A Guide for Writing a Trauma-Informed, Problem-Based Learning Vignette or Case

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Problem-Based Learning (PBL) and Trauma-Informed Care

Problem-based learning (PBL) uses cases or examples to allow learners to think through complex problems in complicated situations. PBL slows thinking down, involves discussion and perspective sharing, and builds problem-solving skills for real world problems. These aspects are all critical in trauma-informed care, given research evidence that reflective thinking, perspective sharing, and low-risk practicing of skills for high-risk settings are all best practices for social emotional learning and trauma-informed care.

The PBL process can be transformational in itself, as it helps develop a collaborative, safe community where people’s observations and values direct the learning process. In order to build the right learning experience for your audience, you need to have PBL material that increases the availability of the materials you want learners to be contemplating. This guide will help you develop PBL case material to teach about trauma-informed care.

Step One: Define your audience and identify their learning needs

When writing a PBL case or vignette, start with identifying two things: 1) the specific audience you are training, and, 2) what they need to know to be successful in their role. The methods for determining this information depends on your expertise in the subject matter. If you are a subject matter expert, you might already know what your learners need and where to obtain necessary additional information. If you are not a subject matter expert, you will need to find ways of obtaining this information from other sources.

- If you are a subject matter expert:
  - Think of the skills of the profession that are necessary for good trauma-informed care. Write those down. Identify the ones that are critical for professional success and mark them as high priority.
  - Think of the areas of the work that are particularly difficult or that create systematic barriers. List these to ensure that attention is directed towards negating these barriers and that tools and strategies will be provided to support the difficult work.

- If you are not a subject matter expert: There are a variety of methods for collecting the necessary skills and knowledge associated with a profession from subject matter experts. Some options are focus groups, surveys, interviews, literature reviews, observations, evaluations, or any combination of these methodologies. Overall, you want to provide your learners with practice in the necessary skills important for their professional success.
  - Determine the skills and understandings that are necessary for your audience to provide good trauma-informed care.
  - Identify areas that create systematic barriers for good trauma-informed care.

Step Two: Conceptual Structuring

At this point, you should have a list of understandings and skills that your learners will need to practice. These understandings and skills are currently your learning goals and will become your learning objectives. These need to be grouped and prioritized. When you are finished, you should have conceptually grouped learning objectives that can be covered in your anticipated training time. Below is a description of a simple prioritization process. If you would like to be more sure you are aligning your training materials to your learning goals, try the more complex prioritization process outlined in the worked example for teachers.

Simple Learning Objective Prioritization

A. Prioritize the items on your skills and understandings list based on how important you think it is for your learners to leave with that particular skill, concept, or understanding.
B. Put a star by the highest priority learning objectives. These are the ones you must cover. As an estimated guideline, I try to make these 60% of the case content.
C. Group your learning objectives into conceptually related units that can be presented together.
D. Think about the amount of time you have for training. Make sure your highest-priority learning objectives can be covered adequately in the allotted time/space. If it will not fit, either adjust the training time expected or the complexity of the learning objectives.

Step Three: Identifying Shared Representations

Adult learners have a lifetime of experiences that structure their thinking. This is meant both figuratively—your experiences shape your perception—and literally—the pathways that you use most, have stronger signal patterns and are further strengthened with practice. These pathways and patterns are what we use to interact with the world and interpret experiences; they are known as mental schemas.

When adults learn new information, it is interpreted through the mental schemas that the information activates; they interact with the new information to construct new understandings from the combination of the two. Knowing this, we can plan our problem-based learning case to optimize this feature of learning. We can intentionally incorporate story aspects that will interact with our audience’s internal representations of the information to create rich learning opportunities. To begin this process, we must first identify shared characteristics about the audience that might relate to the learning material.

Identifying Shared Representations

A. First, identify factors that influence how learners might perceive and think about the case. These factors include family, culture, age, complexity of traumatic experiences, system constraints, secondary traumatic stress, and other ecocultural—socio-cultural and environmental—factors. Write these factors in a list.

B. Next, go through the list. For each ecocultural factor, think of related life experiences that might influence the way in which learners may interpret the case. Write these examples next to the factor in your list. Examples might include 1) having personal experience with the situation—living through similar experiences; 2) prior school-based learning—(e.g., all social workers are trained in affect management); and 3) professional experience—as a school counselor you see many cases of domestic violence. These shared representations can be used as story aspects to strengthen learning and understanding of the case.

C. Finally, think of your audience—which of these life experiences will your learners need to be aware of?
   a. Which areas might enrich their understanding of the subject and connect it to their own experiences?
   b. Which areas have complexity and might warrant greater discussion?
   c. What do they need added to their internal representations to reach your learning goals?

Identify the areas of richness and complexity. These areas are going to form the setting and circumstances of the case. You will write in issues related to these areas so that your learners will get experience thinking through them. When you are complete, you should have a list of ecocultural factors that will relate to your learning objectives. These will guide you in the settings and situations you construct.

Step 4: Mapping Case Material to Learning Objectives

The next step of the process is mapping out your case(s) structure. You need to determine how many sections you would like to use to share your learning objectives. Are you creating a whole case with different sections, or alternatively, different vignettes as different sections to reach your particular learning objectives?

- For each section, determine which learning objectives you want to cover. Make sure that all of your objectives are covered in the total training across sections. (If this is not possible, revise your learning objectives so they can be adequately covered). As a guiding estimate, assume that each page of a case can cover from 1 to 3 learning objectives and will take between 20 minutes to 1 hour to process through, depending on the complexity of the associated discussions. If your section is more than one page long, think about issues of learner attention. As a guiding estimate, try to keep sections to a page or less. For a section longer than a page, have learners individually read the information instead of popcorn reading.
Creating the Necessary Understanding

For each learning objective, note down how you are going to create the necessary conversations to build the needed understandings. This can be done in a number of ways. Here are some examples:

- by providing an accurate example
- by providing an example of bad practice
- by building in complex interactions that are revealed
- by including contradicting information
- by incorporating information from different ecological levels
- by creating realistic systems difficulties and constraints that need to be reasoned through

Before you begin to write your rough draft, outline the following information for each section of the case/cases in order to meet your learning objectives. When the outline is complete, you are ready to write your section rough drafts. Each section outline should contain the following information:

- Title of Section
- Overview of Setting
- Overview of Characters
- Learning Objectives Covered
- Incorporating Learning Objectives
- Mapped Ecocultural Aspects
- Rough Discussion Questions for Examining Learning Objectives

Step Five: Self-Checking Your Rough Draft

Once you have a rough draft, you will want to assess whether it meets your learning needs. A well-designed PBL case helps learners to practice the skills necessary to think like an expert. To make sure you have successfully incorporated all the aspects you intended to include, check through your rough draft with this case construction checklist.

Did you:

- Determine the skills necessary for the audience in their role in trauma-informed care?
- Determine the learning objectives desired for your audience?
- Familiarize your audience with a specific type of common problem or critical decision?
- Ensure that the building blocks needed for these understandings and skills are built into, and throughout, the case as it unfolds?
- Include both highly trauma relevant and less relevant information, to allow learners to discuss and sort through what information is meaningful in the situation?
- Incorporate different sources of evidence and types of gathering methods at different points in the case to help your learners develop skills in gathering and integrating mixed evidence?
- Incorporate complex interactions that provide places for rich discussion to help learners incorporate multiple perspectives on an issue?

Formatting Your PBL Case

PBL cases are designed to make real world material accessible to learners in low-risk settings. This allows them to practice necessary skills before they need to implement them in a high cost/risk/impact situation (e.g., real-life practice). The closer the practice material is to the expert task, the easier it will be to transfer the practice to real world professionalism (though this must constantly be balanced with time and complexity constraints). Case material can be shared in a written format, an auditory recording, a video, a simulation, written artifacts, or mock experiences. What method you choose to use will likely depend on your learning audience, your resources, and your learning objectives. While this guide was constructed around creating written PBL materials, the steps will work to guide the creation of other media formats with minimal adaptations.
Secondary Traumatic Stress and Trauma-Informed PBL

Secondary Traumatic Stress (STS) is an inevitable aspect of work in the helping professions. Case material about child trauma is created to resemble real world traumatic situations. These representations can serve as trauma reminders and evoke distress reactions in your learners. Being aware of these risks is helpful in at least three ways: First, it helps you be aware that you will need to create a safe space to discuss these sensitive issues. Second, it allows learners to examine their implicit biases created by their own trauma history and think about how they may influence their work. Third, you can provide examples of self-care and wellness practices that learners can adopt to support their work. For these reasons, it is important to consider aspects of STS in your case and to consider how STS influences your learners, both during the learning experience and in the workplace.

Collaborative Case/Vignette Construction

Working as a group to construct case material can be very supportive. Outside feedback allows you to consider factors you might have overlooked, recognize when different groups frame similar information in different ways, and help you find solutions to difficult case construction issues. A group of individuals who each work on their own case but share the process is one way of doing this. All of the earlier steps are enriched by discussion (“are these the necessary learning objectives”, “are aspects of the ecocultural context missing”, or “is the example I created realistic enough?”). It is particularly useful to provide a place for authors to discuss issues with their drafts and support each other in refining them. These discussions are particularly rich if you have authors summarize their cases around shared discussion prompts. For example: 1) Summarize the plot of your case; 2) Discuss the aspects you think are strong; and 3) Ask for recommendations in the areas you would like support. This structure allows for organized places to share perspectives and benefit from others’ expertise.

If you were to conduct short case writing in a collaborative group, it helps to break the process down into discrete steps. The Project Process Breakdown below is one way to break the case writing down into discrete, manageable units to work on. It can be adapted for the needs of your particular group. The Project Process Breakdown has two parts. Part 1 is covered in this case writing guide.

**Project Process Breakdown**

- Determining Audience and Identifying Learning Needs
- Learning Objectives—Prioritized and Organized
- Identifying Shared Representations
- Mapping Case Material to Learning Objectives
- Rough Draft of Case Materials
- Peer Review and Feedback

These Steps Are Not Currently Included in this Resource

- SME review and feedback
- Training Designing and feedback
- Test Training and feedback
- Feedback incorporation
- Branding and finalization of cases

Following is a worked example of this process looking at what information classroom teachers might need about trauma-informed approaches.
Worked Example for Backwards Designing a Short Case: Trauma-informed practice for teachers

When conducting a design practice for the first time, sometimes having a well-worked example helps support designing a similar product. This worked example is provided to support PBL facilitators in creating their own PBL materials. It breaks down my process in creating a short problem based learning case about childhood trauma for teachers. Please use this worked example to think through the problem-solving necessary to create a good quality PBL case or vignette.

I am a former classroom teacher. Thinking back to my time in the classroom, I think about how my teaching practices might have been different if I had understood about child trauma and how it influenced the classroom experience. As an instructional designer with the Core Curriculum for Childhood Trauma, I now have the skills needed to understand how trauma might influence a student’s life. I wanted to make this information more accessible to teachers to help support their practice. I decided to create a PBL short case to help teachers explore trauma-informed care in the school setting. In this worked example, I will illustrate step-by-step how I planned a training about child trauma for teachers.

First, I figured out my learning objectives. I started by listing the skills related to child trauma that I know are skills that a teacher will need. To identify these skills, I think about the job of teaching and the places where child trauma might affect a teacher’s classroom practice. I think of the aspects that are day-to-day things teachers need to be aware of, systematic issues of trauma that influence their work setting, and episodic issues with child trauma that might influence their practice. It is impossible to make this list exhaustive but you also have time limits in what you can present. Try to identify the most important connections between child trauma and your audience.

1) What skills do teachers need in relation to child trauma?
   - Identify signs of trauma in students
   - Reason around how trauma reactions affect learning and classroom culture
   - Deescalate traumatic situations in the classroom
   - Create classroom cultures that are trauma-informed
   - Understand how different ages manage and express trauma differently.
   - Manage their own personal STS reactions
   - Know how to refer/support a traumatized child within their system
   - Know how to obtain more information related to specific types of trauma

Next, we are going to look at the Core Curriculum General Learning Objectives. This helps us to see how our learning objectives line up with the Core Curriculum materials, and to identify places where we missed identifying important information. The alignment between your skills and the Core Concepts and General Learning Objectives is the first place where you monitor and self-check your process.

2) Which of the 6 General Learning Objectives are especially important for teachers? I chose the following:
   - Core Concept Lenses (1)
   - Identification of Ecological Factors (2)
   - Critical Reasoning (4)
   - Real-World Application (6)

3) Of the 12 Core Concepts, which are especially important for teachers? I chose the following:
   - Traumatic responses vary (4)
   - Protective and promotive factors (7)
   - Neurobiology and development (9)
   - Community and Culture (10)
   - Secondary Traumatic Stress (12)

At this point I had a list of Core Concepts I wanted to concentrate on, General Learning Objectives I saw as important, and skills that I thought students needed to practice. These items would become my learning objectives after they were prioritized and grouped.
Step 2: Prioritization

Now that I had my list, I needed to prioritize and group information. First, I prioritized those skills I considered most important. To determine importance, I ranked the skills’ priorities based on a 6 factor scale:

These factors mark information as higher priority, in order of importance:

1) **Clarity** — Is the skill or concept necessary for conceptual comprehension? If the information is necessary for basic understanding, that material is given high priority.

2) **Applied** — Is the skill or concept necessary to adequately apply the concept in the world? If the information is necessary for broad application, the material is given high priority.

3) **Pertinence** — Is the skill or concept particularly important to your particular audience or context? Information that is necessary for clarity or application with your audience is more pertinent and given higher priority.

Additional factors to consider if training time and space allow (not listed in order of importance):

4) **Relevance** — is the skill or concept relevant for the conceptual learning? More relevant information is given higher priority, but relevance alone doesn’t ensure high priority.

5) **Transfer** — does the skill or concept make information more useful in other settings? Can it improve the quality of learning? Higher priority is given to aspects that improve transfer.

6) **Interesting** — is the information conceptually interesting, making the information more accessible?

I took all the skills I identified as important for a teacher and prioritized them based on the above factors. You might not have time to include everything that you feel is important, but try to include all the material that is important in the top three factors of priority. Let me explain my reasoning to model the process for you.

- **Identify signs of trauma in students** - If you cannot identify signs of trauma in your students, you cannot identify when they may benefit from support. You could also inadvertently cause them to experience trauma reminders. That makes identifying signs of trauma necessary for clarity. I thus assign it highest priority.

- **Reason around how trauma reactions affect learning and classroom culture** - If you cannot reason about how the trauma you identified may shape your students learning and interactions, then being able to identify signs of trauma will still leave you feeling ineffectual. You need to be able to contextualize your understanding to your environment. This makes this learning objective also necessary for clarity. I also assign it highest priority.

- **Deescalating traumatic situations in the classroom** - This learning objective is about using your reasoning and understanding about trauma in applied classroom settings. Although it is possible to understand child trauma without knowing how to deescalate traumatic situations in the classroom, this skill is essential to applying your understanding. That classifies it as necessary for application, or the second-level priority.

- **Creating classroom cultures that are trauma-informed** - This learning objective is also about applying your trauma understanding to actually create the classroom culture and learning that you desire. This is necessary for application, or the second-level of priority.

- **Understanding how different ages handle trauma differently** - Children of different ages react to trauma differently, in part as a function of their development. This information might be very important and useful for a teacher, particularly a teacher that teaches different grade levels. However, not all teachers teach different grade levels—and you can apply trauma knowledge in one grade level very well without understanding how it might affect different ages differently—so this learning objective is pertinent for some audiences and only relevant to others. This categorizes it at the third level of priority.

- **Manage their own STS reactions** - Whether they know it or not, STS shapes classroom interactions for teachers and leads to stress and burn-out. Without understanding how STS influences their work, teachers will not be adequately able to address trauma in their classroom or maintain their professional careers. This classifies it as a clarity issue or the highest level of priority.

- **Know how to refer/support a traumatized child within their system** - In order to apply your knowledge about child trauma, you need to understand how that trauma influences different parts of the school’s educational system and
how to support a student within that system. This is necessary for an applied understanding of trauma, or the second-level of priority.

- **Know how to obtain more information related to specific types of trauma** - If teachers want more information about trauma, knowing how to find it will increase the likelihood they will continue to learn about the subject. This information is relevant, important for transfer, and likely interesting... but not particularly necessary for clarity, application, nor particularly pertinent for teachers compared to other professions. This skill is of low priority. Thus, incorporate it if you have time, but do not take time away from higher priority learning objectives to teach this one.

### Aligning with the Core Curriculum

The next step is to align the audience-specific skills with the learning objectives you identified as important from the Core Curriculum. Align the Core Concept or general learning objective to the skill or skills that it most relates to. If a general learning objective applies to more than one learning objective, write it in for each of the places it applies. This can give you important information about things that can be taught together.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learning Objective</th>
<th>Clarity</th>
<th>Applied</th>
<th>Pertinent</th>
<th>Relevant</th>
<th>Transfer</th>
<th>Interest</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Identify signs of trauma in students</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Traumatic Responses Vary (4)</td>
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<td>• Identification of Factors</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reason around how trauma reactions affect learning and classroom culture</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Protective and Promotive Factors (7)</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Community and Culture (10)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Deescalating traumatic situations in the classroom</td>
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<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Critical Reasoning</td>
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<td>• Real-World Application</td>
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<tr>
<td>Creating classroom cultures that are trauma-informed</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Critical Reasoning</td>
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<td>Understanding how different ages handle trauma differently.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Neurobiology and development (9)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Manage their own STS reactions</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Secondary Traumatic Stress (12)</td>
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<td>Know how to refer/support a traumatized child within their system.</td>
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<td>• Real-World Application</td>
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<tr>
<td>Know how to obtain more information related to specific types of trauma</td>
<td>X</td>
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<td>X</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

This gives us 6 necessary learning objectives, one preferred learning objective, and one useful but not necessary learning objective for our training segment. This is the second place in the process where you can stop and self-assess your process. Do you have the time to present the learning objectives that you feel are necessary? If not, can you condense or simplify what you want from your learners? This determining your learning objectives is the first project benchmark.
How these are grouped, introduced, and presented will still rely on more information about your audience and learning content.

**Identifying what is already there**

To create learning material to share learning objectives, you will need context about two things: 1) what the audience already knows, and 2) aspects of the ecocultural context—the environmental and social ecologies where the learned skills will be applied. To better understand these aspects, we have created an organizing chart looking at:

1. Aspects of the learning connected to the learner’s prior knowledge
2. The identified learning objectives
3. The ecocultural context the skills will be used in after learning

I have filled in the chart with the information I think is relevant to teachers:

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The map looks a little busy, but remember that it is only a tool to help you remember information. Fill it out as completely as possible and then use it as a guide in the next steps.
Look at each learning objective sequentially. For each one, identify the internal representations and the ecocultural contextual information that relates to the specific learning objective.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learning Objectives, Core Concepts, &amp; CC General Learning Objectives</th>
<th>Internal Representations</th>
<th>Ecocultural Context</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Identify signs of trauma in students</td>
<td>- Previous work with kids, -Previous trauma exposure</td>
<td>- language learners, different levels of SEL skills in learners, trauma reminders, secondary adversities</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reason around how trauma reactions affect learning and classroom culture</td>
<td>- Teaching experience, working with kids knowledge</td>
<td>- bridging gaps between groups needs trust, safety and danger in the classroom, social contract and fairness, people with different types of trauma sharing community</td>
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<tr>
<td>Deescalating traumatic situations in the classroom</td>
<td>-Teaching experience, knowledge re: working with kids, self-knowledge</td>
<td>- Trauma reminders influence interactions, peer interactions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Creating classroom cultures that are trauma-informed</td>
<td>-Teaching experience, working with kids knowledge</td>
<td>- Peer Interactions, culture as relates, classroom management, focusing on subject-matter</td>
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<tr>
<td>Manage their own STS reactions</td>
<td>-Personal trauma, previous student interactions</td>
<td>Trauma reminders influencing classroom, classroom management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Know how to refer/support a traumatized child within their system</td>
<td>-Experience w/system, working with kids knowledge</td>
<td>- Different schools have different supports, different communities have different supports, limited time and energy, different access to resource, school culture, caregiving influences, community and cultural resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding how different ages handle trauma differently.</td>
<td>-Teaching experience, working with kids knowledge</td>
<td>Trauma processing can restrict cognitive and social development</td>
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<tr>
<td>Know how to obtain more information related to specific types of trauma</td>
<td>Information collection</td>
<td>Different communities have different supports available, caregiving influences</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Now that we have identified what we want to cover, we need to create a short story that covers these topics related to the audience and the ecocultural context. To do this, you should look at the highest priority learning objects in their context and make sure to provide practice for those learning objectives. For teachers, that is the learning objective about identifying signs of trauma in students. This skill is based upon the background of understanding and remembering the signs of traumatic stress in children so that when signs of trauma are seen, they can be identified. To support this, the story should include different students with different signs of trauma so that the learners can practice with a broad range of trauma reactions. For this reason, I am not choosing to focus on just one child, rather, this case will be focused on a classroom of children. The variety of trauma should span genders and culture so that these have places to be discussed.

The second important aspect is helping identify supportive factors in the classroom and what kind of practices support a trauma-informed classroom. Being able to conceptualize around supportive factors is especially important because they are sometimes harder to identify, but if important factors get overlooked, treatment efficacy can be greatly reduced. To build this knowledge into the story, I will go to the literature and identify characteristics that are seen as creating a trauma-informed classroom.
From the literature in creating a trauma-informed classroom, I identified characteristics of a trauma-informed classroom that I want to integrate into my story: Giving choice, fair emotional interactions, metacognitive modeling, meaningful collaborative interactions and growth-oriented mindsets. These elements can be incorporated as either positive or negative examples to provide a place for reflection and to help examine their importance. This gives the learners practice with the learning objective around reasoning about trauma and the learning objectives about deescalating trauma and creating a safe classroom experience.

**Continued Reasoning**

As I slowly reason through the case construction, I identify a number of other factors I would like to incorporate:

- Making sure to include an escalated situation where the teacher needs to consider how to deescalate and the emotional reactions around the situation build towards the third and the fifth learning objectives. Incorporating a place where a child needs to be referred for more services and a discussion prompt about the process of referral within their system help build towards learning objective 6.

- In order to incorporate aspects of culture, I am intentionally putting the school in a culturally diverse location.

- In order to have contrast, I am having two focal teachers, perhaps a master teacher and her intern who takes over for a day.

- I go to the literature about signs of trauma. Luckily the NCTSN has a number of fact sheets summarizing signs of trauma. Why do I go to the fact sheet when I already know them? I use the fact sheet to monitor my coverage—it is an efficient way to ensure I am including all the behaviors I want my learners to be able to identify.

**Example Conclusion**

This worked example was written before case construction for a case published under the following citation:


Please use this guide to support your PBL learning needs. It can be cited with the following citation:

Appendix A: A Ecocultural Map to simplify identifying and organizing factors related to the case being planned.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learning Objective</th>
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Appendix B: A prioritization chart for organizing learning objectives.
Section Planning Outline

Title of Section:

Learning Objectives Covered in Section:

Overview of Setting:

Overview of Characters:

How Learning Objectives Are Incorporated:

Ecocultural Aspects:

Possible Discussion Questions: