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Teaching and being trauma-informed in higher education classrooms

A duoethnography of social work educators

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Introduction

The growth of Trauma-Informed (TI) practices in social work is a pragmatic response to the overrepresentation of trauma histories among service users. While social work education has always been trauma-focused, it has not been explicitly trauma-informed. Hence, there is a growing need to address teaching trauma in social work curricula. In this chapter, we (two social work educators) situate our duoethnography within our Caribbean cultural context to explore how we embody, model, and teach TI practices in our classrooms. Our inquiry revolves around the following research questions:

- How do TI practices function to promote safety in our classrooms?
- How do we model TI practices in our classrooms?
- What barriers and challenges are encountered as we strive to embody TI practices as educators?

We begin with an overview of the research and practice-based literature on TI care and TI approaches to social work education. This is followed by a discussion of the methodological framework that guides our study and dialogic narratives through which we explore critical incidents in our classrooms. Our discussion reflects on cultural tensions interrupting and disrupting our ability to be present in our bodies. In so doing, we explore how we negotiate the parallel process of holding space for our trauma memories while being custodians of psychological safety in our classrooms. The importance of boundary setting and critical reflective practice emerged as core emancipatory practices for our students and ourselves.

Trauma and being trauma-informed

The trauma literature, which spans the last thirty years, is prolific and characterises trauma as intense physiological and psychological distress that occurs as a result of exposure to a single event or successive events experienced as harmful or threatening. Trauma events can be experienced directly or vica-

riously and are marked by their potential for long-lasting impact on individual functioning across one or multiple domains. Migrating from the field of emergency medicine into a broad study spectrum termed traumatology, trauma has become widely used and misused in cultural settings to address a range of responses to incidents deemed to cause harm.

There have been several significant shifts in the past two decades; pre-eminent among them is the burgeoning of evidence about the neurobiology of trauma that has focused treatment on somatic-based interventions (Figley, 2012) and a change in Criteria A diagnostic definition of trauma as acute post-traumatic stress (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

An impactful development has been the emergence of outcome studies, which have established that adverse childhood experiences heighten the likelihood that an individual will be susceptible to a spectrum of negative consequences across their lifetime (Frederick et al., 2020). The strength of these predictors originated from the first Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) study, which demonstrated “a strong dose-response relationship between the breadth of exposure to abuse or household dysfunction during childhood and multiple risk factors for several of the leading causes of death in adults” (Felitti et al., 1998, p. 251). Presently, ACE studies significantly influence interventions at the micro level and hold substantial relevance within the policy sphere (Larkin et al., 2014). The elevated awareness of the implications of traumatic experiences for a range of medical and psychological outcomes continues to be one of the major drivers of TI care principles and models.

Trauma-informed care is an approach to service provision which accounts for the possibility that clients may have experienced some form of past trauma. These care principles include ensuring the experience of safety, nurturing trust, working collaboratively with clients, and offering choices and opportunities for clients to feel empowered when accessing services (SAMHSA, 2014).

Frederick et al. (2020) point out that TI care is inherently aligned with social work because it connects to a foundational social work concept, “the idea that relationship is central to the achievement of positive outcomes for service users” (p. 3018). They argue that new knowledge generated by the latest empirical studies “help[s] us better understand the connections between cause and effect [is] returning us to old familiar places with regard to what is involved in an effective helping alliance” (p. 3018). Trauma-informed social work practice draws attention to the power of the therapeutic alliance; it does

not presume that a client is a trauma survivor, nor does it assume that the conduct of a trauma intervention is inevitable. Instead, TI practices are perceptive “to the ways in which the client’s current problems can be understood in the context of past victimization” (Knight, 2015, p. 26).

The therapeutic alliance is crucial in providing a corrective emotional experience; however, the “therapeutic potential of the relationship depends upon workers being knowledgeable about childhood trauma and its relationship to the client’s current difficulties” (Knight, 2015, p. 27). A TI approach to social work practice does not presume that all practitioners are trauma specialists but posits that all practitioners should practise from a culture of awareness. TI social work practice also positions post-traumatic growth and understanding of secondary trauma, burnout, and vicarious trauma within a practice framework (Levenson, 2017). These competencies must be cultivated in the social work education curricula (Sanders, 2021).

The classroom as a co-created practice setting

The educator in the classroom is expected to create a liminal space for students to engage in informational and transformative learning (Mezirow, 2003). Mezirow describes transformative learning as learning that “transforms problematic frames of reference – sets of fixed assumptions and expectations (habits of mind, meaning perspectives, mindsets) – to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective, and emotionally able to change” (pp. 58–59). Transformative learning aligns with a liberatory pedagogy that positions teaching as more than transmitting information. Freire’s (1970) critical pedagogy provides a theoretical framework that integrates power dynamics, political influences, and existing social structures in the broader societal context within teaching and learning processes. As such, students’ personal backgrounds and social contexts are conceptualised as integral components of the learning experience.

Social workers tend to have high ACE scores, indicative of higher-than-average incidents of traumatic experiences (Aykanian & Mammah, 2022; Steen et al., 2021). Social workers are more often aware that their trauma

histories influenced their choice of profession, and they evaluate their histories as beneficial to their practice (Aykanian & Mammah, 2022). However, personal trauma history increases vulnerability to vicarious trauma (Caring et al., 2017). Steen (2021) argues that the prevalence of trauma among social workers underscores the ethical responsibility of social work education to create trauma-sensitive curricula. Educators should facilitate “opportunities for reflection and personal growth, including having social work programs develop and institutionalise knowledge related to students’ recovery from their ‘wounded healer’ experiences and understanding of the benefits and risks of such backgrounds” (Steen, 2021, p. 228).

Social work educators have begun to critically reflect on trauma-sensitive approaches in social work education, acknowledging that coursework material vicariously traumatises as well as re-traumatises students (Carello & Butler, 2015). Gilin and Kauffman (2015) offer 13 teaching strategies for social educators to address trauma and possible vicarious trauma activation. There is also a need for explicit training on vicarious trauma to increase both social workers’ knowledge of its features and their ability to recognise and respond to the reactions of their colleagues when painful feelings are evoked (Cunningham, 2004). Cavener and Lonbay (2021) argue that promoting resilience should be added as a sixth TI principle, informing not only care but also social work education.

Acknowledging that teaching should be informed by and consistent with the implications of the content taught, Carello and Butler (2015) forward specific guidelines for implementing the TI principle of safety in the classroom setting. These educators offer the following:

Teaching about trauma is essential to comprehending and confronting the human experience, but to honor the humanity and dignity of both trauma’s victims and those who are learning about them, education must proceed with compassion and responsibility toward both. (p. 167)

Comprehensive guidelines must include the content and context of the curriculum, parameters for behaviours and interactions between teachers and students, instruction and modelling of self-care, and the design of assignments. Rebuffing exposure approaches to teaching (Agllias, 2012), Carello and Butler

(2015) insist that increasing risk and exposure to trauma material does not equate to increased potential for student transformation and empowerment.

Mishna and Bogo (2007), however, warn that conflict and threat activation are unavoidable in social work classrooms. They argue that “‘safety’ in the social work classroom and focusing on strategies to achieve safety are limiting. Instead, the focus of teachers should be responding ‘effectively’ when sensitive issues cause discomfort.”

Clarifying trauma with the lens of culture and social justice

Power imbalances often frame victimology and should not be divorced from knowledge and intervention generation to address trauma. Wilkin and Hillock (2014) point out that “medicalizing, individualizing, and pathologizing of trauma reactions also increase the likelihood of victim blaming,” positioning the blame and responsibility of trauma solely on individuals instead of acknowledging the culpability of structures and systems (p. 190). Connecting this reality to social work education, these researchers highlight that graduate social work programmes relegate feminist and trauma perspectives as “add-ons” and not central elements of the curriculum. They offer an Integrated Feminist-Trauma Model that situates “individual experiences and symptoms within historical, community, and group contexts” (p. 195).

A social justice-oriented framework permeates every speciality area of the social work discipline, from clinical work to social policy. Identifying a distinct category of trauma, termed Socially-Engineered Traumas (SET), Shaia et al. (2019) argue that the hyperfocus of contemporary social work on micro-level experiences ignores the genesis of trauma in oppression and inequality. They present a case for socioeducation, defined as “an act of assisting clients to reinterpret their experiences through the lens of SET” (p. 238). Diversification of social work pedagogy for TI education must include identifying macro-level perpetrators such as racism, neoliberalism, and patriarchy as engines of micro-level trauma.

Coercive hierarchical relations of power are core to educational practices in the post-colonial context (Lavia, 2012). The legacy of colonisation for colonised people often includes the notion that educational attainment is integral to refashioning “the post-colonial identity” (Hickling-Hudson, 2006). The educational system, however, was designed to subjugate the mind of the colonised, reinforcing oppressive frames of thinking that reproduce structures which continue to perpetuate inequalities and power differentials through schooling (Lavia, 2012).

Pedagogy is never neutral (Freire, 1970) since the classroom context is built on power relations mirrored in other structures that drive the interaction between dominant and subordinated groups (Cummins, 1997). These structures have informed coercive power, predisposing educators to be the “expert dispenser of knowledge and the student [as] the passive recipient of wisdom transmitted by the sage” (Chisholm, 2021, pp. 8–9).

Methodological framework

The authors of this chapter are social work educators who are trauma specialists teaching and living in a post-colonial context. Infusing TI practices in social work education is a counter-hegemonic pedagogical practice essential to refashioning educators’ colonial identity in our context. The etymologies of the words “teaching” and “being” denote an enduring connection to subjectivity and embodiment. While teaching has distinct theoretical frameworks, it is also a deeply personal endeavour. We have common professional and personal positionalities as Caribbean women with an orientation toward understanding and teaching trauma as an embodied somatic experience, and an inclination toward arts-based inquiry. These factors were critical to our decision to adopt a duoethnographic methodological approach for our research.

Duoethnography is a qualitative method that uses dialogic, emancipatory, narrative writing, and research practices to explore the subjective understanding of social phenomena (Norris et al., 2012; Snipes & LePeau, 2017). It draws on emergent, subjective, culturally situated data to foster meaning-making

around social phenomena. This methodological frame is a powerful tool that disrupts grand narratives as researchers locate themselves as sites of inquiry (Sawyer & Norris, 2015). Two or more researchers collaboratively co-write and co-create narratives to explore their shared experiences, interactions, and perspectives (Norris et al., 2012). The process uncovers the complexities and nuances of the researchers' experiences and interpretations. Our duoethnography represented a conversation between two educators who built a relationship as they worked through a safe circle where trust was prominent.

Duoethnography emerged from curriculum theory (Sawyer & Norris, 2016), which seems fitting as we examine our curriculum for trauma-informed teaching. We communicated through meetings, text, writing, reading each other's narratives, and sharing our reflections. We utilised this embodying inquiry to create textual transactions from prompts. We wrote stories that were considered the "fork in the road" (Burleigh & Burm, 2022). These stories served as points of reflection and learning.

This paper adopts Hummel and Toyosaki's (2015) epistemological movements of duoethnography: *duo* denoting two authors sharing and shaping their cultural identity through the re-telling of stories; *ethno* indicating an examination of trauma in the classroom and using this knowledge as a transformative space; *graphy* demonstrative of our writing in, becoming, and using the method as a powerful teaching approach through shared reflection. Our narratives took the form of oral histories, poems, and songs.

Our stories

Arna

When I first arrived at the University, I was asked to be a guest speaker for a Master's-level class. I was offered a rubric for marking the presentation. After the students presented, I launched into my feedback, giving detailed comments on what could be improved while highlighting the missing areas in their presentation. I wondered why the students looked dismayed, as if

they had failed the presentation. They had not failed. I decided to ask one student how they felt about the feedback. The student exploded, stating that I was too critical. One of their fellow presenters had experienced a death in the family, and they were trying their best to support her. All they had heard was criticism—nothing about improving in key areas.

This grounded me; I knew I had to adjust my teaching methods. Reflecting on the presentation that night, I realised that I was replicating how I was schooled in this business of academia. Who cares about what went on in your life? No one. Do the best presentation; that is how you get your grade. But how did students feel after each presentation? I wanted to care; I knew I wanted to care. I knew that feelings mattered.

Never again. This was the beginning of my pursuit to do better, my quest for the label trauma-informed. The power of this one event still strikes me. I am glad that I entered my reflective space as a Social Worker. The two positions had to merge; relationship-building and people's ability to feel safe in my presence were important. I now view my students as "clients". This does not mean we have a dual relationship, but I see them as individuals with lives and histories. They must feel safe in my presence to hear, learn, and transform. My knowledge of Social Work was not as important as making students feel safe in my presence. I had to do better and incorporate "How are you doing today?" into our encounters.

Tracie

I engaged a group of postgraduate learners in an experiential learning activity to explore how to practise self-compassion. The activity required them to recall a moment when they were younger and needed a compassionate listener. I instructed them as follows: When you think of the moment, rate how you felt on a distress scale, with zero being very little distress and ten being extremely distressed. I asked them to locate an event that registered at a five. After a few minutes of quiet reflection, I asked the students if they found the memory. When everyone indicated they had, I asked them to look for another moment that carried less charge. Another period of silence was given. I then asked the class to write a self-compassionate letter to their younger self. This letter should begin with the opening salutation of "Dear" and end

with a closing salutation of their choice. I emphasised that the opening and closing were important.

The students were then given twenty minutes to write their letters. This was a private activity. After a brief discussion, I asked them to look at the letter and write a poem, using only words from the letter that expressed their compassionate sentiments. Three students who indicated they were comfortable doing so shared powerful poems that expressed the curative power of being seen by their older selves. They expressed how powerful self-kindness felt and how purposeful the activity was for them.

During the class, I noticed one student looked visibly affected by the activity. At the end of the class, she and I spent ample time speaking about how she felt. She disclosed that the activity triggered hurtful memories. I did not ask for details of the memories. I sat with her mostly in silence and offered grounding exercises. She shared that she was looking for a therapist. We discussed ways she could access help, and I made a referral to counselling services. I left the encounter feeling confident that she was leaving the classroom in a stable manner. I was proud of my work with the class and confident that I included sufficient protective mechanisms.

The next afternoon, I received a call from the programme coordinator informing me that one student was severely traumatised by participating in the class. The student's identity was disclosed as the student who remained after the class to speak with me. The student's report of the events did not include our one-on-one conversation and differed significantly from mine. I knew better than to call the student a liar, but I fell into a shame spiral around the incident. An external professional was called to debrief the class, and I was asked not to attend. The coordinator subsequently shared that during the debriefing session, most students reported that the classroom activity was facilitated in a way that allowed them to reflect and feel safe doing so. As a young teacher, I experienced intense feelings that I did not know how to process. The remainder of that semester was filled with angst.

Arna

Each semester, I teach a class in the Social Sciences Faculty that averages ninety students drawn from many disciplines. These students are not exclusively social work students. I met them for 13 weeks, many of whom I would

never see again. As is the norm, students had to complete evaluative instruments; these instruments in academia are sometimes only completed when something negative happens.

I started to pay close attention to my evaluations when several students wrote that they felt safe in my class. They felt seen in my class. Students wrote that they regretted the class ending. Others wrote that they felt they were given choices for the first time while attending university.

These evaluation comments were the first of many. What did I do differently? I started each class by reminding students of my policy of being non-judgmental, asking them to be mindful of their language and comments. I created a feedback form allowing students to voice concerns and queries so that I could address the matters raised. I also started to give students flexible assignment dates—I no longer had issues with late submission of assignments. If a student did not attend my class for a certain period, I was alerted, and I contacted the student. I checked in on them and reassured them.

Tracie

After a lively engagement with Critical Theory, I mentioned that feminist social work would be the focus of the subsequent weeks. This announcement met with a sigh of despondence. In retrospect, it is clear how that collective sigh triggered and activated a reactive response from me. The assignment was my attempt to ensure engagement with the subject matter.

When I walked into the classroom the next week, I did not find the usual chatting among students. The air felt heavy with anticipation and fear. I knew I could not proceed with the lecture I had scheduled for that day. I asked the eight students to place their chairs in the middle of the room in the form of a circle. This was different from the usual configuration for our class sessions.

These students were halfway through the second semester of the first year of their MSW degree. I was accustomed to a relaxed, informal tone in my classroom, but today, the room was stiff and tense. Eyes shifted uneasily around the room as though afraid to hold each other's gaze. Bodies fidgeted with uneasiness.

I closed my eyes and let my shoulders drop as I imagined tension draining downward and off my body. I focused my attention on my pelvic floor, and as I exhaled, I imagined my hips sinking deeper into the firmness of the

seat of my chair. I felt my body release into the support beneath it, and I let my awareness fully absorb the fullness of my inhalation and exhalation until it felt soothing, gentle, and effortless.

It was only then that I acknowledged that perhaps a substantial portion of this anxiety was mine and not the students'. More than this, it was only at this point that I could discern that the appropriate entry point to this classroom debriefing session would be for me to engage in repair. Perhaps my activation around the subject content undermined my ability to provide safety for engaging with the course material.

I invited each student to use the following prompts:

- When I think of the last class, my body feels...
- I am not sure about...
- I want to take responsibility for...
- I am...

I shared first:

- When I think of the last class, my body feels a little overwhelmed.
- I am not sure about how today's class will go.
- I want to take responsibility for not doing more to take care of the class.
- I am completely present.

Arna

Sitting in a staff meeting, I heard a fellow lecturer say they have a zero-tolerance policy. They did not care what was happening to a student; they expected them to submit the assignment no matter what. I saw the look of passion on their face, which read, "It is my way or nothing at all."

In that moment, I also saw the faces of my students—students who had surgery while attending classes, students who could not afford public transportation and walked to the University, students whose parents had died, students going through divorces, and students so overwhelmed by the system that they thought of giving up.

Nevertheless, here was someone passionately declaring that they did not care, in a staff meeting. I thought, “How cruel you are—I will not be you.” My dedication to trauma-informed principles is cemented in my reflection on all my students who have been journeying through this life, sometimes hanging on solely to the feeling of safety and care. My passion is to ensure that they know they matter.

Tracie

- “The truth is...” she paused and looked away.
- “Take your time. The truth is”, I repeatedly softly.
- “The truth is that when we discuss issues like sexual assault, it is hard for me to focus.”

I was having a one-on-one consultation with a postgraduate student. Over the semester, she had become more reserved, and her active class participation had declined. I started our meeting by noting my observations.

The student disclosed that she had been sexually assaulted a couple of years before, and the module on sexual assault was very triggering for her. She shared that she had been seeing a counsellor at the University and that it was going well.

I asked her if she could think about what kind of support she needed from me as her Lecturer and the programme coordinator. After a period of silence, she offered:

- “I keep thinking about what my Lecturer from [names another discipline] told me. She said that people like me cannot work in mental health and that I needed to think about doing something else.”
- “People like you?” I asked.
- “People who have been sexually assaulted.” she clarified. “People who have trauma.
- “Do you think that is true? Do you think that people who have a trauma history cannot be social workers or counsellors or psychologists?” I asked.
- “I don’t know, but I keep hearing her voice in my head saying that I can’t do this.”

Our dialogue...

Arna to Tracie:

I am who I am

Educator, mother, social worker, wife

I am who I am

Compassionate, carer, reflector

I am who I am.

I have grown over the years in many ways. Tracie, I thought I needed to somehow separate who I am—but when I step into my classroom, I am learning to carry all of me into that space. I have begun to embrace my whole life experiences, understanding that in the business of being trauma-informed, it makes a huge difference.

I am a trauma survivor, having endured many unique childhood traumas. I am learning each day that we do not walk away from or separate ourselves from trauma, especially childhood trauma, because it changes our identity. I am a survivor who now understands that my personality has been my survival mechanism.

I am a mother working at a university. I faced many hurdles to become a mother—mothering is important, and being with my family, my husband, is important. I am a carer for my elderly mother. I am a social work practitioner teaching social work students. As I embrace embodying what I teach, my actions must match my words.

Being trauma-informed is a decision I made to ensure I teach knowing that any version of myself can show up in the classroom—the vulnerable adult trying to adjust to uncertainty, the adult who is balancing many things, the adult who is dealing with anxiety and depression but has not yet realised she is coping and that there is no one to be blamed.

Trauma-informed teaching is the opposite of the cultural norm in the Jamaican teaching landscape. There are many challenges and barriers to truly

embracing trauma-informed teaching. Our academic culture is filled with hierarchy and power differentials. Some students expect this kind of energy—an energy of “what I say goes,” “this is my domain,” and “you are not in charge”—a power play in the classroom.

Tracie to Arna

I often feel torn in the academy; sometimes, that strain shows up in my classroom. Like you, I want to show up as myself. I experienced harm as a graduate student, and that experience is still in my body—I have learned that the academy is a dangerous place. Sometimes, it is difficult to leave that danger at the door.

I still have messages from a senior faculty member buried in my body about being “too much energy” for a university. I know that these messages were about her uneasiness in her body, but those messages have landed in mine and co-mingled with other vulnerabilities connected to my trauma history. Sometimes, it is difficult to leave that danger at the door.

However, I remain in the classroom because I am called to be here. When I slip into my flow while teaching, create paintings to massage emergent research themes, or write poetry based on interview transcripts, I know without a shadow of a doubt that I am doing precisely what I am supposed to do with my professional life.

I am learning that engaging in repair with my students is a way of engaging in a corrective emotional experience—an experience that my would-be mentor, in her trauma body, could not provide for me. And that is why I show up.

Arna to Tracie

Reflecting on our experiences, I am grateful to have the courage to do things differently. It comes with a desire to be a courageous and better human being. We must simply do better. Our experience has certainly taught us that we carry our invisible backpack; we carry our stories into our classrooms.

As educators, we must arrange our teaching to fully appreciate that teaching using trauma-informed strategies is good teaching. Our classrooms need to be supportive sanctuaries for learners. Trauma robs students of self-

leadership, and designing a class to fully embrace students' power is challenging in the context of our Global South teaching model, but it is also deeply rewarding.

This whole process must start with this realisation. For me, I had to learn how to respond by integrating new knowledge about trauma into my teaching practices, examining how it shows up in the classroom, and identifying what can be done to reduce the likelihood of re-traumatisation.

Tracie to Arna

Steady time, let me breathe

Pour dreams into grails of sound and sea

Tiptoe along sand, soles kissing space between

Here and there

Be mountains to scale

Souls to embrace, scents to inhale

Steady breath, let me time

Eras into endings

Enslaved by circumstances, death and themselves

Warmth to caress, stories to pen

Callings to find, therein to tremble

Sands of shores to ponder, grain by grain

Slow mind, let me rest

Too much to lose in this very moment that is NOW.

Reflections

We approach the social work classroom as a site for transformative learning, emphasising the collaborative and social nature of learning. As women teaching in an institution and a social context informed by coloniality, we cannot divorce our teaching from the systemic trauma that has produced inequalities. We view our classroom as a practice setting that reflects the power dynamics of our larger cultural and social environment.

We also have personal trauma histories, and through our reflective practice, we are mindful of the ways those histories have informed who we are and how we show up for teaching. We do not assume that learners can leave their trauma histories at the entryways to our classrooms, and we are mindful that perpetuating a false narrative that this is expected or possible covertly transmits the notion that students can do the same as professionals.

Educators are products of the same trauma-infused environments that produced their students. Many of us are trauma survivors; we hail from families of origin and environmental contexts that have harmed us. We have personalities shaped by endurance trauma born of the very colonial education that shaped us, for which we have now, ironically, become gatekeepers.

In this chapter, we explored why all educators involved in training human service professionals should be trauma-informed. We situate this work in a framework that can be helpful for social workers across global contexts because trauma is a universal phenomenon, and being trauma-informed is imperative for all educators. With that said, we cannot ignore our positionalities as educators from a global south context. Systemic oppression and structural vulnerability have shaped our experience of education systems in very nuanced ways that have implications for how we understand and embody TI practices.

Notwithstanding, in this chapter, we sought to connect the educators' ability to be trauma-informed to their capacity to create trauma-informed classrooms. Lastly, we emphasise the importance of establishing the mandate to craft trauma-informed learning experiences as crucial for training trauma-informed professionals.

Reflection questions

1. How might the insights gained from this duoethnography inform your pedagogical practices?
2. Our personal trauma histories enabled deeper examinations of our teaching approaches. How can you use personal reflections to enable a deeper examination of your approach to teaching?
3. How can educators safely leverage lived experiences to enrich trauma-informed dialogue in classroom settings?

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