Trauma Responsive Educator

Strengthening the capacity of educators to meet the needs of students coping with trauma

Engagement Management

TREPEducator.org/magazine

Project Director's Note

As expected, it has been an unusually challenging academic year—even educators who are expert at supporting dysregulated students are struggling to establish a positive and productive classroom environment. Educators are also noticing that their own coping skills are stretched thin as they navigate student emotional "meltdowns."

We must continue to remind ourselves that the 16 months of remote and hybrid learning gave students substantial autonomy over when, where, and how they engaged in academic learning. Younger students only knew the freedom of laying on their bellies or backs while reading, and the choice to sit, stand, or walk around while using their tablets to log into the classroom. Older students suddenly had the flexibility of logging in and starting their school day at a time of their choosing, and many experienced early ends to their school day.

To ensure that school does not become a place that re-traumatizes vulnerable students, we must think and act differently to avoid unproductive battles for control over the classroom.

Micere Keels

30 Days of Mental Health

Given the state of child and youth wellbeing, mental health promotion must be integrated into the daily work of schools.

Join the 30 Days of Mental Health campaign to obtain no-cost, easy-to-use lessons to help you talk with children and youth about mental health and mental illness.

30DaysOfMentalHealth.org

In This Issue

Managing the Classroom Through Engagement

By Micere Keels, Tynisha Jointer, & Lauren Smith

Many behavior management issues stem from the fact that classrooms are unnatural social and behavioral contexts. Many classrooms would be considered illegal overcrowding in any other setting, and overcrowding creates stress, anxiety, and conflict. Children are expected to tolerate extended periods of silence and physical inactivity, despite the fact that we are active, talkative, social beings. There is much memorization of academic content that is often disconnected from its meaning or use in daily life, which works against the fact that our brains are wired for socially situated meaning.

As vividly described by Gordon West, a social psychologist, the fight for control of the classroom is a perennial problem because educators must "assume their position as leaders imposed on a group of some 30 youngsters, [many] of whom are usually involuntarily compelled to attend class, and [many] of whom usually share a mutual dislike with the teacher and resist control." Delay, denial, interruption, and distraction are some of the behaviors that students use to assert themselves in classrooms that ask little of their engagement in the learning process.

You don't have to fight for control of the classroom; you can win it through engagement. In engaged classrooms, learning is bi-directional and co-constructed among students and between educators and students. In these classrooms, educators don't ask for recitations of the right answer, but for reflections about the process of getting to the right answer, and for discussions about how what counts as the right answer is often socially constructed.

In engaged classrooms, educators are facilitators—their learning plans are regularly updated to connect with the identities and lives of the students in their classrooms. They curate diverse learning resources to enable student choice, and then go back and forth between whole class, small group, and individual instruction to invite students to be agents of their own learning processes.

Lesson Planning with Engagement in Mind

Planning instruction with engagement in mind is one way to provide additional behavioral support while keeping the focus on curricular goals. This is a trauma responsive classroom management strategy because educators proactively plan instruction to intentionally discourage off-task behaviors and encourage on-task behaviors. Disengaged students are more likely to exhibit off-task behaviors, leading to more educator reprimands that can snowball into a conflictual relationship.

LESSON PLANNING FOR ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY 1: SMALL GROUP, COLLECTIVE RESPONDING

Because whole-class prompting techniques rely on individual student response, the number of opportunities for each student to respond is limited. Additionally, students who have less knowledge of the content are less able and willing to engage in individual responding during whole-class discussion and questioning.

Ask questions to the whole class but give time for students to work in pairs or designated small groups to problem-solve and agree on a collective answer. Strategies such as elbow-buddy pair-share before responding promotes engagement, activates prior knowledge, teaches social and emotional skills, and improves comprehension and retention.

LESSON PLANNING FOR ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY 2: PURPOSEFUL MOVEMENT INTO INSTRUCTION TO INCREASE LEARNING ENDURANCE

Movement integrated into instruction helps students who are bored, inattentive, or hyperactive extend their learning endurance and remain on-task by meeting their need to move in ways that are connected to the curriculum. Connecting movement with instructional goals leads to improvements in knowledge, skills, and test scores.

It is crucial to consider any mobility limitations of students in your classroom and include options that enable them to participate using modified movements. It is crucial to consider any mobility limitations of students in your classroom and include options that enable them to participate using modified movements.

Here are *three methods of integrating movement into the teaching of academic content*:

Dancing to learn information. You probably already use rhymes or songs as memory aids for students. Add some dance steps or relevant gestures to the routine as an engaging supplement.

Ordering and organizing. Have students organize themselves into lines, rows, or other groupings to answer a question. This could include handing out cards that represent a math formula or sentence and having students order themselves to demonstrate the formula or sentence.

Representing with actions. Have students display specific actions to represent their understanding of some aspect of the lesson. For example, during read aloud, they might be asked to stomp their feet, representing a period, every time the educator reaches the end of a sentence.

You can also create additional structured movement opportunities to aid in improving the behaviors of students who struggle to remain seated or display excessive chatter. Behavior support movement opportunities includes helping to collect assignments from classmates desks, taking the attendance sheet to the office, or walking to another location in the class to get materials for the educator.

LESSON PLANNING FOR ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY 3: ALLOW BOUNDED CHOICE

Bounded choice focuses on giving students an explicit set of limited options that are equally acceptable to you. There are many learning benefits for students who have the opportunity to engage in choice making while meeting learning objectives; this includes SEL gains, reduced disruptive behavior, increased task engagement, skill acquisition and generalization. This brief article lists the five areas in which educators can provide students with choice over their learning.

Add the following checklist to your lesson planning template to ensure that you increase engagement and minimize behavior challenges:

✅ Included small group discussion and response into the lesson plan

✅ Included movement activity into each 45+ minute learning block

✅ Included bounded choice into in-class assignments/activities and homework assignments

Leveraging Student Interest to Improve Engagement

Exploring the topics that students are passionate about can be a powerful tool for enhancing their classroom engagement. When students feel their interests are accounted for in lessons, they are more likely to demonstrate motivation and attentiveness to the material. Additionally, research has shown that when students' interests are incorporated into their classroom lessons, students are more likely to work harder outside of the classroom context and develop additional curiosities and subsequent interests. Leveraging students' interests in the classroom is a trauma- and culturally- responsive tool that can be easily implemented to nurture academic achievement.

LEVERAGING STUDENT INTEREST FOR ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY #1: DEDICATE CLASS TIME TO GETTING TO KNOW YOUR STUDENTS

Getting to know your students can be done as a whole class activity by asking about their weekend or asking them to share one thing that happened after school the previous day. Attending to students' interests in meaningful ways demonstrates that you care equally about their academic performance as well as their individual traits, hobbies, and passions. By granting students this space to share about their lives outside of the classroom context, you may increase your

understanding of your students along with their engagement in class material.

Be sure to create space for small blocks of time throughout the day to allow students to chat with each other. Consider times like before or after lunch or an enrichment class as students are often more social during those times. This creates natural opportunities for you to pick up on things students discuss passionately with their peers and apply those things into lesson planning, while also increasing opportunities for friendships and support systems in your classroom.

Use this *list of ice breaker questions* as a starting point for facilitating whole group "getting to know you," activities.

LEVERAGING STUDENT INTEREST FOR ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY #2: LET STUDENTS DIRECTLY TEACH YOU ABOUT THEIR INTERESTS

Use technology tools (e.g., Kahoot, Poll Everywhere) as a way to get to know your students in the classroom, from fun getting-to-know-you questions to questions related to your subject matter. Students can immediately see how they and their classmates respond to a given question, which is a guaranteed classroom discussion stimulator. It is critical to follow-up with this activity by using the information that you learned in how you select assignments, texts for reading, and other curricular elements to ensure that

you are maximizing opportunities for students to connect with the content.

Here is an *activity to incorporate into your daily class lessons to learn more about your students*.

LEVERAGING STUDENT INTEREST FOR ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY #3: MAKE LESSONS MORE PERSONAL

Connect learning to your students' personal lives by allowing them to integrate their interests into lessons.

During math lessons, have students imagine their favorite store and an item that they might purchase from that store. Encourage students to even conduct this research during class time. Apply the math skills from the lesson to the item For example, if they are learning how to calculate percentages, have students calculate the tax amount for their chosen item.

Pay attention to their favorite music, sports, celebrities and television shows, and incorporate these topics into lessons. For example, you might play their favorite songs at the start or end of the class day. Explore ways to use sports analogies during lessons or use characters from a favorite tv show to explain a concept.

Here are more examples of ways to personalize your lessons to include student interests.

Strengthening Engagement Through Positive Reinforcement and Praise

Your use of positive reinforcement and praise can strengthen the engagement of the students in your class. These techniques can help to change the culture of your classroom from one where students often hear messages about what they are doing wrong to one where they are praised for what they are doing right. Specific, timely praise reinforces expected behaviors, strengthens intrinsic motivation, and helps students develop a sense of their excellence. When you communicate genuine, realistic appreciation and encouragement to students, you are nurturing students' self-esteem and resilience.

On the surface, praise appears to be a simple strategy, but it is actually a complex reciprocal process that involves ensuring that the message that you communicate as the provider of praise is the same as the one that students receive as the recipients of your praise.

The three primary types of praise are:

💡 **Personal praise** such as "you are really smart!," tends to focus on natural talents or skills that come easily to students, rather than the effort they put in or the techniques they use. Minimize your use of this type of praise.

💡 **Effort-based praise** such as "you worked really hard to minimize rounding errors on this assignment," emphasizes what students can control as they attempt to get better at a task or learning goal. Maximize this type of praise especially for struggling learners to increase their persistence.

💡 **Behavior-specific praise** such as "you did a great job transitioning into the classroom and getting your homework into the homework folder right away," lets students know what they are doing correctly. This is an evidence-based classroom management strategy that focuses on providing specific feedback to describe your approval of student behavior. Maximize this type of praise for all students.

Differentiate Praise Based on Students Cultural Expectations and Individual Needs
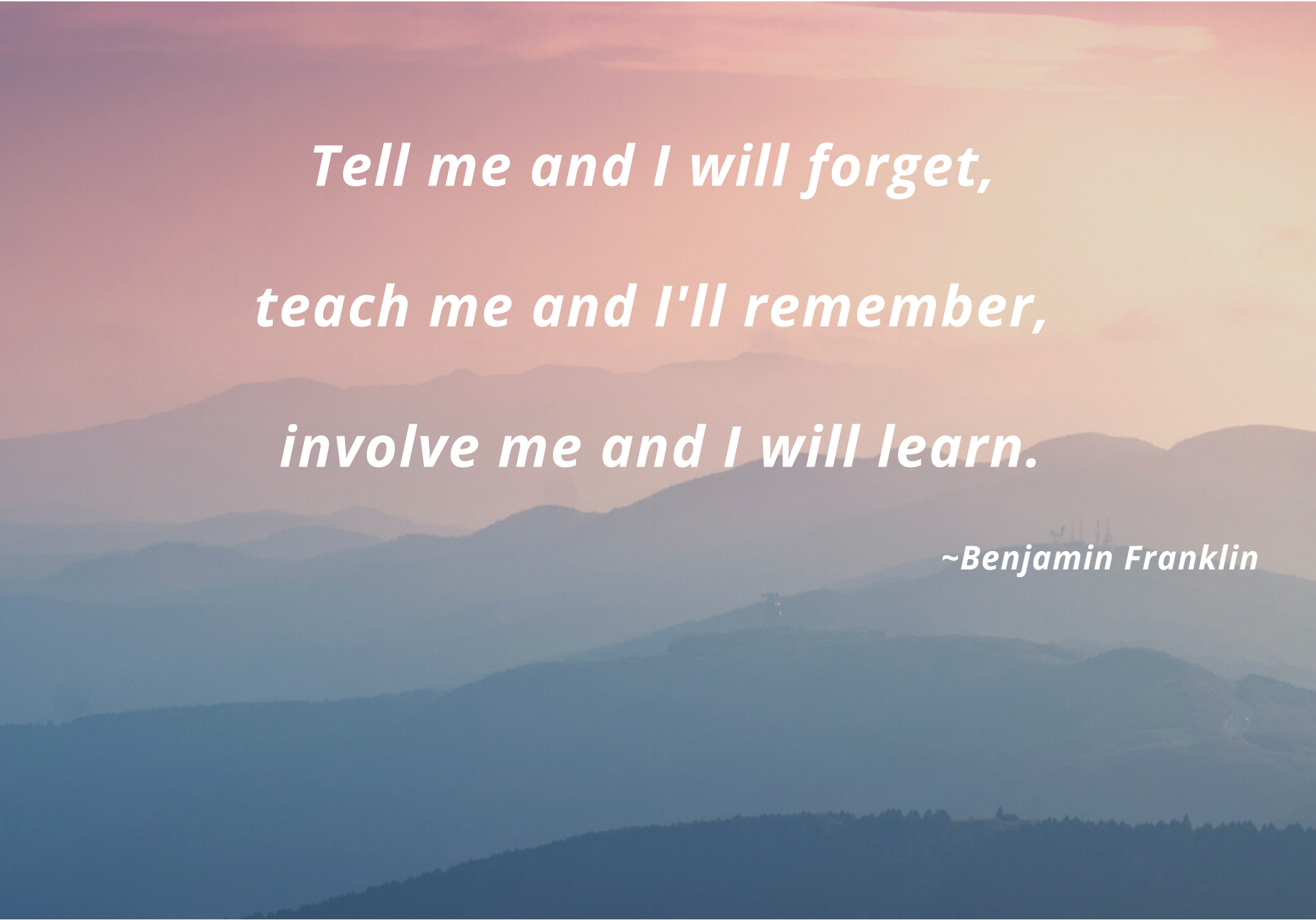
Because children's backgrounds and life experiences, including socioeconomic status, ability levels, developmental levels, and genders affect how they may respond to praise, positive reinforcement and praise should be culturally appropriate to the student.

When "Praise" is experienced as a racial and ethnic micro-aggression. Some forms of "praise" may actually reinforce stereotypes related to race, ethnicity, or disability. For example, consider Black or Latinx students who are praised for "speaking English well". Although it may be intended as praise, U.S. born students of any racial and ethnic group experience this as a microaggression because it should come as no surprise that they can "speak English well." For students, this type of praise reveals that their educators don't expect their Black or Latinx students to be well-spoken. This harmful stereotype could leave students questioning their teachers' assumptions and expectations, as well as questioning their belonging in the school and classroom.

It is easy to slip into overpraising students. Overpraising for " non accomplishments " can be harmful to students' sense of themselves as learners because it sends the message that educators have low expectations for them—the exact opposite of the high expectations that educators should hold. It can also make students doubt whether they're capable of handling the big things, or whether you think they are. Focus on precise, sincere, and effort-based praise at opportune moments, like when students try a new skill, make progress in a project, or show mastery of a concept.

When in doubt, keep praise private. It is common to praise individual students in front of the entire class. While some students may thrive on public praise, others may be triggered by being singled out, even if it's for a good reason. Similarly, public positive reinforcements such as stickers charts and color behaviors systems can also be triggering for students. Students who are particularly well behaved and academically gifted and receive more public praise than others can also end up being targeted and bullied by classmates for being the "teacher's pet." Explore with students how they like to receive positive reinforcement and praise. For some students, preferred praise methods may include written notes, classroom jobs that they select, or lunch with a trusted adult. As you differentiate how you praise students, you are building positive individualized relationships with them.

Tell me and I will forget,

teach me and I'll remember,

involve me and I will learn.

~Benjamin Franklin

The ***Trauma Responsive Educational Practices (TREP) Project*** is a research-practice translation project that works to connect research on the science of trauma with the realities of school and classroom management. We aim to create schools and classrooms that can meet the social, emotional, and academic needs of students coping with toxic levels of stress and trauma.