

trauma-sensitive
leadership

creating a safe and predictable
school environment

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Introduction

Cassia, a sixth-grade student, has been in trouble for the last two years in school. In early elementary school, teachers commented about how attentive and interested she was in learning. All of that changed at the end of her fourth-grade year. She suddenly became withdrawn and quiet. She stopped turning in assignments and kept to herself a lot. Since it was the end of the school year, Cassia's teacher thought something had changed, but didn't want to pry into her family situation.

During fifth grade, all the classes were departmentalized. Cassia didn't make a meaningful connection with her teachers there and did just enough to get by.

For sixth grade, Cassia attended Floyd Middle School. At this school, the team members met every week to discuss the students and their educational progress. Floyd Middle School had adopted the care factor as a central component of its school culture. Principal Raul Haven had aligned resources to help teachers focus on students first. Teachers met in collaborative teams and structured each meeting based on the unique needs of the students and teachers.

At their third weekly team meeting, the team focused on student welfare. Team members could complete a referral and discuss student concerns at this meeting. The team members listened as Cassia's base teacher, Ms. Deacon, shared her concerns about Cassia.

After listening to her concerns, team members developed a plan to study the situation to better understand what was happening. They adopted the following elements in their plan:

- As a sixth-grade team, they decided it would be important for each of them to develop a better relationship with Cassia.

- *Cassia's base teacher, Ms. Deacon, would keep a log of Cassia's classroom behaviors to see if patterns had emerged.*
- *The collaborative team leader would keep Principal Haven sensitive about the data they had gathered so he could be ready to provide additional resources once the team better understood the problem.*

By implementing the plan, team members were able to develop a relationship with Cassia. As a result of this relationship, they were better able to determine the patterns in her behavior while also helping her to feel more comfortable and engaged in each classroom. After gathering more information, the sixth-grade collaborative team would meet again and develop a plan for implementing strategies to help Cassia to get back on track. The process would take some time, but the team knew Cassia needed the time to become comfortable with them.

In this scenario, the sixth-grade collaborative team put the success of their students at the center of their work. Because of Principal Haven's leadership, each collaborative team reserved at least one of their weekly meeting sessions to focus specifically on student welfare issues. Since this process has been implemented, the collaborative teams at the school have been able to keep many students from "falling through the cracks" and instead, helped them be successful. The leadership of Principal Haven had helped the school become more trauma sensitive.

Our Personal Experiences With Childhood Trauma and Leading Trauma-Sensitive Schools

As we detailed in our book *Trauma-Sensitive Instruction: Creating a Safe and Predictable Classroom Environment* (Eller & Hierck, 2021), we have experienced childhood trauma in our own lives, taught in classrooms using trauma-sensitive strategies, and led schools that served trauma-impacted students during our careers.

Because of our backgrounds and experiences, we are uniquely qualified to assist teachers and school leaders as they work with students from traumatic homes and situations. Our biographies appear at the front of this book, but following are some of the experiences we've had to directly transfer to the mission of supporting students, teachers, and school leaders in working with trauma-impacted students.

John F. Eller

In developing this book, John called on his extensive experiences in implementing foundational strategies that support trauma-sensitive classrooms and schools, plus his research and previous writings on the topic.

John has served as an elementary and secondary school teacher, a principal in several schools, an assistant superintendent of curriculum and learning, a principal's center director, a university professor, and in various other positions during his career. Following are some of John's pertinent experiences.

- Worked extensively as a classroom teacher, principal, and district office administrator in communities and neighborhoods that served students living in traumatic conditions.
- Supported teachers and leaders as a consultant in the areas of positive classroom environments, classroom management, building relationships, developing parent partnerships, and other areas directly related to adverse childhood experiences (ACEs).
- Developed and implemented programs that were beneficial to students experiencing trauma. One of his schools was honored with the Iowa First in the National Education (FINE) Award for transforming school culture, and John was named as the state principal of the year and a National Distinguished Principal with the U.S. Department of Education.
- Authored many books and articles on topics related to trauma-sensitive instruction, including developing the *care factor* with students and families, in which the principal helps teachers and students feel that someone cares for them; in turn, teachers show their level of caring for students, and then students show each other they care. This helps establish and maintain a caring and nurturing school culture. Topics also include school culture, classroom management, de-escalating conflict, and working with teachers to implement change.
- Worked as a consultant since 1996 with schools, districts, intermediate education agencies, and other education institutions on foundational topics related to trauma-sensitive classrooms and schools. In addition to consulting on these topics in North America, John also has worked with teachers and leaders in Chile, Australia, China, Japan, and Europe.



Tom Hierck

Tom has channeled all of his expertise and experiences into this new book to help teachers and leaders make their classrooms more trauma sensitive. Tom has served as a teacher, a school administrator, a program director, and an author in the area of trauma-sensitive teaching and leading. Following is a summary of those experiences.

- Worked extensively as a teacher, an administrator, and a consultant in the areas of trauma, behavior management, and developing student resilience and potential.
- Worked in programs serving students with severe behavior issues and in alternative education programs designed to help students experiencing trauma.
- Developed a model program to help indigenous students and families.
- Led the reform of a behavior program that helped students to build resilience, and implemented intervention programs, such as positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS), to help teachers understand the trauma behind behaviors and teach students alternative behaviors while building resilience.
- Worked as a consultant in North America and Australia helping educators understand student trauma, building classrooms and schools that are more trauma sensitive, developing classroom environments where students are taught and practice productive behaviors, building positive learning environments, and championing the idea that *all* students can learn and be successful at high levels.
- Authored many books on response to intervention (RTI), school and classroom culture, assessment, and positive behavior management all related to trauma-sensitive teaching and leading.

Both of us have had experiences similar to those many of your students may have had. This has been a tremendous asset in our work with students from traumatic situations. These experiences have helped us *relate* to them and understand some of what they are going through themselves, allowing us to empathize and step back and try to understand each situation in a unique manner.

Some of you may also have experienced trauma as a child. Somehow, you may have overcome your situation, or maybe the experiences are hidden in your deep memory and influence how you think and process experiences. Your experiences may have made you more sensitive and aware of the impact of trauma on your students, or they may have made you less tolerant of some of the situations your students are facing. This lack of tolerance may lead someone to think, “I worked hard and overcame my traumatic situations. Why can’t my students do the same?” In contrast, if your experiences have made you too sensitive, you may allow your students too much leeway so that they are unaccountable for their behaviors. Letting students get by with misbehaviors does not help them develop the resilience they need to overcome their trauma. Whatever your experiences have been, trauma does impact how you think about working with trauma-impacted students.

Teachers tell us that more and more students live in trauma and experience mental health challenges. We have observed how trauma-impacted students struggle to focus and learn. These issues impact the classroom and behavior management, and cause teachers to take time away from teaching and learning activities to address students’ mental health needs. These traumatic home situations have been amplified during the COVID-19 pandemic.

You don’t need to have experienced childhood trauma to empathize and understand students’ perspectives. If you try to understand what students might be experiencing, that’s a great first step. Being able to step back before reacting will help you better understand their situations and develop positive relationships that will help you work with them more successfully.

Purpose of This Book

In *Trauma-Sensitive Instruction* (Eller & Hierck, 2021), we discussed the topic of trauma from the classroom or teacher perspective. In this book, we focus on trauma from a school and school leadership perspective. You’ll explore ideas and strategies to support teachers and implement trauma-sensitive instruction as a whole school. Effective implementation and change happens because leaders help set the stage and promote and support these changes.



Based on these data, it is more important than ever to understand these traumatic situations and make classrooms and schools more trauma sensitive. This has been heightened by the world's struggle with the recent COVID-19 pandemic. With students and families working and learning from home, the traumatic situations students are facing have increased.

Because of the prevalence of childhood trauma, we decided to write this book to help school leaders understand the importance of this topic and share strategies and ideas to help move a school closer to being trauma sensitive. While there are many books on the trauma-sensitive process, none of them offer the unique perspectives and experiences that we bring to this topic.

Overview of This Book

This book is designed to serve as a resource as you embark on your trauma-sensitive journey. While information is organized sequentially, you do not have to read this book from cover to cover. Feel free to read the chapters in the order that makes the most sense for you. Following is an overview of the information you will find in each chapter.

- **Chapter 1: Examining Trauma and Its Impact on Educators and Students**—Chapter 1 examines both foundational and current information related to trauma and how it impacts the students, parents, and teachers in your school. The focus may need to be refined when working with teachers who have experienced childhood trauma versus working with those who have not. This chapter also explores recent brain research related to trauma, what it does to students' brains, and how it can shape their reactions. This information is important because it not only helps you understand what's happening to students, but also provides the information you need to design strategies to support students when coping with trauma.
- **Chapter 2: Fostering a Trauma-Sensitive Attitude and School Culture**—In this chapter, the importance of understanding the attitude and mindset you bring to school is crucial. If you have preconceived notions about students and their families that are experiencing trauma, your trauma-sensitive efforts will not be successful. Shaping your attitude as an educator and leader, and helping teachers to shape their

