



TRAUMA BELONGS IN SCHOOLS. THIS NEW BOOK EXPLAINS WHY.



Megan was a first-year teacher who had lost someone dear to her, and she was sad. So sad, in fact, that she wasn't sure how she was going to get through a day of teaching 25 first graders. When writing workshop time rolled around, she had planned to teach a lesson on descriptive words, but she wasn't sure she was up to it. So, on a bit of a whim, she tried something new: Rather than trying to hide her sadness, she shared it with her students, modeling a writing lesson in which she recalled words from her father that had helped her persevere when life got tough. Her eyes watered as she wrote, and the vulnerability felt uncomfortable at first. But then she started to notice something: Her students were incredibly engaged. They asked about her loss. They drew connections to their own feelings and experiences. When Megan invited them to write about a difficult experience if they felt comfortable doing so, most immediately got to work. But two lingered behind. They asked Megan if they could write about two particularly difficult and personal subjects that they feared might not be appropriate for school—the suicide of a beloved grandfather, and the incarceration of parents. Given affirmation they diligently got to work. By the end of the workshop, one had volunteered to share his story with the class, even though he had never previously spoken of his experience in school.

The type of reciprocal vulnerability that Megan describes is a core component of a pedagogical approach to trauma that is the focus of NEPC Fellow Elizabeth Dutro's new book, *The Vulnerable Heart of Literacy: Centering Trauma as Powerful Pedagogy*.

“Even when the particulars and consequences are different (and they most certainly always are), when we share a certain kind of trauma with others, we recognize a bond, even if tenuous, even if with very different stakes,” Dutro writes in her book, which centers on Megan

and her experiences. Their collaborative study examines how to attend to trauma in the literacy classroom in ways that recognize students' lives as a source of knowledge for school literacies.

For this reason, Dutro invites teachers to model the risk and vulnerability of bringing difficult experiences into a setting—the classroom—where they have often been ignored, pushed aside, or medicalized with “trauma-informed” education models that create false dichotomies of the adult “healer” and the “broken” child.

“Those us/them binaries that some popular images and frameworks create chip away at children’s humanity,” Dutro writes. “We can consciously reframe the assumptions of who needs healing and who is wounded. We can attend to the difficult dimensions of life as a reciprocal, circular, and ever-present process in literacy classrooms.”

This doesn’t mean that these teachers are dumping their problems on the children, or falsely equating their own experiences to those of the students. The teacher’s “testimony” (the term Dutro uses) is presented in an age-appropriate matter. It serves as an invitation, a means of connection, especially to those students who may have perceived that their own difficulties are “not for school,” a fear expressed by the child who wrote about his grandfather’s suicide.

Under Dutro’s model, children should never be required to write about traumatic events. They should only be invited to do so in an environment in which such voluntary sharing is comfortable because it has been modeled by the teacher. Dutro suspects that this is one reason why parents have not, in her experience, pushed back about her approach by complaining, for instance, that a child is sharing family business in class.

“Children make decisions that do or may connect to the explicit or implicit sense they have of what is ok with their family, as well as their own comfort in sharing a particular experience,” Dutro explained.

Addressing trauma in class is not a sideshow that detracts from the “main event” of learning to read and write, with the teacher forced to inappropriately take on the role of social worker or psychologist. That’s because learning does not occur in a sterile vacuum. It is inextricably entwined with feelings and experiences of teachers and students alike.

“These pedagogies, and the affective dimensions of teaching and learning that they inherently encompass, are inseparable from instruction, content, and curricular goals,” Dutro writes.

Nationwide, most teachers in public schools are white females from middle-class backgrounds. Student demographics are different: lower income and predominantly of color. Accordingly, most of the examples that Dutro draws upon in her new book take place in schools that serve large proportions of students from low-income families and students of color. Yet everyone experiences difficulties in life. Dutro explains that her approach is applicable in every community, while also adding that plenty of children in the schools she studied wrote about relatively less difficult events like losing a pet or arguing with a friend.

In all these circumstances, Dutro emphasizes the need for teachers to serve as “critical witnesses” who recognize the power differentials that can result from the inequitable consequences of their own traumas versus the trauma of their students. For instance, teachers

might challenge colleagues who use deficit language to discuss students and families, or they might seek out resources to better understand the impact of race, gender, and class. Similarly, they might assist families with transportation and other needs or demonstrate solidarity for families experiencing difficulties related to structural inequities.

“Critical witness, then, involves actively working to engage in critical analyses of the deficit discourses surrounding many students and public education and taking steps to advocate for students and work toward social justice,” Dutro writes.

Elizabeth Dutro is a professor of education in the School of Education at the University of Colorado Boulder. Her areas of expertise include literacy education, educational equity, and accountability policies in reading and writing.

NEPC Resources on Literacy Education

This newsletter is made possible in part by support provided by the Great Lakes Center for Education Research and Practice: <http://www.greatlakescenter.org>

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