Thank you for your interest in Corwin.

Please enjoy this complimentary excerpt from Humanizing Distance Learning.

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Academics matter, and I would even go so far to say that academics should be a major component of distance learning. I bond with my kids over learning, as all teachers do. I connect with them over good books, the stories they write, and challenging math problems. But we also must recognize that our students have endured what will become the generational trauma of a global pandemic. Our students will bring big feelings, real worries, and valid fears into our classrooms as a result of the pandemic.

Experiencing a global pandemic has been traumatic for all of us, and as educators, we cannot take this lightly. The education world is waking up to the effects of trauma on students, and as a result, educators should be decentering academics, intensifying socioemotional work, and finding ways to incorporate trauma-informed practices into their everyday pedagogy.

But it’s important to note that understanding trauma-informed teaching is not only important because we are living through the COVID pandemic. Black and Brown students, LGBTQ+ students, and neurodivergent students wake up in a world that more frequently feels unsafe; they venture out into a society that was not built for them. To my white readers, I urge you to remember that our nation experienced more than one pandemic in 2020. For Black and Brown people, white supremacy is a centuries-long pandemic, the result of which is a profound generational trauma that has been burned into the DNA of every Black and Brown student who enters our classrooms (DeGruy, 2005). LGBTQ+ students are constantly faced with the traumatic impacts of homophobic and transphobic microaggressions, and students with disabilities and/or neurodivergent students are served repeated reminders that their way of interacting with the world is often considered second,
Humanizing Distance Learning needing to be accommodated instead of centered. The COVID-19 pandemic has likely exacerbated trauma for all of these groups.

To add insult to injury, social and emotional learning teaching strategies have been weaponized against Students of Color, LGBTQ+ students, and neurodivergent students.

Dena Simmons, author and assistant director of the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence, described socioemotional learning as “white supremacy with a hug,” if not taught in tandem with explicit anti-racist and anti-bias practices (Madda, 2019). While self-regulation is a critical component of socioemotional learning, as defined by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), encouraging self-regulation can easily become a means for the control and further oppression of marginalized students.

In her *New York Times* bestselling book, *So You Want to Talk About Race*, Ijeoma Oluo (2018) defines “tone policing” as a person of privilege not necessarily pushing back against what is being said, but instead the way it is being discussed. Tone policing and the weaponization of self-regulation go hand in hand, and in order to take a trauma-informed approach in an era of distance learning, we must understand that sometimes our students’ communication of their “big” feelings will mirror the feelings themselves. When students feel sad, we will likely see sadness in their eyes, and when they feel the pang of anger that results from the stings of injustice, we will likely see anger in their bodies and hear it in their voices. This has to be expected; this has to be okay. We can’t possibly convince our students that we’re interested in building a safe place to express feelings, all the while policing the manner in which they’re communicating. To be liberated means to be able to share feelings openly, without judgment or repercussion.

When teaching from a distance, we must be more sensitive than we have ever been to the trauma our students bring into our classrooms on a daily basis. We must be aware that trauma is not confined to the global pandemic in which we’ve all found ourselves; it is ever present, intertwined with our students’ and their families’ identities. The challenge in our digital classrooms is that we no longer have the benefit of reading body language and facial expressions to the degree we could before. We must, instead, build new structures into our classrooms that center socioemotional literacy and ensure our students that we are still here to provide them with emotional support—and we must remember to keep these structures in place even long after distance learning is no longer a part of our reality.

In “A Trauma-Informed Approach to Teaching Through Coronavirus,” the Teaching Tolerance Staff encourages educators to consider three key areas
that are often disrupted in times of trauma: sense of safety, connectedness, and hope (2020). Consider some of the following tools, strategies, and structures to fortify your classroom culture with safety, connectedness, and hope.

**STRUCTURE IS HEALING**

I can’t stress enough the importance of structure in classrooms. My husband, who works as a licensed clinical social worker in Chicago, always says that “chaos is trauma and structure is healing.” To be trauma-informed means to provide structure, reliability, and continuity for kids in the midst of this traumatic chaos.

Our commitment to providing children the structure that they need is not because their parents are unable to give it to them. Yet it goes without saying that, as teachers, this is something we can provide that is far more meaningful than literacy or mathematics instruction. While our students may not want to admit it, many of them love the routine of school. They love knowing what to expect, and they find a sense of safety and comfort in reliably predicting what’s coming.

Structure always starts with the schedule. When my school transitioned to distance learning, I created visual schedules for my students, with a checklist of expected activities (see Figure 2.1 on the next page). On the checklist, I also included their specials classes and a reminder to log in if it was a synchronous class.

The regularity of our schedule from the Spring served my students and me well. They knew I’d be available every morning at 8:00 a.m., in case they needed something, or in the event that I needed to work with them a bit more. They knew that we’d begin the day with a brief morning meeting and reading workshop, take a break, and meet back for synchronous math workshop at 11:00 a.m. They came to expect a final meeting at 1:00 p.m. for writing workshop. Our classes also followed a relatively similar structure. Because my learning blocks were already structured off of derivatives of the workshop model, which we’ll address in Chapter 7, my students knew that we’d come together for a minilesson, spend time working in small groups and conferencing, and then reconvene at the end of the learning block for a reflection.

I knew this schedule and the cadence of my learning blocks provided the structure I intended because when I inevitably spent too long conferencing or working with small groups, I’d receive a message in Google Hangouts: “Hi, Mr. France, don’t we have to come back to the whole-group Meet for reflection?”
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Monday 4/6</th>
<th>Tuesday 4/7</th>
<th>Wednesday 4/8</th>
<th>Thursday 4/9</th>
<th>Friday 4/10</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8.00</td>
<td>Make sure you are able to log into Meet and that you can see the upcoming meeting. If you can't, contact Mr. France and Miss Gannon.</td>
<td><strong>Specials</strong>&lt;br&gt;☑ Computer Science Activity Card&lt;br&gt;☑ Spanish Activity Card</td>
<td>Office Hours  🎓&lt;br&gt;☑ Practice logging in for office hours</td>
<td>Office Hours  🎓&lt;br&gt;☑ Art Activity Card</td>
<td>NO SCHOOL</td>
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<tr>
<td>9.00</td>
<td><strong>Reading Workshop</strong>&lt;br&gt;☐ Reading Log&lt;br&gt;☐ Seesaw Card&lt;br&gt;☐ Practice using Hangouts with Mr. France</td>
<td><strong>Reading Workshop</strong>&lt;br&gt;☐ Reading Log&lt;br&gt;☐ Seesaw Card</td>
<td><strong>Reading Workshop</strong>&lt;br&gt;☐ Reading Log&lt;br&gt;☐ Seesaw Card</td>
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<tr>
<td>10.00</td>
<td>BREAK</td>
<td><strong>Specials</strong>&lt;br&gt;☐ Library Activity Card</td>
<td>Music  🎼&lt;br&gt;☐ Log in for class</td>
<td>Science  🎬&lt;br&gt;☐ Log in for class</td>
<td>NO SCHOOL</td>
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<tr>
<td>11.00</td>
<td><strong>Math Workshop</strong>&lt;br&gt;☐ Anchor Task&lt;br&gt;☐ Workbook Pages&lt;br&gt;☐ Document on Seesaw Card</td>
<td><strong>Math Workshop</strong>&lt;br&gt;☐ Anchor Task&lt;br&gt;☐ Workbook Pages&lt;br&gt;☐ Document on Seesaw Card</td>
<td><strong>Math Workshop</strong>&lt;br&gt;☐ Anchor Task&lt;br&gt;☐ Workbook Pages&lt;br&gt;☐ Document on Seesaw Card</td>
<td><strong>Math Workshop</strong>&lt;br&gt;☐ Anchor Task&lt;br&gt;☐ Workbook Pages&lt;br&gt;☐ Document on Seesaw Card</td>
<td>NO SCHOOL</td>
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<td>12.00</td>
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<td>LUNCH</td>
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<tr>
<td>1.00</td>
<td><strong>Writing Workshop</strong>&lt;br&gt;☐ Set a Daily Goal&lt;br&gt;☐ Document Progress on Seesaw Card</td>
<td><strong>Writing Workshop</strong>&lt;br&gt;☐ Set a Daily Goal&lt;br&gt;☐ Document Progress on Seesaw Card</td>
<td><strong>Writing Workshop</strong>&lt;br&gt;☐ Set a Daily Goal&lt;br&gt;☐ Document Progress on Seesaw Card</td>
<td><strong>Writing Workshop</strong>&lt;br&gt;☐ Set a Daily Goal&lt;br&gt;☐ Document Progress on Seesaw Card</td>
<td>NO SCHOOL</td>
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<td>2.00</td>
<td><strong>Specials</strong>&lt;br&gt;☐ PE Activity</td>
<td><strong>Specials</strong>&lt;br&gt;☐ PE Activity</td>
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<td><strong>Specials</strong>&lt;br&gt;☐ PE Activity</td>
<td>NO SCHOOL</td>
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“We do!” I’d say in reply. “Thanks for reminding me.”

Kids derive structure not only from the predictability of a schedule, they also find the healing nature of structure when classroom agreements are upheld, and when adults set clear boundaries for behavior.

Liam had struggled most of the year with behavior in the classroom. Without revealing too much about his learning profile, I can say that physical regulation challenged him and that he historically had struggled with attention and focus. He also required a great deal of validation. He’d frequently ask me questions that I knew he could answer on his own. I saw beyond this behavior within the first weeks of school and partnered with parents to develop a plan for helping him become more independent, weaning him off of the constant counterproductive validation he seemed to be seeking from me.

It was clear that distance learning was a struggle for him. While he was always present in our synchronous learning sessions and giving his best effort to participate, I could see through his camera that he was reeling. Within his tiny box of my computer screen, I could see that he was always in motion, and frequently I’d have to remind him to mute his microphone, as he’d not realize it was on, sending ancillary sounds echoing into the speakers of the remaining twenty students.

When a child violates classroom agreements, it should not be a means for punishment. Instead, it’s an indicator that we need to get to the root of the problem. After reaching out to Liam’s parents, getting some more information on what was challenging for him, and doing some reflecting on what was and was not working with my distance learning practices, I scheduled a conversation with Liam to chat some more.

“I’m just really tired,” he said. “It’s hard to stare at a screen all day.”

“I understand,” I replied. “It is really hard.”

“And I have all of this work that I haven’t finished from my other classes,” he said, referring to art, music, and other specials. “I feel like I have so much to do, and then I can’t finish up my work for reading and writing and math, too.”

It became clear to me through listening to Liam that he needed a lighter workload. He was unable to cope with its demands, given the fact that his learning profile already necessitated modifications. It became clear that Liam needed all of his teachers (including his interventionist and the specials teachers) to collaborate on a plan that would reduce his workload and his anxiety. It was also clear that Liam needed an extra outlet—a time to check in and talk about his feelings, his workload, and to clarify things from our synchronous sessions that were confusing or unclear.
“Liam,” I said, “how would you feel about setting up a time in your calendar every day where we can check in and talk? I can help you finish assignments, clarify things from class, or even just check in to see how things are going. Would that help?”

Liam jumped at the opportunity for a little extra one-on-one time, adding structure and safety to his schedule that I’m certain helped ease some of his anxiety for the duration of the school year. Each day, shortly after our 9:00 morning session, Liam and I would check in. Some days, it wasn’t necessary, and Liam elected to go to his synchronous special instead of chatting with me. Other days, it was necessary. While it didn’t alleviate every challenge that Liam encountered, it provided a support that was appropriate and helped him cope with the chaos, uncertainty, and challenges of distance learning. I couldn’t help but wonder: Why didn’t I do this more during the school year? Why couldn’t I build this structure into my classroom more regularly?

I won’t be too hard on myself. There were, in fact, times where I checked in with kids one on one to see how they were coping with friendship challenges, changes to their family structure, or even in an effort to provide some extra academic help, but making it a regular part of the school day once we return back to in-person learning could, without a doubt, drastically change our students’ experiences and counterintuitively make them more independent in their learning.

But wait, how could more support and more one-on-one time actually help with independence in the classroom?

I can’t help but think it’s because of trust. When our students know we are there to build trust with them, support them, and help them pick themselves up when they’ve fallen down, they are more apt to take risks, make mistakes, and otherwise stand on their own. They learn quickly that falling down doesn’t mean they’ve done something wrong or that their teacher will be upset with them; they learn that teachers who check in on them care about them. They feel safe because they feel supported, they feel important, and they feel connected to the adult they see each and every day—even if it’s through a computer screen.

**A SENSE OF COMMUNITY**

At the beginning of each synchronous learning block, I made a conscious choice to start with an emotional check-in. My students had grown accustomed to using Leah Kuypers’s *Zones of Regulation* vernacular (2011), and as a result, my kids would start each learning block by sharing which zone they were in, if they were comfortable. I did, too, as a way to continue modeling
what it looked like to share the wide range of feelings that we humans experience on a day-to-day basis. Some days, I was tired, and I told them. Truth be told, they could probably see it, too. Other days, I was optimistic and excited to work on their projects with them. And some days, I was angry. I was angry that the world felt like it was on fire or frustrated that one of our digital tools was malfunctioning, throwing a wrench into my plans for the day. We’re often conditioned to believe that these negative feelings are counterproductive to a healthy and happy classroom culture, but I assure you they are not. When we don’t model how we deal with uncomfortable feelings like anger or sadness, we send an implicit message that there’s something wrong with us when we experience these emotions. When we model how to communicate “big” feelings, we normalize them, helping students learn how to communicate them effectively, too.

In order to give every child a chance to share, I leveraged the chat function in Google Meet. While some students shared by unmuting and describing their emotional state in greater depth, others shared succinctly with an emoji that corresponded with the color of the zone in which they found themselves. Red stop signs meant they were dysregulated or upset, while green shamrocks showed they were feeling ready to learn.

Naturally, when coming to a synchronous learning session, some students were early, while others were late. Talking about our feelings was the perfect way to keep them productively occupied while we waited for the remaining students to join us. For my latecomers, the conversation was easy to join, partially because we did the emotional check-ins so frequently, but also because it required no prerequisite knowledge. It simply required showing up and being human.

Stretching and deep breathing has been proven to lower stress and anxiety in students, and as a result, we coupled our emotional check-ins with a stretching routine led by my co-teacher, Logan. Luckily for me, Logan had a second job as a yoga teacher, and so leading the students in a recurring yoga practice was right up her alley. That said, you don’t need to be a yoga teacher to lead your students in stretching and breathing. In fact, we drew from a couple of very simple, child-friendly poses, including child’s pose, cat-cow, downward-facing dog, and mountain pose. With enough structure and routine, students began to volunteer to lead our stretches, deepening their connection not only to the routine, but to each other. Kids love to learn from one another; they love to be leaders and to do the things their teachers do. Leading our stretching exercises allowed them to do that.

These stretching routines and our emotional check-ins not only created a predictable cadence to our asynchronous sessions, they provided students
with a sense of community, too. Stretching and yoga became a part of our classroom culture, and our emotional check-ins served as a tool for connecting with each other and showing that we cared for one another's well-being.

Connectedness doesn’t only have to entail socioemotional learning. As I mentioned earlier, I bond with my students over the core subjects and academics, and students can bond with each other over academic learning in the classroom, too.

In Chapter 7, we’ll discuss small-group instruction, but in this chapter, we’ll only examine small-group and collaborative learning in the context of socioemotional learning, trauma-informed instruction, and building a sense of community.

One of the most salient arguments in favor of returning to in-person learning is the social isolationism that has inevitably resulted from distance learning and a global pandemic.

“I feel it, too,” I would say to the kids. “I miss my friends, too. You are not alone.”

I’m sure that these words of reassurance did little to actually make them feel better, but I also gently reminded them of the reality that being in person simply wasn’t safe right now. The likelihood for so many of us, for that matter, is that if we contracted COVID-19, we’d likely be fine. But it’s also possible that we wouldn’t be—or that someone we love or a vulnerable person with an underlying condition wouldn’t be either. It’s not only up to us to recognize these truths in times of crisis, as adults; it’s up to us to build empathic capital in our students during these tender times. We must help them see that their actions could, in fact, have ripple effects—in the case of the COVID pandemic, that by going out in public without a mask or going on playdates could make the pandemic worse and impact people who lack the health privilege that they have.

While socialization may look different in the COVID era, using a disproportionate amount of time to engage students in small-group and collaborative learning experiences mitigates social isolationism and provides students with at least some of the social interaction that they need. I was pleasantly surprised with my third-grade class in the Spring of 2020 when they engaged in Research Clubs, a Unit of Study in the Lucy Calkins Reading Workshop Curriculum (2015). While small groups can be easily achieved through Break Out Groups, I ended up using separate Google Meet rooms that I could jump in and out of with ease, checking in on group dynamics and the progress they were making on their research. I even spent a handful of lunch hours
with a Google Meet open, allowing my students to talk freely and socialize while I muted my microphone and turned off my camera. In talking with a group of kindergarten teachers toward the end of the year, they shared that they had a specified time of day called “table talks,” where kindergarten students would set up their iPads on the floor or a table and engage in free play while they simply talked to their friends, getting much needed social interaction, albeit in a vastly different format.

It’s not lost on me that social connection and a sense of community matter. Especially in the midst of a global pandemic where so many of us are confined to our homes, our kids need to socialize. It’s a critical part of learning. But there are, in fact, ways to make this happen from the safety and comfort of our own homes—especially if doing so means saving lives in times of crisis. We just need to be creative about it.

**HOPE AND GRATITUDE**

We couldn’t have been but a few days into distance learning before my students began asking a number of questions, none of which I felt I could answer:

- What about the musical at the end of the year? Will that still be happening?
- How are the Olympics going to work this year? Will we still have them?
- When are we going back, Mr. France? Are we ever going back?

The fact was that I just didn’t know. And I didn’t know how to tell them that I didn’t know. I didn’t always know how to say that I was scared, that I was grieving the loss of all of these things, and that I had absolutely no idea, when—or if—we’d be back in school together again.

*Teaching Tolerance* (www.tolerance.org) provides a handful of recommendations for helping students find hope in times of trauma or crisis. This includes talking about historical times of crisis, going outside and getting some fresh air, and even sharing stories of positive affirmations and hope. All of these things are helpful to do when trying to instill a sense of hope in your students. In addition to these, I recommend a daily gratitude practice, which could be very easily intertwined with the emotional check-ins and stretching routines we discussed earlier. Gratitude is known to bring us back to the present moment and help us find an anchor in times of distress or chaos.
There are fun and concrete ways to formalize a gratitude practice while teaching from a distance, too. In Chapter 7, we’ll also discuss journaling, and journaling is a great way to have students log these moments of gratitude. I’ve also had my students create “gratitude chains,” where they write gratitudes on long strips of paper, turning them into a paper chain. I’ve even had my students create gratitude trees where each gratitude takes the form of a leaf on a tree. As they add more gratitudes, they concretely see that they have a lot to be grateful for, instilling a sense of hope within them, even in times of crisis.

**JUSTICE FOR TEACHERS**

Centering socioemotional literacy matters not only for students. It matters for the adults in the room, too. And so I’ll take a note from *Teaching Tolerance*, and encourage you to practice one strategy, in particular, that they recommend for giving yourself hope while getting through distance teaching in a global pandemic—as well as future storms we will have to weather as an educational community. This strategy is speaking truth to power.

Our kids deserve teachers who are cared for. Our kids deserve teachers whose lives are held in high regard. Our kids deserve teachers who feel empowered to stand up for themselves, their humanity, and the humanity of their students. Our kids deserve teachers who feel empowered to bring their whole selves into their classrooms—big, uncomfortable feelings and all. And they deserve teachers who are willing to advocate for all of this, especially when it’s being threatened.

Speaking truth to power and standing up for myself gives me hope and has opened my eyes to a world of opportunity beyond the classroom. I hope that doing so—even in small, subtle ways—can give you hope for the future and help you take care of yourself in the process. And I hope that exercising this now will give you the courage to continue changing education for the better, even after the coronavirus pandemic is over.
• Center emotional well-being, not learning loss.
• Build predictable structures for daily schedules and learning block routines.
• Create visual schedules to help students keep track on their own.
• Schedule additional check-ins for students who are struggling, including “office hours” where students can come for extra help if they need it.
• Build emotional vocabulary by allowing students to talk about their feelings at the start of every learning block.
• Model how you communicate and process your feelings, normalizing them for students.
• Practice gratitude with your students through journaling.
• Speak truth to power and advocate for yourself if you feel you’re being put in an unsafe situation. Your physical and emotional health and well-being matter, too.