Shifting Our Lens:

Practical Trauma-informed Approaches for Educators

Social-emotional learning. Diversity and inclusion. Trauma-informed education. These are buzzwords in education today, with interest growing as educators seek to support students and families amidst the realities of COVID-19's ongoing ramifications.[1] Teachers and administrators of small schools and multigrade classrooms need practical solutions that align with our Seventh-day Adventist worldview and educational philosophy.

We (the authors) share the privilege of working with young people and teachers worldwide. Still, we have noticed that in the reality of our broken world, our students (and, when we're honest, even we ourselves) are having a hard time concentrating on academic subjects and following through on tasks. The individual realities of various forms of household dysfunction, abuse, and neglect,[2] community violence, political strife, racial tensions, natural disasters, and consistent exposure to what may be minimized as "lesser traumas" occur at an alarming rate.[3] Additionally, various people groups have experienced shared historical trauma or collective traumas. Certain categories of school children (racial, gender, special-needs, neurodivergent learners, etc.) also have diverse experiences that are shared and sometimes unique. All these experiences affect people's brains, biology, bodies, beliefs, and behaviors.[4]

Perhaps we are like the Israelites in Exodus 5 and 6, who were so distressed by the burden of making the same number of bricks without straw being provided that when God sent

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His redemptive message through Moses, they *could not hear it* (vs. 9). While various Bible translations use other terminology, they consistently show a picture of people so devastated, with such broken spirits that they could not even hear the message of deliverance.

When I (I.W.S.) worked as a child-and-family therapist prior to becoming a university educator, young people with devastating personal stories would be referred to me. The impact of the stressors on their nervous system would cause them to not only have difficulties learning but also managing their emotions which, in the long term, led to significant potential for many harmful conditions. The brain is negatively impacted as cortisol hormone levels rise. Although cortisol production is necessary for healthy body function and useful in helping the body respond to stress, in recent years, we have been seeing levels that are toxic.[5] and can produce a variety of symptoms such as anxiety, depression, digestive problems, headaches, muscle tension and pain, heart disease, high blood pressure, and stroke, sleep problems, weight gain, and memory and concentration impairment.[6]

As a teacher in a one-room school, I (T.B.) feel this! Multigrade classrooms filled with multiple sad faces, negative thinking, insecurities, aggression, and off-putting behaviors paint only a small picture of what I experience year after year. Even after serving as an administrator and teacher for more than 20 years, I never get used to meeting the challenge of receiving new students into my classroom, knowing they will come with a wide range of mindsets, experiences, and backgrounds. As an Adventist educator, I know I play a vital role in how diversity is addressed within my small-school classroom.

I (C.G.) have had the unique opportunity to grapple with the realities that my co-author (T.B.) shared as a middle school and high school teacher, as well as responsibilities in preparing preservice teachers and in-service educators to meet the widespread need for trauma-informed approaches with students. Hope is possible, particularly when teachers receive help by being empowered with tools and strategies for implementation. It is with this understanding that Seventh-day Adventist educators can approach the diverse needs of a variety of groups while allowing for individual differences and experiences. This is the heart of trauma-informed diversity and inclusion work.

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Scope of the Problem

According to Dan Siegel, "Trauma is the word used to mean overwhelming experience/s" or "experience/s we have that overwhelms our capacity to cope."[7] Human brains are responding to chronic stress, which is at historic levels, due to the current state of our world. The raised cortisol levels are not allowing people's bodies to move from a condition of crisis response into a rest and digest/restore response that is so vital for learning and social relationships.

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network states that children who have experienced trauma can experience a variety of responses, including intense and ongoing emotional upset, depressive symptoms or anxiety, behavioral changes, difficulties with self-regulation, problems relating to others or forming attachments, regression or loss of previously acquired skills, attention and academic difficulties, nightmares, difficulty sleeping and eating, and physical symptoms, such as aches and pains.

Teenagers may use drugs or alcohol, behave in risky ways, or engage in unhealthy sexual activity.[8] "Higher level brain growth is stunted, leaving some children at as little as half their age in cognitive functions. Lower-level brain functions, which control instinctive flight or fight responses, overdevelop as a response to trauma."[9]

The book chapter on trauma-informed restorative responses from *Revealing Jesus in the Learning Environment* states:

"Most trauma occurs in the context of relationships. Abuse, neglect, violence—these are all inflicted by another person, often someone close. Unfortunately, in this broken world relationships can often bring about more brokenness. The students that you have in your classes may have distorted perceptions of themselves, others, and even God due to how they have been treated. They may be suffering the lasting consequences of trauma from a relationship that was meant to build them up rather than tear them down."[10]

It is not uncommon for trauma to reveal itself within the foundations of learning and the learning process itself. Students who have unresolved trauma may have difficulty processing oral and written communication and thus will benefit from receiving instruction in multiple modalities. Executive function (the mental processes and cognitive functioning that help one regulate behavior, remember, plan, focus, and think) is also often a struggle for many students. Explicit instruction, visual representation,

guided practice of procedures, and step-by-step goal completion are critical to their success. Understanding cause-and-effect relationships can also be very difficult for such students.[11]

Understanding these issues may also offer insight into why students may not respond well to classroom-management strategies that rely heavily on a consequences-driven approach without the added support of retraining the brain to respond differently in the future. Students may have difficulties with transitions within or between subjects or be unable to sustain focus on their academic work. This lack of focus does not result from student inattention; rather, it is a hypervigilant focus on what may appear to us to be all the wrong things. Our students may be paying attention to their environment and the smallest of changes in the tone, cadence, body language, or variety of sensory input around them to ensure their own safety. (For alternative strategies, we recommend looking into Trust-based Relational Intervention out of the Karyn Purvis Institute of Child Development (http://tcu.edu), Lori Desautels' work on Connection Over Compliance (http:revelationsineducation.com), and Ross Greene's work on Collaborative Problem Solving (http://www.cpsconnection.com).

Shift in perspective

In the face of the staggering impact of trauma, Sandra Bloom[12] is credited for changing the perspective of asking "What's wrong with you?" into asking "What's happened to you?" This shift will revolutionize how we work with emotionally hurting people. The trauma-informed approach implements Howard Bath's[13] three pillars to achieve a healing and growing environment: *safety, connections*, and *managing emotions.*

When we consider our small-school classrooms, especially the one-room classroom, it can be overwhelming for even an experienced teacher to meet the needs of students who may be experiencing the aforementioned challenges. Such children must feel safe for their brains and bodies to develop and heal. Deep connections or relationships, especially with key adults, are essential to growth. And the recognition and management of emotions are critical to well-being throughout one's lifespan.[14] To support students culturally and socio-emotionally, as well as be sensitive to their trauma, care and concern must come first—before curriculum and content. It is within this whole-person development that students are prepared "for the joy of service in this world and for the higher joy of wider service in the world to come."[15]

Implementation of the principles

As we seek to incorporate these pillars into an already demanding structure, we must lean on Christ's wisdom, success, and strength (see Philippians 4:13; and *Education*, page 19). Countless strategies might be considered for each individual classroom setting. Still, teachers must continue to keep the three pillars in mind when deciding if the strategies they have chosen will be effective for their students. The authors and others have used the following strategies to effectively address the needs of these students:

Safety

Working hard to make sure students are physically safe (i.e., using various drills, COVID protocols, etc.) is key, but developing an environment where all students *feel* safe is also important. Be sure to intentionally build relationships and rapport with each student. Learn as much as possible about how every student thinks and what makes your students feel safe.

Create predictable schedules and routines (and contingency plans for situations when flexibility is needed).

Schools are typically very good at developing a structure through schedules and routines. Build on that strength by creating a strategy to use when things need to change. For example, when introducing the schedule for the year, make sure to post it in your classroom and talk about times when flexibility will be needed. Have specific color cards laminated to represent these specific times, and practice putting a card next to the place on the daily schedule poster where flexibility is needed. For example, a blue "flexibility card" could be placed next to the "outside at lunch" part of the schedule to show that lunch recess will take place in the gym due to weather conditions. Reassuring students that the teacher has a plan for the unexpected and specific physical actions for them to take when the unexpected occurs will make them feel confident about their continuing safety and security.

Expect unexpected responses

When students experience traumatic life experiences, this can trigger behaviors that teachers might otherwise label as "challenging." Educators must be ready to face any unexpected responses when interacting with students. Preparation for such responses can help teachers turn a potentially disastrous situation into a learning experience. For example, a teacher can commit to asking the question "What's the need behind this student's behavior?" With this mindset, teachers can identify the five to seven most common challenging behaviors (i.e. giving up/lack of caring, sassy responses, refusals that quickly move to anger or crying, students running out of the classroom) that are occurring in their classrooms and more proactively identify a set of phrases and actions to address those situations. Additionally, as teachers get to know their individual students and their likely responses, they can work with the child and the family to identify specific responses that will support the student so he or she may return to learning.

Small-school classrooms can quickly turn hectic as the teacher tries to meet the many instructional needs of each day successfully. Moving from one group to the next, there is always a risk of losing a personal connection to what is going on with individual students.

Connection

Relationships between the teacher and students can significantly affect student resilience[16] and academics.[17] According to Perry and Szalavitz, "It is people that change people, not programs.")[18] One way to do this is to conduct daily check-ins with students. For example, ask students to use the metaphor of an engine, check in with how they are doing, and select the appropriate color—blue for "too slow," green for "just right," and red for "too fast" (see The Alert Program: https://www.alertprogram.com/teachers/). Alternatively, students could indicate how they are doing by giving thumbs up, down, to the side, or by identifying on a chart what most accurately describes their state of mind.

When a classroom consists of several grade, age, and ability levels, surveys can identify problem areas in students' lives and what makes them uncomfortable, after which the teacher or counselor can conference with them individually to be sure the survey results are accurate, and then take appropriate action to solve the problems identified.

Implement meaningful interactions

Small-school classrooms can quickly turn hectic as the teacher tries to meet the many instructional needs of each day successfully. Moving from one group to the next, there is always a risk of losing a personal connection to what is going on with individual students. Here are three strategies to help small-school educators implement meaningful interactions with their students:

Strategy No. 1: Focus on changing how you give directions or respond. You can reduce problematic behaviors with your patience and tone. Teachers make up 50 percent of every interaction with a student. *For example*: Your class is working on a group project, and some students do not want to participate. By choosing to be patient and taking the time to ask why, you

may be surprised to discover that they show you ways the project can become more engaging.

Strategy No. 2: Avoid authoritarian directives. Although we as teachers are the authority in our classrooms, we don't have to constantly try to prove it. We are there to serve and teach, so we must value every student's feelings. Children can sense when someone cares only about being in charge and not about how they feel, so we must avoid power struggles whenever possible. We must pause and consider how we say things and how our responses make others feel. *For example*: Write down the carefully worded directions on a sticky note and place them gently on the student's desk to avoid a scene while at the same time accomplishing the instructions being given. Allow a generous wait time for the instructions to be followed.

Strategy No. 3: Give each student a sense of control in decision making. This is when we can use our authority to guide students into good decision-making. Sharing decision-making power with our students enables them to own their own choices and commitments. Embed choice in your directions. *For example,* instead of saying, "Line up with the other students," you can offer them a choice by asking, "Would you like to go to your assigned position in the line or to the back?" Choice options should be carefully worded so students learn the benefit of making good decisions.

Build rapport

When schools have intimate classroom structures and a small student population, building rapport with students and getting to know each of them as individuals will build trust. Here are a couple of strategies that have worked well for us:

Strategy No. 1: Greeting students daily by name is a very simple strategy but is easily forgotten. Every student, especially our traumatized students, should be called by name every day at school. This should take

place first thing in the morning. You can have a meeting time to allow all students to greet one another. This will give you the opportunity to greet the students with whom you are particularly looking to build a stronger relationship. Teach the class to greet with love, care, and respect.

Strategy No. 2: McKibben's 2-by-10 rule[19] is a strategy that can be used specifically for students who need to develop, as soon as possible, a trusting relationship with their teacher in order for effective learning to take place. To get to know them, talk to them for two minutes a day for 10 days in a row about topics unrelated to academics or behavior. Alternatively, if there are many students who would benefit from this strategy, but the teacher lacks the time to implement this with each one individually, a group two-minute targeted journaling time could be used. For 10 days, the students take two minutes each day to journal how they feel that day. The teacher then responds to the students by writing in their journals outside of class time. This trust-building strategy should be repeated several times throughout the year, especially after students exhibit anger or frustration and after school vacations and long weekends.

Managing Emotions

Teach emotions and self-regulation strategies

Actively teach and reinforce what students are already doing to help calm themselves when they are feeling

very excited or upset about something (i.e., spinning, shaking their leg or moving from side to side, covering their mouth with their hand, fidgeting with something, etc.). Introduce new strategies that can further this goal (i.e., box breathing,[20] humming a tune, drinking ice water, doing wall push-ups, etc.). Give students ample opportunity to practice a variety of strategies and to develop their own personalized list to refer to in the future.

Change the channel

As trusting relationships are built between teacher and student, it becomes easier to direct students away from behavior that hinders learning. In a small-school setting, the teacher can train the entire school or classroom how to help one another stay focused on learning.

Sometimes in our small-classroom settings, it seems easier to separate and isolate students. Unfortunately, during these breaks, students may dwell on negative memories, current stressors, angry thoughts, or worries, which can be counterproductive.

It can be helpful for students to learn that they can "change the channel" within their minds in order to focus better at school. Explain that their brain is like a remote control that they can use to "switch the channel" to help them calm down. Cognitive distractions or brain breaks can help reduce negative thinking. For example, for young children, these switching activities can include a listening center or a "find the picture" activity. For older students, you might try creating a think tank within the classroom, provide coloring pages for older children, or use more abstract strategies such as counting all the green items in the room, saying the alphabet backwards, etc.

Identify and build on strengths

Doing something well provides a foundation for doing other things well. This strategy lends itself well to small classroom settings, as it provides the opportunity for the teacher to build a family of strengths.

It is often easy to focus on the weaknesses of students. However, when students feel needed and valued, the atmosphere changes—they feel empowered to be the person God created them to be. It is important that students experience competence to develop a more accurate self-narrative and to create a positive self-image. We want them to say, "I really enjoyed helping the younger students with their artwork. When I grow up, I want to help children." Or "I am good at fixing things. I could be an engineer or mechanic someday."

When giving negative feedback, teachers can start and end with a positive comment: (1) "I love how you remembered . . . ," (2) "You made a small error when . . . ," (3) "Great job getting back on track after . . . ." Helping students see their competence helps shift our energy as teachers from "fixing problems" to "identifying and reinforcing strengths."[21]

Conclusion

The trauma-informed perspective may seem overwhelming. However, trauma-informed education is not a list of activities, items for the classroom, curriculum, or even changing our language, it is a way of being—a way of viewing ourselves and the children we lead through God's eyes of full acceptance.

We invite you to join us on a journey where together, we keep the three pillars of the trauma-informed perspective always in sight: *safety, connection*, and *managing emotions*. To do this, Pause each morning and evening and ask yourself, How did I see these three pillars today? How can I be intentional about planning to see them tomorrow? When we choose this "lens," we will be able to create safe environments for children from any background to be seen and fully accepted—and to be aware of their value in God's eyes. We will teach while recognizing and managing our own emotions and, possibly most importantly, seek to connect intentionally and deeply with each child, as here is where transformation happens.

Remember the children of Israel who couldn't even hear the message of redemption and freedom? Much like them, we are in for a journey before reaching the ultimate promised land. Through times of tribulations, lack of resources, and discouragement, Moses led the people. And though he faced fear, frustration, and even anger, he held on to God's hand and leaned on Aaron and others. Seek and be open to joining other educators, not only for support but also for practical implementation ideas. As small-school educators, we can partner with other small-school educators by sharing strategies and resources through e-mails, Zoom co-planning sessions, or administrative working sessions. God dwelt every step of the way with Moses, and He promises to do the same for us.

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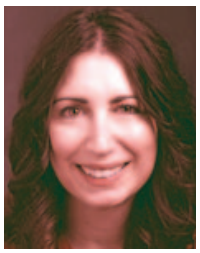

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