in instruction and the need for better facilitation of shifts in candidates thinking about students affected by trauma. Many of the hallmarks of teacher preparation such as intentional integration of information, analysis, practice, and reflection were effective; however, we identified concerns with our instruction, along with areas needing more robust attention.

Literature Review

Attention to childhood trauma and the subsequent need for trauma-informed care has contributed to emerging discourses related to teaching practices, school climate, and the delivery of trauma-related in-service and pre-service teacher preparation (Cole et al., 2005; Day et al., 2015; Oehlberg, 2008). Psychological trauma, frequently experienced by school-aged children (Costello et al., 2002), includes experiences or events that are perceived as harmful, create intense distress, and impact an individual's overall wellbeing (SAMHSA, 2014). Traumatic stress in childhood can impede brain development and is associated with barriers to school performance (Perfect et al., 2016), negatively influencing students' capacity for self-regulation, organization, comprehension, and memorization (Wolpov et al., 2009, 2016). Consequently, students' behaviors may be perceived by their teachers as problematic, resulting in punitive teacher responses, classroom-based consequences, and a range of other disciplinary actions that may lead to disproportional detrimental consequences and the school to prison pipeline (Dorado et al., 2016). Literature across disciplines documents the impact of trauma on children in schools, the need for school and community-wide approaches (Walkley & Cox, 2013), and the dearth of empirical work in this area (Day et al., 2015). Nevertheless, within the educational research literature, the gap between research and practice continues (Alvarez, 2017; De Pedro et al., 2011) and trauma-informed teacher preparation in this area remains underdeveloped (Rossen & Hull, 2013; Wong, 2008) and under-researched (Day et al., 2015; Thomas et al., 2019).

Trauma-informed Teaching and Teacher Preparation

Empirical literature exploring TIP in education and teacher education or preparation outlets describe teachers' experiences teaching youth effected by trauma (Alveraz, 2017; Morgan et al., 2015), students' experiences with participatory action research (Mutch & Gawith, 2014) and parents' experiences with community programs (Lawson & Alameda-Lawson, 2012).

Recent studies frame TIP more specifically in teacher preparation. Reddig and VanLone (2022) found that five states require training in "trauma-informed pedagogy" which they define as 'a teacher's collective use of trauma-informed practices" (p. 2). They also found states often required elements associated with trauma-informed care, such as social-emotional learning and cultural responsiveness. That said, without an explicit policy directive, it remains unclear to what

extent teacher preparation programs are required to provide candidates information or training in trauma-informed teaching as well as the specific content and processes through which TIP is delivered.

Teacher educators in health and physical education note the “lack of emphasis in our teacher preparation programs and professional development opportunities” around trauma-informed practices (Walton-Fisette, 2020, p. 9). Walton-Fisette (2020) and Ellison et al. (2020) offer information and recommendations for candidates in health and physical education. Studies of preservice teachers in both Australia (Davies & Berger, 2019) and the United States (McClain, 2021) describe participants’ responses that their preparation programs did not prepare them with trauma-awareness nor responses to trauma. In the literature, preservice teacher and teacher candidate are used synonymously. We will use the term selected by the authors, but in our state, we typically use teacher candidates.

Preservice teachers who participated in Foreman and Bates (2021) study received instruction on trauma-informed care for the classroom during a single, 90-minute class meeting. Those in an Australian study completed by L’Estrange & Howard (2022) received a six-week unit. Surveys of participants completing the unit indicated that their knowledge increased, and they were responsive to the content. L’Estrange & Howard (2022) recommended preservice teachers “receive ongoing support to develop their skills into their early careers” (p. 1). Rodger et al. (2020) surveyed teacher candidates in Ontario who took an online, mandatory mental health literacy course including trauma-and-violence-informed-care. Findings indicated that the course increased participants’ attitudes and efficacy in using teaching practices to support children in schools. The tools and strategies included information about how trauma can affect students’ behavior and learning as well as resources on vicarious trauma. Findings across these studies confirms the need for trauma-informed practices in teacher preparation and the willingness of candidates to receive such content (L’Estrange & Howard, 2022; Rodger et al., 2020). They also point to next steps for research to explore how candidates make sense of the content in the context of the other elements in learning to be teachers.

Designing for Trauma-Informed Teacher Preparation for the Current Study

To create a research-informed framework for teacher preparation, we drew from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration’s (SAMSHA, 2014) guidance for a trauma-informed approach. This framework is intended for professionals in health specialties, but adaptable for other “sectors . . . that have the potential to ease or exacerbate an individual’s capacity to cope with traumatic experiences” (p. 13), and is used to push candidates toward shifts in thinking about how they build and maintain learning communities. Rossen and Hull (2013) emphasize the need for educators to build “a classroom climate of mutual respect and empathy and most importantly, to foster positive self-esteem and competency building for traumatized students” (p. viii).

Trauma-informed practice in schools requires educators to recognize the prevalence, impact, and indicators of childhood trauma and to respond to student behavior in ways that support traumatized youth without re-traumatization (SAMHSA, 2015). Derived from an interdisciplinary approach to students’ wellbeing in schools, trauma-informed school practice requires educators to receive basic training in childhood trauma including ways it may manifest in students’ behavior (Day et al., 2015). It also requires teachers demonstrate insight and flexibility in their classroom management and instructional practices. In essence, trauma-informed teaching seeks to acknowledge the ways a young person’s life course is affected by trauma and to use trauma-sensitive strategies in place of traditional, often punitive, and trauma-blind school practices-practices which have historically compounded the effects of students’ trauma (Craig, 2017). Previous research considering practicing teachers found teachers responded positively to information around trauma-informed practices and consequently felt comfortable implementing these practices (Dorado et al., 2016). As mentioned, work describing candidates’ experiences with trauma-informed teaching is limited. That said, RB-Banks and Meyer (2017) advocate for candidates’ early exposure to trauma-informed practices, regardless of the difficult nature of such experiences.

We were concerned as well that TIP content would be perceived by candidates as an add-on, a series of tricks or tips, and potentially confirm candidates’ deficit assumptions about marginalized communities (Milner, 2008). To that end, we

strived to scaffold candidates learning of the TIP modules around larger discussions of equity, cultural responsiveness, and systemic challenges.

To describe the learning processes, we explored two research questions: How do candidate develop perceptions of trauma-informed teaching as a component of building classroom communities? And how are they constructing those perceptions?

Theoretical Framework

Because of the educator preparation program's intent to foster a shift in candidates' perspectives around building classroom communities that are trauma-informed, this practitioner research informed by action research is grounded in a sociocultural perspective using a transformative design (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). Sociocultural theory's inclusion of thought, language, and learning as dialogic, and the emphasis on human social and cultural interaction (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996), pushed us as instructors and researchers to examine if and how the resources we used, along with the instruction we provided, shifted candidates toward more informed perspectives and guided actions. Action research processes included intentional, critical reflection and self-evaluation of candidates' practice with emphasis on their roles in next steps, decision-making, and implementation of new learning (Sales et al., 2011). We intend for the findings of this study, as well as the insights offered by candidates, to improve the course and inform teacher preparation around trauma-informed practices.

In designing our study, we remained mindful of transformative paradigmatic assumptions. The transformative paradigm assumes ontological and epistemological stances that inform our study. Specifically, we recognize the inevitability of multiple, socially constructed realities that are also affected by power and privilege, necessitating explicitness regarding each of our values and positionalities. That is, our racial, gender, and other characteristics in addition to the power and privilege instructors hold over students must be transparent. Additionally, our epistemological assumptions recognize the nature of relationships among the instructors and students, and the ways those relationships and power relations inform the social and historical contexts for knowledge (Mertens & Ginsberg, 2008).

Collectively, our work intends to support candidates to inform practices around building learning communities (i.e., culturally responsive communities), create trauma-informed learning environments, improve teacher preparation for trauma-informed practice, and address a notable gap in the research regarding teacher preparation as a component of trauma-informed systems of care. Further, Mertens and Ginsberg (2008) describe transformative, qualitative approaches and action research as potentially complementary, if the participatory component is framed to involve transformational change. To that end, we include Brydon-Miller et al.'s (2003) definition of fundamental principles of action research to include "respect for people and for the knowledge and experience they bring to the research process, a belief in the ability of democratic processes to achieve positive social change, and a commitment to action" (p. 15). Our intentions with this study are to respect the perspectives and experiences of candidates while working with them to challenge deficit views of middle and high school students and explore more informed and transformational stances around trauma-informed teaching.

Methodology

As an instructional and research team, we viewed our work as an opportunity to problematize teacher preparation, more specifically, within a required course on building learning communities with newly added content around trauma-informed practices. Drawing from the conceptual umbrella of practitioner research (Cochan-Smith & Lytle, 2009) along with action research and self-study methodologies, we explored how teacher candidates developed and constructed their perceptions of trauma-informed teaching as a component of building classroom communities. Cochran-Smith & Lytle (2009) frame practitioner research and practitioner inquiry as interchangeable, noting the significance of their choices of terms including practitioner as "an expansive and inclusive way to mean a wide array of education practitioners" (p. ix). Cochran-Smith & Lytle's (2009) descriptions of the features of practitioner research include several

relevant to our study. For instance, we each held dual roles of practitioner and researcher, and we collaborated with our partners who are “stakeholders” (p. 41) in the process of trauma-informed teacher preparation with a “problem of practice” (p. 42) as our central purpose.

Context

In Spring 2017, as a transdisciplinary team, we initiated a trauma-informed project in a required undergraduate teacher education course, addressing ways to establish and maintain a learning environment with specific attention to: cultural conflicts in the classroom (D’Haem & Griswold, 2016); racial literacy (Sealey-Ruiz & Greene, 2015); engaging students who are the hardest to reach; and explicit attention to childhood trauma and trauma-informed practice from a social work perspective (Wolpov et al., 2009, 2016). This project, titled Transforming Learning Communities (TLC), was informed with input from partners, including veteran teachers, school counseling staff, policy advocates, and recruitment and staffing personnel from the local public school system. The TLC project intended to better prepare candidates to establish and maintain productive learning environments by fostering learning communities that affirm and support diverse students, including those affected by trauma, through course redesign, field experience supports, and action research.

The TLC team’s primary task for the project was to revise an undergraduate teacher preparation course, Building Learning Communities (BLC), that was originally designed to engage pre-service teacher candidates to understand effective approaches to build and maintain learning environments that are academically, socially, physically and emotionally safe and productive. This course is one of the first taken by students enrolled in the undergraduate program and is taught onsite at one of the University’s partnership schools. As mentioned, candidates often refer to it as the classroom management class. The revisions to BLC’s focus on building learning communities were based on foundational principles of trauma-informed practices. Specifically, these included intentional and explicit foci on candidates’ constructions of their learning communities as trauma-sensitive. As a result of this shift, instruction emphasized creating classroom structures that are flexible, consistent, and responsive to the needs of all students, particularly those impacted by trauma.

Classrooms as Communities

We framed classroom communities as trauma-informed to direct candidates toward a philosophical shift in how they think about students’ behaviors and actions that, in turn, translates into decisions about how, as teachers, they establish and maintain a productive and safe learning environment. Through the inclusion of intentional content and structures around trauma-informed practices and asset-based frames, we aimed to support middle and high school teacher candidates’ development of foundational perspectives and understandings which recognize their needs to (re-)consider approaches to community building while asking fundamental questions that challenge assumptions about students and their experiences.

Educators who build and communicate a sense of community within classrooms create welcoming and productive learning spaces to benefit students and teachers. In these environments, students are more engaged, contributing to their sense of motivation and competence (Watkins, 2005). Calls for community within educational spaces harken back to the works of both Dewey and Vygotsky as these scholars viewed learning as a social process (Osterman, 2000). In P-12 classrooms, with explicit attention to community, students are involved participants who see themselves as members of a larger community. Through their relationships with others, in turn, they view their classmates as active, contributing, and valued partners (Watkins, 2004). Watkins (2005) explains how typical approaches to learning in teacher-centered classrooms, where the teacher transmits knowledge to students are replaced within community approaches, where “social relations and knowledge creation” (p. 48) are fundamental to learning. Watson et al. (2019) acknowledge learning occurs in community and note the critical nature of the teacher’s role in not only building such a community but also in sustaining it over time by fostering trusting and supportive relationships among members.

We also recognize challenges in building relationships and community with students whose prior experiences with teachers are negative while affirming the significance of the community building process for students’ socio-emotional and academic learning. To that end, teacher candidates need instruction modelling practices supportive of classrooms

as learning communities (D'Souza, 2017). Researchers have demonstrated how coursework can be a place where candidates experience community building firsthand. Cooper (2003) links community building efforts to positive outcomes with students. She also describes her efforts to build community in a pre-service course by modeling specific actions candidates might take in their classrooms. D'Souza (2017) also modeled strategies with candidates while connecting research and practice in a middle school methods course. Drawing from the work of Dweck (2007, 2010), Marzano (2003), and Rathvon (2008), D'Souza (2017) modeled strategies such as greeting students by name, attending to classroom arrangement, connecting with students' lives outside the course, and engaging in active learning. Candidates recognized these actions affected their learning and sense of belonging, viewing these actions as relevant for their future classrooms. Further, Gillies (2017) suggests modeling positive and supportive relationships in a classroom community at the college level "make(s) formal, complex environments seem more academically and socially supportive, which enables students to feel like they belong in higher education" (Johnson et al., 2007; as cited by Gillies, 2017, p. 20). As part of their own experiences, their sense of belonging within the pre-service classroom supports candidates' conceptualizations of the communities they wish to build with their students in the future.

During the first semester, we established baseline data, using The Trauma Survey (Crosby et al., 2016) as a formative assessment, while creating a sustainable course design to provide candidates with opportunities and tools supporting their ongoing learning, reflection, and action toward more inclusive classrooms. Instructors delivered content on trauma-informed teaching via four modules spread throughout the 14-week course with additional discussions woven in throughout the semester. Modules included directed readings, lectures, class activities and discussions, and reflective assignments focused on recognizing psychological trauma in childhood, and its multifaceted impact on youth functioning with ways include to address these in classroom settings.

The two teacher educators were listed as co-instructors of record for the course and were responsible for grading. The social work educator and the English and rhetoric educator were listed as instructors but did not have grading responsibilities. The course is included in an IRB allowing self-study for teacher preparation coursework that requires protections against coercion. Instructors for courses using the self-study protocol must explain the self-study process to candidates, reviewing an invitation to participate included in syllabi. The invitation explains instructional tasks and assignments may be used as data, and self-study is used by the program as a mechanism to improve courses and, more broadly, to advance teacher preparation. Candidates who chose not to participate in self-study can complete an opt-out form indicating their wishes. These forms are collected independently by an administrative assistant throughout the semester. Instructors do not know which candidates chose to opt-out or not to participate until after course grades are posted. Thus, data analysis procedures cannot and did not occur until the course ended. Candidates completed separate consent letters during the professional learning community semesters.

Positionality

The instructors include a Black social work educator, a Black English and rhetoric educator, and two white teacher educators. We all identify as female. Together, we form a multi-racial and multi-disciplinary group of scholar-activists with varying levels of relevant experience in schools and classrooms.

Participants

During the first semester, 17 candidates enrolled in the redesigned BLC course and participated in the research. Of the candidates, 12 out of 17 continued into the second semester PLC and research, and seven remained as members in the PLC and in the research for the student teaching semester. Six of these completed the full student teaching experience and one withdrew. Among the candidates in the first semester course, two identified as Biracial, one as Black, and the remaining as white. In the third semester, participating candidates identify as Black (n=1), Biracial (n=1), and the remaining five identify as white. We do not identify gender because of the low number of participants. Participants chose their own pseudonyms.

Data Sources and Collection

During the first semester, data include course assignments (see Appendix) along with candidates' reflections on their experiences. During the second semester, we facilitated the monthly PLC meetings to continue candidates' engagement with trauma-informed perspectives after the course. Using both written and verbal prompts, candidates used stimulated recall (Heikonen et al., 2017) in focus groups to revisit the topics and assignments from the first semester.

In the third semester, candidates met in the PLC focus groups to reflect on trauma-informed practices, and each of the seven candidates completed Critical Incident Descriptions (Angelides, 2001) twice; once at the midpoint of the student teaching semester and again at the end. The Critical Incident Descriptions were intended to engage candidates in critical reflection of elements of their student teaching, such as classroom climate, the behaviors and intentions of students, and the assumptions candidates may make about each.

Specifically, to deconstruct their assumptions and actions, candidates identified incidents in their classrooms and responded to prompts about the incidents. Consistent with Akpovo's (2019) perspective, we believed having candidates choose the incident, instead of the instructors, and prompting them to explain the significance of the incident could identify candidates' perspectives of why the incident was instructive to them. Akpovo (2019) suggests that "it is not the event itself that is important; it is how the teacher interprets the event, and the resulting actions and reactions based on these insights" (p. 148).

In Critical Incident Descriptions, each candidate described four different scenarios. Candidates described their perspectives and reflections on interactions with students who (a) acted out; and (b) shut down, as these are identified in the literature as behaviors presented by students who have experienced trauma (Baker et al., 2008). Importantly, they had to describe one incident of a student acting out that ended with a positive resolution as well as one incident of acting out that ended with a negative resolution. They repeated the process describing incidents of a student shutting down; one with a positive resolution and one with a negative resolution. To understand how candidates' perceptions changed during their first semester and again during student teaching, we asked them to complete the School Faculty/Staff Trauma Survey (Crosby et al., 2016).

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using directed content analysis, a structured process using existing theory for predetermined codes (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), with particular attention to thought, learning, and human development in the context of social and cultural interaction (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996). Along with attention to language and development, the transdisciplinary theories used to design the study directly informed the process of analysis and interpretation of findings.

Data analysis was a recursive process that began while we taught the course, prior to confirming the precise data set we would analyze. That is, as we assessed and discussed candidates' performance in the course and on their assignments, we logged our ideas and our questions about candidates' developing perceptions of trauma-informed teaching. More formal data analysis began once the course ended. We determined our final data set from the course, based on the candidates who had not opted out of self-study. Drawing from Saldaña (2015), we coded in two stages. As part of our first cycle codes, we applied codes across multiple passes of the data attending specifically to where candidates described that their thinking changed or where we saw shifts in their thinking. Our second cycle of coding included closed coding derived from our theoretical framework; returning to data chunked through those first codes, we next asked: what language did candidates use and how did their interactions with the content of trauma-informed practice, along with their interactions with students influence or change their thinking about building learning communities from trauma-informed perspectives? We reviewed our earlier logs written during the instruction along with the additional data. From all of these sources, we developed the categories around which we organized the findings: increasing awareness of trauma, exploring relationship building from a trauma-informed perspective, adding teacher moves, and reframing teacher behaviors.

Findings

The findings revealed how candidates shifted their perspectives of classroom communities as they recognized their need, as teachers, to be trauma-informed. With our attention to development in the context of social and cultural interaction (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996) the findings illuminate how, throughout the study, they co-constructed those perspectives.

Candidates Developing Perceptions of Trauma-informed Teaching

As part of our action research and to inform us, as instructors, whether candidates were developing perceptions of trauma-informed teaching, they completed the School Faculty/Staff Trauma Survey (Crosby et al., 2016) at the beginning and at the end of the course as well as at the end of the third semester after student teaching. Responses to the Trauma Survey administered the second week of class during the first semester and again at the end of that semester demonstrated candidates' changes in their responses to questions:

- *I can identify traumatic responses in students (11 or 64.7% agreed initially)*
- *I am mindful of how my verbal expressions impact a traumatized child (all 17 students agreed initially)*
- *I am mindful of the way my body language and nonverbal expressions impact a traumatized child (14 or 82.4% agreed initially)*

By the end of the class, all students enrolled agreed with these statements.

The other data sources revealed the nuances around these statements and how candidates' perspectives across each semester honed in around four actions. These actions serve as themes with respect to their perceptions of trauma-informed teaching within learning communities: a.) increasing awareness of trauma (distinct from trauma-informed teaching); b.) relationship building; c.) adding teacher moves; and d.) reframing teacher behaviors.

Candidates' reflections revealed how they constructed their understandings of these actions by framing course content and field experiences in support of learning trauma-informed practices. Candidates connected these to other relevant topics around classroom community. They also recognized that trauma-sensitive practices are "often overlooked . . . but teachers should always keep it in mind when managing a class . . . recognize signs of trauma and avoid actions that may re-trigger trauma." They continued to note that signs of trauma may be overlooked by teachers, and, in later semesters, noted potential instances in classrooms where that may have been the case. That said, as researchers who no longer had routine contact with candidates in a course, we wondered if they were inferring trauma as the single explanation for the behavior and academic challenges they encountered in classrooms.

During the first semester, while they were enrolled in the course, candidates' mentions of trauma were specific (and often mandatory because of the directions for assignments), and they referenced resources including readings and discussions. During the two later semesters, candidates often continued to explicitly mention trauma-informed practices without our prompting. At other times, they discussed topics that included responses that were often trauma-informed or trauma-sensitive without explicitly mentioning trauma. For example, in one of her Critical Incident Descriptions during student teaching, Jenny [pseudonym] wished that she had de-escalated a conflict with a student rather than escalating it. Jenny's reflection on this critical incident was similar to others' shifts and recognition of the significance of their decisions and actions. In short, Jenny's developing perceptions of community building from a trauma-informed perspective changed to include recognition that her actions might re-traumatize.

Increasing Awareness of Trauma

During the first semester, candidates enrolled in a course with intentionally explicit information regarding the pervasiveness and indicators of trauma, the impact of trauma exposure, and the responses to students' behavior that support students within learning communities and avoid re-traumatization. Candidates routinely documented that, as a

result of exposure to this information, they were aware of the signs of trauma, and they acknowledged that they needed to act accordingly. Hermione exemplifies this recognition of awareness in order to respond during a first-semester assignment where she also shares her perspective and owns her responsibility:

There are many types of trauma signs that span externally and internally. I feel like it's so easy for a child to fall through the cracks and go by unnoticed by those who can help. Not every child will react the same way or show equal signs. I need to be prepared to spot a potential child who is in need.

In describing her awareness of trauma, Hermione incorporates several key ideas from the course models about how trauma may manifest in students' behaviors in the classroom and positions herself to respond to a hypothetical student who has experienced trauma.

In later semesters, candidates also revisited what they learned about trauma awareness, why this was significant for them, and they articulated how they might respond as a result. For example, in the second semester, Anna reflected on what she learned about trauma informed practices and shared that "learning to understand how trauma affects students (by) looking from their perspective can help (teachers) be sensitive to their feelings/triggers." Anna recalled what she learned about how trauma may manifest in students' behaviors in the classroom and why that awareness was important.

During the final PLC conversation of the semester following the class, candidates were asked what they were still thinking about from the class. Margo responded:

I really liked learning about the trauma-informed teaching, because that's something that no one has really mentioned in any of my education classes before that and it's such an important thing . . . we're learning research behind it and how to affect every student and show that you care about that student, because you never know what's going on in their lives and that's so important.

At that point in the program, just prior to student teaching, Margo had completed almost all of her teacher preparation courses and related clinical experiences. Her awareness of trauma held throughout the second semester. That said, Margo's appreciation for exposure to the content which she described, "no one has really mentioned in any of my education classes before," reflected a trend across the candidates. They had never encountered information about the causes and impact of trauma, and, consequently, they needed time to process.

After she student taught during the third semester, Hermione reconsidered her earlier writings about awareness of trauma, including from the first semester:

I knew the right answer but I didn't know why that was the right answer. I think after having all the experience we have now, I can take this and push it in the right direction in a way that I understand why I'm doing it, and not just answering a question.

Over time, she realized she needed more than information and awareness about trauma. She also required additional opportunities for analysis and experience. As an instructional team, while we were encouraged by candidates' increasing awareness, we remained concerned that they were using trauma as a blanket explanation for everything they experienced in the classroom, with trauma-informed practices as the remedy. Had we potentially replaced one set of assumptions with another? We wondered if the central focus on community building was, in their minds, not as significant as the trauma-informed practices.

Relationship Building

During the first semester course, each candidate wrote a plan for their future classrooms that incorporated attention to student and teacher relationships, relationships with families, and relationships among peers. While they described relationships as key to safe, supportive learning communities, they did not initially frame relationship building specifically as a component of a classroom-based response to trauma. For example, in her plan, Melissa discussed relationships as one of the "core principles" of her philosophy of education. Similarly, Rose mentioned how important

she deemed relationships as she wanted her classroom to be an accepting environment. During student teaching, Rose believed that building rapport and connections was a proactive step toward creating and maintaining community, as well as a tool for addressing challenging student issues.

Later, during her student teaching semester, Rose more explicitly connected relationships in the classroom to trauma-informed practices. Rose states, as good practice, “I noticed that just making personal connections and building relationships was good.” She further considered how those relationships may have helped avert potentially problematic situations by indicating, “When I could joke with them or laugh with them, I was able to make that connection, and they respected me. And so then they would not go off into huge behavior issues.” Over time, and with experience, Rose’s perspectives on community became more explicit in terms of what relationships entailed.

Adding Teacher Moves

Many of the moves or actions candidates planned or performed during student teaching incorporated what they learned about the trauma-informed modules in the first semester as well as the broader concepts about building learning communities from the course as part of their response to trauma. For example, in an assignment completed during the course, Jessica planned to enact several different practices to ensure her classroom was trauma-informed. She wrote, “I will build a community [. . .] learn who my students are, be culturally and gender inclusive, have trauma sensitive practices [. . .] manage student behavior and manage instructional activities.” She also intended to create calm transitions and to make the shift from asking “what’s wrong with the child” to “what’s happening here.” Reflecting on her original plan after she student taught, Jessica realized that a great deal of the trauma-informed practices she planned for were actually plans for what she would do as a teacher. She also reflected on her practice and regretted, “I probably should have implemented these a little bit better when I was student teaching.” In essence, Jessica realized honest reflection is critical for breaking away from her earlier, more naïve conceptions in order to replace them with more grounded stances and explicit actions.

Reframing Teacher Behaviors

Candidates frequently mentioned they needed to avoid behaviors used as a means of surveillance or to connect with students. They realized they how these behaviors may trigger or re-traumatize students and named how they intended to reframe typical teacher reactions to potentially charged classroom scenarios. CJ was explicit during the first semester about his intention to “actively resist re-traumatization and escalation.” He described his plan by saying that he needed:

To be conscious of my actions and try to avoid those that may trigger trauma. For example, touching a student's shoulder can retrigger trauma if they've been sexually assaulted in the past . . . Escalation is another thing to watch out for . . . we as teachers have to understand that we could escalate situations by calling students out before knowing why they are doing what they're doing.

Like Jessica, after student teaching, CJ also recognized the need for teachers to revisit their earlier ideas, and if needed, revisit their plans and reframe their behaviors. He explained how important he believed learning about and implementing trauma-informed teaching is for teachers, recognizing it as a process requiring ongoing work. During a focus group in the final semester CJ acknowledged “The best thing we can do is continue to have these conversations and continue to revisit what we know about trauma-informed teaching” as mechanisms to support reframing teacher behaviors.

Constructing Perspectives

While they were enrolled in the class, candidates used the language and examples from the readings and discussions. Later, and particularly while student teaching, candidates were less likely to invoke the specific term trauma-informed. Instead, descriptions of their thoughts and practices were consistent with trauma-informed practices without specifically invoking the term. For example, during the PLCs in the second semester, candidates continued to focus on teacher actions, including deescalating situations, noticing facial expressions and body language of students, and

considering and re-considering their assumptions about the causes of student behaviors. Candidates reflected on what behaviors and decisions they might do differently next time they encountered a similar situation. They also found the opportunities to reflect on what they learned during the first semester in later PLCs, a practice they found helpful. Katie spoke to this, explaining, “I loved the trauma-sensitive practices conversations. These talks weren’t always particularly fun, but they were so important. It was a huge reminder to try and understand why certain behavior manifests, rather than condemning it as ‘misbehavior.’”

Candidates positioned trauma-informed teaching within the context of other elements of their communities, preparing to put what they learned into practice. During the PLC, one candidate shared, “I feel that as long as I consider the themes individual identity, a safe community, equitable opportunities, cultural and gender inclusiveness, and how to deal with trauma, and as long as I consider action steps for each.” As instructors, these types of responses referring to trauma-informed practices as a component of community building, helped us reconsider how we position trauma-informed practices. They reaffirmed our need to facilitate a shift in candidates’ thinking as opposed to providing them with prescriptive tools. Another candidate remarked in a focus group:

No one has really mentioned [trauma informed teaching] in any of my education classes before that and it’s such an important thing . . . and it makes me so hopeful for the future, because we’re all gonna (sic) be great trauma-informed teachers.

While we are cautiously optimistic that the shifts in their thinking will continue to take place, we continue to reflect, rethink, and revise how we can support candidates to create learning communities that truly transform.

Limitations

Limitations to this study include the small sample size, as well as the use of self-reported data. It is also important to highlight we did not have the capacity to conduct classroom observations of teaching during the student teaching semester. Therefore, data do not speak to the quality of the relationships developed between candidates and students nor to teaching practices. Understanding this limitation, we focused on how candidates develop and construct perceptions about trauma-informed teaching. We also recognize that attrition complicates the analysis as perhaps those who chose to continue in the study were more likely to “buy-in” to our central purpose. Furthermore, aspects of the course itself created an additional limitation—while field placements during the semester were developmentally appropriate, candidates had limited interactions with students in the classroom.

Discussion and Implications

This project was conceptualized as an intentional, long-term approach to teacher education around community building from a trauma-informed perspective. candidates revisited topics as they co-constructed what they learned in a first semester course throughout the second and third semesters of their programs. the through use of action research within practitioner inquiry explicated these processes. the documentation and evidence from this study, as analyzed and described by the transdisciplinary team, contributes to continuing course revisions. this study, along with other investigations of preservice education coursework, raises questions about how candidates’ come to understand classroom communities that are trauma-informed. additionally, we wonder how those understandings are shaped by the additional emphasis on trauma-informed practices.

Findings show teacher candidates felt more knowledgeable about childhood trauma as well as how to incorporate this knowledge into their teaching philosophy and practices. Importantly, candidates also framed trauma-informed practices from a non-deficit perspective (in some cases) by connecting these to other topics from the class, such as exclusionary discipline practices, discipline disparities, and the school to prison pipeline.

Further, with additional field experiences and new knowledge from other coursework, they benefited from revisiting the purposes and content of trauma-informed teaching after the class, through intentional structures such as PLCs. In

essence, learning to be a trauma-informed teacher, like learning to teach, entails a long-term process that integrates information, analysis, practice, and reflection. Learning to be a trauma-informed teacher also requires a commitment to considerations of the larger implications of teacher actions.

Research has illustrated the need for exposing teaching professionals to this content earlier in their careers and even at the pre-service level, (Ko et al., 2008; Thomas et al., 2018). We found the content appropriate to introduce when candidates are first developing ideas about community building. By adopting a framework from social work (SAMHSA, 2014), we provided teacher candidates content to support shifts in their thinking.

Through our ongoing analysis and reflection on the data, we returned to the body of research about the power of the apprenticeship of observation (Lortie, 1975/2002) and the challenges teacher educators experience when they urge candidates to teach differently from how they themselves were taught. We recognized, unlike their counterparts in social work education, teacher candidates likely do not have prior knowledge about trauma or of trauma-informed practices. Furthermore, it is highly unlikely such practices were part of their prior experiences in schools. During their “apprenticeships” as P-12 students, candidates recognized “problems” in classrooms and with students’ behavior. However, they do not enter teacher preparation with a framework that is trauma-informed that might support alternative explanations for their observations.

After reflection on our instruction and the data, we recognized acknowledgement of trauma is significant for candidates. Furthermore, it is not only foundational, but also frequently “triggering.” Some have personal experience with trauma and traumatic events. Many candidates shared they had not been exposed to the research around the prevalence of trauma, similar to other studies of TIP in teacher preparation (Davies & Berger, 2019; McClain, 2021). The introduction of that information forces them to focus and, perhaps, linger on the nature of the trauma. We wonder if they then over-attribute trauma to classroom scenarios.

Not every student in schools has experienced significant trauma, and we remain concerned about candidates’ assumptions around trauma. That said, we continue to hold that it is vital that through teacher education, candidates establish a pattern of thinking and a philosophical stance—rather than a set of tips—on trauma-informed teaching practices to frame classrooms as communities from a trauma-informed perspective. It is also imperative that instructors aid candidates toward shifts that include understanding the complexity of trauma, and an awareness of their own assumptions about students. These shifts should include consideration of other aspects of learning to teach to transform candidates’ perspectives of community in support of each learner. This study provides context for the ways in which discussion and reflection of learning communities that are trauma-informed can occur. We posit that endeavors to move teacher candidates toward such reflection and change requires intentional approaches and further research and encourages teacher educators and researchers to be innovative in these efforts.

In the time following the initial revisions to the course and the analysis of the action research data described here, we have engaged in continuous reflection and modifications to the course through routinely scheduled discussions among the instructors and partners. At the beginning of the project, we introduced candidates to a broad overview of the prevalence and effects of trauma on students and their learning; now we include focused attention to the implications for teaching practices. Through our data analysis we determined specific gaps in the instruction and located needs within candidates’ preparation. Specifically, while we found that our core modification, comprised of the introduction to trauma awareness as a foundation to building community, began to shift candidates’ thinking, we needed additional modifications along with more deliberately designed tasks to engage candidates in processing what they learned, and better preparing them to take the theoretical elements of trauma-informed approaches to their practice as teachers.

We became strategic about our pace of instruction; we devoted more time to targeted reflection, giving candidates space to digest what they were learning about trauma from a teaching and from a personal perspective. We also recognized that the introduction of content on trauma was triggering for some candidates. Additionally, we identified the need to create a more race-conscious approach to trauma that included structural considerations of the circumstances in which trauma occurs and how racism shapes the conditions in which students experience trauma (Alvarez, 2020).

As mentioned previously, we now designate more in-class time for candidates to reflect and process, and we provide tools to support them. Those reflections followed deeper dives on the impact of trauma, and the implications of that impact for classroom learning and behavior, along with more substantive resources and introspection into the connections with the teachers' biases around race and ethnicity, and the role of teacher biases in the school to prison pipeline.

We also modified the critical incident description, originally used to capture candidates' reflection on their actions during student teaching, for use in the course as means to engage them through the processes of building learning communities with a trauma-informed approach earlier in their programs. We also added a module on self-care, adapted from social work education (Wolpow et al., 2016), because we recognized many candidates had also experienced trauma and were themselves struggling with mental health issues such as stress, anxiety, and depression which would potentially affect their capacities to support students once they became teachers (Chambers Mack et al., 2019). Though we know we must continue to recognize, problematize, analyze, and revise, we do believe candidates emerge from the course more informed and better prepared to transform their learning communities to support students who have experienced trauma.

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M. Shelley Thomas

University of Louisville

M. Shelley Thomas, Ed.D., is an Associate Professor of Elementary, Middle, and Secondary Teacher Education and co-Director of the Consortium for Transdisciplinary Social Justice Research at the University of Louisville. Her research explores transdisciplinary approaches to pervasive problems in teacher education.



Penny B. Howell

University of Louisville

Penny B. Howell, Ed.D. is Professor of Middle Level Education at the University of Louisville where she is the Professor in Residence at the University's Signature Partnership Middle School. Dr. Howell's research is focused on middle level teacher education and policies related to certification.



Shantel Crosby

University of Louisville

Shantel Crosby, Ph.D., LCSW is an Associate Professor in the Kent School of Social Work & Family Science at the University of Louisville. She is also a practicing mental health clinician. Dr. Crosby's on-going research focuses on the intersections of race, gender, trauma and racial trauma exposure among youth.



Khirsten L. Scott

University of Pittsburgh

Khirsten L. Scott, PhD is an assistant professor at the University of Pittsburgh and director of the Western Pennsylvania Writing Project, DBLAC, and HYPE Media. She is a community-driven educator who works across rhetorical theory and writing studies, digital and Black studies, and critical pedagogy.



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