

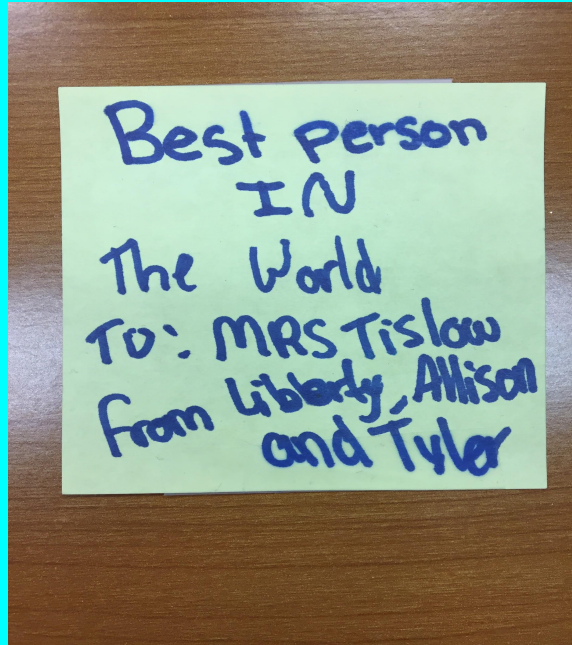


ACES ARE HIGH, BUT SCHOOL DOESN'T HAVE TO
BE WILD: THE IMPACT OF TRAUMA—INFORMED
ADMINISTRATORS IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOL SETTING

SARAH TISLOW GUSTIN
PRINCIPAL, DELPHI COMMUNITY MIDDLE SCHOOL
GUSTINS@DELPHI.K12.IN.US

Background Leading to My Inquiry

Liberty "Libby" German
"In a minute!"



Abigail "Abby" Williams
"They're pens, not markers!"



Background Leading to My Inquiry

- The trauma that has impacted my school and my community is still being felt two years later.
- How can I, as an administrator, make a positive impact on students who have been impacted by trauma?
- How can I, as the building leader, educate my staff, the families of my students, patrons, and other stakeholders about trauma and its effect on children?
- How can I, as the building leader, generate buy-in from my staff in regards to trauma-informed/trauma-invested practices?

The Purpose of My Inquiry

As my building's leader, I felt ill-equipped when it came to trauma-informed practices. I needed help, my staff needed help, and my students needed help. Even before Abby and Libby were taken from us, "anxiety" was quickly becoming the prevalent diagnosis for my students, followed closely by depression. Knowing my students as well as I do, I am aware of many--too many--who have grown up bearing witness to ACEs and other forms of trauma. Therefore, the purpose of my action inquiry was to educate myself on trauma-informed practices, and to assemble a toolkit of trauma-informed resources and practices to support my staff and my students and to educate not only the members of my school community, but also the local community as a whole.

My Wondering

With this purpose, I wondered what the most effective resources and practices might be to help students who are traditionally classified as “at risk” or “unreachable” and who have been impacted by adverse childhood experiences other forms of trauma.

My Actions

- November 20, 2018--Attended IASP Fall Professionals Conference Session, “The Neuroscience of Learning and Adversity/Trauma” with Dr. Lori Desautels
- Wednesday, November 28, 2018--Presented information learned from Dr. Desautels’ workshop to DCMS staff members during Professional Development
- February 7, 2019--Attended Strobel Education Workshop. “Trauma-Sensitive Classrooms: Cultivating Gritty, Resilient Students.”
- Weekly “Trauma Informed Tip of the Week” in my *Monday Memo* staff newsletter, beginning the week of February 4-10, 2019.
- Staff E-mail shares: Weekly, beginning on February 22, 2019
- Indiana IEP Resource Center Focus on Inclusion Conference 2019: Attended two trauma sessions with Kristin Souers
- DCSC School Board Meeting Presentations: February 2019, March 2019, April 2019

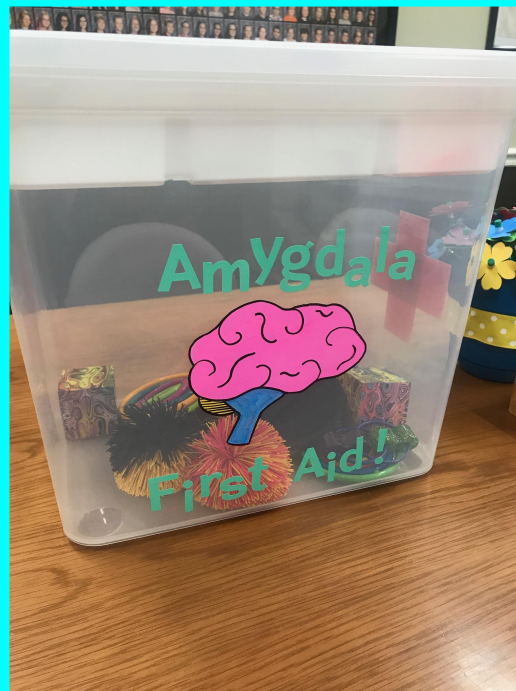
Books:

- Desautels, Lori. (2012). *How May I Serve You?* Indianapolis, IN: Revelations in Education.
- Desautels, L. & McKnight, M. (2016) *Unwritten: The Story of a Living System. A Pathway to Enlivening and Transforming Education.* Deadwood, OR: Wyatt-MacKenzie Publishing.



With Dr. Desautels at the IASP Fall Professionals Conference.

My Amygdala First Aid Kit.



Daniel and I during lunch. :)

Data Collection

Because the majority of my data is qualitative, my analysis focused on common themes, common practices, and common language across the variety of experts that I consulted; in addition, observance of trends and patterns with my students was likewise considered.

My Data

Identify Your School Triggers

Page 1 of 4

Name: _____ Date: _____

Directions: Read each item and answer honestly. Take your time as you complete this. Ask for help if you don't understand an item.

Rate each item from 1 – 5.

- 1 = Does not bother me at all
- 2 = Makes me feel a little uncomfortable
- 3 = Makes me feel stressed
- 4 = This upsets me
- 5 = I'm going to explode!



	1	2	3	4	5
A teacher gives me feedback / constructive criticism.					
Someone or something interrupts me while I am working.					
A teacher tells me to correct a mistake.					
When I don't understand what someone is saying to me.					
When I disagree with a classmate.					
When a classmate asks for help.					
Homework.					
When a teacher tells me to do something.					
Group work with peers / classmates.					
When others make suggestions on how to do something.					
When one of my ideas is not included in a project / activity.					
When someone starts "small talk" with me.					
When I am excluded from an activity or conversation.					
Meeting new people.					

Identify Your School Triggers

Page 2 of 4

Getting a lower grade on a test, quiz, or paper.					
When someone points out a mistake I made.					
Greeting people.					
Taking tests.					
When I make a mistake.					
Reporting to school on time.					
Writing papers.					
Wearing specific clothing (i.e. long pants, coat)					
School bells or loudspeaker announcements.					
Fire drills.					
When a classmate disagrees with me.					
Surprise quizzes (pop quizzes).					
Tornado drills.					
When I am late to work / school.					
When I have to do something new or different.					
Hearing other people's music /radio.					
When others touch me (i.e. handshake, pat on back).					
Large crowds.					
When I have to wait for something.					
Teasing by others.					
Crowded hallways.					
Peer pressure.					
When my daily routine is changed.					
Loud places.					
Specific noises (i.e. beeping, humming).					
Certain smells (examples: perfumes, foods).					
Math assignments.					
Big projects.					
When a teacher / authority figure tells me no.					
Changing classes.					

Identify Your School Triggers

Page 3 of 4

Bright lighting (i.e. fluorescent).					
When I have to do something in a different way from usual.					
Big classrooms.					
When I don't understand a certain idea or concept.					
When I don't finish something on time.					
Getting wet (i.e. hands, shoes).					
Field trips.					
When someone talks to me about something that I am not interested					
Certain textures (examples: in clothing, paint, glue, chalk).					
Changes in noise level.					
Deadlines, time pressures.					
Sitting at a desk for long periods of time.					
Reading assignments.					
When other people are talking near me.					
Small spaces (i.e. cubicles).					
Asking for help.					
When I am confused about a task / activity.					
When I have to follow specific instructions.					
Physical activity (i.e. in health class or P.E.).					
Large spaces (i.e. auditoriums, gyms, conference rooms).					
When I have to organize my things.					

Identify Your School Triggers

Page 4 of 4

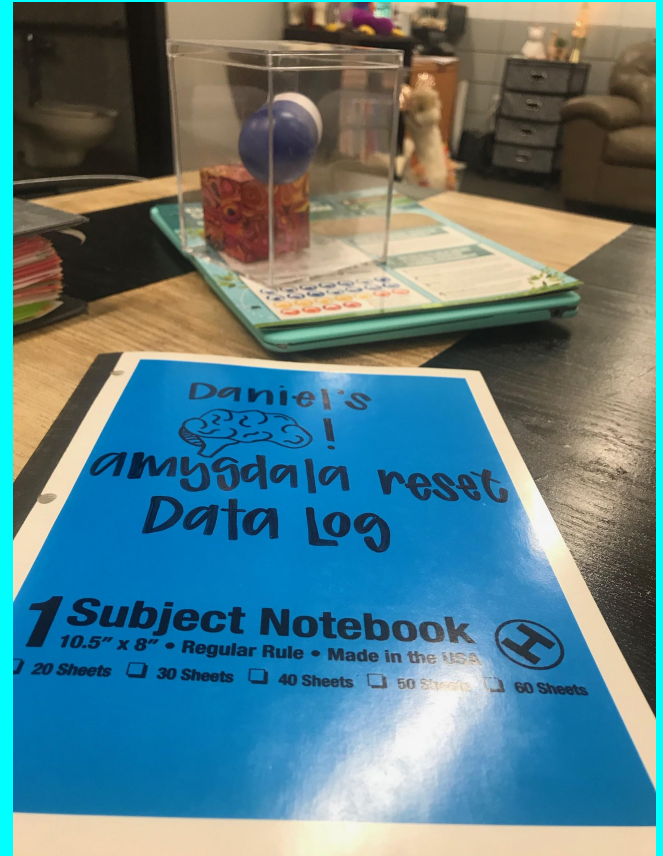
Now that you have finished rating these items, identify your **BIG TRIGGERS**. These are items that you scored as a "5" (or perhaps even a "4"). Write those down below, and be as specific as you can. For example, if certain noises make you want to "explode," describe the specific noise that makes you feel this way.

My TOP FIVE "5's" ARE:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

My Data

Grades 2018-19	02/06/2019		04/15/2019	
Class	Grade	Percent	Grade	Percent
Writing 6	F	34	D+	67
LA 6 RTI	C-	72	B+	88
Math 6 RTI	F	30	F	23
PLTW 1	D	64	B+	87
SOC STUDIES 6	F	56	D+	67
SCIENCE 6	F	38	D	69



My Discoveries

- Relationships are key.
- It is important to remember that WE are the adults and that a shift in mindset is essential to understanding trauma and trauma-informed practices.
- If a student does not know how to ride a bike or work a math problem, we teach him/her. If a student does not know how to regulate, why don't we teach him/her?

Where I am Heading Next

- I am attending the *Trauma Invested Institute for Fostering Resilient Learners* this summer with Kristin Souers and Pete Hall.
- “Brain Boot Camp” for incoming 6th graders

Bibliography

Desautels, Lori. (2012). *How May I Serve You?* Indianapolis, IN: Revelations in Education.

Desautels, L. & McKnight, M. (2016) *Unwritten: The Story of a Living System. A Pathway to Enlivening and Transforming Education.* Deadwood, OR: Wyatt-MacKenzie Publishing.

THANK YOU for your generosity!



*Indiana IEP
Resource Center*



ACEs are High, but School Doesn't Have to Be Wild: The Impact of Trauma-Informed Administrators in the Public School Setting

Principal Name: Sarah Tislow Gustin

School Name: Delphi Community Middle School

Principal's Email Contact: gustins@delphi.k12.in.us

Background Leading to My Inquiry

A little over halfway through my first year as a building principal, my school and my community changed forever on February 13, 2017. That night, while sitting at a school board meeting, I learned that two of my students, Abby Williams and Libby German had been reported missing after spending an unseasonably warm afternoon at the Monon High Bridge Trails, part of Delphi's extensive and beautiful trail system--an area frequented by our students and members of our community.

The following day, shortly after noon, I was notified that the bodies of the girls had been found. Nothing had prepared me for the emotions or my reaction that day. I knew that my duty as principal was to care for my students, my staff, and my community; however, I was truly not equipped to deal with the trauma and how it would affect me. As the media, the FBI, and law enforcement descended on my school and our small, close-knit community, it was easier for me to operate on auto-pilot. Taking care of my students and my staff, attending to the requests from the FBI and law enforcement, and managing day-to-day operations filled my days, but 99% of the time, I couldn't have told you what I had for lunch on any given day, let alone what I had (or had not) accomplished. This was my truth for over a year.

The grieving process, which looks different for everyone, coupled with the trauma of the events manifested themselves very differently for our students and our staff members. As adults, while we were in no way prepared to deal with such a devastating loss, may tend compartmentalize our feelings in order to get through the day. Our students, on the other hand, were not able to do this. Outbursts, anger, and aggression were not uncommon. Fights between friends began occurring where there had previously been no issues. Feeling sad, upset, or just "not right" and not knowing "why" is terrifying for a child. The trauma that our community had just sustained, coupled with the other forms of trauma that impact our students on a daily basis and the adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) that affect their development and maturation could fester into a perfect storm with devastating and lasting effects on our children. I became determined that I would do everything in my power to help my students and staff navigate through not only the trauma of the loss of Abby and Libby, but also through the trauma in their own lives.

The Purpose of My Inquiry

As my building's leader, I felt ill-equipped when it came to trauma-informed practices. I needed help, my staff needed help, and my students needed help. Even before Abby and Libby were taken from us, "anxiety" was quickly becoming the prevalent diagnosis for my students, followed closely by depression. Knowing my students as well as I do, I am aware of many--too

many--who have grown up bearing witness to ACEs and other forms of trauma. Therefore, the purpose of my action inquiry was to educate myself on trauma-informed practices, and to assemble a toolkit of trauma-informed resources and practices to support my staff and my students and to educate not only the members of my school community, but also the local community as a whole.

My Wondering

With this purpose, I wondered what the most effective resources and practices might be to help students who are traditionally classified as “at risk” or “unreachable” and who have been impacted by adverse childhood experiences other forms of trauma.

My Actions

To gain insight into my wondering, I knew that the first place to start was, quite honestly, in my own backyard. A dear friend of mine, Anne Marshall, is the Neuroscience Educator for a neighboring school district, and I had been following her social media shares voraciously. In addition, I knew that Dr. Lori Desautels, renowned in the field of neuroscience and trauma-informed practices, was someone from whom I could learn a great deal, and who is also located within my reach at Butler University.

I reviewed content related to the subject of trauma approximately every week from October 24, 2018 through March 27, 2019. I attended four workshops, I read two books and six articles, I watched one TedTalk, and I referenced twenty-seven infographics. I conferred with our school counselor on this topic, and had many insightful discussions with her that not only provided me with the knowledge that I craved, but those conversations also challenged me to shift my perspective.

As I continued to explore, I noticed that I was growing increasingly mindful of my words and my actions when speaking with students. For example, when a student was in my office, I began sitting next to him/her as opposed to sitting behind my desk. I began to choose my words more carefully when speaking with students, and I noticed that my mindshift had completely changed--I was less occupied with the action that had caused the student to be sent to the office, and more interested in finding out what the student needed in that moment. I found myself offering opportunities for regulation to students, and they were taking them! I began to see normal daily occurrences (hugs from four girls each morning in the cafeteria, for example) from a new perspective--in the case of my morning “huggers,” maybe touch is comforting for them and helps them to regulate.

One student, a sixth grader who chronically “shuts down” during class became my inspiration. He is truly a delightful young man who is very bright. The first time I tried talking with him, he sat in my office for nearly thirty minutes without saying a word. I finally got him to speak when I asked him about his sister, who is also a student in my building. From there, we talked about video games, and on that day, our relationship was formed. He was the first student I spoke with about the brain and how it works, and what happens when we go into our “downstairs

brain.” I would walk by his classroom and give him a hand signal by making a fist that was either “upstairs,” “downstairs,” or “halfway.” I created an Amygdala First Aid Kit/Brain Box, and he was the first student to utilize it. He comes to my office every morning before first period to pick out a fidget toy to help him regulate during the day. Sometimes, on days when he is struggling, I get him out of class and sit next to him on the floor of the hallway. We talk about Fortnite and play with our fidget toys until he is regulated and is able to return to class. Educating this student about how his brain works is important, but all education cannot be directed solely to our students.

For the staff in my building, I have incorporated a “Trauma-Informed Tip of the Week” into my weekly staff newsletter, I presented on the topic of trauma and ACEs at one professional development session in my building. I have also presented on ACEs and trauma at three Delphi Community School Corporation school board meetings.

Data Collection

Because the majority of my data is qualitative, my analysis focused on common themes, common practices, and common language across the variety of experts that I consulted; in addition, observance of trends and patterns with my students was likewise considered.

My Data

In addition to journal entries and reflections, I utilized the “Identify Your School Triggers” Stress Triggers Survey in addition to student grade data from my corporation’s student management system, Skyward.

My Discoveries

Upon analysis and reflection on the data that I have gathered, there were two takeaways that were the most prevalent. First and foremost, relationships matter. As humans, forming relationships with other humans is a basic and essential need. When relationships fail to thrive in their homes, students may seek to fulfil this need with their teachers or other school personnel. According to Desautels (2012), “There is not a child or adult that doesn’t desire to be understood and loved. There are no techniques, behavioral strategies, or assessments that provide the unique DNA for reaching out to students who dare you to teach them...” (p. 81).

The second takeaway is simply that as teachers, we must remember that we are the adults. We are equipped to keep our emotions under control (which may not be a reality for other adults in our students’ lives), and engaging in power struggles with our students will not lead to a positive outcome; rather, we may further traumatize them. Research by Desautels and McKnight (2016) describes such a struggle with a student named Dan, with whom “we had spawned a power struggle that would simply never end” (p. 43). The authors go on to describe the cycle of disruptive behavior that led to suspensions, returning angry from those suspensions, and the cycle began anew. Oftentimes, it seems impossible to fathom forming a relationship with these students, but according to Desautels and McKnight (2016),

As educators, parents and community members, we all need to recognize these children and look beyond their surface behaviors...at-risk children and youth, in need of our care, act in ways that push us away, often triggering the adults who want to help them to respond in counter-aggressive and non-productive ways (p. 46).

Finally, a very basic truth remains--if a student does not know how to ride a bike or to work a math problem, we teach that student. If that is the case, when a student does not know how to effectively regulate himself/herself, why don't we TEACH him/her to do it? Again, this is a shift in mindset that requires time, patience, and knowledge.

Where I Am Heading Next

The action research process was extremely beneficial for me both personally and professionally.

After presenting on the science of trauma and ACEs to my staff and to those present at each of the three school board meetings, I learned that trauma-informed education is truly a step-by-step process that requires drastic shift in one's mindset. After sharing information, I have received several questions, ranging from, "Does this mean that we are getting rid of discipline" to "Are you sure we don't just need to tell the kids to toughen up?" I wonder if adults' inability to recognize and accept trauma and ACEs as reasons behind some of the behaviors that we are seeing has to do with the fact that when we were in school, talking about family issues or personal matters was staunchly frowned upon and we were encouraged to put on a brave face or pretend like nothing was amiss. Someone who sought therapy or counseling was seen as "weak." Many of the stereotypes or beliefs of the past have forced us to bury our own feelings deep within ourselves, and when we are forced to face them, as we may be when discussing trauma/ACEs and interacting with our students, we may, ourselves, feel triggered. Growing comfortable with ourselves, with our own truths, and with the science of the brain is a process--just as the trauma did not occur right away, understanding the depths of it will not occur immediately.

It is my hope that at the beginning of next school year, my school counselor and I will be able to team teach neuroscience lessons to our students, beginning with our sixth graders, who not only may be suffering from trauma, but who also are embarking on a new academic journey at the middle school. I would be interested in pursuing further research to discover whether or not the transition from elementary to middle school is in any way traumatic and how to ease that transition, which is the quintessential "million dollar question" for all middle school teachers and administrators.

Bibliography

Desautels, Lori. (2012). *How May I Serve You?* Indianapolis, IN: Revelations in Education.

Desautels, L. & McKnight, M. (2016) *Unwritten: The Story of a Living System. A Pathway to Enlivening and Transforming Education.* Deadwood, OR: Wyatt-MacKenzie Publishing.

