

Special Issue Interview Feature

Translating Trauma-Responsive Schooling to Instructional Design Practice

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Instructional Design

Trauma

Instructional Design Practice

Interviewing



*In extending the conversation around trauma-informed instructional design, one of the key assets we utilized for this special issue of JAID was the text, *Trauma-responsive schooling: Centering student voice and healing* by Lyn Brown, Catharine Biddle & Mark Tappan (2022). As editors, we felt that our readers would benefit from learning a little more about this resource as well as some scaffolded linkages between the trauma-informed literature and the traditional approaches to instructional design. We were fortunate to have the opportunity to interview two of the authors to help make this linkage more clear in this special issue.*

As the authors point out in their last chapter, there are some specific key takeaways from the text that we'd like to start with here:

1. The way that trauma and inequity connect and affect one another is complicated. It is not necessarily the case that attending to one or the other in isolation will address the other, rather we must respond to each in order to facilitate healing.
2. Teachers must reexamine their assumptions about childhood and children in order to focus on equity and trauma-responsiveness.
3. Student voice is an essential component of education, in order to educate the whole child, teachers *must* commit to enabling student voice.
4. The process of truly listening to children, to the student voice and what they have to say about safety and healing in schools is likely to cause teachers to re-think their current practices. This level of re-examination and self-reflection require humility and courage.
5. Because relationship between teachers and children are primary, teachers have to be open and willing to change their daily practice, to embrace improvisation and collaboration.
6. In order to see significant and equitable change, particularly across whole school cultures, there must be supportive agents across the school, district and community.
7. Rural schools, which are the focus of this particular book's examples, do have important implications and lessons for urban and suburban schools in terms of appropriate trauma-responses and equitable change.

As editors, we felt that our readers would benefit from learning a little more about this resource as well as some scaffolded linkages between the trauma-informed literature and the traditional approaches to instructional design. We were fortunate to have the opportunity to interview two of the authors to help make this linkage more clear in this special issue. Below is an edited and focused interview between the guest editors of this special issue (JAID) and the authors of the text (AU):

JAID: Trauma informed Pedagogy may be considered a lens or a practice with strategies. And so there's just a lot of terms orbiting around this conversation. Can you tell us what you have learned from this project, and particularly from an instructional perspective?

AU: I think one of the big things that we learned through this project was just, and I don't know if this is a learning, so much is just a reinforcement of the importance of relationships between instructors and their students. I think one of the things that this project really foregrounded was that relationships aren't just about, you know, learning the things that motivate students to coerce them into better engagement in the classroom. But that it's really about *understanding* at a fundamental level their emotional lives and making space for those emotional lives in the classroom in agentic ways. So giving them choice over how they want to manage their emotions over how they relate to other people, the kinds of activities that they engage in, and that through making that space you are, in fact, creating a healing trauma-informed environment. I mean the opportunities we created, and by extension sort of the lesson [of the book], is any opportunities that teachers and administrators and folks have in schools to give students a sense that their voice matters. Students need to feel that they're being listened to, that they're being taken seriously, that their needs matter. We saw lots of evidence that this listening is the key to building the relationships that are essential to healing. So if teachers take student voice seriously, then students get a sense that they are being listened to. We have lots of examples of that happening, and we wrote about a lot of them in the book. I mean, that was the point, really, to tell those stories. We also have lots of evidence that this also improves instruction and learning.

JAID: With the idea of listening as a radical act in regard to what you just said about developing those relationships, it seems to me that it starts with the listening piece, and one of the quotes that really, you know, we thought was just so resonant is when you wrote, "If trauma is the result of dehumanizing experiences, healing begins with voice being heard, and with a claim to humanity. So you describe the importance of listening to our students and we believe that means incorporating their voices into the instructional design process. How does this happen? And how do we go about doing this in the real world?

AU: That's a good, really good question, and I think we were able in our project to have coaches in each school who were former teachers who were really steeped in the trauma responsive work, so they were able to support that, and encourage and scaffold teachers in their listening. It's not rocket science, you know the teachers can do it. I mean, one

quick example is our “Some days” initiative. This is where each kid is asked what do they want to do in school “some day” and then try to make that come true. And one of the stories in the book is about a little boy who wants to play Beyblades with his teacher someday. They didn’t have a great relationship, but she reluctantly agrees, and she sits down, and he teaches her how to do the battling tops, and it radically transforms their relationship. It radically transforms his experience in school. So she was just open to being kind of open and creative about that opportunity to listen. So that’s one example.

The other thing is making the decisions in this moment about this, and making sure our learners voice is represented. There’s so much in education that’s top down just to start with. Right? The structures just drive that, and a lot of that comes from the idea that the teacher is the God of the world. What happens when we invite students to have the agency to do design with us? What are the structures that get us there? And I think that’s the challenge right? Because that structure is so counter-normative to the way that we do education now that even just building it is the starting point. So yes, this is radical, counter normative. And maybe you all in your world have lots of examples of students as instructional designers, but it just doesn’t happen. It’s still pretty rare. If you let students have that agency, a voice in the design, that’s healing for the kids who’ve experienced trauma, it’s really beneficial for all kids.

JAID: We’re curious about the power of stories because you give a lot of emphasis to that. So the listening and then the storytelling, I mean, they all go hand in hand, and the relational building, and also that co-constructive process of designing together. Where I want to go next is sort of this idea of stories, because you talk about the importance of authorship and storytelling. Can you unpack that a little bit more for readers of this issue about how these stories work?

AU: Yes, we were very inspired by Elizabeth Dutro’s work, and the work that she did around critical witnessing as just a sort of foundational element of how we thought about the teacher-student relationship with regards to trauma. There are a lot of opportunities, particularly with older kids, to get them to articulate their emotions, their experience of the world in different ways, right? And they have the kind of cognitive wherewithal to do that. When we were working with much younger kids we struggled with this question of how do we create space for that? And stories are such a generative way to understand the world. But they also bring in this incredible opportunity to connect to kids’ home lives in different ways, you know, by allowing in culturally responsive stories, for example, and holding that space for students. Stories are also a great way to bring in other people from kids’ lives. So, for example, we had parents who maybe wouldn’t have connected strongly with the school coming in to help read or facilitate moving stories. So I think we come together around stories in different ways. And so that natural tendency to gather around narrative is something we can leverage, and in learning spaces we can use narratives to help humanize people and connect people with one another.

Carol Duffy developed this process out of her own individual therapeutic work, her clinical practice with kids. It started out as play therapy in the clinical setting, and then she expanded it to a group setting. And then she said she’d help us try it out in our setting and train folks. It provides a kind of physical model so that the stories are chosen carefully—really powerful children’s literature—across a variety of contexts. Then they’re literally acted out and then they are asked to respond and to tell their own story. Sometimes they have their own sanctuary. Sometimes they draw as a way into telling their own stories. And there’s somebody who’s listening, either another kid or a grown up in the room. And so there’s an audience. It has to be the right setting and not every kid’s comfortable with that. But it seems to me it’s a structure that really helped—this holding space.

JAID: What Does that mean to you? Because I’m trying to see it, this structure?

AU: I think one of the things that is amazing about some of these strategies is that they’re very complex, but they’re also very simple. Right? So telling a story, on its face, does not seem like a very complex thing to do. But you know if we have the student use a sand tray to tell the story, particularly with younger children, the sand itself has a calming quality. The agency around selecting the figures and placing them in the sand is an opportunity for young people to express themselves. It seems so small, Right? But it’s not small, and you can see how powerful it is. You get this incredible insight into the dynamics of a classroom, just watching the kids interact with the sand tray as a group, you know. And so, as a teacher being able to sit back and look at this and understand it from a social perspective. What is happening

here emotionally, you know is just through this very simple structure. You get some really powerful information from that. I think there's a kind of messiness in this. When you hold that space, you don't know what's going to emerge out into it, and that's the whole point. But that is so counterintuitive to the way that we do teaching and learning right now where we have standards and expected outcomes, and a set of activities to get us from Point A to Point B. And that space kind of becomes foreclosed by that structure. And so you're pushing back against that to hold it.

JAID: So thank you for these strategies that you've been talking about. One of the things that we've wondered is, Does this have implications for our thinking about pedagogy, instructional design and teacher preparation? And if so, what are your reflections on that?

AU: I work in an educational leadership program so think about how to coach faculty towards these practices. Teacher preparation programs should be moving away from behaviorist ideas about student behavior management. Not that those can't be tools in the toolbox. But I think that those types of approaches get in the way of the types of relationships that we're trying to build with students to do this in an authentic way. One thing that I don't see enough of is authenticity—authentic approaches to listening to students. I really think it just starts there, which from an instructional design perspective, prompts several questions: What are the structures that you build in your classroom to listen to students? What are the ways in which they can determine their own learning? Do they have authentic opportunities for agency that aren't teacher driven, that aren't one of two teacher predetermined choices, but real choices. I think there is an aspect of this that gets to deconstructing some of the things we take for granted, deconstructing that traditional teacher-student relationship. And I feel like that's really at the heart of this.

JAID: So there's a huge emphasis right now, especially post pandemic on whole child education. We've been so much behind our zoom screens, and locked down for so long that we have lost connection with our moving, sensing body as part of the learning process. So I'm thinking about this notion of embodied education as part of a whole child approach. So can you talk about how you think about foregrounding embodied learning from a trauma-responsive lens?

AU: Perhaps the best example we discuss in the book is the use of micro-adventures as a way to structure outdoor education within the school day. e, Mico-adventures are intended to align with the curriculum and to be genuine learning opportunities within the context of a set of curriculum targets in science and math. We also partnered with an outdoor education organization called the Main Outdoor School. They trained outdoor educators who worked with kids to take them out and do all kinds of experiential learnings around nature and habitats, and constructing shelters. The simple part of it is you getting kids out of the classroom, moving around in the natural world, engaged with each other, not having to sit in rows and raise their hand. It can be chaotic at times, but we have lots of examples, formal and informally, where the kids learned a lot and also benefited socially and emotionally from those opportunities.

I think the story of how that came together is demonstrative of how the principles of the project drove what actually happened. So the kids said they wanted more recess, but then they asked the kids, "Why do you want more recess?" And it was like, "Well, we want to spend more time outside. We want to spend more time moving our bodies." And so then it was like, "Well, how can we do that and leverage the natural assets of these rural schools?"

JAID: I know that the book was published in two thousand and twenty-two, and that Covid, you know, had an impact on the project. I'm wondering if you would share your thoughts on the impact of Covid on childhood trauma. As we are learning more and more about learning losses. What do you think we're looking at going forward?

AU: I think the place to start is just the number of kids that have lost a caregiver. One of the things that we forget is that a huge number of people have died in this pandemic, and that's affected kids profoundly. Then there is the issue of schools having been locked down for such a long time. If school is a place that supports the healthy development of kids, then their relationship to that supportive environment is disrupted. This has had profound implications for kids, regardless of the other environments that they spend their time in.

PK-12 instructional designers and curriculum administrators should be mindful of the fact that young people have felt incredibly isolated, have felt isolated from their friends, from the adults that support them, from other environments, like after school programs and other positive adult mentors in their lives. I think we're grappling with a crisis of isolation, and

the mental health effects even more than the disruption of learning itself. It's so easy to get completely obsessed with learning loss and worrying about lower academic achievement, but to address that we must also acknowledge the causes, one being that so many young people are trauma-exposed and isolated.

JAID: To that point, can you help us to link between trauma informed instruction and SEL (Social Emotional Learning) conceptually?

AU: It's honestly a question that we've thought a lot about. We're pretty critical of the automatic assumption that all SEL approaches or SEL curriculum are trauma-informed. So I think it has to be done really carefully and thoughtfully. Helping kids build and develop their social and emotional capacities and skills, they can't be passive participants in that process. They have to be active. They have to be empowered, they have to be given the opportunity to make choices. We were inspired deeply by the work of Judith Herman and others in the trauma world, who talk about the importance of voice and reclaiming story and agency and control for adult trauma survivors.

I'd say one of the reasons that SEL and Trauma-informed pedagogy get confused is that they're both universal approaches. Trauma informed pedagogy is really about two things. It's about centering the healing of the person who's experienced trauma and preventing retraumatization. There's nothing about social emotional learning necessarily within that. There might be some that happens for any individual survivor, but it's really about providing opportunities for people to chart paths to their own healing and giving them enough space to do that, while also creating an environment that's calm enough, or that removes learning barriers, whereas SEL is a cognitive approach to emotional learning. So SEL may offer children some words and vocabulary and tools to enhance emotional awareness, but it doesn't have a healing objective.

JAID: I just want to close with a kudos. Not just for advancing an understanding of what it means for schools to be trauma responsive, but focusing on rural school settings while still drawing implications for suburban and urban schools. So thank you both so much.

AU: It's been a delight. So thank you for inviting us to thank you for helping us to go deeper into this topic.

Conclusion

This opportunity to interview the authors of *Trauma-responsive schooling: Centering student voice and healing* (Lyn Brown, Catharine Biddle & Mark Tappan, 2022) was a real honor. As is obvious from the edited transcript, the conversation was both spirited and engaging for all. As we talked about the work, and understood it within the lens of the other contributions for this special issue as well as within the context of instructional design, we believe we've learned several specific takeaways from this conversation:

- The primacy of relationship in trauma and healing
- The absolute importance of student voice and agency
- The necessity of giving learners authentic choices
- Listening as a radical act
- The important role and specific characteristics of coaches
- The power of stories and storytelling in healing
- Consider the whole child including embodiment and nature
- Teacher education should move away from behaviorist models toward student agency
- Social Emotional Learning is not automatically Trauma-informed pedagogy
- COVID has caused a great deal of trauma beyond learning loss and we must begin to prepare for trauma-informed classrooms to respond to their needs
- Rural settings have a lot to tell us about trauma-informed learning models and these learnings can be translated to urban and suburban settings

As we move closer to a model of instructional design with positions itself to be responsive to learner trauma and needs, we see the alignment of the ideals of many needs based models of design including traditional ID, Social Emotional Learning (SEL) Universal Design (UDL) and Trauma-informed pedagogy. As Carr-Chellman (2022) points out, we must find ways to integrate this into our daily practice as the pandemic will likely point all of us toward more need for trauma-informed instructional design models. From this interview we can hear the importance of suspending our traditional top down model where the teacher and the designer make all the decisions. Rather the need for student voice, agency, storytelling, and decision-making control are essential to the critical relationship building that is needed for post-traumatic healing and growth. This represents a significant and well-documented departure from traditional ID models with supportive evidence from the book's case study in Maine. We are grateful to the book authors for their time and patience in guiding us through these initial steps.

References

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About the Interviewed Authors

Lyn Mikel Brown is a professor of Education at Colby College in Waterville, Maine. She uses qualitative, voice-centered methods to explore the intersections of culture, context, and development, with a particular focus on youth voice and engagement in schools and communities. She is a founder of three youth-driven organizations and the author of six books, including her first, *Meeting at the Crossroads: Women's Psychology and Girls' Development* (with Carol Gilligan), and her latest, *Powered by Girl: A Field Guide for Supporting Youth Activists*. Past research projects include a five-year longitudinal study of girls' psychological and social development, an analysis of social class differences in girls' experiences of schooling, and an exploration of the ways adults can effectively scaffold youth-driven social change work.

Catharine Biddle is an associate professor of Educational Leadership at the University of Maine. Her research focuses on ways in which rural schools and communities respond to social and economic change in the twenty-first century. She's particularly interested in how schools can partner with community organizations or groups to address issues of social inequality and how nontraditional leaders—such as youth, parents, and other community members—may lead or serve as partners in these efforts. Prior to joining the faculty at UMaine, she spent five years as a research affiliate with the Center on Rural Education and Communities at Pennsylvania State University. Catharine also served as the executive director of the Nanubhai Education Foundation, an international education nonprofit working in rural India, and as an out-of-school-time educator for the national nonprofit organization Citizen Schools.

Mark Tappan is a professor of Education at Colby College in Waterville, Maine. He is a developmental and educational psychologist whose early work focused on narrative and sociocultural approaches to identity development, moral development, and moral education. Currently, his research interests include equity and social justice in elementary, secondary, and higher education; the development of healthy forms of masculinity among children, adolescents, and young adults; and trauma-responsive education in rural schools and communities.



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