

# Teaching With Strengths in Trauma-Affected Students: A New Approach to Healing and Growth in the Classroom

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**T**he National Child Traumatic Stress Network in the United States reports that up to 40% of students have experienced, or been witness to, traumatic stressors in their short lifetimes. These include home destabilization, violence, neglect, sexual abuse, substance abuse, death, and other adverse childhood experiences. The effects of trauma on a child severely compound the ability to self-regulate and sustain healthy relationships. In the classroom, the effects of trauma may manifest as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, conduct disorder, oppositional defiance disorder, reactive attachment, disinhibited social engagement, and/or acute stress disorders.

In this article, we contend that the classroom can be positioned as a powerful place of intervention for posttraumatic healing both in the context of special education and in mainstream classrooms that contain trauma-affected students. The current landscape of trauma-informed practice for primary and secondary classrooms has focused on teaching practices that seek to repair emotional dysregulation and fix broken attachment. In working for more than a decade with mainstream and specialist schools, we have discovered that positive psychology has a role to play in contributing to trauma-informed learning. We argue that combining trauma-informed approaches with positive psychology will empower and enable teachers to

promote both healing and growth in their classrooms. This article presents scientific and practice-based evidence to support our claim. We present education interventions aimed to build positive emotions, character strengths, resilient mindsets, and gratitude, and show how these can be embedded in the daily routines of classroom learning to assist struggling students.

## Trauma and Students

Trauma has been described as an overwhelming experience that can forever alter one's belief that the world is good and safe. A *simple trauma* can be defined as a short-occurrence or one-time event that threatens bodily injury or serious harm (e.g., accidents or natural disasters), which can be accompanied by a social innovations response such as coordinated support from civic organizations. *Complex trauma*, sometimes referred to as *relationship trauma*, describes traumatic exposure that can be longer in duration and involve multiple incidents, ongoing personal threat, violence, and violation. Examples include child abuse, neglect, bullying, and sexual or domestic violence. In simple trauma, the victim often receives little blame. For complex traumas, however, the social innovations response may be morally ambiguous or cloaked in shame. In these cases, the child does not receive the same kind of immediate care response given following simple trauma and is often implicated or blamed for the trauma.

The American Psychiatric Association advises that directly experiencing a trauma, witnessing a traumatic stressor, learning about trauma events, or exposure to adverse details can lead to enduring, debilitating conditions such as posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Childhood PTSD can have significant effects on child development, in-

cluding problems with self-regulation, aggression, attention, dissociation, and physical and motor problems. As part of the PTSD response, the child's acute alarm reaction when perceiving external threat triggers the body's stress response systems. When this system is repeatedly triggered it damages key neurological and psychological systems in the long term.

As a consequence of the neurological and psychological damage resulting from trauma, trauma has been shown to lead to disadvantages in a child's educational journey. Robert F. Anda and colleagues conducted a large epidemiological study of adults who reported adverse childhood experiences in their youth. The study was funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and the sample was sourced in a large HMO. The study found that individuals who experienced childhood abuse were more likely to have been suspended or expelled, failed a grade, have lower academic achievement assessments, be at significant risk for language delays, and be assigned to special education. Given these alarming rates of school struggle and failure, teachers must have the strategies and support needed to meet the complex needs that students bring to the classroom.

## The Need for a Trauma-Informed Teaching Approach

It is important for children who experience trauma to receive therapy by qualified psychologists, psychiatrists, and/or social workers. However, many students and their families lack access, motivation, and ability to successfully participate in therapy and follow treatment plans. For most students, attending school is the most regular and predictable routine in their young lives. For

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senior secondary students, access and adherence to treatment may be lacking, but those same young people will choose to attend school in an attempt to meet their needs for social belongingness and opportunities to

classroom learning depends on a well-organized and regulated brain—or at the very least, moments of regulatory alignment allowing students to access neural resources to meet developmentally appro-

opportunities to healthily modulate their active heart rate and resting heart rate while simultaneously creating group cohesion and readiness for learning.

## *We believe that schools can be healing institutions—in addition to academic institutions—for the 40% of the student population who are adversely affected by trauma*

improve themselves. Help can be gained in some instances by school-based counseling, but we also suggest that teachers are well placed to be *front-line trauma healers* in the context of the classroom. Although teachers are not therapists or clinicians, and are neither trained nor prepared to delve into personal trauma histories with their students, there are techniques they can use that can have a healing effect. Indeed, the very relationship they form with students can be a key element of healing in and of itself. We believe that schools can be healing institutions—in addition to academic institutions—for the 40% of the student population who are adversely affected by trauma.

Bessel van der Kolk of the National Center for Child Traumatic Stress Complex Trauma Network identified three critical developmental pathways that are thwarted by trauma: the maturation of specific brain structures at particular ages; physiologic and neuroendocrinologic responses; and the ability to coordinate cognition, affect regulation, and behavior. The resulting consequences of these maladaptive conditions can dramatically affect learning through decreased cognitive capacity, poor memory and concentration, language delays, and the inability to create and sustain positive relationships with peers, teachers, and carers.

Effective classroom teaching approaches must address these underdeveloped neural pathways before attempting to teach in ways that require higher regions in the brain needed for the cognitive integration and memory required in successful academic learning. This statement is based on foundational understandings of trauma's effects on stress activation and the regulatory capacities of the body's most basic functions such as heart rate, body temperature, and blood pressure. Indeed,

appropriate and challenging classroom tasks.

To gain a comprehensive understanding of trauma-informed models, we completed a review of the last decade of therapeutic principles adapted for teachers working with trauma-affected students. We found that existing trauma-informed education models include two broad intervention areas for trauma-affected classrooms: healing the dysregulated stress response and addressing attachment capacity.

### **Self-Regulation**

Bruce Perry of the Child Trauma Academy positions self-regulation as a core developmental strength for children. As such, trauma-informed approaches emphasize strategies to address the dysregulated stress response of trauma-affected students. Effective classrooms that build the capacity for self-regulation introduce students to coregulatory experiences that focus on both physical and emotional regulation.

Physical regulation is a “bottom-up” form of regulation because it comes from the body's sensory and nervous systems. Physical regulation strengthens the body's own regulatory abilities through rhythmic, somatosensory interventions. Mollie Hiebert and colleagues, from the Mount Saint Vincent treatment facility for trauma-affected children, conduct a number of rhythmic, self-regulatory activities that organize sensory input, modulate arousal levels, and mediate responses to sensations. Often, these interventions take the form of rhythmic, patterned activities that reinforce repetitive opportunities for self-regulation such as songs, circle games, drumming, short-bursts of exercise, and other sensory integration activities. These activities require enough repetition within the classroom to give students

For older students, rhythmic, patterned, and regulatory activities can take the form of mindful breathing, visualizations, yoga or tai-chi adaptations, drumming, or music-based activities. If possible, “brain-breaks” for older students can involve short exercise bursts on stationary equipment (e.g., treadmill, bike, or elliptical machine), a walk around the sport oval, sport drills, or adaptations of personal training circuits. In addition, teachers have had great wins in the classroom when they introduce heart rate as a theme for older students. Lessons about biofeedback and looking at heart rate data through both numeracy and science units afford powerful opportunities for students to notice, modulate, and gain better understandings and potential strategies to encourage the opposite of the stress response: the relaxation response. As part of a greater psychoeducation curriculum within upper primary and secondary classrooms, teachers can incorporate psychoeducation lessons of basic neurodevelopment, the stress response, and the potential impacts of toxic stress on wellbeing.

Regulatory activities can be employed with students when they are having a difficult time staying engaged in classroom tasks. In addition, we recommend a proactive and planned use of regulatory activities in the daily classroom timetable. As students enter the classroom, transition from activity to activity, or break for short moments during independent work time, planning rhythmic movement breaks can provide numerous opportunities for students to coregulate and to self-regulate throughout the day. We also emphasize here that these intervention activities are not just for trauma-affected students but can be used to build self-regulatory neural pathways in healthy, non-trauma-affected students.

Emotional regulation is another priority of trauma-informed teaching. Ray Wolpov and colleagues, from the Washington State Superintendent Office, recommend that trauma-affected students must have opportunities to emotion regulate by identifying and acknowledging difficult feelings, linking their internal feelings with external experiences, and learning personal strategies for de-escalating heightened emotions that enable them to return to a calm state after

arousal. Students must have multiple opportunities throughout the day to build emotional regulatory capacities to notice, understand, and communicate their feelings to others. Teachers can design and incorporate

the Sanville Institute and psychologist Allan Schore has described attachment in psychobiological models as a regulation process. This form of regulation, which begins in the mother–child dyad—as in the case of healthy

motivations and can engage in defensive reactions that reject and hurt the teachers who attempt to show warm care toward them. They reject first to avoid the pain of being rejected (a pain they may have experienced many times over in their lives).

One example of such resistance is that of a teacher struggling with an adolescent male student who had a background of suspension and prior school disengagement. The teacher had set up a classroom environment of unconditional positive regard; yet, the student's first response to teacher correction was to reject and lash out at the teacher with this comment: "You are trading on your good looks to get into our heads. You don't care about us." This teacher was initially challenged and bewildered by the student's outburst, and it caused him to question if it was indeed true. After consultation with his supervisor, this teacher reconnected to the principle of unconditional positive regard, developed a plan for modeling a moment of mindful breathing, and committed to a consistent de-escalation strategy to address these outbursts in a calm, regulatory manner: "I see that you're frustrated, and I'm here to ensure your growth as a student. Let's give you two choices which will allow you to accomplish today's learning aims. . . ." As part of this plan, an important step in restoring the relationship became consistent follow-up between teacher and student to explain the effects of these sorts of comments once both parties were in a calm state for successful reflection.

Trauma-informed teachers must develop a strong resolve to understand their own stress responses within the pressured context of the classroom. As models of adulthood, teachers hold a position of sometimes-unacknowledged power. A re-

## Attachment principles can guide teachers when nurturing relational strengths in students through classroom-based relationships

curricular opportunities such as analyzing texts through an *emotion lens*, drama-based activities where students act out and de-escalate emotions, or collaboratively problem solve using student examples. For instance, one teacher we have coached has a favorite literacy activity where the students take different highlighter colors to the text and code the text for emotion states and emotion shifts of characters, paying special attention to when the character's stress response escalates and de-escalates accordingly.

development—initiates an attunement and regulatory process for the body's stress responses and relational hardiness. The presence or absence of nurturing interactions form future templates for self-protection in the face of adversity, threats, or danger. In trauma-affected families, these templates are inconsistent and maladaptive because of unpredictable or erratic responses to stressor scenarios when children cannot comfort or soothe themselves. Defensive behaviors such as aggression, withdrawal, dissociation, and bullying can serve as protective strategies for children as a consequence of abuse or neglect.

Attachment principles can guide teachers when nurturing relational strengths in students through classroom-based relationships. Teachers must establish strong relational foundations in the classroom to ground the students in safety and belonging. In a meta-analysis of the effects of teacher–student relationships, Jeffrey Cornelius-White of Missouri State University found that strong classroom relationships are built on teacher empathy, warmth, genuineness, nondirectivity, and the encouragement of critical thinking. He noted that teachers do well when they approach student relationships as attempts to build reciprocal and secure attachments. Thus, we have adapted Carl Rogers' popularization of Stanley Standal's concept of *unconditional positive regard* for the classroom. A position of unconditional positive regard encourages a teacher to value a student regardless of his or her behaviors, affect, or presentation. Carl Rogers refers to this as a *warm caring* for the child, which is neither possessive nor demanding of personal gratification for the adult.

Such a task can be difficult with trauma-affected students, given that these students struggle with backgrounds of broken family attachments and often have the inability to create or sustain strong and lasting relationships. They may be suspicious of teachers'

### Repairing Regulatory Abilities

- Aligning the body through sensory integration strategies (e.g., drumming, music, circle games).
- Weaving rhythm and repetition across the school day, particularly during transition times.
- Introducing mindfulness strategies or mindful "brain breaks" throughout the school day.
- Staying consistent with classroom routines which practice self-regulation.

### Disordered Attachment and Building Strong Relational Capacities

The second emergent focus of trauma-informed education that came through our review of the literature concerns the healing of disordered attachment styles. The foundational theorizing of John Bowlby, Judith Schore of

### Strengthening Relational and Attachment Styles

- Building strong classroom relationships through multiple, consistent, and daily relational interactions.
- Teaching emotional intelligence competencies to understand self and others.
- Incorporating play and fun into classroom learning as a way to shift affect and prepare for learning.

lationally based classroom is predicated on the belief that struggling students will put forth their best efforts for teachers they like, respect, and believe will be present for them at times when they are not at

psychological strengths, and heal their psychological problems.

Our argument to incorporate positive education into trauma-affected teaching is supported by sociologist Corey Keyes, who posits

## *Positive education offers an important perspective to trauma-informed models of classroom learning because it creates more pathways for teachers to address differentiated social and emotional skills development*

their best. Teachers must continually work to employ attachment-based principles to present consistent, proactive, and welcoming invitations to remain in teacher-student relational mirroring and modeling to create safe opportunities for learning.

### **But Is It Enough?**

From a review of the literature on trauma-informed teaching and learning classroom models, two clear areas of intervention are strongly positioned as important opportunities to intervene when supporting trauma-affected students—regulation and relationship. However, over the last decade of working with mainstream and specialist schools to embed a wellbeing approach using interventions, we believe that positive psychology also has a role to play in contributing to trauma-informed learning. We argue that combining trauma-informed approaches with positive psychology will empower and enable teachers to promote both healing and growth in their classrooms.

We know that teachers are assisted in conceptualizing their practice through a healing lens by having the strategies required to build regulatory processes and relational strength. If trauma-affected students do not increase their abilities in these two areas, they will not be nurturing their own developmental stamina and persistence to take on greater challenges in the future. We also want teachers to widen their understandings of wellbeing and strengths-based approaches in the classroom because we believe that all students must be given opportunities to identify, practice, and grow their

a two-factor theory of mental health. This theory argues that building mental health requires more than repairing illness. One does not learn about one's strengths by studying one's weaknesses, and it has been theorized that mental health and mental illness are not opposite ends of the same continuum. Trauma-affected students need ever-present opportunities to build upon their strengths. Scholarship, especially in the field of positive psychology, continues to show that those who report struggles with mental illness and trauma also show posttraumatic growth and positive accommodation. We advocate a model of education that acknowledges the importance of increasing psychological growth in the trauma-affected classroom through proven positive psychology interventions that increase wellbeing in students.

### **Positive Psychology and Positive Education: Feeling Well and Doing Well**

Positive psychology is the empirical paradigm that studies wellbeing, human strengths, and optimal functioning in individuals, groups, and organizations. Positive education is the application of positive psychology in a school setting and positions wellbeing learning to be of equal importance to academic learning. Positive education offers an important perspective to trauma-informed models of classroom learning because it creates more pathways for teachers to address differentiated social and emotional skills development. Lea Waters, Chair and Director of the Center for Positive Psychology at the University of Melbourne, reviewed the field of positive education and found that positive education activities are

positively related to a range of wellbeing outcomes including hope, optimism, resilience, mindfulness, and other character strengths. We contend that when teachers focus on repairing regulatory competencies and maladaptive attachment styles together with a positive education approach, the resulting pedagogy is a full-bodied approach where teachers can envision their classroom as a therapeutic milieu addressing the effects of adverse childhood experiences and structuring trajectory-shifting learning to enable posttraumatic growth, psychological wellbeing, and academic aspirations for their students.

Psychologist Kate Hefferon incorporates positive psychology in her research on trauma's effects on the body in participants who have shown posttraumatic healing and growth. Similar to our work, Hefferon's research advocates a mind-body approach addressing the factors that promote posttraumatic growth by increasing psychological resources through strengthening both social support and new strengths-based competencies. We believe this same approach will assist struggling students.

### **Positive Education Interventions in a Trauma-Informed Classroom**

Our goal is to give trauma-affected students many more opportunities to build psychological resources through the inclusion of positive education. We have suggested that building upon one's strengths is both theoretically and pragmatically different than addressing that which requires healing (e.g., disrupted regulation and broken attachment patterns). Many of the intervention strategies in positive psychology require a strong sense of cortical mediation incorporating language, cognition, and social skills. As such we argue for a sequential approach to the use of positive education in trauma-affected classrooms.

Here, we detail four specific interventions with examples of how positive education interventions have been successfully used with trauma-affected classrooms in both mainstream and specialist schools.

### **Positive Emotion as a Priming Activity**

Barbara Fredrickson from the University of North Carolina has put forward the *broaden-*



*and-build* theory of positive emotion, which explains that positive emotions broaden one's thought-action repertoire and build social resources. Among a number of effects in the broaden hypothesis, positive emotions

short activities that grab students' attention at the beginning of the lesson. Often these hooks are designed to intrigue and connect preexisting student knowledge to the aims or objectives of the current day's lesson. This

## *Teaching character strengths in schools has been shown to increase school performance, achievement, and wellbeing; and to be an effective tool in planning higher education and career pathways with students*

broaden attention, improve visual attention, and change the experience of the present moment. Future resources, such as physical health, social support, resilience, and enduring skills and knowledge, generate after repeated positive emotion experiences. The broaden-and-build research has shown an upward spiral of enhanced health, growth, positive accommodation, and fulfillment.

Teachers that we have coached have made significant changes to their classroom pedagogy when focusing on positive emotions as an intervention strategy in their classrooms. Although many teachers considered themselves to be positive people who employed positive affect with their students, it was not until they considered positive emotion as a specific resource enhanced through targeted interventions that their planning created deliberate, explicit, and predictable classroom effects. For example, when priming the learning environment with positive emotion, teachers need to have specificity in their lesson planning regarding the "dosage" of positive emotion within the classroom. How does the environment look to students? Might music or sound be used to positively prime the environment? Are the classroom walls covered in chaotic text, or are there colorful, calming, and positive visuals that inspire or make room for creative thinking? Can the lighting be adjusted to increase natural or soft light to enhance a warm and relaxing environment? Is the furniture and seating such that students feel able to both concentrate and work with others effectively?

Many teachers prime their classrooms with positive emotion by transitioning into academic lessons with positive "hooks":

can occur through lesson introductions that use film clips or inconsequential games to illustrate the day's theme or aims. It may be through a humorous or thought-provoking debate which raises interest and passion. Music is a powerful positive cue to bring regulating rhythms and lyrical content to prime students for learning. If teachers are made aware of positive emotions' effects, they can then be held accountable for bringing in strategies to increase positive emotions in hourly and daily ways.

### **Character Strengths**

Developing character strengths is a powerful way for students to live toward their own values and to achieve personal goals that improve their sense of wellbeing and accomplishment. One's character strengths and personal talents are similar, but talents are valued for their tangible outcomes and strengths are valued as wellbeing outcomes in and of themselves. Psychologists Christopher Peterson and Martin Seligman proposed the *VIA Classification of Character Strengths and Virtues*, a useful and practical framework for schools to unify their strengths language through a whole-school approach for teaching and learning. The vocabulary can be easily adapted, and many schools have found that the VIA language aligns to existing school values and curricular priorities. The VIA classification of 24 strengths is divided into six corresponding virtues. Together, they are as follows: (a) virtue of wisdom and knowledge (i.e., creativity, curiosity, open-mindedness, love of learning, and perspective); (b) virtue of courage (i.e., bravery, persistence, integrity, and vitality/zest); (c) virtue of humanity (i.e.,

### Questions for Self-Assessment

1. What are the critical developmental pathways that are thwarted by trauma and how do the resulting maladaptive conditions affect learning?
2. Describe the two intervention areas included in models for trauma-affected classrooms.
3. What are the arguments given by the authors for increasing positive psychology interventions into trauma-affected teaching?
4. In what ways can teachers focus on positive emotions in their classrooms?

love, kindness, and social intelligence); (d) virtue of justice (i.e., citizenship/teamwork, fairness, leadership); (e) virtue of temperance (i.e., forgiveness, humility and modesty, prudence, and self-regulation); and (f) virtue of transcendence (i.e., appreciation of beauty and excellence, gratitude, hope, humor, and spirituality).

When identified and practiced by the individual, the concept of signature strengths can bring one closer toward personal values enactment and greater wellbeing fulfillment. All students, especially trauma-affected students, must have opportunities to identify, recognize, practice, and set goals using their signature strengths. Although there are a handful of youth-friendly, Internet-based assessments and other diagnostic ways to determine a student's signature strength, we have found great success with alternative methods to introduce and determine signature strengths with trauma-affected students—ways that do not rely on high levels of literacy and build on increasing relational interactions.

Teaching character strengths in schools has been shown to increase school performance, achievement, and wellbeing; and to be an effective tool in planning higher education and career pathways with students. For example, in a classroom for incarcerated youth, a teacher attempted to give a formal character assessment without having built relational trust or classroom expectations with the students. This teacher's first attempt was not successful, and the students—

## Increasing Psychological Capacities and Strengths in Trauma-Affected Students

- Plan opportunities during the lesson to boost positive emotion during introductory hooks, transitions, or independent work breaks
- Explore character strengths through curricular connections
- Teach and model a resilient mindset when encountering small daily adversities in the classroom
- Provide ways to action gratitude through student initiatives

all adolescent boys—rejected the assessment. They yelled comments such as, “You just want to get into our heads!” We assisted the teacher to brainstorm an alternate activity for the students to select and hone in on character strengths that best described them. Every day, the teacher would write two strengths on the board and provide the following instructions: “Today, we’re going to study a text that describes a difficult social situation between two friends. Before we begin reading together, I’ve written two words on the board: courage and fairness. Which of these two words would you select as the way you’d want to manage this scenario if you were involved?” Over the course of the school term, the boys increased both their strengths vocabulary and their understandings of how the strengths worked within their classroom texts and their own lives. By the end of the term, they were able to create signature strength profiles of themselves—and each other. Along with other like-minded educators, we have found that when paired up with a friend, trauma-affected students are quite accurate in naming signature strengths in one another as they co-create their character strength profiles. With further planning, teachers and counselors can use these character strengths to enhance motivation for future academic tasks, higher education, or career pathways for trauma-affected students.

## Resilient Mindset

Resilience for trauma-affected youth is not an endpoint or a destination. We conceptualize resilience as an ongoing develop-

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mental process wherein students must have opportunities to employ the strategies of a resilient mindset in big and small moments of adversity. Although one may consider resilience as positive coping from surviving a life-altering trauma or series of traumatic stressors, we also want to position daily resiliency for a student that includes micromoments of self-talk to buffer frustration and successfully manage the next task of the day. As in the case of vulnerable adolescents who may not live in their family home, young people constantly negotiate the social world around them; and they sometimes navigate a stream of teachers, social workers, police officers, and clinicians—still managing to live out daily resilience in con-

tinuous ways. Students make resilient choices that often go unnoticed—making the choice to come to school, even if the classroom has been a prior place of failure, frustration, and isolation. Teachers can teach daily resilience and the strategies to promote positive self-talk such as “that adult didn’t respect me the way I’d like; but all adults aren’t the same, and I have people in my life that I can trust.” Situating self-talk beliefs as temporary and nonpervasive is an example of a strategy that connects micromoments of resilience.

Teachers can teach concepts from resiliency research such as optimistic explanatory style, thinking traps, disputing one’s self-talk, and mindfully making room for

calm and focus through manualized resiliency programs (such as the *Penn Resiliency Program*, University of Pennsylvania or *MindUp*, Scholastic). We have found that once teachers learn these strategies and can integrate them into their own lives, they are able to weave these resilient mindset interventions into the life of the school day.

To incorporate resilience lessons into a busy school schedule, many classrooms begin the day in a morning meeting or a morning classroom circle, where teachers introduce and then regularly review resiliency vocabulary. A favorite strategy is to listen to radio hits and have students identify the resilient and nonresilient self-talk. It is a pretty easy task for students to determine if the pop singer is catastrophizing their current state in a love song. If the classroom has established a strong sense of peer trust and safety, students bring up personal problems or situations for seeking peer advice, and collaborative problem solving can occur through a resilient mindset lens.

Similarly, another popular activity is asking students to bring in Internet links of their favorite sport clips or defining sporting moments. Teachers ask students to imagine what parts of the brain might be firing at those particular moments and what the resilient or nonresilient self-talk may have been for that athlete. Students can be very insightful when placing themselves in such positions, and these activities give teachers valuable opportunities to suggest and insert resilient thinking cues into student responses.

## Gratitude

Teaching gratitude in trauma-affected classrooms has become a hallmark of our efforts to integrate positive education with trauma-informed practice. At times, some of the most well-meaning teachers that we have worked with initially struggle with teaching gratitude. Teachers have told us that students who have experienced traumatic stressors may find lessons on gratitude to be inappropriate given the trauma they have experienced. We understand this concern and refer to psychologist Robert Emmons, whose research in gratitude emphasizes an *embodied* sense of gratitude through action, lived experience, and

connection to others, and a recognition that even in dark times, people can benefit from practicing gratitude.

A useful definition of gratitude is being aware and appreciating good things, particularly another's actions, and experiencing the kindness of others. For trauma-affected students, conversations around gratitude must lead to opportunities to "action gratitude." Time and time again, we have found that students surprise themselves with positive action when given the time and encouragement to design their own gratitude initiatives. Gratitude also helps students to notice and capitalize "small moments of good" that occur during their day at school, such as laughing with a friend, having a heater in the classroom, or lunch provided each day. These small moments can build a positive bank account that accrues emotional, cognitive, and social resources based on Fredrickson's broaden-and-build theory.

In the positive psychology literature, gratitude activities have been shown to yield enduring wellbeing effects through daily actions such as keeping a gratitude journal, acknowledging three good things, recalling what is working well, and making "gratitude visits" to show appreciation to another.

In one school working with prior-identified trauma-affected students, a group of students mutually decided to make the principal their "gratitude target" to thank her for extraordinary efforts to include them in the life of the school. Without the principal's knowledge, the students dedicated a week of doing small, secret favors for the principal, such as leaving notes at her office and figuring out ways to recognize her publicly. At the end of the week, all was revealed to the principal, and one young person exclaimed in the debrief: "I knew that I was doing things for her so she would feel good, but I'm surprised about how great I felt doing it." These efforts are a powerful reminder that gratitude affects both the giver and receiver, and gratitude can be an effective way for trauma-affected students to build strong, empathetic relationships through action.

Teacher educator Kerry Howell has suggested that effective curriculum connections can come through gratitude. Two classroom examples involve teaching students units about the Rwandan genocide and the Jewish

Holocaust. In both cases, teachers were able to invite individuals to their classrooms who could give first-hand accounts and stories of their survival to share with the students. What began as a desire to have dynamic, interactive history lessons on trauma and resiliency became unforgettable lessons in gratitude as the students recognized and created gestures of gratitude for the visiting guests. In both classrooms, the students invited the visitors back to their classrooms. On the return visits, the students initiated and prepared shared-meals, gestures of appreciation, and moderated the conversations themselves. These classroom moments are rich examples of education toward strengths and growth, which occurred in rhythmic and regulated environments anchored in relationships of safety and belonging.

## Conclusion

Trauma-informed models of teaching and learning have been employed to connect and engage students in the classroom. By focusing on the two broad domains of improving self-regulation and building relational capacities, trauma-informed teaching assists struggling students to strengthen their capacity to learn. With proper supports, students can develop the stamina through self-regulation within a relational context to find levels of safety and belonging in the classroom that are necessary to take learning risks. We believe that trauma-informed models of teaching and learning can be enhanced by embedding positive education into the classroom. We have introduced this third focus to trauma-informed teaching and suggest that teachers can increase psychological resources such as positive emotion, character strengths, resiliency, and gratitude. By adding positive education techniques to trauma-informed teaching approaches, teachers provide the 40% of students who are trauma-affected with the opportunity for both healing areas of deficit and growing areas of strength. Our experience over the past decade with this approach has given us, the teachers, and their students great cause for hope—a quintessential positive psychology emotion.

**Keywords:** classroom; pedagogy; positive education; trauma; wellbeing; healing; growth