Early Childhood Educators Today:

Facing a New Reality

Susan Bernheimer and Sonia Semana

Collective traumas do not unfold in a gradual, tidy manner. They strike ferociously and quickly, leaving people to face a new reality of unimaginable loss. Stunned and confused, they are often disoriented, not sure who they are anymore. This article is about the unique challenges facing early childhood educators dealing with increasing numbers of collective trauma and their repercussions in the lives of young children.

What is happening?

It was late morning in January 2025, another sunny day in Southern California. The winds were lightly blowing as I (Susan) left for my walk through the neighborhood. From the nearby Santa Monica Mountains, I saw billowing clouds of smoke blowing up into the air. Watching it rapidly grow a surge of alarm went through me.

By evening, it had turned into a cataclysmic, out of control inferno with 100 mile an hour winds pushing it in every direction, destroying entire communities. To the east, in the San Gabriel Mountains, another out of control inferno was destroying surrounding communities.

I watched in horror as broadcasters filmed parents with young children running for their lives. One woman voiced what thousands of other parents were suddenly facing. She told a reporter that their 2- and 3-year-old children were with her mother. With tears streaming down her face, she asked the question on every parent's mind, "How do I tell my children they do not have a home anymore? They have no neighbors and no preschool. Their world is gone." It was a

momentary glimpse into the repercussions of this collective trauma on young children and their families.

Far from Los Angeles, Sonia, a colleague living in Colorado, described another type of widespread trauma unfolding in a nearby community. Government forces were sweeping through Denver communities, capturing immigrants and taking them away in buses. Terrified, parents stopped bringing their children to school, staying in their homes behind locked doors. They stopped using stores and restaurants. Their community was quietly vanishing with no end in sight.

For early childhood educators, the fires and political trauma were more than news events. They knew the effects of these catastrophes would have profound implications for their work with young children. It was also a reminder that, once again, they would be facing challenges beyond anything they were prepared to handle.

Encountering a new reality

As the director of a child care program serving 60 families, Sonia regularly checked her email. On Friday evening, March 13, 2020, a message appeared saying "The child care center will be closed indefinitely beginning now." The Covid-19 pandemic had begun. Sonia sat there stunned. Questions were swirling in her mind, "What will happen to the children, the parents, the teachers?"

The frantic phone calls didn't stop. Sonia knew she had to do something. Over the next few weeks, she drove around bringing food, toys, diapers to families. She met with her teachers online. She couldn't sleep at night. Then, she started getting severe chest pains. Her doctor told

her to calm down or she would be in serious trouble physically. This was Sonia's first encounter with collective trauma.

Two years later, the children began slowly coming back to school. Sonia wasn't sure what to expect. She read up on what to watch for with children in trauma. They told her to expect behaviors such as clinging to parents and being emotionally volatile or withdrawn. She read about supporting children through a consistent environment and having them name their feelings (Bailey, 2015). Her readings generally said that signs of trauma should go away after 2 – 3 months.

What Sonia's readings did not tell her were the effects of trauma that upend the lives of families, destroy communities, and leave entire populations in shock. It was this magnitude of trauma that Sonia encountered as children returned to school.

She soon realized that she couldn't predict children's behavior; even in the course of a day. Some children, like 3-year-old Michael, seemed to be happy and doing well. When another child accidentally bumped into him, he lashed out and started hitting him. He then burst into tears and wouldn't stop crying. Sonia attempted to comfort the child and help him name his feelings. These calming techniques were ineffective. She didn't have answers, but knew they were dealing with a new reality that went beyond our usual definition of trauma.

Early childhood educators at a crossroad

By 2023, the pandemic was officially over. As a supervisor, Sonia's concerns were no longer limited to the continuing effects of Covid-19 on children. There were also indicators that early childhood educators were in crisis. Teachers believed it was okay to resume their usual

curriculum. Sonia's observations showed something different. They were following a playbook for teaching children that was no longer working.

She remembers watching a typical morning routine for children 3 – 4 years old. As the teacher was conducting their group time, something felt off with the children. Nobody was acting out or being disobedient. Instead, they sat there quietly listening to the teacher with blank, disengaged looks on their faces. When the teacher tried to engage the children in a discussion, they did not respond to her questions or show any interest in what was happening.

Teachers came up to her complaining about the children. She recalls talking with Anne one afternoon. "I'm so frustrated. I'm under a lot of pressure to get them ready for kindergarten. But they don't pay attention, and dealing with their erratic behavior is exhausting. We've tried everything. Now we're starting to write up children that we think have learning disorders. We have limited their play time. Nothing seems to work."

Listening to the teachers, Sonia knew their frustration was about more than children's behavior. They did not have the tools needed to work with the long-term repercussions of the pandemic. Most alarming, Sonia saw other widespread traumas on the horizon. She wondered, "How are teachers going to cope with the political and environmental traumas unfolding?

Searching for Answers

Sonia reached out to me, since we had done previous writing together on the pandemic. Now, three years later, she was searching for answers to ongoing problems with children and teachers. As she described what was happening, it became clear to me that teachers were struggling to deal with something they did not understand.

Our conversation reminded me of my experience as a preschool teacher in 1994 when I suddenly found myself face-to-face with the aftereffects of a major earthquake. I had little understanding of trauma, let alone an earthquake that traumatized the entire city of Los Angeles.

I was aware that trauma and adversity had damaging effects on children's healthy development (Erikson, 1963; Bowlby, 1988). I had one goal when the children returned to school; provide a happy and productive classroom environment so they would forget about the earthquake. It didn't work. When the children showed little interest in the curriculum and kept re-enacting the earthquake trauma, I thought it was proof of how badly they were affected. Yet, I instinctively knew something more was going on.

An earthquake that traumatizes a city is different from a global pandemic. Yet, they had similar effects on our lives as early childhood educators. In both cases, we were encountering trauma whose scope had grown from one or two children to the entire class, their families, and their communities.

Lacking a roadmap, Sonia and I began doing something we never expected; letting children take the lead. The following section examines the insights we gained from our ongoing discussions about supporting young children in a time of widespread trauma and adversity.

Expanding our view of development

Our first step was reviewing how we defined healthy development. Masten (2014) spent much time studying children facing adversity all over the world. She witnessed children's ability to heal, grow and fully develop, even in the face of great adversity. In order to support young

children's healing and resilience, she believes our greatest need is to expand our current view of healthy development to one that includes adversity as part of children's growth.

Using this expanded view of development, we examined three key questions related to how children heal and grow from large-scale disruption. 1) How are children coping with a changing reality that turns their rules for living upside down? 2) What new skills are children developing in order to thrive in a shifting and uncertain world? 3) How can teachers support children's healing and resilience in the aftermath of collective trauma?

1. *How are children coping with a changing reality that turns their rules for living upside down?*

This was a question on Sonia's mind as she observed the children. After carefully watching their play, she realized they were engaging in important work. She used two guidelines to help her understand their experience.

- *Observing children's actions over time and looking for emerging themes.*

At first, nothing seemed unusual in the children's play. They didn't mention the pandemic or talk about being quarantined. But over time, the effects began to surface as they worked through what they had experienced.

One example was a scenario she observed of three 4-year-old girls playing in the sand area. Initially, their play looked typical for this age group as they began cooking in the mud kitchen. But things changed when a fourth child tried to enter the mud kitchen and wanted to come in and play.

One of the girls told the child, “You can’t come in, there are too many people.” The child was not giving up. He said, “What are you making?” They answered, “We are making lemon soup.” The child, still wanting to play, tried again, “I can bring more lemons.” A few minutes later, he came back with lemons and was once again told, “You can’t play in here, there's too many people.” Another child in the mud kitchen added, “You can call us by phone and we will bring the lemon soup to you.”

The theme of social distancing was clearly part of their play. The issue became more complex when another child was persistent in wanting to join them. A second theme, being inclusive, unfolded as one of the children found a way to include the child while maintaining social distance.

Rather than interfering or adding comments on their play, Sonia was learning to carefully observe. She drew on the insights from Dr. Bruce Perry (2024) that reenacting this experience was a natural and powerful way for children to begin healing and making sense of what they’ve been through.

- *Honoring children's timeline for processing trauma*

By 2023, social distancing restrictions were no longer in place. But the regulations were still present in their play. Sonia saw that the children were following their own timeline for processing the abrupt changes and altered reality they had been through.

She recognized that working through difficult issues that were still coming up for them was a necessary part of children’s ability to work through the changing conditions created by the pandemic. Using an arbitrary date to return to a regular curriculum was interfering with this

important process. Without time for play and self-expression, the effects of trauma do not go away. Instead, they become an invisible block to their learning.

This insight fits with Piaget's theory of children's cognitive development (1977). He found that children go through three stages of processing a new reality in order to gain the complexity of thinking needed to integrate it, 1) Assimilation (encountering a new reality), 2) Accommodation (modifying or creating a new schema to fit the new reality), 3) Equilibration (the process of play and self-expression needed to bring it all together and incorporate it into their thinking). When this process is aborted, it leaves children stuck and unable to move forward.

2. *What new skills are children developing in order to thrive in a shifting and uncertain world?*
    - *Skills for living in a time of uncertainty*

Thinking back to the children's sand play, it was clear that they were testing out new skills, such as enforcing social distancing while being inclusive. Sonia observed other skills being practiced by the children. She watched a 4-year-old girl drawing. At first it looked like a typical drawing of a girl's face. After carefully looking at it, the girl added dots all over her face. When the teacher asked, "What is that?" The child answered, "The girl is sick because she did not wear her mask."

Her drawing was strengthening the importance of wearing a mask at a time when things were changing. By 2023, some children were wearing masks and others were not. This child was working on a new skill - thinking for herself, regardless of what others were doing. It was

another example of children expressing through their play what they could not articulate verbally.

- *Resilience for a shifting world*

For much of their short lives, the children have needed to adjust to sudden, frightening changes in living. Just as they were learning how to be part of the world, all the rules changed. As they learned to adapt to a new way of living, the rules were changing again.

By following their inner guidance, children were engaging in the developmental work of learning how to thrive in a world of constant change. Watching them, Sonia was struck by the stark contrast between the children's behavior during play and what she had previously observed in their group time. The blank, disconnected expressions that once marked their faces were gone. In their place was a sense of purpose and presence. Now they were actively engaging with key developmental challenges facing their lives.

In doing so, they were forming a basis for resilience, the complex skills needed to cope with adversity and unexpected changes that could occur in their lives. Jones & Cooper (2006) believe that "to survive and thrive in a changing world, people need to think creatively. Social problem-solving is a necessary life skill…Play is the most basic way children develop these skills."

3. *How can teachers support children's healing and resilience in the aftermath of collective trauma?*

Thinking back, the powerful earthquake that hit Los Angeles in 1994 was a wake-up call for me (Susan) as a teacher. Following the agenda I had been taught was not working. Regardless of my efforts to continue with my standard curriculum, the children showed little interest, and continued reenacting scenes from the earthquake.

Even with my limited understanding of trauma, I knew that trying to force my planned agenda was not helping the children. Watching them reenacting the trauma, I realized that it wasn't a sign they were damaged. Something else was happening. They were following their inner guidance for healing and growth. Most disturbing was the realization that by forcing my planned curriculum I was teaching them a dangerous lesson, "Don't follow your instincts. Close down your emotions. Just follow the agenda."

- Responsive curriculum

My goal was to create a learning curriculum that was meaningful and responsive to the children's needs. The following are guidelines I used to develop this curriculum.

- *Observation and documentation*

I began by carefully observing the children during free play. As they continued to reenact scenarios from the earthquake, I started bringing in related material. Books, fire trucks, medical supplies, and art material were brought into the classroom. Children gravitated to it and began acting out, drawing, and reproducing their experience of the earthquake. Observing and jotting down notes helped me to slow down and see the themes that were being played out.

I remember watching Jeremy and Mark playing in the block area. They brought over several additional items, including a small dog, fire trucks, and several wooden people. They got to work building houses and tall buildings. Around the dog, they placed blocks. The wooden people were scattered around the houses and buildings.

The unfolding scene was full of drama. The houses and buildings crashed to the ground. Jeremy and Mark raced over and brought fire trucks to the broken buildings. They laid the people on wooden blocks. Then they began searching for the dog, which they found inside

the surrounding blocks, “Here’s Rover! He was in a hole,” yelled Jeremy. Then, they got medical supplies and began working on the people.

Not all their play was full of drama. One 3-year-old girl was terrified of coming into the classroom. I asked if she was scared, and she nodded “Yes.” Eventually, she was willing to take my hand and walk through the room. I found an enclosed area near the books. When she sat down, I surrounded her with pillows, a stuffed animal, and a few books. When I asked her if she felt safe there, she nodded “yes.”

- *Expanding our learning curriculum*

The children’s play was guiding me into a more expansive curriculum. Their play, art, and honest responses to the earthquake were more than a healing mechanism. They were providing material for a rich and meaningful learning experience (Stacey 2018).

I decided to incorporate the themes I observed into our group time. I began reading books about children going through scary experiences as well as being brave. One day, I brought in a dish I had that was broken. I shared about how much I loved this dish, and how angry and sad I felt that it was broken.

When I asked if they lost something they loved or a favorite toy got broken, it was like a dam breaking. Everybody had something to share and several of the children started to cry. I let each child know how sorry I was about what happened, and reassured them that we were all there to help each other. I wanted them to know that they were now part of a safe and caring community (NAEYC, 2021).

Re-thinking our role as early childhood educators

Every collective trauma will have its own unique impact on children and families. Beyond the particular trauma lay differences in cultural background, family circumstances, and each child's response to adversity. Facing these complex issues, teachers will need to re-think their priorities and develop new skills.

- *Supporting teachers on this new journey*

During the pandemic, uncertainty, fear and anxiety were common experiences for educators. As schools and early childhood centers began planning for reopening, Sonia knew that teachers were already working under stressful conditions (Kwon, Horm, Amirault, 2021). She recognized the emotional toll this transition could take on her team. In addition to their own stress, the teachers would be facing complex issues emerging after a time of isolation and fear from a global pandemic.

She reminded them of an important truth: educators can only show up fully for children when they themselves feel ready and supported (Jennings, 2019). This meant first acknowledging their own emotions and exploring what they needed from one another to feel safe, both physically and emotionally. Sonia wanted to lay the foundation for a stronger, more connected teaching community, one built on trust, empathy, and mutual care.

The return to in-person learning during the pandemic was not just a logistical challenge, it was a human one. As a supervisor, Sonia knew the staff would need support in re-thinking their role as a teacher. During staff meetings, they discussed the families, including how they were coping, if they needed support with food, and were children showing any changes in their behavior at home. In particular, they talked over issues of communication with parents.

Sonia guided them in practicing skills for facilitating a more responsive curriculum: Allow more time for free play and watch for children's message, asking, "How is this part of their healing? What are they learning? How can you incorporate this into the curriculum?"

Conclusion

Our children are growing up in an increasingly unstable world, environmentally, politically, and economically. Large-scale threats will touch their lives, often in unexpected ways. News reports of school shootings and possible terrorist attacks create a general sense of fear and distrust of public places. Government policies can suddenly pose a threat to families living here as immigrants.

Yet, even in the midst of uncertain societal conditions, one factor remains constant. Children need a place where they can fully develop, learn and grow. In order to do this, they will need classrooms that foster spaces where children are not only safe, but empowered to engage with the very conditions that frighten and confuse them.

Teachers may not be able to prevent frightening events from occurring. Nor can they stop children from being upset and traumatized. But they can provide healing environments where children can authentically express and work through the challenges facing them.

As teachers respond to the needs of the children, their curriculum will provide a meaningful and relevant education; one that will teach them necessary lessons for our time. Through engagement with issues they are facing, children will learn that they have inner resources to guide them to grow and develop regardless of outside circumstances.

The long reach of collective trauma

Fires can be extinguished. Vaccines can be developed. Earthquakes stop shaking. But, the effects of collective traumas are long lasting. The impact of the pandemic continues to affect every part of our society, including the lives of children and parents.

In the months following the wildfires in Los Angeles, the repercussions for thousands of families who were displaced have not gone away. In many ways the upheaval for these families has increased. Hopes of quickly rebuilding homes, schools and resuming their normal life vanished as they discovered one obstacle after another. These obstacles have ranged from toxic soil and a lack of insurance coverage to ongoing instability and delayed grief (Landau, 2025). Collective traumas do not disappear.

Healing and resilience are needed as part of a teacher's curriculum. A pre-programed agenda, unresponsive to emerging needs, can lead to children becoming disconnected from each other and learning. Engaging in the process of dealing with relevant issues does not diminish children's education. They are learning valuable skills, such as language, social interaction, problem solving, and empathy for others.

A responsive curriculum is a meaningful way to address current problems in early childhood programs such as teacher frustration, disengaged children, and acting out of erratic behavior. Most importantly it brings into the classroom a critically needed component for our times, a learning environment that models a deep respect for the humanity of everyone.

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