

IDENTITY SAFE Classrooms

Grades
6-12

Pathways to Belonging and Learning

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Thank you

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CORWIN

Please enjoy this complimentary excerpt from *Identity Safe Classrooms, Grades 6-12*. In this critical module, the authors outline the importance of building relationships with students who have experienced trauma.

The support we give students to self-regulate is even more urgent with students who have experienced trauma.

Trauma

While some students have had horrific experiences and shown tremendous resilience, others are stymied by deep wounds incurred from trauma. Traumatic experiences can take many forms, such as physical or sexual abuse, violence, an acrimonious divorce, or death of a loved one. It also may result when parents have rejected their child because of the child's sexual orientation or siblings have tormented them about their learning disabilities. Sometimes, if traumatic experiences have occurred at a young age, repressed feelings emerge during adolescence. Alicia's mother died when she was eight years old. She was from a low-income family and was placed on a list to receive counseling by county mental health services. For the next seven years, her name remained on the waiting list. She never received any form of grief counseling or support. By the time she was 13, she often flew into rages, becoming extremely rebellious. Similarly, students who have been traumatized may be disruptive in class and instigate conflicts by fighting with peers or talking back to their educators. Others withdraw and shut down. The unleashing of teenage hormones and spinning emotions can add yet another challenging layer to the mix. Approaching this fragility with tender mindfulness makes sense.

Racial Trauma

In his 2013 article "Healing the Wounds of Racial Trauma," Professor Kenneth Hardy describes the wounding that results from living in our society where racial oppression manifests through a disproportionate number of people of color who experience dis-



ADVERSE CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES STUDY

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2014) and Kaiser Permanente conducted the *Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) Study*, gathering data from 17,000 people about their childhood experiences in connection with their current health status. The study catalogued a set of adverse childhood experiences they called ACEs (included in those experiences were abuse, loss, neglect, etc.). The researchers then correlated the number of traumatic experiences to negative physical and mental health conditions (e.g., addiction, depression, heart disease and other chronic conditions, financial problems, and more). Researchers found that over 66 percent of the participants had experienced at least one of the adverse experiences, and more than 20 percent had three or more ACEs. They also found that the greater number of ACEs a person experienced, the greater the risk of serious negative health and well-being outcomes across their lifetime.

crimination, poverty, and a lack of access to education. He describes the following impacts of racial trauma on people of color:

- *Internalized devaluation*: In a society that privileges Whites, many people of color internalize a message that they are unworthy, disrespected, or characterized as criminals.
- *Assaulted sense of self*: This is the result of many experiences of feeling devalued and watching media coverage that continually judges and stereotypes people of color. It is especially wounding as young identities are being formed.
- *Internalized voicelessness*: This occurs when people feel incapable of defending themselves against the onslaught of negative messaging about people of their backgrounds or those who look like them. This voiceless feeling is exacerbated in color-blind environments.

Hardy also explains that racial trauma can result in what he calls the wound of rage, which is expressed as overwhelming anger and frustration, manifesting in self-destructive behaviors. He suggests that traditional methods aimed to help students can be ineffective. For example, initially forcing them to take responsibility for their behavior and be more respectful may exacerbate the negative feelings. Hardy recommends beginning by acknowledging the student's feelings. From there, he suggests openly talking about race, sharing stories, and naming the frustrations. This serves to help students realize that worrying that something is wrong with them is baseless. Rather, they can learn that this sense of devaluation stems from oppressive societal attitudes instead of something that is innate and irreversible within them, their families, or communities. He says that educators can explain that negative behaviors, while counterproductive, can be understandable for a young person seeking to gain dignity and self-respect while experiencing life's numerous trials. From there, students can be guided to take stock of their counterproductive behavior and realize that they are hurting themselves. They can seek alternate means to channel rage. Instead of being self-destructive, the student can develop a new repertoire of behaviors that will lead to both healing and positive outcomes. This is not a rapid or easy process, but by developing an awareness of the depth and roots of anger, educators—at times with the support of counselors—can help students reverse downward spirals incurred by repeated outbursts of rage.

Trauma-Informed Practice

Identity safe educators, with an understanding of trauma, mindfully attend to a student's race, culture, gender, religion, social class, and personal history. They ask themselves, What may have happened to this student? rather than What is wrong with him? By doing so, they are in a better position to support a student's path toward agency. Also, educators and counselors avoid becoming personally triggered and are able to de-escalate explosive situations. The initial pathway to engender trust begins with how students perceive we treat them.



A TEACHER WHO CARES MAKES ALL THE DIFFERENCE

Daevy, an elementary teacher in Modesto, California, described how she became a teacher in spite of the fact that she had been a disruptive student. In 10th grade, Daevy's brother was about to be deported to Cambodia, although he came to the United States from a refugee camp as a very young child and never learned the Cambodian language. That whole year, Daevy experienced many levels of worry, anger, and sadness and was very much on edge. She shares her personal "tale of two teachers," explaining that in English class, she was always cutting up, challenging the teacher, talking back, and picking fights that led to her suspension. In math class, Daevy was completely different; her behavior was less confrontational and even cooperative. She explained that—although she was not conscious of it at the time—she later realized that her behavior was based on the different treatment she received from her two teachers. In English, she felt disrespected. Her teacher was quick to judge, complained about incomplete homework, and often criticized her. Alternatively, her math teacher, who also had been her brother's teacher, would ask about the welfare of her brother and her family, and she felt safe enough to share her fears with him. Each day, he greeted her at the door, asking about her brother and her family. The math teacher cared, which was the difference. Daevy feels that her math teacher was the person who inspired her to later become a teacher.

Our brains are wired to fight, flight, or freeze in response to a threat, activating an alarm system. Additional reactions (Adamson, 2015) include to dissociate (shift attention outside the body to avoid pain), collapse (literally fall apart and lose the capacity to physically respond), and appease (behave in a way that betrays our values and beliefs to be safe).

A youth who has experienced trauma is more likely to experience threat with an overactive alarm system. The feeling of threat can be sparked by an unpredictable situation or sudden change. A student may be triggered when they feel overwhelmed and vulnerable. For example, they can react with emotions of anger, frustration, and rejection if they perceive others are confronting or excluding them. Even praise or positive attention can backfire for a traumatized student.

Trauma-informed practices are well matched to identity safe classroom strategies as follows:

- Building trusting relationships
- Teaching social and emotional skills
- Using discipline strategies that de-escalate student responses while remaining sensitive to and avoiding their triggers (see Chapter 12: Teacher Skill)
- Creating a space for students to go when they are triggered

- Providing wraparound student support services for families, including cognitive behavioral counseling, grief therapy, and other types of support

Trauma-informed educators know students and ways to preempt and avoid unnecessary confrontation. By reaching out, they can support healing and the rebuilding of their autonomy.

Trauma Literacy Sessions for Educators

Carlee Adamson (2018), an expert in trauma-informed practice, works to help educators understand trauma and generate healing in our students' lives as well as our own. She reminds us that we, also, are not immune to trauma. Many educators have faced extreme challenges in their lives. She adds that while our stress responses have helped us survive and cope with life's difficulties, they may be detrimental to our relationships. According to Adamson, in addition to building an awareness of trauma, the goal of "trauma literacy" is to do the following:

- Support students in learning to trust their own responses and self-regulate their emotions
- Learn to better respond to students who get triggered or who might trigger us
- Understand ourselves better and consider how to draw from our inner resources to interact and respond in the best way we can
- Know when to reach out to others in our school community to support us or particular students

In professional development sessions, Adamson introduces educators to the concept of trauma and guides them toward awareness of their own sensitivities that can work against their best efforts to be supportive of students. She takes educators through a process to examine their trauma histories and experientially arrive at an understanding for a wide spectrum of responses to their stressors. In the sessions, educators perform an activity where they identify their "go-to" responses and consider how these responses might trigger others, in particular our students, even though they may work to de-escalate our own stress.

Finally, Adamson (2018) encourages staff teamwork to support one another in skillfully responding to students who have experienced trauma. She reminds educators not to pity students who have experienced trauma or to consider supporting them as a "lost cause." Rather, by working with colleagues, they can find entry points, responses, and provide tools to help students manage their emotions. Many books and resources augment these suggestions and increase their understanding of trauma and self-regulation, including *The Invisible Classroom* (Olson, 2014).

One caveat for dealing with trauma involves taking care not to pathologize every student. Not all students from low-income families have experienced trauma. And some

students who have experienced trauma come to us with amazing resiliency. Therefore, we must be careful on several counts: First, we must not make assumptions about our students and their families. Second, we can act in accordance with the famous adage to “not judge a person unless we have walked a mile in their shoes,” which is apropos when we are seeking to understand and address the impact of trauma.

Empathetic Distress and Compassion Fatigue

Sometimes, the empathy we feel for our students can be overwhelming. Considering how much upheaval some of our students have experienced in their short lives can induce within us a measure of secondary trauma. Educators, along with counselors and social workers, at times feel a tremendous identification with their young charges, inasmuch that they become drained, imposing an emotional toll and impacting their professional and personal lives.

I recall a cathartic experience during my first year as an administrator as dean of students in East Oakland, California. A family who was squatting in an apartment without heat enrolled four children in our school. The children told us that as they huddled around gas burners on their stove, the kids would sometimes play “Heat the Fork” and would burn each other with the hot forks. We called Child Protective Services (CPS), but it opted not take action because it considered that the harm was enacted by the children and not the parents. CPS claimed that this form of parental neglect was not in its purview, which sounds strange to me as I write this many years later. We also learned that the parents sent the children to McDonald’s to beg for food in the evenings. At school, each of the children behaved differently in response to these survival conditions. One, a little first grader, melted down each afternoon in a wild tantrum that we thought may have resulted from lack of sleep or—sadly—second-hand inhalation of meth. Her twin sister and her fourth-grade brother became both quiet and withdrawn, avoiding contact with others. On one occasion, the sixth-grade girl had a tantrum in which she ran through the halls screaming, punching, and tearing down bulletin boards. We had to lock down the rest of the school, keeping students confined to their classrooms to protect them, as we tried to calm her. I became obsessed with finding resources and ways to alleviate the suffering. I lay awake at night, worrying and pondering different solutions. That experience became my baptism by fire as I reached out to every community support and mental health resource that I could find. And shortly, before any of the services kicked in, the entire family disappeared and never returned to the school. I quickly realized that I could not live at that emotional pitch and be present to support the students. I needed to find ways to draw out my own resilience. My parents, who suffered tremendously when escaping Nazi Germany, were my role models. I learned to focus on what I could do, connecting with the students and their families and becoming adept at marshalling support services, but not taking it home with me in the way I had with the family in the East Oakland school. I later learned that secondary trauma that results from feelings of tremendous empathy is actually considered a work hazard (National Child Traumatic Stress Network, 2018).

Another reaction can manifest in a form of numbness known as *compassion fatigue*, a type of emotional detachment. I didn't want to fall into this trap, either. With self-care and a healthy work-home balance, I ensured that I was able to work for many years without becoming paralyzed, detached, or burned out. Identity safe teaching has inspired me to find an internal space for compassion and love for myself as well as my students.

Addressing Depression and Mental Illness

Keeping in mind the wisdom of protecting ourselves against secondary trauma and compassion fatigue, we can consider the importance of becoming knowledgeable about mental health issues, including depression, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and bipolar and eating disorders. All adolescents experience growth spurts, and the onset of hormonal changes with puberty can bring on questioning, doubts, irritability, frustration, and mood swings. However, the typical reactions to puberty can be compounded by the added stressors of childhood trauma, mental health issues, and difficult life situations.

Due to the high percentage of students in the United States with mental health disorders (Cole et al., 2009), educators need to consider how the different aspects of a student's mental health conditions can influence their behavior, in turn disrupting their education. The line between what can be considered normal development and specific mental health problems is often blurred. Yet outbursts of anger or anxiety, frequent illness, and inconsistent school attendance may signal struggles beyond a normal range, indicating trauma or mental health issues.

Some students engage in extreme behaviors, such as anorexia, cutting, delinquency, or substance abuse, while yet others manifest clinical depression or sexual deviance and, in extreme cases, take their own lives. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported in 2010 that one out of every 53 US high school students (1.9 percent) made a suicide attempt that was serious enough to be treated by a doctor or a nurse (SAMHSA, 2012). During a workshop I presented to 60 high school students from diverse socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds from across the United States, I asked the group to indicate if there had been a suicide of one of their classmates. Nearly every hand in the room was raised. Suicides greatly impact the entire school community, and prevention efforts are needed.

Identity safe educators seek to be knowledgeable about adolescent mental health and trauma. They watch for signs that include a sudden drop in grades, increased absences, and physical conditions manifesting as anxiety, drowsiness, or frequent illness. Educators can reach out to students and their parents, seeking out additional counseling support. They can make programmatic accommodations to help the students during difficult periods and provide support to move forward in school. When a suicide does occur, educators need to take immediate action to support the student body and, in particular, vulnerable students in order to prevent the "copycat" effect. Efforts are needed to forestall a possible cluster of suicides that have been known to occur in a particular area in a short period of time (Gould et al., 1989).



TIPS FROM THE SAMHSA SUICIDE PREVENTION TOOLKIT

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) offers a free Suicide Prevention Toolkit that recommends that schools implement the following:

- Protocols for helping or responding to students who are at risk of suicide
- Staff, student, and parent training
- Protocols for responding after a suicide
- Screening and health provider support and mental health counseling

One mother shared a frightening story about her daughter, Sandy. Unbeknownst to her mother, Sandy had plans to take her life. Sandy's mom noticed that her daughter was withdrawn but did not realize the extent of her distress. With an intention to execute her plan, Sandy uncharacteristically straightened up her room and departed for school earlier that day. However, she took an unplanned detour and went to find her Living Skills teacher, Mr. J. She confided her despair to him. Mr. J. was able to talk Sandy out of her plan and immediately sought help for her. Sandy's mom tells this story with tears in her eyes. Having the supportive relationship with Mr. J. saved her daughter's life.

In a trusting environment with an emphasis on belonging, identity safe educators can accomplish much to support students with mental health challenges. Schools can greatly decrease the number of suicides by taking the warning signs seriously. They can develop clear protocols, train staff, and offer mental health services.

Fostering Resilience

Developing resilience can be instrumental in overcoming the impact of trauma and emotional distress. Resilience affects and expands our capacity to recover from or adjust to difficult decisions or change. It has been studied across a range of situations, including long-term studies of people who have gone through wars, lived in concentration camps, and/or experienced devastating earthquakes or abject poverty. The researchers particularly sought to understand the characteristics of those who overcame tremendous obstacles such as these. Resilience springs from a source deep within, but researchers have discovered patterns and identified ways to foster and model it.

Bonnie Benard (1991), resilience researcher, reviewed the many long-term studies of youth who have experienced traumatic situations. She explains that those who grew into well-functioning adults were able to develop social skills—not only for coping with the situation at hand but to later prevail and lead successful lives. I witnessed this in my own family. My father fled from Nazi Germany as a 12-year-old. He lost his mother a year later and spent his teen years during the war in dire poverty, often going hungry, living in a Jewish ghetto in Shanghai, China. Yet there were some very supportive allies

who helped him along the way. Although he never finished high school, he went on to continue studying and received a master's degree. He was able to become a successful adult, enjoy a good marriage and family, and complete a career as a Jewish cantor. He accomplished what Benard refers to as the capacity of “self-righting,” involving the ability to transform himself.

Benard (1991) points out that resilience is not a superpower or a genetic trait. Schools can work to foster resiliency by providing protective factors through positive relationships. The protective factors, also evident in identity safe teaching practices, include acceptance of one's identity, the capacity to adapt and stay hopeful, and the formation of positive relationships with a caring adult. Educators who practice the identity safety components of listening to student voices and classroom relationships (based on trust) and who promote meaningful opportunities for classroom autonomy and cooperation can greatly contribute to developing a student's sense of resilience.

Circling Back to Educator Resilience

We spoke about educator resilience in Chapter 2: Educator Identity Safety and the Importance of Self-Awareness. Positive thinking, a spirit of compassion, and forgiveness for ourselves and others, along with self-care, are all necessary to prepare us for the long haul as we grapple with how to make a difference and become the kind of educators we seek to be. Often, the rewards do not come until years later; recently, I received a Facebook message from a former student from 20 years ago. He referred to moments in my class when he acted like “a little monster,” as he phrased it, and thanked me for believing in him. Even when those thank-yous are few and far between, our resilience sustains us. As we write about each component of identity safety, we keep circling back to the single most important aspect of creating an identity safe classroom: the presence of that caring and encouraging adult in the lives of our students.

Dilemmas and Points of Tension

Loving the Student Who Has Hurt Others and Continues to Do So

Margarita, an eighth-grade science teacher, had a student named Luis who was frequently mean to her. Luis also regularly insulted and bullied his peers. He did not seem to change, despite how hard she tried to connect with him. Eventually, his disparaging comments and flippant attitude left her cold and wanting to avoid him. Finally, she, along with some of her colleagues, sat down to consider who among them enjoyed a good relationship with Luis. They realized it was Gerardo, the custodian. Gerardo was friendly, often chatting with students, and Luis was one of them. Many students liked to help Gerardo with simple tasks such as setting up chairs for an assembly. Margarita approached Luis, who gladly agreed to help with the daily lunchroom setup—Luis was amenable because he got to leave English class ten minutes before it ended. Although, missing class time was not opportune, Margarita felt it was worth it to find a way to reach through Luis's walled-up defenses.

Sometimes, mean behavior can mask deep insecurities, serving as a protective mechanism or a cover for gaps in a skill set (see Chapter 12). Yet when students engage in repeated mean behavior, it can exhaust and challenge us to our last nerve. Whatever the instigating factor, not every person is easy to love, especially the ones who appear to take pleasure in being mean. That may be why different religions have specific parables and precepts, such as the phrase “Turn the other cheek” (Christian) or Buddhist meditations for generating compassion for people in our lives who present their difficulties to us (Chodron, 2001).

As identity safe educators, the challenge of continuing to seek ways to reach these students falls to us. Sometimes, it takes many repeated efforts to awaken compassion and help break through the walls a student has built up for many years. Developing a relationship with a student who is practiced in pushing people away is not easy, but our best recommendation is to keep trying. Look for student strengths and draw from them. Avoid labeling these students (e.g., referring to them as a bully).

In identity safe classrooms, we recognize that every student is growing and changing, and we keep working to reach students who appear angry or mean. If you need inspiration, Rita Mae Pierson’s (2013) TED Talk, *Every Child Needs a Champion*, can fill the bill. She points out that even if you do not like every student, you can certainly act like you do. And for those who are not easy to teach, the simple fact that they have shown up at school means they, too, deserve to be taught. She closes with the words, “Is this job tough? You betcha. Oh, God, you betcha. But it is not impossible. We can do this. We’re educators. We’re born to make a difference.”

Dismantling “White Savior” Mentality

Marvin Pierre (2017) described how his greatest challenge as a school administrator involved dealing with the tendency of White teachers to see themselves as “saviors” who come to rescue Black and Brown students from a terrible future. This savior mentality is a trait commonly featured in movies (e.g., *Dangerous Minds*, *Freedom Writer*) when a White teacher or social worker saves people of color from their plight. Educators may try to “save” their students from poverty and the negative influences in their lives. Even though well-meaning, White educators in this role can unintentionally denigrate the students’ backgrounds—and sometimes their entire worlds—by forging ahead with unexamined assumptions. Without appropriate training and knowledge, they may exacerbate negative stereotypes about the students’ families and communities. The savior mentality can lead down a dangerous path that ultimately devalues the student and increases stereotype threat. Even efforts to create “grit” can greatly underestimate some of the obstacles students have already faced and overcome with great effort. White educators can access their desire to make a difference with students of color and work to ensure that their approach respects and honors the backgrounds and experiences of the students, their families, and communities.

When I was a school principal, the parent of an eighth grader came to me to lodge a complaint. I remember that he began speaking even before he sat down. “I was a journalist in Mexico, and I do not appreciate a teacher making disparaging comments about me or any of the other parents.” This father shared that his son’s teacher told the class that they needed to study hard so they wouldn’t turn out like their parents, who the teacher had described as “stuck doing menial labor because they were uneducated.” We spoke for a long time, and I assured the man I would follow up. The teacher claimed that his intentions were to motivate the students. As the boy’s father had made patently clear, by insulting the students’ parents, any positive intentions backfired, and both the student and his father felt devalued.

When we honestly look into our inner selves, we can ask if some of our attitudes are a result of implicit bias (see Chapter 3). We can intentionally work to challenge our biases and transform our attitudes. Rather than seeking to express a savior mentality, we can aim to serve as a *resource* for our students as they navigate the numerous choices for their education. We must recognize that the heavy lifting will always be done by the students and that we are there to point out possibilities, remove structural barriers, and build their confidence in the process. Pierre’s suggestions for ways to counteract the savior mentality are the same criteria we suggest to create identity safety: forming authentic and caring relationships, listening to our students, understanding their stories, and expressing high expectations while providing the support needed to meet them.

Chapter Summary

Educator–student relationships are at the core of every one of the identity safety components. In *Teacher Warmth and Availability for Learning*, we focused on trust and positive rapport. We began discussing ways to build trust. We also shared ideas for getting to know our students while offering tips for finding the time to do it. We also highlighted that the way feedback is both offered and perceived can make or break a relationship. By giving wise feedback on what specifically needs to be improved, pointing out progress, and communicating our belief in our students’ capacity and intelligence to succeed, we can motivate our students. We shared tools to teach self-regulation and other effective practices to help students manage their often complicated emotional reactions.

We delved into the topic of trauma, sharing statistics on the large numbers of people who have suffered adverse childhood experiences. We offered trauma-informed practices. We also described racial trauma that results from living in an unjust society where students frequently feel devalued. Educators need to be able to address all forms of trauma in order to help students overcome the negative impacts. We then addressed mental health issues, including suicide, and suggested protocols for providing educators with knowledge and effective strategies. While we discussed mental health issues in this chapter, we acknowledge that a student’s mental state also impacts relationships with their peers. These relationships can be greatly impacted when anxiety, depression, or

other emotional challenges are in play. The suggested self-regulation tools also apply in peer relationships. We closed this part of the chapter with a hopeful note describing the power of resilience for both students and educators.

Of the many potential educator–student dilemmas, we selected two potential challenges faced by educators to showcase: (1) Reaching into ourselves to find a way to like—even love—a student who makes our life difficult and (2) ways an educator can avoid the tendency to become a “White savior,” exhibiting misguided efforts to rescue low-income students or students of color. The world of relationships is multidimensional and nuanced but well worth examining as we seek to connect with our students and facilitate learning.

Check Yourself

1. What techniques do you use to connect and get to know each of your students? What new ones can you try?
2. What kind of feedback have you been giving your students? Have you tried wise feedback? What did you notice?
3. What assumptions about your students’ parents and home life might be interfering with your relationships?
4. How do you react to students who are consistently mean or hurtful to other students and/or yourself?
5. For teachers who identify as White: How do you view your role as an educator for students of color? Do your approaches demonstrate your value and respect for each student’s background, including their family and community experiences?

TRY IT OUT: END-OF-CHAPTER ACTIVITIES



Wise Feedback

Consider a student and a situation where you can give wise feedback. Write a paragraph or two in your own words that aims to communicate the following ideas:

1. Communicate your high standards.
2. Offer suggestions for improvement, using specific language.
3. Assure students you believe they can meet the standards and explain how you will provide scaffolding to support them.
4. Point out their progress to date.

5. Give students tools to reflect on their progress for themselves and celebrate it as they continue to improve.
6. Offer some suggestions on what to do next.

Describe the student:

Plan what to say:

Try it out and share what happened. How did the student respond? What did you learn in the process?



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