Key Takeaways
Safe Enough to Learn: Trauma-Informed Teaching in Indian Country
Whitney Nordvold, LCSW-QMHP

1. Trauma-informed practice is root-focused, not just behavior-focused.
Trauma-informed teaching means looking beyond what a student is doing to consider what might be contributing to their behavior. Stress, trauma, anxiety, depression, unmet needs, and environmental factors can all influence how children respond. Understanding the root of a behavior doesn't mean removing expectations or accountability. It means responding with curiosity rather than assumptions and addressing what may be contributing to the behavior.

2. Behavior follows nervous system state.
Our nervous systems influence our ability to think, learn, connect, and respond to the world around us. When students feel threatened or overwhelmed, they may become reactive, defensive, restless, avoidant, or withdrawn. What looks like laziness, defiance, or a lack of motivation may actually reflect a student struggling to manage their internal experience. Behavior tells us something is happening, but it doesn't always tell us what.

3. Safety creates the conditions for learning.
When children feel relatively safe and connected, they have greater capacity for curiosity, problem-solving, cooperation, creativity, and learning. When they experience significant stress or perceived threats, those abilities can become harder to access. A student's ability to engage can change depending on their nervous system state. Safety doesn't mean students will never experience discomfort or frustration. It means they have enough support and stability to navigate those experiences.

4. Safety is more than the absence of danger.
Our nervous systems continually receive information from the people and environments around us. Warm facial expressions, respectful communication, predictability, consistency, connection, and genuine joy can all communicate safety. Unpredictability, hostility, humiliation, exclusion, and ongoing tension can communicate threat. Children are particularly attentive to the adults responsible for them. What they observe in our interactions matters, even when those interactions aren't directed at them.

5. Co-regulation is a powerful part of teaching.
Our nervous systems influence one another through relationships. A steady, responsive adult can help a child manage overwhelming emotions and return to a state where learning and connection are more accessible. Co-regulation happens through everyday interactions, including tone of voice, facial expressions, attention, consistency, and how we respond to challenges. Regulation doesn't mean being perfectly calm or emotionally neutral. Healthy regulation includes the ability to experience emotions, respond flexibly, and repair relationships when things go wrong.

6. The well-being of educators matters, too.

Teachers and staff bring their own experiences, stressors, relationships, and histories into their work. Burnout, compassion fatigue, and vicarious trauma can affect those who regularly support children and families experiencing hardship. In Native communities, educators may also be navigating some of the same grief, historical and generational trauma, and community challenges affecting their students. Shared identity doesn't automatically mean shared trauma, but those overlapping experiences deserve recognition. Developing self-regulation skills, engaging in personal healing, and protecting our well-being are important parts of supporting children. Schools also have a responsibility to create environments where staff are supported and have access to the resources they need.

7. Consistency, predictability, and connection help create safety.

Children benefit from knowing what to expect and experiencing adults who respond in reliable, respectful ways. Clear routines, consistent expectations, preparation for transitions, and appropriate choices can reduce uncertainty and support regulation. Connection can be built through simple interactions such as greeting students by name, noticing their efforts, showing interest in their lives, and responding with curiosity before correction. Boundaries and accountability remain important, but they can be maintained without shame, humiliation, or threats to the relationship.

8. Children need to feel genuinely liked and enjoyed.

One of the most meaningful experiences we can offer children is the opportunity to be around adults who genuinely enjoy them. Smiling when students enter the room, sharing laughter, celebrating accomplishments, and showing enthusiasm for being together can communicate warmth, connection, and belonging. Children also observe how faculty and staff interact with one another. When responsible adults are relaxed, consistent, connected, and expressing joy, they provide important cues of safety. Children don't need adults who are happy all the time. They need adults who are authentic, respectful, reasonably predictable, and able to maintain and repair relationships.

9. Mattering means both feeling valued and adding value.

Psychologists Isaac and Ora Prilleltensky describe mattering through two interconnected experiences: feeling valued and adding value. Children need to know they are noticed, respected, appreciated, and genuinely wanted. They also need opportunities to contribute, use their strengths, help others, and experience themselves as important members of their classroom and community. Meaningful responsibilities, student voice, encouragement, and opportunities for contribution help support a sense of belonging and purpose. A child's worth is not dependent on

what they contribute, but having something meaningful to offer can strengthen their experience of mattering.

10. What we practice together becomes school culture.

School culture develops through repeated interactions and shared experiences. When adults consistently practice curiosity, respect, accountability, connection, repair, and encouragement, those experiences help shape what students come to expect from their school environment. Trauma-informed education is not simply a collection of strategies for managing difficult behavior. It is an ongoing commitment to creating environments where students and staff experience safety, belonging, dignity, and opportunities to thrive.

Final Reflection

Children bring more into our classrooms than we can see. We may not know everything they have experienced, and we cannot control every circumstance affecting their lives. But we do have influence over what they experience in our presence.

Children need more than adults who manage their behavior, meet their educational needs, or keep them physically safe. They need relationships where they feel known, valued, wanted, and genuinely enjoyed.

And the same is true for educators. Healthy, supported adults are better positioned to create healthy, supportive environments for children.

Taking care of the adults who care for children is part of taking care of children.

Ultimately, trauma-informed teaching is about more than understanding what children carry. It is about recognizing what we bring into the room and being intentional about what we create together.

Ask yourself: What does it feel like to be a child in my presence? Do the children I work with know that I genuinely enjoy them? Do they feel valued, and do they know they have something valuable to contribute?

Safety creates the conditions for learning. Relationships help create safety. And every child deserves to experience that they matter.

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Resources:

Bailey, B. A. (2015). Conscious Discipline: Building Resilient Classrooms. Loving Guidance, Inc., https://consciousdiscipline.com

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Prilleltensky, I., & Prilleltensky, O. (2021). How People Matter: Why It Affects Health, Happiness, Love, Work, and Society. Cambridge University Press.