SEPTEMBER 2020

Trauma Responsive Educator

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

Ongoing Police Violence Is Devastating to the Mental Health of Black Children and Youth

By Micere Keels, Ebony Hinton, & Hilary Tackie

Here's How You Can Support Them in Your Professional Role as an Educator

Includes links to curriculum resources

TREPEducator.org/plc

Racially motivated police brutality is an *incredibly traumatizing form of violence* because the effects extend far beyond the individual or group of police officers who commit these acts. Such violence affects children's fundamental beliefs that the world is a safe place and diminishes their willingness to trust authority figures.

For youth, the inability to feel safe and trust in authority can spill over into their educational experiences. This is especially salient for Black students in communities where *substantial numbers of youth have had direct contact with violent and intrusive policing tactics*, common in large urban areas.

Too many Black students can end up in conflicting educational contexts when their school—an institution they are told to turn to for care and support and that they are legally mandated to attend—also operates as a direct threat to their well-being by relying on the police for behavior management.

Psychological Trauma

The lens of psychological trauma provides a framework for understanding the collateral effects of police violence beyond individual incidents, as well as how to mitigate its adverse effects. Trauma is the psychological, emotional, and spiritual wound that is left after a traumatic event has passed. Such wounds are difficult to detect because you can't look at your students and see how *they are hurting*.

In this brief, we identify the steps that you need to take to better prepare yourself to support students who are impacted by racialized police violence and its coverage in today's media. We have mapped these steps onto the *4Rs of being a trauma responsive educator*.

A trauma responsive educator:

- **Realizes** the impact of trauma on student well-being and schooling and understands potential paths for recovery.
- **Recognizes** the signs and symptoms of trauma in the behaviors of students and staff.
- **Responds** by integrating knowledge about trauma into policies, procedures, and practices.
- **Resists re-traumatization** by recognizing how classroom/school practices can trigger trauma histories.

This call to action is directed to you as individual educators because you are Black students' best hope for a safe and caring learning environment that can help to mitigate the effects of intergenerational trauma. **Students are mandated to spend the majority of their day with you**, and *how you engage with them will have a substantial effect on how they understand* this period of civil unrest, the continuing homicides of people who look like themselves, and what is becoming an election season of political campaigns that depict their Blackness as something to be feared.

Even if your district and school are unsafe for Black students, you, as an individual educator, have the power to ensure that your classroom is a *safe space*. This does not absolve district leaders and school administrators from their responsibility to create structural change by implementing policies that require and support all educators in doing the work necessary to ensure that schools don't *reproduce and reinforce existing societal oppressions*.

1. Realize how police violence affects student mental health

The far-reaching consequences of racialized police violence require that educators use "universal precautions" with their Black students. Universal precautions is a term borrowed from medicine that refers to safety precautions practitioners must follow regardless of specific information about any individual patient.

We use universal precautions to refer to *proactively providing racial care* in the classroom. Although you don't know what traumatic event a child is coping with, you know that Black students' likelihood of direct and indirect exposure to police violence incidents is high.

Exposure may come through their own or a family member's direct interaction with the police, incidents among their friends and classmates in the community and at school, or media and historical neighborhood narratives about recent and historical experiences. This cumulative exposure is difficult to process and cope with and may leave children emotionally and behaviorally dysregulated, the results of which will show in their behaviors at school.

Unlike news cycles of a generation ago, shocking clips can be shared and repeatedly viewed before parents may have the opportunity to debrief the event with their children. While cell phone footage has provided valuable evidence, it is also a source of ongoing traumatization as brutal imagery posted to social media becomes inescapable. Such exposure increases the *potential for mental health disorders*. Black children are growing up in an age where videos of *Black people's deaths at the hands of police have become casual viewing*.

The trauma of police violence is reflected in the *symptoms that Black youth display*. Research shows that Black youth who have been traumatized by direct or indirect experiences of police violence may experience intrusive thoughts such as nightmares and flashbacks. Evidence of their traumas are also reflected in seemingly irrational attempts to escape interacting with police officers, such as running as soon as they see officers regardless of whether they have done anything wrong. Additional potential psychological consequences include distrust, fear, anger, shame, isolation, and self-destructive behaviors.

Although racialized police violence has occurred for as long as there have been police in this country, this current era of irrefutable video evidence has reawakened broad collective movement for change. As eloquently stated by Dr. William Gipson, "Black people know that the country is racist from its very foundation, but there can be long stretches [without] particular incidents where it rises up and totally disorients our days..."

In addition to the impact of police violence itself, fighting for racial justice also comes at a personal cost. It is empowering for your students to engage in protests aimed at advancing racial justice, but it is also stressful and can take a *toll on their mental health*. Regardless of your personal proximity to the reality of racialized police violence or the fight for racial justice, as an educator, it is critical to understand your students' lived experiences, so that you can provide an authentic and engaging learning environment.

2. Realize how police violence can directly interfere with Black students' educational experiences and outcomes

There are many ways that the police show up in students' educational experiences. Some are indirect, such as the popular proofreading resource *Editing COPS*, which assists students in policing their writing by "arresting" grammar mistakes. This assignment and its associated mnemonic may feel neutral or even positive for some students, but it is likely triggering and counterproductive for many Black students.

To understand the effects on education, it is instructive to take a close look at the findings from a recent *study of over 250,000 New York public school students ages 9 to 15*, which details how aggressive community policing

can negatively affect Black students' educational outcomes. The New York Police Department deployed Operation Impact starting in 2003, which saturated high-crime areas with additional police officers with the "mission to engage in aggressive, order-maintenance policing."

The researchers tracked students' English Language Arts test scores before and after the years that

Operation Impact was in effect in a given neighborhood. They found that Black girls, Latinx students, and Black boys under age 13 were unaffected. However, Black boys ages 13 to 15, who lived in the neighborhoods that experienced the police surge, showed significantly lower test scores during the years their neighborhood was targeted. Although the negative effect on test scores dissipated over time after the police surge ended, a small lingering statistically significant impact remained for Black boys who lived in the neighborhoods that experienced the increase in police surveillance.

Repeatedly witnessing and being involved in police stops is emotionally distressing as these stops can entail racial degradation and include the use of excessive force. These factors contribute to *toxic stress that undermines children's cognitive abilities*.

Direct effects on students educational outcomes have also been found in other studies, such as Dr. Desmond Ang's recent study which found that among Black and Latinx high school students, *exposure to localized police violence and the shooting of unarmed suspects leads to persistent decreases in grade point average*, increased incidence of emotional disturbance, and lower rates of high school completion and college enrollment.

These adverse effects of interactions with the police outside of school are only compounded by the stressors associated with having to also encounter police inside one's school. We have had the unfortunate experience of watching Black students as young as kindergartners undergo a daily security check with a metal-detecting wand because of mandatory school policy. Research shows that such interactions can *weaken students' sense of security and school belonging*.

3. Recognize how police-related fears and distress may show up in classroom behaviors

Police-related fears can affect children's development and manifest in their behaviors in many ways, such as the direct dysregulating effects of a recent event from which they have yet to recover. Their behavior in your classroom may also become dysregulated because a traumatic memory of a past event gets triggered in the current moment, or because growing up with a persistent lack of feelings of safety and trust has left them agitated, distrustful, and overly defensive. *Understanding the traumatic effects of police violence through your students' eyes* is a critical aspect of being able to recognize its impact on their behaviors.

Almost all children experience elevated stress hormones after witnessing or receiving information about violent incidents, and there is substantial body of research detailing the many negative developmental effects of chronic stress activation.

For some students, the presence of police officers and related professionals such as security staff will be experienced as triggering events that repeatedly activate their stress hormones. Unfortunately, most Black students, especially those living in urban communities, cannot escape engaging with police and security staff as part of their regular school experience.

Some may respond to police-related fears by hiding beneath oversized hoodies or policing their behaviors by withdrawing into themselves in hopes of avoiding the possibility of disobeying those in power. Others may respond by reacting emotionally and aggressively to even small requests by authority figures. These behaviors may appear to be counterproductive on the surface because they often lead to increased contact with school disciplinary officials. Still, the immediate need to escape one's feelings of anxiety is often intense, ultimately overwhelming their deliberative thinking processes.

The racially motivated fears and concerns that many Black students must work to process are often exacerbated by uninformed and unfiltered conversations among school staff and classmates. *These school-based micro and macro aggressions are triggering* and may result in increased acting out behaviors and decreased willingness to comply with individuals they see as representing an unjust system.

4. Respond with anti-racist practices

Increased awareness and understanding only matter if they manifest in your interactions with students and how they experience your school and classroom. As noted by Dr. Thema Bryant-Davis and her colleagues: ***"it is easier to side with the perpetrator of trauma because the only thing perpetrators require is silence. Conversely, to support victims requires the observer to bear witness, speak, support, and facilitate safety and recovery."***

Anti-racist teaching is...

Anti-racist teaching is about much more than race; it is an ongoing commitment to pedagogical practices that make small inroads into undoing centuries of many forms of structural oppression that has seeped into American public institutions. Consequently, being an anti-racist educator goes beyond improving the educational experiences and outcomes of any one racial group of students. The principles and practices discussed in this brief can be adapted for meeting the needs of Latinx, Asian, as well as sexual minority, transgender, and other groups of *children and youth who are marginalized in society and dependent on their educators for validating spaces*.

There are several beginning steps that you can take in your classroom and in your interactions with students. We were going to call these low-stakes steps, but the reality is that *even the smallest actions that aim to disrupt existing hierarchies of oppression can receive large reactions*.

There are many ways that racial and cultural oppression seeps into teaching practices. One way is through content and curricular choices that center white history and erase the lives and perspectives of other groups. Another documented way is through implementing well-intentioned *social and emotional learning that is culturally biased*.

It is harmful to encourage children to "bring their whole selves into the classroom" if they are then criticized and marginalized because the only acceptable ways of being are those that reflect white middle-class cultural norms. Creating classroom environments, where *you share your power with students* in creating classroom cultural norms and expectations, is one part of enabling them to feel safe being their full selves and empowered to deeply engage in learning.

Beginning anti-racist practices include:

- Ensure that all students in your classroom see themselves in some aspect of your classroom decorations.
- Be intentional about including decorations that highlight your valuing of justice and equity.
- Choose texts and assignments that reflect classroom demographics and are reflective of students' communities and life experiences.
- Conduct an anonymous student audit to assess how they feel about the way race is discussed in your classroom and adjust your practices accordingly.
- Learn about your students' lives outside of school and be mindful of current and community events that may impact their emotional well-being.

Anti-racist practices can be *adapted for remote classrooms*.

More *advanced anti-racist practices* engage students in well-planned lessons and discussions that make space for students' voices in interrogating systems of oppression. The best way to begin this work is to use developed lessons such as:

- *Let's Talk About Anti-Blackness*
- *Say Their Names*: A Toolkit to Help Foster Productive Conversations About Race and Civil Disobedience
- *26 Mini-Films for Exploring Race*, Bias and Identity with Students

We caution against engaging your students in whole-class discussions about race, racism and other forms of oppressions until you have done some *critical self-work*; otherwise, your racial discomforts, unconscious biases, and blind spots will be projected onto your students, and you will be reluctant to shut down discussions that are damaging for marginalized students' identities. This *Teaching Tolerance graphic organizer* can help you plan for how you can create emotional safety in your classroom while discussing race and racism.

5. Respond by advocating for evidence-based approaches to school safety

Our schools' safety is paramount, especially making schools a physically, psychologically, and emotionally safe place for students. Police in schools is one of the least effective ways of achieving safety. Research shows that *increasing police officers in schools makes it more likely to detect (but not reduce) serious incidents of violence*, but not more likely to have safer school climates or students exhibiting prosocial behaviors.

The ineffectiveness of police in schools is compounded by the fact that they are *especially damaging* for Black children's life outcomes. The presence of police officers in schools *increases students' likelihood of being shuttled into the legal system* for virtually every offense in schools, including minor offenses like fighting and theft for which children and youth should be counseled not arrested. And, because police officers are more likely to be in urban, mostly minority schools, students who would be counseled if they were White and privileged enough to attend affluent suburban schools are instead pipelined into the legal system because they are Black and with limited economic means.

Research consistently places mental health and social and emotional learning interventions at the center of evidence-based school safety interventions. As noted above, to ensure that one system of oppression is not replaced by another, all mental health and social and emotional interventions must be culturally relevant for students.

Advocate not for "removing" but for "replacing" police in schools with social and emotional and mental health professionals who have the dedicated role of implementing evidence-based school safety interventions. Following the *divest-invest framework* for replacing police in schools is critical to ensuring that vulnerable students will get the support they need while also fostering school safety. The prioritization of spending on punitive practices is reflected by the fact that there are many schools where there is *a police officer but no counselor or social worker*.

It is estimated that U.S. schools *spend $14 billion a year* for school safety personnel, metal detectors, video cameras, and other security practices. If those funds can be repurposed for social and emotional staff and interventions, schools could do much more to facilitate vulnerable students' development.

Especially during this COVID-19 period of massive educational budget shortfalls, we should not allow billions of dollars to go towards practices that, at best, *don't affect safety* and, at worst, *harm children's life outcomes*. The push for the utilization of evidence-based educational interventions should apply to choosing *approaches that have been shown to be effective at reducing school violence*.

6. Resist re-traumatization by supporting rather than punishing students who are having trouble coping with adversity

We have focused on current events, but the traumatizing effects of racialized police violence can only be fully understood through the lens of intergenerational trauma. Black students are contending with the accumulation of generations of credible and real fear of the police—fears that lead generations after generations of Black parents to instruct their young children about how to stay safe if and when the police stop them. As such, many Black students are carrying and processing their trauma and that of their predecessors, often without access to adequate coping supports.

Because trauma creates cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dysregulation, teachers often

perceive traumatized students as demanding and frustrating foci of repeated classroom disruption. And, despite teachers' desire to do otherwise, lack of understanding, coupled with feelings of frustration, resentment, and anger, leads to harsh and punitive discipline. The resulting classroom context is unsafe.

Re-traumatization can be resisted by first increasing your self-awareness and ability to be present and mindful of the emotional transactions between yourself and your students, empowering students with more prosocial ways of expressing when they are distressed, and seeking to understand the underlying causes of their distress, rather than punishing their inability to cope with chronic racial trauma and racialized police violence.

Failing to reflect on, acknowledge, and change how racialized policing and racism more broadly may be influencing your teaching practices can leave room for these oppressions to seep into the classroom environment. It is only through intentional and committed effort that schools resist reproducing societal oppressions.

Micere Keels is the founding director of the ***Trauma Responsive Educational Practices (TREP) Project*** and an Associate Professor in the Dept. of Comparative Human Development at the University of Chicago.
Ebony Hinton is a doctoral student in the School of Social Service Administration at the University of Chicago.
Hilary Tackie is a doctoral student in the Dept. of Comparative Human Development at the University of Chicago.

About the TREP Project

The 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.