Let Them Get Mad: Using the Psychoanalytic Frame to Rethink SEL and Trauma Infomed Practice

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Let Them Get Mad: Using the Psychoanalytic Frame to Rethink Social-Emotional Learning and Trauma-Informed Practice

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> *The children in Ms. Martin's third grade class seem restless as they make their way in from art class. "Put your things away," Ms. Martin says, "and sit in your assigned seats."*
>
> *Jaziel slides over to me and asks, "Have you even ate breakfast?"*
>
> *I smile at him and nod, then gesture toward the rug where Ms. Martin is sitting in her teaching chair. "It's time for read-aloud," she announces, "so when I call your number, come to your rug square."*
>
> *"I never get breakfast," Jaziel continues, edging closer. He points to a cardboard box in the corner of the room. The box is labeled, "Breakfast" in permanent marker. "I didn't get time," he tells me.*
>
> *"This is your second chance!" Ms. Martin's voice gets louder. "We're silent now. If I have to talk again, you'll owe me recess. So give me a voice level zero."*
>
> *At the word "recess," most of the kids seem to settle. Jaziel walks to the rug circuitously, peering into the Breakfast box on his way. Once he sits to listen to the story, which Ms. Martin reads from her iphone, I walk over to peek in the box as well. It is filled with French toast sticks, cinnamon-flavored, in grab'n'go bags. Jaziel is watching me, I notice, so I sit down and try to tune in to the book, too.*

The role of emotions in the lives of schoolchildren has garnered increasing attention in public discussions of curriculum and instruction. Hess (2019) describes the recent release of national recommendations to ensure that children's emotions are at the fore of their experiences in school. The report, Hess explains, echoes a growing national sense that "it's a big deal to observe that children learn better when they feel valued, respected, supported and safe." The rise of Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) is documented by the numbers of states adopting comprehensive standards for students' emotional learning and well-being; the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL, 2019) shows that "fourteen states have k-12 SEL competencies/standards, up from 1 in 2011" and "21 states have SEL-related web pages that provide guidance and resources."

I argue that the turn toward SEL must be seen in historical context, in part as an extension of neoliberal demands that children's lives be surveilled and managed. Previously, I have shown how SEL makes demands of regulation and positive affect that are unrealistic in the developmental and human context of childhood and education (Stearns, 2019). This research led me to ask: What kinds of emotional education and affective expression occur in the margins, outside of programmatic SEL structures, and unseen because of a growing and already heavy emphasis on SEL and its codified goals?

Recently, I spent time observing in Ms. Martin's classroom, in an urban New England K-8 school. Ms. Martin is a new teacher in a school that has not yet adopted an SEL mandate, though most of the other schools in the district have. This is largely because the school, which is in receivership, has been the target of so many interventions and mandates that they are struggling to keep up. The academic strictures are rigid as

the administration works methodically to improve test scores and keep up with state requirements. The teachers, like so many public school teachers today, are subject to rigorous surveillance and give regular academic assessments, attend "data meetings," and implement one intervention after another in pursuit of a rather ephemeral vision of success.

Next year, Ms. Martin's school will join others in the district in their approach to SEL. This district has adopted the Second Step program for SEL (Committee for Children, 2016) in combination with extensive professional development on "trauma-informed practice" (e.g., Desai, 2018) and the CHAMPS program for "Classwide Positive Behavior Support" (Sprick, 2019). There will be a mandated once-a-week "SEL block," which will seek to respond to what is seen as the behavior and dysregulated emotions of a comprehensively traumatized population. The goal, as with most SEL, is to teach regulatory strategies and explicit, predetermined relationship skills in pursuit of greater academic success (Stearns, 2019).

This essay explores the possibility that in the context of traumatic life experience *as well as* the trauma that is normative to development (e.g., Freud, 1922), the classroom should not be seen as a venue for recovery of positive affect or regulation of the self. My observations take place in the absence of reified SEL, though the discourse of "trauma-informed practice" is certainly in the background. I make no claims that Ms. Martin's students are emotionally "well," but I do wonder, alongside others, about the legitimacy of that concept, in childhood and in human life overall (Farley, 2019)..

Instead, I propose a vision of the classroom as a "frame" (Bleger, 1967) or "the totality of the phenomena included in the… relationship" among teachers and students. I wonder if we could envision "trauma-informed practice" differently if we theorized an educational frame as a place where children can enact a wide range of emotions, grow alongside their teacher in sometimes unpredictable ways, and experience discomforts openly together—without rushing to perform a specific version of overall wellness.

It is easy to feel empathy toward Jaziel in the opening vignette. He is hungry, in both the literal and figurative senses. His teacher, the principal, and most of the people involved with the children at his school see Jaziel and his classmates as traumatized. "We get a lot of talks about trauma-informed practice," the principal told me in an interview. "These kids have rough home lives and they've seen a lot. But sometimes, I do think they just need to see who is in charge."

When I asked about the "rough home lives," the principal shrugged, vaguely citing parents struggling with poverty and anxiety about deportation, but emphasizing the fact that "the parents just don't want to come to school, they don't value education that much." The idea that parents of color or those living in poverty "don't value education" has been widely debunked (Ladson-Billings, 2006), but it remains prevalent among teachers and school administrators, undermining potential for an open and trusting relationship.

Jaziel's teacher often feels despairing about the behaviors her students show, "throwing chairs, desks, getting more and more aggressive with (me)." She said in one interview, "These kids should be coming to school and learning and being happy and they're not. I can't even keep the basic promise to keep them safe."

Like many schools across the country, this one is about to respond to children's difficult, sometimes violent behaviors by subscribing to curricula, professional development, and programming oriented toward the basic precepts of SEL, teaching children and adults to "understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions" (CASEL, 2019).

The CHAMPS program the school will soon use aims for children to "feel empowered and happy to be in the classroom" and "motivate students to put forth their best efforts" (Sprick, 2019). From a psychodynamic perspective, these demands are disruptive to the basic human needs to be seen and heard. In the name of "trauma-informed practice," schools are oversimplifying the nature of trauma and misappropriating emotional life. SEL might inscribe a layer of regulation defined explicitly in terms of compliance, "self-management… impulse control and stress management… discipline, goal setting, and organizational skills" (New England DESE, 2011, p. 2).

Yet this bears little relation to emotional education, which early childhood educators in particular have long argued is part and parcel of any educational encounter (Silin, 2019, Tobin, 2007). Looking at a few scenes from Ms. Martin's classroom helps me posit something called the "educational frame," wherein emotions related to traumatized experience are not resolved, but are put on display relationally, with the ultimate, gradual possibility of "working through" (Freud, 1914). How can a teacher make space for a broad range of affective expression in the classroom while honoring the complex constructs of physical and emotional safety? What can a teacher in a school today do to push back against trauma-informed practice that oversimplifies trauma, healing, and working through?

Understanding the Frame

The frame is a psychoanalytic construct, and any analogy between a psychoanalytic encounter and an educational one can only be partial. Psychoanalysis is usually a therapeutic exploration undertaken between one analyst and one analysand, and education takes place in interactions among many people. Psychoanalysis is usually elective, and education is compulsory.

Yet as Britzman (2009) points out, "The educator was once a child with frustrated thoughts and fears over loss of love and is now in the position to frustrate others with an offer of love." She completes the analogy with a question: "Could it be that education, like psychoanalysis, is an attempt to cure by love?" (p. 17). In other words, Britzman and other like-minded theorists maintain that the emotionality and relationality of every educational encounter is central, and for this reason, theories used to understand the psychoanalytic encounter can be drawn on productively to help understand what goes on unnoticed, and sometimes unconsciously, in education.

In psychoanalysis, the frame is generally understood as the location and conditions of the ongoing relationship between clinician and patient. Jose Bleger, who contributed most substantially to the theorization of the frame, explained that any institutionalized way of being, or set of prescriptions for behavior, becomes "part of the individual's personality" (1967, p. 239). What becomes most intuitive about an institution—unnamed and sometimes even un-thought—is precisely what comprises its frame. The unspoken ideas about how a person acts in school are, of course, multitudinous, for teachers as well as for children. There can also be conflicts between how people understand these expectations, which are mediated, as most teachers know, by culture, class, gender, age, ability, geography, and other less definable factors.

There are a lot of different frames co-existing in an educational setting. For instance, the teacher might propose and enact one frame without articulating it, but simply via behavior; the students or even just a few of them might enact an entirely different one. Often, little by little and without mentioning it, students and teachers begin to meet each other's expectations for communication, behavior, and coexistence, although sometimes this does not happen and the ensuing conflicts are more disruptive.

As Bleger describes it, each person's frame is their most primitive and ostensibly automated way of existing, and it can only be moved by being gradually rendered conscious, taken seriously, and then disrupted (p. 241). Teachers might, for instance, notice their students' responses, ways of being, and habits; they might describe these, incorporate them into curriculum, play, art, and classroom routines; they might talk together about how these frames do and do not jibe with those of the institution of school or the expectations of institutional life more broadly. Conversely, teachers may take their observations about students' affective habits and use them to make sense of our own expectations for behavior, where they come from, and whether or not they are constructive and reasonable.

As a codified construct, SEL works within very specific boundaries for behavior, thought, and emotion, and encourages the development of these phenomena in children—by the teacher, who is assumed to be absent of trauma and to understand and expertly embody disparate skills associated with social and emotional life. Can a person really be regulated, though, by telling them how important it is for them to regulate? Should trauma be addressed by the pedagogy of deep breaths and good cheer? Does learning mean settling down and taking up the discourse of "best efforts" or even healing and recovery? What might it mean to question these undertheorized premises and develop an understanding of the educational frame: a place where children can exist within their trauma and feel themselves seen and heard, their ways of being understood and sometimes questioned, alongside the adults in their lives, and only then, and only so slowly, moved.

Methods

The empirical data for this paper comes from observations over the course of one school year in Ms. Martin's third grade classroom. Ms. Martin teaches in an urban public school with a high level of poverty. The K-8 school is historically low-performing and has gone through extensive administrative and teacher turnover over the last 10 years. The principal and Ms. Martin are both new to the school.

I observed Ms. Martin's class 10 times, taking running records of students' language, gestures, and movements over the course of each hour-long session. I conducted one interview with the school's principal and three interviews with Ms. Martin, very loosely following Seidman's (2013) protocols for phenomenological interviews. The observations were focused largely on understanding behavior management and responses to affective outbursts in the classroom. Following each interview, I coded my notes according to Charmaz's (2006) grounded theory approach, trying to discern categories for understanding and responding to my catalyzing questions.

Teachers Get Angry

Ms. Martin is introducing a math activity to her students. She wants them to work in centers, rotating through so that each group is doing a slightly different activity.

As she explains the structure of the work, Briana begins giggling. She taps the students on either side of her, and they join in her giggle. Hakim starts to cough and laugh at the same time, and Ms. Martin throws her hands in the air. "I didn't say anything funny so I'm not sure why you're laughing!" she says. The children begin laughing harder.

Ms. Martin's voice grows louder, presumably to drown out the laughter. She finishes giving the instructions, ignoring the disruption, and sends the kids off to centers. Immediately on arriving at their center, Alina and Hakim begin to argue. "This is dumb," says Hakim.

"You're dumb," Alina says. Hakim grabs her work and rips it into pieces. Ms. Martin, who has convened a

work group at the rug, looks up sharply, "This is a level two of noise!" she yells. Then she approaches the children and notices what has happened. "Look what you did!" she tells them., "I'm trying to help you, to help you learn… but now I'm frustrated, really frustrated."

Ms. Martin puts her fingers to her temples and takes a deep, exasperated breath. Both kids are staring at her, eyes wide, rapt. Hakim moves closer to her body and lifts his head. When she opens her eyes again, she looks calmer, "I'm not sure," she says coldly, "that was the right thing to do." Hakim throws the shredded pieces into the air and storms out of the room.

"I'm really angry, Hakim!" she yells after him, before turning to Alina and asking her to help clean up the mess. Presumably, Hakim will be intercepted by one of the many security personnel who patrol the hallways of this elementary school. I don't see him again until my next observation.

Difficult, disruptive behaviors from students elicit all sorts of emotional responses. "Best practice" discourse on SEL and trauma-informed practice recommends that the teacher remain calm and outwardly regulated in the face of child misbehavior (Elias & Weissberg, 2000). Teachers are meant to model "SEL skills" such as regulation and calm (Morcom, 2014). Teachers' emotional competency and regulation leads to the establishment of a "prosocial classroom" (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009) where problem behaviors are minimized.

By these metrics, Ms. Martin requires additional education and intervention. She frequently gets angry at her students. She tells them directly she is angry, and she sometimes shows it with expressions and body language. What I often observed, though, and what is demonstrated in the anecdote above, is that her outward expressions of anger can reflect her students' emotions. They represent the fact that their projected intense emotionality and extreme frustrations with their situations are actually heard and taken in, even taken on. This happens on an unconscious level, as is often the case with projection, and Ms. Martin feels that she ought not express her anger so explicitly. However, again and again, it is precisely when she subverts her own intense emotions—closes her eyes, takes deep breaths, and calms her voice—that she loses her students; they storm out of a room where their own emotions cannot be tolerated or mirrored.

In his explanations of how people can relate to the important objects, or others, in their lives, Bleger points out that a "symbiotic quality" is usually present (1967, p. 73). It is natural for the object of anger, upset, and outrage to grow angry. "Symbiosis," explains Bleger, "is a close interdependence between two or more persons who complement each other in order to keep the needs of the more immature parts of the personality controlled, immobilized, and in some measure satisfied" (p. 79).

The most difficult of feelings—extreme anger, confusion, ambivalence, and intolerable physicality of emotion— are inevitably projected onto the other. The teacher might feel consciously angry at the student, but on an unconscious level, this signifies an introjection of, identification with and, ultimately, empathy toward the student's anger. Perhaps this helps account for why Ms. Martin's anger draws Hakim's attention, where her calm and more regulated attitude sends him away. One implication might be that rather than surveil teacher language and behavior with the goal of glossing over difficult emotion, it could be helpful to encourage teachers to attend to their affective responses and take them seriously as both cognitive and emotional cues that could help with attuning to students.

As Moore (2018) has pointed out, the affective needs of teachers are largely ignored in the broader context of accountability discourse. However, this does not mean that teachers can proceed as emotionally neutral people, untinged by humanity. What if Ms. Martin had not felt compelled to carefully "school" her anger?

What if, instead, she were allowed to stay with it and encouraged to contemplate what it could show her about Hakim's internal world? It seems that Hakim might have been more responsive then, stayed closer, and possibly become more open to developing an ongoing educational relationship.

In the context of an individual school, teachers might address their own emotionality by gathering in supportive groups where they can discuss their emotional responses to student behaviors and provocations. Teachers can help each other identify their own frames and the ways these might be conflicting with students' frames, and can develop an inter-classroom culture of examining—rather than schooling, controlling, or teaching—emotion. Gradually, teachers can build the trust it takes to identify emotional patterns in themselves and their pedagogical responses, but even in the short term, groups can alleviate the pressure that comes with an assumption that teachers are experts on emotional existence, and help them function as people in very difficult circumstances.

Students Get Angry

"Come to the front of the room for uniform check," says Ms. Martin. I am startled; this is the first time I have visited the class so early in the day, so perhaps I'm about to witness a new routine. The students somewhat reluctantly line up in front of their teacher.

I notice that there are fewer students in the room than the usual thirty. Later, I learn that this is because of the weather. It's been very cold lately, and many families have been keeping their kids home. Moreover, it is flu season. Many children are out sick or staying home, presumably to avoid getting the flu. Ms. Martin and the principal are despairing over their attendance statistics, sending regular letters home in English and Spanish stressing the importance of coming to school.

Ms. Martin is holding a clipboard with her class list affixed to it. As each child approaches, she checks their uniforms: pale blue shirt, navy pants or skirt, and appropriately colored socks and shoes. If they are dressed "right," she gives them a check and a little sticker to put on their shirt. If not, she puts an X in the box and withholds the sticker.

Cynthia is the only child in the class who is not wearing any part of the uniform; she is dressed in ordinary street clothes. "They're in the laundry, my mom says...," she tells her teacher. Ms. Martin tells her that this is a third offense and she will have to miss recess. "Then can I get a sticker?" Cynthia says.

Ms. Martin tells her no and sends her off to do a grammar worksheet, but Cynthia digs in her heels. "That's not right," she yells. Ms. Martin grimaces, "Cynthia..."

"If I got to miss recess I need to get a sticker!" she yells. Other children look up from their worksheets or from their place in the line. "Yeah," murmur their collective voices. "It's in the laundry!" Cynthia yells, kicking the leg of a table.

"Cynthia! We don't kick!" Ms. Martin looks nervous and confused.

Cynthia looks down at her foot. "Come on," she says, voice getting loud again. Ms. Martin glances at me, and I wonder if she's nervous about my judgment. She gives Cynthia a sticker. "Next time, remember your uniform," she says half-heartedly. Cynthia beams at her and returns to her desk.

Common parlance about the "trauma-informed school" indicates the importance of rules, routines, structure, and compliance. Kaufman (2019) says that a "trauma-informed school" must include "an environment with

clear behavior expectations for everyone." He explains, "Trauma-exposed individuals benefit from clearly defined expectations" with the idea that clear rules and policies help traumatized students to feel safer and more secure.

Carello and Butler (2015) confirm that this sort of structure and routine allows for more of a sense of safety in the classroom. In general, SEL and trauma-informed discourses do not explicitly define safety, but they imply that safety is an affective sensibility that emerges from ongoing compliance. While SEL-oriented approaches are rarely directly punitive in nature, they do rely on the sense that discipline, routinization, and consistency are key in working with children in emotionally responsive ways (e.g., Responsive Classroom, 2011).

Children sometimes get very angry. Adults who are objects of this anger may be frightened, exhausted, put off, threatened, or angry in return. It is possible that responding to anger with rigidity can provide a child with a sense of containment and holding (e.g., Winnicott, 1962). It is also possible, however, that anger and its expression might be seen as what Sedgwick (2011) describes as a performative representation of what is ultimately a political experience. If we look at the vignette through this lens, then we could say Cynthia staged a minor protest when she grew angry, even aggressive. What's more, her protest was successful; she engaged support from her collective, and in the end, she got what she wanted. Her frame—her way of being—was in sync with that of her classmates, and her teacher grudgingly acquiesced, arguably to Cynthia's, and everyone's, emotional benefit.

It is possible to read Ms. Martin's acquiescence to Cynthia's demand as an outgrowth of her exhaustion, which, to be sure, is substantial. From the perspective of most codified SEL programs and disciplinary codes, she committed a faux pas. In fact, I saw Ms. Martin behave in this way many times. Her students get angry a lot, and they really are angry, because their lives are hard, because being a child is hard, because being in third grade can be demanding, because their clothes are expensive and hard to come by, and because they have to line up to get surveilled for checkmarks and stickers every single day.

This kind of angry outburst is hard to tolerate, and I maintain that a great deal of SEL and even trauma-informed practice is put in place to protect the adult world from the extremely uncomfortable feelings, including guilt, engendered by the protest of the angry child. If we look at Cynthia from the perspective of the educational frame, though, what happened is not a slip-up in consistency. Rather, it is the experience of her protest being heard and legitimized, of the outrageous external conditions of her life and circumstance being recognized, and of her bravery in expressing her extreme, taboo emotion being rewarded. Her reality becomes the reality of her class; they are in one frame, together.

It can be hard to figure out ways to make space for anger, and for a range of emotional experience and expression, while maintaining physical and emotional safety for most kids. Some expressions are overwhelming, and others are simply confusing. It is the exploration of these questions mutually in a classroom that can help with the establishment of a useful, ever more conscious, and meaningful frame.

What really happens when Cynthia has an outburst? Where do the rest of the students file the lessons they take away from these episodes? Children and teachers can talk about these triggering experiences together, make responsive art together, explore the historical and sociopolitical implications of deeply angry protest, make use of what emotions and affective life can teach us as part of an ongoing, emergent, and responsive childhood curriculum. But this cannot be determined in advance or reduced to a poster on a classroom wall.

Certainly, staying with anger is difficult for some students, and the feelings that come with it deserve attention and containment. But to imagine that external demands for regulation will somehow relieve students of this

burden is false; instead, in the context of a more regimented classroom life, hard feelings go undiscussed and their taboo nature becomes embedded in a less conscious frame.

Adjusting the Frame

SEL and trauma-informed practice both come from ethical intentions in relation to children, perhaps particularly children living in difficult circumstances. These intentions exist on a conscious level and, as such, are laudable. Unconsciously, though, these same intentions actually mask a set of sociocultural desires in relation to children that are communicated subtly via the rigid proscriptions put forth about what kinds of affect and emotion are acceptable.

The concept of the frame is a fruitful way of understanding that emotional education cannot happen immediately. It is not quick. It is also something that happens on a less conscious level than any codified curriculum can make space for. The frame is the situation of the educational encounter, the setting in which constant transactions occur between children and teacher, and among children. The frame is how children and teachers figure out how they will function together, which aspects of themselves they will not compromise, and which they will compromise as a way of honoring the other. It cannot be predetermined by a teacher, a school, or a clearly articulated set of "best practices." Rather, the frame (and its disruptions) should be attended to, read, and occasionally adjusted.

One of the many things that gets lost in the context of "trauma-informed discourse" and SEL is the longevity and the utility of negative affect. Ms. Martin and her students are not formally part of a school where SEL is mandated, though it is making gestures in that direction and will soon undergo a mandate. In part because there is no formal SEL curriculum, and in part precisely because Ms. Martin is a novice teacher and overwhelmed, her classroom makes more space than many for expression of the negative (e.g., Stearns, 2019). Many observers might see this as problematic. Ms. Martin certainly struggles, she worries that her students are "out of control" and do not feel "happy" in school. In fact, the most consistent feedback she gets from her administrators is that she should adopt more regulatory strategies, aligned with much of SEL discourse research on trauma-informed schools.

The feeling in the classroom is chaotic and even scary at times. Yet Ms. Martin's students connect with her. They approach her to talk about their home lives. They lean into her as she talks, reads, and explains. They want to know about her puppy, her house, where she celebrates the holidays. In addition, they show themselves to her. It might mean avoiding externally mandated work, but the children draw pictures of their pets, interrupt her lessons to tell stories about going to the mall, and yell out when their clothes are in the laundry. Ms. Martin cannot recognize any of these phenomena as helpful or positive, and it is hard to say how meaningful any of it is in the long run. But education is at least in part about relationality (Biesta, 2015), about moral encounters with the other (Todd, 2003), and about what Levinas (2003) has positioned prominently as the "recognition of the humanism of the other."

I propose that the concept of trauma-informed practice is helpful as a transitional phenomenon, in that it reminds the educational community that some children are living in complicated and disturbing situations that must be held in mind. However, the constructs that have grown out of this understanding can be excessively rigid, repressive, and dehumanizing. Re-framing the conversation, in terms of the construction and reading of what exists anyway as emotional classroom life, might make more space for children and teachers to feel, experience, and live within a fully comprehensible anger. In time, this might allow for a deeper humanization of the educational experience, one in which children and teachers are mutually engaged, attuned with one another, and—to a limited extent, of course—known.

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