



---

## TEACHING IN TROUBLED TIMES: A Q&A WITH A TRAUMA EXPERT



We live in traumatic times. The COVID-19 pandemic has killed over 135,000 thousand in the U.S., and has sickened many more. The economic downturn has resulted in more than 50 million unemployment claims. Police have continued to kill unarmed people of color, touching off nationwide protests that may or may not lead to widespread permanent reforms. All of this has **disproportionately impacted** people of color and low-income families, who have been more likely to get sick and die from the virus, lose their jobs, and face violence at the hands of law enforcement.

Throughout it all, schools, which serve not only as a place to learn but a sanctuary and source of comfort for many, have been closed since March to slow the spread of the coronavirus. With the resurgence this summer of the disease, remote instruction may continue in many places through the fall.

In the Q&A below, trauma and learning expert and National Education Policy Center Fellow **Elizabeth Dutro** responds to difficult questions about how teachers can effectively and respectfully address the traumas that are touching so many of their students' lives, either in person or from afar, even as they, themselves, may be experiencing similar traumas of their own. A professor of education at the University of Colorado Boulder, Dutro is the author of *The Vulnerable Heart of Literacy: Centering Trauma as Powerful Pedagogy* (Teachers College Press, 2019). She is currently collaborating with children and teachers to examine what trauma means and how it functions in classrooms. Her other research interests include teachers' opportunities to learn together in the context of their daily work and relationships with children, as well as the role of teacher education in critical and affective teaching.

**Q: The coronavirus pandemic has obviously led to a lot of trauma in people's lives. How might teachers think about trauma in the lives of their students right now?**

**A:** It certainly is a traumatic time, on so many fronts. As the pandemic continues, all of us as educators can reflect on the complexity of what trauma means and the forms it takes for children and youth. For instance, it is important to consider how this time in history is collective and specific as a source of trauma for children and youth. The virus is certainly saturated with pain, loss, and fear on a global, national, state, and community level. Almost all children and youth are experiencing loss of the physical presence of some of their family members, as well as friends, teachers, mentors, coaches. Physical proximity matters in relationships. They are also missing many of the routines and structures of life that can provide a sense of order and security. Many students have had to process the cancellation of significant events, from high school graduations to summer camps, sporting events to theater performances, *quinceañeras* to Pride festivities. And, of course, the images and headlines are full of the despair and uncertainty of the crisis. Those aspects of the pandemic are shared.

However, the traumas embedded in the experience of the pandemic are also highly specific—to individual children and youth, but also to particular communities. Some children are mourning loved ones who have died of COVID-19 or are grappling with the fear that an ill family member may not get well. Many have seen one or both parents lose their jobs and felt the impact of compounded economic hardship. Further, we know that none of these impacts have been equally distributed. Communities of color are disproportionately taking the brunt of this pandemic in the US, for reasons embedded in centuries of systemic oppression. The pain and grief that students of color are carrying as we move through these months, particularly Black students, is further magnified by the ongoing murders of Black people that are fueling crucial recent protests against police violence and amplified movements for anti-racism and systemic change. Black parents, families, and communities are wrapping children and youth in support. But, as we approach fall and the transition back to school, in whatever forms that takes, teachers who do not share students' racial identities and the trauma of racism—White teachers like me—must commit to anti-racism so we can bring awareness, advocacy, and the keenest compassion to supporting students.

**Q: Your work contains many examples of teachers and students exploring trauma together in the classroom. During this period of school closures, what are some suggestions for teachers addressing trauma with their students even as those teachers may themselves be experiencing adverse situations in their personal lives?**

**A:** It is significant that students and teachers are all navigating this pandemic, even as the impacts certainly vary. Teachers' experiences of the crisis are a central resource for connecting with students, demonstrating value of students' lives and knowledge, and supporting them in learning in the midst of this challenging time. In our research, teacher colleagues and I found that when educators shared stories from their own lives in classrooms, students were much more likely to draw on life experiences as a resource for their learning. Too often, considerations of trauma in schools position teachers as healers, and students as wounded and in need of healing. That is of course a false distinction and, frankly, fuels the false and

harmful idea that can be perpetuated by some trauma-informed approaches: that children and youth are damaged. However, when teachers allow children and youth to witness their struggles, humanity, and vulnerabilities, students are positioned as active participants in a reciprocal process of being present as witnesses for one another. In addition, teachers' sharing helps to demonstrate to students that all aspects of life belong in school, that they are seen, heard, and valued in the classroom, and that their experiences matter as a source of knowledge. This will matter all the more given the experiences that will accumulate for students and their teachers during this crisis. And, this *can* occur online, in written messages, recorded videos, and synchronous interactions.

How can teachers do this? Sharing our own stories as teachers can be woven into many aspects of day-to-day life and instruction in classrooms. It can be through voicing connections with a character in a text, using a story of vulnerability or loss when modeling writing, acknowledging to students when it is hard to focus or concentrate because of what we're feeling, launching the day or a class period with even a small snippet of a teacher's life or feeling and an invitation (never a requirement) to check in. This has to be genuine, of course—we have to trust students enough to be vulnerable with them, as well as listen to students with love and hold ourselves accountable to learn from students' experiences. And, inviting students' hard stories as a valued source of connection in school has to be joined with commitments to advocate for students' humanity in schools and communities. These commitments are always crucial in classrooms, but they are all the more essential as we look toward fall.

**Q: Your work focuses mainly on elementary school teachers and students. Do your suggestions differ for teachers of elementary and secondary grade levels? Do you have any suggestions for how secondary teachers might sensitively and effectively address trauma with their students, especially if they teach subjects like math that are sometimes seen as being detached from emotional experiences?**

**A:** The principles of recognizing and turning toward difficult experiences as an important aspect of pedagogy cross all grade levels and subject areas. Teaching and learning are emotional and relational across the board. We have to challenge the idea that only certain content areas demand those investments. What our teacher team and many other researchers have found in secondary classrooms is that, no matter the content, students feel most valued and supported when teachers demonstrate trust, invest in relationships, position students as knowledgeable, and advocate for them in the school. Those qualities of teaching are central within the ideas and actions related to the trauma of the pandemic and the traumas of racism I discussed above.

**Q: How would you recommend that educators respond right now regarding students they know or suspect are experiencing trauma, particularly if those students stop logging in, reaching out or otherwise being readily available for communication? In what situations, if any, would it be better to step back and not engage or interfere? In what situations would it be better to persist in reaching out?**

**A:** For many teachers, I know losing touch with some students was the hardest part of the

sudden move to online in spring. Given well-documented disparities in access to digital tools and Wi-Fi (even when districts are trying to provide them), challenges in connecting with some students are going to be inevitable. It can feel heartbreaking to lose those connections. However, teachers can persist, even as we have to accept that there is no perfect path. Of course, if a teacher has serious concerns about a child's safety, based on evidence and not assumptions, they'll follow the law on mandated reporting in their state. Most of the time that is not the case, though, and it's crucial to ensure we're reaching out with care and compassion, and not blame. So, for example, very often parents can be reached on cell phones and, even if online learning access is limited, conversations with a student on the phone might be possible. A teacher can leave supportive, caring messages for students in whatever ways possible. Some schools are also finding ways to support teachers and other school staff to connect with students and families in person in safe ways and are partnering with community organizations, located in students' neighborhoods, to support families in accessing resources they need. But, of course, if families are experiencing illness or loss of loved ones, it makes sense for them to need space. And, given the economic impact of the pandemic, some families will be under a lot of additional stress, which may mean that responding to a teacher simply cannot be their top priority. There is nothing easy about this crisis and its inequitable impacts on people, including students. Teachers can put care at the center while, at the same time, accepting the limits of their role and what is possible.

## NEPC Resources on Classroom Teaching and Learning

This newsletter is made possible in part by support provided by the Great Lakes Center for Education Research and Practice: <http://www.greatlakescenter.org>

The National Education Policy Center (NEPC), a university research center housed at the University of Colorado Boulder School of Education, produces and disseminates high-quality, peer-reviewed research to inform education policy discussions. Visit us at: <http://nepc.colorado.edu>