

# “When my mom was incarcerated, I missed her.”

## Trauma’s Impact on Learning in Pre-K-12 Classrooms

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### Abstract

Trauma affects our classrooms frequently. Children who observe or experience trauma directly often demonstrate an altered learning process and shifting emotional needs. What guidance might inform K-12 instruction productively? This article frames the patterns discovered when a teacher researcher studied the teaching practices, strategies, and language of six educators who survived their own experiences of childhood sexual assault. With a keen awareness on strength and fragility, I detail the engaging, authentic, and community-centered methods from educators who turned their own experiences of trauma into effective ways to engage learners and build welcoming learning communities.

### Trauma’s Impact on Learning

We gather near the library door, preparing to return to our classroom. Jae’len struggles with the transition, and I ask if he can walk by himself or if he needs help. His verbal rant grows louder, and I gently hold his hand. Verbally loud and physically pulling away, he relentlessly holds my hand. With gentle energy, I lead us into our classroom and slowly shut our door.

I work with a small group on the carpet; Jae’len draws on the whiteboard beside me. After a few moments, he taps my shoulder and tells me how his picture shows “he anger.” I continue working with my group. A few minutes later he speaks again, telling me how I make him feel. His drawing shows a picture of me with a smile; he has changed his angry face to a smile. He moves closer, reminding me he did not do his “box” this morning. Much like a hope box, we use the small cardboard box to metaphorically hold his anxieties and anger each morning. I ask if we ought to do it now, and he says, “Yes.” Excusing myself from the small group, Jae’len and I walk over to my desk in silence, where he completes his much-needed-but-sometimes-not-completed morning ritual. I notice his energy change, and I asked him if my staying with him helped. He very quietly whispers, “Yes.”

Alongside the Common Core and district initiatives that drive classroom work, educators must find and use the most effective methods to ensure all students reach their highest potential and the desired goals. Jae’len taught me the most effective method for him was to be *with* him. If I waited with compassion even when he was furiously lashing out, he would almost always stay with us. Whether he was succeeding in writing his numbers or working through the challenges he experienced when writing words, Jae’len already knew what alone felt like. He needed human connection to take significant

academic and social risks in our classroom. He needed to be known and appreciated for who he was. He needed me to take the risk of being a genuine teacher every single moment.

On a field trip at a large forested park later in the year, angry Jae'len walked away from his group. Luckily, I had chosen to accompany the group, following my intuition of believing the trip might be difficult for him. Witnessing his escalation, I followed him, eventually catching up. I stood silently, looking at the surrounding forest and occasionally at him. I asked questions I genuinely did not know the answers to and listened intently to both his silence and verbal offerings. After about 20 minutes of conversation and silence, Jae'len walked over to me, slid his hand into mine and said, "Andie, I came on this field trip to be with you. I didn't want to come, but I wanted to be with you."

Jae'len: the boy who shouted his hatred of our classroom more times than I can count, the five-year-old who no longer received Christmas presents because presents stop at five in his family, the young man whose family includes more than 10 siblings, had done it again. While stating over and over that he wanted to leave, his voice communicated what he really wanted: to "be with" me.

When our students are emotionally taut and explosive, teaching and learning in the classroom can be difficult or impossible. Administrators sometimes prefer to remove disruptive children from the classroom, attempting to reduce disruptions. However, if Jae'len and students like him are not in the classroom, they can't sit in the Author's Chair to read their writing, they can't grapple with math problems, and they can't talk about the materials they are reading. If Jae'len wants to be here, then he will engage, learn, and grow. What does he need to stay in our classroom?

This article focuses on research I conducted with children and adults who have experienced trauma. While the larger research study is beyond the scope of this article, here I will describe the research literature that informs my work; then I will specifically focus on one of the critical findings. The voices of the many teachers and children who have bravely shared their stories and their classwork are woven throughout. Suggestions for working with survivors of trauma as well as potential future research will be explored.

## **Methodology**

In a major collaboration between the Center for Disease Control and Kaiser Permanente Medical Group, the ACE (Adverse Children's Experiences) Study identifies how the impact of experiences either with or from trauma in children's lives dramatically increases risk factors for adult-life difficulties (Felitti et al., 1998; Anda et al., 2006). In a 2012 National Council presentation, Anda and Felitti stated that adverse childhood experiences are both common and often ignored, and they reported that ACE's are a strong predictor of later-in-life health issues. Poverty, bullying, accidents, illness, immigration, family separation, and emotional, physical, and sexual abuse all are forms of trauma. Children who experience trauma may develop "toxic stress," or as defined by researchers at Harvard Medical School, "healthy development can be derailed by excessive or prolonged activation of stress response systems in the brain and body" (Center on the Developing Child, 2016).

Informed by neuroscience and psychology, trauma-informed teaching practices offer students who have survived or are experiencing trauma structures to combat the potentially debilitating effects of such negative experiences and develop positive brain and body growth. Creating supportive environments and relationships reduces damaging stress and increases healthy stress responses (Center on the Developing Child, 2016). My intent with this research is to document how teaching practices change and student support expands from the viewpoints and practices of educators who are survivors of childhood sex abuse themselves. In this article, I will refer to these educators as “survivor/educators.”

What strategies do survivor/educators use to effectively connect with, support, and engage students who have experienced trauma? Whether a student is experiencing the challenges of cancer or being beaten by a parent, we have choices about how we interact. We can continue to support their isolation by silencing our own fears and turning away from strugglers, leaving students alone and fear-centered. Alternatively, we invite them into authentically safe environments, encouraging them to speak, write, and learn in a supportive community.

Over the last 10 years, my teacher research has focused on how adults who experienced trauma themselves and who teach productively in the classroom. Specifically working with teachers who survived sexual assault and abuse through interviews, prompted writing, and storytelling, I identified patterns that highlight the power of positive student-teacher relationships, grounded theoretical frameworks, and effective teaching strategies for all students regardless of life experience. Each teacher in this research holds at least the following qualifications: engagement in the teaching profession, well respected by colleagues, and active teacher-researchers. One additional life experience sets us apart: we all experienced childhood sexual abuse. We six educators wear an empathetic lens in our lives, and we keenly understand trauma from the inside out. My research study documented our critical actions that effectively serve students who have experienced or are experiencing trauma and those who have not. The survivor/educators who informed this study are:

- \*Melissa: a Head Start preschool teacher
- \*Bree: a third-grade classroom teacher
- \*Ella: a third/fourth grade classroom teacher
- \*Indigo: a middle school classroom teacher
- \*Kate: a middle school and high school English teacher
- \*myself: a second- and fourth-grade literacy/math support teacher

## **Conditions of Learning**

In the research, a fundamental set of specific frames, internal mindsets, and teaching strategies emerged. I identify these practical roots as *Conditions of Learning*, critical actions we use while working with students, trauma survivors or not. Here is a list of the *Conditions of Learning*, articulating the students’ initial response to trauma and the desired educational change:

\*We **rebuild foundations**, leading students from isolation into community: the goal of this condition aids students to shift from isolated individuals in the midst of others into important community members;

\*We **set boundaries**, ensuring emotional and physical safety in the classroom to grow resilience: the goal here identifies healthy organizational and communication structures so students know clearly what to expect in our work together;

\*We **witness our students**, inviting self-value and preservation consistently: we actively see, hear, and learn directly from each student, making it clear that each person is important, no matter what;

\*We **lean in**, staying with students when their learning practices become unsettling: in this goal, we engage with students from their demonstrated needs, making sure our own discomfort or fear remains outside of the classroom. While we acknowledge students' emotional reactions within the classroom, we do not become them. We remain vigilant advocates for each child, and we ensure our own emotions and actions remain supportive; and

\*We **hold relentless faith**, supporting the transition from fear to hope and possibility: in this condition, our goal is to ensure all of us hold unfaltering belief and confidence in each student.

NeNe, Kenzi, Cristian, Gaby, Jae'len, and Gabe are just the first students I think of as I consider how trauma—poverty, abuse, hunger, violence, neglect, divorce—emerges in our classrooms. Our students bring an endless array of trauma histories into schools. Building foundations starts a new beginning but doesn't remove the original rocky foundations each child carries into our work. How do we build and rebuild foundations at the same time? How can we invite students to move healthily between silent isolation and community?

Using the critical details discovered within the *Conditions of Learning*, I noticed how we survivor/educators rebuild foundations, inviting students to healthily move between silent isolation and community to find safety in both. Specifically, these strategies emerged repeatedly: work from a place of genuine **presence**, carve generous moments of **time**, offer **gentleness**, **repeat** our words and intentions over and over again, bring **authenticity**, and **listen** deeply. Each action highlights the importance and depth necessary to rebuild foundations for survivors of trauma. This article details one of these Conditions, Rebuilding Foundations. The research also helped me create new definitions I will share.

## Changing One Outcome of Trauma: Isolation

Researchers have documented the damage of isolation for years. Jean Baker Miller and Irene Stiver, relational-cultural theorists from the Stone Center at Wellesley College, have eloquently captured the extreme effect of isolation. They write,

We believe that the most terrifying and destructive feeling that a person can experience is psychological isolation. This is not the same as being alone. It is a feeling that one is locked out

of the possibility of human connection and of being powerless to change the situation....  
(Brown, 2012)

Kate, a sixth-grade educator, taught a selective-mute student who found comfort in the class collection of stuffed animals. He built fortresses with them, petting the stuffed animals and castling himself in. Soon after he created safety for himself in the classroom, he volunteered to write in the class science journal during a class science experiment. Triggered again when a local engineer mentored the class, the boy repeatedly snuck under desks. In time, he found ways to occasionally move out into the open with the rest of the students and Kate found that her support helped him grow as well. Reflecting later, Kate told me,

Those small things matter. I felt committed to pay attention to him and decided inside that I was going to walk with him, whether difficult or not, and help out when I can. I think those small things matter too as far as 'I can trust you' and 'this is a safe place' and 'if I'm having trouble, you can help me solve a problem.' It's that availability piece. I tried to say in every way I could figure out, "you can be here, you can always be safe here, you can get help here when you need it." That balance of isolation and community is very challenging; it is easier to put on a happy face and pretend nothing happened, nothing bad is there.

NeNe experienced ongoing trauma from seeing her mother sell and use drugs, solicit sex while in the home, and from frequent neglect. Her response in our classroom often included striking other children, screaming rages, and loud crying. Students didn't know how to handle NeNe's actions. Turning to inquiry to welcome her sadness, I grabbed chart paper, markers, and inner calm. On the top of the chart paper, I drew a human face with tears running down the cheeks. Below that, I drew from left to right a pair of human eyes, a human ear, and finally a hand and a heart. I separated these three drawings into columns large enough for writing. I invited my class to join me. Once my "friends" got settled, I asked what they saw when someone in our class had a face like in the left-hand picture. Pen ready to record their words exactly as they shared them, I heard: "Tears run down their face," "Sad in the heart," "They are crying."

Then I pointed to the ear and asked what we might hear when someone cries. "We hear the crying." "When someone is crying, it means they will stop and share."

When I asked about the hand and heart symbol, only one student spoke. Luis shared, "I feel sad."

And then NeNe, my young friend who rarely showed empathy, offered us her window through the trauma she experienced each day: "When someone yells at you, they cry. You can hear them."

Inviting students to voice their own reactions together offered them new ground to work from. The chart hung in our class for months; students referred to it when moments of disequilibrium erupted, offering them options and confirmation of community. Little did I know that we were using mirror neurons.

## **Mirror Neurons**

Brain research identifies the literal disconnect between how we think and how we feel during traumatic experiences. Trauma forces the brain into the high alert of fight/flight/freeze, causing pathways to

concretize. The amygdala jams open during trauma, and unless we make changes through different neural pathways, it stays on, continuing unsafe emotions. This amygdala hijack occurs when the brain can't distinguish present moment from original trauma. Amazingly, the body has a way to battle this brain destruction. Dr. Dan Siegel's research explores and deepens our understanding of the powerful positive relationships on the brain. One detail of particular import is the mirror neuron. "Mirror neurons are the antennae that pick up information about the intentions and feelings of others" (Siegel, 2010, p. 224). When traumatized, the brain's pathways become rigid; when socially welcome occur, isolation diminishes, internal states engage with people nearby, and the brain physically and positively changes.

Mirror neurons play a primary role in shifting the brain from disconnection to connection through empathy, according to Siegel. To activate mirror neurons, humans must empathetically interact with another human being. This idea of a "shared state" (Siegel, 2007) seems to be something survivor/educators seek to create automatically in the classroom. This in turn fosters resiliency, encourages self-regulation, and positively alters brain growth. By directly teaching my students how to use mirror neurons to welcome someone deeply troubled, we found ways to stay with NeNe, and other students, even when we were scared.

## **Genuine Presence**

Based on my research, I define "presence" as being available to students without judgment or agenda. This often means offering more wait time and physically standing or sitting beside a student silently for a few moments longer than might be commonly used in classrooms. Shaniqua is one such student who taught me about genuine presence.

Shaniqua puzzled us deeply. By my side one moment and out the door the next, this kindergarten student ran away from our room almost every school day. Conversations with her mother simply confirmed that Shaniqua ran away from home too, climbing out of her second-story bedroom window frequently. Details I documented about her only partially filled in my confusion. She often smiled, used good manners, engaged happily with other students, and had a large group of friends. She was an expert of fish and wanted to become an expert of ballet. Whether one on one with me or side by side with other students, her comments often communicated a distinct lack of self-value. Once I heard her tell another student, "I wish I could live on the street." Shortly after I finished reading a book aloud to the class, Shaniqua told me quietly she wanted "to get a car run over" her. During a whole-class writing session, she told a table of students to "throw me in the garbage." One time she switched our actions and told me, "you ranned away."

Sometimes my behavior affected her. She disliked if I spoke loudly to her, and she sometimes ran away if I spoke with other children. She liked to climb the wall of windows in our classroom, and sometimes her escape path trailed right by me, allowing me the chance to wrap my arms around her tummy and hold her.

Most frequently Shaniqua sat next to me untying my shoes or sat with her body touching mine.

I recognized the other students as panicked and confused when Shaniqua ran away. They saw no one else running away from our classroom, and they directed their anger at Shaniqua and me for not stopping this activity. I had to help them relearn that I would not desert them emotionally or physically. Our job as teachers was to create a safe community in the midst of what felt incredibly unsafe. I knew that Shaniqua was doing the best she could, and our judgment and punishment would not serve her well at all. I had to find ways for us to be present with her.

We read and watched “Miss Twiggly’s Treehouse” (Warren, 2002), a Claymation video and book framing kindness and welcome in spite of resistance, and we made tree houses. I hosted a daily opening circle, passing stuffed animals around to help my students talk and share conflicting emotions like anger and empathy. The school social worker reminded me to use these helpful phrases such as, “This is a safe place,” and “This is our school.”

One day in spring, Shaiqua ran out of the school building. Police found her blocks away soon after, safe and running toward her home without breaking a sweat. Days after this sad event, her mother withdrew her without word or return. When we learned of her withdrawal, the students and I sat together and shared how we felt. Students talked about missing her. We celebrated and we said goodbye, sad to not see her again. We also held tight to our own community growth, bound by the fracturing of loss and the binding of presence. It was important for the children to know that even though certain students were no longer attending our school, they were still with us in memory, and their history affected all of us.

**Carve generous moments of time.** Trauma fractures survivors’ ability to trust, and healing from that destruction takes time. Survivors of trauma need to establish trust on their own terms and at their own pace. Based on my research, I define these generous amounts of time through the lens of educator: be available for the unpredictable openings in students’ and learning communities.

Kate’s reflection on her work with high school students shines light on the repeating need for time with any-age learners.

I was actually thinking back to the poetry that we have during the community building times because it’s that place where I can set the tone and it’s safe to say anything, to share anything. I can start to say “what is said in the room, stays in the room” part of the community, of partly saying we are a community where we hold each other’s stories. So that it’s not someone shares something that is painful or difficult and then that’s gonna go and get talk about in the hallway or discussed with other friends who mean well. When anything that happens in the classroom stays just there unless there is something that is dangerous. We set that up between students/teacher and among students that this is a place of safety....

...The dialogue journal is where I found out “my parent has cancer,” where I found out...there is a young adult novel *Deadly Unna* that is still taught in Portland sometimes. And the father is abusive and an alcoholic also, and this young boy wrote, “As bad as Jackie’s dad is, I bet he wasn’t out drinking the night he was born the way my dad did. My dad left when I was a baby because he didn’t love me. So there’s that chance for me—the teacher—to write back to him and say, “Nothing to do with you.” As we respond to papers, as we listen to what students have written and they’re the audience for each other, lots of things will come out then too.

When one fellow student spoke negatively about another student's dismissive feelings about her mother, Kate recalled,

...she just started yelling, "You have no idea what my mom is really like." She talked about being locked, this girl was locked in her room because her mom had men, and she said "my dad had to rescue me from how I was living. We didn't have enough food, it was awful." She was able to say in class in front of everybody. They all said, "I'm so sorry, I didn't know." They were there for her. I hope I was there for her too.

Melissa confirms the teacher's lens of presence within that necessary time expansion.

...making sure that there's space for those kids, even though you know they are not going to say anything, you just wait. Not letting other people say, "Well, she doesn't talk anyway so she doesn't need to be a part of this group"...making sure they're always included even if they're silent. They have to know that you know they're worth it...

As teachers negotiate time in the classroom, survivor/educators add a layer of awareness in preserving student connection and risk taking.

**Offer gentleness.** Traumatic stress can concretize brain pathways, reducing normal cognitive development. In a committed attempt to reduce fixed mindsets and foster academic growth, survivor/educators shift their energies from classrooms of demand to cultures of genuine welcome. Parker Palmer uses the idea of "presume welcome and extend welcome" as a focal point of effective relationship building in his groundbreaking book, "The Courage to Teach: The Inner Landscape of the Teacher" (Palmer, 2007). Similar to Parker's important articulation, I define offering gentleness as calm, present, and unassuming.

Bree, a third-grade classroom teacher told story after story of how one of her students repelled adults in the school where she taught. He pushed her away as well but her gentle, kind, calm actions kept him coming back to her. She intentionally formatted interactions with him where she remained silent in the midst of his silence, patiently waiting for his brain to move from rigidity to the beginning of fluidity.

...Sometimes he comes back from recess and he's totally shut down and he gets really upset. So recess can be a trigger. Sometimes things happen in the classroom. I know people say things to him or he just totally shuts down. So I am trying to figure out those triggers. I'm trying to notice that he gets really frustrated sometimes, he clinches his fist and he gets really frustrated and he's very inverted all of a sudden. I do some deep breathing with him, and then I walk away and let him his space, I think he needs his space. But when he is ready, he will come walk up to me and I know that he is ready to come back into the community...

Ella, also a third-grade teacher, chose to frame gentleness and welcome through an exercise in silence. Her lens altered how many listened within what can be a dangerous place for trauma survivors. Sitting in a class circle, she said, "I thought if we had something to focus on, we might be silent. Focus on listening to ourselves and watching the hermit crabs and being."

When quiet, Ella placed two large hermit crabs in the center of the circle. In the silence, the crabs emerged and started wandering. As the crabs came close to students on the outside of the circle, teacher

Ella gently returned them to the center over and over; students giggled quietly in awe. Ella's gentle voice chimed into the quiet, "I want you to know that that was 4.5 minutes of silence."

The students all started talking, words spilling out into the room. Ella invited them to process what just happened.

"Chase, I can see you are with me. Jimmy, I saw you find that space with your body. So how did that feel?"

"Calm," Kara said. Others agreed.

Diego, who struggles with communication issues, told the group, "Feels new."

Anastasiia shared that she felt "water, kind of under the water."

Trentin shared he "was walking with the hermit crabs."

Vincent said, "It was great to hear no sound."

Ella smiled and confirmed their work: "Because we were silent."

Trusting silence in a community and becoming a community while being silent together were two points identified as important within the research; survivor/educators' use of calm and genuineness to access silence allowed students to grow trust and community at the same time. Bree worked one on one with her student who struggled, offering him both welcome and physical space when he was most upset. Ella helped her students learn to be silent in a community and from a culture of welcome and calm as opposed to a more commonly used practice of silence through stress and expectation.

**Repeat our words and intentions over and over.** Whether students have experienced trauma or not, they need to trust what adults say and do. Within my research, it became apparent that educators must gently repeat the intention safety. In this story, Indigo reflects on her consistent use of emotional safety and how it threads through communities after students graduated from the school she teaches at:

...He was in my class for two years, he would be my classic story. Super hard times at home, divorce, nobody tracking anything, no self-confidence, total shut down. He didn't say a word for the first two months of my class. Then we did designs for the mural and he's an incredible artist and he did the design and everybody freaked out about how beautiful it was. And they were like we want to do that, you have to help draw. He started to get up and he opened up. He came back eighth grade year, and he wasn't as hooded and it was a slow thing, then basketball became comfortable, and now I see him in public, he's excited to see me, he'll talk to me. In seventh grade there was not a part of him that would have a conversation with an adult by choice...ever. It was no eye contact. I just let him be who he was and came up next to him. Oppositional kids or people who have been told down, they can't hear the boss, but they can hear the "Let's go somewhere together." And so he's one of those. I see the value in you, this is school, you have to jump through this hoop, I know it sucks. But this is what we are doing. I know you can climb that tree really well but we're not really supposed to climb trees right now. Instead of get down

right now. He is taking IB classes at high school. He could have gone so many directions. He could've just been not seen.

Indigo's gentle constant repeating welcome allowed this student to see his value in this community.

## **Authentic**

Authenticity remains crucial to survivors of trauma. Because of the violating experiences, many survivors are extremely hesitant to trust and highly doubtful of others. False engagement practices limit or destroy relational progress. I define "authenticity" here as true to self, true to others; in these relationships, fear no longer stops the survivor. Melissa's story from the classroom mirrors the need for deeply authentic interactions, especially in the midst of tension:

For the kids who I really worry about, I seek deeper relationships with them. That is how I try to help them. The ones I most worry about get more of my time and attention. And I do more of the foundation building with them because we are gonna need it when I need to say, "No, that is not okay" or "Put that down and sit right over here." When I have to be really directed for safety or someone else's safety, then that relationship is like a well filled and they can pull it and say, "She still loves me" or "I can do what she said, it's gonna be okay" without thinking about it, without thinking to fight me.

Kate, teaching high school students, reflects on how her students taught her to stay true to her practices:

I know I've created a safe space when they are able to tell the truth, and know they will be heard, and believed. Sometimes the truth is rage, like the girl who wrote a poem to her father, and said, in part, ..."I will never call you papa... I will never forgive you for leaving us. ...Do you thinking buying me a happy meal is going to make me happy?" She could be as mad as she wanted in my class without being judged for it. My evidence is their stories, and it's chilling, and inspiring. I've sat at my desk and cried as I've read their stories of a parent's cancer, of abandonment, of loneliness, of families divided. One young woman wrote, "I'm a war baby. I was born in the middle of a divorce." I'm proud of her strength to tell the truth. I'm in awe of teenagers' ability to be vulnerable, to share their truth, and find optimism and courage through the mess of things.

**Listen deeply.** Survivors of trauma need to be deeply listened to. Predetermined responses are often impetus for internal doubt and loss of trust. I define the ability to listen deeply as hearing what is genuinely said and withholding judgment. Ella's experience with a student who refused to talk offers one such example.

And finally one day I pass it to Stephanie and I sit as did the entire class. Today we are going to share I passed the apple to her. She sat and she sat and this was the longest sitting time I ever had, the longest wait time I have ever had: four minutes thirty two seconds, we sat in silence. And a few students at first tried to rescue her and then we sat and then I found myself trying to prompt her and I stopped. Then she said, clear as a whistle, I wish I had more words. but I can say that I am happy. And she passed the apple as fast as she could. And I said thank you and the

whole class was just silent. She had been in our class two months and not spoken. So the next week at community circle, I pass the apple to Stephanie and said we are going to use our voice today. And we waited a long time. But because we have a lot of ELL kids, it is not like a huge thing. You know and she shared maybe four words, just real...I think she said I like writing and she passed the apple. Thank you, Stephanie....and I think that is so vital to finding your voice and finding who you are and you can't be wrong. You can't be wrong because there isn't a wrong in finding who you are. (Ella, 2010)

### Positive Outcomes: So What?

My class and I read Jacqueline Woodson's powerful story "Visiting Day" (2002) together. Woodson's picture book details the story of a young girl and her grandmother preparing to visit the girl's father in prison for the first time, and my students received the story from a variety of life experiences. Kelli recognized her fractured family living within the book as we read.

It was not clear how impaired her mental capacity was due to the abuse and violence she had experienced. She struggled to write her own name, and her explanations of her work confused me. Once successful at communicating her understandings, she became a class leader. She realized the importance of her voice within our academic community. Her classmates respected her offerings. Kelli's response to our reading "Visiting Day" offered a clear window into her life experience. In her drawing of what the book meant to her, she drew a person with tears on their face and dots above in the center of the page. Then she drew a frowning person with hair followed by her stick figure with two feet, no arms, a head, two eyes, a partial mouth, and a cap. On the side she wrote, "Dad," "KD," "Mam" and read her writing to me: Dad, Kid, Mom. She then told me, "My mom and a friend got in a fight and my mom went to jail. When my mom was incarcerated, I missed her."



Fig. 1: Kelli's response to reading the book "Visiting Day"

This was the first time that Kelli shared with me her knowledge of incarceration. Nine months after our work began and a five-year-old's lifetime of homelessness, child abuse, parental drug abuse, and gun violence, Kelli's brain finally communicated her desired message and grade-level growth. She also trusted herself more to speak her own truth.

## Conclusion

My research is in its infancy. These examples begin to point to how foundations must be built and rebuilt with students who are survivors of trauma. Time, intention, genuineness, and so much more are critical energies and actions that invite and welcome establishing relational trust. Students need us to show up fully to craft learning invitations that detail and enact these practices every day. We have the capacity to create classrooms for survivors of trauma, and we need to expand what we know about how people learn after experiencing trauma. As we transition into creating learning spaces where teachers can honestly reflect on their own responses to the actions in their classrooms and explore how they can contribute their wisdom of trauma and life, we will positively enhance the productivity of our students. By thoughtfully crafting classroom practices that center on healing the debilitating impact of trauma, we can alter its long-term effects, enhance student success, and positively support lifelong learners.

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**Andie Cunningham** works to craft welcoming learning communities for elementary students and the adults who teach them by blending trauma-informed practices with social-emotional learning, neuropsychology, literacy, and compassion. A curious teacher-researcher and a dedicated Courage to Teach facilitator, Andie studies how relational trust among faculty members increases school success. While working with a classroom of kindergartners who spoke more than seven languages, an ever-expanding breadth of differing socioeconomic variables, and a variety of family structures, she co-wrote the book “Starting with Comprehension: Reading Strategies for the Youngest Learners” with Ruth Shagoury. Currently, she teaches second and fourth graders in a rural elementary school.