Abstract: The novel coronavirus (COVID-19) has had far reaching implications on every aspect of human life – from where we work, to where we feel safe to grocery shop, to how we greet friends. At the same time, the pandemic has exposed long-standing issues of structural racism, xenophobia, social and economic inequities, precipitating multiple large-scale social justice movements and demonstrations in the United States, culminating in "dual public health emergencies." As Kindergarten through Grade 12 (K-12) students slowly return to school, educators are grappling with how to support their students amid these overlapping crises. In this paper, we discuss the relevance of trauma-informed pedagogy, with a specific focus on 3Rs – relational connectedness, restored trust, and contextualized resilience. We urge educators to keep the whole child at the center of their curriculum, and to make healing – not performance – the priority for K-12 schools amid and following the global pandemic.

Keywords: K-12 schools, pandemic, trauma, resilience, connectedness, social justice


Schlüsselwörter: K-12 Schulen, Pandemie, Trauma, Resilienz, Verbundenheit, soziale Gerechtigkeit
We are at war. Not a war between countries, but one against a deadly respiratory virus that has ravaged the world. As of late summer 2020, the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has sickened over 20 million people worldwide. In the United States alone, more than 6 million people have been infected and over 180,000 have died. At the same time, the pandemic has laid bare the government’s ineptitude in handling a public health emergency and exposed long-standing issues of structural racism, xenophobia, social and economic inequities, precipitating multiple large-scale social justice movements and demonstrations including Black Lives Matter. Adults and children took to the streets to express their mistrust in the current leadership, anger at the senseless murder and police brutality against Black people, and desire to combat systemic injustice.

With weeks away from the new academic year, the following questions are at the forefront of K-12 educators’ minds: Is it safe for students to return to school? What do we expect to see in our classrooms? What stance should we take to approach our teaching? How do we cultivate a school culture that facilitates respect, understanding, safety, restoration and healing?

Much has been written on the severe reactions to stress children experience following major calamities such as war and natural disasters. Traumatic events affect children in all the ways they affect adults. They lead to elevated clinical needs and mental health issues including anxiety, depression, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), functional impairments (e.g., memory loss, inability to solve problems), as well as fear and grief. Many symptoms persist over a long period of time, leading to chronic health effects such as cardiovascular disease, substance dependence and abuse, and premature death.

While we cannot ascertain how students’ needs will manifest come this school year, we do know what challenges they will face. Even prior to the pandemic, 60-70% of all students would have experienced at least one traumatic event in their lifetime by the age of 16 (Copeland et al., 2007). It may not be an overstatement to say that all our students will begin the school year with some degree of psychological vulnerability or trauma; the impact of the global pandemic on children is multifaceted and far-reaching. Here are a few examples:

- **Disruption of schooling.** Due to school closures, many children have been receiving no, or minimal instruction. The impact has been especially egregious for children in school districts under-prepared for emergency remote learning and in homes with limited Internet and technology access.

- **Social and cultural losses.** Physical distancing and home confinement disrupt children’s social and cultural support networks (e.g., school, community, church) and interfere with their sense of structure and normalcy, leading to strong feelings of fear, worry, sadness, anger, and loneliness.

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Illnesses and deaths. Although children are less vulnerable to contracting COVID-19 and developing severe symptoms compared to adults, they can still become hospitalized and become fatally ill. Furthermore, children may witness adults in their lives succumb to the deadly disease.

Economic and familial stress. The pandemic has dealt a severe blow to the local and global economy. Parents and caregivers might struggle to keep their jobs and provide for their children. Being cooped up at home could intensify existing behavioral and mental health issues, family strife and intensions, and increase exposure to abuse and domestic violence.

Moral suffering. Mass information and grim news of illnesses, deaths, police brutality and systemic injustice, as well as personal experience of race-based discrimination, harassment or assaults (e.g., anti-Asian hate incidents) could lead to children’s question whether their community is a safe and caring place.

This is a watershed moment for an educational reframe. Whether we will return to school or more likely, continue remote learning this coming year, the only certainty is that students and families will turn to their teachers, school administrators, and counselors for far more than content learning. We propose that educators should make healing, not performance, the priority for K-12 schools during this unprecedented time. Healing cannot begin to take place until we have established a sense of emotional safety and trust.

In the following, we outline the 3 Rs – relational connectedness, restored trust, contextualized resilience – as critical elements to the process of healing in the school context.

Relational Connectedness

Relational connectedness, also known as social connectedness, refers to a sense of closeness and belonging to a social network (Lee & Robbins, 1995). Positive social interactions boost oxytocin, a neurochemical that promotes trust in others and activates learning centers of the brain. Educators could weave in activities and assignments in their curriculum to foster connectedness in their classrooms, and tangibly show care for their students. For example, teachers could invite students to tell a story about themselves and their families during the COVID-19 lockdown. Such an activity would not only allow students to share their individual perspectives and articulate their feelings, but also highlight their shared experiences of fear, loneliness, frustration, perseverance and hope during a very uncertain time. Teachers could do home visits to increase connection with students and families. During the lockdown, teachers from my (Munyi Shea) children’s school made surprise visits to our house, dropping off learning materials and personalized cards while keeping safe distance. Through authentic relationship building, educators can better understand the needs of their students and acknowledge the myriad factors, including trauma, that shape their students’ psychological landscape. Rather than asking students who are not doing well to start identifying with school, trauma-informed educators would reflect on their own practice and ask how they could identify with these students. Supportive and trusting relationships are critical to bolstering student resiliency and foundational to creating a community that values all its members.

Restored Trust

Healing requires more than putting a bandage on the wound; it calls for an examination of the causes of injury and an actionable plan to stop the re-wounding and suffering. Educators committed to the well-being of marginalized groups of students, including those identifying as black, indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC), must go beyond individual-level student care and advocate for structural changes. For both white and non-white educators, this would mean taking responsibility for our biases, power, privilege, and internalized oppression beyond self-reflection and intellectual dialogue. This would mean critically examining how our assumptions and worldviews inform our notion of education. For instance, are we creating a curriculum that reflects the history and realities of BIPOC and gender diverse students? Are the instructional methods and assessments – whether in-person or online – designed with our most economically disadvantaged students in mind? How does remote learning help certain groups of students thrive (e.g., reduced social distractions and increased physical safety), but widen the learning gaps for others? Do school principals and district administrators share an antiracist vision and demonstrate
concrete support by investing resources in related professional development? Only by actively identifying and eliminating systemic racism, xenophobia, and other forms of prejudice, discrimination and structural inequalities, can educators disrupt the perpetuation of injustice and power imbalances and show our students that we deeply care about them and the world that surrounds them.

**Contextualized Resilience**

Resilience is an important concept in children's social emotional learning. Instead of focusing on adversity and psychopathology, resilience emphasizes strength, adaptivity and an ability to navigate through and bounce back from difficult experiences (American Psychological Association, 2011). However, resilience — like many other mental health concepts — originate from Western culture and is rooted in the biomedical model that asserts that mental disorders are biologically-based brain diseases and tends to minimize the relevance of psychosocial or behavioral contributions (Deacon, 2013). The assumption that mental and behavioral problems are located within an individual person often calls for individualist, person-centered coping responses such as self-awareness and self-management. A contextualized understanding of resilience, on the other hand, encourages educators to acknowledge the varied and indigenous ways of responding to and coping with life challenges amongst our students. During the pandemic lockdown, some school bands and choirs came together online to rehearse for and perform a virtual concert, demonstrating a communal practice to cope with the collective trauma. A contextualized understanding of vulnerability and resilience also frame our understanding of the limitation on students' access to resources that shape their lifestyles and health behaviors. For some students, having a set routine in their households or taking a leisure walk in their neighborhoods is not an option. When students show up to class with symptoms resembling anxiety, attention deficits/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), or major depression, educators could move from a deficits-focused mindset toward a more compassionate approach in providing flexible accommodations.

The elimination of coronavirus and school re-opening may still be in the distant horizon. As educators, we must also tend to our own healing and restoration to avoid compassion fatigue. Honor our limits and acknowledge that this is the “new normal.” As we push onward with our students, it will likely not be the lessons we teach that carry them through hard days and despairing moments; it will be how we teach and show up for our students: with courage, dignity, hope, and perseverance.

**Practical Resources for Educators**

In the following we provide some resources for educators to consider and implement the 3Rs strategies (also included under references). For relational connectedness, we recommend *Teaching Tolerance* (Coombs, 2016); *Multicultural counseling: Understanding bias and practicing humility* (Francis, 2020); *Classroom mental health strategies for students and teachers* (McClintock et al., 2019); and *Training teachers in relationship building* (Pianta, & Allen, 2018). For restoring trust and engaging in social justice-oriented education, we point our readers to the websites of American Civil Liberties Union (n.d.), National Education Association (n.d.), Teaching Tolerance (n.d.), and the Center for Teaching and Learning of the University of Washington (n.d.). For contextualized resilience, readers may want to consult the works by Collins (2020), Minahan (2019), Strauss (2020) on social emotional learning and trauma-informed teaching, as well as to visit the websites of National Equity Project (n.d.), and SAMHSA (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (n.d.). Finally, we recommend Neff (2019) and Nelson et al.’s work (2017) on the importance of and tools for cultivating self-compassion.

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