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Trauma Sensitive Schools 201

Involving Parents and the Community

By Audrey Hokoda, Maria Carmen Rodríguez, María González and Godwin Higa

Editor's note: There are schools across the country answering the call to become trauma-informed and to support not only their students with early life trauma but their families as well. Principal Godwin Higa of Cherokee Point Elementary school and the San Diego State University have joined forces to create a trauma-informed school. In ATN's December 2015 Journal we shared about Principal Higa's work in the school with his students and teachers. In the following article, SDSU and Cherokee Point Elementary staff share how they have worked to grow a community of trauma-informed parents and civic members to further support the students and families at the school experiencing the effects of early life trauma. Whatever the circumstances of the trauma experienced by today's students, lessons can be learned from this school's programs.



Here is a story all too familiar in some schools in America:

Lupita and her husband Jose live in a neighborhood with high rates of poverty, as well as domestic and gang violence. Lupita, at 22, has experienced multiple traumas including sexual abuse as a child, dating violence as a teen, and the loss of friends due to community violence. Recently they enrolled their son 5-year-old Jose Jr. and daughter 4-year-old Maria in Cherokee Point Elementary. Jose is juggling 3 jobs and is rarely home. Lupita struggles with English and navigating her neighborhood, and at night she's scared as she hears patrol cars and ambulances and is alone with her children. Mrs. Lopez from Cherokee Point has been calling because Jose Jr. has been running about his kindergarten classroom, spinning around and kicking classmates. Lupita feels overwhelmed, depressed, tired and lonely.

Cherokee Point Elementary in San Diego provides a trauma-informed community school that not only helps its students with early trauma, but parents like Lupita.

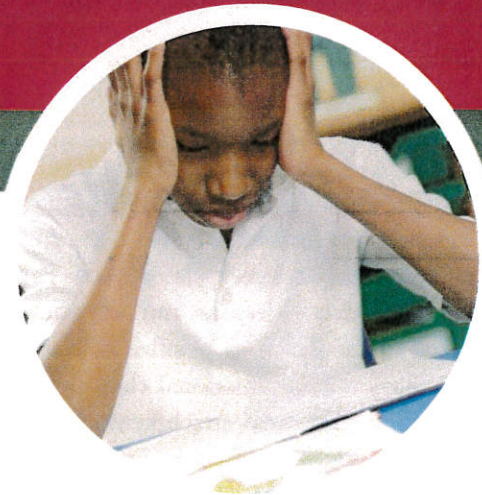
Research shows that more than two thirds of children report experiencing a traumatic event by age 16. More significantly, exposure to trauma is associated with deficits in social-emotional development that may put children at risk for school failure (APA, 2008; Gilliam, 2005; Perry, Holland, Darling-Kuria, & Nativ, 2011; Qi

& Kaiser, 2003). Children from low-income, minority families are more likely to come into school with fewer of the socio-emotional skills needed for school success due to risk factors related to trauma, living in poverty, limited English proficiency, lack of parent involvement, and a negative school climate (Child Trends & Center for Child Health Research, 2004).

Principal Godwin Higa aims to address these needs of the families at Cherokee Point Elementary, and so he strives to make his school a neighborhood learning center, where there is a welcoming school-community environment that facilitates communication and support. The creation of the "Gathering Place", a parent room next to the preschool classrooms, encourages parents to be actively involved in promoting their children's education and well-being from the time their children enter the district as preschoolers until they graduate from high school. Parents gather to socialize, and work together.

The program started as part of the Building Healthy Communities (BHC) Initiative and was funded by the California Endowment for 5 years. Promoting trauma-informed and restorative practices within a community school involves building on strengths and relationships, and supporting the active engagement of Parent Leaders, who are empowered to help their children and their families develop solutions for key problems in their community. Following Guiding Principles of Trauma Informed Care from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), goals include creating a place where the families feel safe, and where there is trust and mutual, collaborative partnerships are developed. The Gathering Place is a space where everyone is cared for, respected, and valued for their strengths. There's an understanding that healing occurs in relationships, through peer support and self-help.





A model of the Parent Engagement activities was developed by Maria Rodriguez, who as a graduate student served as the primary Mentor for the Parent Leaders at Cherokee Point. Her model, Growing Together “*Creciendo Juntos*”, emphasizes relationship building and increasing parent involvement and leadership by addressing cultural barriers that specifically hinder Latino parents’ involvement including logistical barriers (e.g., child care concerns), attitudinal barriers (e.g., uncertainty about parental roles in school) and expectations (e.g., feeling judged by their ethnicity or social class) (Durand, 2010; Huerta, 1998; Henderson, Marburger, & Ooms, 1986; Villareal & Barnwell, 1990, respectively).

One goal of the work is to create a community school that implements trauma-informed practices and addresses the above barriers - and many others minority parents face - that prevent engagement in their children’s schools. Another is to create a “sense of community” where interpersonal relationships are communal, cooperative, close, intimate and informal; where there is extensive home-school collaboration; and where the school infrastructure and activities incorporate cultural values (e.g., familismo, respeto, personalismo) that play a central role in parenting and relationships in Latinos (Calzada, 2010) who are living in the Cherokee Point neighborhood.

The *Creciendo Juntos* Parent Engagement Model consists of 4 levels of parental involvement, with Level One being “reaching out to the parents” through the development of authentic caring relationships as the foundation and prerequisite for success in the other three levels. Luckily, at Cherokee Point, step one had already been implemented by Principal Higa and the teachers in their creation of a warm, welcoming school which promoted trauma-informed, compassionate practices and used restorative circles in the classroom. In addition, monthly “Principal’s Chats” provided opportunities for socialization among parents and a venue for presentations by professionals from the community (e.g., lawyers, police officers) addressing resident concerns (e.g., immigration rights, community safety). The school also built partnerships with agencies and businesses to help with basic needs (e.g., food pantry, clothing donations).

CA Endowment funded the expansion of parent involvement in 2011 with an initial nine months of resident community meetings. These meetings provided an additional venue for the school’s greater community to get to know each other through meals and activities, and where residents provided feedback regarding their priorities for their children, families and community. The parents identified needs that included: how to help their children succeed in school, relaxation/health promotion activities for parents, positive discipline/parenting tips and coping with domestic/community violence.

In addition, as parents voiced their needs, workshops were offered by San Diego State University (SDSU) faculty and students, and community experts (e.g., National Conflict Resolution Center, Center for Community Solutions). For example, Dr. Colette Ingraham, Maria Rodriguez, and other students from SDSU led bilingual parent workshops on helping children with homework, helping children get into college, Common Core State Standards, and differences in school systems in the U.S. versus Mexico.

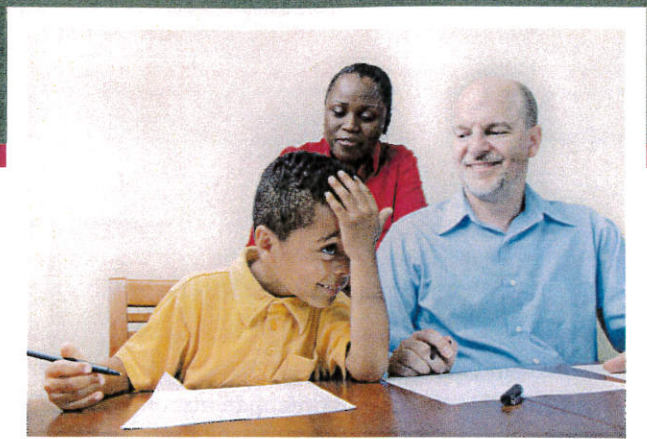
Moreover, guided by parent feedback, as well as by research on the effects of trauma on the brain and a strong desire to emphasize prevention, early childhood education has been a key focus. With the help of Dr. Shulamit Ritblatt from the SDSU Child and Family Development Department, in collaboration with community partners (e.g., Family Health Centers of San Diego), parents of pre-K children were given over 30 sessions of a First Five program (Pathways to Competence), as well as lessons from the Circle of Education, a school readiness program that includes



music and literacy-based lessons in English and Spanish for parents and teachers (circleofeducation.com). Parents gave feedback and selected lessons and activities that address trauma's effects, such as positive discipline in dealing with behavioral and emotional challenges, and ways to promote parent-child attachment and social competence (e.g., friendship, cooperation, anger control). I also led trainings on the effects of trauma on children and families, self-care and coping strategies for stress/depression, and positive parenting.

After over 5 years of mentoring, relationship building, and weekly meetings, Parent Leaders continue to increase their engagement in collaborative work with school-community partners to provide services for children and families. Using a Train-the-Trainer model, Parent Leaders are supported as they facilitate bi-monthly meetings, plan and present at Principal's Chats and workshops, and help coordinate/recruit other parents to volunteer at Principal-led community-building activities (e.g., food distribution, school clean-up, Cinco de Mayo celebrations). Trained on evidence-based trauma-informed care and parent leadership skills, Parent Leaders then individualized their workshops, using stories from their own families, and created interactive small group activities tailored for the families they know. They have led workshops on topics such as: Recognizing Trauma Effects in Children and Families, Self-Care, Positive Discipline/Communication, Depression, Family Values and Resilience.

They have also led Circle of Education lessons that correspond to lessons led in preschool classes, and they have hosted "cafecita sociales" for new parents to meet Principal Higa, teachers, and Parent Leaders. Via this work, new parents are drawn into the ever growing trauma-informed community and provided information about parenting classes and resources. Parent Leaders have also supported other events (e.g., parenting classes by SAY San Diego and Jewish Family Services, City Heights Community Walks with Mid-City Police). Additionally, the influence of the Parent Leaders has broadened beyond their school as they have been asked to present at other schools, community conferences, and to professionals visiting from around the U.S. (e.g.,

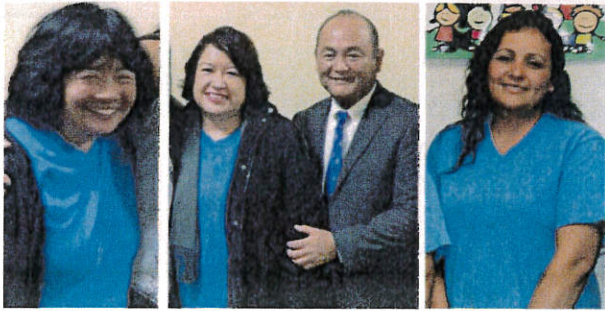


Harvard University, Johns Hopkins University, Echo Parenting of Los Angeles) among others (see www.acesconnection.com).

The Parent Engagement Model at Cherokee Point follows guidelines from San Diego's Trauma Informed Guide Team; establishing recovery from trauma is a primary goal and the Parent Leaders have been educated about the impact of trauma on their children and their own coping skills. We emphasize safety and developing trusting relationships, and use an empowerment model, in which Parent Leaders' strengths (e.g., personal-style, warmth, artistic talents, commitment to families) are embraced. Parent Leaders are equal collaborative partners. Parent Leaders guide workshops, outreach and activities, individualizing lessons for their culture and life experiences.

Remember Lupita? You may still be wondering how specifically does being in a trauma-informed community school like Cherokee Point help a new mom like her. Lupita was stressed and embarrassed to come to school after receiving numerous calls from Ms. Lopez, Jose Jr.'s teacher. However, as she drops off Jose Jr. and Maria in their classrooms, Mrs. Lopez approaches Lupita in a friendly way and invites her to the Parents' "Gathering Place" and tells her about the parenting classes that are being offered. The next day, one of the parent leaders invites her personally, and Lupita decides to go. At the "Gathering Place" Lupita finds the aroma of freshly made coffee, a vibrant room full of parents and toddlers, and everyone is chatting and greeting each other. She notices the photos of parents like herself decorating the colorful walls – pictures of baby showers, birthday celebrations, and workshops. She also sees fliers and community resources that until now she didn't know existed. She has opportunities to learn about how to help her children and to meet supportive and fun friends. Two Parent Leaders – Nancy and Ale - approach her with a smile to welcome her, and Lupita feels a sense of belonging.





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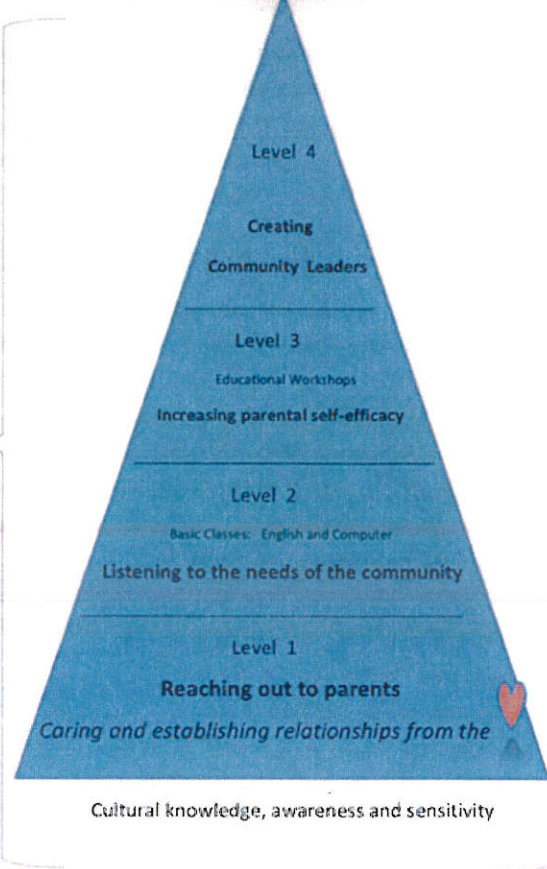
Maria Carmen Rodriguez, B.S., is in a masters program at San Diego State University (SDSU), where she specializes in counseling and mental health services for young children and families. She has been the Parent Leader Mentor working at Cherokee Point Elementary for the past 5 years.

María González is the mother of 3 children who have attended Cherokee Point Elementary, and she has been an active Parent Leader with the Trauma Informed Community Schools program for over 5 years. She has helped lead dozens of community presentations on trauma, resilience-building, depression and early childhood education.

Godwin Higa is the Principal at Cherokee Point Elementary School in San Diego. Previously he served as a teacher for the San Diego Unified School District, was named Teacher of the Year in 1997, and served as a language arts consultant for the state Program Quality Review committee. Currently he serves as a Commissioner of the San Diego City Citizens' Review Board, and is a member of the Hispanic Alliance Community Association.

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Levels of Parent Involvement



EMPOWERMENT

“Creciendo Juntos” Parenting Model

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