

Cultivating Resilience: Trauma-Informed and Culturally Relevant Pedagogy Postpandemic

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Connecting Theory to Practice

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic, compounded by systemic racism and social unrest, has left enduring impacts on students of color in higher education. This paper responds to these challenges by bringing trauma-informed and culturally relevant pedagogy into the dialogue. The proposed framework recognizes trauma, affirms student identities, and builds on cultural assets rather than deficit models. Practical strategies for faculty include trauma-sensitive teaching, culturally affirming curricula, and cocreated learning experiences that strengthen equity and inclusion. The paper also highlights the importance of faculty development in trauma-informed practice and institutional commitments to equitable access and support. By integrating these two pedagogical approaches, this paper advances a holistic model for reimagining higher education and offers actionable steps for creating learning environments where students of color can thrive as learners and knowledge producers.

Keywords

Trauma-Informed Pedagogy, Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, Equity, Students of Color, Post-Pandemic Higher Education

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Introduction

The rapid and sudden onset of the global COVID-19 pandemic caused traumatic stress symptoms that can lead to anxiety, depression, deficits in psychosocial functioning, and even Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in many young people (Bridgland et al., 2021). For many students of color, not only did they experience the stress of the global pandemic, but they concurrently experienced racial trauma in everyday life (Landertinger et al., 2021). Ladson-Billings (2021) explains that four interlocking pandemics, including racism, the climate crisis, economic instability, and the coronavirus crisis, were unfolding simultaneously. These overlapping crises exposed deep systemic inequities and created an opening for higher education institutions to confront injustice differently. This essay centers on how students of color experience the postpandemic world and implications for faculty and instructors in higher education to support the unique experiences of students of color through trauma-informed pedagogy and culturally relevant pedagogy.

Even though the immediate threat of the pandemic is over, the lasting trauma remains. As students of color reflect on their experience during the pandemic, they recall a chaotic switch to online learning, inadequate health support for well-being, and difficulty balancing academic expectations with care-taking and personal responsibilities. Many also had to rely heavily on social capital and family to gather resources needed to complete their education requirements (Corrado & Tang, 2024). Additionally, people of color faced discrimination and systemic racism during both the COVID-19 pandemic and the Racial Awakening of 2020, which significantly increased stress and contributed to trauma symptoms during and after the pandemic (De Leon et al., 2023).

Not only do the fear and uncertainty of the COVID-19 experience still linger, but students in higher education continue to face a wide range of trauma-inducing circumstances. These include uncertainty about immigration status and the risk of deportation for undocumented students and Deferred Action Childhood Arrivals (DACA) recipients, the restriction of access to trans affirming care, and the rising costs of food and housing. Together, these circumstances have intensified the challenges of underserved and marginalized students (Livalska et al., 2024).

In light of the cascading stress of navigating the postpandemic world, faculty should remain vigilant about trauma's impact on academic success and learning (Daughty, 2020). The combination of COVID-19 distress and the racial trauma that society endured during the pandemic and beyond can cause chronic acute stress in the population, especially for students of color (Kamp Dush et al., 2022). This paper addresses key components of deploying trauma-informed and culturally relevant pedagogy to support the needs of students of color in the postpandemic reality.

Trauma-Informed Pedagogy

Increasingly, there is a growing demand for higher education institutions to adopt trauma-informed pedagogy to support student learning and create a safe learning environment (Doughty, 2020; Gunderson et al., 2023). Trauma-informed pedagogy is a commitment to honoring student voices and experiences, maintaining a safe, collaborative environment, and allowing and encouraging student choice (Anderson et al., 2023).

Trauma exposure is the norm, not the exception. Boyraz et al. (2013) estimate that two-thirds of students in higher education are affected by trauma. Even if students have not been impacted by trauma prior to their

arrival on campus, they may encounter trauma during their college experience through institutional racism, exposure to stressful course content, or even sexual violence (Boyraz et al., 2013; Conley & Griffith, 2016; McCauley & Casler, 2015). As such, higher education professors and instructors should be aware of and knowledgeable about trauma-informed pedagogy that can support students in times of distress. Trauma-informed professional development should be part of the framework all faculty receive to identify students affected by trauma, understand potential activators, effectively communicate with them, support students with available resources, and facilitate a supportive learning environment (Doughty, 2020).

As educators, we must be aware of the impact of firsthand trauma or exposure to vicarious trauma on students. Exposing students to trauma through shared experience may create hyperarousal, numbing, and disassociation when discussions or material reminds them of their own lives (Harrison et al., 2023). To create safe spaces for trauma-sensitive learners, instructors may add trauma statements in syllabi, offer activation warnings from material, choose material that lessens the trauma experience, and allow for breaks when students need to exit the classroom briefly (Gunderson et al., 2023). Additionally, being aware of trauma-informed pedagogy can create a safe, supportive, and stable student environment. However, for marginalized students, safety alone is not enough; instructors must also draw on culturally relevant frameworks to ensure classrooms are inclusive and responsive to students' identities and lived experiences.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

Culturally relevant pedagogy grounds culture in the classroom. The three pillars of culturally relevant pedagogy are academic success, cultural competence, and critical competence (Ladson-Billings, 1995). One of the key aspects of culturally relevant pedagogy is that a teacher recognizes injustices and inequities in the world and can bring this to the attention of the students (Ladson-Billings, 1995). For example, the COVID-19 pandemic presented inequities for students nationwide. During this time, students learned from home utilizing the internet and laptops, but many students did not have access to these key tools and thus were unsuccessful. Ladson-Billings (2021) calls on educators to reform their classrooms to be more culturally relevant postpandemic. Educators should work to understand their students' experiences and cultures and embed this within their teaching.

Culturally relevant pedagogies in the post-COVID-19 world include acknowledging and teaching emotional regulation skills for persistent inequities, embracing teacher and students' identities, critically examining biases, and critically challenging inequities (Cataldo, 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic spotlighted a mental health crisis, racial tensions, and political turmoil exacerbating disparities, especially for African American communities (Schmit et al., 2024). Social-emotional skills within a culturally relevant curriculum can provide students with resilience during turbulent sociopolitical times.

As awareness of mental health becomes more salient within society, it will be essential for faculty to understand how disparities affect students' academic success. Furthering critical consciousness, faculty and schools must acknowledge the racism and biases that students of color face (Mize & Glover, 2021). Besides teaching resilience, educators must recognize how their worldviews shape their standards and expectations for student learning. This recognition also includes dismantling any deficit-based teaching methods and actively teaching from an antiracist perspective.

Identifying, celebrating, and affirming students' cultural assets is essential in alleviating bias in instructional practices (Borrero et al., 2022). This affirmation comprises culturally affirming curricula and a well-

developed student rapport. Educators must come together to evaluate and be cognizant of the instructional materials and discussions they implement in the classroom, as faculty send implicit and explicit messages about their cultural competencies to students (Kondo, 2022). Curricular choices are political because those in power choose what perspectives and information are included or excluded. Encouraging faculty to have personal discussions on race in the classroom is vital for developing educators' cultural competence in creating relevant coursework sensitive to students lived experiences (Shultz et al., 2024).

These personal discussions with individual students are essential because implementing culturally relevant practices in a blanket way undermines the variations of experiences of students sharing a racial identity (Mustafaa, 2023). Improved university-faculty-student relationships pave the way for a more optimistic future of systematic change. The pandemic made higher education institutions rethink the policies impacting students in their programs. Moreover, this is a time for universities to how outdated policies and practices perpetuate burnout and stress. Higher education institutions must create accessible and actionable steps for students to experience inclusive and equitable learning experiences and quality programs.

Conceptual Framework

This article conceptualizes trauma-informed pedagogy and culturally relevant pedagogy to inform asset-based approaches to equity and inclusion in higher education spaces. These frameworks center students' identities, recognize the trauma students have suffered, and create safe spaces within higher education. Trauma-informed pedagogy highlights the need for recognizing student trauma, safety, student voice, and a collaborative and safe environment (Anderson et al., 2023; Gunderson et al., 2023; i.e., classroom). Culturally relevant pedagogy is grounded in the three pillars of cultural competence, academic success, and critical consciousness. These pillars center students' experiences, assets, and resists inequities to ensure equitable learning (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Therefore, this conceptualization of these two frameworks requires higher education faculty to recognize the trauma and inequities associated with COVID-19, center students' identities and voices, be flexible, and respond to the trauma to resist re-traumatization. See Figure 1 for a visual representation.

Figure 1

Creating safe and inclusive classrooms in higher education



Reimagining Practices in Higher Education

Reimagining higher education requires a systemic shift toward inclusivity, equity, and responsiveness to student challenges. Institutions must embed trauma-informed practices across all levels, addressing trauma holistically while considering cultural needs, intersectional identities, and historical traumas (Henshaw, 2022). Comprehensive training for faculty and staff is essential to create genuinely supportive environments. Policies in higher education should prioritize flexibility, offering extended deadlines and emergency support to meet diverse student needs (Hills & Peacock, 2022). Safe spaces are critical in fostering supportive environments where students can engage meaningfully and feel secure (Sam, 2021). However, additional efforts may be necessary to address racial and ethnic identities, cultural resilience, and well-being.

The pandemic also “laid bare the gaps in US digital equity efforts” (Ali & Katz, 2024), highlighting disparities in access to technology and underscoring the need for equitable digital infrastructure. Universities should ensure all students can access laptops, reliable internet, and assistive tools, reducing barriers to success. Faculty must receive training to design inclusive digital learning experiences that address diverse learning styles and technological inequities (Bong & Chen, 2024). Ward and Corral (2023) explored the effects of tuition reset policies on higher education institutions. Revisiting tuition structures to support these efforts without deepening financial hardship is crucial for sustainable reform.

Curricula must adapt to an increasingly interconnected world by integrating cultural relevance and social justice. This will enable students to address systemic inequities and explore advocacy pathways. This aligns with Ladson-Billings' (1995) concept of culturally relevant pedagogy, which emphasizes academic success, cultural competence, and critical consciousness. By incorporating lived experiences, fostering critical thinking, and bridging theory with practice, educators empower students to engage with pressing societal issues. Bovill (2020) highlights a whole-class approach to co-creating curricula to foster meaningful learning that resonates with diverse perspectives.

This moment calls for higher education to reimagine itself—embracing practices prioritizing trauma sensitivity, equitable access, and culturally grounded learning—to create spaces where all students can thrive.

Implications for Practice

Further reflecting on the implications of the pandemic, higher education faculty have noted shifts in students' needs and have responded with culturally relevant practices that have had some promising results. There is a reorientation from purely academic, knowledge-based, and transactional learning to a more relational focus. COVID-19 pandemic highlighted that academic success must include social-emotional learning and address inequities and injustices in education (Cataldo, 2022). One such injustice is the lack of focus on students' assets, whether individual strengths, cultural values, or personal characteristics that can help them succeed. While the inequities highlighted during the pandemic involving access to technology and mental health resources among some people of color, women of color reported having more resilience to adversity during the pandemic than their male and white peers (Burt et al., 2022).

Culturally competent faculty adopt an asset-based teaching approach to improve student outcomes, regardless of the challenges a student faces. For example, faculty who created connections between course material and students' lived experiences found that they were better able to scaffold learning experiences so

that students could grasp abstract concepts (Castillo-Montoya, 2019). This scaffolding is necessary to increase students' confidence in other abstract activities, such as academic writing. By way of illustration, many international students face challenges in writing and communicating effectively in higher education because they lack proficiency in English, particularly when navigating academic language. In one study, faculty members adopted culturally relevant practices by connecting writing and discussion prompts to real-life examples in their English learners' lives, resulting in increased written work output and confidence among those who received the culturally relevant teaching compared to those who did not (Khoo & Huo, 2022). The positive implications of culturally relevant teaching suggest that higher education faculty can uplift student success despite systemic hurdles.

Adopting culturally relevant pedagogy requires higher education faculty to first examine their biases and challenge their views on what students lack. Faculty could consider evaluating their cultural competency using a tool like the adapted Multicultural Teaching Competency Scale (Cuellar et al., 2023). Understanding students' trauma and resilience to that trauma can help faculty create meaningful learning experiences that build on students' strengths. Additionally, these evaluations can reveal faculty members' own strengths and gaps in working with an increasingly diverse student body.

Conclusion

This paper extends existing research by bringing trauma-informed and culturally relevant pedagogy into dialogue, offering a combined framework to address the continuing challenges students of color face in the aftermath of the pandemic. By examining the dual impact of COVID-19 and systemic racism, it identifies practical strategies such as trauma-sensitive course design, culturally affirming curricula, and cocreated learning experiences that build directly on students' assets. This paper highlights the need for faculty development in trauma-informed practice and for institutional commitments to equitable access to technology and other essential supports. By integrating these two approaches, it moves beyond single-framework models to propose a more holistic path toward equity and inclusion in higher education. Such efforts can create conditions for students of color to thrive as learners and active participants in knowledge production.

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