

Shaping Trauma-Sensitive Classrooms

Background

Positive interactions with adults help to build upon student strengths and support feelings of success and self-efficacy. Research shows that improvements in students' senses of self-efficacy result in improved engagement and improved behaviour. The classroom environment can be constructed as a place of comfort and safety where positive interactions can occur naturally. Cultivating trauma-sensitive classrooms may require adjusting the classroom spaces in welcoming and safe ways, keeping in mind that the students are coming with an array of different life experiences and stressors. Educators can create a caring classroom community where students' success can be influenced by environmental factors controlled by the teacher, such as desk arrangements, lighting, music, colours, and more.



How Does One Shape a Trauma-Sensitive Classroom?

- Using the colour green more frequently in the classroom space: Colour is one of the environmental perception factors that influences one's mental health. In colour psychology, the use of green has been shown to enhance the feelings of calm, relaxation, trust, and safety in both teachers and students.
- Using sounds in the classroom space: The playing of low pitched white noise can have similar effects as the exposure to green hues. In times of silence (ex: reading hour), teachers can play music/sounds known to improve focus - such as 40hz binaural beats.
- Using other tools and props within a classroom such as fidget chairs, calming scents, and open window access are also supportive of the creation of trauma-sensitive classrooms as they aim to decrease stress and dysregulation.
- Inviting student contributions in classroom decision-making (when viable/appropriate) also contributes to the students' sense of belonging and agency. Inviting student contributions can shape a sense of ownership and care for something other than one's self.
- While utilizing these tools in the classroom, it is important to ensure less colourful and blank spaces are still available for students. This can aid in the comfort of students who have the proclivity to become overwhelmed. Extending from colour psychology, the use of white and/or blank spaces can provide similar effects of relaxation, calmness, and safety.
- All students thrive and feel safe in an environment where the expectations are clear, routines are predictable, and expectations are consistent. This can be particularly helpful for those students who are living with trauma, who need a school environment that counters the lack of predictability and safety in their lives outside of school. The use of visual organizers, daily planners, access to technology, and other academic supports within the classroom can be particularly helpful to students struggling with mental health conditions.
- Having quiet spaces and quiet places. Shaping spaces in the classroom where children/youth can navigate when they begin to feel dysregulated or overwhelmed supports students to use strategies to remain regulated. These spaces can be a bit secluded within the classroom, can be comfortable, and can incorporate the use of other props such as fidget toys for student use.
- Inviting many supports into the space from educational assistants to community service providers, to cultural groups, families, etc., in order to normalize their presence rather than as responsive to a "situation" can shape a sense of worth and belonging for students.

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- Getting to know students' interests and strengths supports students to feel seen and understood and may naturally increase their engagement and participation in classroom activities.
- Ensuring that all class and course content, including class novels, movies, video clips, spirit days, fundraisers, and more, are attentive/responsive to, and supportive of the lived experiences of the students in the classroom.
- Shaping learning experiences to be sequenced, structured, and chunked to ensure positive learning experiences that offer multiple ways of understanding for each student can support both learning and a sense of success.
- Practicing healthy coping strategies with all students when regulated so as to be natural when needed offers students healthy behavioural alternatives. For example, practicing a yoga pose such as Warrior Pose as a class, discussing when it might be useful, and then encouraging individual students who are feeling particularly frustrated to use the pose will again support healthy strategy use toward regulation. Remember to praise both the use and the regulation once achieved.

Concluding Suggestions

Further to what has been mentioned, educators can also keep in mind these points when reflecting on their classroom space and constructing a trauma-sensitive physical environment for their students:

- Incorporate positive signage in the class, especially upon entry.
- Provide a visual schedule of a predictable routine visible in class.
- Keep the class itself clean and organized.
- Consider forms of lighting, sounds, visuals, and seating plans when designing the classroom layout.
- Have students positioned in a manner that allows full view of their behaviours/actions.

Overall, the school and classroom environment can be surprisingly effective tools for regulating student stress levels.