CHAPTER 4

# BECOMING A TRAUMA-INFORMED EDUCATIONAL COMMUNITY WITH UNDERSERVED STUDENTS OF COLOR

## What Educators Need to Know

**Jennifer V. Pemberton and Ellen K. Edeburn**
*California State University*

### ABSTRACT

Disparate adult responses to student behavior, combined with increases in mental health issues and student trauma, compound the equity gap of racially minoritized students. Research suggests a correlation between social emotional learning (SEL) and student success (Gregory & Fergus, 2017). Providing a two-prong approach that includes (a) SEL curricular interventions that are not color-blind embedded within (b) a trauma-informed framework supports racially minoritized students' well-being while simultaneously addressing the equity gap within the (in-person and distance-learning) classroom.

Educators' and policy makers' interest in addressing the equity and opportunity gap in schools has led to a multiplicity of initiatives, program interventions, and policies targeting academic achievement. And yet, the gap persists with a lack of student engagement, student disengagement, the disparate adult responses to negative student behavior, and an increase in mental health issues and student trauma all compound the equity gap. Given the disparities in trauma experiences and mental health outcomes for underserved students of color, educators must incorporate a trauma-informed approach inclusive of ethnic and racially diverse students.

Current research suggests a correlation between Social Emotional Learning (SEL), college and career readiness, and overall student success (Gregory et al., 2016). However, educators are faced with a long-standing debate regarding whether SEL curricular interventions (a) are implemented with efficacy, (b) are beneficial for all students, or (c) result in more harm than good due to potential issues resulting from labeling and pathologizing students. Furthermore, research reveals that SEL curricular interventions that utilize a one-size-fits-all, "color-blind" approach (i.e., does not acknowledge race or racism) is detrimental to underserved students of color (Legette et al., 2020). Annamma et al. (2017) explain, "Color-blind racial ideology has historically been conceptualized as an ideology wherein race is immaterial" (p. 147). Nevertheless, schools need to respond to the social and emotional needs of students, especially underserved students of color, as research reveals an all-time high in mental health issues and traumatic experiences among children and adolescents (Sacks & Murphey, 2018; National Institute of Mental Health [NIMH], 2018; Zablotsky & Terlizzi, 2020).

The purpose of this article is to address academic equity, opportunity, and well-being of racially and economically minoritized students of color within the classroom learning environment by offering a two-prong approach: (a) the implementation of social emotional learning curricular interventions that are not color-blind combined with (b) the implementation of a trauma-informed framework. SEL programs that do not acknowledge race and racism can be detrimental (Jagers et al., 2019; Warren et al., 2020) and dehumanizing to students of color (Legette et al., 2020). By incorporating race as an asset within culturally appropriate SEL curricular interventions, combined with the implementation of a trauma-informed framework, this comprehensive approach provides the necessary supports and opportunities for underserved students of color while simultaneously addressing the persistent equity gap in the school learning environment (whether in-person or distance-learning).

## EQUITY AND OPPORTUNITY GAP OF RACIALLY AND ECONOMICALLY MINORITIZED STUDENTS

Students arrive at the school gate daily with varying opportunities. There are students who arrive and are ready and able to learn and students who arrive enveloped in trauma and mental health issues. There are students who can access the curriculum and instruction and students who are under-resourced, and under-served, who lack opportunity and thus are unable to access the curriculum and instruction. Noguera (2018) claims teachers who participate in structured professional learning communities that extend beyond a generalized-surface focus on academic achievement scores, often find lack of equity and imbalance of opportunity within their school sites.

The equity and opportunity gap of racially and economically minori-tized students of color can be viewed through multiple lenses. For example, looking at the school learning environment through the lens of school climate reveals the severe disproportionality of disciplinary suspension rates for Black students. According to Love (2019), "In every state in America Black girls are more than twice as likely to be suspended from school as White girls" (p. 5). In fact, in the State of California, the Black student suspension rate was 15% in the 2018–2019 school year even though Black students only represented 5.6% of the state's cumulative enrollment population (California Department of Education, 2019). Moreover, 9.4% of California's disadvantaged Black students were suspended during the 2017–2018 school year as compared to a 3% disciplinary suspension rate received by their disadvantaged White peers (Gregory et al., 2016; California Department of Education, 2018). Additionally, the expulsion rate of Black students (with a total enrollment of less than 400,00) in the state of California was 0.19% while their White peers (with a total enrollment of 1 million) revealed an expulsion rate of 0.06% during the 2018–2019 school year (California Department of Education, 2019).

Continuing a review of the school learning environment through the lens of school climate, within the state of California, the rate of chronic absen-teeism again reflects this discrepancy whereby Black students represent more than 22% of chronic absenteeism while their White peers represent only 9% of chronic absenteeism, even though there are more than 1.4 million White students and less than 400,00 Black students enrolled in the state of California public schools (California Department of Education, 2019).

Lastly, the achievement lens reveals the severe disparity of academic growth and opportunity in English language arts/literacy as reflected in the 2018–2019 California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASPP) Smarter Balanced Assessment Test Results (SBAC). For example, 67% of Black students tested did not meet the California state standard

(i.e., unable to achieve the necessary knowledge and skills to be successful in either future coursework or college/career readiness) as compared to 33% of their White peers (California Department of Education, 2019).

Researchers argue that the persistent equity and opportunity gap of racially and economically minoritized students is due to the lack of educational justice and the persistent presence of structural and colorblind racism within the school learning environment (Burke, 2019; Love, 2020; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). This persistent gap is not only compounded by distance learning due to the coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, but also by student mental health issues and student experiences of trauma.

## PREVALENCE OF MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES AND TRAUMA

Today, there is a more noticeable increase in mental health issues among U.S. children and adolescents than before the start of the twenty-first century. The National Institute of Mental Health [NIMH] (2018) documents an alarming rate of almost half of adolescents 13 to 18 years nationwide diagnosed with a mental disorder and over 20% of those experience severe impairment. Over 13% experience major depression (20% females, 6.8% males); almost 32% experience anxiety (38% females, 26.1% males); and 5% post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD: 8% females, 2.3% males) (NIMH, 2018). Further, suicide rates have increased by over 25% in the last decade, with suicide being the second leading cause of death for children 10 to 14 and adolescents 15 to 24 years (CDC, 2016). Latinx and Black adolescents have higher rates of mood disorders, anxiety, and PTSD compared to White peers (Lopez et al., 2016). Further, disparities exist in mental health treatment. Black, Latinx, and Asian teens are significantly less likely to receive mental health services or prescription medication compared to White peers (Cummings & Druss, 2016).

So why are so many children and adolescents experiencing such high rates of mental health issues? There are many factors including brain chemistry, environmental factors, and genetics. However, one of the biggest factors that can result in the mental health issues described is trauma. Over 45% of children and adolescents nationwide are exposed to a traumatic experience, with higher rates for Black (61%) and Latinx (51%) children (Sacks & Murphey, 2018). Latinx and Black adolescents also have higher rates of polyvictimization (Lopez et al., 2016). Such traumatic experiences include sexual abuse, physical abuse, domestic violence, community trauma, bullying, and other violence. Rates of sexual assault are reported by 8% of 12- to 17-year-olds, physical assault is reported by 17%, and witnessing violence is reported by 39% (National Child Traumatic Stress Network, 2014). Studies on adverse childhood experiences (ACEs)

note the long-lasting detrimental impact on development, health, and well-being (Mersky et al., 2013; Moore & Ramirez, 2016). For children and adolescents of color, racism and discrimination can contribute and further exacerbate stress and mental health outcomes (Anderson, 2013).

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated many of these mental health issues. Children and adolescents are experiencing increases in isolation, anxiety, irritability, sleep disturbance, and depression (Singh et al., 2020). Further, for children and teens who are restricted to remain in homes where violence exists, the isolation resulting from public shutdowns and school closures has resulted in increased child abuse (Cooper, 2020).

## Developmental Impact of Trauma

For children and adolescents, traumatic experiences can impact functioning in neurobiological development, emotional, social, cognitive, and behavioral areas. In terms of neurobiological effects, research is documenting the impact of trauma on neurochemistry and brain structures including increased cortisol, norepinephrine, dopamine, endogenous endorphins, and decreased serotonin, as well as reductions in the hippocampus, corpus callosum, prefrontal cortex, reduced brain activity, and an overactive amygdala (Cozolino, 2017; van der Kolk, 2003). These changes result in heightened startle responses, hypervigilance, emotional dysregulation, irritability, depression, dissociation, problems with executive functioning, learning, attention and concentration issues, memory impairment, problems with integration of information, difficulty modulating the fight-or-flight reaction in response to anxiety, and other cognitive impairments (Cozolino, 2017). Along with anxiety, depression, and PTSD, trauma is also associated with sleep disturbance, panic attacks, lack of trust, difficulties completing tasks, anger, substance use, and behavioral impulsivity (Bath, 2008; van der Kolk, 2003). Given that adolescents of color are more likely to experience polyvictimization, such developmental impacts from trauma may be exacerbated for these populations (Lopez et al., 2016; Anderson, 2013).

For traumatized students, the above impairments may directly impact school performance. Such impairments may manifest as excessive absences; an inability to complete assignments; difficulty focusing, attending, retaining, and recalling information; fear of taking risks in the classroom; heightened anxiety about deadlines, exams, and public speaking; withdrawal; dissociation when stressed or if experiencing flashbacks; anger and helplessness; and an overall lack of trust in teachers, peers, and administrators (Brunzell et al., 2016).

## PRONG ONE: CURRICULAR INTERVENTION CHALLENGES OF SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING PROGRAMS

According to current research, there is a correlation between social emotional learning, college and career readiness, and overall student success (Gregory et al., 2016). In fact, when schools invest in SEL programs and their curricular interventions for all students, incorporated into the school day, there is the potential for students to develop and strengthen SEL skills, which support school success and college and career readiness (Peck, 2015). But addressing the well-being of all students necessitates more than securing a school board-adopted SEL program of curricular interventions. Even though SEL programs may include professional development training for implementation, evidence suggests teacher agency and overall school culture must also be addressed. As Gregory and Fergus (2017) explain:

> Even if race- and gender-based equity discipline reforms fully embrace SEL as most people now understand it, the promise for substantially narrowing or eliminating disparities remains limited. That's because the prevailing understanding of SEL is "colorblind" and doesn't take power, privilege, and culture into account. Another limiting factor is an emphasis only on students' SEL, despite the evidence that students' and teachers' social and emotional competencies are interrelated. (p. 118)

In other words, teachers need to be able to contextualize racial disparities (i.e., reflected in drop-out rates, disciplinary actions, and segregational tracking structures) within the school learning environment (Gregory & Fergus, 2017; Gregory et al., 2016; Howard & Rodriguez-Minkoff 2017; Weinstein et al., 2004). Moreover, teachers must not only be able to recognize student actions and behaviors that correlate with mental health issues and student trauma, but they must understand how to respond appropriately within the classroom setting. Thus, addressing the social emotional well-being of our racially and economically minoritized students of color who lack support and opportunity requires a change in teacher agency within the school learning environment, whether it be in-person or remote distance learning.

Lindsey et al. (2020) argues that teachers need to be provided deep and continuous coaching and training to understand their own implicit bias and how to become culturally responsive to their students of color, which in turn will develop their students' SEL skills and disrupt the persistent equity gap within the school learning environment. Additionally, Knesting (2008) suggests that authentic care from adults within the learning environ-

ment correlates with student educational persistence. According to Chin et al. (2020), a teacher's implicit racial biases toward students of color create stress and rejection that "can not only impede the performance in the short term but also can diminish learning in the long term" (p. 567).

One must contextualize the reflexive relationship between students and their teachers (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) to recognize how the relationship (and teacher agency) in the learning environment contextually affects the implementation of the SEL curricular interventions and the potential for our racially and economically minoritized students of color to develop and strengthen SEL skills (Jones et al., 2019; Collie et al., 2011). These findings have important implications for the implementation of SEL curricular interventions and student development of SEL skills. Essentially, we, the authors, argue that educators should not give up on implementing SEL programs nor their curricular interventions but that the challenge is recognizing the contextual relationship of students and their teachers who are the implementers of SELs, especially the relationship between White teachers and racially and economically minoritized students of color.

This challenge includes the impact resulting from teacher agency during SEL curricular interventions within the classroom. Unless the curricular interventions are implemented with complete teacher buy-in, the SEL curricular interventions can be perceived as a burden and additional workload for teachers, thus affecting the potential SEL outcomes for students in the classroom. This issue is compounded further when a teacher implements SEL curricular intervention lessons through a one-size-fits-all, "colorblind lens" approach, whereby teachers do not acknowledge the struggle and oppression experienced by their students of color. Thus, "the colorblind individual, failing to see race, fails to see racism" (Kendi, 2019, p. 11).

Love (2020) argues Blackness must matter. This color-blind/color-evasive lack of cultural proficiency results in low student expectations, with adult agency that reflects implicit bias toward the very students who would benefit the most from the acquisition and strengthening of SEL skills and authentic caring relationships by their teachers. Lindsey et al. (2020) explain that barriers to a culturally proficient school learning environment include varying indicators reflected by adult agency and school culture as a whole, such as (a) an unawareness of the need to adapt, (b) systems of oppression, and (c) a sense of entitlement. When teachers are provided the necessary coaching and supports resulting in their ability to shift toward a more inclusive culturally proficient pedagogy, the learning environment for

students changes and there becomes more opportunity for our racially and economically minoritized students of color to strengthen their SEL skills. Furthermore, Stillman et al. (2018) explain that "when social-emotional measures are reviewed together with academic scores, discipline reports, teacher observation and parent comments, the results yield a broad-based solution-focused approach to student growth and development" (p. 74). When Taylor et al. (2017) conducted a meta-analysis grounded in the SEL framework to determine predictors of SEL program interventions and its long-term follow-up effects, findings reveal that specific social-emotional interventions aligned to specific social-emotional assets result in an increase in academic success and an increase in appropriate social behavior within the school learning environment. Additionally, Jones et al. (2019) suggest that effective implementation strategies that result in best practice components of SEL are ones that recognize the contextuality of the school learning environment, including class climate, school culture, and the skills of teachers as well as the community at large. Such strategies are embedded in the CASEL framework for systemic SEL; examples include addressing "self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision-making embedded in the curricular interventions" (Jagers et al., 2019, p. 165). As Legette et al., (2020) explain, the teacher-student relationship can either be discriminatory or supportive, thus SEL strategies must be developed through a teacher's understanding of the significance of race and racism in the school learning environment.

Moreover, utilizing SEL curricular interventions that address SEL competencies embedded within the curriculum can strengthen a student's self-identification along with positivity toward school and others, increase positive behavior, and thus increase opportunity, access, and academic success (Taylor et al., 2017). Prong one exposes the detriment to underserved students of color when educators do not understand the significance of race and racism within the learning environment. Furthermore, Garner et al. (2014) note that it "situates SEL interventions into a broader social context by reframing the discussion to consider how aspects of sociocultural competence impact the development and delivery of programs" (p. 165).

Therefore, a two-pronged approach is necessary to address the well-being of all students, but especially racially and economically minoritized students of color. As stated previously, the first prong revolves around implementing SEL curricular interventions without a one-size-fits-all, "colorblind" approach. The second prong addresses student experiences of trauma and mental health issues within the school learning environment by implementing a trauma-informed framework. Both prongs address the importance of teacher agency within the school learning environment.

## PRONG TWO: IMPLEMENTING A TRAUMA-INFORMED FRAMEWORK WITH STUDENTS OF COLOR

Given the information regarding the prevalence of mental health issues and trauma among students and the resulting impact, the question is no longer should educators implement trauma-informed strategies and SEL program interventions into the school system, but how can they be implemented in an effective and comprehensive manner. In the age of trauma-informed care, trauma-informed teaching, and the trauma-informed classroom, it is critical that educators consider the needs of students, many of whom are trauma survivors. In the mental health field, many clinicians are skilled in helping trauma survivors, but educators may not recognize or even understand how trauma affects the learning and achievement of students. Trauma-informed care includes understanding the impact of trauma, understanding the vulnerabilities of survivors and trauma triggers, as well as ways to avoid re-traumatization (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMSHA], 2018). For students with histories of trauma, learning can be significantly impaired, and the results may translate to behaviors such as difficulty focusing, attending, retaining, and recalling; missing classes; challenges with emotional regulation; fear of taking risks; anxiety about unhealthy relationships (Davidson, 2017).

When trauma is missed and not identified, the behaviors of traumatized students may be misinterpreted as laziness, lack of motivation, intentional oppositionality, or an overall "bad" student. It is imperative that educators create trauma-informed classroom environments to support the educational well-being and academic success of all students, whether in-person or through remote learning platforms. Further, teachers, administrators, and school staff also need support in the identification, awareness, and knowledge of what it means to be trauma-informed. Single models may not fully address trauma and resilience (Verbitsky-Savitz et al., 2016). Rather than adopting more and more programs with the hope of meeting the needs of traumatized students, we, as authors, propose and encourage schools to adopt a comprehensive framework that enables the school staff and students to benefit from a trauma-informed community in the classroom and overall school environment. In doing so, an inclusive community can be created that prevents a stance of labeling and/or pathologizing students; thus, all students can benefit, including the majority of students who are traumatized but have yet to disclose or report.

By incorporating SAMSHA's trauma-informed care framework and the six principles of a trauma-informed environment, the overall well-being of the entire school can benefit. These principles include: (1) safety; (2) trustworthiness and transparency; (3) peer support; (4) collaboration and mutuality; (5) empowerment, voice, and choice; and (6) cultural, historical,

and gender issues (SAMSHA, 2018). Starting with safety, particularly for students of color who have experienced higher rates of racism, discrimination, and polyvictimization, it is essential that the classroom environment and school community foster a sense of physical and emotional safety for these students. Teachers and counselors can offer more opportunities to reach out with safety concerns (Learning for Justice Staff, 2020). Teachers and staff who approach students with a warm, caring, and supportive stance can enhance feelings of physical and emotional safety. The school must have explicit safety policies in place and faculty and staff that are consistent, predictable, and respectful. Creating opportunities within and outside of the classroom where students can access safe areas and activities that can help with emotional regulation can be helpful. Spending class time, both in-person and in remote learning platforms, on developing safe learning environments also is helpful. For example, defining what safety means in learning as well as defining unsafe learning environments benefits both students and teachers.

Trustworthiness and transparency are important factors given that many victims have experienced trauma at the hands of a "trusted" adult. Therefore, the ability to trust becomes impaired, including trusting teachers and school staff. A trauma-informed classroom and school environment can build trust through clear and explicit expectations and policies. Rubrics for all assignments can help students understand expectations better. Having teachers invite student feedback can also increase a student's feelings of connection and trust. Fostering connectedness can increase trust, particularly for students of color. Some examples include teachers asking students about fun activities students engage in, greeting students by name, and positive gestures for in-person learning (e.g., handshakes, high fives) or virtual versions of such greetings; creating small groups for projects and fun activities (e.g., scavenger hunts); engaging in discussions about the importance of connecting with others (Learning for Justice Staff, 2020).

An atmosphere of peer support is important as it combats tendencies toward isolation and withdrawal and builds a network and community for students. School is a learning environment; however, it is also a place for social connection for students. By enhancing opportunities for positive social connection and support from peers, learning is positively impacted. Research has demonstrated that using active learning practices enhances comprehension, reaches more diverse students, and as well as students with histories of trauma (Eddy & Hogan, 2014; Freeman et al., 2014). For remote learning, ensuring opportunities for peer connection during classroom time and outside is important to combat the isolative nature of this type of learning environment.

Collaboration and mutuality can be accomplished with an approach of partnering with students and families in shared decision-making with

administration, teachers, and staff. Having regular discussions with students regarding their academic goals in the classroom and how best to meet those goals can enhance motivation and commitment. Kris (2018) suggests that having morning meetings between teachers and students can help build a sense of community and belonging.

Similarly, empowerment, voice, and choice can be developed by encouraging students and families to become more involved, finding ways to achieve and accomplish, and creating opportunities for leadership. It is helpful to incorporate students' strengths and interests throughout curriculum development. At times, having choice in assignments may help students feel empowered and thereby may increase the likelihood of schoolwork completion and success.

Finally, cultural, historical, and gender issues address the importance of incorporating an inclusive environment that respects, honors, and embraces diversity and uses approaches that are relevant to the varied cultural and language needs for learning and healing. For students of color, antiracist and antibullying campaigns send a message of an intolerance of discrimination (Quirk, 2020). For immigrant students or undocumented students, providing resources that they can access without citizenship is helpful (Quirk, 2020). Access to interpreters and translated materials is also important. Books and lessons that incorporate and depict more people of color can give students of color a broader reflection of their own community. Forming various student-led clubs that students can join can help them feel like they belong, are respected, and accepted. Modeling use of pronouns can reflect an environment of inclusivity for LGBTQIA adolescents. Recruiting more counselors and educators of color can foster a student of color's sense of belonging with diverse staff.

As authors, we encourage programs that are not just innovative but are also relevant to student engagement of diverse cultures and experiences that can be embedded throughout curriculum, both through in-person and remote learning platforms. For example, given the physiological and emotional impact of trauma, overall wellness programs that address the whole child are important, such as including nutritional programs and sleep hygiene. Mindfulness programs in the schools have been found to be helpful and a skill that all ages can benefit from (Maynard et al., 2017; Siegel, 2009). According to Pecore (2020):

> Mindfulness, which originates from Buddhist meditation, involves an acute awareness of thoughts and feelings with the surrounding environment, through a gentle, non-judgmental lens (Kabat-Zinn, 1994). When practicing mindfulness, thoughts center on sensing the present moment as opposed to focusing on the past or imagining the future. (p. 164)

Mindfulness can be easily imbedded in classroom environments as a quick start and/or ending of class, subject, or transition period and is helpful to ground and emotionally regulate students and teachers. "Mindfulness can strengthen the bond between students and teachers by helping students to recognize that teachers are present for assistance" (Pecore, 2020, p. 164). Yoga and exercise that tap into the physiological imprint of trauma in the body are also helpful (van der Kolk, 2014). Further, for many children and adolescents, traditional forms of therapy may not reach them. As previously discussed, students of color are less likely to access mental health services (Cummings & Druss, 2016). Research has noted how using creative forms of expression such as music, art, and writing can be helpful in the healing process (Green, 2011) and can thereby assist in learning. These activities can be used as either formal parts of the curriculum or used in the classroom for students to use freely and as needed. Incorporating music, poetry, and art from various cultures, ethnicities, and languages can be meaningful and relevant for students of color.

Finally, self-care for the school personnel is crucial in continuing a compassionate and trauma-sensitive school community as it can prevent burnout, compassion fatigue, and secondary traumatization among the teachers and staff who come to learn about and understand the reality of the traumatic experiences so many of the students have either undergone in their past or experience in the present. Regular workshops about trauma-informed care, ideas, and activities for trauma-sensitive teaching and classrooms, as well as having access to consultants regarding trauma issues is helpful in providing the needed social and emotional support for school faculty and staff.

## CONCLUSION

As mental health issues and experiences of trauma continue to impact the development of children and adolescents and have significant effects on their learning, the American educational system is tasked with the difficult and challenging job of overhauling traditional academic settings and developing more trauma-informed educators, classroom environments, and school communities. As children and adolescents spend a significant amount of time in the school learning environment (whether in-person or distance learning), it is critical that educators know how to "intentionally disrupt culturally ingrained dehumanizing schooling conditions" (Legette et al., 2020, p. 2), including SEL curricular interventions that do not acknowledge or incorporate the contextuality of race or racism (Jagers et al., 2019; Warren et al., 2020). In doing so, learning can take place more equitably and effectively.

To address the experiences of trauma and mental health issues, educators must be able to recognize the significance of race (Shah & Coles, 2020) and distinguish the contextual relationships between teachers and their racially and economically minoritized students of color; between power and oppression; and between academic and equity disparities within the school learning environment. Thus, by offering a two-prong approach, the trauma-informed framework, in combination with social emotional learning curricular interventions that are no longer implemented through a colorblind lens, educators can better provide the necessary opportunities and supports for addressing the well-being of underserved students of color while simultaneously addressing the severe disparities of educational equity and opportunity within in-person or distance school learning environments.

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