



Book Review

Trauma-Responsive Schooling: Centering Student Voice and Healing By Lyn Mikel Brown, Catharine Biddle, and Mark Tappan. Harvard Education Press. \$33.00. May 2022. ISBN-13: 978-1-68253-731-2

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Dates

Submitted: 3 August 2022

Accepted: 11 August 2022

Published: 16 January 2023

Production and Hosting by Knowledge E

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Managing Editor:
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Trauma-Responsive Schooling: Centering Student Voice and Healing provides a nuanced understanding of the development of trauma-responsive school practices as a partnership between children and adults. Weaving theory and practice in an engaging storytelling narrative, authors Lyn Mikel Brown, Catharine Biddle, and Mark Tappan focus on implementing the Trauma-Responsive Equitable Education (TREE) Program in two schools in rural Maine over three years. Using a “layered approach to trauma-responsive schooling” (pg. 13) the book’s first half addresses whole-school practices designed to stimulate children to explore meaningfulness in their lives in school. The second half provides a more systemic understanding of trauma-responsive schooling while also considering the conclusion of the pilot and lessons learned.

The work is a thought-provoking read due to its innovative approach to trauma-responsive schooling and emphasis on student agency while significantly contributing to the literature on equity and poverty in rural schools. However, limited contextualization regarding the school selection process, tailoring of TREE to the two schools, and the authors’ positionality make it challenging for researchers and education policymakers to gauge the program’s impact. This book review begins by providing a brief summary of the work’s central argument before proceeding to critique its contents and lastly commenting on the work’s target audience in the conclusion.

The TREE Program is an educational model created as part of a multiyear research project initiated in West Elementary School and East Elementary School in rural Maine. The book provides comprehensive examples, tips, and suggestions regarding adopting trauma-responsive school practices, thereby serving as a valuable resource to educators in rural schools. In their work, Brown et al. indicate that healing cannot take place if

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equity is not upheld, referring to “a fair distribution (or redistribution) of access and opportunity, such as basic needs support and educational opportunities that enable children to thrive and succeed” (pg. 4).

The authors further aim to center students as “agents of change” by deconstructing adultist perceptions of trauma responsiveness. In other words, they challenge the assumption that adults are superior to young people and that the former may impose certain behaviors upon the latter without their consent. Instead, they seek to partner with children to create a healthy learning environment by listening to students’ requests as necessary to their healing process. More practically, with the support of the TREE trauma-responsive resource coaches and therapists, this entails introducing student-led activities rooted in psychology and educational leadership practices. These include “Somedays,”¹ “microadventures,”² and an expressive arts therapeutic technique called “Moving Stories.”³

For example, in West Elementary School, the student body is racially diverse and includes many Latinx children who are bilingual. Through the implementation of “Somedays,” Latinx students were able to incorporate their heritage and bilingualism into class activities. By choosing activities they personally enjoy, the children were able to engage in what the authors call “student-empowered social emotional learning (SESEL)” (pg. 24), which incorporates student voice into traditionally more top-down social-emotional learning practices. The authors outline other instances of adopting trauma-responsive and equitable practices in the classroom, demonstrating that TREE was tailored to each of the two schools.

The narrative focuses on the two schools of East Elementary and West Elementary. However, TREE works with various schools across Maine and the broader United States, especially high-poverty, rural institutions. The process through which these two schools were selected by the TREE research-practice partnership (RPP) team is not clearly delineated in the book aside from the fact that both are underfunded and remotely situated. This serves as a disadvantage for those who may be interested in the mechanics of the selection process to understand how *representative* the two schools may be of inequity in rural America from a public policy perspective.

In addition, while the authors depict the messiness and flexibility inherent to the program as one that focuses on individual psychology, they do not coherently reflect on the blueprint they followed to tailor the TREE Program to the two schools. For example, while the students have access to resource coaches and in-school mental health providers, it is unclear how such counseling was procedurally utilized in conjunction with student-initiated activities to empower the children in question. This

is compounded by the book's layout, where each chapter in the first half provides qualitative examples of activities undertaken. While this makes for an engaging read, it is difficult to envision the practical implementation of this program on the ground due to the book's unconventional structure.

Lastly, while the TREE Program's founding, overall objective, and general trajectory is documented, and the appendix outlines the research and evaluation process, the recruitment of the key members of the RPP and their exact involvement are not specified. This leaves the reader slightly confused about how the authors are situated within the TREE Program. Only upon conducting further research online, the reader may discover that the authors have worked with TREE since 2016 which emerged through their previous involvement with the Rural Vitality Lab,⁴ and their expertise in developmental and educational psychology (Colby College 2022; Colby College, n.d.; University of Maine, n.d.).

In sum, Brown et al. provide a compelling case for shifting the social–emotional learning discourse to center student voice and agency in schools and to support collaborative partnerships between adults and students. It is further geared toward practitioners and educators in its focus on providing constructive examples and practices that can be utilized in the classroom to redress existing inequities in rural schools. As such, this may make the book less relevant to policymakers and researchers who may be more interested in the underlying mechanisms of the program and its potential scalability. Nevertheless, the book remains a valuable contribution to the literature on trauma-responsive schooling and equity. It is a powerful reminder of how transformative school change can take place, but only if students are given a chance to speak their truth and raise their voices.

Notes

¹Invented by student voice expert Bill Preble, “Somedays” are requests made by students regarding an activity they would like to take place in school.

²Microadventures “are whole-body, emotionally connected learning experiences” (pg. 41) which enable students to creatively interact with their surroundings.

³Moving stories involves telling stories using objects and figures in a sand tray.

⁴The Rural Vitality Lab is “a collaborative research initiative co-led by educational researchers from the University of Maine and Colby College” (Rural Vitality Lab, n.d.).

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