

Book review of *Trauma-Sensitive Schools: The Importance of Instilling Grit, Determination, and Resilience*

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Abstract: This paper is a review of Colleen Lelli's book "Trauma-sensitive schools: The importance of instilling grit, determination, and resilience". With her career and lived experience as her reference, Lelli provides a practical and informational guide for educators working with children and youth who have experienced trauma. Drawing on many foundational theorists, this book provides insight into trauma-sensitive schools, the benefits, and how teachers can implement these practices within their classrooms. This book is sure to be valuable to educators at any stage in their careers.

Keywords: trauma-sensitive, education, child development, abusive family system, classrooms

The Effects of Trauma in a Classroom

Colleen Lelli recently expanded her doctoral work into *Trauma-Sensitive Schools: The Importance of Instilling Grit, Determination, and Resilience* to elaborate on strategies and tools educators can apply when using “trauma-informed practices in school settings, classrooms, before and aftercare programs” (p. x). Her background includes being a high school learning support teacher beginning in the mid 1990’s and she is currently a college professor. Her lived experience included observing students who were unfulfilled with learning and school in general. Lelli explains that her experience of working with high school students led her to query whether some of her students’ past traumatic experiences and home lives affected their learning.

The title of the book and the use of the words *Grit* and *Resilience* are, at best, controversial when talking about children who have been traumatized. Written in the United Kingdom, this book features explanations, tools, and skill-building activities for educators. Lelli incorporates many studies, theorists, and organizations from around the world and how their work contributes to a trauma-sensitive school. She pulls together an exhaustive review of the literature and does so in a very inclusive way that does not differentiate between classrooms in different countries. Given that Lelli draws on research from education contexts across the globe, her findings and practical guidance may be helpful for teachers in a wide variety of contexts, including Canada where many students have experienced traumas that impact their daily lives. At 157 pages, this is a straightforward, reader-friendly text that successfully targets educators and is mindful of time constraints in the classroom. The book is divided into three distinct parts so an educator can easily pick it up and turn quickly to the information they are needing at the moment: Part 1: Background Knowledge for Children of Trauma (Chapter 1); Part 2: The Impact of Trauma and the Interventions to Success (Chapter 2,3,4,5); and Part 3: Toolbox with more strategies to Support Children of Trauma (Chapter 6,7,8,9). Lelli begins Part 1 by focusing on the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) Study and explains its purpose in describing how childhood abuse, neglect, and other traumatic experiences could affect well-being in adulthood. Explaining in depth the ACEs study, Lelli supplies visuals, tables, and summarizes how Adverse Childhood Experiences affect the education of children.

Part 2, which is comprised of chapters 2 through 5, takes the reader on a journey of understanding. It begins with a succinct introduction to what exactly domestic violence is and the effects of domestic violence on children. Lelli shares definitions of domestic violence and defines key terms and abbreviations (e.g., IPV, Intimate Partner Violence). Using diagrams gives the educator tools to understand better domestic violence’s complexity and its cascading deleterious effects. A wonderful inclusion in the beginning of Part 2 is the breakdown of myths and realities of domestic violence and the warning signs of exposure to domestic violence. Chapter 2 concludes with a descriptive narrative on how domestic violence affects children who must live within an abusive system.

Chapter 3 encompasses how trauma affects children through the developmental stage. Lelli makes a valuable point at the onset of the chapter: “As we begin to explore the various theorists below, remember to keep in mind these stages are average ages and that each child develops at their speed” (p. 35). Lelli describes seminal developmental theorists Erik Erickson, Jean Piaget, and Urie Bronfenbrenner and interweaves the theorists’ perspectives into age-specific examples of what behaviour might be displayed at each stage, i.e., early childhood, elementary-aged students, and secondary-aged students, when trauma or adverse experiences occur. For example, in elementary-aged students

“If trauma exists then children will demonstrate impairments in social and cognitive development” (p. 45). The inclusion of a figure (p. 46) on the behaviours children who have been traumatized may display is of extreme importance as many educators would be able to incorporate into their own scheme that behaviours are communication.

Chapter 4, Lelli discusses how childhood trauma affects a child’s language and memory. Once again, her use of diagrams and charts helps to make the information accessible for all educators. She provides strategies and suggestions to aid educators in supporting a child’s language development, including a detailed list of strategies to support a student struggling with expressive and/or receptive language (p. 53-54). Regarding memory, Lelli concisely explains the different types of memory for educators. She concludes the chapter with strategies and suggestions to help assist children with their short and long-term memory, once again including a detailed list of ways to support a child struggling with long-term and/or short-term memory (e.g., mnemonics, repetition, concept maps; p. 57).

In Chapter 5, Lelli explains the relationship between childhood trauma and self-regulation. She breaks the chapter into the conceptual framework of attachment theory and writes about the significance of the student-teacher relationship. Lelli successfully includes not only the concept of self-regulation but also the stress response system and how that can affect all relationships including the student-teacher relationship. In this section, Lelli presents a table of internalized and externalized behaviours that an educator may see in a classroom for a child with poor self-regulation due to disorganized attachment to their caregiver and once again proceeds to share strategies to help students in the classroom (p. 75-77).

Part 3 contains a “toolbox” for educators when working with children of trauma. Chapter 6 shares examples and strategies to help children expand on their reading. Lelli demonstrates the necessity for shared reading and that home reading experiences are positively related to “language growth, emergent literacy skills, phonological awareness, and reading achievement” (p. 85). Chapter 7 delves into the concept of bibliotherapy, or literature that helps connect students to lived experiences, and how problems can be solved through the narratives of the characters. Lelli provides educators with a book list which is broken down by traumatic experience (e.g., child abuse, foster care) and then what books would be suitable for the subject matter and the grade of the student. Not only does Lelli provide these resources, but she also includes a list of books with a synopsis for adolescents. This invaluable resource allows an educator to address difficult and sensitive subjects with the students which in turn can open up the lines of communication and hopefully be able to build on the teacher-student relationship.

Chapter 8 explores the necessity of mental health awareness and emphasizes the importance of a student feeling safe within the classroom. Lelli cites Becker and Luthar’s (2002) seminal research, “[that] stress in the classroom can be reduced, and promotion of social-emotional growth can exist by the creation of a nurturing environment” (p. 111). Throughout the chapter, Lelli emphasizes the need for a positive school climate and the importance of mental health awareness as it “is critical to learning in addition to social and emotional development and a trauma-sensitive approach” (p. 112). She then provides the reader with social-emotional learning frameworks and social emotional curriculum in an education setting.

Chapter 9, the final chapter of this part, speaks to how an educator can instill resilience, grit and determination. Lelli breaks down the chapter by providing models and frameworks for resiliency as well as a list of strategies that could be applied across many different classrooms throughout elementary and secondary school as they include education-related resources as well as personal growth (e.g., writing the story of a picture, hot chocolate breathing, the use of media to begin discussions; p. 138-140). Lelli continues by providing a list of helpful and unhelpful sentences to say, so that teachers may avoid saying the latter to students. For example, say “You worked so hard on this project” rather than “You are smart” (p. 136). She concludes the chapter with practical strategies an educator can implement into their class as well as a list of books an educator can use to instill resiliency.

There is one final chapter in the book that is not included in the separate sections and that is self-care for educators. This final chapter is wonderfully filled with information regarding signs and symptoms of vicarious trauma, compassion fatigue, and secondary traumatic stress. Lelli gives multiple examples of how an educator can engage in self-care and provides permission to all educators to experience what they are feeling. This is a perfect way to end this book as it is important for those who care for others to take care of themselves. If an educator is not mentally healthy (burnt out, exhausted, etc.) then they will have great difficulty in being there for their students. The ending of this book is a good reminder of this.

Trauma-Sensitive Schools: The Importance of Instilling Grit, Determination, and Resilience offers educators not only a broader understanding of what a trauma informed school is, but also how an educator can implement tools and strategies within their classroom so that their classroom is trauma-sensitive. In conclusion, this book allows educators a glimpse into the effects of trauma on their students and how some simple yet effective strategies can affect the climate of the classroom. Lelli covered a lot of information in this book, which may be overwhelming for educators. However, she recognizes this and provides suggestions for further in-depth reading. Furthermore, the book takes on the assumption that a child stays with an educator for a full year; however, it may be the case that a child moves between foster homes and is not in the same class. There also is not a full discussion about when a child presents academically much lower than their chronological age, which may be critical for educators to understand in some cases. Overall, I believe this book needs to be on the shelf of every educator as “helping traumatized children does not have to take place in a clinical setting but can take place in nonclinical settings with people such as educators, caregivers, coaches, and family members” (p. x).

REFERENCES

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