



Brave Spaces: How to Empower Staff and Students via SEL and a Trauma-Informed Approach

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*"Don't give up on us - we
need just one human to
show grace and compassion
so we can heal together."*

...

Student Quote

Over the past year we have experienced large scale stress and strain on the education system. All of the wonderful concerts, performance opportunities, art shows, theater productions, and dance recitals were replaced with endless Zoom classes and stretching our brains to be more creative and engaging than we ever have been before. While the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the education system, it is not the only large scale interruption that can happen at a school. Natural disasters such as tornadoes or floods, violence in our communities, and a cessation of safety net resources such as unemployment are all events that can happen to many families. All

of these events can lead to trauma in our schools for all stakeholders. We are going to examine trauma through three different lenses: that of a school administrator, that of an arts teacher, and that of our students.

Trauma is defined as "an event that threatens injury, death, or the physical integrity of self or others and also causes horror, terror, or helplessness at the time it occurs" (American Psychological Association, 2011). Trauma resides on a continuum and is different for each person.

An event that causes trauma for one person may not for another. It is common for some of our students/staff each year to experience trauma. Our challenge, for the foreseeable future, is that large groups of stakeholders (including teachers and support staff) have a higher probability of having experienced at least one traumatic event. How can school leaders help our students and our staff? We need to address this challenge systemically.

*"There are teachers in my school that say their
space is safe- but it is false. I want to yell
'HEY you just yelled at us and now you want to ask
me about my feelings!'" We have
these circle activities at school and it is super fun
with some teachers, but with others it's
like why am I even here in this class. They make
me feel like not coming to class."*

...

Schools that already have Social Emotional Learning (SEL) embedded into their classrooms are set up to succeed as trauma-informed schools. Embedded SEL instruction in all classrooms helps give students identity and belonging. Building in similar systems for teachers and staff also increases job satisfaction and staff retention. Trauma-informed schools take SEL a step further and implement specific additional guidelines in anticipation of needs, instead of in reactionary ways to help those that have experienced trauma.

"I really like the staff vs. student activities. It gets our minds focused on the students that make up our school family. We have group Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) with different groups of staff members and run circles and SEL activities as teachers. Some get into it, some don't, but we all feel seen and heard," said one staff member when asked about SEL activities. The key to implementation is to use common, research-based practices building-wide with intentionality (Embedded, Intentional, Sustained). Schools and their leaders can use basic school-wide guidelines to help those experiencing trauma:



- **Frequently** evaluate to ensure that the school environment is welcoming to all
- **Prioritize** positive adult-student relationships daily
- **Ensure** that students and staff know that you "see" them every day by using their name and making proper eye contact
- **Establish** consistent routines that all stakeholders can count on to be predictable
- **Prepare** a system and a space for stakeholders to regulate their emotions and transition back to class with dignity
- **Ask** for help when you notice a child/staff member needs additional supports

Sometimes as school leaders, in our preparation to "solve" a problem, we forget to really listen deeply to those we serve. Student voice, otherwise known as agency in social emotional learning, is an incredibly powerful tool when trying to understand trauma from the student's perspective.

As the teacher above noted, the same tools can be used for staff members to get to be comfortable with being uncomfortable. Darlene Machacon has used the phrase "Brave Space" to describe our trauma informed teaching spaces. In a recent study seeking to capture student voices, we discovered their perceptions of trauma. Take a close look at a few of the actual student responses:

Defining Trauma

How do you define trauma?

Something that affected you in your past life, such as an accident, abuse, bullying etc, and I think that people are left thinking a lot, they get panic attacks.

Something happened to you, the aftermath would be you scared or sad when reminded of that event.

A shock emotion because it is an emotional response to a terrible event or something.



How does music/art help you through a traumatic time?

I get anxiety attacks that are triggered by past traumas and, as cheesy as it sounds, I like to put on music to dance it out. It's a safe and positive form of self care.

Music, no matter the genre, can be very comforting, especially when the music is associated with a good memory.

I feel as though music helps release emotion and personally when I am going through an upsetting time I often look for lyrics in the song that relate to my situation.

It takes the pain away and lets you be yourself in your own world.

Students need the support of caring, compassionate and collaboration of all teachers. In the arts we have students for multiple years and are therefore uniquely advantaged to be a witness to the student's journey over time. Many of us are that one teacher that the students love and colleagues may be envious of but that is ok- they have their 'kids' too.

*"I was shot during the COVID pandemic and **school was the last thing on my mind**. It is **hard for me to relate** to my teachers because they seem to have a perfect life- I've never seen them act like my mom when she is stressed. **How can I talk to someone who will just judge me** and put blame and pressure on me? That's why I come to you- you listen and care."*

That is a powerful statement from a student who could be right in your school- down the hall- acting out- punching- angry- too social- talking back- depression- any of the behaviors that are unacceptable, worrisome or out of character for that student-- that is their snap. We all have one, that breaking point that sends you to the edge. "Don't cry over spilled milk" is a common phrase for when there is no point to cry over something that can not change. But what about what led you to cry over spilled milk? Was it just the milk or the mountain of other things on your mind? Here are what some students say about their 'snap.'

What does your 'snap' look like when you are upset?

I don't ever get mad, but when I have my attacks, I start to dissociate and cry while my mind races with thoughts that never stop.

I usually get overwhelmed and develop a sort of attitude towards everyone, and I might not be able to communicate very well in general.

My snap either looks like silent treatment and me shutting down, or me talking and expressing my emotions.

Usually I cry in the bathroom.

What do you want teachers to do when you are having a bad day?

Just put yourself in our shoes. We know we might seem ridiculous but really we just need you to understand we can't control it. Have some sympathy for us and try to understand please.

The last thing I'd wanna do is talk about it. I would personally would just like a little bit of time to clear my mind or put my head down.

Let me be or let me play something to distract myself.

What do you think about when another student is having a meltdown?

I understand and relate. It doesn't usually trigger me but it helps me be more self aware of my own meltdowns and how it could potentially affect others.

I feel bad for the student, I know how it is and I wouldn't wish a meltdown on anyone. I would just want to help them.

I know what it feels like so most of the time I'll just want to inform anyone to let that person calm down but if he or she gets physically, approach calmly because most of the time people won't mean what they do during that process.

These are powerful statements from our students. Imagine trying to learn when you feel this way on the inside? Trauma responses, or “snaps”, are automatic physiological reactions even after the traumatizing event has ended. In other words, they cannot be easily predicted or controlled, as in our milk example above. While arts teachers are not therapists, many techniques are easily applied to our arts classrooms in addition to social emotional

learning. They require minimal amendments to the current practices and expand options to include a trauma-informed approach.

Students experiencing a “snap” need space to get themselves regulated with dignity so that they can come and be part of our classrooms again. Here are some ideas about how to marry the social emotional learning pillars with a greater focus on deeper trauma informed practices within arts classrooms:

Social Emotional Learning Pillar	Trauma-Informed Practice
Identity (Self-Awareness & Self-Management)	Providing a brave space for students to experience their emotions Provide physical and emotional safety, including safety from feeling shamed, admonished, or judged Emotional Regulation Teach awareness of breath Begin with a metered breathing practice, such as Breathing Gym
Belonging (Relationship Skills & Social Awareness)	Curate a sense of community and connection with all class members Become aware of our individual role within the group Become attuned to those around us Avoid blaming or shaming between students in your classrooms
Agency (Responsible Decision Making)	Students participate with their peers in creating art by making both personal and group choices. Allow for differentiated instruction when needed.

Trauma Informed Arts Instruction

Activities such as dancing, playing the drums, drawing, or embodying a character in a play are engaging activities that can help a student's brain recenter within the arts classroom. "My mind races and I just don't know what to do- then teachers start yelling that I'm off task and I just can't even remember what I was supposed to be doing, then I get angry because kids laugh- they think I'm stupid, so I would rather hit or yell to get out of the classroom to go calm down. My drama teachers let me dance freely- kids think it's crazy, but it's a release for me and sometimes they join in and laugh in a good way- not bad." With all the trauma lenses we have looked through, what does this mean for you and your arts classroom?

When back in the classroom and someone, even you, becomes overwhelmed, stressed or triggered, try really reading the classroom then take your lesson rogue. Play a song of your choice, perform for students anything you like, free draw on the board, take a 10 min heads down break- show them how to heal. Be an advocate for mental health while showing students a healthy way to deal with stress.



Pause right now- picture your classroom- ponder on these questions:

- What is something that I can bring to the table today?
- What is the first thing that your students see when they enter the classroom?
- Is this the first period that the students have been free to move?
- Who needs a special wave or acknowledgment for today?

Students will take notice when you put in the effort.

"It was weird at first for my teachers to say good morning to me when they saw me in the halls but it has become my favorite part of the day. When I get the huge good morning, I smile on the inside and sometimes I show it or say it back. I just like to know that I exist."

"I love in my teacher's room there is this tree with all the special ornaments students have given them over the years. It's a whole mood' to look at- when I need a break. I like it when we get to bring something special into school like when we were in grade school- it's fun to break away from the rehearsals for a second."

Student Quotes



The next time you are in your classroom, take a moment—imagine what lens you will be seeing your class through and how you can effect positive change through being a trauma informed teacher. You do not have to live through trauma to be an advocate of SEL- just be mindful of you and your students triggers and, most importantly, your usage of this knowledge.



"I was very nervous when I started using SEL in my classroom. I had so many 'What-if's' that the thought of a circle was anxiety inducing. But my neighbor teacher gave me the advice that I needed to know who my students were before I tried to go into deep feelings and vulnerability. They suggest a game like categories or a kahoot followed by a writing prompt to literally 'throw away' a negative feeling."

Anonymous Quote

There are layers, like an onion, to trauma-informed instruction that can be implemented on both the large and small scale. As educators, we peel back the layers of hurt and anguish and then learn to grow and heal together in our schools. That may start with the

core of SEL in the arts classroom. Teacher by teacher, students to administration, all peeling away at the semi translucent layers of harm within the motto of 'WE will make this school better' will have the advantage to see all the agents of positive and negative


change. The accountability of good and bad behaviors by all agents (students, staff, administration) coupled with the reflective approach of changing with non-judgmental attitudes and clear communication is the pillar to start the change we need in our schools.

Remember you just need one person to help the healing process- be that one for yourself and your classroom. Are you that person that never takes lunch? Do you know that person who stays after till 7pm making copies? Self reflection is key and we hope that by employing a trauma-informed lens in your situation, not only can you provide more enriching, memorable, and intentional artful experience for your students, but you also have research-backed advocacy tools at the ready for campus and district administrators.



Mission Statement

The Center for Arts Education and Social Emotional Learning (ArtsEdSEL) is dedicated to illuminating the intersection between arts education and social emotional learning to facilitate the embedded, intentional, and sustained application of SEL-informed arts education.



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