

The Trauma-Sensitive Classroom

A Few Words of Caution

There is an appeal to checklists - they are simple, easy to use, and categorize experience. However, they can also reduce the complexity of those experiences to tidy rows, and with that reduction, they do not leave space for all of the variables and intricacies. Often, checklists are decontextualized over-generalizations that aim to do the most good for the greatest number but were not created with a teacher's specific context, or specific students in mind. Rather than a trauma-sensitive classroom checklist, this brief offers a re-orienting toward a trauma-sensitive way of being.

A Few Orienting Statements

A trauma-sensitive classroom makes no assumptions about individuals' experiences or experiences with trauma.

A trauma-sensitive classroom understands that life outside of school impacts life inside of school.

A trauma-sensitive classroom is a strength-based space seeking to understand behaviour rather than labeling it - it seeks to understand: *what has happened to you*, rather than *what is wrong with you*. This space understands behaviour as a mode of communication of needs and emotions rather than a display of disrespect and defiance.

A trauma-sensitive classroom is a place crafted intentionally to minimize risk and the need to be perpetually 'on guard' in all ways.

A trauma-sensitive classroom is a place of predictability, routine, and rhythm, which increases feelings of safety and control, decreases anxiety and increases the capacity for mastery.

A trauma-sensitive classroom offers pathways to success, not perfection, starting with understanding students' survival capacities (fight, flight, freeze, please), and offering anticipatory, in the midst, recovery, and ongoing strategies.

Anticipatory Strategies

Practice particular age-appropriate strategies with the entire class even when everyone is regulated.

Be aware of shifts in feelings, intensity, mood, engagement & frustration.

Mirror what you are seeing: *I can see that you are getting frustrated; let's try that yoga pose Warrior that really works for you to bring you back down.*

Or possibly: change the entire class' activity - *change the channel* - do an impromptu game. Often this can act as the reset everyone needs.

Offer opportunities for choice and control - regaining these can act as a reset.

Offer the opportunity to make sense of the emotion and meta-cognitively engage: *You are having big feelings right now. Everything is too much. The last time you felt this way, breathing worked. Let's try that.*

Recovery Strategies

Notice the effort in self-regulation - *I am really impressed with how you calmed yourself down.*

Offer a quiet time, quiet space, choice, and control - after being dysregulated, a young person experiences all kinds of emotions because they can, once again, reflect on their behaviour. They may need a few minutes to just be.

Offer a balance - identify something good that the person did during another part of the day.

Offer the young person a chance to release energy and reconnect with their bodies in a good way.

In the Midst Strategies

For both the adult and the student, a trauma-sensitive space understands that the educator needs to be regulated to come alongside a young person struggling.

Variations of breathing - finger counting, belly breathing, smell the flowers/blow out the candles.

Notice 3-2-1.

Do not attempt long logical conversations that require executive functioning (logical decision making, anticipating consequences, evaluating solutions, or developing other outcomes). Such pressure can serve to intensify the situation.

Be careful to use observational, not judgemental language: *you just started yelling - it seems you are quite angry* - this gives the young person permission to have emotions as you focus on their modulation.

Ongoing Strategies

Offer students the opportunity to be metacognitively aware. There are many excellent resources (e.g. Blaustein & Kinniburgh, 2021) that offer worksheets that support young people to identify aspects that get them heightened emotionally, to attune them to tracking their energy and emotions, identifying things that make them happy/ upset them, etc.

These strategies can benefit all students, and practicing them can become part of the daily/weekly predictable routine. With more practice, they will be more easily drawn upon in moments of dysregulation.