

Equity-Centered and Trauma-Informed Teacher Education: A Model for Teacher Preparation

Kathryn E. Tillet
University of Louisville

Shelley Thomas
University of Louisville

Jasmine Haynes
University of North Florida

Shantel Crosby
University of Louisville

Stefanie Wooten-Burnett
University of Louisville

Steven D. Kniffley, Jr.
University of Cincinnati

ABSTRACT

Teacher preparation programs must equip educators to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse student population, including building teachers' understanding of trauma-informed practices and racism-based traumatic stress. Building on feedback from a pilot trauma-informed curriculum indicating that teacher candidates needed skills for better managing their own stress, trauma, and racial trauma to meet the needs of their students, an equity-centered, trauma-informed teacher preparation model was developed. The model described in this conceptual article was delivered in conjunction with a teacher residency program in a large, urban emergent school district.

Keywords: Trauma, Racial Trauma, Teacher Education, Equity-Centered

Teacher preparation programs are important channels for developing teachers who adopt trauma-informed school practices (Thomas et al., 2019a), including those about racism-based traumatic stress (Alvarez, 2020). Though schools and teachers are often included in discussions of trauma-informed systems of care (Chafouleas et al., 2021), teacher education programs may not be (Brown et al., 2022). Teacher education first shapes novice teachers' understanding of how to build healthy, equitable school environments and is distinct from in-service professional development, which occurs after schools hire teachers. We hold that systems of care should routinely include these programs. When schools focus on equity and creating trauma-informed



environments, they can help disrupt the conditions contributing to higher rates of traumatic stress experienced by school community members who identify as Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) (Gherardi et al., 2021; Saleem et al., 2022). For both BIPOC students and teachers, such experiences can pose challenges to emotional well-being, impeding young people's school success (Perfect et al., 2016) and contributing to teacher turnover (Kohli, 2018).

Traumatic experiences are common among U.S. children and can cause harm across the lifespan, including symptoms that hinder academic achievement and social relationships (Perfect et al., 2016). However, teacher preparation programs have not traditionally provided opportunities to incorporate evidence-based, trauma-informed approaches into classroom practices (Crosby, 2015; Thomas et al., 2019a). Teacher education has likewise not typically included instruction about mitigating secondary traumatic stress (STS) (Thomas et al., 2019a), the post-traumatic stress disorder-like symptoms that people in caring professions can develop from indirect exposure to traumas experienced by those they serve (Sprang et al., 2019; Bride et al., 2025). Because teachers can have high rates of exposure to students affected by trauma and may have previously experienced traumatic events themselves, they are at increased risk of STS (Hensel et al., 2015; Knox et al., 2024). Finally, appropriately responding to trauma and resisting re-traumatization (SAMHSA, 2014) for BIPOC students necessitates that teacher candidates be equipped to attend to the concerns of racism-based traumatic stress and the structural conditions resulting in disproportionate exposure to traumatic situations (Alvarez, 2020; Gherardi et al., 2020; McAdoo et al., 2023). Research has shown that BIPOC teachers can be especially effective in supporting the academic needs of BIPOC students and in helping create the safe, supportive, racially affirming school environments needed for trauma healing and prevention (McAdoo et al., 2023; Redding, 2019). Unfortunately, the diversity of the teaching workforce falls far short of that reflected by students (Ingersoll et al., 2019) due to systemic racialized barriers to both recruitment and retention of BIPOC teachers (Steiner et al., 2022).

Thus, our team developed an equity-centered, trauma-informed teacher education (ECTITE) model to complement a teacher residency initiative designed to increase teacher diversity in a large, urban emergent (Milner, 2012) school district, in a midsize, Southeastern city. In addition to developing teacher residents' capacities to create trauma-informed classrooms, the ECTITE project focused on supporting resilience in teacher residents, over half of whom identified as BIPOC, by helping them learn to recognize and address any traumatic stress and racism-based trauma experienced during their own time as students or in their current work environments. This paper explores the theoretical underpinnings of the ECTITE model and describes the foundational components of the curriculum and its design.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Associations between experiences of racism and negative effects on the well-being of people who are BIPOC are well-established (Paradies et al., 2015). Included among these harms are trauma response symptoms and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)-like reactions (Kirkinis et al., 2021). Studies have found that the more often

BIPOC individuals experienced racial discrimination, the more likely they were to develop PTSD symptoms (Abdullah et al., 2021). Racism-based traumatic stress differs from that of other trauma sources in that it impacts people of color cumulatively in an ongoing fashion due to frequent re-exposure (Comas-Díaz et al., 2019). These incidents can originate from individuals, institutions, and cultures (Bryant-Davis & Ocampo, 2005). They may take the form of overtly racist language and behavior, discriminatory systemic practices, or subtle microaggressions (Carter, 2007). For example, in school settings, BIPOC students and educators report being subjected to microaggressions through racial stereotype-based assumptions about their abilities and being overtly or indirectly told that aspects of their cultural identity (e.g., hair, language, clothing, history) are not valued (Steketee et al., 2021; Kohli, 2018).

Strong evidence connects experiences of individual and structural racism with negative mental health symptoms among BIPOC children (Bernard et al., 2021), particularly those of depression, self-esteem, stress, and anxiety (Cave et al., 2020). Nadal et al. (2019) found higher rates of microaggressions, which Black U.S. youth report experiencing an average of five times daily (English et al., 2020), were associated with increased trauma symptoms, and that microaggressions occurring in schools or workplaces were most predictive of symptoms. Children may be especially susceptible to harm from witnessing or directly experiencing discrimination because they are still developing the language and awareness helpful for processing resulting feelings and are still forming a sense of self and racial identity (Saleem et al., 2020).

Saleem and Byrd (2021) describe the important role that school adults, school policies, and classmates play in students' ethnic-racial socialization, which, depending on the messaging conveyed, can either alienate BIPOC students or foster a sense of positive racial identity and belonging. In their exploration of prior research, Saleem and Byrd (2021) found that most schools adopt a race-evasive approach that doesn't acknowledge the racialized experiences of BIPOC students. In doing so, the very educators striving to create caring environments supportive of student success, become inadvertent perpetrators of racial stress (Saleem et al., 2022). Not only do race-evasive perspectives create barriers to BIPOC students' feelings of belonging at school, but they also result in missed opportunities to encourage student development of positive racial identities, shown to be protective against racism-based trauma and predictive of academic achievement (Saleem et al., 2022; Saleem & Byrd, 2021).

Centering Equity in Trauma-Informed School Practices

Because of increasing evidence illustrating the effects of racism-based trauma and traumatic stress on young people's mental health and academic outcomes, recent scholarship has highlighted the need for trauma-informed school practices that better incorporate this information (Alvarez, 2020; Bernard et al., 2021; Chafouleas et al., 2021; Gherardi et al., 2020). As Gherardi et al. (2020) point out, trauma-sensitive school initiatives often operate from a race-evasive perspective and neglect to address institutional or systemic sources of trauma, including racism-based and historical trauma. Thus, the root causes contributing to disproportionate exposure to traumatic events and racism-based stress for BIPOC students remain overlooked while normal

student responses to stressors are pathologized (Gherardi et al., 2020). Alvarez (2020) details a parallel concern for research on trauma-informed education, contending that much of it promotes counter-productive deficit-based perspectives of BIPOC students and families. Alvarez (2020) further identifies a need to equip educators with skills to work through challenges to equity-centered trauma-informed school practice, namely, resistant staff culture, burnout, and identity development. Saleem et al. (2022) likewise offer that many educators lack understanding of how to recognize or respond to incidents of racism, despite their prevalence in schools (Saleem et al., 2022).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The ECTITE curriculum uses instructional approaches grounded in critical trauma theory (Stevens, 2009; Nelson, 2021), sociocultural learning theory (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996), and transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1994). Stevens' (2009) explanation of critical trauma theory highlights the interconnections of race, gender, and class with trauma, and pushes us to consider the multiple positionalities of those encountering traumatic experiences. Stevens (2009) further urges criticality toward understandings of trauma, including the "...European and American impulse to force diverse peoples into the culturally specific rubric of trauma, casting aside the authority of local knowledge" (p. 2). We posit that a critical perspective of trauma provides a foundation for building teacher residents' understanding of students' traumatic experiences in a trauma-informed way, and for unpacking residents' own experiences and indirectly incurred traumas as educators.

Sociocultural learning theory's emphasis on language, learning, and the co-construction of knowledge also informed our approach. Social interactions within dynamic, historically situated cultural contexts guide individual cognitive development and learning, making learning a social process (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996). Thus, prior and current contexts continually inform the process, and it is understood "there is not likely to be one best way" (Rogoff, 2003, p. 12) of learning or teaching. For example, in some respects, the residents are learners of teaching; in others, they are knowledgeable, capable experts within their own cultural contexts.

Lastly, Mezirow (1994) describes transformative learning as a process through which adults come to understand their world and experiences from a new perspective, driven by increased awareness and the challenging of previously held assumptions. Learners' individual and collaborative engagement in critical reflection about self, social contexts, beliefs, and the nature of practice problems drives this transformation (Mezirow, 1997). Instructors encouraged transformative learning regarding resident beliefs and roles in fostering equity-centered trauma-informed classrooms through critical incident descriptions, critical self-reflection writing, and facilitated discourse.

In a complementary way, these theories guided us in engaging teacher residents in the overlapping processes of learning to teach and learning to be trauma-informed. Given the emphasis on critical perspectives, intersectional identities, and sociocultural theory's co-constructed meaning in learning, the theories assist us in exploring the idea that teacher residents bring with them a history of experiences, including various identities and ongoing experiences as members of marginalized communities, *and* are concurrently working with K-12 students from similar and

different marginalized communities. Therefore, practices shared with teacher residents must emphasize understanding the cultural contexts of schools and students, as well as the cultivation of positive, trusting relationships. Additionally, teacher educators must practice cultural humility (Nelson, 2021) through ongoing critical self-reflection that focuses on feedback from the residents. In the following section, we share the ECTITE curriculum components and how to apply this model in teacher preparation.

THE ECTITE MODEL

Without a robust literature base about how to include trauma-informed teaching in teacher preparation programs, our team launched a three-year pilot project, informed by research from social work, teacher education, and the humanities, and integrated into teacher preparation coursework (Thomas et al., 2019b; Thomas et al., 2018). This pilot project focused on classroom management with an emphasis on cultural conflicts in the classroom (D’Haem & Griswold, 2016); racial literacy (Sealey-Ruiz & Greene, 2015); engaging hard-to-reach students; and childhood trauma and trauma-informed practice from a social work perspective (Wolpov et al., 2009), and later informed the development of the ECTITE model. The redesigned ECTITE curriculum responded to pilot study findings that identified the need for additional attention to racism-based trauma in schools and self-care (Thomas et al., 2019b; Thomas et al., 2018), resulting in a curriculum for teacher residents that prioritized equity concerns in its approach to trauma-informed school practices. A diverse interdisciplinary team of teacher education, social work, and psychology scholars developed the ECTITE model, drawing upon experiences as teachers and students in K-12 schools and work with school systems that shaped their perspectives on trauma and racism-based trauma. Using a sociocultural learning lens, instructors modeled and emphasized co-constructed learning.

The model includes follow-up professional development coaching to enable teacher residents to use classroom-based teacher action research to inform their own practice and to take up new skills. Coaching occurs within the community created for the teacher residents’ ongoing learning by establishing routine mechanisms and resources that serve as alternatives to often race-void and White-normative professional development (Morales et al., 2022). Key aspects of the ECTITE model include *foundational professional development*, an *intentional cycle of critical self-reflection and co-construction of knowledge*, *mentoring residents through coaching*, and an emphasis on *acknowledging the whole person*.

Foundational Professional Development

Teacher residents received in-class professional development throughout their residency. These sessions were grounded in the theoretical perspective that learning to teach is a social process (Oldfather, 1994) and that knowledge construction takes place when learners engage with previous knowledge and experiences, contexts, information, and interactions with others (Heineke et al., 2018; Rogoff, 2003; Vygotsky, 1978). Sessions also drew on the tenets of traditional apprenticeship methods (Collins et al., 1987) through a sociocultural approach focused on the social

and cultural nature of learning and development (Heineke et al., 2018). Teacher residents engaged in context-specific learning focused on equity-centered, trauma-informed practices with experts in teacher education, social work, racial trauma, and trauma-informed care. Guided by sociocultural learning theory, residents co-constructed their understandings of trauma-informed practices with peers and faculty, creating a continuum of expertise that built capacity and ensured sustainability by supporting new teachers' enactment of trauma-informed practices.

Professional development included four in-class sessions, and teacher residents were invited to additional sessions during their first year as teachers of record. Planning for these sessions centered on the overlapping needs of new teachers who identify across marginalized communities and work with students from similar and different marginalized communities. Residents received ongoing support to build knowledge and efficacy around the content of race-conscious, trauma-informed perspectives, with attention to racial and other tensions in their communities, schools, and personal lives. They were encouraged to maintain their connections with one another and with the project team during their residency year as they shifted toward full-time teaching and instructional decisions foregrounded by their experiences with the ECTITE model and informed by critical self-reflection.

Cycle of Critical Self-Reflection & Knowledge Construction

The ECTITE model aims to foster transformation among teacher residents. Mezirow (1997) posits that an adult learning experience is transformative when learners' frames of reference, which shape their perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors, are challenged through individual and collective critical reflection. Critical reflection is integral to trauma-informed professional learning experiences (Anderson et al., 2022a, 2022b), especially those grounded in race-conscious, equity-centered frameworks that address trauma through a critical lens. For instance, Haynes et al. (2023) describe how incorporating critical reflection into a culturally responsive, equity-centered, and trauma-informed professional learning series helped educators process their personal and professional racialized experiences in relation to the knowledge gained from the series. Therefore, in addition to providing professional development content to increase teacher residents' understanding of childhood trauma, STS, racism-based traumatic stress, and structural inequities, the ECTITE pedagogical approach included regular opportunities for teacher residents to engage in critical self-reflection and collective construction of knowledge about the content based on personal experiences and teaching practice.

Considering that sociocultural environments influence individuals' frames of reference (Ioanide, 2019), the critical reflection component of the ECTITE model aimed to encourage the meaning-making of professional and personal experiences in relation to the curricular content. After completing the curriculum, residents were specifically asked: (1) What do you want to learn more about regarding trauma and racial trauma? (2) What feelings emerge in relation to the content we've covered? (3) What are you thinking about differently and why? (4) What thoughts do you currently have about the content we've covered? (5) What has been most important and why; (6) What action do you plan to take as a result of the content we've covered?

Additionally, critical reflection aided skill acquisition through social interactions with the cohort, instructor, and mentors, supplemented by continuous reciprocal discourse and the incorporation of co-constructed knowledge within the group. As teacher residents learned new content related to trauma, STS, self-care, and racial trauma, both individually and collectively, they connected it to their experiences in and outside the classroom, strengthening self- and social awareness. This reflective context shaped both residents' understanding of the content and the skills they developed for applying it. Instructors expected Teacher residents' knowledge construction, practice abilities, and learning needs to change as they learned from each other and encountered situations in their schools and lives. Instructors engaged with residents, recognizing that curricular content must adapt to these evolving conditions. Therefore, the ECTITE model's critical reflective approach embodies participatory engagement and establishes a pathway for transformative learning and action among teacher candidates.

Mentoring Residents through Coaching

The literature on teacher residency programs provides effective guidance for mentoring residents. Recommendations include building on what mentees bring to the experience (Kolman et al., 2017) and the importance of mentors providing supportive spaces for mentees to learn, grow, and develop their unique educator identities (Fisher-Ari et al., 2019). In their work, Kolman et al. (2017) identify four themes of learner-centered mentoring (i.e., resident-centered mentoring): “showing vulnerability, sharing authority, modeling, and progressive vision” (p. 102). Studies focused on mentoring teacher candidates call for mentoring to be less generic and more aligned with the candidates' needs (Crasborn et al., 2022). Residents entering urban teacher residency programs bring life experiences that shape their views on teaching, and to help them hone their craft, their mentorship process must be responsive and deliberate to support their professional growth. Furthermore, residents' experiences may include trauma and life-changing situations that require support as they learn to teach, just as trauma-exposed students do in their classrooms.

Studies of mentoring teachers as they transition into the field underscore the importance of trusting relationships that focus on both mentees' professional growth and their emotional needs (Squires, 2019; Dreer-Goethe, 2023). Kutsyuruba et al. (2019) found that, for novice teachers, mentoring relationships strongly correlated with higher well-being, whereas the absence of mentoring strongly correlated with lower well-being. Similarly, Dreer (2021) found that the quality of mentoring relationships predicted student teachers' well-being over time, and Mosley and McCarthy (2023) found that mentoring quality was significantly associated with novice teachers' risk of stress. Thus, the ECTITE model employed a mentoring approach to provide emotional support and professional guidance throughout model implementation.

ECTITE mentors included instructors, coaches, teachers, and administrators in both formal and informal spaces. Though the specifics of the mentoring relationships, particularly the informal mentoring, are outside the scope of the current manuscript, conceptually, those relationships bolstered the capacities, efficacy, and well-being of

teacher residents (Dreer-Goethe, 2023). Coaching conversations that helped residents deconstruct prior negative experiences with schooling and recognize their own growth were a cornerstone of the formal mentoring. For example, following the planning, implementation, and reflection cycle, the mentor would routinely prompt residents to explain how the conversation had supported their growth. As a result, the residents acknowledged their growth, which contributed to their efficacy.

McLaughlin and Marsh define teacher efficacy as "the extent to which the teacher believes he or she has the capacity to affect student performance" (1978, p.84). Guskey (2021) posits that to foster educational improvement, teachers need to recognize that what they do matters, which in turn prompts them to seek additional ways to improve. Thus, efficacy, particularly with respect to residents' understanding of themselves as equity-centered and trauma-informed, is significant because teachers who are confident about their effect on students improve their effect on students (Guskey, 2021).

Acknowledging the Whole Person

In addition to the model's attention to teacher residents' emotional support needs through mentoring and instructional content on STS and self-care, an overarching component of the ECTITE model, in alignment with sociocultural theory, is the understanding that this work is deeply personal and nuanced. The racialized experiences of racism, oppression, and privilege that each teacher resident brings inevitably shape their engagement. Therefore, the model endeavors to approach teacher residents as whole people, rather than solely as future teachers receiving professional development. To help create safe discussion environments and prevent the pervasive silencing, dismissal, or stereotyping of BIPOC teacher residents' perspectives (Souto-Manning & Emdin, 2023), instructors offered certain discussions and activities in separate groups for White teacher residents and BIPOC teacher residents. For example, teacher residents were found to need different opportunities to process instructional content on racial trauma based on their own racial and ethnic identities. BIPOC teacher residents found that aspects of the content resonated strongly with their lived experiences and that they needed a safe space to process the emotions elicited. White teacher residents, on the other hand, needed a space to discuss and reflect on how the new information related to their roles as allies and how racial trauma can impact their BIPOC students. In these ways, we prioritized the needs of all teacher residents, acknowledging the identities and attributes each brought to the process and leveraging the strengths of diverse perspectives, while being sensitive to the different instructional needs of teacher residents.

IMPLICATIONS

School system inequities have contributed to a shortage of BIPOC teachers, racially disproportionate use of exclusionary discipline, limited access to culturally relevant curricula, and a dearth of teachers prepared to address the unique needs of BIPOC students. Additionally, racial discrimination and microaggressions encountered by BIPOC students can significantly influence their experiences of racial trauma. BIPOC

teachers are not immune to these experiences and often must navigate them while supporting their BIPOC students.

Tatto et al. (2016) urge teacher educators to embrace the complexity and contextualized nature of teaching and learning. Teacher preparation that centers equity develops teachers who understand and adopt trauma-informed practices across their repertoires, while honoring this context and their overlapping identities in response. The delivery of trauma-informed teacher preparation must remain mindful of how the content of “trauma,” as well as messages about who is “traumatized,” are not essentialized. Improving teacher preparation, diversifying the teacher workforce, and supporting students’ well-being can be overlapping goals, meaningfully addressed through collaborations across disciplines and roles that are attentive to the inequities surrounding these issues.

CONCLUSION

The ECTITE model provides a framework for teacher resident preparation that addresses the preservice needs of K-12 teachers in relation to equity-centered, trauma-informed educational practice. By prioritizing equity in the development of the ECTITE model’s components: *foundational professional development, critical self-reflection and feedback, mentoring residents through coaching, and taking a “whole” person perspective*, the model attempts to build skill and confidence for BIPOC teachers, helping them to move past the expectation of adhering to Eurocentric teaching standards and the consequences of racial trauma exposure, while simultaneously equipping White teachers with tools to be effective racial advocates for their colleagues and students. We hope that this model will contribute to current efforts to reduce educational inequity, reduce the impact of trauma and racial trauma, and elevate the experiences of BIPOC teachers and students.

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KATHRYN E. TILLET, MSSW, is a PhD candidate at the University of Louisville Kent School of Social Work & Family Science. Her research focuses on equity-centered, trauma-responsive schools, and school mental health systems, as well as organizational approaches to workforce wellbeing in K-12 education and social service settings. Email: Kathryn.tillett@louisville.edu

SHANTEL CROSBY, PhD, LCSW, is an Associate Professor at the Kent School of Social Work & Family Science at the University of Louisville. Her major research interests lie in the area of youth wellbeing, trauma-informed practice, and education equity. Email: shantel.crosby@louisville.edu

M. SHELLEY THOMAS, EdD is an Associate Professor at the department of Elementary, Middle, and Secondary Teacher Education at the University of Louisville. Her research interests are primarily in transdisciplinary social justice approaches to pervasive challenges in education and in equity centered, trauma-informed, culturally responsive and sustaining teaching. Email: shelley.thomas@louisville.edu

STEFANIE WOOTEN-BURNETT, PhD, is an Assistant Dean for Educator Preparation and Clinical Associate Professor in the Department of Elementary, Middle, and Secondary Teacher Education at the University of Louisville. Her research interests are the impacts of teacher residency programs and teacher candidates' teacher efficacy. Email: stefanie.wootenburnett@louisville.edu

JASMINE HAYNES, PhD, is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Sociology, Anthropology, & Social Work at the University of North Florida. Her major research interests lie in the area of trauma-informed education, racial trauma, and social-emotional well-being. Email: j.haynes@unf.edu

STEVEN D. KNIFFLEY, JR., PsyD MPA MBA ABPP, is an Associate Professor in the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Neuroscience at the University of Cincinnati. His research interests focus on the treatment of racial trauma and Black male psychology. Email: kniffled@ucmail.uc.edu
