TEACHING WITHOUT TRAUMA-INFORMED PREPARATION
A JOURNEY OF EXPERIENCE, REFLECTION, AND ADVOCACY

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Over the past eleven years as a professional educator, I have had the privilege of wearing many different hats: classroom teacher, interventionist, administrator, mentor, and, most recently, teacher educator. Experiencing education from these multiple vantage points has reinforced my understanding of the challenges educators face and the gaps that exist in teacher preparation. As a result, I have come to understand the importance of advocating for systemic changes in how preservice teachers are prepared and supported. This understanding did not emerge all at once but developed gradually over time. In my early years, I believed that strong classroom management and engaging lessons would be sufficient to meet my students' needs. However, as I encountered increasingly complex emotional and behavioral realities, I began to recognize that something deeper was missing—not only in my practice, but in how I had been prepared for the profession. What initially felt like gaps in my own teaching began to reveal themselves as gaps in my preparation. This realization marked a turning point, shifting my perspective from refining instructional strategies to rethinking the very foundations of effective teaching. It was through this shift that I came to view trauma-informed practice (TIP) not as an instructional add-on, but as a necessary lens through which all teaching should be understood.

This evolving perspective has shaped my current work and passions, particularly my commitment to urging universities to critically evaluate and more intentionally incorporate TIP into preservice teacher preparation programs. What was once a personal realization has become a professional imperative, influencing not only how I teach but how I think about preparing future educators for the realities of today's classrooms. Despite the growing recognition of trauma's impact on students (Cole et al., 2013; Frydman & Mayor, 2017; Magruder et al., 2017; Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2014), there remains a noteworthy gap in the literature regarding how universities are equipping teacher candidates with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to effectively implement TIP in the classroom. This gap is particularly concerning given the increasing prevalence of trauma in students' lives and the critical role teachers play in creating supportive, responsive learning environments. Without intentional integration of trauma-informed approaches into teacher preparation, preservice teachers risk entering the profession underprepared for the complex emotional and relational dimensions of teaching.

My own experience as a preservice teacher, who completed a clinically accompanied teacher preparation program in the 2000s (Jacobs & Burns, 2021), lacked a focus on TIP, which left me underprepared to navigate the complex emotional (McLaughlin et al., 2014) and behavioral (Bowen & Bowen, 1999; Perfect et al., 2016; Thomas et al., 2022) challenges many students face. While the theory emphasized in my preparation program taught me about teaching strategies and content, it didn't adequately prepare me for the impact of trauma on student learning and behavior (Blodgett & Lanigan, 2018; Shonkoff et al., 2012). In many ways, my idealized vision of teaching did not reflect the realities of the classroom, where trauma can deeply affect a child's ability to engage (Webb et al., 2022), learn (Cantor et al., 2019, Shonkoff et al. 2012), and build and maintain

healthy relationships (Latham-Mintus & Brown, 2018). As I entered the classroom, I quickly learned that teaching required far more than the strategies outlined in textbooks; it required an understanding of the deeply human elements of my students' lived experiences. This realization highlighted a critical gap in my preparation—the need for preservice teachers to be equipped with the knowledge and tools to recognize (Reddig & VanLone, 2024), understand (Bell et al., 2013), and address (L'Estrange & Howard, 2022) trauma in the classroom. This gap is not unique to my own experience but reflects broader systemic challenges in education. Many teachers enter the profession without adequate preparation for the realities they will face, contributing to widespread burnout (Ingersoll, 2003; Kyriacou, 2001), unaddressed social-emotional needs of students (Oberle & Schonert-Reichl, 2017; Zins & Elias, 2007), and persistent academic disparities (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020; Durlak et al., 2011). Additionally, some students are exposed to traumatic events within the very school environments meant to support them (Finkelhor et al., 2015), further complicating the work of educators. Given these realities, *currere* provides a valuable framework for critically reflecting on my own trajectory and examining the ways in which teacher preparation must evolve to meet the needs of today's classrooms.

The *currere* I present in this article reflects my ongoing journey of professional growth, resilience, and commitment to educating the whole child, particularly through a trauma-informed lens. Drawing from my own experiences and reflecting through the lens of Pinar's (1994) method of *currere*, I examine and contrast my preservice teacher education with the lived realities of the classroom, especially as they relate to trauma. Through vivid examples—such as encountering student trauma, navigating grief, and adapting to diverse emotional needs—I illustrate how preservice teacher education programs have traditionally lacked an emphasis on TIP (MacLochlainn et al., 2022; Reddig & VanLone, 2024; Young & Schepers, 2023). This lack of preparation sends novice teachers into the profession with insufficient support to enact TIP within their classrooms, highlighting the urgent need to integrate TIP into teacher preparation.

THE MISSING PIECE: NAVIGATING THE CLASSROOM WITHOUT TRAUMA-INFORMED PREPARATION

The faint scent of freshly sharpened pencils mingled with the soft echoes of children's laughter as I stepped into my first classroom on the first day of school in 2014. Rows of carefully arranged tables gleamed under fluorescent lights, a testament to the countless hours I had spent organizing, laminating, photocopying, and preparing for my students. This space, my "garden of kindergartners," felt full of possibility, poised to support my students' growth. Yet beneath its polished surface were challenges my preservice teacher education had not equipped me to handle—most notably, the reality that many of my students would arrive each day carrying burdens far greater than academic struggles.

When I transitioned into my first in-service teaching role, I stepped into my kindergarten classroom confident in my preparation to deliver content and support my students to succeed on their benchmark assessments. The real classroom, however, quickly demanded far more. My first year of teaching became a delicate balancing act—pouring energy into helping students master foundational skills while grappling with moments my training had never prepared me to face.

As a new kindergarten teacher, I dedicated myself to helping students develop foundational skills and progress toward academic standards. I celebrated measurable successes—students mastering phonics, recognizing letters and numbers, or learning to write a simple sentence. It was

a moment of triumph when a child who had once stumbled through counting to five proudly soared all the way to twenty. My heart swelled with pride the day a kindergartener, who had initially struggled with fine motor skills, confidently wrote their name for the first time. By early October, my classroom was buzzing with energy, and I eagerly invited colleagues in to witness the magic of a reader's workshop already in full swing, a testament to the rhythm and routine we had built together. These moments reassured me that my work was making a difference.

One moment, though, stands out vividly because of the way it interrupted my early sense of success. A student approached my desk with hesitant steps, clutching a crayon drawing tightly in his hands. His small voice carried words that struck me like a blow: "I hate you," he muttered as he thrust the paper toward me. Puzzled and concerned, I unfolded the page to reveal a chilling scene. The drawing depicted me—lifeless, blood pooling around my body. Red crayon streaks emphasized the violence of the image, and its simplicity made it even more haunting. My breath caught as I held the drawing, its edges crumpling under the weight of my trembling hands. Hurt, fear, and uncertainty surged within me. I retreated to the bathroom, locking the door behind me as tears blurred my vision. In that moment, I questioned everything—my abilities as a teacher, my connection with this child, and whether I had the capacity to make a positive impact on his life.

Nowhere in my preservice education had I been prepared for this moment. My coursework had focused on crafting engaging lessons, aligning objectives with standards, and implementing best instructional practices. Nowhere had we discussed how to respond when a child expresses anger or trauma through unsettling behaviors. Nowhere had we been taught what to do when a student's actions reveal pain far deeper than academic struggles. The unspoken message of my teacher preparation seemed clear: if every instructional objective aligned perfectly with standards, if assessments seamlessly measured outcomes, and if activities were sufficiently engaging, then students would learn, and academic success would follow. This approach reflected a "knowledge-for-practice" model (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999), where theoretical knowledge about planning and instruction was prioritized, yet meaningful connections to the complexities of classroom realities were structurally unsupported.

One of the most common pedagogies I experienced in my program was delivering simulated lessons for my undergraduate peers. These simulations took place in sterile, controlled university classrooms where feedback was superficial, polite, and devoid of the unpredictable realities of students' human emotions, needs, and behaviors. My simulated students never presented me with tears, trauma, or emotional outbursts; there were no moments that required more than content knowledge or a flawless transition. The preservice focus on technical skills left essential elements of TIP—empathy, adaptability, and responsiveness—as mere afterthoughts. In these simulations, it was easy to believe that teaching could be reduced to a tidy sequence of objectives and rubrics, overlooking the complexity and relational demands of the actual classroom. This gap between theory and practice became painfully evident as I faced moments that extended far beyond lesson planning.

During my second year, two district counselors entered my buzzing classroom, their somber expressions delivering unspoken weight. A note revealed the news: two children in our school had passed away. That morning, I sat with my students in a circle, my voice steady despite the lump in my throat. "Your friends won't be coming back to school," I explained, bracing for their reactions. Their blank stares and quiet sniffles filled the room with a heaviness I had never experienced as a teacher. Some students avoided eye contact, others fidgeted nervously and a few asked questions I did not feel equipped to answer. I remember pausing, searching for the "right" words, only to realize that my preparation had never given me language for moments like this.

In the days that followed, the weight of that moment lingered. I found myself second-guessing how I had responded—wondering if I had said too little or too much. I began to notice how grief surfaced in unexpected ways: through irritability, withdrawal, and sudden emotional outbursts. It became clear that my role extended far beyond delivering phonics instruction; I was now helping children make sense of loss, even as I struggled to process it myself. Their blank stares and sniffles highlighted my unpreparedness for grief. I was teaching phonics while these children were wrestling with loss—worlds that had never intersected during my preservice teacher education. This moment marked a turning point in my thinking. I began to understand that trauma was not an isolated incident or extreme circumstance but an ever-present and often invisible force shaping my students' experiences. More importantly, I realized that my effectiveness as a teacher depended not on how well I delivered content but on how well I could respond to the human needs in front of me.

While these two milestones stand out as defining moments, the daily struggles of the classroom were equally profound in shaping my understanding of teaching. Outbursts over seemingly minor frustrations, chairs flung in fits of anger, and the all-too-familiar "room clears" to ensure the safety of others became routine. These moments tested not only my patience but also my ability to remain composed and compassionate under pressure. My experiences—both extraordinary and everyday—revealed the stark limitations of my preservice teacher education. I could teach children to count to 100, but I was unprepared to guide them through trauma, heartbreak, or the weight of emotions they could barely articulate. It was through facing these realities that I began to realize that teaching was not solely about academics. It was about educating the whole child—seeing my students as complex, emotional beings and meeting their needs with empathy, resilience, and a willingness to adapt. Simply stated, my preservice teacher education had prepared me to teach lessons, but it had failed to prepare me for the most essential part of teaching: understanding and responding to the human experience unfolding before me.

Every day felt like a battle for equilibrium—a fragile balance where my students and I were not thriving but merely surviving, wrestling with challenges that went far beyond the curriculum. My preservice training had never addressed how to build relationships with students navigating trauma, how to regulate my own emotions in response to distressing situations, or how to create an environment where students felt truly safe. I had been trained to teach standards but not to support the whole child. Without trauma-informed preparation, I was left to navigate these moments through trial and error, learning only through experience what should have been foundational knowledge from the start. Over time, this trial-and-error approach began to transform my practice. I became more attuned to my students' emotional cues, more reflective in my responses, and more willing to pause instruction in favor of connection. What once felt like interruptions to learning, I began to see as essential entry points into it. This shift—from prioritizing content delivery to prioritizing student humanity—fundamentally reshaped my identity as an educator.

Reimagining Teacher Preparation: Building Bridges Between Theory, Practice, and the Human Experience

I dream of a future where teacher preparation is transformed, where every aspiring educator enters the profession not only equipped with content knowledge but deeply attuned to the emotional and human complexities of the classroom. In this future, theory and practice are not

separate entities but woven seamlessly together, guiding teachers to see their students as whole beings with stories, struggles, and strengths. TIP is not an afterthought, but an intrinsic part of every course, embedded in the very fabric of preservice teacher education.

Imagine a world where preservice teachers do not wait until their final year to step into a classroom for an extended time but begin their journey alongside students from the very start. Their coursework breathes life as they apply their learning in real-time, guided by mentors who model what it means to teach with both skill and heart. They learn to recognize the silent struggles of children, to create spaces where every student feels seen, valued, and supported. No longer do preservice teachers feel unprepared for the unpredictable human moments that arise in classrooms—they are ready, because they have been immersed in the reality of teaching all along.

In this vision, universities and schools are not separate institutions but partners, working hand in hand to cultivate teachers who are not only knowledgeable but deeply compassionate. Future educators learn in environments where reflective practice is the norm, where storytelling and case studies illuminate the profound impact of trauma and resilience, where their own emotional growth is nurtured alongside their professional development. They emerge not just as teachers but as changemakers, ready to shape learning environments where every child, regardless of their background, has the opportunity to thrive.

I dream of a world where teaching is no longer reduced to lesson plans and assessments but recognized as the relational, dynamic, and deeply human endeavor that it is. In this world, teacher preparation is not just about mastering pedagogy but about cultivating the kind of presence that transforms classrooms into places of possibility and hope. This is the future I see—one where the missing piece is finally found and where education becomes the force for healing and empowerment that it was always meant to be.

At the Intersection of Theory and Practice

As I reflect on my journey through the unique intersection of being both an inservice teacher and a teacher educator, I find myself in a space that is as challenging as it is illuminating. This dual role offers a rare vantage point—one that reveals the missing gaps in teacher preparation while immersing me in the lived realities of K-12 classrooms. What is striking is not only how clearly I can now name these gaps but how long it took me to understand them. Earlier in my career, I internalized these challenges as personal shortcomings, believing I simply needed to try harder or plan better. Now, I recognize them as systemic issues, shifting my focus from self-correction to advocacy and change. It is within this space that I find myself compelled to not only analyze what we are doing in teacher education but to imagine what we could be doing differently to prepare future teachers more effectively.

My own experiences as a preservice teacher mirror many of the gaps that persist today: a curriculum heavily weighted toward theoretical frameworks but disconnected from the unpredictable, deeply human realities of classroom life (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999). As an inservice teacher, I was left to navigate behavior management, trauma, and equitable instruction largely on my own, without the foundational support my preparation should have provided (Brunzell et al., 2016). The "knowledge-for-practice" model of my teacher education emphasized what I should know about teaching but offered little guidance in how to apply that knowledge meaningfully or adapt it to my students' complex needs (Ball & Cohen, 1999).

Now, as a teacher educator, I see how these missing gaps persist. In my role teaching two courses, I have witnessed the continued emphasis on rigid lesson planning, standards alignment, and theoretical models; while TIP, relationship-building, and adaptable pedagogy remain at the margins (Garwood & Vernon-Feagans, 2017). Preservice teachers are still being taught that immaculate lesson plans equate to effective teaching, despite growing research that underscores the importance of social-emotional learning and trauma-informed strategies in creating inclusive, effective learning environments (Wolpow et al., 2009).

What is clear to me is that teacher education, as it currently stands, is not fully preparing preservice teachers for the realities they will face. The gap between theory and practice persists, leaving new teachers underprepared for the relational and emotional dimensions of teaching (Zeichner, 2010). This dual role as an inservice teacher and teacher educator compels me to advocate for change—change that prioritizes intentional integration of TIP, experiential learning, and space for preservice teachers to engage in reflective, adaptive teaching.

Ultimately, this unique positionality is not just an opportunity but a responsibility to illuminate the missing gaps in our current systems, critique the structures that sustain them, and reimagine a future where teacher preparation truly bridges the divide between theory, practice, and the human experience of education.

Bridging the Gap in Teacher Preparation

The gap between theoretical instruction and the lived realities of the classroom reveals a critical need to better prepare future educators for the emotional, relational, and often unpredictable aspects of teaching. This disconnect emphasizes the importance of embedding TIP into teacher preparation programs to equip educators with the tools needed to navigate these complexities. This realization, however, is not new; scholars have long critiqued the ways in which teacher education privileges content knowledge and pedagogical frameworks while neglecting the human complexities that define classroom life (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Zeichner, 2010). Yet, despite this knowledge, the field continues to emphasize standardization over adaptability, theoretical mastery over student-centered teaching, and immaculate lesson planning over the ability to navigate student trauma and emotional needs.

My own journey illustrates these gaps in stark detail. As a preservice teacher, I was immersed in a world of lesson planning templates, theoretical discussions, and philosophical debates about pedagogy. Yet, when I stepped into the classroom, I found myself unprepared for the realities that shape students' learning experiences—the impact of trauma, the challenge of behavior management, and the necessity of building trust before meaningful instruction could occur. My teacher education program had equipped me with abstract knowledge, but it had not taught me how to respond when a student shut down in the middle of a lesson due to anxiety, when a child erupted in frustration after experiencing instability at home, or when the weight of my students' lived experiences made content delivery feel secondary to emotional support. Research on trauma-informed teaching highlights the need for in-service teachers to be equipped with strategies for recognizing and responding to student trauma, yet these approaches are rarely central to preservice training (Brunzell et al., 2016; Craig, 2016). The absence of this preparation is not merely an oversight—it is a systemic issue that leaves in-service teachers ill-equipped to meet the realities of their students' lives.

Now, as both an in-service teacher and a teacher educator, I see these same patterns playing out in the preparation of new teachers. In the courses I teach, preservice teachers are taught how to align instruction with state standards, how to design structured lesson plans, and how to analyze student data. But what remains largely absent from the curriculum is how to build relationships with students, how to implement TIP, and how to manage the inevitable unpredictability of teaching in real time. The literature supports the need for teacher education to include clinical experiences that immerse preservice teachers in authentic classroom settings before they begin teaching independently (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). However, these experiences must be more than observational. They must be structured in a way that allows preservice teachers to engage with the full complexity of teaching, including the social-emotional dimensions that shape student learning (Hamre & Pianta, 2001). Without this, we continue to send new teachers into classrooms unprepared for key practices that are fundamental to effective teaching.

Moreover, my experience as a graduate teaching assistant has illuminated another critical issue: the limited agency of teacher educators in shaping curriculum. As a teacher educator, I am expected to prepare future teachers, yet the structure of my role—delivering a predetermined curriculum with little space for innovation—mirrors the very problems I critique. Teacher educators, particularly those in early career or adjunct positions, often lack the authority to integrate experiential learning or TIP into their instruction, reinforcing the same rigid structures that limit K-12 teachers (Korthagen, 2017). This systemic issue not only affects preservice teachers but also stifles meaningful reform in teacher preparation itself.

To truly prepare future teachers, we must move beyond a model of education that prioritizes theoretical mastery and standardization at the expense of human connection and adaptability. A reimagined teacher preparation program must embrace a clinically based curriculum that integrates trauma-informed pedagogy, fosters reflective practice, and prioritizes relational teaching alongside content delivery (Ball & Forzani, 2009; Garwood & Vernon-Feagans, 2017). Preservice teachers must have the opportunity to engage meaningfully with students, practice addressing behavioral and emotional challenges, and reflect on these aspects as integral to their teaching, rather than as secondary considerations.

Ultimately, rethinking teacher education is not just about improving instructional strategies, it is about shifting the very foundation of how we prepare educators. Future teachers must be empowered with not only pedagogical knowledge but also the skills to navigate the deeply human, often unpredictable realities of the classroom. This requires a commitment to integrating theory and practice, creating robust university-school partnerships, and fostering a model of teacher education that sees adaptability, empathy, and trauma-informed care as essential components of effective teaching. Only through this reimagining can we hope to cultivate teachers who are not only prepared to instruct but who are equipped to connect, support, and inspire the students they serve.

CONCLUSION

Looking back on my experiences in the classroom, I realize that the most profound lessons I learned were not about curriculum design or instructional strategies, but about the emotional realities my students carried with them each day. The outbursts, the withdrawn silence, the moments of deep frustration or unexpected breakthroughs—these were not simply behavioral challenges to manage but reflections of my students' lived experiences. My preservice education

had prepared me to teach academic content, but it had not prepared me for the complexities of supporting students who had experienced trauma. These moments were not just deviations from the curriculum; they were the heart of teaching itself. Each challenge, each moment of uncertainty, reinforced a truth that my preservice education had overlooked: teaching is not just about delivering content but about responding to the human experiences unfolding in the classroom. Trauma shapes the way students learn, engage, and connect, yet teacher preparation programs often fail to equip future educators with the trauma-informed knowledge and strategies necessary to support their students holistically. Without this preparation, new teachers enter classrooms unprepared to recognize, understand, and respond to the emotional and psychological realities that deeply influence student success.

My roles as a classroom teacher, interventionist, administrator, and now teacher educator have provided me with a unique opportunity to advocate for change, illuminate these critical gaps, and share the lived realities of teaching with future educators. I have witnessed firsthand how trauma impacts students, how unprepared teachers struggle to navigate these challenges, and how intentional TIP can transform classrooms into spaces of safety and healing. As a teacher educator, I see the urgency of integrating trauma-informed pedagogy into teacher preparation not as an elective or isolated module but as an essential, embedded component of how we train future educators.

To bridge the gap between theory and practice, preservice teachers need meaningful, clinically based experiences that allow them to engage with trauma-sensitive strategies in real classrooms. Universities and K-12 schools must work together to create programs that prepare educators to build relationships, foster resilience, and respond to student trauma with empathy and skill. By centering TIP in teacher education, we are not just improving instructional approaches—we are ensuring that every child, regardless of their experiences, has access to an environment where they feel seen, supported, and capable of success. This belief is grounded not only in research, but in my own transformation over the past 11 years—from a teacher focused primarily on instruction to one who understands that meaningful learning begins with connection, safety, and trust.

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