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Issue 43: Possibilities and Problems in Trauma-Based and Social Emotional Learning Programs

Tracey Pyscher and Anne Crampton

Social, emotional, and affective experiences are impossible to separate from thinking, doing, and being in the world. Increasingly, schools and community-based organizations are recognizing this truth through the adoption of programs that focus on the emotional lives of children and youth, especially when emotions are fraught, and lives have been difficult. Programs such as social emotional learning (SEL) frameworks and trauma-informed practices (TIP) are not only popular, they are deemed “essential” in almost every corner of the social services sector.

Advocates for these programs claim that SEL and TIP create a necessary foundation for greater self-awareness, better relationships, and improved learning capacities for children and youth. We, along with other authors in this issue, suggest that these programs often focus on those who are marginalized through race, class, and/or experiences of violence, including family violence, while ignoring the social conditions that create marginalization and its effects, and neglecting the many strengths and strategies deployed by these children and youth. This focus can lead to labeling and/or silencing legitimate expressions of resistance and difference in a quest to elicit specific types of behavioral and cultural conformity for students to be deemed “learning ready” (e.g., Crampton, Pyscher & Robinson, 2018; Pyscher, 2019).

Issue #43 of the Bank Street *Occasional Paper Series* explores the sometimes troubling beliefs and assumptions at work in popular social and emotional learning and trauma-informed pedagogies as well as some of the impacts of this new attention. In this issue, we seek to critically examine both the problems and possibilities raised by the adoption of these efforts. Most SEL and TIP research has focused on claims to “improve” the social and emotional responses of children and youth. While we are encouraged to see the ways researchers, educators, and other practitioners position social and emotional dimensions as worthy of attention, we are apprehensive about the way this research routinely positions children and youth as somehow in need of correction, “healing,” or fixing. We ask what happens when expressions of emotion are categorized as desirable or not desirable, without regard to the context and cultural make-up of children and the adults working with them, and especially when children and youth who have experienced traumas (e.g., racism, poverty, domestic violence) continue to be viewed as damaged, even down to their DNA (*ACES Connection*, 2015).

We are also concerned with how SEL and TIP have become commodified and packaged in ways that lead practitioners away from some important original intentions. In the case of SEL, this includes supporting the whole child through building skills in emotional intelligence and conflict resolution (*Edutopia*, 2011). More recently, in its commodified form (e.g., CASEL, 2019), SEL appears mainly concerned with pro-social emotional expression. We argue that this emphasis promotes conformity and compliance and is often devoid of expectations that teachers reflect upon their relationships with children and youth, especially when interactions are difficult (Lewis & Crampton, 2015; Pyscher & Lozenski, 2017).

TIP emerged from a need to understand and address the dramatic impact of domestic violence on communities, including the way it drained social service resources. Virtually all TIP initiatives are built on findings from the CDC’s Kaiser Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study from 1995-1997 (*Centers for Disease Control and Convention*), and although this landmark study is now over two decades old, little has

changed. The astonishing annual financial cost of addressing the impact of domestic violence within the U.S. is \$9.3 billion (*Institute for Women's Policy Research, 2017*). The human cost is also disturbing. On average, an estimated 50 women are killed each month in situations of domestic violence (Snyder, 2019) and over 10 million children are reported as experiencing ongoing familial domestic violence (*Research Center on Domestic Violence, 2011*).

The need to address domestic violence is urgent. And it follows that there is a pressing need to honor all children's social and emotional lives in school and social service settings, with special attention for children who have experienced or are experiencing trauma. However, as many of the articles in this special issue argue, there is a problematic assumption that difficult or resistant behavior indicates a deficit of social-emotional learning or intelligence. This in turn gets diagnosed as originating from "trauma" and subsequently treated with trauma-informed practices, which too often ignore childrens' cultural and communicative repertoires (Gutierrez & Rogoff, 2003) such as expressions of resistance (Pyscher, 2018). Several authors in this issue describe how SEL and TIP flatten the complex experiences of children's social, emotional, and psychic lives in what proves to be an ineffective cycle that can be damaging for students and demoralizing for practitioners.

In this call, we invited educators, practitioners, therapists, curriculum planners, and curriculum theorists to report on non-pathologizing approaches to working with and for children targeted as in need of services within SEL and trauma-informed practices. We sought articles that offer critical, humanizing perspectives with a goal of re-envisioning possibilities for the social and emotional well-being of children and youth. Inquiries included:

- How might trauma or social-emotional frameworks and/or programming shape educators, practitioners, therapists, and curriculum planners' beliefs and create damaging and/or positive effects on the children and youth they serve? How do we cast light on these complicated, troubling, and hopeful effects?
- What kinds of frameworks, professional development programs, pedagogies, and community programs are being implemented that show promise and innovation in supporting the social and emotional lives of children and youth from marginalized communities, especially those with histories of violence, both intergenerational and systemic, and familial (domestic)?
- In what ways might SEL and trauma-based pedagogies perpetuate inequities or function to pathologize difference?

We encouraged authors to take a critical stance and identify the struggles and limitations of SEL and TIP as well as the successes of these approaches within a range of contexts. The articles in this issue include personal, educational, and community-based narratives, multimodal representations, as well as research studies. We believe the authors in this special issue help to paint a more complex picture of how children, youth, families, teachers, community-based educators, and researchers experience and view SEL and TIP.

This special issue begins with five articles that describe how implementations of SEL and TIP shape not only the systems they are set in, but the lives of children and youth who are served within them. While the pieces by (1) Foster, (2) Stearns, (3) Winninghoff, (4) Khasnabis and Goldin, and (5) Mahfouz and Anthony-Stevens demonstrate the need for improved ways of thinking about and enacting SEL and TIP, the subsequent six articles move toward envisioning how educators and practitioners can rethink this work with and for the children and youth who are most profoundly impacted by SEL and TIP frameworks. Articles by (6)

Golden, (7) Wilson and Richardson, (8) Koplow, Dean, and Blachly, (9) Gibbs and Papoi, (10) Payne, Adair, and Sachdeva, and (11) Her, Hermann, and Parker offer hopeful and even transformative practices and beliefs that advocate for different approaches in supporting the social, emotional, and psychic well-being of children and youth and the community of adults that surround them.

1. Looking for Trouble and Causing Trauma

Marquita Foster, a former pre-K principal, opens this special issue. She offers a poignant and powerful retelling of her experience trying to navigate teachers to challenge the deficit discourses of SEL and TIP shaping the lives of the marginalized (racialized) children they are charged to educate. She offers painful analysis from a systemic level, yet presents important glimpses of transformative possibilities through an alternative, culturally sustaining practice of “othermothering,” a West African tradition (Collins, 2000).

2. Let Them Get Mad: Using the Psychoanalytic Frame to Rethink SEL and Trauma-Informed Practice

Clio Stearns shares research from a year spent in a third-grade classroom with a teacher who made space for a broad range of affective expressions, including anger. Noting that “in the name of trauma-informed practice, schools are over-simplifying the nature of trauma and misappropriating emotional life in the name of teaching compliance,” Stearns argues that we would do better to examine emotion rather than attempt to regulate and control it. She recognizes that one strength of TIP has been to bring awareness to teachers about the complexity of children’s lives, but cautions that TIP is a quick fix (and not really a fix at all).

3. Trauma by Numbers: Warnings Against the Use of ACE Scores in Trauma-Informed Schools

Alex Winninghoff examines the role that ACE scores have come to play in trauma-informed schools, and raises an alarm about how the well-intentioned trauma-informed practice of asking, “What happened to you?” instead of “What’s wrong with you?” actually sends educators and students the message that something is wrong with traumatized students because something happened to them. Winninghoff uses questions and data from the ACE framework, as well as a reading of a scene from the movie *Paper Tigers* to ground this thoughtful critique.

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

Debi Khasnabis and Simona Goldin argue that teachers, especially during their most fraught interactions with students, find themselves seeking solutions based on problematic causes that often lead them to “re-traumatize and re-stigmatize the children they serve.” Set in the context of the professional development they lead with teachers, they suggest that teachers need to engage differently to interrogate their own beliefs and actions related to TIP and to engage in what they call a “systemically trauma-informed practice.” In turn, the analysis and tools they offer open opportunities for a more humane approach to working with marginalized children.

5. Why Trouble SEL? The Need for Cultural Relevance in SEL

In this article, Julia Mahfouz and Vanessa Anthony-Stevens offer a critical and generative critique of the SEL model and its use when working with marginalized, minoritized, and/or historically under-resourced students in a kindergarten classroom in a sovereign tribal nation in Idaho. They

question SEL's use and argue that its implementation is void of what they call a "cultured context of social interaction and school learning." They recommend that schools adopt an interdisciplinary lens, integrating culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) and culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP) into SEL programs to create conditions for student well-being and academic achievement across contexts.

6. Importance of Narrative: Moving Towards Sociocultural Understandings of Trauma-Informed Praxis

Noah Golden describes how the effects of trauma are framed in terms of biomedical damage, leading to the "fixed approach" of many TIP programs. Instead, Golden proposes a sociocultural view that enlists children and youth who have experienced trauma in trauma-informed praxis. Golden draws on data from a study in a TIP school to make a case for praxis emerging from strong relationships with schools, faculty, and peers that sets the stage for youth to engage in powerful meaning-making of their past and present experiences and allows them to imagine visions of the future.

7. All I Really Want to Say Is They Don't Really Care About Us: Creating and Maintaining Healing Centered Collective Care in Hostile Times

Asif Wilson and Wytress Richardson move away from Western conceptualizations of TIP and offer two powerful case studies in what they call "healing centered collective care—a fugitive framework of care for caregivers." Extending Ginwright's (2018) healing centered engagement, they describe their work with each other in higher education and with volunteers working with a girls' group in a Chicago-based after-school library program. Their tools and practices are rooted in kinship relationships, helping to create spaces that expose structures of oppression and are grounded in asset-based explorations of well-being.

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

Coming from the field of social work, Lesley Koplow, Noelle Dean, and Margaret Blachly offer a description of what Emotionally Responsive Practice (ERP)—an approach created at Bank Street College—offers to teachers and caregivers who work with children who have experienced trauma. ERP suggests that teachers' and practitioners' own experiences must be consciously acknowledged in order for them to see and hear the children in their care. The article presents narratives from teachers who were learning about ERP from the authors and highlights the technique as effective and humanizing for adults and children.

9. Threading the Needle: On Balancing Trauma and Critical Teaching

Brian Gibbs and Kristin Papoi explore how teachers can engage learners in difficult content, with the example of three case studies. They offer teachers persuasive and concrete strategies for developing more critical and transformative examples of TIP within the contexts of what they call "teaching hard histories." These include teaching social justice topics in unjust school spaces, teaching about war to the children of soldiers, and teaching about lynching in schools near historic lynching sites. They make a powerful argument that the imposition of SEL can work to silence teachers' confidence, often positioning them to avoid discussions related to tough topics because it might "traumatize" students. Rather, they suggest that engaging in tough discussions is its own form of healing.

10. Creating Classroom Community to Welcome Children Experiencing Trauma

In this piece, Katherina Payne, Jennifer Keys Adair, and Shubhi Sachdeva share their findings from a year-long study in a South Texas Head Start program. Their moving description of classroom practices that welcomed individual students experiencing trauma (such as homelessness) into a shared community offers a model of SEL and TIP that is a powerful example of civic education for early childhood settings and beyond.

11. Interrupting Trauma with Hope, Kindness, Art, and Healing

Told through compelling perspectives of community-based educators, Christine Her, Yvette Hermann, and Emma Parker close this issue with an inspiring window into a community-based art organization. ArtForce Iowa is dedicated to supporting marginalized young people to understand and engage in self-healing from trauma through a variety of art mediums. The youths' stories and art demonstrate the power of self-healing through alternative approaches and offer culturally sustaining possibilities in and out of school contexts. We recommend that readers especially take time to listen to and view the multimedia art created by the young people who are involved in artmaking/healing at ArtForce Iowa. Their art can be found in live links within this article.

In Closing

We want to thank all the authors in this special issue. We deeply appreciate their contributions and insights. We are also grateful to the reviewers and the Bank Street editors and board. It was an honor to serve as guest editors in the support of this work and in service to the Bank Street *Occasional Paper Series*. We would love to hear how this effort towards justice impacts the work you do.

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