

2023

I Wish My Teacher Knew: Trauma, Stress, Loss, and Learning in Today's Classrooms

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Recommended Citation

Goodman, J. R. & Oglan, V. A. (2023). I wish my teacher knew: Trauma, stress, loss, and learning in today's classrooms. *South Carolina Association for Middle Level Education Journal*, 107-113.

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Published online: March 2023
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I Wish My Teacher Knew: Trauma, Stress, Loss, and Learning in Today's Classrooms

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As teachers and students continue to navigate the new normal of in-class, remote, and hybrid learning environments, three ongoing themes of trauma, stress, and loss have become pervasive. Here are important points for educators to consider:

- Seventy-five percent of American high schoolers and fifty percent of middle schoolers have described themselves as “often or always feeling stressed” by schoolwork. A PEW survey shows that seventy percent of teens say anxiety and depression are a major problem among their peers. (Maroney, 2021).
- Data indicates that as many as 43,000 children have lost a parent to Covid-19. Additionally, school/classroom lockdowns and quarantines have led to social isolation, resulting in increases in depression and anxiety in children and adolescents. Moreover, since schools can be a stabilizing force in many children's lives, switching from in-person to remote to in-person again can add stress (Curtis, 2021).
- Up to two-thirds of U.S. children have experienced at least one type of serious childhood trauma (e.g., abuse, neglect, natural disaster) or have experienced or witnessed violence. Research studies have indicated that trauma is possibly the largest public health issue facing our children today (CDC, 2019). Traumatized students are especially prone to difficulty in self-regulation, negative thinking, and being on high alert. Also, they may have difficulty trusting adults and may engage in inappropriate social interactions (Lacoe, 2013; Terrasi & de Galarce, 2017). They often have not learned to express emotions healthily and instead show their distress through aggression, avoidance, shutting down, or other off-putting behaviors. These actions can feel antagonistic to teachers who do not understand the root cause of the student's behavior, which can lead to misunderstandings, ineffective interventions, and missed learning time (Minahan, 2019).

The truth is that when it comes to being affected by trauma, stress, and/or loss in today's classrooms, no one (teachers included) is immune!

However, educators have the power to create schools that are places of learning about oneself and the world for all students and safe harbors for those whose lives are chaotic (Fisher, Frey, & Savitz, 2020). To reach and support all students, educators must approach everything they do through a trauma-informed lens. Dr. Jamie Howard writes, “There's chronic loss happening right now. So much of what kids have lost recently — the end of the school year, celebrations, camp — is related to real developmental milestones. These things...really matter to kids” (as cited in Sheldon-Deene, 2021, para. 13). Additionally, researchers have discovered how brains under chronic stress will have trouble learning new things and committing new material to memory (Pellissier, 2014).

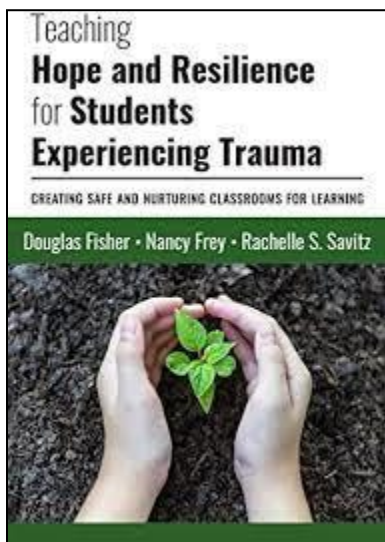
When faced with such widespread trauma, how can teachers help students deal with and heal from stress and loss? How can teachers help students who are at risk for lowered academic performance? What about the teachers, many of whom are traumatized and stressed themselves?

This collection of resources can give all educators a broader understanding of stress, trauma, loss, and learning as well as provide information that can be applied directly into work with students in the classroom and the community. Rachelle S. Savitz, assistant professor of adolescent literacy at Clemson University, has partnered with Douglas Fisher and Nancy Frey, both at San Diego State University, to author their book, *Teaching Hope and Resilience for Students Experiencing Trauma: Creating Safe and Nurturing Classrooms for Learning* (2020). This powerful book can serve as a road map for creating uniformly excellent classrooms and schools by utilizing humane and growth-producing methods. Patricia A. Jennings (2019), in her book, *The Trauma-Sensitive Classroom: Building Resilience with Compassionate Teaching*, shares strategies that will help educators better understand how to create the kinds of experiences that will make learning possible while dealing with trauma. *Teaching, Learning, and Trauma: Responsive Practices for Holding Steady in Turbulent Times (Grades 6-12)*, written by Brooke O'Drobinak and Beth Kelley (2021), explores the intersection of teaching, learning, and mental health by utilizing the integrated approach of knowing, planning, being, delivering, and partnering. David Rockower (2022) shares in his book, *The Power of Teaching Vulnerably: How Risk-Taking Transforms Student Engagement*, how his personal journey of transforming his classroom into a safe space where students could take risks resulted in impactful learning for all. *Building a Trauma-Informed Compassionate Classroom: Strategies & Activities for Reducing Challenging Behavior, Improve Learning Outcomes, and Increase Student Engagement* by Jennifer Bashant (2020) is an excellent resource for teachers as they work to navigate the new normal

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in their classrooms where many students are struggling. She offers a collection of checklists, charts, surveys, and inventories for assessing the classroom environment, student interests, and student triggers and she provides a variety of strategies to support teachers with these topics. Lastly, *Learning from Loss* by Brittany R. Collins (2022) is a valuable resource that provides teachers with an understanding of the responses a student may experience both biologically and behaviorally when dealing with loss. Also, Collins includes a variety of strategies for learning how to approach a grieving student and what to say to offer authentic support. (JRG)



Teaching Hope and Resilience for Students Experiencing Trauma: Creating Safe and Nurturing Classrooms for Learning

by Douglas Fisher, Nancy Frey, & Rachelle S. Savitz, 2020, 138 pp., Teachers College Press. ISBN 978-0-8077-6147-2

How many among us experience the daily trauma that substantial numbers of our students face? Trauma can take many forms including

abuse, homelessness, poverty, food insecurity, discrimination, violent neighborhoods, school shootings, or family deportations. Throughout this book, the authors stress how schools and classrooms can become safe havens for the many students experiencing trauma, stress, and loss. However, this is only possible if teachers know and understand the appropriate methodology for working with today’s students and understand the intentionality that must be behind their actions. In this book, the authors present five chapters that serve as a road map to guide courageous teachers on this journey. Acknowledging that while this is never going to be an easy task, they pose the question: “But who among us decided to enter this profession because we thought it would be easy?” (p. 7)

Chapter 1 focuses on the fundamental importance of *teacher-student relationships*. The authors point out that “hope-filled schools invest in structures that promote strong relationships” (p. 25). Research has shown the powerful influence of positive teacher-student relationships on learning. However, it has also been shown that students identified as low achieving are often treated differently by their teachers. Limited and negative interactions with teachers can increase the likelihood that these students will adopt negative attitudes about themselves and exhibit problematic behaviors (p. 13). However, teachers have the power to interrupt the pattern and build the resilience of students by developing stronger relationships characterized by warmth and support.

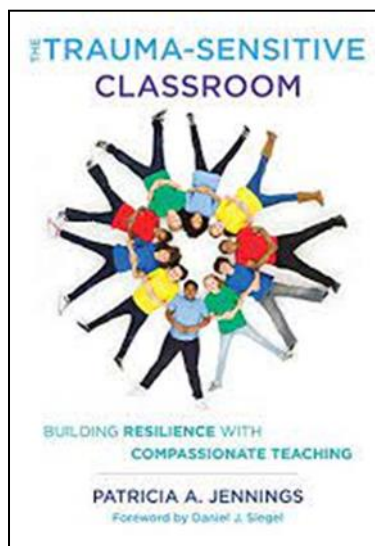
Chapter 2 addresses the way *social and emotional learning* can be integrated into the school day. Some suggestions for helping students grow in their identity and agency include using class meetings to promote dialogue, aiding students who have difficult peer relations, addressing bullying and cyberbullying, and suicide prevention. While these situations may be painful to consider as part of a teacher’s responsibility, the authors point out that whether teachers intend it or not, they teach students SEL in every interaction.

Chapter 3 focuses on the ways in which *literacies can be levers to maximize learning*, especially for traumatized youth. The authors posit that there is power in carefully selected literature and that writing can serve as catharsis. They write: “Literacy is a crucial tool for accomplishing the dual missions of teaching and healing” (p. 57).

Chapter 4 speaks to *learner empowerment*. The authors note how loss of agency is one of the most debilitating side effects of trauma. To offset this loss, they offer ways to teach for empowerment by having students engage in research and inquiry. Teachers are reminded that part of being a teacher is being a change agent in student-centered classrooms.

Chapter 5 explores the nature of the *school community as an agent of change*. As the authors point out, “Trauma-sensitive schools are a vital conduit for organizing efforts, supporting families experiencing trauma, and mobilizing community resources (p. 7).

Fisher, Frey, and Savitz have authored a book for the many teachers who may feel powerless when dealing with the trauma, stress, and loss that students bring to school with them every single day. However, they remind us all that “...the last thing that children who have experienced trauma need is pity and low expectations about their future. What they need is empathy and a path forward” (p. 5). This book shows teachers that path. (JRG)



The Trauma-Sensitive Classroom: Building Resilience with Compassionate Teaching

by Patricia A. Jennings, 2019, 200 pp., W.W. Norton & Company. ISBN 978-0-393-771186-8

Educational jargon can be casually bandied about, leaving teachers confused about how many more hats they will be required to wear as they work alongside their students! Patricia Jennings has authored a

timely book that will help teachers define the terms related to trauma and stress they need to understand as they interact with children and adolescents in their classrooms. In the

“Introduction” she writes: “My intention is to provide the knowledge and skills educators need to create a compassionate learning environment in which all children and teens feel respected and understood and are provided the supports they need to flourish” (p.3). She goes on to explain how *trauma-sensitive* is the term she wants teachers to consider as they engage with their students. This term refers to “the educational practices and approaches that are intended to cultivate a safe learning environment and mitigate the impact of trauma symptoms on student learning” (p.3).

Jennings divided her book into three parts: “Understanding Trauma in Schools” (2 chapters); “Addressing Trauma in Schools” (3 chapters); and “Building Resilience with Mindful Compassion” (4 chapters).

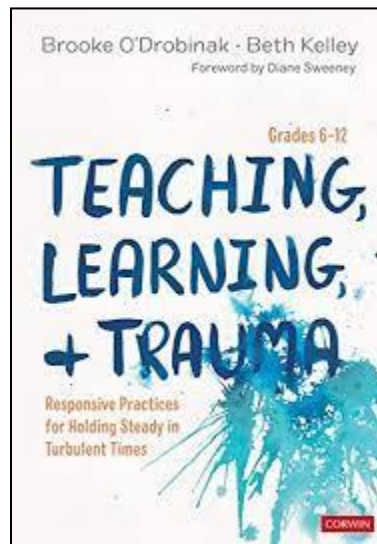
She explains in Part I how trauma and stress manifest in the body by explaining the physical, mental, and emotional components. However, she cautions that children and teens who have been exposed to trauma and adversity do not fit one profile. She notes that every person is different so this means that teachers must be sensitive to individual students’ needs. In addition, she devotes a section in Part I to address the trauma and stress many teachers experience that not only impacts how they might react to their students but also could lead to their own burnout. Jennings provides vignettes, checklists, and suggestions that teachers and schools can take to become more trauma-sensitive.

In Part II, Jennings introduces her readers to what she has identified as the “Three Keys to Compassionate Teaching.” These include building supportive relationships, creating safe spaces, and supporting prosocial behavior. Be assured that Jennings does not look at this through rose-colored glasses; instead, she writes frankly about the difficulties teachers face when trying to build caring relationships with trauma-exposed students. She describes how these students may interfere with classroom learning as well as distrust peers and adults, especially authority figures. They may be overly defensive or defiant. They often find themselves in conflict with their peers, either victims or perpetrators of bullying. Some dissociate and become socially isolated. However, understanding that these behaviors are symptoms of the trauma can help teachers begin to understand these students and hopefully provide them with the support they need (p. 49).

Part III explores how teachers can build their own resilience, enabling them to provide what students need to build their own resilience. Establishing a trauma-sensitive educational environment hinges on teachers who “have the resilience to resist the tendency to overact and can recover quickly from the challenges that arise day to day” (p. 107). In Chapter 6, “Building Resilience,” the author addresses teachers directly by providing information, self-awareness and self-management strategies, and a resilience self-reflection checklist. Chapter 7, “Mindful Awareness,” defines what mindfulness means in an educational environment and includes trauma-sensitive practices for teachers. Chapter 8, “Compassion,” explores the elements of compassion along with providing trauma-sensitive practices to build compassion

between and among teachers and students. Chapter 9, “Cultivating Compassion in the Classroom,” could very well be the most important chapter in this book. In it, Patricia Jennings presents a holistic picture of *what could be* in any classroom in any school in any geographical location. Teachers who are mindful, purposeful, intentional, resilient, and trauma-sensitive position themselves as role models and advocates for all students.

As a final bonus, the author provides readers with an extensive “Appendix” that has listings of related and supplemental texts. Educators will want to explore these resources to learn more about trauma-sensitive classrooms and schools as well as resources to incorporate into instruction for students of all ages. (JRG)



Teaching, Learning, and Trauma: Responsive Practices for Holding Steady in Turbulent Times

(Grades 6-12) by Brooke O’Drobinak & Beth Kelley, 2021, 152 pp., Corwin. ISBN 9781544362892

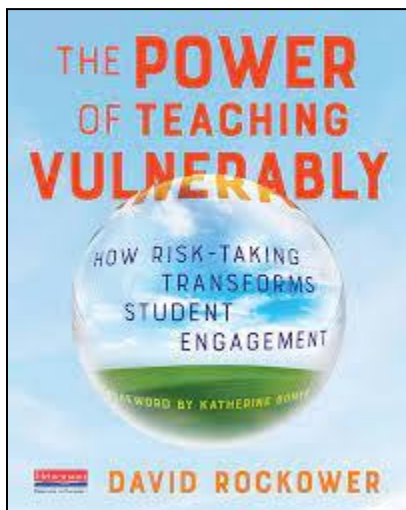
In the “Introduction,” Diane Sweeney writes that if her own teenagers attended a school like the authors describe in this book, “I would be confident that the teachers in their lives

understand them as complex individuals who carry a heavy burden of what it’s like to be a teen in today’s turbulent times” (p. xiii). This book could very well become the “go-to” book for teachers who want to move their instructional practices in a direction to meet the needs of their students. After all, the world today is quite different from the world in which most teachers grew up.

The authors of this book have conceptualized an integrated model in which teaching, learning, and mental health practices come together (p.1). Some of the topics addressed in this book include understanding and teaching adolescent learners with chronic stress and trauma; self-regulation is the key to calm; healthy relationships in complicated times; conflict resolution. All adults who interact with adolescents in an educational environment will benefit from spending time on each of these critical topics. As the authors write: “Offering an integrated approach to education provides a pathway through chaotic situations into those which are more stable” (p. 129). Isn’t this what all educators want in their classrooms and schools?

These two authors have created an interactive handbook that would benefit all educators of adolescent learners. Their intended audience list includes teachers, counselors, instructional coaches, principals, and district leaderships.

As they note, “We are all in this together” (p. 2). Each of the seven chapters includes vignettes from the world of secondary education, valuable and much needed information about the chronic stress and trauma that currently exists in all facets of our society, reflections for readers to record their own thoughts, and a “Toolkit for Tomorrow.” Each chapter also ends with personal encouragement from Brooke and Beth entitled, “In the End, Be Loving.” This book will make you smile and feel hopeful, despite its focus on the sad and disheartening content of stress, trauma, and loss. (JRG)



The Power of Teaching Vulnerably: How Risk-Taking Transforms Student Engagement by David Rockower, 2022, 136 pp., Heinemann. ISBN 978-0-325-13523-6 With so much emphasis and attention on the trauma, stress, and loss that today’s students are experiencing, one

question remains: What about the teachers? The good news is that David Rockower, recipient of the 2017 National Middle School English Teacher of the Year award, has authored a book that puts teachers at the center. He argues that teachers must bring their authentic selves into the classroom by teaching through the lens of vulnerability to develop positive student relationships. Indeed, a poignant “Foreword” written by Katherine Bomer sets the tone for readers as she points out the importance and power of teachers engaging in a vulnerability discourse, just as David does in his book.

Readers will quickly notice that David has written this book in first person---*this is his story*. We as readers can take the journey alongside David as he came to understand what he named “teaching and learning as a vulnerable act” (p. xv). He questions how we as teachers can support our students both educationally and emotionally if we are not willing to be vulnerable and open ourselves up to them. He notes that while we routinely ask our students to take emotional risks at school, are we willing to step up and take those risks ourselves? While this idea of allowing ourselves to be vulnerable may seem scary or difficult to many, be assured that David is there alongside us all to show us how he did it. He begins by sharing three dimensions of teacher vulnerability: personal, relational, and dialogic.

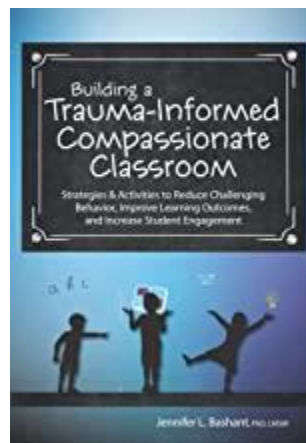
David explains that *personal vulnerability* allows our students to see who we are as authentic human beings instead of just “the teacher.” This is when we share with students our failures, joys, hobbies, or memorable moments. He notes that personal storytelling is a wonderful community-building activity. Students learn to trust adults who willingly open up

and make themselves vulnerable by telling stories. Perhaps it was a time when your parents caught you in a lie; maybe it was the time you won the “Best Sense of Humor” award in high school. Regardless of the story, just the intentional telling of it can begin to chip away at the outer shell of even the crustiest adolescent in your class!

He goes on to explain how *relational vulnerability* allows you to admit fault, offer genuine apologies, listen deeply, or give specific, heartfelt compliments, while *dialogic vulnerability* invites crucial conversations that may create tension or discomfort into the classroom. Follow David on his journey to become more vulnerable in the classroom by reading chapters 1-4 in his book.

By now, you may be asking yourself: “But where do you draw the line? How do you set boundaries?” Don’t worry; David tackles these questions in Chapter 5, “Vulnerability and School Culture.” He cautions readers that it takes time to build a trusting classroom environment where everyone feels safe. If teachers try to go too fast, it can become counterproductive to the work of establishing an authentic learning environment (p. 110).

Teachers would do well to heed David’s final words in “Closing Thoughts” where he urges teachers to “be brave and be real” (p. 119). Numerous research studies have shown that a positive, caring, authentic student-teacher relationship is fundamental to a student’s academic, emotional, and social learning. Students coming to school from places of trauma, stress, and loss need caring adults in their lives. As David writes in the conclusion of his book: “We learn from people we care about, and we can only care about them if we know them. Show them who you really are, tell stories, laugh, cry, and allow them to do the same” (p. 120). (JRG)



Building a Trauma-Informed Compassionate Classroom: Strategies & Activities for Reducing Challenging Behavior, Improve Learning Outcomes, and Increase Student Engagement by Jennifer Bashart 2020, 98 pp., PESI Inc. ISBN: 1 683 732 758 “Trauma is defined as an event or situation that exceeds one’s ability to cope” (p. 3)

In addition to the many demands teachers face in the classroom to instruct a diverse population of students, teachers have historically faced challenges that continue to cause concern. Some of these include school safety, funding, class size, poverty, and bullying. Over time, teachers have worked to develop strategies to deal with these issues because they impact students in significant ways. However, since the covid pandemic, students are facing circumstances that are causing stress, anxiety, and depression and teachers need help in addressing this new level of support needed by their students.

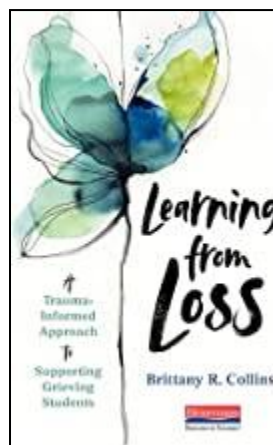
Jennifer Bashant's book is a much-needed resource for teachers that is easy to navigate. The book is divided into three parts and teachers can choose the part that best meets their immediate needs.

Part I is titled "Understanding Trauma and Its Impact on Students." There are three chapters in this section, all of which offer valuable information on how to identify and deal with student trauma in an effort to build a trauma-compassionate classroom. Bashant makes the point that trauma is individualized based on the experiences students have had in their lives. These experiences form an emotional foundation which may render the student emotionally strong or emotionally wounded. Students who are emotionally wounded and have trauma history have lived experiences that have rendered them unable to cope. These students need teachers who understand where students are in terms of their emotional foundation. This knowledge will help teachers develop and implement self-regulation strategies to help students address their ability to make decisions, problem solve, and develop healthy relationships with both their peers and teachers. Bashant offers a variety of checklists and charts in Part I along with a crisis plan for teachers to identify, assess, and determine what coping and self-regulating strategies best suit each student. Bashant reminds teachers "It is one thing to understand the clinical manifestations of trauma, but it is another to know how to respond in the moment when disruptive behavior is derailing the lesson and affecting 20+ other students (p. viii).

Part II is titled "Compassionate Classrooms are Conducive to Healing." There are three chapters in this section which offer teachers many ideas for building an inclusive and supportive classroom environment and connecting with family to share ideas. Bashant addresses such topics as: teacher response to behavior, collaborative vs punitive discipline, building positive relationships, identifying behavior triggers, improving behavior by planning for triggers, and developing strong connections with families. Students who have experienced trauma are extremely sensitive to the teacher's facial expression, body language, frustration, feelings, tone and volume of voice, and mood. As a result, it is essential that teachers are mindful of their non-verbal communication and Bashant offers a teacher checklist to assess this. Having a collaborative classroom where every student feels safe, valued, and cared for by the teacher allows a student with a trauma history to engage and thrive as a learner. Teachers need to build a classroom environment that empowers students to build confidence as learners and to share positive interactions, dialogue, and discussions with both their teacher and peers. Once again, Bashant offers teachers an array of checklists, charts, surveys, and inventories for assessing the classroom environment, student interests, and student triggers and she provides a variety of strategies to support teachers with these topics. She also offers helpful information and strategies in the form of checklists, questionnaires, and surveys for families along on ways to address both their child and their connections to the school.

Part III is titled "Encouraging Personal Growth and a Positive Vision for the Future." It includes four chapters which offer teachers ideas about teaching students how to: label feelings, build resilience, identify their personal strengths, acknowledge gratitude, embrace kindness, have compassion for self and others, and develop personal calming strategies. The statement that stands out in this section is "All of us are born with gifts and talents, and we feel good about ourselves when we have opportunities to showcase them" (p. 59). Teachers who develop a personal relationship with each student and who foster a positive class climate make teaching and learning much more enjoyable. Students who feel valued by their teacher are more willing to engage in positive ways in the classroom. Bashant offers a comprehensive Neurodiversity Strengths Checklist (Armstrong, 2012) for teachers to identify student strengths in a variety of areas to include: personal, communication, social, emotional, cognitive, creative, literacy, logical, visual-spatial, physical, dexterity, musical, nature, high-tech, spiritual, cultural, and other. This survey can be adapted for students to do a self-assessment. The information gleaned from this survey can be useful for teachers as they come to know their students in detailed ways.

This book is a valuable resource and a must have for teachers as they work to navigate the new normal in their classrooms. At the end of the book, Bashant offers a collection of extremely useful resources for teachers that include products, apps, books, and YouTube videos. (VAO)



Learning from Loss by Brittany R. Collins 2022, 166 pp.,

Heinemann ISBN: 0 325 134 200

The pandemic has had a negative impact on all of us and brought many challenges. One of those challenges is the many forms of loss we have experienced as a result of the pandemic. Some of the losses include healthy living, changing work schedules, time with family and friends, going to sports events and concerts, going out to dinner, spending time at the gym, enjoying travel, and living

with the deaths of family and friends. Of particular concern is how young people are processing these losses. Students of all ages may not have developed effective coping strategies to deal with the stress, fear, anxiety, and grief they may be feeling as a result of the pandemic. Teachers need resources to deal with the new mental health crisis in students. Brittany Collins's book *Learning from Loss* offers many strategies that can be implemented to support students who are struggling. The book is divided into eight chapters which are easy to navigate. Teachers can choose chapters that best suit their immediate needs.

Teachers will find chapter 1 titled "When a Student is Grieving, What's Going On?" helpful in developing foundational understanding of the responses a person experiences both biologically and behaviorally when dealing

with loss. Collins offers a list of these responses some of which include anger, avoidance, sadness, denial, attention seeking, people-pleasing, complaints of headache and other physical issues, helplessness, hopelessness, apathy, and self-destructive behavior. She then follows up with a collection of strategies teachers can use to support students who are struggling. Collins makes the point that teachers need to create a classroom environment where students feel safe, valued, cared for, and connected to their teacher and peers. This type of collaborative environment helps students feel a part of the classroom community surrounded by support from everyone. One feature that appears at the end of each chapter is titled “Write and Reflect.” Here, Collins offers teachers prompts to reflect on some of the classroom experiences they have had when dealing with students experiencing loss.

Many of us have had the experience of feeling unsure of how to approach someone who is grieving. It is always a challenge for teachers to address sensitive topics, especially with students who are vulnerable. In chapter four titled “What Should I Say? The Courage to Connect and Communicate with Grieving Students,” Collins details a strategy titled “CODE” which is a four-step framework that outlines how teachers can facilitate supportive conversations that are both strategic and sincere when approaching fragile students. CODE is an acronym for compassionate, open-ended, direct, and evolving. Collins suggests teachers can reflect on their own losses and remember what it felt like to be supported.

Approaching a grieving student by having a private one-on-one conversation that demonstrates genuine concern and respect for their loss is a good starting point. Open-ended questions are also encouraged in this framework. This positions students as the narrators of their experiences and provides the teacher with some insight into the nature of the students’ grief. Being direct is also a part of this process. Although teachers should not force a student to talk about their grief, letting them know that you are willing to share in an honest conversation when they are ready. And finally, some students may not be comfortable talking about their loss and when this happens, teachers can offer support in ongoing ways. Compliment students for their efforts, share book titles that may be helpful, attend extra-curricular events letting students know you care and are reaching out to build a relationship with the student.

Collins’ book will be an important addition to a teacher’s professional library. It offers sound advice, strategies, checklists, charts, and a comprehensive list of resources and further reading at the end of the book. The pandemic will continue to impact schools. Teachers want to be ready to address students’ mental health issues in effective ways and this book is a good starting point. (VAO)

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Recommended Citation (APA 7th ed.)

Goodman, J. R. & Oglan, V. A. (2023). I wish my teacher knew: Trauma, stress, loss, and learning in today's classrooms. *South Carolina Association for Middle Level Education Journal*, 107-113.

This article is open access by the South Carolina Association for Middle Level Education (SCAMLE). It has undergone a double-blind peer review process and was accepted for inclusion in the SCAMLE Journal.

Published online: March 2023

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