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Becoming a Student of Your Students: Trauma-Informed, Culturally Relevant Practices for Physical Education Teachers

VAL ALTIERI, JR., MARIAH ROONEY, LOU BERGHOLZ, AND JOHN MCCARTHY

Physical education (PE) classes offer students many potential benefits and opportunities for building physical literacy, as well as social and emotional skills. Yet, for students with a history of exposure to trauma, the physical education environment may present them with potentially harmful or triggering events. In PE classes it is not unusual to encounter situations that differ from those of classrooms (i.e., loud noises, games or group situations where youth can navigate their own bodies in space, moving objects, other moving bodies). Additionally,

depending on factors such as student age, stage of development, level of coordination and emotional control, PE classes could in some instances lead to inadvertent or unintentional physical contact with other students. Further, because trauma affects students in a multitude of ways, it can be difficult to know fully how their personal histories may interact in novel play situations or physical activity settings. Because teachers may never fully know the extent and nature of their students' traumas, it is necessary for PE teachers to continue to learn about their students while also improving their

own skills of self-awareness and understanding. At a minimum, PE teachers should be skilled enough to avoid the retraumatization of socially vulnerable students.

In recent years, schools have begun to consider the importance of social and emotional learning (SEL) on all aspects of student growth. The importance of SEL reaffirms that PE teachers have unique opportunities to teach or reinforce skills that could help students with emotional regulation, impulse control and development of the ability to work with others. But SEL work alone is not a panacea for addressing students with profound impacts from trauma. Fortunately, all students can benefit from trauma-informed approaches regardless of whether they have a history of trauma or not (Trauma Learning Policy Initiative, 2019). Therefore, integrating and continually updating trauma-informed and culturally relevant practice is a foundational part of sound pedagogy.

Martinek et al. (2006) first proposed guidelines to meet the needs of traumatized children in PE settings. Fortunately, since 2006 there has been a dramatic increase in research that informs our understanding of how trauma impacts brain development and learning (Perry & Szalavitz, 2017). Positive implications for PE teachers is that the growing understanding of the embodied nature of trauma (van der Kolk, 2014) affirms that physical activity can contribute not just to their students' physical development but also to their psychological and overall sense of well-being. Unfortunately, since the time of Martinek et al.'s (2006) article, educators have had more reason to become concerned about their students' increased exposure to trauma. Since 2006 not only has there been a continual stream of horrific and widely publicized events, such as mass shootings at schools, places of worship, and public events, but many students across the country have had to cope with the effects of natural disasters, such as hurricanes, tornados, floods, earthquakes and wild-fires. If these events were not enough, nearly all students have had to deal with some of the immediate and likely enduring impacts of the COVID-19 global pandemic. Furthermore, in 2020 alone, the ubiquitously publicized deadly violence perpetrated on Black persons (not exclusively Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd) by law enforcement officers and other individuals and groups sparked worldwide protest, civil unrest, and violence, particularly following the death of George Floyd.

In the years ahead, PE teachers can be more responsive to the trauma-related challenges presented to them by becoming attuned to how trauma is affecting their students and by creating classroom environments that can accommodate their individual and cultural differences. Further, because this work is especially challenging, teachers must establish ways to continually renew and fortify themselves to be able to sustain their efforts. With the aforementioned in mind, the purpose of this article is to first provide PE teachers with an understanding of the different types of trauma students face, including traumatic events and historical trauma experienced by members of racial, ethnic, sexual and religious minorities, as well as how trauma exposure interferes with student learning. Second, we will encourage teachers to build their own

trauma-informed skills, such as self-awareness, self-care, self-regulation and mindfulness, in order to help them model healthy social and emotional skills for their students (National Child Traumatic Stress Network [NCTSN], 2017b). Third, because PE teachers operate in a different environment than their classroom counterparts, they require a specialized set of guidelines for trauma-informed instruction that provides safety for all.

Before offering any guidelines for practice in regard to trauma it is important to gain a working understanding of the concept of trauma and what is at stake if we misunderstand its consequences. One of the difficulties in generating a shared understanding of trauma is that practitioners have failed to agree upon a common definition for it. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA, 2014) has put together a compendium of the various definitions of the concept of trauma, while also putting forth a definition that captures the broadest notion of trauma. At the same time, they also describe some of the various and subtle differences that might exist between individual survivors' experiences of traumatic events.

SAMHSA (2014) synthesized the concept in this way:

Individual trauma results from an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual's functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being. (p. 7)

One striking aspect of this definition is how pervasively exposure to trauma can impact a person's entire health and well-being. Next, it is important to grasp how the circumstances around any particular traumatic experience combine with the peculiar and individual vulnerabilities of a person at the time of exposure to that trauma.

The 3 E's of Trauma: Events, Experience, and Effects

SAMHSA (2014) described the concept of trauma as events, experience and effects. To better understand the unique nature of trauma, there are a wide variety of factors that need to be considered regarding how a person who survives trauma might interpret the traumatic events and how the long-term impact is felt. The first E to be considered is the nature of the traumatic event. That is, an individual may have encountered a single event (e.g., car accident, tornado) or have exposure to a series of events (e.g., being subjected to a pattern of abuse or witnessing violence to others). The severity of this or these events may be a factor in how they are experienced. At the core of events that cause traumatic stress on an individual is the sense of powerlessness. Examples of this loss of power may include cases of children experiencing abuse at the hands of adults, witnessing violence in their communities, or being affected by natural disasters. The common thread in all of these situations is a loss of agency to control such events.

The second E is the experience, bearing in mind that different individuals might experience the same trauma in vastly different ways, depending upon a variety of factors. SAMHSA (2014) described experience as, "How the individual labels, assigns meaning to, and is disrupted physically and psychologically by an event will contribute to whether or not it is experienced as traumatic" (p. 8). Some of the factors in how the events' traumatic impacts are felt may include the age and developmental stage of the person affected, the person's cultural beliefs, how much support was available to that person, and how the individual responded in the crisis.

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Table 1.
Effects of Trauma on Individuals

An inability to cope with the normal stresses and strains of daily living
An inability to trust and benefit from relationships
An inability to manage cognitive processes, such as memory, attention, thinking
An inability to regulate behavior
An inability to control the expression of emotions
An altering of one's neurobiological makeup and ongoing health and well-being
An exhibition of hypervigilance or a constant state of arousal (SAMHSA, 2014)
<i>Source:</i> Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (2020).

The third and perhaps most important E to understand refers to the effects of trauma and how those effects can present themselves in different ways. The effects can be long-lasting or present in the short term. They may show up soon after traumatic events or later in life. Because it depends on how the individual interprets such events, the adverse impact can be highly dependent upon the individual. As a result, the effects that students experience may be different depending on several factors (SAMHSA, 2014). Examples of those effects can be seen in Table 1.

All of these effects can eventually wear a person down, physically, mentally and emotionally. Often survivors of trauma resort to numbing or avoidance behaviors in an effort to cope with the persistence of such adverse effects.

Because childhood trauma is so widespread, it is important to consider what is at stake if we do not understand how to address those who have survived it. Sadly, without support, most people with high levels of trauma do not escape its pervasive effects. Children who suffer from abuse and neglect experience more physical injuries, as well as emotional and psychological problems. There is strong evidence that health outcomes into adulthood and over the long term are worse across a range of indicators. In addition, the societal cost of mitigating these problems is substantial. A Centers for Disease Control and Prevention–Kaiser Permanente (Felitti et al., 1998) study of the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Scale, which aggregates negative experiences an individual can suffer, includes categories of abuse (physical, psychological and sexual) and family dysfunction (substance abuse, mental illness, spousal abuse, criminal behavior). This study indicates that those with high ACE scores are much more at risk for an array of negative health outcomes, including disease and early death. Because we know that the long-term cumulative effects are dire, any reasonable measure PE teachers might take to lessen or mitigate the effects of those experiences is crucial. Figure 1, the ACE Pyramid, categorizes the long-term effects of adverse childhood experiences.

Historical Trauma

Though traumatic events can happen to anyone, it should not be surprising to educators that students from families with low socioeconomic status are also typically those from racial groups (e.g., Black, Latinx, Indigenous) who are more likely to have traumatic experiences. When the killing of George Floyd, a Black man, was captured on video, it was viewed and reshown countless times on various media outlets and social media platforms. Viewing coverage of events like this can affect anyone, but students from a racial group with a shared history of oppression

may experience more distress when events are shown over and over than those who do not have the same history (NCTSN, 2017a). The same is true of other groups that have experienced oppression, such as members of ethnic, sexual, gender and religious minorities.

Bronfenbrenner (1979) viewed child development from an ecological perspective in which he urged educators to consider how events happen within levels of a dynamic system. Children can be differentially impacted by five subsystems he defined: the microsystem (family, schools, teachers etc.), mesosystem (relationship between microsystems; i.e., family and school), exosystem (i.e., settings that include a parent's job and a child's school), macrosystem (culture of political climate and social system) and chronosystem (role of time and when events occur in the child's life). Though it would be difficult to gauge how all of these events can affect the development of any young person growing up in the post-COVID-19 era, taking an ecological systems view offers teachers a more in-depth way to consider a student's history and background. From the ecological perspective offered by Bronfenbrenner, examining the culture of the political climate and system (the macrosystem) offers insight into how traditionally marginalized groups are affected within meso- and exosystems particularly when it comes to health care and systems. The COVID-19 pandemic and other recent events have made it plain to see the existing systemic inequalities in schooling, health conditions, income, access and quality of health care, and exposure to harm by law enforcement.

Though it is beyond the scope of this article to unpack the social and political shifts needed in schools, the authors aim to connect current understandings about trauma to the development of best practices for PE teachers when working with students affected by trauma and to help PE teachers apply trauma-informed methods that are imbued with a sense of cultural humility. Because trauma is disproportionately intertwined with communities that are historically marginalized in the United States, becoming more socially just and equitable requires PE practitioners to gain insight into the systemic and cultural factors that influence the students they work with that may be different from their own experiences.

The theory of social vulnerability (Vettenberg, 1998) identifies structural factors or institutions (e.g., family, school, job market, health care and criminal justice) that may lead to socially vulnerable individuals accumulating negative experiences. This way of considering students shifts responsibility from blaming individuals or a community group for these experiences, placing the emphasis instead on how these institutions have failed to

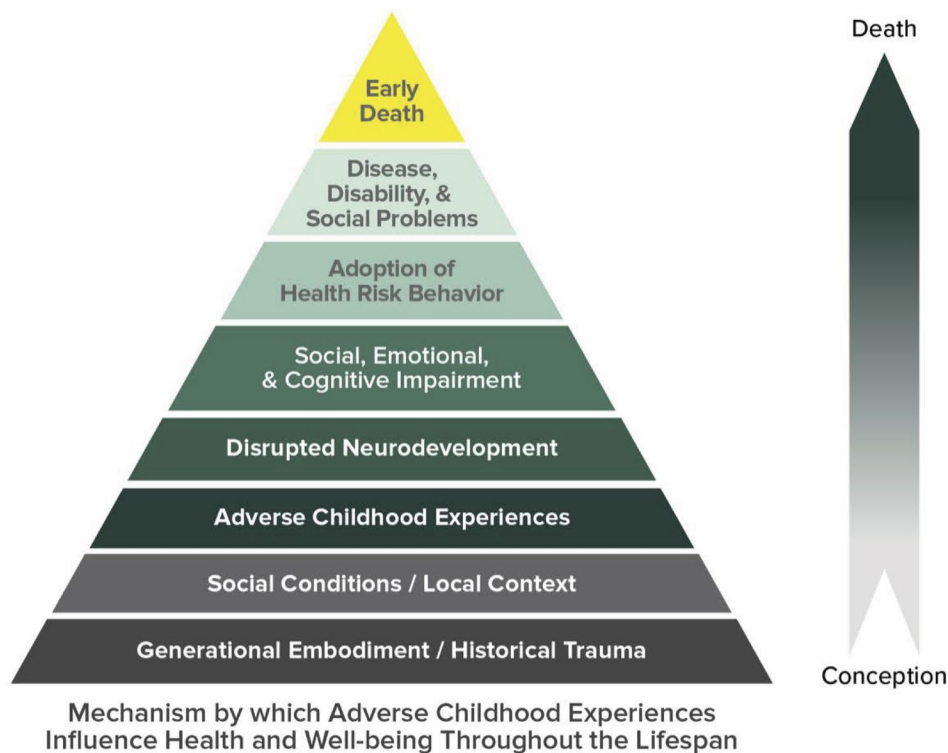


Figure 1.
The ACE Pyramid
 Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2020).

equitably serve persons from these groups. For example, the experiences of Black males in the U.S. criminal justice system are particularly galling and distorted on many indicators of inequitable treatment (e.g., instances of use of force, rate of deadly force, rate of incarceration, severity of sentencing, time until parole hearings). Importance is placed on gaining awareness and understanding of the systemic features and cultural properties that make some groups more likely to experience systemic inequities while not in a position to change those conditions. Teachers must advocate for students who by virtue of their social vulnerability are unable to do so.

Lynch et al. (2020) outlined 10 strands of oppression that educators can become more aware of: gender, race, sexual orientation, ability, nationality, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, religion, age and language. Any student at the intersection of several of these identities that are historically marginalized may be even more vulnerable as a result. Educators can work to liberate students from being oppressed on the basis of any of these identities by reflecting upon their own identities and biases and also affirming, supporting and protecting students in their care and by creating more inclusive spaces that support their identities.

In an increasingly diverse and multicultural world, gaining more than a superficial understanding of their students requires teachers to actively broaden their perspectives. Alvarez (2017) argued that to work better with students from diverse backgrounds and with a history of trauma, teachers should consider (1) context-specific recognition where trauma is grounded in a specific context, while recognizing a broad range of possible experience within that context; (2) trauma-conscious approaches that consider race, racism, socioeconomic status, discrimination, and structural and systemic

challenges; and (3) holistic responsiveness that recasts the educator's role into one that provides the strategies and resources and a safe environment in which students can heal.

Parham (2020a) identified some contextual parameters of mental health and wellness, such as personal identity (e.g., culture, race, ethnicity, age, gender, disability, LGBTQ status, political affiliation, country of origin). Understanding how these overlapping personal identities figure into their experience helps us work better with individuals. Crenshaw (1989) argued that observing the intersectionality or by acknowledging how those with combined different identities represent different social realities would allow the legal system to address inequities and biases that are based on the intersectionality of these identities (i.e., Black and female, Latinx and disabled).

A clear challenge for PE teachers is to reconcile their teaching practices, policies and curriculum with trauma-informed practices that are in tune with the cultural differences that exist between them and their students. As we will discuss below, a hallmark of trauma is that it destroys an individual's sense of trust and safety. Working with a large number of students with high levels of exposure to trauma can be difficult and exhausting work. To restore some of what is lost by exposure to trauma, teachers need straightforward guidance around restoring trust and safety in particular. One overarching way that PE teachers can approach working with students can be borrowed from the field of medical education. Tervalon and Murray-García (1998) explained, "The physician relinquishes the role of expert to the patient, becoming the student of the patient" (p. 121). Similarly, in the context of elementary and secondary education, the teacher relinquishes the role of expert to the student, *becoming a student*



of the student. This does not imply that the teacher relinquishes the role of expert in their craft and subject matter. Rather, the teacher enlists the students' collaboration to work toward mutual understanding.

In becoming a student of the student, the PE teacher commits to a stance of curiosity about learning from students about their interests, history, culture, identities, family life and other relevant information. Stevenson (2014) referred to cultural relevance as a way to directly address the racial tensions that exist in schools. Cervantes and Clark (2020) advocated adopting a stance of cultural humility to encourage teachers to learn about their students' personal identities and unique personal histories and also for the purpose of confronting existing structural inequities. Cervantes and Clark summarized three fundamental pillars in cultural humility: (1) lifelong commitment to self-evaluation and self-critique; (2) mitigating power imbalances, including institutional accountability; and (3) developing mutually beneficial partnerships with individuals and groups. The time and care the teacher invests helps them to build a bridge between their classroom and the life of the student. This approach goes beyond basic relationship-building and wades into the deeper waters to find the footing upon which a sturdy bridge of trust can be built.

Signs and Symptoms of Trauma

The impacts of trauma can leave profound and long-lasting effects on students. Early on, one effect that can be seen is that it can dramatically interrupt students' abilities to learn. PE teachers are quite often faced with the daunting task of witnessing and

trying to respond to some of the challenging and sometimes concerning behaviors presented by students while maintaining their composure and classroom climate to work with all of their students effectively. When PE teachers are able to view behaviors through a trauma-informed lens, it prepares them to grasp how pervasive the impact of trauma is on young people. NCTSN (2017b) stated:

It is critical to highlight that even when a traumatic event does not result in clinical symptoms/behaviors consistent with traumatic stress, it can have a serious impact on the developmental trajectory of a youth across all major domains of functioning (e.g., physical/health, cognitive/learning, behavioral, social/emotional). (p. 2)

When students experience developmental delays or learning challenges, they are often placed on an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) that helps prepare their teachers for what background and needs students may bring with them into the classroom. However, many students do not have IEPs and, even if they did, those plans may not indicate a history of trauma or capture the full extent or nature of their trauma. If more than 60% of children are exposed to trauma by age 16 (Copeland et al., 2018), then schools are not likely to know the specifics about some of the children under their care. The school personnel and PE teacher may not learn about a student's traumatic incident for days, weeks or months, if at all. How trauma "shows up" in student behavior also may depend on the age and developmental stage of the student. Table 2 describes how, based on age, the differences may show up

Table 2.
Signs of Child Traumatic Stress

Preschool Children
Fearing separation from parents or caregivers
Crying and/or screaming a lot
Eating poorly and losing weight
Having nightmares
Elementary School Children
Becoming anxious or fearful
Feeling guilt or shame
Having a hard time concentrating
Having difficulty sleeping
Middle and High School Children
Feeling depressed or alone
Developing eating disorders and self-harming behaviors
Beginning to abuse alcohol or drugs
Becoming sexually active
<i>Source: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (2020).</i>

Table 3.
Examples of Behaviors in Play Settings

Benign fouls or small incidents escalating to full-blown arguments and even physical violence
Lack of self-awareness about feelings and how they are acting
Quitting a competition or even the team for a seemingly minor situation
Inability to make friends or form prosocial relationships with teammates or coaches
Struggling to play by the rules when things do not go the player's way
Inability to handle the pressure of a high-stakes competition or handling a loss
Lack of focus or concentration (Bergholz et al., 2016, p. 245)

among preschool, elementary, and middle and high school students (SAMHSA, 2020).

In physical activity or physical education settings, trauma may manifest in unique ways based on the context (Bergholz et al., 2016). Table 3 describes the identified examples of signs of trauma in physical activity settings. It can be helpful to recognize the signs to be able to respond to a child's distress and prevent further dysregulation.

Viewing Behavior and Affect Through a Trauma-Informed Lens

Schools have behavioral management systems that try to create order for teachers and students with a clear and consistent set of guidelines to address negative student behavior. The traditional behavior management literature in PE has highlighted that behavior can be developed and controlled (Rushall & Siedentop, 1972). However, students presenting oppositional or disruptive behaviors may respond poorly to traditional approaches. For this reason, many schools are moving away from zero tolerance policies (NCTSN, 2017b) and toward restorative justice approaches that do not use force or punitive approaches but rather focus on the ethos, processes and skill building needed to resolve conflict and

acknowledge and repair when harm done (Hopkins, 2004). Because these behaviors are the result of trauma, in most cases it makes more sense if the teacher is willing to adopt an understanding and patient stance accepting that trauma likely plays some role in driving such behavior and to act calmly to deescalate emotional situations.

Students have their own particular ways of coping that are symptomatic of their traumatic stress. Parham (2020b) noted that such behaviors are the symptoms: "Symptoms can be analogous to a home smoke detector. When smoke detectors sound an alarm, it is not an indication that it is broken" (p. 270). Instead, viewing student behavior as signals that are related to their way of coping with difficult and untenable circumstances will allow the teacher to be more understanding of students whose survival mechanisms may have been set off by stress. Perry and Szalavitz (2017) explained that when under duress, students with a trauma history typically become hyperaroused (acting out, making noise, disrupting others) or they can disassociate (sitting and rocking, blending in, not causing trouble, getting good grades). It is vitally important for teachers to not allow themselves to be dysregulated emotionally by the hyperaroused student but also to not overlook the compliant, disconnected and sometimes fawning behaviors of the dissociative student.

Students with a trauma history often have trouble controlling themselves behaviorally and emotionally. Alberto and Troutman

Table 4.
Functions and Definitions of Types of Behavior

Attention — Students engage in inappropriate behavior to receive attention from a peer or adult
Access — Students misbehave in order to gain access to an object or activity
Escape — Students engage in problem behavior in an attempt to get out of a situation
Sensory stimulation — Students act inappropriately because it enjoyably stimulates one or more of the senses (Alberto & Troutman, 2013)

(2013; as cited in Alstot & Alstot, 2019) described how behavior analysis has identified that students' behaviors are compelled by different reasons (see Table 4). Knowing the functions of behavior can assist teachers in understanding that behaviors are sought after to satisfy different student needs or for them to regain a sense of control. Teachers can see this lack of control as a lack of willpower (a failure of will). Conversely, PE teachers can see student failure to be able to control issues as a lack of skill. Another way for PE teachers to look at teaching emotional regulation skills is to have them look at teaching them just as they teach physical skills (Morse, 2017). PE teachers naturally devise plans or progressions to assist the young person to develop physical skills. Taking this approach would assist them in the development of needed social and emotional skills. Reframing how PE teachers orient to the student's behavior can also help students

who have trouble regulating themselves to regain a sense of power and agency.

Creating Trauma-Informed Spaces

The research on trauma-informed approaches is still evolving. As noted above, the PE environment is unique in that it requires some additional considerations to those of classroom teaching. The following section will describe some ways to create a trauma-informed classroom environment. These include support for teachers, focus on individual student needs, cultural responsiveness, creating trauma-sensitive spaces, advocating for smaller classes, and opportunities to empower during physical activity. For the PE teacher's work to be more successful, school districts will need to consider impacts of



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exposure to trauma on student learning. School leadership will be compelled by student need to create school communities that are committed to a new way of being that is trauma informed, culturally affirming and anti-racist in their curricula, policies, and practices.

It Starts With Teacher Self-Care. Teaching is a highly demanding profession under the best and smoothest conditions. But when working with students with trauma, teachers need to be aware of the effects of secondary traumatic stress among educators (NCTSN, 2017b). Because PE teachers are subject to the same challenges, finding supportive adult colleagues in the building can be a way to disperse some of the burden of the stress. Actively seeking the support of other adults in the building can be more difficult for PE teachers because their classes take place in areas that are often isolated from other parts of the school (gym, field, track, etc.). Despite this, connecting with other staff such as social workers, school resource personnel, administrators, paraprofessionals and custodians is important for PE teachers.

Teachers place enormous focus on caring for others but sometimes neglect their own needs. Developing a healthy work-life balance can be a lifestyle choice that allows you to make a difference in your profession for the long haul. The PE teacher who makes a commitment to regularly investing some time and energy in recharging themselves will be able to persevere. According to the American Institute of Stress (2020), there are three main ways to combat stress: (1) Calming techniques: meditation, deep breathing, listening to calming music, spending time in nature. Many mindfulness-based apps (e.g., Calm, Headspace) that can be downloaded to your phone can help you access guided meditation, brief exercises and centering strategies without having to spend too much time. (2) Active techniques: working out, cleaning up your space or gardening. (3) Social Activities: connecting with good friends or family members, even if through video conferencing or video chat.

Check In With Yourself — Self-Regulation. Teachers can find many moments throughout their days of teaching where they can check in with themselves and regain a sense of calm and control, such as finding time to integrate mindfulness practice when possible such as before and in between periods, during preps and lunch breaks. When teachers cannot escape or leave the classroom, are faced with rising emotions, or cannot leave or take a break even temporarily, they need a plan for themselves. Being aware of how you are feeling, however, is not always going to be enough to handle the stress of working with children who have trauma backgrounds. Sometimes students get the best of teachers or they can become dysregulated. An important tool in the trauma-informed toolkit is to connect to your breathing. Even taking one deep breath can alter one's physiological response. If you are able to practice breathing, yoga or other mindfulness-based approaches regularly away from class, you will be able to connect to that centered feeling more quickly and with greater ease. Some of these breathing and mindfulness practices can be used during school between class periods, during lunch and during prep periods. These practices can also help the teacher better respond to student behaviors. Taking breaths before responding to a student, especially one whose behavior brings about feelings of discomfort or irritation, can create space between the behavior and the response. Using breaths after those interactions can be a tool to help the teacher let go of the interaction.

Self-Compassion. Teachers are great at caring for others and have been trained to be self-reflective. For some, this constant self-reflection can lead to feelings of failure and being overly critical of self when a lesson or an interaction with a student does not go as well as one would have liked. If you do not get it right it is okay to let your student know

that. But you can also learn to direct yourself toward self-compassion, in a sense, learning to become okay with the situation not being okay. This approach allows you to offer warmth and kindness to yourself when dealing with the difficult emotions of challenging students (Neff & Germer, 2018). Being self-reflective can help teachers gain awareness to not become dysregulated themselves, but with self-compassion teachers can offer themselves the same care they afford their students because they are subject to the secondary traumatic stress of working with students with trauma.

Being a Student of Your Students

Despite the acknowledgment mentioned previously about the high percentage of students affected by trauma, until Ellison et al. (2019), there has been little recent guidance for PE teachers in regard to trauma. Physical education teachers often need to consider a host of variables to meet their students' needs. For that reason, the authors advocate embracing an approach of cultural humility in physical education (see Cervantes & Clark, 2020). Lynch et al. (2020) recommended that PE teachers "take time to understand students' biographies and how they identify" (p. 9). Initially, make sure to learn how to pronounce students' names and learn their pronouns (see mypronouns.org) if they are willing to share them. Getting to know the students in your classes will assist you in building and creating a safe environment for them and will help you to individualize instruction and provide appropriate resources.

By taking a stance of cultural humility, the teacher brings themselves into the equation. Teachers can do this by seeking to recognize their own weaknesses and biases while also spotting and addressing the power balances that exist between their students and themselves. Additionally, they can support, protect and advocate for their students who may struggle with power imbalances with other personnel in their school.

Create a Calm and Predictable Learning Environment and Routines. Establishing predictable routines helps all students know what to expect when they come into and exit the classroom. Establishing classroom routines and equipment protocols can prevent disagreements, distraction and loss of momentum (Saphier et al., 2008). For students with a trauma background, too much uncertainty and unpredictability can make them feel unsafe. The Teaching Personal and Social Responsibility (TPSR) daily program format is an example that provides structure and at the same time helps the teacher prioritize key relational time with their students (Ellison et al., 2019; Hellison, 2011; Martinek et al., 2006).

Check on Your Students' Emotional Needs. Students who are affected by trauma can sometimes struggle with emotional control. Institutions like schools can leave those students, particularly those from traditionally oppressed groups, feeling even less control. If PE teachers can remember that a loss of a sense of control is a defining feature of trauma, then teachers can have more empathy for their students' ups and downs. One simple way to gauge where students are emotionally is to have a routine for checking with your students when they enter the gym. Depending on the age of the student, you could check in with them and ask them if they can share verbally or indicate nonverbally with a thumbs up (doing good), sideways (for okay) or thumbs down (for not doing good). With younger children you could have a chart on which they indicate how they feel with an emoji. By committing to this practice, the teacher can gain valuable information about the student and the student gets to practice in naming their emotions (i.e., hungry, tired, anxious, worried, angry, sad, lonely), which is an important skill to develop.

Foster Caring Relationships. The basis for student well-being begins with teachers being able to connect to their students and create a caring environment. Li (2015) noted, “A PE teacher can build a caring relationship with his or her students through three approaches: (1) making instructional task adaptations, (2) building interpersonal rapport, and (3) creating a positive, motivational learning climate” (p. 35). Student surveys are a good way to connect with them in the beginning of the year; see Wahl-Alexander et al. (2019) for an example. In Hellison’s (2011) TPSR model, allowing opportunities to connect with students and for them to connect with each other is referred to as *relational time*. He also advocated and encouraged students to give the teacher feedback on the class.

Empowerment, Voice and Choice (SAMHSA, 2014). The TPSR model provides teachers with ideas and concepts that align with trauma-informed care (Ellison et al., 2019; Hellison, 2011; Martinek et al., 2006). Martinek et al. (2006) suggested that opportunities to empower youth through physical activity included (1) allowing for students to practice decision making, (2) leading others and (3) reflection. Allow students to create class expectations at the beginning of the school year and ensure that they hold each other accountable. The TPSR model (Hellison, 2011) offers a daily classroom format, activities and empowering approaches for teachers to build a caring classroom climate. Students gradually learn to lead each other and reflect upon how well they are doing.

Safe Space to Calm Themselves. For students who are prone to becoming emotionally dysregulated, teaching them the skills and strategies for managing their rising emotions is consistent with a trauma-informed classroom design. The NCTSN (2017b) recommends that “the school develops and designates safe spaces inside and outside of the classroom for students to calm themselves after exposure to trauma and loss triggers. Safe spaces provide opportunities for students to self-regulate when experiencing behavioral and emotional challenges” (p. 9). A designated space where students can go allows them to be able to self-regulate and it also gives the teacher the signal that a student is struggling so that they can check in with that student. For example, in one program, players were taught to call a timeout when they were starting to feel unsafe where they could leave the game and go to a predetermined area to cool off (Bergholz et al., 2016).

Locker Rooms. In the effort to create a trauma-sensitive classroom, teachers should acknowledge that locker rooms can be spaces that can be hostile or stressful for adolescents. First, changing clothes in front of or near others forces them into confrontations with their own body image, body weight and/or sexuality in the context of and in relation to others (Doolittle et al., 2016; Morrow & Gill, 2003; O’Connor & Graber, 2014). Students who have body image issues or are overweight and obese can feel self-conscious. Fisette (2011) cited the need for separate and private spaces for changing, particularly adolescent girls.

Additionally, locker rooms were designed for the gender binary system and do not offer LGBTQ youth, especially transgender and gender-nonconforming students, with welcoming or comfortable options. GLSEN’s most recent School Climate Survey found the following spaces to be the three most commonly avoided by LGBTQ students because they felt unsafe or uncomfortable: bathrooms (45.2%), locker rooms (43.7%), and physical education (40.2%; Kosciw et al., 2020). The survey also asked students their level of comfort talking with school personnel about LGBTQ issues. It found that 61.5% feel very uncomfortable talking with an athletics coach or PE teacher about

LGBTQ issues, as opposed to 23.9% with other teachers. This data suggests the need for educating students about gender and sexuality, setting clear expectations for students, monitoring the space, and creating a climate where students are able to come to the teacher with their concerns.

Avoid Punishment. Working with students with trauma in their backgrounds can lead teachers and school personnel to want to curtail difficult behaviors (e.g., threats to health, property, disruption of routine, and violations of their own safety and basic rights; Wahl-Alexander et al., 2018). As a result it might seem that punitive measures are required. But there are more effective ways to redirect students who are not heading in a positive direction. Punishment can be threatening, especially coming from a teacher who is an adult in a position of authority, and students with trauma can be mistrusting of adults. Wahl-Alexander et al. (2019) suggested a gentle intervention method, one-on-one conversations, or making efforts to strengthen the relationship with that individual student.

Communication Techniques. When working with socially vulnerable high school students, the following three communication techniques have been effective: (1) Ask permission, (2) take a knee or change your position and (3) whisper (McCarthy & Hayden, 2016).

Ask Permission to Give Feedback. One strategy we have used is asking, “Can I give you some coaching?” Nearly always the student says yes. But if they answer no we respect their wishes and wait for a more appropriate time to ask.

Change Your Position. Instead of approaching students face to face, which can appear threatening to already vigilant students, change your bodily position to appear less so. It could be taking one knee, sitting down or moving alongside the person with a friendly closeness (McCarthy & Hayden, 2016). Perry and Szalavitz (2017) advocated “lowering stature rather than towering over [children]” (p. 371).

Whisper. Rebecca Roulier (personal communication, 2012) of the Doc Wayne Sport Therapy program shared what she learned from the first 2 years of working with traumatized children and summed it up in one word: “whisper.” According to Perry and Szalavitz (2017), this approach makes sense, because they advocate for “speaking softly but firmly and making them aware they are in a safe space” (p. 366).

Integration of Yoga and Meditation

When appropriate, teachers can integrate yoga and mindfulness into their physical education classes. Yoga has been utilized as a strategy to work directly with trauma among veterans, and it may hold promise as a modality for working with traumatized youth, especially if delivered in a trauma-informed way (Emerson et al., 2009). Otto (2014) and Deutsch (2020) are resources for yoga in PE and after school activity programs and Knothe and Martí (2018) is a resource for integrating mindfulness. Yoga can be useful to help engage students in an alternative activity that is less strenuous when students are not in an emotional space where they can participate in what was planned for the class that day. After engaging in yoga they may be willing to join the activity the rest of the class is participating in. Mindfulness can be made part of a daily routine. For example, it can be included to calm students in the introduction of class or in the closure before they go to their next class.

Advocate for Smaller Classes

Though it is unlikely that schools and school districts would be inclined to support PE teachers in reducing class sizes, it is a simple but effective change that can improve outcomes for all students. Modified PE, also referred to as unified PE and buddy or peer PE class, is characterized as a small, inclusive class of 10 to 20 children with and without disabilities (Lieberman & Houston-Wilson, 2018). Modified or unified PE benefits children with disabilities by reducing the number of students in the class, allowing the teacher to attend to student needs and interactions; it also cuts down on noise and the number of distractions, which can benefit children with a history of trauma, who can be hypervigilant and more reactive to perceived threat.

Seek Other Support/Aid

Though the thrust of this article has been a call for PE teachers to build relationships with the students by becoming knowledgeable about them, it is also necessary to use all of the resources available within the school and outside of it to form a multidisciplinary team. Martinek et al. (2006) noted, “Indeed, the commonly used phrase ‘it takes a village ...’ is especially relevant when working with traumatized children” (p. 37). Teachers should reach out to other school personnel (e.g., social workers, psychologists, nurses, other teachers and administrators) to learn more about the student’s background, coordinate other supports, and be able to keep up with the student’s difficulties and accomplishments. Community-based groups and appropriately staffed physical activity programs that specialize in working with youth who have experienced trauma can be potential collaborators on your team of trauma-informed professionals (Bergholz et al., 2016).

Though seeking help from other key personnel is highly encouraged, PE teachers are often not even aware of key student information. Block (2016) found that general PE teachers often experienced challenges to the IEP process in physical education. Therefore, it is even more imperative for PE teachers to be aware of the signs of trauma because there can be many instances where the IEP is not going to prepare the teacher adequately for the extent and nature of a student’s trauma history. Going forward, PE teachers should advocate to be part of the IEP process.

Future Directions

There is a pressing need to increase the research and scholarship about the role that PE can play in healing of those who have survived trauma. It is especially important to discern what teaching practices hold the most promise for students who experience different types of trauma and have come from different contexts. Lastly, future research must identify the promising methods or frameworks for working in PE settings. For example, more empirical work using a familiar framework like TPSR (Hellison, 2011) could be investigated.

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