

Trauma Informed Schools and the Lasallian Tradition – Rooted in the Same Values

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Introduction

"All children have a right to learning environments that will help them to calm or temper their emotions, develop positive relationships and solve conflicts peacefully, and become successful learners so that they can grow up and take their place as productive citizens."² While this quote could easily appear in any of the writings of the Founder or later Lasallian scholars, it is in fact taken from "Helping Traumatized Children Learn: A Report and Policy Agenda," a 2005 publication aimed at creating supportive school environments for children who have experienced trauma. The paragraph concludes "In a democratic society, no group of children should be disregarded or dismissed simply because they have faced overwhelming stress or even terror in their lives and need help reengaging in the world around them."³ When thinking about how this might apply in a Lasallian setting, this quote might put Circular 461 in mind:

"Lasallians regard education as a process of integral human formation. They recognize human dignity in the face of everyone they meet. In keeping with the Lasallian tradition, they devote themselves especially to the education of young people who are in difficult and challenging circumstances."⁴

De La Salle and the Christian Brothers were likely teaching the kinds of children discussed in the 2005 report, though they may not have identified their students as "traumatized children." The Brothers almost certainly saw children who lacked focus, had poor communication skills, or who engaged in reactive, aggressive, or impulsive behavior. While they probably did not tie this behavior to the impacts of trauma and adverse experiences on neurodevelopment, De La Salle recognized the need to address students in what would now be considered a "trauma informed" manner. Recent research in neurobiology suggests that trauma can affect the way the brain develops, altering its function, and impeding a student's ability to succeed in the classroom setting⁵ and there has been a push to insure that more schools are trauma informed.⁶ The purpose of this essay is to provide some background information on the research surrounding adverse childhood experiences, toxic stress, and the potential impacts of trauma both in general and in the school setting, define trauma informed teaching, and explore the intrinsic relationship between Lasallian pedagogy and trauma informed teaching.

Adverse Childhood Experiences and Brain Science

Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), including emotional, physical, or sexual abuse, household dysfunction, and loss have been linked to a number of health risks, diseases, and problematic behavior.⁷ A review of all of the findings related to the negative impacts of ACEs is beyond the scope of this essay; however, the following paragraphs review the accumulated

research on the effects of trauma on neurological development and problematic behavior. This will provide the background necessary to understand why trauma needs to be addressed and why helping those with the highest levels of trauma is a public health concern that can affect people without trauma histories.

Research using brain mapping and imagining indicates that traumatizing experiences result in structural and functional differences in the brain,⁸ including the prefrontal cortex and the hippocampus, which are related to emotional regulation and self-control.⁹ The Harvard Center on the Developing Child has a web page dedicated to how brain architecture is impacted by what they call toxic stress that provides a fantastic overview to the science of trauma.¹⁰ These differences in brain development might explain, in part, maladaptive, delinquent, and/or criminal behavior by children, adolescents, and adults.¹¹ Research shows that youth with a history of trauma demonstrate higher levels of interpersonal violence, including delinquency, bullying and fights and have an increased likelihood of arrest, criminal charges, and adjudication.¹² There is also evidence suggesting that trauma may play a role in recidivism,¹³ including re-offense for youthful offenders.¹⁴

Trauma Informed Schools

Given the research reviewed above, it should come as no surprise that trauma can impact the classroom as well. Children with a history of trauma “are easily overstimulated and cannot achieve the same secure readiness that is necessary in order to be open to new information.”¹⁵ There is a strong correlation between trauma and low academic achievement.¹⁶ This is due both to the altered brain development seen in traumatized children as well as the psychological impacts of trauma.¹⁷

While there are a number of resources to help teachers and administrators understand what a trauma sensitive school might look like, there is no single definition for trauma informed teaching, nor is there a set model of how to develop a trauma sensitive school. Researchers suggest that trauma informed systems utilize screening tools to assess for trauma exposure, focus on evidence informed practices to address and mitigate the effects of trauma, make resources available, and provide a continuity of care across service systems.¹⁸

A number of reports detailing the impact of trauma on children in the classroom and strategies for developing trauma sensitive schools have been published. Two that are particularly helpful for understanding the effects of trauma in the school setting are highlighted in this essay. Both are available online and are excellent resources for any school.

A detailed two volume report from the Massachusetts Advocates for Children: Trauma and Learning Policy Initiative entitled “Helping Traumatized Children Learn” describes the effects of trauma on behavior, providing in-depth information about the numerous ways that trauma can negatively affect all aspects of a student’s experience in school. According to the research presented in the reports, trauma can affect a student’s language and communication skills, can make it difficult for the student to organize narrative material, regulate emotions, take another’s perspective and can change how a student sees cause and effect relationships.¹⁹ Trauma can also affect a student’s ability to engage in the curriculum by increasing reactivity and impulsivity,

aggression, deviance, and perfectionism.²⁰ The report also discusses how to create and advocate for trauma-sensitive schools and policy recommendations to help schools become more trauma-sensitive. This report's description of the attributes of a trauma sensitive school provides the framework for the comparison between the Lasallian worldview and trauma informed schools.

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network has created a toolkit for educators, which provides a significant amount of useful and applicable information about trauma. The document details a number of facts about trauma, indicating that trauma can impact school performance through lower GPAs, higher rates of school absences, increased drop-out, more suspensions and expulsions, and decreased reading ability. It also details the ways that trauma can impair learning through anxiety, reduction in ability to focus, intrusive thoughts, poor sleep patterns, anger, moodiness, and social withdrawal.

An analysis of the attributes of a trauma sensitive school, as defined in the “Helping Traumatized Children Learn” reports and Lasallian pedagogy, as described by the Founder and those who have followed him, demonstrates that they are rooted in the same values. While there is much overlap between the attributes of a trauma informed school and Lasallian education, this essay focuses on three: providing safety, addressing needs holistically, and connecting students to community.

Providing Safety

Volume two of “Helping Traumatized Children Learn” indicates that a trauma informed school aims to provide a sense of safety to all students. This safety is not merely physical, but also encompasses social, emotional, and academic safety. A child who has experienced trauma is in need of this sense of safety not only to participate in the classroom, but also to obtain a sense of well-being. To help a child feel safe in the education setting, a school must provide structure and limits, routine, and consistency. The suggestions for educators provided by the National Child Traumatic Stress Network also focus on the importance of routine to establish a feeling of normalcy and predictability, which leads to feelings of safety. The toolkit also stresses the importance of clear limits about inappropriate behavior and logical consequences to help students understand what is expected of them and what they can expect from teachers.

Much of *The Conduct of the Christian Schools* focuses on the need to establish and maintain routines. De La Salle details every part of the school day and the expectations of both student and teacher. This structure was necessary, as both students and teachers often came from chaotic backgrounds, and De La Salle recognized that without structure, routine, and consistency, neither his students nor his teachers would succeed. This is echoed in the work of Brother Agathon who stated a teacher “will be consistent in his dealings, this is all the more essential since...the children would never know precisely what to count on...”²¹ Providing children with an understanding of “what to count on” is a truly trauma informed perspective. Agathon recognized that a teacher must be “loved” in order for a pupil to do well in school and suggested that this could be achieved through the virtue of gentleness, which includes providing a consistent atmosphere for the students.

Addressing Needs Holistically

Another attribute of a trauma informed school is its focus on addressing students in a holistic way “taking into account their relationships, self-regulation, academic competence, and physical and emotional well-being.”²² Traumatized students can present with a range of behaviors and failing to address the underlying trauma that is driving these behaviors will not curb them, and may actually exacerbate them. A school that takes a holistic approach not only addresses problematic behavior, but also works to improve relationships, self-regulation skills, success in academic and non-academic settings, and physical and emotional well-being.²³ These are all critical to student success and can help mitigate the negative impacts of trauma. This is not to say that problematic behavior does not need to be addressed, but discipline should not be punitive and should focus on helping the child understand the relationship between behavior and consequences with an understanding that trauma may be driving even the most disruptive and dangerous behavior.²⁴ Problematic behavior should be seen as actions generated from the after effects of trauma instead of acts of choice, and should be addressed as such.²⁵

Discipline is also an important part of Lasallian pedagogy, but De La Salle and the Brothers of the Christian Schools took great pains to make it understood that this discipline should not be intended to harm the student. “No correction that could be harmful to the one who is to receive it must ever be administered. This would be to act directly contrary to the purpose of correction, which has been instituted only to do good.”²⁶ De La Salle further explained, “To deal with young people very harshly is to forego all hope of bringing about any good.”²⁷ He also instructs teachers to not call students names “It is really disgraceful to call your students by insulting names, and it also gives them a bad example.”²⁸ Brother Agathon pays a lot of attention to the requirements for appropriate correction of students in *The Twelve Virtues of a Good Teacher*.

Teachers also need to adapt to the needs of their students. Trauma may be triggered by a number of situations, some of which might be unexpected. They must also understand that children may process their trauma through re-enactment during interaction with others.²⁹ Staff development should focus on sensitivity to the needs of students and the effects that verbal and nonverbal communication can have on a traumatized child.³⁰

The Lasallian pedagogy is rooted in a holistic view of the person. Circular 461 describes the need to approach the whole person: “The holistic view of human nature includes intellectual, emotional, social, cultural, ethical, spiritual dimensions. Lasallians recognize that each person can and needs to be formed in a holistic way.”³¹ De La Salle’s writings, particularly the Meditations for the Second Sunday after Easter about how teachers should act toward their students, outlines an individualistic, whole person approach. He understood the need to adapt to the needs of the individual student. “There are those who call for much patience, those who need to be stimulated and spurred on, some who need to be reprovved and punished to correct them of their faults, others who must be constantly watched over to prevent them from being lost or going astray.”³²

Connecting Students to Community

In addition to providing discipline that is appropriate to the infraction and logical to the students, a trauma informed school does not discipline students in a way that would alienate them from the school community. Traumatized students often feel a lack of connection to those around them, and overly punitive punishments that ostracize a student and use him/her as an example to the class, may negatively impact a traumatized student, particularly as they struggle to develop trusting relationships.³³ As previously mentioned, Brother Agathon goes to great lengths to discuss what constitutes appropriate correction from the Lasallian perspective, and he includes a caution about punishments that unduly affect the connection students have to the classroom community. In his discussion of gravity, Brother Agathon states “he must also refrain from...giving penances which disturb order, which provoke laughter, which might be unbecoming” as this will reduce the students’ confidence in the teacher. This confidence is a necessary component of classroom productivity “for students would not listen to what is taught them by a master whom they cannot look up to.” Brother Agathon also instructs teachers to act with precaution, indicating that while students may need correction, it should not be done in a way that might result in loss of reputation for the student, making the student an outsider.

While connections in the classroom are important, a trauma informed school recognizes that school is only part of a student’s day and functions in a way that allows a student to practice social skills taught in school that they will need to use in all aspects of their lives to help them form positive connections.³⁴ While he was writing in a different time period with different norms, De La Salle devoted an entire volume of writing to behavior and skills. *The Rules of Christian Decorum and Civility* provided students and teachers with a detailed description of deportment and appropriate behavior in common situations. This was an important component to Lasallian education, as both students and teachers were often in need of these kinds of skills. Brother Agathon echoed De La Salle’s teachings, indicating that a teacher should instruct students on skills “in order to be esteemed in society and live there honorably,” which would allow students to make the kinds of healing connections described in the trauma literature. Brother Agathon also instructed teachers to allow students leeway for the correction of behaviors, as students may not be fully aware of or in control of their actions, and might therefore need a chance to work on the skills that they were developing.³⁵

Conclusion

As we gain more knowledge about the effects of trauma on the brain, it is important to develop trauma sensitive environments. This is particularly true in the school setting, where the rigors of the classroom and the social aspects of the learning environment may be greatly affected by the changes in brain architecture that can result from trauma. It is fortunate, therefore, that Lasallian pedagogy and the attributes of a trauma informed school are rooted in the same values. While there are certainly differences between some of the recommendations of De La Salle and other Lasallian scholars and what is considered appropriate in the modern school setting, there is no doubt that a Lasallian school can and should be a trauma informed school. Though this essay focused on providing safety, addressing needs holistically, and connecting students to community, there are a number of other attributes of trauma-sensitive schools for further exploration. In addition, though much focus has been placed on the school system, it is equally

likely that these recommendations will also apply in the university setting, as the effects of trauma can be long lasting and may affect college students in similar ways.

Endnotes

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