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Don’t Be Fooled, Trauma Is a Systemic Problem: Trauma as a Case of Weaponized Educational Innovation

Debi Khasnabis and Simona Goldin

There is always an easy solution to every human problem—neat, plausible, and wrong.

–H. L. Mencken (1917)

What follows is a handful of snapshots of classroom incidents that educators have shared with us as examples of the impact of trauma in schools:

- A third grader flips over a table and throws his pencil at the teacher when a peer takes his toy.
- A kindergartener retreats to hiding under a table when told to put away her materials and line up for music class.
- A middle school student yells and swears when a staff member insists that he change his blood-stained shirt, soiled from an injury.

These incidents present great challenges instructionally. Educators ask us: How should teachers respond? Should they allow swearing in the classroom if a child is triggered? Certainly, the child is troubled, but if there is no punitive consequence, are we not condoning the misbehavior? How can we stop and attend to one child, when 25 others are ready to learn? And we hear again and again, if we stop and attend to one child, won’t we lose “control” of the others?

These questions seem reasonable. The educators are right—they need guidance in order to see and support the students they are responsible for. Yet in looking at these “problems” and the solutions they engender, the cause is often obscured. Our argument here and in the professional development (PD) that we lead is that these questions direct attention to the wrong target, and thus might lead educators to re-traumatize and re-stigmatize the children they serve. While some practitioners are indeed attentive to this tension, we have observed that a stigmatizing stance toward children and families who experience trauma is quite pervasive. Thus, we advocate for asking questions that attend more broadly to the contexts within which the problems occur. For example, what are the systems in my school that are re-traumatizing this child? Why am I holding the child responsible for the trauma they have faced? How do I focus my energies on the child’s assets and capabilities rather than on their failures and deficits?

This orientation to reading systemic problems at the individual level is nothing new and, we believe, is linked to broader educational patterns. In seemingly cyclic fashion, our leaders, educators, policymakers, and communities have wrung their hands at the crisis of public education, in search of a solution to the many problems that plague our schools. But more often than not, instead of looking to interrogate the root causes of problems, we have gravitated to easy (or easier) solutions (Love, 2019).

One set of solutions takes specific aim at the tremendous inequality that defines and dogs United States schools. These solutions aim to address inequality, most often “focusing” on individual behavior and learning outcomes, more and more frequently measured by standardized tests. There is no question
that attention to inequality is needed, and desperately so. The school-to-prison nexus has expanded to include infancy and the preschool years (Edelman, 2007). Children of color lag behind White students on all academic outcomes (Hanushek, Peterson, Talpey, & Woessman, 2019). And college attendance racial gaps persist (Jaquette, Curs, & Posselt, 2016).

It would seem logical then for schools to hunt for urgent solutions to urgent problems. We argue that the combination of the search for easy solutions with this state of urgency only magnifies the potential damage, which can have significant and violent effects on children and their communities. It is for this reason that we see the mis-use of innovation as, oftentimes, the weaponization of design and innovation against the very communities the innovations were meant to support. As such, we argue for systemically trauma-informed practice—practice that manages prejudicial tendencies and supports educators to unlearn them (Goldin & Khasnabis, 2020).

**Equity Projects and the Propensity for Blame**

In this article we investigate a particular type of implementation failure—what can and often does go wrong when schools and educators take aim at the deep inequalities of U.S. public schooling. These solutions are often expensive and time-consuming. And too often, they fail (e.g., Payne, 2008; Sarason, 1990; Mehta, 2015; Cohen and Moffitt, 2010). We highlight a recurring set of pathologies associated with these innovations—one with dangerous consequences. When educational innovations that seek to address inequality fail, we often blame teachers and students. Kumashiro (2012) examines the “bad teacher” trope, noting that we regularly hear politicians exhorting “we need to get the lazy, incompetent teachers out of the classroom” (xi). In our newspapers, in our leaders’ speeches, and in school board meetings, it is common to hear complaints that teachers don’t “adopt” with fidelity, they’re not committed to their students and their communities, they don’t collaborate, or perhaps they collaborate too much.

Trauma-informed practice—increasingly promoted as an answer to equity-related problems that surface in schools—is particularly susceptible to these pathologies. It is founded in understandings of trauma that were born in the medical field as doctors searched for explanations for differential health outcomes (Felitti et al., 1998; Felitti et al., 2019). Understandings that adverse childhood life experiences impacted a wide range of lifelong health outcomes motivated professionals across many disciplines to design interventions that would support victims of trauma not only to survive but to thrive. Trauma-informed practice extended from these origins becomes a set of principles and practices that support individuals to heal from trauma and to grow and thrive across settings, including classrooms and schools.

These origins of trauma-informed practice are substantive, and have the potential to be of great use. However, it is within the context of urgency that its danger lies—a danger of ending in the blaming of teachers, students, and families. When trauma-informed practice does not work and performance measures continue to plummet, teachers may be held responsible. Teachers, then, are likely to hold children and families responsible. We have heard terrible things said of children and their communities when they experience trauma, including, “The parents here don’t know how to parent. They just need us to teach them.”

As teacher educators who often support educators in underserved schools, we are regularly confronted with this problem: How can teachers and schools support students who have lived with and through trauma, without resorting to a “blame the victim” mentality? We have observed again and again that this problem is met with individual-level solutions, solutions that often obscure or ignore structural racism, White supremacy, and inequality in U.S. society and schools. These individual-level solutions do little to tackle the systemic causes of trauma.
The educators we work with are concerned about the well-being of their individual students. Often, they are desperate for strategies, approaches, and methods. Most see the individual children in their classrooms as deserving of love, resources, safety, and learning opportunities. But when those children are hurting, deeply in pain because of the various forms of trauma they have experienced, teachers often see the behaviors that result from the individual pain and not the systems that construct and contextualize that individual trauma—systemic racism, deep poverty, and inequality. As a result we ask: What can we do to help teachers learn to see and account for systemic racism in their classroom and construct their teaching practice?

But who are we, and how are our identities and positionalities at play here? We are both teacher educators, and together we have constructed and enacted PD for schools and districts, focusing on multicultural education and anti-racist pedagogy. While we have enacted PD in schools with varying student demographics, the teachers and administrators we work with have been predominantly White. The first author is an Indian American woman and the second author is a White Jewish woman.

We have found our different racial identities to be great resources for the co-implementation of PD. We are, perhaps obviously, viewed differently in these spaces. Even more, we see and are entrusted with different information, which might be related to our different racial identities. Our different identities mean that we have had vastly different cultural, racial, ethnic, life experiences and traumas. Together, as a whole, this pool of collective experiences helps us understand our participants’ perspectives and their trauma. Enacting PD together allows us to splice these different frames together, enabling a more expansive and more complete understanding of what it is participants know and are learning and allowing us to tailor our work with them accordingly.

**Shifting the Focus to the System Level**

*Systemically trauma-informed practice* is founded upon the awareness that trauma is a systemic problem and must be addressed at the systemic level in addition to the individual level. Treating trauma as only an individual-level problem, when it is not, has the unfortunate and perhaps somewhat predictable effect of blaming children and families for challenges they did not cause. Ironically, although teachers often bring significant privilege to the work that they do, they themselves operate in systems that demoralize them, that exert perverse incentives, and that weigh on them.

One administrator who works in a district in which we delivered and designed PD reminded us of the system within which teachers do their work. He lamented especially the heavy focus on children's achievement and teachers' effectiveness, as measured by test scores, which has “devastated” the relationship between teachers and their students, and eroded trust between teachers and administrators. He pointed out that the focus is now on the product, not on the whole child.

This focus on product also transfers to teachers. Describing the pressure on teachers and students to perform, he said, “When we meet for a teacher evaluation, we tend to ask, 'How do we get your data up?' We are not asking, 'What are your needs? How are you feeling? Are you experiencing secondary trauma?' Things like morale, they don’t matter in the current environment.” The very system that blames children and families also blames teachers.

Scholars have suggested that racism itself is trauma, pointing to the systemic nature of *racial trauma*. We agree. Racial trauma (Comas-Díaz, 2016), or repeated and accumulating exposure to discrimination, points to the systemic nature of trauma. Myriad examples abound. A 2011 study found that “Arab male applicant[s] needed to send two résumés to every one résumé sent by a white male applicant to receive a callback for an interview by the hiring personnel” (Widner & Chicoine, 2011, p. 806). Pierson and colleagues (2019)
found that across the country, Black drivers are 20 percent more likely than White drivers to be pulled over. Students of color are disproportionately disciplined in schools for subjectively interpreted transgressions, such as defiance (Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002).

Demeaning moments like this can have severe consequences for children who are repeatedly marginalized in schools and can contribute to a school-to-prison nexus for students of color (Winn & Winn, 2016). Experiencing these patterns themselves constitute trauma—racial trauma that is baked into the systems of our society, including educational systems, judicial systems, and employment systems.

We argue that in addition to racial trauma, all trauma is nested within a racist world. Consider the 1995 Kaiser Permanente study, which initially documented the widespread existence of adverse childhood life experiences (ACES), including abuse, neglect, and household challenges such as domestic violence, substance abuse, or parental separation. Two-thirds of the population were found to have experienced at least one ACE (Felitti et al., 1998, Felitti et al., 2019).

This widespread trauma is nested within an inherently unequal society, where oppressive forces such as racism permeate all parts of society, including communities, schools, and classrooms where educators and students interact (see Figure 1). In other words, any particular ACE, such as child abuse, may not itself be an example of racial trauma; but the occurrence of child abuse is nested within a racist society, and is at risk for being interpreted in racist ways. For example, one study found that doctors are more likely to report Black children’s injuries as suspected child abuse, than those of White children with identical injuries (Lane, Rubin, & Monteith, 2002). This discriminatory reporting pattern, not disproportionate rates of abuse, could explain higher rates of Black children’s removal from their parents.

Our work in schools with children and teachers leads us to conclude that this same phenomenon occurs in classrooms. While trauma may affect all children, the trauma that children of color experience is likely to be hyper-visible. An eye-tracking study conducted by Walter Gilliam and colleagues (2016) found that teachers were more likely to surveil Black boys when looking for behavior problems. In an NPR podcast,
Gilliam explained, "If you look for something in one place, that's the only place you can typically find it" (see Turner, 2016). Our experience in schools suggests that Black children and families are also more likely to be seen for their trauma, even when trauma is not present.

An added complication is associated with class, and unequal access to resources such as health care, childcare, housing, and food for families and communities living in poverty. A range of protective factors can buffer children from trauma or support them in developing resilience in the face of trauma. When families lack access to resources, however, rising above trauma proves challenging. Add the association of class with race and the potential for racist interpretation only increases. Thus, the nestedness of trauma within a racist society sets up an unfortunate reality—where trauma is likely to be over-identified with people of color, and especially poor people of color. This association is dangerous, because it can result in deficits being assigned to those who have experienced trauma, or to entire communities.

There is a dangerous corollary to this pattern. Complementary to the pathology of overemphasizing trauma in underserved communities is the worry that trauma experienced by children in privileged communities may be unseen. A former student illustrated this phenomenon when describing the impact of her father's physical abuse: “I lived with my mom. She understandably took to alcohol to self-medicate, and for the most part ignored me and my brother...Because of our wealth, I looked really well-off. But really, I wasn’t.” In both contexts—privileged children with unseen trauma and marginalized children who are perceived largely for their trauma—the relative visibility of hardship is a systemic phenomenon demanding system-level solutions.

**Toward a Pedagogy for Systemically Trauma-Informed Practice**

The hunger for work on trauma-informed practice in schools is clear. When we engage with teachers about their current needs with regard to trauma-informed practice, we are asked questions such as the following:

- “We already know our kids have trauma! What should we do about it?”
- “We’ve already learned about what trauma is. But no one is giving us enough information on how to manage the crises happening in our classrooms! What do I do about the kid having a meltdown?”
- “Tell us what to do to get the parents to listen. They are making it worse!”

Statements like these strike us as insensitive and impatient, and sometimes as racially unaware; however, we remember that teachers are themselves in crisis. They have been asked to take on the task of managing and even solving the effects of societal dysfunction, an example of which is differential access to resources in their classrooms. We work to bring both compassion and nuance to our response so that we can support the transformation of their practice.

We respond to this frustration by teaching about trauma. For example, we show the documentary film, *Resilience: The Biology of Stress and the Science of Hope* (Pritzer & Redford, 2017), which provides an orientation to the topic of ACEs and the ways that professionals across fields support people who have experienced trauma. We also teach methods for interacting with children productively, including, for example, reflective listening techniques. But while there is value in developing understandings of trauma-informed practice, this approach to practice must be developed in tandem with understandings of the way that racism informs perception. Educators must recognize that they are always at risk of reproducing racist ideologies because they work within a racist society.
Given the systemic nature of trauma, how and in what way do we support teachers in practicing in systemically trauma-informed ways—ways that challenge prejudicial tendencies and support educators to unlearn them? Educators must first be supported to recognize and contend with racist lenses through which trauma is frequently interpreted and weaponized to injure, blame, and pathologize, in particular, poor children and families of color who may struggle to thrive. And then, they must be supported to recognize the ways that systemic racism obscures the assets of communities of color that teachers are purportedly meant to support. Finally, we work with learners to develop their practice, to embed this knowledge into the design and enactment of their work with their students, seeking to support individual students but also seeking to understand and interrupt systemic dysfunctions that are either causing or exacerbating trauma for them and their families.

The Isaiah Lamb Learning Sequence

A key pedagogical tool we use to engage teachers in these understandings is counter-story (Goldin, Khasnabis, & Atkins, 2018; Goldin, Khasnabis, O’Connor, & Hearn, 2019; Khasnabis & Goldin, 2016; Khasnabis, Goldin, Perouse-Harvey, & Hanna, 2019), offering educators practice-based opportunities to engage with stories of strength, where they may have expected stories of weakness. This orientation has been an effective exercise for prompting educators to recognize presumed deficit narratives, often due to racial bias, that they hold about students.

One of our instructional sequences centers on a young Black athlete, Isaiah Lamb, a basketball player who faced homelessness as a high school student. He was featured in a cover story of *Sports Illustrated* (Wertheim & Rodriguez, 2014). After the story was published, Lamb went on to attend and play basketball at Marist College, where he had received a scholarship. Lamb and his mother were also featured in a *Sports Illustrated* film titled *Young, Gifted and Homeless*. The film makes clear that Lamb is exceptionally talented, relentlessly hard-working, and poignantly hopeful and positive—embodying the very concept of resilience. Lamb’s mother adds perspective, describing her own immense challenge in providing for her son and the sadness she experienced living out of her car, coupled with the joy she felt when they finally found housing. Lamb’s story is an authentic story of trauma as well as a story of significant strength, the kind of strength that is frequently overlooked in the everyday life of schools.

Using Lamb’s story, we engage educators in an opportunity to contend with their expectations. As such, we define what we mean by deficit and asset frames. We provide the following definitions:

- **Deficit perspective**: Describing a child/family/community by either explicitly or implicitly emphasizing their challenges, limitations, constraints, and/or pathologies. Often based on assumptions or **assumed intentions**.

- **Strengths-based perspective/Asset perspective**: Describing a child/family/community either explicitly or implicitly by emphasizing their strengths, assets, competencies, capabilities, and/or potential. Often rooted in viewing with **generosity**.

Examining these is useful, but we know that simply learning new terms and understanding them doesn't, by fiat, change practice. Instead, we scaffold teachers’ abilities to put these understandings into practice. We constructed a fictitious narrative that integrated imagined ways that Lamb may have been perceived by high school educators who were neither trauma-aware nor racially sensitive. It is told from the view of a hypothetical teacher, and embodies racially biased perspectives that we have often heard to describe students of color. This narrative and the questions we ask teachers to support their analysis are captured in Figure 2.
Directions: Review the case as a narrative for critique.

Isaiah Lamb is an 11th grade student in your fourth hour English class. He is on the basketball team, and his grades have been slipping over the course of the year. You notice that he is tired in class, rarely raises his hand to participate, and regularly falls asleep in class. It is clear that he is not completing the readings that you have assigned. You are considering reporting his poor progress to the basketball coach as it may not be possible for him to continue to be on the team, given his poor academic progress.

Your colleague who was his 10th grade English teacher has informed you that last year Isaiah started the year well but then struggled for most of the rest of the year. She said that she had made many efforts to reach out to Isaiah's welfare-dependent mother to help support her son in school, but most of her calls were unanswered. Once, his mother returned a phone call, but she seemed agitated when your colleague voiced her concern about his tiredness and distraction and didn't acknowledge the issue. Ultimately your colleague said that she felt Isaiah's mother was unwilling to support her son.

Question Set 1 (to be completed after reading narrative)
- What are your reactions to this narrative?
- What questions do you have?
- Propose an alternative hypothesis than that depicted in the text.
- What would your next steps be as Isaiah's teacher?

Question Set 2 (to be completed after viewing film)
- What thoughts do you have given your more contextualized understanding of who Isaiah is?
- Given what you've learned about Isaiah, what would your next steps be as his teacher?
- Critique the case depiction itself: What about it was useful? What about it are you critical of?

After educators read the fictitious narrative, we prompt them to journal their reflections in response to Question Set 1. Teachers typically react to the scenario with many substantive questions, wondering for example what efforts have been made to help Isaiah get the rest he needs. Frequently, teachers are insistent that a next step would be to talk to Isaiah himself and to consult with his coach. Coaches who we have worked with share that their relationships with students are less constrained by academics and thus provide an opportunity to know students more holistically; they encourage their colleagues to reach out to them in cases like Isaiah's. These responses illustrate the way that educators typically respond with compassion for Isaiah and a desire to help him.

By asking participants to propose an alternative hypothesis, we aim to push educators past a space of compassion alone to begin to consider that the conclusions portrayed in the narrative could be false. In response to this prompt, participants note that attempts to connect with Isaiah's mother do not appear substantive, and in fact, she may not have received the teacher's calls or messages. Developing participants' ability and their commitments to consistently and persistently look for alternative hypotheses is a key practice we seek to nurture in educators, and has proven particularly useful in enabling them to bring
knowledge into practice, and to interrupt and dismantle the ways that teaching practice can, so often, re-traumatize students.

We then show the film, which includes Isaiah’s voice, as well as his mother’s and coach’s voices, as they are interviewed, stretching educators to reexamine their jottings and serving as a “counter-story” to the deficit-laden fictitious narrative with which they were first presented. Figure 3 highlights some of the richness of what we learn about Isaiah Lamb’s actual life and his many assets. These quotes capture Lamb more holistically—portraying him not as a student who is falling behind and “at risk,” but as a hard-working young man with dreams and talents, a mother who is devoted to him, and a coach who believes deeply in him.

**Isaiah Lamb**
- “My teammates know me as the good basketball player who has the perfect life. But they never knew what I went home to.”
- “For about three years, a parking lot like this was my home. Just sit in the corner in the car and sleep there for the night.”
- “My mother was always on me about getting good grades and going to college. Do what you love in order to get your mind off of what’s going on.”
- “I would definitely like to get a full academic scholarship.”

**Isaiah’s Mother: Valerie Lamb**
- “When we was coming up it was always believed that the dinner table... you sit down at the dinner table and the children tell you everything. But what if you don’t have a dinner table?”
- “Isaiah is so tall he would be crunched up in the back. Many nights I would just cry looking at him because he was so crunched up in the back.”
- “I had a good life when I was younger. And I wanted that for my children. But it didn’t work out that way.”
- “I never know he had it in him... he was such a good basketball player!”

**Isaiah’s Coach: Matt Lochte**
- “He’s one of the best athletes in the Baltimore area. And I say that with no hesitation...his maturity as a young man allows him to be that leader that we need.”
- “Isaiah’s courage comes from his upbringing. Some of the things he’s been exposed to, some of the things he’s seen.”
- “Some players that are gonna go to college with or without basketball maybe sometimes aren’t as focused as the ones that know basketball becomes an opportunity.”
- “Right now he officially has six Division 1 basketball scholarship offers. You know, he’s athletic enough to play high-level basketball in college and potentially from there open up some other basketball opportunities.”

*Figure 3. Quotes from Isaiah Lamb, his mother, and coach in the film counterstory*

The film pushes educators to realize that the information they were told by their fictitious colleague, “the 10th grade English teacher” was incomplete. Even more, it illuminates the erasure of the challenges that Lamb has faced and the many assets he and his mother possess, as well as the deep and important relationship he has with his coach.
We ask educators to journal their reflections a second time, but in response to Question Set 2. By responding to these questions and engaging in discussion about the case, educators often come to the realization that not only were they given biased information, but that they themselves were influenced by bias. For examples, educators now understand there were logical reasons for Isaiah’s fatigue. Typically a participant will point to the way that Isaiah’s mother was misunderstood. She was facing severe challenges, but she had in fact been trying to support her son.

Participants often remark on situations they have experienced as teachers where their students were experiencing homelessness. We then report to the group that we ourselves wrote the case to represent a biased set of statements that we often hear spoken about children in schools—and further, that while the case narrative was fictitious, Isaiah Lamb is a real person. Without fail, this prompts participants to begin researching Isaiah Lamb on their phones and a murmur of appreciation for Lamb spreads across the room as participants realize that he is a real young man who has faced homelessness and who now attends Marist College, where he plays on their Division 1 basketball team. We allow time for participants to learn about Lamb.

Five years after the launch of the *Sports Illustrated* video, Lamb devotes his time not only to basketball and academics, but also to service and innovation, regularly mentoring young athletes and designing equipment for his new fitness brand LoLamb, which was inspired by his recovery from ACL injuries (Bjarnar, 2019). It is clear that Lamb is a man characterized by insight, integrity, intellectual curiosity, and innovation—who also could have been overlooked by his teachers, or worse, mischaracterized and unsupported, his exhaustion misread as lack of motivation and ability. Given the over-representation of students of color in lower track classes and in special education (Ferri & Connor, 2005) and the school-to-prison nexus (Winn & Winn, 2016), the dangers are real and significant.

We then facilitate a discussion around the educators’ reactions to the case, aiming to support participants to recognize that the case depiction of Isaiah and his mother is deeply biased, racist, classist, and inflammatory. We remind participants that we wrote the case using language that we regularly hear in schools, and ask them to share any language they found problematic. With this prompt, educators open up, expressing their concerns about the case. In particular the 10th grade teacher’s characterization is riddled with racist, classist, and sexist language, dog-whistles aimed at Black mothers, in particular. Describing Isaiah’s mother as “welfare-dependent” invokes classist and racist tropes long used in the U.S. in biased and stereotypical ways (e.g., the 1965 Moynihan Report and the trope of the “welfare queen”), here invoked as the singular description of Isaiah’s’ mother, Valerie Lamb. The teacher’s description of Ms. Lamb as “unwilling” erases her commitment, love, and dedication to her son, recasting her as detached and unavailable, another stereotype leveraged at Black mothers. The term “agitated” itself trades on dangerous and essentializing stereotypes. Each of these stereotypes is embedded in intersectional biases, and grows out of longstanding biases directed, in particular, at Black mothers (Rosenthal & Lobel, 2016). Our goal here is to illuminate that the language used to describe Isaiah initially was biased, false and, in fact, violent; and moreover that these pervasive biases are systemic. Within school contexts, educators commonly perpetuate these tropes throughout the system, biasing one another to the detriment of students’ learning.

By opening up this discussion, we also illuminate the way that Isaiah has been described as a function of deficits. We challenge educators to name Isaiah’s many assets highlighted in the film and assess the different instructional response that is opened up when we build from those assets rather than emphasize the deficits that were noted in the narrative. Participants report, for example, that Isaiah is talented, he is motivated, he has both academic and athletic goals, he has a mother who is devoted to him, he is
courageous. Figure 4 presents the artful musings of an educator as she engaged in our PD, taking in these intersecting goals of grappling with the danger of deficit language and the opportunities associated with asset stances. Also conveyed in her artwork is a recognition that it is worth taking our time to do substantive work.

![Figure 4. Educator participant's notes during PD](image)

A related goal is to show what Gorski (2016) has powerfully stated: “No set of curricular or pedagogical strategies can turn a classroom led by a teacher with a deficit view of families experiencing poverty into an equitable learning space for those families” (381). We believe this to be true about trauma-informed practice and Isaiah Lamb. In fact, we worry that trauma-informed practice can be used against students like Isaiah Lamb and others experiencing trauma if they are ascribed deficits and not seen for their strengths. They are pitied and/or pathologized, rather than seen for the strengths they bring. Seeing Isaiah for his assets would likely motivate a teacher to find ways to build upon those assets while simultaneously addressing some of the real challenges Isaiah was facing in his life.

**Drawing Attention to Individuals and Systems**

Once participants have begun to recognize the biases present in the Isaiah Lamb fictitious narrative, they also begin to recognize that, in fact, these biases are prevalent throughout schools. When we work with educators for an extended amount of time, we present them with many case narratives depicting classroom incidents that involve students who have experienced trauma. The cases show how deficit-speak is ubiquitous in schools, and that often it is indicative and derived from bias; even more, deficit-speak can lead to practice and actions that delimit students’ opportunities to learn and thrive. The pervasiveness of such language is indicative of a systemic issue—one that requires systemic attention. Thus, we promote systemically trauma-informed practice to support schools to think both individually and systemically about these issues in the following ways.

1. **Work at the individual level.**

   On the one hand, we have repeatedly argued that trauma is a systemic issue and so it must be addressed systemically. However, this does not mean that we should ignore individuals. We
wholeheartedly support the work of school-based, trauma-focused programming, which has been shown to be very effective (Herrehnkohl, Hong, & Verbrugge, 2019) — for example, in areas such as building relationships, helping students to monitor their socioemotional needs, and offering mental health supports when needed. Teachers are critical in this work and can be powerfully impactful, supporting students’ resilience. We work to develop and enrich teachers’ capabilities in these realms, knowing their importance.

2. See, recognize, and name the systems that contribute to trauma.

If we only see individual-level trauma, then we risk holding individuals responsible for problems they did not cause. Thus, we support educators to think about the larger systemic issues at play and we ask educators to recognize that they themselves co-construct a system, the institution of a school. We push on this, because we find that educators often feel overwhelmed by the task of confronting systemic injustice. But if they recognize that they, themselves, construct systems, then deconstructing systemic injustice feels more plausible to them.

3. Work in concert within the school to mount systemic responses to trauma.

Finally, we push educators to devise systemic approaches, within the power of the school system, to support children experiencing trauma. For example, if children are experiencing food insecurity, schools can look for community-based partners to ensure food accessibility for students and their families. Sometimes systemic issues are invisible to educators. For example, many families experiencing trauma do not reach out to schools for help. We encourage schools to consider why this might be.

What power dynamics may be getting in the way of authentic communication and relationships between educators and families? What legacies of distrust exist between schools and communities, and how may schools perpetuate and construct that distrust? We support educators in examining their policies and practices to uncover the real reasons that families may not trust their children’s schools, and may suffer through trauma without reaching out. Significant attention must go into this, including family engagement activities and critical community- and relationship-building between educators and families.

Interrupting the Weaponization of Trauma-Informed Practice

We argue here for enriching individualized trauma-informed practice with systematically trauma-informed practice, accompanied by support of teacher learning that will substantively manage and interrupt prejudicial tendencies. For this to happen, educators must be supported to recognize and challenge racist frames through which trauma is frequently interpreted and weaponized to injure, blame, and pathologize, in particular, poor children and families of color.

We push against singular responses that encourage only simplistic, easy (or easier) solutions that tell our students to simply breathe, for example, or our teachers that all they need to do is to create a calm corner. Perhaps breathing and a calm corner get us somewhere, but in no way are these solutions adequate to the scale of the problem, nor do these target the systemic racism and inequality in U.S. society and the ways that they seep into our schools and classrooms.

To be clear, individual children need individual-level support. Teachers can and must bring support and attentive practice to serve the individual children in their classrooms as they see and come to understand the ways that behaviors are linked to and emanate from experiences of trauma. But this cannot be all that
we do. Instead, because trauma is systemically produced, and is embedded in and manufactured by racist structures and systemic inequality, seeing and supporting the individual child must only be one of a series of reparative steps.

We know that teaching is social justice, and that effective teachers can do great good in the world. If teachers come to understand the systemic nature of trauma, and embed this understanding in systemically trauma-informed teaching practice, then they stand a chance not just of serving the students in their classrooms, but interrupting and addressing the effects of trauma that hound so many of the students we serve.

References


### About the Authors

**Debi Khasnabis** teaches courses in multicultural and multilingual education in elementary teacher education and is the chair of Elementary Teacher Education at the University of Michigan School of Education. She conducts research on pedagogies of teacher education that support the development of culturally responsive teaching. Dr. Khasnabis has designed professional development opportunities for practicing teachers across southeast Michigan on the topics of homelessness and schools, anti-bias education, trauma-informed practice, culturally responsive teaching, family outreach, and multilingual learners.

**Simona Goldin** teaches courses at the University of Michigan pertaining to the sociology, history, and policy of schooling in the United States. She conducts research on ways to transform the preparation of beginning teachers to help them teach in more equitable ways and has elaborated the teaching practices that bridge children’s work in schools on academic content with their home and community-based experiences.