Confronting the Trauma-Sensitive Writing of Students

Deborah Kellner
University of Cincinnati

Without question, we have students in our schools who have been the victims of trauma. This article describes the ramifications of exposure to trauma and examines how it can manifest itself in students’ writing from an early age on through college. It discusses the supportive role that literacy educators can play when exposed to students’ trauma-sensitive writing. Specific writing samples from traumatized students are included to exemplify that the actual literate act of reading and writing may hold the key to helping students process any trauma that they have experienced. In particular, this paper addresses what literacy educators can do to support victims of trauma in two ways: (a) through describing an in-depth case study of one student over the course of 20 years; and (b) through describing a class of college freshmen who revealed examples of trauma in their writing.

Some people believe that without history our lives amount to nothing. Our history is what shapes us and guides us, and it resurfaces time after time. But what happens if that history includes a traumatic event? Trauma touches many people who experience it directly or who witness the experiences of others. Perhaps only a select few have been lucky enough to escape any exposure to trauma during their lifetimes. As trauma carries no boundaries, it is especially daunting for those who are least equipped to deal with it: the children in our schools. Equally daunting is the lack of training given to teachers who work with students who have been exposed to a variety of traumatic circumstances. Too numerous to list in entirety, these circumstances can include abject poverty; health issues; the death of a significant family member; ongoing substance, physical, emotional, and/or sexual abuse; natural disasters; and/or family members sent to war (Wolpow & Askov, 1998). While these circumstances may have few lasting adverse effects on those who experience them, some cause trauma that, if left untreated, can potentially harm students (Perry, 2000). This article discusses the role literacy educators can play in supporting students who have been exposed to trauma.

Defining Victimization

According to Steele (2002), there are four possible ways to be exposed to trauma: first, as a surviving victim; second, as a witness to a trauma-inducing incident; third, being related to the victim; and fourth, verbal exposure to the details of a traumatic experience (Figley, 1995).
Regardless of the type of exposure, trauma is experienced as a sensory experience and can lead to difficulties in processing verbal information, following directions, and recalling information (Saigh & Bremmer, 1999; Steele, 2002). Those exposed to trauma may also develop a low self-esteem and sense of hopelessness (Yang & Clum, 2000). Yang and Clum (2000) suggested that trauma in the early years of life strongly influences cognitive development, especially when people repeatedly experience trauma through multiple incidents (Terr, 1990). Regardless of the trauma diagnosis, research has confirmed that “trauma can significantly interfere with a child’s ability to learn, interact socially, problem solve, and function as a healthy, normal child or adolescent” (Eth, 1986, as cited in Jacobs, 2003, p. 3; see also Deblinger, Lipman & Steer, 1996).

The practical effects of exposure to trauma are notoriously difficult to predict. Each year in the United States over 2 million children are traumatized by physical or sexual abuse or by exposure to domestic or community violence (Steele, 2002). Many of these children’s parents may be unavailable. Their abuse often leads to anger, acting out, breaking the law and/or other mechanisms (Alexander, 1999). Untreated exposure to trauma can lead to attention problems, drug and alcohol dependency, increased risk of dropping out of school, recurring physical and mental health problems, difficulty maintaining adult or peer relationships, and repeated delinquent behavior leading to adult criminal behavior (van Dalen, 2001). It is not surprising then, that schools are the logical witnesses of the pain of their students. Although it is not the legal responsibility of teachers to deal with that pain, they can help by showing acceptance, attention, loyalty, and support while adding a stabilizing factor for children who have been traumatized.

**Evidence in the Classroom**

It is not uncommon for teachers to frequently observe students who struggle academically, but they may not be aware that the students have been traumatized. Often victimization is played out with identifiable negative school behaviors that easily can be misunderstood. Evidence of trauma often takes an all too familiar route as students play out low academic performance, behavioral problems, and inept social skills (Kellner, 2007; Pynoos, Steinberg, & Goenjian, 1996; Spinazzola et al., 2005). Within the classroom, traumatized students may find it difficult to respond appropriately when educators try to incorporate the integration of home and school in their literacy lessons. For students who have been victimized, this integration is not always fluid, and they may not connect with their teachers or the lesson at hand. As teachers become more adept at acknowledging the lack of fluidity, they can begin to recognize that there may be non-academic causes to explain students’ lack of connections with others and with the content.

Sometimes teachers may stumble inadvertently upon an incidence of trauma as students reveal their victimization in their writing. When this happens, it is best to offer support to the student and refer the student to psychological services for additional help. However, because of the unnerving number of trauma cases today, teachers, too, need to support each other as they remain committed to teaching literacy (Wolpow & Askov, 1998). Literacy educators are especially vulnerable and can be exposed to sensory trauma just by hearing others’ verbal stories (Figley, 1995; Mitchell & Everl, 1996). The very nature of teaching reading and writing often lends itself to a wide range of topics and discourses. Compounding this fact, educators
themselves may face some of these same issues and there becomes an additional need to examine ways that we might support one another.

Using Literacy Skills for Self Healing: Case One

For some individuals, the experience of trauma is so great that it overrides all other aspects of performance until it can be understood. Long and short-term intervention becomes a necessary tool to restore the sense of safety and power that is lost as well as to restore any cognitive, memory, or behavioral functions (Steele, 2002). When many students do not receive the help they need, they are left to deal with the effects of the trauma incident(s) on their own. Their own literacy skills, the actual act of reading and writing, may hold the key to understanding what has happened to them and may help them become self-motivated to write about the experience in the form of journaling.

One such case, a qualitative, longitudinal case study of one woman’s life history, allowed an opportunity for a close analysis of journal entries and revealed the victim’s own perspective of trauma (Kellner, 2007). This study examined the past experiences of one academically at-risk college freshman, based on pre-college academic records and experiences, to explore why academic success is so easy for some and so difficult for others. The subject of this study was a twenty-two year old American born Mexican American who volunteered to participate in this study after an open invitation was made to one college freshman class at a Midwestern university. She was the first to graduate from high school on her maternal side where the effects of alcoholism were documented. She attempted college, located two hours away from family, but found the obstacles too great and moved back home. Data sources included field notes taken during all interviews, audio and video taped interviews, personal handwritten journals, voice recorded journals, photographs and other artifacts from her lifetime of experiences.

This individual’s narrative revealed more than any one person should have to experience. Her trauma included physical abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse, neglect, abandonment, impoverishment, violence, repetitive moving, the divorce of her parents, and witnessing alcohol and drug abuse. This victimization began to reveal itself to teachers as early as first grade when this child used journaling to expose her faltering self esteem and worries.

Figure 1: First grade journal entry.
Most likely, her classroom teacher was unaware of her exposure to trauma as there was no specific reference to it in her journal entry. She merely was expressing her need to be liked by someone and showed only self-doubt. Her teacher responded in writing: “You are a beautiful girl. Just be yourself and you will be liked.” Nonetheless, her writing was evidence of self-doubt and a clue was provided to the teacher to remain vigilant regarding this child’s future needs. The teacher’s response showed that she was supportive and caring when the child continued to express her worries in other entries.

When her chaotic home life continued to inflict victimization, she chose the familiar practiced route of journaling that she learned in her early schooling years. She continued to document her concerns and by the time she reached middle school, her writing became trauma-specific and graphic as she detailed victimization in the form of sexual abuse.

Figure 2: Middle school journal entry.

At this age, the act of journaling was intense almost to the point of becoming obsessive. Her journal had become her friend and, as she put it, the only one she had to talk to. She wrote in it for hours at a time, frequently late at night, pouring out her private thoughts, while warning others who may be curious not to read it.
As she continued this form of expression, the ramifications of her ongoing victimization revealed the same self doubt she exhibited in first grade. She reported that this uncertainty gnawed at her through the years and she felt disappointed in herself as she struggled to deal with the life she was living as she questioned her actions and the people in her troubling world.

In high school, her writing became particularly poignant. She wanted other people to know her feelings and she considered running away. Ironically, she was able to recognize her own cynicism and need to think more positively about people. Here, it is important to note the emotion in these pieces because, for the traumatized individual, it appears that the literate act is frequently displayed as a feeling rather than a thing (le Doux, Romanski, & Xagorians, 1991).
Spoken and Unspoken Issues in the College Classroom: Case Two

The following discussion is based on research taken from a class of college developmental freshman (underprepared readers and writers based on college admission standards) at a large Midwestern university. The fragility of some of these students who may have suffered some form of victimization becomes obvious as many choose to reveal their lives within the academic setting. It is not uncommon for freshmen to surreptitiously weave bits and pieces of their traumatic experiences into the classroom through their spoken and written words. When given an anonymous survey, their honest responses, laden with hurt, exposed their difficult experiences.

When asked the open ended question, “If I could change one thing in my life it would be,” they responded: to put my parents back together; not losing my mom; to bring back my best friend; to not care what people think of me; to go back to first grade and change everything.

When asked the open ended question, “The most difficult thing I have had to do,” they responded: put my dog to sleep; go to school with a baby; Grampa’s funeral; live holy; tell mom I got into an accident; quit drinking; deal with mom’s cancer; graduate.

These particular students took advantage of an anonymous format to reveal parts of their histories, but some students feel comfortable using their identified voice to let their teacher know what experiences they have endured. The following are brief segments from academic assignments wherein various students chose to write about their issues in a poignant and telling way even though the writing prompt was very generic. These trauma-related issues were woven into various assignments and are all parts of larger pieces.
Before I entered high school, I was depressed, suicidal, and saw no hopeful future for my life. Because I was sexually abused for more than half my life, I did not believe in myself or my future.

As a child growing up, life was different for me than for many people. I had no fatherly figure and my mother was always at work. At home I was all alone and I had no one to talk to, so I stayed to myself and kept my head in the books. School was an outlet from home, reading was an outlet from life and writing poetry was an outlet for my feelings.

On August 6, 2006 my best friend was shot and killed by her ex-boyfriend. This was the hardest thing I’ve ever had to deal with.

I always said my prayers before I went to bed. I never went a night without saying them, “Dear God, thank you for today. I knew a new start was the best thing for me. You put me around new people, a new place, and I just feel new. I pray for an even better day tomorrow. And I pray for my dad. Amen.” I never knew that during such a good day the worst that could happen would actually happen. I never knew that the thing that would hurt me my whole life would happen.

This last student, in her narrative assignment, continued on to detail a sexual assault that occurred during the middle of the night after saying her prayers.

For college teachers, it may be difficult to know how to respond to such writing in a supportive, caring way, particularly when this type of discourse is often not acknowledged in the college classroom. For students, it is perhaps the first time such an experience has been revealed. Even though some students may not have sought professional help, they instead used their own writing to begin to either make sense of what had happened to them or to let someone else know about their experiences. In these instances, it becomes critical that their voice is heard and their feelings validated. Moreover, students themselves may begin to see the value of writing journals, such as the student who reported:

The experience within writing these journals helped me increase my writing skills and overall experience. Writing these journals made me actually want to start writing down my own daily thoughts in a journal each night; especially when I’m thinking about my mom. This whole experience while being stressful at times ended up being a positive motivation builder and a way to maybe express my feelings on paper in the future; something I have never even thought of before.

Trauma-Specific Reading and Writing

In both K-12 and college settings, some of this writing is assignment-driven and some is not, yet all reveal the authors’ intent to let their story be told. When their story is told, it may encourage healing to begin. For the victim, healing can also begin when understanding someone else’s trauma. Dailey (2006) described the healing that can take place from reading about the struggles of others. Students may find a connection in memoirs or pieces of fiction where they
can relate to the struggle to survive. They can also find strength, particularly if the experience proves surmountable.

Whether it be reading or writing, one thing is certain: Trauma can drive students writing. It is through the examination of one’s writing that the chosen ordinary symbols in language and in occurrences are anything but ordinary. In truth, they are intimate symbols chronicling a life where certain places, certain people, certain behaviors, or certain things have meanings that only the individual knows. It is here then that literacy becomes a feeling rather than a thing. Without a feeling, it is merely a behavior that is acted out. When teachers closely observe what students are reading and writing about, they have many opportunities to be privy to these intimate symbols and unlock their mysteries. When teachers watch the unfolding of their students’ lives, both teachers and students may experience a greater sense of equity. For students, it is perhaps the one opportunity to open up their souls and let someone know their innermost thoughts and feelings. For teachers, it can be a moving moment to witness these intimacies.

Teachers play a most significant role in supporting students who struggle with experiences related to their histories. Without a proper background in counseling and psychology, teachers may not know what to do or how to do it when faced with a traumatized student. Nonetheless, teachers who are empathetic have a healing power, and that empathy becomes a powerful tool as students are allowed to read and write about these difficulties (Wolpow & Askov, 1998). For teachers, the worrying questions are whether the victimization will ever stop, and whether they are equipped to deal with traumatized students (Figley, 1995). Neither question can easily be answered but one thing is certain: Teachers can and should work to recognize first, that the likelihood of exposure to trauma is high; second, that some students need to be allowed to read and write about their traumatic experiences; third, that if and when students indicate they have been traumatized, they are heard and referred to a competent professional to be validated; and lastly, that collaboration with other teachers is critical. Perhaps another student said it best in the epilogue of her 24-page autobiography:

I feel that my life may be a reflection of my mom’s life. It’s like everything that happened to her while she was growing up it’s happening to me. For example, my mom’s father passed away when she was a year old. My father passed away about four months before I was born. My mother was raped when she was younger. She never told anyone until she was about twenty-seven. I was molested and never told anyone until today. It’s like a cycle that’s goin on in my family. If I don’t break it and speak out then my children may be raped and/or molested; and their children may be raped and/or molested. Speaking out was not the easiest thing to do. But sometimes, the most difficult thing you have to do can make a life’s difference.
References


