

TRANSCRIPT

## Voices from the Field: The Importance of Trauma-Informed Practices

January 30, 2018

NARRATOR

The use of trauma-informed practices to help children and youth thrive is gaining traction in K–12 schools and other youth-serving organizations. New interdisciplinary research is pointing the way forward to help youth be safe, healthy, and engaged learners, and to help the adults who support them to be successful.

Trauma describes a range of experiences that are emotionally painful and distressing, and that overwhelm a person’s ability to cope, leaving them with feelings of helplessness, fear, and disconnection. Trauma-informed practices are aimed at understanding how harmful experiences can shape someone’s thoughts and actions, and building the relationships necessary to help them overcome the negative impacts of trauma.

At a recent REL West event, two leading researchers in the field of trauma and resilience, Dr. Leora Wolf-Prusan and Dr. Martha Merchant, shared their perspectives about the way trauma-informed practices are making gains, both for individuals and for strengthening the culture of schools and other organizations that support students.

DR. LEORA WOLF-PRUSAN

The promise of trauma informed is not a new promise, right? We’ve been talking about the importance of safety and relationships in education, particularly in the small schools movement for many, many years. What’s happening now is that it’s giving educators the language to really understand that the non-academic or non-cognitive factors are actually academic and cognitive factors. We can’t get to cognition until we get to safety and relationship.

I think part of what has contributed to the proliferation and, kind of the adaption of...and adoption of trauma-informed services and care for us as educators is this idea that—one, is that we’re learning an enormous new amount about the brain. So suddenly, those of us who have been tasked to teach an organ that we really didn’t understand for a long time, now we’ve got new information to make our personalized learning environments more rich and brain-science informed, which is incredible.

The second piece, I think, is more about our culture nationwide, which is that we’re actually at this pivotal inflection point where generations before us...it’s not like trauma is new; trauma has always existed, right? But what is new is that we’re no longer being shameful about living with pain, living with harm, or addressing rupture in relationship.

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DR. MARTHA MERCHANT

You know the research says that 84% of us will experience a trauma in our lifetimes. It's important because we're not talking about those people over there who have trauma. We're talking about all the people in the world that have experienced things that are traumatic; and the approach doesn't just help people who have experienced trauma, in fact, trauma-informed systems, trauma-informed schools help everyone in the building to do better.

When we understand trauma and stress it can help give us like an "aha" moment; it can help us understand the puzzling behaviors that we see in front of us, right? If we know what's going on for people, we can approach that differently.

We really want to ask people to shift their perspective from one that asks, "What is wrong with you?" to one that asks, "What has happened to you?" right? When we're able to do that we get context, it fosters compassion, it helps us to see strengths in the face of adversity.

NARRATOR

We heard from both about specific actions that educators can take to create more trauma-informed environments.

DR. LEORA WOLF-PRUSAN

In terms of what can a new teacher do to start to embed and embody trauma-informed practices and approaches into their, into their new teaching practice, pretty foundational is to engage in self- and collective care.

We really want to be conscious that you're not that student's savior, you're not responding to their trauma, you're not going to take care of it. What you can do is be their meaning-making partner and, and know that the student knows that you know them, knows that you pay attention to them, knows that you know their name, and also know that they can come to you and approach you if they're in need of further support beyond your traditional role.

DR. MARTHA MERCHANT

For every "big I" intervention that we talk about—therapy and services and wraparound and all those things—every one of those is built up of "little I" interactions, right? Hi, how's it going? Call you by name, look you in the eye, nice to see you today, what's up today, right? All those "little I" interactions make a difference. Every positive interaction that you have with a trustworthy other, helps to rebuild connections in the brain, right? Such that we can move the song from the fear song to the compassion song. To the "school is a place for me" song. To the "I know where to find help" song.

NARRATOR

They both shared what's really exciting to them about using trauma-informed practices with students and in schools.

DR. LEORA WOLF-PRUSAN

What it feels like, when the world feels overwhelming, violent, shifted; I can't trust people, I don't believe that people are inherently there for me, and I know...and I fundamentally believe that someone will leave me.

When someone sits across from me and says, "I see you. I not only see your potential, I see your, your gift. I'm not, I'm not asking you to be different, I'm seeing you for who you are," that in itself can be incredibly healing for someone who may not feel seen.

DR MARTHA MERCHANT

I feel like I've been honored to see a lot of transformations. I've seen entire school buildings become calmer, quieter places where it's easier for kids to learn and for teachers to teach. I've also seen relationships between students and teachers change such that kids really felt like valued members of their classroom and changed the way that those kids looked at their education going forward. And I've also seen individual students have remarkable transformations where they moved from a place like "school is not a place for me, school is not an important place for me" or "I don't care about school," to feeling like not only do they belong in school, but that they really can succeed there.

DR. LEORA WOLF-PRUSAN

At this point, we know. We know that nationwide our young people are hurting, our educators are hurting, and our schools are hurting. So there's not...there shouldn't be a question anymore, there should only be a "Where can I learn more?"

NARRATOR

This video is funded by the Institute of Education Sciences at the U.S. Department of Education. To learn more, please email us at [relwest@wested.org](mailto:relwest@wested.org) or visit [ies.ed.gov](http://ies.ed.gov).