Keynote for Emotionally Responsive Schools Conference

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The Story of Teacher Mental Health in Our Time

What makes the threat of COVID-19 a mental health issue for practicing teachers, school leaders and social workers? Certainly, there is an inherent conflict for everyone in every walk of life who is trying to stay sane and healthy these days, since the prescription for physical health depends on maintaining distance, while the prescription for mental health depends on maintaining closeness and connection. Good Mental health depends in part on feeling safe, and no one is feeling very safe these days. While there has been much written about the effect of the pandemic on the emotional well-being of everyone who is living through this time, what are the unique challenges to maintaining emotional equilibrium for teachers, school leaders and school social workers?

This morning I will try to address that question in ways that I hope will leave you in good company as we approach a potentially challenging and isolating holiday season. I will also bring to light the possibility of applying the techniques of story, play and expressive arts that ERP teachers offer to the children they
teach, but *this time*, as avenues to support *your own* mental health. I will talk about the benefit of acknowledging, reflecting and valuing both *your* positive and negative feelings in this time of crisis, and giving those feelings a voice and a “cozy corner”, or other safe space in your own life.

Typically, we adults feel capable of differentiating real from pretend. Then, the year 2020 came along, a year when adults, as well as children, struggled to get a grip on realities that changed day by day. Suddenly, last spring, benign, everyday experiences like going in to the grocery store or going into a school building were becoming increasingly dangerous to public health. First, it seemed that staying inside the house was the safest way to stay protected from COVID-19 germs. Then, it seemed that going *outside* in open air was the safest way to stay protected from COVID-19 germs. When we looked to reliable government sources for clarification, the federal government was doing its best to *blur the lines* between fantasy and reality, leaving adults as well as children anxious, confused and vulnerable.

For children, differentiating fantasy from reality is a slow, developmental process that is in play throughout childhood and adolescence, during the time when children are still dependent on their parents and teachers for guidance and boundaries. When the adults who are in charge can’t differentiate what is real from what is make believe, it can become terrifying for *us* as well as the children who depend on us.
For people whose work is with children, this blurring of reality lines is complicated on a professional level as well as on a personal level. Teachers, social workers and school leaders have multiple roles, but one of those roles is to help interpret what children are taking in from the outside world; this is very difficult to do when what is happening is dangerous and national responses are illogical!

Another role is to protect children from danger, buffer threat, and give children a safe space in which to learn and thrive. This is almost Impossible to do when threat to our collective well-being is pervasive, we are not allowed to be in school at all, or, schools are open with the expectation that we can keep children safe and healthy IF we put protective measures into place. However, these protective measures assume high levels of financial support, which are, for many schools, absent. If the expectations for safekeeping are real, but the support for those measures are make believe, it leaves teachers and school leaders in the untenable position of needing to become superheroes, literally, overnight; principal Clark and/or Clara Kent one day, and Superpower the next. (Secretly, these professionals know that they are really just teachers and principals, afraid that their showcased, make-believe powers will be inevitably revealed as false, if a child or staff member becomes sick with COVID-19.) In situations like these, overwhelming feelings of inadequacy and guilt can undermine mental health.
All over the country, teachers and social workers and school leaders have had to transform many times since the pandemic made its presence known here. (The city’s policies and practices in the time of COVID-19 indeed seem to change week by week.) Educators and school social workers have had to abruptly shift from providing in-person education to providing virtual education, going back and forth between the two or sometimes providing both simultaneously. They have had to pretend that very young children can sit in front of a screen all day, that children with special needs can be well served virtually, that therapy sessions can happen seamlessly without any privacy at all, and that virtual access is a reality for all of their children, even though it’s not.

People who work with children know that sometimes intentional pretending as a professional strategy can be the bridge to discovering and creating real solutions. (For example, “I have no clue what I am doing on virtual apps, but I will pretend that I can do it, and sometimes I can. I use the “Little Engine That Could” strategy….) Over time, many educators have found their virtual voices, and used the strength of their caring relationships with children to make their virtual classroom experiences meaningful.

Paradoxically, the inability for teachers, and social workers to have in-person contact with parents has sometimes resulted in more interaction, as parents reached out for tech guidance, and contacted teachers and social workers as an antidote to isolation.
In addition, teachers and school social workers were literally observing the impact of job loss, illness, and tragically, death and loss on their students and their families through the Zoom window into family’s homes. This resulted in some extraordinary partnerships developing between teachers, social workers and school leaders and their school communities.

Many Schools met the moment by evolving into a responsive community resources for food and other survival needs for their children and families. In so doing, schools began to embrace some of their real powers, the powers of deeply rooted learning communities whose caring relationships can support child and family well-being. These powers may not be revealed on test score outcomes, and schools that often function in this way are constantly fighting for their right to exist. As school leaders know all too well, it is hard to retain sanity when your efforts to support health and mental health in times of crisis, are considered to be beside the point.

We know that relationships have the power to buffer adversity. While warm, supportive consistent teacher-child relationships have enormous power to buffer children during trying times, they become less effective when the well-being of teachers is compromised. As Mark’s research shows, we often leave teacher mental health to chance during stressful times, and in so doing, risk leaving teachers feeling demoralized and undervalued. We struggle for the resources needed to create concentric circles of support for those who are buffering
adversity for children in traumatic circumstances. The feeling that someone with more power than you cares what happens to you, so that you are not a sacrificial lamb, is essential for good mental health. For so many school leaders, teachers and school social workers, those concentric circles of support are missing.

Many teachers have talked to us about the benefits as well as the stressors of the seemingly boundary-less professional life that has resulted from COVID-19. When teaching virtually, teachers are not only in children’s living rooms, but their students and their families are in their living rooms! Teachers who also have their own children, have struggled to manage the impossible mission of attending to their virtual classrooms as well as to their own children’s learning and emotional needs simultaneously. Since this is essentially impossible to do, this dual mission inevitably results in more feelings of inadequacy and guilt.

For teachers who went back to their classrooms in the summer, or in the fall, the torturous conflict of possibly carrying germs home to vulnerable family members while maintaining their jobs and caring for children was and is always present.

For the teachers, school leaders and social workers who lost family members, or others close to them to the Coronavirus, grief, guilt and anger do not maintain 6 ft of distance. Those feelings will shadow you for a long, long time, and will return to school when you return to school.
Since being in “good company” is a necessary condition of grief resolution, loss is made 100 times more difficult without access to our usual rituals, far away people and places, and other resources made inaccessible in COVID Times.

Many teachers found that their return-to-school anxiety diminished once children were actually present in the classroom. Children live in the here and now, and can pull the adults into their orbit and into the here and now world with them. In some ways, being in a busy classroom can protect adults from being in touch with their own fear, grief or emotional pain, at least while the children are surrounding them.

In other ways, being in the classroom can be more emotionally evocative than almost any other workplace. People outside of the field can often be blissfully unaware of their own childhoods, or their “little selves” while they are at work on a day-to-day basis. A teacher’s “little self” has ongoing invitations to enter the classroom along with their professional selves. After all, all teachers were once children in somebody’s classrooms, and classroom life can be intense! In traumatic times, a teacher’s “little self” can be woken up by the emotional climate, especially when children are anxious and afraid, and acting angry. Historical adversity in the teacher’s own life, that had been hiding from the teacher’s “professional self” can start to feel neglected and uncomfortable, and vie for the teacher’s attention.
Having access to our “big and little selves” is both a gift and a curse for people in our field: Perhaps having access to “both selves” is what makes us strong enough and motivated enough to endure during periods of political insanity that impacts our practice, as well as disruption and loss, and still remain a voice for policies and practices that are in the best interest of children. Unlike many adults, part of us still remembers what it was like to be little! Being in touch with this phenomenon and having access to “both selves” can leave us vulnerable, but is also what makes us able to connect with and empathize with the feelings and experiences of the millions of children who depend on our love, creativity, and meaningful teaching practices every single day, even though our “Little selves” are busy denying us distance from our own histories.

The teacher’s invisible “little self” can be surprisingly demanding, and sometimes scary during difficult moments in the classroom. When the teacher’s “grown up self” does not welcome the intrusion, and tries to ignore the persistent “little self’s “voice”, there might be a demand for silence from all voices big and small, paralyzing everyone, making mental health feel elusive, and making school feel too intense and too dangerous. Ever present threat tends to wake up feelings that came from earlier times of threat and trauma, and that can make the classroom feel like a very crowded place in traumatic times, with only one or 2 grown-ups present, and so many more frightened “little selves” to contain.
People who work with ERP in their classrooms know that we value ambivalence as a cornerstone of child mental health. Allowing BOTH positive and negative emotions to live in the classroom respects the broad continuum of human emotional experience. Valuing all emotions equally avoids the determination that “happy” means “good” and “angry” means “bad.” People who have worked with ERP know that we advocate for the use of interactive feelings charts over behavior charts, since feelings underlie children’s behavior. We know that there are less likely to be explosions when children are in touch with a range of feelings, and have many invitations to express and explore these in containing and school friendly ways during the school day, including through literacy dialogues, writing, drawing, story dictation and story acting, play, expressive arts and social studies. When the classroom community and curriculum acknowledges emotional complexity, no one is left out. In especially trying times, it is important that our classrooms can nurture hope, as well as hold the negativity that is likely to be present. As a lonely 11-year old recently said to me most emphatically, “COVID sucks!”

If I were to try to convince him otherwise, I would be undermining his real experience, and leaving him alone with his anger and despair.

While people who raise their hand to take care of children and parents are not always the best at taking care of themselves, it might be comforting to know that there is evidence to suggest that using some of the very familiar tools of
Emotionally Responsive Practice that help to protect the mental health of school children, can also be used to protect your own mental health, perhaps creating shelter for both your “big and little selves” during this stressful time. Teachers who have been in ERP’s support groups know that we often integrate hands-on expressive modalities into the support group experience.

For example, people familiar with our practice know that we talk a lot about inviting self-expression through symbolic processes that can hold, or contain, all kinds of feelings in the classroom. These expressive invitations often include writing, story dictation, Vivian Paley’s story acting, representational expressive arts, as well as our intentional use of Transitional Objects, (usually Teddy Bears) in the classroom. Although much of our Teddy Bear work focuses on children, science supports the intuitive value of using comfort objects, with both for children and adults. When children or adults hold Teddy Bears, studies find that blood pressure and stress hormone levels go down, and feelings of well-being, increase. (Kenneth Tai, 2012, 2020) In addition, the presence of Teddy Bears mitigates loneliness in both children and adults, and fosters more responsive prosocial behavior when interaction with others is available.

There are known benefits of allowing children to free write or free draw when they are in distress. Long time public health research outcomes on supporting adult mental health in traumatic times shows that writing about important personal experiences in an open ended, emotional way for as little as 15
minutes over the course of three days brought about improvements in both mental and physical health. (Pennebaker and Segal, 1999)

According to follow up studies, “expressive writing occurs on multiple levels—cognitive, emotional, social and biological—which may promote emotional integration and produce long-term improvements in mood and health.” ( ) These effects have been shown to hold across cultures, age groups, and diverse samples.

In a literature review of the value of artistic engagement during difficult times, Stucky and Nobel recently found indications in multiple studies that creative engagement can decrease anxiety, stress, and mood volatility in adults as well as children. (2020) Studying the impact of engagement with writing, music, visual arts, dance and drama, they conclude that the use of arts in healing brings “emotional, somatic, artistic, and spiritual dimensions” together to support well being.

The act of representing “what it’s been like” for you during this isolating and traumatic time, through any expressive vehicle that feels right to you (music, dance, drawing, painting, sculpting, writing) gives your multiple, complex feelings a voice. In traumatic times, trauma expert Bessel Van der Kolk notes that lack of outlets for psychological and physiological emotional release makes overwhelming traumatic sensations likely to build up, increasing volatility and
the likelihood of unwanted explosive episodes. (2014) I will add that living through lockdown in small spaces, either alone or with family, and without access to our usual outside pursuits and connections, can exacerbate that affect. Given the professional demand to “keep swimming” through this tumultuous time, we may need to be conscious of “rescuing ourselves first” in order to stay above water.

If you are a parent, allowing for time and emotional space for yourself in this unrelentingly stressful period might seem impossible. Studies show that being playful with your own children can bring some relief to both them, and to you. Play can create a safe, creative space for both children and adults to invent symbolic, playful solutions to the essential conflict between closeness and distance that defines our experience in the time of COVID. Creating an alternate universe with LEGO’s or a fort strong enough to prevent COVID germs from entering can bring relief for all inhabitants, big and little.

While playing and creating apart from your children may seem like an impossible mission, especially now, the prospect of gaining some emotional equilibrium might be worth putting a movie on for the kids, and hiding somewhere with paper, pen and art supplies!

Adults without children at home may have more time to create music, poetry or narratives on their own or in conjunction with a friend or significant other.
Creativity can work like an anti-depressant in bad times, reminding both your “big and little selves” that they can still have their voices for all of what they are feeling.

When grief or trauma make inventive capacities difficult to access, Jones suggests using collage as a more available expressive modality to promote adult mental health in adverse times. Collage allows the artist to use already existing images to create symbols that eventually can emerge to become personally meaningful. (Jones, 2018). Symbols create a “holding space” for overwhelming feeling, as well as a vehicle for people to connect with one another, once the symbols are shared. If you are learning about the Zoom Window as Quilt this morning, you may experience this phenomenon.

Integration of overwhelming experience is one of the biggest goals of trauma recovery. Hinz (2009) describes the role of symbols in coping in traumatic times “a visual symbol can act as a bridge between what’s happening in the outside world and personal meaning; and has the capacity to describe an individual’s experience in its entirety, which a cognitive verbal description cannot often do”

That’s one of the reasons that ERP staff is always encouraging young children to draw before learning to write. We want their expressive modalities to hold as much meaning as possible at every age, as a tool for protecting their emotional being as well as creating strong foundations for cognitive learning.
When symbols are shared within relationship or within community, the process fosters connections to others with aspects of shared experiences, and can decrease social isolation, protect against depression and help both your “big and little selves”, integrate aspects of traumatic experience. Sometimes visual symbols can capture what words cannot.

Finally, ERP emphasizes the importance of a “good mirror” for retaining sanity in troubled times. A good mirror reflects experiences accurately, even when what is being reflected includes grief, loss or conflict. Some of you will choose to learn from practicing teachers later today, who use different kinds of emotionally responsive literacy and social studies as “good mirrors” in classroom practice. For now, I will use some “Once upon a time stories.” that reflect some of the feeling experiences that I have heard from Teachers and school leaders during COVID times.”

“Once upon a time, there was a 2nd grade teacher who was teaching using the hybrid model during the time of COVID. While she was overwhelmed at first, she eventually began to feel more and more mastery over the virtual learning environment, and her ability to translate in-person teaching improved. She started to be excited about the possibilities of doing Experience-based learning within the virtual milieu on the days that she taught remotely. She began to feel powerful, as though she had slayed an invisible dragon.”
“Once upon a time, there was a Head Start director who was wondering about the classification of her staff as “essential workers.” Usually, when something or someone is essential, it means they are highly valued, and therefore, well-guarded and well protected. Yet, she, and her staff of mostly black and brown teachers who teach mostly black and brown children, were summoned to return to the classroom weeks before the city’s schools reopened, even though studies were showing that the demographic of staff and parents in her Head Start community was the most vulnerable were they to get sick with COVID. She began to feel that being “essential” was code for “needed, but ultimately expendable.” She became aware that feelings of rage and betrayal were taking up a lot of her mental energy.

“Once upon a time, there was a 3rd grade teacher who worked from home, teaching remotely. He knew he couldn’t be at school these days, since he had Type 1 diabetes, which put him at high risk if he were to get COVID-19, but he missed the interactive presence of children in his day to day life, and felt isolated and depleted at the end of the virtual work day. The only time of day he felt right was when everyone in the neighborhood opened their windows and clapped and banged on pots and pans to show gratitude for the medical community. His “little self” was comforted by the thought that doctors could save him if he needed saving, as they had done once when he was a child. His “big self” was relieved to be actively engaged with his neighbors, who were also clapping and banging.”
“Once upon a time, there was a teacher who went to school every day, even though she was afraid of the Coronavirus. Her kindergarteners were spontaneous and affectionate, sometimes running to her for hugs when they felt joyful or upset about something that happened in the classroom. She allowed them to hug her, but refrained from hugging them back. Every time she held back on providing this level of physical comfort, she felt overwhelmed with guilt and sadness.”

“Once upon a time, there was a school leader who lost her grandmother, her uncle and her great aunt to COVID-19. She could not attend their funerals because of COVID travel restrictions, and was isolated with grief and overwhelming sadness. She wanted to return to school, but was afraid that she too would get sick. One night, she had a vivid dream that her cousin in Peru moved into her apartment building. When she woke up and realized that it was a dream, she called her cousin, and the two talked and cried together for hours. When she hung up, she felt like she could breathe for the first time since the reality of COVID happened.

“Once upon our time, there was an infant-toddler teacher who held and fed and nurtured their very young children for many hours every day, and felt good as they interacted with the children in their care. At night, they began to feel anxious. Once asleep, they had recurring dreams that something dangerous
was coming. Once back in the childcare center where they worked, holding an infant in their arms, all of the scary dream images were gone.”

If you see yourself in these stories, then they may work well as a “good mirror”, helping you feel seen and heard, and leaving you in good company. If not, writing your own stories will feel better.

In conclusion, maybe the moral of the story when teaching in the time of COVID is that you might not need to be a superhero every waking moment in order to stay relevant in this moment. Making space for a range of your own feelings, and using creativity to give them a voice might create a space between the unrelenting demands of working in these times, and your own emotional needs, so you can stay in touch with them, and give them some attention. You might use the advocacy techniques that you learn in Mark’s workshop to fight for funds to support the needed concentric circles of support. In the meantime, a little self-care might let both your “big and little selves” breathe a sigh of relief, and maybe curl up in harmony for a relaxing nap in the cozy corner that you make for them.

We hope we can give you some space for all of the above today, as we work together to support both children and the adults who care for them. Thank you for coming, and we look forward to checking in during our closing comments, and sharing about your day.