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## Emotionally Responsive Practice as Trauma Informed Care: Parallel Process to Support Teacher Capacity to Hold Children with Traumatic History

Lesley Koplow  
*Bank Street College of Education*

Noelle Dean  
*Bank Street College of Education*

Margaret Blachly  
*Bank Street College of Education*

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# Emotionally Responsive Practice as Trauma Informed Care: Parallel Process to Support Teacher Capacity to Hold Children with Traumatic History

Lesley Koplow, Noelle Dean, and Margaret Blachly

*“If you hadn’t heard him and brought his comment to my attention, I wouldn’t have even heard his voice.”*

—A pre-K teacher

Emotionally Responsive Practice (ERP) is a trauma-informed approach to supporting social and emotional well-being in schools (Koplow, 2002, 2007, 2009, 2014). Developed at Bank Street College of Education, ERP teaches adults to understand children by looking through the lens of child development as well as through the lens of life experience. While ERP includes many child-focused therapeutic techniques<sup>1</sup>, its focus on adults is an equally powerful feature of the approach. Essentially, ERP engages teachers<sup>2</sup> in a **parallel process**, giving them felt experience with the emotionally responsive techniques that can be useful in the classroom throughout the day. When teachers feel validated, seen, and heard, they are much more likely to be able to hear and see the children they work with. In this way, ERP strengthens teachers’ foundation for integrating an empathic approach into their work with children with traumatic history.

This article will focus on the aspects of ERP related to work with teachers and administrators with their own traumatic histories. While most trauma-informed programs in schools primarily focus on teaching adults to recognize and understand trauma in children, ERP presupposes that the *way that adults in schools respond* to reactive behaviors associated with trauma such as fight or flight is in part influenced by the *adults’ own histories*. ERP work acknowledges that both children and adults bring their life stories into the classroom. Without a parallel focus on the adults’ experiences, their stories might interfere on an unconscious level with the best intentions of adult members of the school community. It is necessary to simultaneously give teachers, along with children, room to express, reflect on, and heal from their own traumatic experiences, within a safe community as witness.

Our work with teachers and administrators often begins with remembering. Through intentionally planned activities, teachers are invited to recall what it was like to be little. This can be a quiet, reflective time, often aided by an art or journaling activity to represent the remembered experience. We begin with remembering for a few reasons. The primary reason is that if teachers can remember what life was like from the perspective of a child, they can more readily access empathy for and insight into the children with whom they spend their days.

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1 ERP’s child-focused techniques include use of emotionally responsive literacy, intentional use of transitional objects in classrooms in and beyond early childhood, and invitations for creative play and use of metaphor to hold difficult experience and traumatic events. ERP’s conceptual framework for classroom practice involves offering a learning environment that features a balance of invitations for self-expression and exploration *within* containing, dependable, predictable routines and structures (see “Over the Hills and Far Away,” Occasional Papers, # 39).

ERP is not an age-specific SEL approach; it has been implemented in infant-toddler centers, early childhood programs, elementary schools, and middle schools, as the conceptual framework and supportive techniques can be adapted to the developmental levels of the children present.

2 Throughout this paper, we will often use the word *teachers* to refer to the many adults we work with in schools and center-based programs, including head teachers, assistant teachers, paraprofessionals, aides, specialists, and administrators.

Working with young children may bring up memories of one's own childhood. If teachers are aware of this, they are more likely to be able to make conscious choices about how to respond to children who trigger those memories. Conversely, when memories are engendered on the unconscious level, teachers are more likely to respond reactively and without a sense of agency. Often teachers talk about how some children in their classrooms remind them of themselves as a child. As author and sociologist Sarah Lawrence-Lightfoot (2003) writes, "They discover that their relationships with individual students—their overidentification with one, their unfettered admiration of another—are often the result of seeing their own childhoods mirrored in their students" (p. 5).

Connecting to childhood memories can be difficult. The brain has many mechanisms in place to keep trauma at bay, among them the defense mechanisms of dissociation and splitting (Cori, 2008; van der Kolk, 2014). The result is that many people have internalized the ways in which adults saw them as children, rather than staying connected to their own childhood feelings. People who spend many hours a day in classrooms with traumatized children may become overwhelmed by children's traumatic affect. When teachers can't remember their own childhood feelings, it can be incredibly lonely and potentially scary for the children in their classrooms who also have traumatic history, since their teachers may be unable to tolerate the children's needs. When teachers can find compassion for their childhood selves in relation to traumatic experiences, they are likely to become a powerfully nurturing and connecting resource for children.

### Stories of Parallel Process<sup>3</sup>

*"I Wouldn't Have Even Heard His Voice."*

A group of three-and-a-half-year-olds sat listening to their teacher read a story. The story included a picture of a firetruck in front of a house with smoke coming from the window. When the teacher showed that picture, a little boy spoke up.

"My kitty cat died when a fire came to my house," he said in a clear voice. The teacher kept reading.

Again, the child spoke up. "My kitty cat died when a fire came in my house!" he said. The teacher kept reading.

Tatiana, an ERP consultant in the room at the time, moved closer to where the little boy was sitting in the circle and gave him an empathic look.

"Ana," she called to the teacher, "Miguel is telling us something important. He said that his kitty died in a fire at his house."

Ana, looked up, startled. "I'm sorry, Miguel," she said. "I didn't hear you." Flustered, she then went back to reading the story.

Tatiana asked Miguel if he wanted to say more about losing his kitty or about the fire. He shook his head. She offered him an opportunity to draw about his story after the read-aloud. Miguel nodded eagerly.

During choice time, Tatiana sat with Miguel, who drew a picture of a very large cat. He showed

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3 The anecdotes related in this paper have been recreated from field notes and memories of actual sessions. While the essence of each story keeps its original integrity, actual quotes and details have been put into narrative language by the authors to increase readability and to communicate concepts effectively. Names of individuals and schools have been changed to protect privacy.

his picture to Ana and they put it up on the bulletin board where children could display artwork that they wanted to share.

Later, when the children were out in the play yard with their assistant teacher, Ana came back to the classroom to talk with Tatiana.

“I remembered something,” she said, sounding incredulous. “I had a fire in my apartment when I was very little. I don’t even know how old I was! I remember we had to leave the building and couldn’t go back for a long time. We stayed with my aunt. When we came back, I kept asking my mother where our dog was, but she would never answer me. It was so confusing!”

“It sounds like Miguel’s story brought that memory back. At first, your story was too traumatic to remember,” Tatiana said with empathy.

“I swear I didn’t even hear Miguel say anything! If you hadn’t heard him and brought his comment to my attention, I wouldn’t have even heard his voice.”

Tatiana was present in Ana’s classroom to help facilitate the development of an emotionally responsive classroom community. ERP classrooms often use emotionally responsive literature that reflects children’s issues to invite children to share their own life experiences within the containing routine of story time that can then begin to “hold” the stories that have been invited.

On this morning, Tatiana had suggested the book for the read-aloud, a popular children’s story about hope and recovery called *A Chair for My Mother* (Williams, 1982). The story includes an apartment fire. Tatiana suggested the book because another child in the class had recently been relocated to a shelter after a fire destroyed her home and the homes of her neighbors. Knowing that enhancing connection around adverse events and decreasing emotional isolation is a protective factor for vulnerable children, Tatiana thought the book might be helpful.

Tatiana hadn’t known about Miguel’s experience of loss from a fire, and neither had she known what this story might bring up for Miguel’s teacher, Ana. Tatiana’s presence in the classroom allowed her to bear witness to Miguel’s experience of trauma and loss and hold those experiences *with him* when Ana was unable to hear his voice. In turn, Tatiana’s ability to hear and acknowledge Miguel’s voice allowed Ana to *hear* her own voice of trauma and loss within the supportive teacher-consultant relationship. The support that Tatiana was able to offer Ana *within the classroom* helped to build Ana’s capacity to be more receptive over time to the traumatic stories that the children brought into the room. After a while, Ana could invite and hear these stories instead of tuning them out or being trapped in the room with behavioral evidence of children’s distress but without a connection to its source.

Eight years after our work in Ana’s school was finished, our office received a package containing a teacher-made book, beautifully written and illustrated by Ana. The story featured a girl who lived with her grandmother and had never known her mother or father who lived in another country. The note accompanying the book explained that Ana had written it to reflect the experience of many children in her room over the last few years who had been separated from their parents. The teacher who was once not able to hear a child’s traumatic story was now writing for children based on the worries and fears that she heard in the classroom every day.

## The Support Group Process: Finding the Lonely Kid

The two stories below describe the use of parallel process in the context of support groups for teachers. In both cases, remembering and gaining empathy for the “little self” allows for the potential for shifts in teacher practice.

### *Laura’s Story:*

In a recent support group, teachers talked about feelings that arise in children toward the end of the school year. A teacher named Laura talked about wanting her four- and five-year-old students to be as independent as possible during the last weeks before summer vacation. She emphasized that her sense of having succeeded as a teacher rested almost solely in her observations of children being able to solve problems on their own and to work independently.

In a writing activity, the teachers were invited to remember what the end of the school year meant to them as a child. Laura shared that she had never felt fully comfortable at school as a young child and that the end of the school year always came as a relief—“freedom,” she called it. She shared that her family had immigrated from Venezuela when she was a young child. For her, school became an unsafe place as teachers’ overt and implicit biases communicated to her that she did not belong. Her story carried in it the trauma of both racism and xenophobia (National Child Traumatic Stress Network, 2017). In an effort to keep Laura protected, Laura’s mother taught her to never trust adults outside of her family. With her mother’s voice in her ears and recollections of painful experiences of invalidation from teachers in her mind, Laura remembered that her days at school had been lonely and that her strength had come from her ability to be independent.

As the teachers in our support group listened and then shared about the children in their classroom who had come to mean so much to them and who had already begun to express deep sadness at the impending ending of their time together at school, Laura began to shift her thinking about herself as a teacher and how she was measuring her own success. She thought about the nurturing ways in which she interacts with the children in her classroom and the reflective essence of her child-teacher interactions. In a soft voice, she described how she often asks children if they would like a hug, offers them an opportunity to find comfort in the cozy corner, and gives them opportunities to express themselves by letting them move their name on the classroom feelings chart.

She had become a teacher who validates children’s feelings and life experiences, unlike the teachers she had as a child. Though independence had been a wise survival mechanism for her when she was young, children in her classroom were thriving because of the relationships and connection she had facilitated. By understanding the roots of her emphasis on independence and bringing her memories to the forefront of her consciousness, she could have more agency over how she chose to assess the well-being of the children in her room. Laura left the support group with a wider lens through which she would view the final weeks of school in June. Perhaps independence would be a part of how she measured growth, but not the sum total of it.

### *Danny’s Story:*

Danny was part of a support group for assistant teachers. The group met monthly over the course of the school year, for a total of 10 meetings. Our first meeting began like most, with remembering our little selves.

Danny introduced his little self as one of the “bad” kids who was always getting in trouble. He told the group about having to be picked up at school by his mother on a regular basis and how he would be beaten when they arrived home. He shared, in some heartbreaking detail, what he recalled of the beatings, but ended with a joke and laughed about how he must have deserved it. I interpreted his laughter as a form of self-protection from the painful experience.

When the group laughed alongside Danny, it felt as if they were allowing him to remain protected by giving him emotional shelter. Support groups, like any kind of therapeutic experience, must respect where each person is and allow them to travel their journey at the pace they choose.

In our following monthly meetings, the teachers thought together about places and people who kept them safe as children, and they created quilt squares depicting intimate safe spaces like a living room couch from their childhood, a backyard with a tree, a counselor’s office at school, and a grandma’s house. As they shared what they made, they talked about what made those spaces feel safe. Mostly they spoke of being able to be themselves, being understood, and being seen.

ERP facilitators help teachers make bridges between the memories conjured up during the group meetings and their classroom work as teachers. We ask, “Where are places in your classrooms where children feel safe?” “What worries or scares the children in your classroom?” Teachers move back and forth in their minds between their memories of needing to feel safe as a child and their everyday teacher practice and emotional safety in their classroom. They come to group, and then they return to their classrooms and their lives. It is a process of slowly integrating their often-fragmented selves.

Just as Danny had spoken of himself as a “bad” kid, he often used the same binary of “good” and “bad” when he talked about the kids in his class. One day, a few months into our work together, we talked about children who “act out” in order to receive attention from the adults in the classroom. Group members shared stories about children who are often on their own when they are home, sitting in front of an iPad while their parent is lost in the world of the Internet on their phone. They talked about having a sense of why kids “act out” in order to be noticed. Danny listened, and then he shared that he was thinking about how his mother rarely paid attention to him except for when he was “bad” and needed to be disciplined. He remembered that his mother never hugged him and that getting in trouble and hit by her was actually the only way he felt noticed by her. Then he wondered out loud if perhaps the reason he had acted out was to get the attention he so desperately sought from his mother. He wondered if maybe he wasn’t really a bad kid, but instead, a lonely kid.

Though our group came to an end and I was not able to keep in touch with Danny, my hope is that his ability to empathize with his child self will impact his practice as a teacher. When Danny next responds to a child who is dysregulated or disruptive, instead of thinking “he’s a bad kid just like I was,” he may stop in his tracks and take a moment to wonder about the meaning behind the child’s behavior because he had rediscovered his own behavior’s meaning (Jacobson, 2019).

### **A School Leader in a Flooded School**

Mrs. Coriander’s school on the tip of Coney Island is within walking distance of the water. Ninety-eight percent of the families in this little pre-K to second-grade charter school receive free or reduced-fee lunch. Many of them live in the housing projects surrounding the building. There is also a homeless shelter nearby

that houses some of the students and their families. In addition, there are newly arrived, undocumented families who come to school anxiously looking over their shoulders. Mrs. Coriander's building was "flooded" with trauma that children and adults brought into the building each day. The trauma and the chaos that it created overpowered the school's ineffective, authoritarian attempts to contain them. Residual trauma spilled out of the classrooms into the hallways and was felt immediately upon entering the building.

Mrs. Coriander had been the assistant principal at the charter school for four years. The school had had five principals in as many years, giving Mrs. Coriander authority in the building. She was drawn to the children, yet overwhelmed by their difficult behavior. She often vacillated between an affectionate demeanor and a scolding, demeaning voice. She became impatient and highly stressed by children's extreme acting out, but was even more intolerant of teachers who felt as overwhelmed by the trauma around them as she did.

Then came Hurricane Sandy. Hurricane Sandy *literally* flooded the school and closed it down for weeks. The school reopened to a traumatized community of children, teachers, and school leaders. Many families in the school community, including staff families, had lost homes, been isolated in buildings that were dark and freezing with no elevator service, or seen fires consume their living space. Because communities affected by natural disasters eventually receive relief funds, after Hurricane Sandy the state offered some of the trauma-focused support that the school had needed for years.

Before introducing the process of trauma-focused ERP to the children in this school, ERP's onsite consultant, Alana, went through a *parallel process* of Teddy Bear<sup>4</sup>-focused, trauma-informed work with teachers and school leaders. In this way, she hoped to offer the adults the felt experience of having a safe space and a source of comfort in the midst of tragedy. In so doing, she also hoped the teachers would be able to allow a similar process to unfold in their own classrooms and that school leaders would be able to give teachers permission to do this.

In between support groups and classroom work, Alana checked in with Mrs. Coriander at least one of the two times weekly that she came to work at the school. Mrs. Coriander always seemed grateful to have another adult to talk to. Alana was able to reflect the reality of how much trauma was in the building before the hurricane as well as the reality of the whole-community trauma that was the result of the hurricane. While she acknowledged these realities, she also expressed hope that the school could become strong enough to hold that trauma and could become a safer place for the children and the staff. Both during office check-ins and through the weekly support group process, Alana created a safe space for Mrs. Coriander.

During the initial month of group process, each teacher and school leader was given a square of felt to make a comfort object to hold when they were feeling afraid. Many materials were provided so that participants could decorate their objects with imagery of something that would make them feel safer when they were remembering scary parts of the hurricane. One of the teachers shared that for years, the ocean had been her most reliable source of comfort. In the wake of the hurricane, what had been a comforting presence suddenly felt like a threat. She wasn't sure what felt safe and what felt dangerous anymore.

Mrs. Coriander confided, "I lived by the water my whole childhood and never learned to swim. I was terrified as a child that I might fall into the ocean and never come out. I still don't know how to swim!" A teacher offered to teach her. Teachers and Mrs. Coriander were beginning to empathize with one another through this initial trauma-focused process. Alana reflected with them upon how scary things can be for children who feel unsafe.

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4 Trauma-focused ERP for children involves the use of individual Teddy Bears who "sometimes remember" the traumatic event and need someone to be with them and provide comfort. The bears become an important symbol of teacher-child connection and a source of self-comfort for children.

Soon thereafter, during an office check-in, Mrs. Coriander told Alana that her grandfather had been a raging alcoholic. She grew up with her grandparents but never felt safe as a child unless her grandmother was in the house. As Alana continued doing ERP work at the school, determining how to help children feel safer at school became a joint mission for her and Mrs. Coriander.

At the beginning of the second school year of our trauma-focused intervention, Mrs. Coriander told Alana that she had enrolled the school's first graders in swim classes at a nearby community center. Alana wondered aloud if that was connected to Mrs. Coriander's own childhood experience. Mrs. Coriander's reply was affirming; "I want these children to feel safer."

Little by little, Mrs. Coriander started to create other administrative policies and practices with emotional safety in mind. This first manifested when she began to refer distressed teachers to Alana's support groups or directed Alana to provide coaching in those teachers' classrooms. Instead of feeling alone and overwhelmed by the teachers' distress and reacting to it in a demeaning, authoritarian manner, Mrs. Coriander knew that she had a partner who could help her hold that distress, which allowed her to slowly develop a more stable presence in the building.

After 18 months of receiving hurricane-related funding, Mrs. Coriander found other ways to support the ERP work in her building. Over time, working in relationship with Alana, she began to support continuity of relationships within the school. She did this by having one-on-one aides follow the children they were assigned to support not just for one year, but throughout the grades, when possible. She also encouraged teachers to loop with their classes, so that children with traumatic history were known more deeply by their teachers. Although the school continues to serve children who carry trauma into the building, now when children and adults enter the school, they can often breathe a sigh of relief.

While several of ERP's child-focused, parent-focused, and teacher-focused interventions played a role in the school's recovery from the storm, without this parallel process work done with Mrs. Coriander there would have been a missing brick in the school's foundation for recovery.

### **Relationship Building**

The act of intentionally building trust and relationships with the adults who work with children is a parallel process that we consider essential to the long-term efficacy of ERP. In the anecdotes above, we have offered several examples of adults' parallel process with ERP consultants. These stories from the field demonstrate the power of parallel process to open adults' minds to an empathy-based perspective when they consider the behaviors and needs of children in their care. It is essential to note that these developments were possible because the ERP practitioners intentionally approached their work using a relationship-based model, where the teachers felt seen, known, and valued. Without the supportive relationship work, the teachers in the anecdotes would have been unlikely to share such intimate stories and even less likely to make the connection to their own work with children.

The relationship-building process in and of itself requires us to use several ERP techniques, including *inviting* adults' authentic selves and stories into the group space and *containing* those selves and stories through the structure of the activity presented (for example, making time for adults to engage in creative art expression activities, such as drawings, collages, quilts, models, and homemade books). ERP practitioners also use something we call *reflective technique* to ensure that the adults we are working with know that their stories, their perspectives, and their experiences are important to us and are valid—even when the adults initially express resistance to our model, or even voice ideas that run against the ERP core concepts.



These techniques play out both in group settings and in our one-to-one debrief sessions with teachers and administrators.

Consider the narrative below written by Madeline, an administrator who had been in ERP support groups for administrators and had also received individual support from an ERP consultant for four years. In both individual and group support sessions, our work included invitations to share both positive and negative experiences from participants' own childhoods. Initially, Madeline seemed hesitant to connect to her own childhood, but as trusting relationships with ERP consultants grew, she began to speak about it tearfully.

Recently, Madeline wrote to us about how she had chosen to relate to a child in a moment of crisis:

In tears, a 7th grade child came to me to share that there was no value in living as no one seemed to appreciate her presence nor desired to spend genuine quality time with her. Nor were they embracing the better person that she was trying to be. Then the child said, 'All I want is a hug sometimes or to be invited to lie down in bed with my adopted mother, but I'm never considered unless I'm needed to do a chore.'

Refusing to hold back my only maternal instincts any longer, I embraced and enveloped the child in my arms and we stayed like that for approximately two minutes—the child sobbing and I embracing. When we managed to pull ourselves away from each other, I shared my story. I shared that I too went through a period of time when I didn't want to live and when I felt unloved and uncared for. I shared how I spent some years in the foster care system. I shared how when I went to live with my birth father he was arrested and incarcerated for a brief stint. I shared how I became physically and mentally ill because of my situation. And then, I ended by pointing to the gallery of family pictures on my wall of my happy period in life and shared, "It will get better!" With that, the child eyed me and the photos on my wall and gained some composure. We then continued to talk about the possibilities of the future and discussed how being adopted illustrates that life is already heading in a better direction....

The child's nonverbal and physical moves (straightened posture, fixed eye contact, and the desire to linger) in that moment signaled that a sense of hope was sparked for the future. After countless intentionally ignored phone calls and knocks at my office door, we were able to calmly and respectfully get back to the matter at hand with our pride and integrity intact.

Madeline's ability to have compassion for her "childhood" self and her courage to share her story enabled her own trauma to be a healing resource for children with traumatic histories. She was a good mirror for the student who confided in her, and she offered the message that the student could move beyond surviving her trauma and into thriving with strength, joy, and a sense of belonging. In this way, Madeline naturally put into practice what Ginwright (2018) refers to as "healing-centered engagement:"

A healing-centered approach views trauma not simply as an individual isolated experience, but rather highlights the ways in which trauma and healing are experienced collectively. The term *healing-centered engagement* expands how we think about responses to trauma and offers [a] more holistic approach to fostering well-being ...(para. 10)

A healing-centered approach to addressing trauma requires a different question that moves beyond "what happened to you" to "what's right with you" and views those exposed to trauma as agents in the creation of their own well-being rather than victims of traumatic events (para. 12).

Because of Madeline's own healing process, she was able to recognize and validate the child's expression of emotions, connecting with her around her own story from a place of strength and hope, much as Ginwright (2018) suggests.

## Conclusion

Emotionally Responsive Practice at Bank Street is a preventive mental health program that is often called upon to partner with school communities where there are large numbers of children who have experienced trauma. Trauma in childhood is no longer considered a low incidence problem. Recent studies on Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) find that 45%-47% of children in the United States have experienced at least one adverse experience, with 10%-17% experiencing three or more (Sacks & Murphy, 2018). While studies show that the occurrence of ACEs is higher than anticipated throughout the income spectrum, the highest incidence of multiple ACEs and childhood trauma often occurs in high-poverty neighborhoods where families and communities may have less access to support (Bruner, 2017).

Research on neuroplasticity has shed light on the restorative power and necessity of nurturing, trauma-informed care (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2010a, 2010b, 2014). Studies have found that *consistent and supportive relationships with adults* provide the *buffering* that allows children to develop social, emotional, physical, and cognitive strengths even when highly stressed (Sege & Browne, 2017). Teachers and childcare providers are one source of potentially consistent, supportive relationships in the lives of all children. Given the power of the teacher-child relationship, *supporting teacher mental health* becomes a critical component of trauma-informed care. Studies reveal a high incidence of ACEs in the histories of teachers and caregivers. A recent small study of early childhood teachers including both an urban and a rural sample found that 75% of participants identified one or more adverse experiences in childhood (Brickley & Guyton, 2016). In addition, teachers who work in high-pressured school environments serving large numbers of children with traumatic history are vulnerable to vicarious traumatization, sometimes causing teacher mental health issues that lead to high staff turnover and create a cycle of disruption and discontinuity in the lives of fragile children.

Acknowledging that adverse experiences and trauma may be factors in classroom and school dynamics among children, teachers, and administrators can allow for a buffering response when schools and districts organize around this reality. Where trauma is present but unacknowledged, policies and practices may be antithetical to the social and emotional well-being of children and teachers. When traumatic history is a part of children's or teachers' life experience, traumatic affects and reactions can invade the classroom and leave everyone feeling unsafe. Trauma-focused ERP can help by diminishing the risk of retraumatization in schools. It does this, in part, through parallel process work. Creating a safe, holding environment for stressed adults in the building makes it possible to enhance teacher and administrator capacity to create safe holding environments for children.

The stories shared in this article illustrate the power of this essential component of ERP's trauma- focused work. Investing staff time in emotional partnering with teachers and encouraging *reflection on both the positive and negative aspects of classroom life within a community process* heightens connections between staff members, diminishes the isolation that occurs when teachers are alone with highly stressed children for many hours each day, and can interrupt the cycle of retraumatization as adults develop more empathy for themselves as well as for the children in their care. When teachers are in the presence of a "good mirror," they are better able to see, hear, and respond to the voices of children and better able to provide that mirror in their own classroom practice.

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## About the Authors



**Lesley Koplow, MS, LCSW**, is the Director of the Center for Emotionally Responsive Practice at Bank Street College. The Center collaborates with early childhood programs and elementary schools to support the social and emotional well being of children, parents, and teachers in the school setting. Ms. Koplow is the author of several books on child mental health in schools, including; *Unsmiling Faces: How Preschool can Heal*, *Creating Schools That Heal: Real Life Solutions*, *Bears, Bear Everywhere: Supporting Children’s Emotional Health in the Classroom and Politics Aside: Our Children and Their Teachers in Score-Driven Times*. She was the winner of the 2013 New York Zero-To-Three Emily Fenichel Award for Educational Leadership and the 2018 Bank Street College Thomases Award for Leadership.



**Noelle Dean, LMSW**, has been a social worker in New York City for over 20 years with more than half of those years working at Bank Street College. At Bank Street, she is a mental health consultant in the Center for Emotionally Responsive Practice and is the “feelings teacher” in the School for Children’s Lower School. In past years, she has taught as an adjunct in the Graduate School as well. She has experience as a community organizer as well as using dance as a form of expressive arts therapy. She is passionate about social justice issues and believes that emotional wellbeing is a human right.



**Margaret Blachly, GSE '05**, is a psycho-educational specialist at the Center for Emotionally Responsive Practice at Bank Street College. She is also an advisor and instructor in the Early Childhood Special Education and Bilingual Programs at the Bank Street Graduate School of Education. Margaret spent 11 years teaching pre-K and kindergarten in dual language and inclusion settings. She is a Learning Specialist at The Children’s Learning Center of Morningside Heights in New York City and is a graduate of Bank Street’s Early Childhood Bilingual General and Special Education Program.