

Some Considerations when Teaching Students with PTSD

Monica Graham

Eastern Washington University



Monica Graham received her bachelor degrees in history and philosophy from Central Washington University in 2006, her TESOL certificate from Gonzaga University in 2010 and her Master's in Social Work from Eastern Washington University in 2017. She served in the Peace Corps 2006-2009 and was posted to Ukraine. She has taught in India, China and Taiwan. Currently, she teaches at Spokane Community College in the English as a Second Language program. Her areas of interest are refugee mental health and supporting teaching working with students facing mental health issues.

Abstract

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder or PTSD is affecting our refugee and immigrant student population. Teachers need to quickly assess students' state of mental health each day in order to create a safe and learning environment in the classroom. Asking questions to establish how students are feeling each day is one way to achieve this goal. Once established it is important to assess students' basic needs. Basic needs consist of food, shelter and /or personal safety. From there it is possible to create a safe classroom environment. Students need to feel safe in the classroom in order to allow for learning to take place. Consider your classroom layout and how you interact with students to lessen the symptoms of PTSD.

Keywords: PTSD, basic needs, feelings, safe learning environment

For four years, I have had the privilege to teach students who are often newly-arrived refugees. My students come from a wide range of countries including /but not limited to: Iraq, Afghanistan, Myanmar, DRC, Ethiopia, Ukraine, and Marshal Islands. Students range in age from 21 to 75 years old. Some students arrive with little or no first language schooling. Newly arrived students are placed in my lower level class and it is my job and privilege to welcome them to the community and begin to help them on their learning journey. These students have regularly struggled to overcome the barrier of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder or PTSD in their learning. Their struggles inspired me to return to school and obtain my masters in social work focusing on refugee / immigrant mental health. Allowing me to combine my love for teaching with a newly acquired knowledge of trauma and the effects of PTSD on students. In this brief article, drawing upon

my teaching experiences in the United States as well as overseas and my background in social work, I share the three elements that I have found essential to consider in support for students whose learning and development is often impacted by PTSD.

I have found that it is most imperative to pay attention to the role of feelings in the classroom. The first task I carry out starting my class every day is ask, "How do you feel today?" As a teacher and mental health professional, I know that the answer to that simple question will determine the course of the lesson plan. If students respond with, "I feel good" or "I feel happy," I know I will be able to focus on grammar or more complex concepts. If students offer responses such as "I feel hungry," "I feel sad" or "I feel scared," then I realize I am not only up against the day-to-day difficulties of language learning, I am facing potential traumas resurfacing. My primary job then becomes to make students feel safe and welcome in order to reach the goal of learning. Often as educators we have students that fail to thrive in a learning environment, and as a TESOL professional we consider such factors as age, previous educational experience, and motivation; however, I suggest that we also need to ask: "How is the student's mental health? Are basic emotional needs being met?"

Another key question I ask myself is, "How can I provide the safest learning environment possible for students?" To address a safe learning environment first consider your classroom layout. Many PTSD survivors feel uncomfortable when they cannot clearly see the exit. Others might feel uncomfortable if they can be easily seen from a window. Consider changing the layout if possible. Although in TESOL and in education in general, we strive to create diversity when placing students in groups, you might wish to consider if students are initially placed in such a way that raises their anxiety level. Especially for new students, consider if being placed near others of the same language group or gender would lead to more learning or less at least in the early stages of teaching as students adjust to their new setting and culture. As we work towards integrating our diverse classrooms and I truly believe it's up to the teacher's discretion on how to group students. I would simply recommend to be aware especially of students who are new to this country that they may feel very anxious sitting next to someone of a different race or gender. If students are anxious

it can stunt the learning process. Students with PTSD may revert to a kind of fight or flight mode or a hyper state of awareness students are then unable to learn and retain new information. Conversely, consider that just because students speak the same language does not mean they will be comfortable next to each other. We need to have a basic understanding of the conflicts that are happening around the world and how they may have shaped the places and experiences our students come from. Sometimes students who were on opposite sides of a conflict are in the same classroom together. Be aware of how and when you call on students who have not raised their hands. Being called on unexpectedly can be a very triggering event for some PTSD survivors. Especially until you create a good teacher student relationship. A seemingly harmless question directed at any student at random can have a negative effect on students with PTSD as they might shut down, when students shut down they stop retaining new information.

Once you establish a safe learning environment, next you need to ascertain if the students' basic needs are being met. If students are hungry, cold, tired, or scared they will be unable to process your lesson. If this happens, you will find you are continually repeating yourself, causing frustration for everyone. If possible through community donations make sure your students have warm clothes in the winter and offer food in your classroom for those students who are hungry. Offer to hold onto students' books and materials after class if their home situations are not ideal or if they are forced to move around a lot. Eliminating students' worries regarding their basic needs will allow them to focus on educational goals which will lead to your classroom running more smoothly.

Finally, it is important for you to acknowledge that sometime students need more support than an educator can provide. For this reason, we need to establish strong working relationships with mental health professionals in our communities. At some point you may need to refer or encourage a student to seek more help. I have found that many students are uncomfortable with the term counselor or going to counseling, which is why as educators it is ideal to create strong bonds with student, to be able to refer students to the proper professional. Often we become unwittingly the front line mental health professionals

and as educators this is not our role. This can blur the lines of our profession and put our own well-being at risk. For example students can unwittingly transfer secondary trauma to educators if they are relating war experiences or other horrors they have experienced. As educators we must do what in the best interest of our students as well as take care of ourselves and refer students to mental health professionals if needed.

In summary, by making your classroom a safe place you can reduce symptoms of PTSD in your students and optimize student outcomes. With a basic understanding of triggers and students' needs you can reduce anxiety in the classroom and allow students to flourish in an academic setting. This enables you to focus on what you do best – teach!

For Further Reading:

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